

T.S. ELIOT: Most of us have very few original ideas in the course of a lifetime. Most of our original ideas come to us when we are young and inexperienced. And some of us devote our later years to trying to express the same ideas better, or to facing the fact that they are not nearly so original as they once seemed to be. Yet we go on to the end of our lives, hoping to say something that we have never said before, that no one else has ever said before, something which is worth saying, something which is even true.

T. S. E L I O T

And while we are under the illusion that we have found such a thing to say, it seems to us at the moment the best offering that we can possibly make to any audience.

JOSEPH CHIARI (Poet and Critic): He was an extremely discreet, if you wish, elusive type of man. He hated confessions. He hated the personal pronoun "I."

SIR STEPHEN SPENDER (Poet): Mr. Eliot was a wonderful poet, but was disguised as a businessman, or bank clerk, and wore a bowler hat, carried a fold umbrella, was always meticulous and polite and so on.

CHIARI: Eliot dressed as a businessman because he didn't want to appear as the poet. He didn't want to parade this title of poet. He didn't affect to be able to be a revealer of hidden things.

ELIOT: A poet may believe that he is expressing only his private experience. His lines may be for him only a means of talking about himself without giving himself away. Yet, for his readers what

4

he has written may come to be the expression both of their own secret feelings and of the exultation or despair of a generation.

FRANK KERMODE (Professor and Author): Eliot came here to East Coker only once, on a warm afternoon in the summer of 1937. It's remarkable that this little village should be so powerfully associated with his work, so as to form a sort of emblem of his whole career. He came here to the village of his ancestors, who had left for America in the seventeenth century to escape religious persecution. And he returned to find his beginning and his end, and his end and his beginning. Those memories of his early life in St. Louis with the Mississippi, his young man's life in New England, and the life that he chose in old England, and the place that he chose for the end of his life at East Coker are related. One set of them is a transfiguration of the other. There is a strange lack of nationality perhaps about Eliot. And that's why I think it's futile to debate as to whether he's an American poet or an English poet. He doesn't see these as separate nations, as separate lives, but as versions of one another.

Excerpts from FOUR QUARTERS

EAST COKER 1940

In my beginning is my end. In succession
Houses rise and fall, crumble, are extended,
Are removed, destroyed, restored, or in their place
Is an open field, or a factory, or a by-pass.
Old stone to new building, old timber to new fires,
Old fires to ashes, and ashes to the earth
Which is already flesh, fur and faeces,
Bone of man and beast, cornstalk and leaf.
Houses live and die: there is a time for building
And a time for living and for generation
And a time for the wind to break the loosened pane
And to shake the wainscot where the field-mouse trots
And to shake the tattered arras woven with a silent motto.

Home is where one starts from. As we grow older
 The world becomes stranger, the pattern more complicated
 Of dead and living. Not the intense moment
 Isolated, with no before and after,
 But a lifetime burning in every moment
 And not the lifetime of one man only
 But of old stones that cannot be deciphered.
 There is a time for the evening under starlight,
 A time for the evening under lamplight
 (The evening with the photograph album).
 Love is most nearly itself
 When here and now cease to matter.
 Old men ought to be explorers
 Here and there does not matter
 We must be still and still moving
 Into another intensity
 For a further union, a deeper communion
 Through the dark cold and the empty desolation,
 The wave cry, the wind cry, the vast waters
 Of the petrel and the porpoise. In my end is my beginning.

CHIARI: The past is always in the present, the past by itself is
 nothing. It's an eventuality which the present brings to life.
 And the "Quartets" are above all about time, what is time. It begins
 with when time present and time past are both perhaps present in time
 future. And the "Quartets" are above all, the theme of the "Quartets"
 is time, what is time.

Excerpts from FOUR QUARTETS

LITTLE GIDDING

The dove descending breaks the air
 With flame of incandescent terror
 Of which the tongues declare
 The one discharge from sin and error.
 The only hope, or else despair
 Lies in the choice of pyre or pyre--
 To be redeemed from fire by fire.

ELIOT: The young writer certainly should not be consciously bending his talent to conform to any supposed American or other tradition. The writers of the past, especially of the immediate past, in one's place and language, may be valuable to the young writer simply as something definite to rebel against. He may recognize the common ancestry, but he needn't necessarily like his relatives. Some of my strongest impulse to original development in early years has come from thinking, here is a man who has said something, long ago, or in another country and in another language, which somehow corresponds to what I feel I want to say now. Let me see if I can't do what he has done in the language of my own place and time.

CHIARI: He did what Hemingway did. He did what Gertrude Stein had done. He came to Europe in search of his roots. He lived modestly the life of a student, following lectures at the Sorbonne and wandering around the streets of Paris to see what life was like.

Excerpt from RHAPSODY ON A WINDY NIGHT
(First published 1915)

ELIOT: "Rhapsody on a Windy Night." This was written in Paris in 1910 or 11. I don't know very much about it now. If it needs any explanation, I must leave it to others to explain.

Twelve o'clock.
 Along the reaches of the street
 Held in a lunar synthesis,
 Whispering lunar incantations
 Dissolve the floors of memory
 And all its clear relations,
 Its divisions and precisions.
 Every street lamp that I pass
 Beats like a fatalistic drum,
 And through the spaces of the dark
 Midnight shakes the memory
 As a madman shakes a dead geranium.

Half-past one,
 The street-lamp sputtered,
 The street-lamp muttered,
 The street-lamp said, 'Regard that woman
 Who hesitates toward you in the light of the door
 Which opens on her like a grin.
 You see the border of her dress
 Is torn and stained with sand,
 And you see the corner of her eye
 Twists like a crooked pin.'

I can't explain that now. I recognize the geraniums as Jules Laforgue's geraniums, not mine, I'm afraid.

CHIARI: We had emerged from the eighteenth century, which had been soaked in sentimentality and tears. We didn't want that anymore. The shouting of the Romantics, the heartbeating of the Romantics, had become tiresome. Symbolism is above all, if one was going to sum it up in a few words, the art of undirectness. And Symbolism expresses the feeling of the artist, but without him uncovering himself. Mallarme took reality, abolished it, and replaced it by the poem. People were tired of the "I" of Victor Hugo, of the egotistical sublime of Wordsworth and so on. That was ended, as Romanticism was ended. Symbolism is post-Romanticism, if you wish, and a reaction to Romanticism. They needed something else, and Laforgue was that. And that's why Eliot took to him so readily. Prufrock, for instance, is sheer Laforgue.

WILLIAM ALFRED (Professor and Playwright): The wonderful thing about that poem for me is the mixture of hilarity--it's a terribly funny poem--but it's also got a deep poignancy, because it's about a trapped man. And you know that he's going to do that as long as he lives.

SPENDER: To me, the depths in "Prufrock" are really an underlying sense of horror, a horror at what is going on in a drawing room, which makes all the kind of civilization represented by conversation of pretentious people in that drawing room. A terrible kind of farce.

And the feeling underneath, that there is sheer horror.

WILLIAM ALFRED: Mr. Eliot, having had a taste of this high thinking and high living, wanted to see what the other side of the town was like. He imagines himself walking through the part of the city that has a seedy life, sawdust restaurants and oyster shells. But he's headed probably for someplace on the hill where there's going to be a tea party. He edges in what fascinates him, which is the women. But there is a terror in him at his interest in the women: he sees the hair on their arms, and it's sensual, and then he recoils from it. But it was a generation in which women were changing from being Juno, or some kind of goddess, into people. Suddenly they weren't wearing steel armor corsets anymore, and it must have been a little puzzling to somebody--particularly somebody who came from the kind of "respectable" world that he did, where the woman was someone who maintained the tone in society.

PETER ACKROYD (Author): It has been called the first poem of the modern movement, in the sense that it entirely gets away from apparent Victorian and Georgian ideas of tone, of cadence, and of form. It's a poem made up of fragments which have been coalesced at a later stage. It's a poem with a very "modern" sensibility, and it came as a great shock to the people who read it first.

Excerpt from THE LOVE SONG OF J. ALFRED PRUFROCK
(First published 1915)

Let us go then, you and I
When the evening is spread out against the sky
Like a patient etherised upon a table;
Let us go, through certain half-deserted streets,
The muttering retreats
Of restless nights in one-night cheap hotels
And sawdust restaurants with oyster-shells:
Streets that follow like a tedious argument
Of insidious intent
To lead you to an overwhelming question...

Oh, do not ask, "What is it?"
Let us go and make our visit.

In the room the women come and go
Talking of Michelangelo.

.....

And would it have been worth it, after all,
After the cups, the marmalade, the tea,
Among the porcelain, among some talk of you and me,
Would it have been worth while,
To have bitten off the matter with a smile,
To have squeezed the universe into a ball
To roll it towards some overwhelming question,
To say: 'I am Lazarus, come from the dead,
Come back to tell you all, I shall tell you all'--
If one, settling a pillow by her head,
Should say: 'That is not what I meant at all.
That is not it, at all.'

SPENDER: There was a kind of sexual demon in Eliot's early poetry, and it's really that of the Puritan. A frequent theme of Henry James is of a man who is living in a world in which people are going through the experiences of sex and love and these things, but they're doing them in a macabre and unfeeling kind of way. Whereas the man who is impotent, who feels himself impotent, incapable of having these experiences, knows their value and knows their reality.

ACKROYD: His interest in St. Sebastian came primarily from his first trip to Europe, where he saw paintings, one of them by Mantegna, in Venice, of this young man who is pierced by arrows, and the image attracted Eliot. I think it's partly because it represented for him his own feelings of self-disgust, that here was a religious emblem that also had direct relevance to his own feelings about himself. Eliot was the sybil without the secret. He's the man who talks about secrecy without having secrets. He's the man who talks about guilt without having anything guilty to confess. He was getting away from

a familial background. Eliot was a man who was a self-confessed virgin and who remained so for some time, but who was fascinated by low life. It's the fascination of the timorous man, the frustrated or repressed man. And you see it in poetry he wrote in France in that period, which is poetry of the silent observer, watching women, wondering about his own sexual state, unable to make a first move.

CHIARI: Tom was so soaked in moral principles, in his New England Puritanism, which he never shed completely, that he never indulged in any kind of weaknesses which could allow him to mingle with this demimonde and participate in its life. Sexual experience was still something awe-inspiring. Sex depends on the way you meet it for the first time, and his first experience had not been good. And he was not the man, when he was in Paris, who could go to a brothel. I don't think he would be capable of doing it, as a Frenchman would, as an Italian would, as a Spaniard would. There you have the man, and you have the problem about this question of a sensibility and inhibition about sex.

ACKROYD: The licentiousness of city life is one of his great themes. And a book he read there, *BUBU de MONTPARNASSE*, by Charles Louis Philippe, was about the prostitutes of Montparnasse and the pimps of that quarter. And in one of his "Preludes," I think the third, he uses images from that book as one of his major themes.

GROVER SMITH (Eliot Scholar): We find in the early poetry a curiosity and also a repugnance. I don't agree with those critics who think of Eliot as intentionally debasing the image of women in his poems. His idealism is baffled, thwarted, by his realization that women are merely people. I don't see this as extremely naive on his part, but as perhaps a misdirection, an emotional misdirection at some

point in his development. The third "Prelude" comes out of the experience in Paris of reading the naturalistic fiction of Charles Louis Philippe. The atmosphere is of a hard and rather hopeless urban world, of struggle, of suffering, of certain defeats, but of obstinacy in going ahead.

Excerpt from "Bubu de Montparnasse" by Charles-Louis Philippe

At noon in the hotel room of the rue Chanoinesse, a grey and dirty light filtered through the grey curtains and dirty panes of the window ...and there was the unmade bed where the two bodies had left their imprint of brownish sweat upon the worn sheets--the bed of hotel rooms where the bodies are dirty and the souls as well. Berthe in her chemise had just got up. With her narrow shoulders, her grey shirt and her unclean feet, she too seemed in her pale yellowish slimness to have no light.

PRELUDES - III
July 1911

You tossed a blanket from the bed,
You lay upon your back, and waited;
You dozed, and watched the night revealing
The thousand sordid images
Of which your soul was constituted;
They flickered against the ceiling.
And when all the world came back
And the light crept up between the shutters
And you heard the sparrows in the gutters,
You had such a vision of the street
As the street hardly understands;
Sitting along the bed's edge, where
You curled the papers from your hair,
Or clasped the yellow soles of feet
In the palms of both soiled hands.

ACKROYD: It has been said that he was a late Victorian, in some ways he's probably the last Victorian. When Eliot arrived in London in

1914, it was of course the time of the war, but there was a great deal of literary activity going on, there were other American expatriates, prominent amongst them Ezra Pound. But there was also a tradition of what was then considered to be radical literature, particularly Bloomsbury. It wasn't long before he got to know Virginia Woolf and Leonard Woolf, for example. Eliot met them through Bertrand Russell who had been his tutor at Harvard.

QUENTIN BELL (Author and Art Critic): Leonard and Virginia clearly fascinated him. I don't think he'd met people quite like that before. He'd met the wild men, the people who shouted at the tops of their voices, like Wyndham Lewis, for whom he had great admiration. In England, when Eliot began to publish, many of the people whom we think of as Bloomsbury were still potential rather than actual writers. People like Virginia were just beginning to show their strength. She and Eliot, so to speak, grew up together. They both had their way to make in the world.

KERMODE: If you think of Eliot and Pound, a couple of young Americans in a strange country in the middle of a war, nobody knew much about them, cared much about them, and what they wanted to do was to change the whole future of not just one art, but several arts, because the Vortex movement was interested in painting, sculpture, all the rest of it.

ELIOT: It is the function of all art to give us some perception of an order in life by imposing an order upon it. The painter works by selection, combination, and emphasis, among the elements of the visual world, the musician in the world of sound. No writer, however skillful, can say anything important for his own time or for any future time in a style, however good, that belongs to a past age.

11

KERMODE: He was very keen on the new, but it was always the new which had a special and vital relationship to the old.

ELIOT: It's no more use trying to be traditional than it is trying to be original.

KERMODE: So he came up with a notion which I think is based on the idea of the canon of the Bible, that you have a number of sacred works. You have to think of these, Dante, for example, Sophocles, Homer, whoever they are, Shakespeare, as out of time in some way. As not existing in the past, but existing in some temporal medium in which a new work can join them. When it joins them, they're all altered.

SPENDER: He was raiding tradition, he was raiding the past, which was sympathetic to him, or seemed relevant to him, to the present, and turning it into his own kind of art.

KERMODE: He writes the kind of poetry which requires us, I think, to see it as containing many bewildering mirrors. I think that's a very important clue to the way his mind worked--sexual expression of course. But he uses it in a letter to Stephen Spender. "But there must first of all be the bewildering mirror." There must be a surrender of personality to a particular line or even a particular word. Then you must withdraw from it and consider what has happened. And then if you like you can try to say something about it.

SPENDER: He was deliberately using a kind of idiom which was contemporary and modern. And in that sense he was a very modern writer.

KERMODE: They spent a lot of time in music halls. It was very much the thing to do for poets. People like Ford Maddox Ford claims to have edited THE ENGLISH REVIEW in a box at the music hall. He

wrote a tribute on the death of Marie Lloyd, the great performer, which he thought so well of that he printed it in his selected essays.

ELIOT: When we are in a state of innocence, there is a continuous reciprocal influence of colloquial speech on writing and of writing on colloquial speech. Writers must take their language as they find it spoken. Mark Twain, at least in HUCKLEBERRY FINN, reveals himself to be one of those rare writers who have brought their language up to date and in so doing purified the dialect of the tribe.

SPENDER: He was not so much English as a Londoner, I would say. He really had a passion for London. When Virginia Woolf referred to him as the American all-time, you know, there's a kind of amusement about it. You know, this perfect Englishman who speaks with a better accent than any of us the King's English is an American. But as a Londoner he enjoyed his roles. And he enjoyed the role of bank clerk. Actually he wasn't a bank clerk, he was quite important in the bank. Although Bloomsbury, of course, considers him the humblest of bank clerks. Aldous Huxley once described to me that if he visited Eliot he went several stories below ground, and the only attraction was the heels of typists walking across the sort of glass pavements above the office.

ACKROYD: This is the period when he was writing "The Wasteland." So you have the double image of this man writing what was considered to be the most modern poem in the English language--and some people still think it is--at the same time as Eliot was putting on the perfect uniform of the banking clerk and going to the city every morning. His hours were regular; I think they were nine to five. Then he would go home and try to write.

SPENDER: On the very first occasion I met Eliot I asked him whether I was right to have the impression from reading "The Wasteland"

that civilization was completely collapsing. And he said yes, he did think this. And I remember saying, well, how do you think it will end? He said it will end with people killing each other in the streets.

CHIARI: The age of "The Wasteland" is the age which had just finished a war meant to end all wars, and yet it was a fiasco. The Treaty of Versailles was not working, thousands of dead in the trenches, rats in the alley, rats in the mind. Wind, the wind is always a kind of disturbance, wind at the doors, at the windows. Signs of tension. "The Wasteland" is, if you wish, a drama, with many voices and every passage can be read dramatically as embodying a character. And he lived his poems in his head.

ACKROYD: Eliot in "The Wasteland" used what you might call anthropological myth, and in particular a book by Jessie Weston called FROM RITUAL TO ROMANCE. But I think for him such themes were very much convenient vehicles which he could take up and put down when he had no more use for them. Certainly "The Wasteland," it would be very difficult to see any coherent mythic formula running through it.

CHIARI: "The Wasteland," if you wish, is a kind of ragbag in which everything, all his memories, were coalesced into one poem. There's no great sorcery in saying that this could easily relate to his relationship with his wife.

SPENDER: His marriage to Vivien Haigh-Wood was extremely unfortunate and unhappy. The core of "The Wasteland" is really the dialogue between two lovers who can't speak to each other, and carry on a tragic conversation of thoughts.

ACKROYD: There's talk about the hysterical woman who says what is that noise, what is the wind beneath the door. And some people have pointed to the fact that Eliot in a sense is talking about his

wife. But I think that's only partly true. I think he was using theatrical devices to a certain extent. He certainly showed that particular poem to Vivien, and she put "wonderful" in the margin of it, so it doesn't sound to me as though she was offended or upset by these references. At the time "The Wasteland" was written, they were quite close still. I think they both needed each other. They both were rather nervous, high-strung people, and they sort of played off each other's nerves. At this point he was a very deeply divided and deeply unhappy man. He was living with a wife who was slowly going mad, but at the same time they were almost accomplices against the world. He was suffering what we can only call nervous crises. He did in fact suffer a nervous breakdown and was sent to Lausanne for a while to recuperate. He went to Margate on doctor's orders before he travelled to Switzerland, and he sat in a shelter by the beach and played the mandolin which Vivien had given him, and sketched people. They were sort of made for each other. They moved together like sleepwalkers.

THE WASTELAND 1922

Excerpt from I. THE BURIAL OF THE DEAD

April is the cruellest month, breeding
 Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
 Memory and desire, stirring
 Dull roots with spring rain.
 Winter kept us warm, covering
 Earth in forgetful snow, feeding
 A little life with dried tubers.
 Summer surprised us, coming over the Starnbergersee
 With a shower of rain; we stopped in the colonnade,
 And went on in sunlight, into the Hofgarten,
 And drank coffee, and talked for an hour.
 Bin gar keine Russin, stamm' aus Litauen, echt deutsch.
 And when we were children, staying at the arch-duke's,

my cousin's, he took me out on a sled,
 And I was frightened. He said, Marie,
 Marie, hold on tight. And down we went.
 In the mountains, there you feel free.
 I read, much of the night, and go south in the winter.

Frisch weht der Wind
Der Heimat zu
Mein Irisch Kind
Wo weilest du?

'You gave me hyacinths first a year ago:
 'They called me the hyacinth girl.'
 --Yet when we came back, late, from the hyacinth garden,
 Your arms full, and your hair wet, I could not
 Speak, and my eyes failed, I was neither
 Living nor dead, and I knew nothing,
 Looking into the heart of light, the silence,
Oed' und leer das Meer.

KERMODE: The use of Tristan in the poem is intended, I think, to keep in our minds all through the whole myth of disastrous romantic love. The Tristan and Isolde story represents sexual infatuation as being as disastrous as madness. Eliot's leading critical ideas of the tradition, of the necessary separation of the man who suffers from the artist who creates, all these ideas have precedent in Romantic thought. And the idea too of poems as complex images which are not necessarily connected with rational discourse. "The Wasteland" is a highly developed form of Romantic poetry. Romantic thinkers and poets were very interested in the fragment. And what is "The Wasteland" but the kind of apotheosis of the poetry of the fragment.

SPENDER: When I first read Eliot I read "The Wasteland," and I suppose I was an undergraduate, and it appeared to me a kind of crazy work. I mean I think that we thought of it rather as contemporaries of Allen Ginsberg thought of "Howl." It seemed in a way a kind of hidden, obscure confession. He also wrote about subjects which were not considered poetic. And Eliot stunningly wrote in the kind of language which

people actually used in conversation, in the street.

KERMODE: It used to be called "He'd Do the Police in Different Voices." Of course there are many voices in it. The voices of men, voices of women, the voice of Tiresias, and a completely abstract voice in the last greatest section of the poem. All of this did no doubt point towards some kind of dramatic power. Because we do recognize that all these voices really do belong to one voice, the voice of Eliot.

Excerpt from II. A GAME OF CHESS

When Lil's husband got demobbed, I said--
 I didn't mince my words, I said to her myself,
 HURRY UP PLEASE ITS TIME
 Now Albert's coming back, make yourself a bit smart.
 He'll want to know what you done with that money he gave you
 To get yourself some teeth. He did, I was there.
 You have them all out, Lil, and get a nice set,
 He said, I swear, I can't bear to look at you.
 And no more can't I, I said, and think of poor Albert.
 He's been in the army four years, he wants a good time,
 And if you don't give it him, there's others will, I said.
 Oh is there, she said. Something o'that, I said.
 Then I'll now who to thank, she said, and give me a straight look.
 HURRY UP PLEASE IT'S TIME
 If you don't like it you can get on with it, I said.
 Others can pick and choose if you can't.
 But if Albert makes off, it won't be for lack of telling.
 You ought to be ashamed, I said, to look so antique.
 (And her only thirty-one.)
 I can't help it, she said, pulling a long face,
 It's them pills I took, to bring it off, she said.
 (She's had five already, and nearly died of young George.)
 The chemist said it would be all right, but I've never been the same.
 You are a proper fool, I said.
 Well, if Albert won't leave you alone, there it is, I said,
 What you get married for if you don't want children?
 HURRY UP PLEASE ITS TIME
 Well, that Sunday Albert was home, they had a hot gammon,
 And they asked me in to dinner, to get the beauty of it hot--
 HURRY UP PLEASE ITS TIME
 HURRY UP PLEASE ITS TIME

Goonight Bill. Goonight Lou. Goonight May. Goonight.
Ta ta. Goonight. Goonight.
Good night, ladies, and good night, sweet ladies, good night,
good night.

DAME IRENE WORTH (Actress): Eliot was not a great writer for nothing. He sometimes reminds me of Synge, who was said to have put his ear to the floor of the pubs and simply wrote what he heard. Eliot's observation of people in society was extremely fine, very accurately observed.

ACKROYD: While he was at Lausanne he wrote the last sections of the poem, which are some of the finest sections. And in a sense, what you have here is a poem which is holding Eliot together as much as Eliot is holding it together. It's a poem which came out of nervous collapse, but also it's much more than just a poem about a nervous breakdown. It's a poem about the state of the whole world, the society in that period.

SPENDER: Eliot considered the last part of "The Wasteland" to be the best part of the poem, partly because it was almost automatic writing. People who are not poets talk about inspiration, but if you are a poet you usually realize how very very rarely you actually are inspired, and it seems to flow out without conscious effort on your part. Writing the end of "The Wasteland," all of this flowed out faster than he could write it down. It was a sort of proof to him of inspiration and authenticity.

ACKROYD: Eliot gave Pound the manuscript of what they called the "Ur Wasteland," which is the "Wasteland" we have now. But also much more verse. Much of it was parody, much of it was pastiche, much of it was soliloquy. What happened was that Pound understood instinctively the music of Eliot. He understood the cadences, the

rhythms of Eliot. So what he did was he took that poem and with his red pencil he excised what he considered to be unnecessary stuff.

CHIARI: He gave it to Pound, and Pound cut off all what you would call the unnecessary story line, or recitation, and left the block of "The Wasteland," the block therefore of feelings, side by side, so that you have a kind of collage.

KERMODE: He'd been pushing the poem about, adding bits, taking bits out. And then in Lausanne, the whole of the fifth section, "What The Thunder Said," just came, as if willed it. And Pound knew this, Pound just recognized it, I mean, he didn't touch a word in it. That was fine. "Stet" is all Pound has to say about the fifth section.

Excerpt from V. WHAT THE THUNDER SAID

Ganga was sunken, and the limp leaves
 Waited for rain, while the black clouds
 Gathered far distant, over Himavant,
 The jungle crouched, humped in silence,
 Then spoke the thunder
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Datta: what have we given?
 My friend, blood shaking my heart
 The awful daring of a moment's surrender

I sat upon the shore
 Fishing, with the arid plain behind me
 Shall I at least set my lands in order?
 London Bridge is falling down falling down
Poi s'ascose nel foco che gli affina
quando fiam uti chelidon--O swallow swallow
 Le Prince d'Aquitaine a la tour abolie
 These fragments I have shored against my ruins
 Why then Ile fit you. Hieronymo's mad againe.
 Datta. Dayadhvam. Damyata.

Shantih shantih shantih

SPENDER: You can't really distinguish the subject from the language. You might say the language is the subject. And the language is this kind of biblical language, although in a modern idiom. "The Wasteland" is about the voice that underlies everything, which is the voice of religion, although it doesn't become fully realized in "The Wasteland." Empson once said to me that Eliot amazed him, because Eliot really did have a medieval mind, that he did really think of a religion in which there was hell and damnation. All these things which people from the Middle Ages believed in were very real to him.

ELIOT: Some men have had a deep conviction of their destiny, and in that conviction have prospered. But when they cease to act as an instrument, and think of themselves as the active source of what they do, their pride is punished by disaster. The concept of destiny leaves us with a mystery. But it is a mystery not contrary to reason, for it implies that the world and the course of human history have meaning. Only in humility, charity and purity can we be prepared to receive the grace of God without which human operations are veiled.

KERMODE: By the time the "Ash-Wednesday" poems were written he had a religious commitment, which he had not had at the time of "The Wasteland." But they're only part of a much more complicated evolution. I suppose one could say that the voice print of "The Wasteland" is still there, but the difference is clear to everybody. There's a sort of incantatory, almost liturgical quality which is new too.

Excerpt from ASH-WEDNESDAY 1930

Because I do not hope to turn again
 Because I do not hope
 Because I do not hope to turn
 Desiring this man's gift and that man's scope
 I no longer strive to strive towards such things
 (Why should the aged eagle stretch its wings?)
 Why should I mourn
 The vanished power of the usual reign?

CHIARI: In the world in which he was living, life was indeed meaningless. You doubted everything. Religion was ebbing away under the impact of science and materialism, and Eliot was very conscious of that. He strove very hard to try to make his contribution toward the maintenance of religion in modern society. By the end of the twenties, he had found again his faith, and he chose the High Anglican Church, which is very close to Catholicism.

ACKROYD: It happened in 1927, after a period of instruction in the faith. He did the formal act of being converted to the Church of England. The purposes of this were twofold: one, the Church of England offered Eliot some hope for himself, and I think Eliot needed some resting place. But secondly, it attached Eliot to the English community and to English culture.

KERMODE: Hierarchical society appealed very strongly to him, and he loathed all forms of dissent. Politically, this made him a Tory of a very pure sort. He believed in elites, he believed in class, he believed that people should not move out of their class. You might call him a philosophical imperialist, and therefore a royalist, and a conservative, and all of the other things that follow. The Civil War became for him the critical doctrine of the dissociation of sensibility. And you can see why to someone of the age of Marvell or Milton that the execution of the King really did mean dividing time in two. The "kingdom old was being cast into another mold," to use Marvell's words. So it was one of those once for all historical events, and you could use it, as Eliot did, I think, to give an exact date for the end of a society which it was possible in some way to approve.

BELL: He enjoyed the company of the dignitaries of the church,

I think he found it pleasant. Leonard Woolf once went so far as to say that Eliot's conversion was simply a way of becoming a bit more English.

ACKROYD: He was offered a job at the firm that was then called Faber & Guire. He was by then a well-known poet, and in a sense Faber made Eliot. It made Eliot into the guru of the culture of his period. He was responsible for publishing much of the verse we now consider to be the best English verse, Auden, Spender, Hughes, and so on. One of the strange characteristics of Eliot's career is the sense in which he reverted to an almost priestly or teacherly role, which he'd inherited from his Unitarian background. Eliot was commissioned to write "Murder in the Cathedral," and he took up the commission willingly. For him "Murder in the Cathedral" and succeeding verse plays offered a double advantage. It allowed him to practice poetry, but it also offered a convenient home for his religious sensibility.

Excerpt from MURDER IN THE CATHEDRAL 1935

Who are you? As you do not know me, I do not need a name.
And as you know me, that is why I come. You know me, but
have never seen my face. To meet before was never time nor
place. Traitor! Traitor!

ELIOT: If I set out to write a play, I start by an act of choice. I settle upon a particular emotion or situation, out of which characters and a plot will emerge. And then lines of poetry may come into being, not from the original impulse, but from a secondary stimulation of the unconscious mind. The effect of great verse drama should be to make us believe that there are moments in life when poetry is the natural form of expression of ordinary men and women.

WORTH: The idea of a play in poetry was a terrific challenge, to make that contemporary play still in verse, and many people resented

it. But Eliot has said in an essay somewhere that the height of emotion is always expressed in poetry. "The Cocktail Party" builds up into the most incredible hothouse of emotion. After the enormous success of "The Cocktail Party" there was an enormous influx of reporters from America, and I remember very well all these light bulbs--this was in 1949--all these light bulbs, these flash bulbs all lying all over the stagelike thousands of little eggs.

ACKROYD: In the forties and the fifties, which was the time of his preeminent fame, he was a man who seemed almost close to death. He did not seem to be able to enjoy his fame. But at the very end of his life, he married a lady called Valerie Fletcher, his secretary from Faber's. This was the consummation he had always been waiting for. He was revived. He found new comfort, new security. I've always believed that he found in Miss Fletcher what he had found as a child in his family in St. Louis, Missouri. He found feminine comfort and protection. He said at the end of his life that he had paid too high a price to be a poet, that he had suffered too much for what he had achieved. The interest in drama sprang from a frustration about his powers as a pure poet. There were often periods in his life where he didn't think he'd ever write poetry again.

ELIOT: So then the war came, you see, and then one had other duties, and things to do, and one was here and there, and one didn't have time, connected time for writing a play, so I turned to writing the "Quartets." They came in, they occupied the war years very well, I was able, in the conditions in which I was living, to write poems of that type and that length.

SPENDER: I wrote to him at the time and asked him whether he had been listening to the last five quartets of Beethoven, particularly the one in A minor, when he wrote the "Four Quartets." And he

wrote back and said yes, he had, and he'd played it again and again. He thought this expressed a kind of mystery, and suffering, he said, suffering, which was unattainable to him, but this was what he hoped to attain in poetry.

KERMODE: He aimed at absolute transparency. There was no flesh, as it were. The imaginative realm of poetry was so pure, so transparent, that there was nothing between the eye and what it was referred to.

ACKROYD: The most striking characteristic of the "Four Quartets" is the way in which these sequences are very carefully structured. They echo and reecho each other, and one sequence in each poem, as it were, echoes its companion sequence in the next poem. I think its formal characteristic is in some ways its most striking characteristic. The "Four Quartets" are poems about a nation and about a culture which is very severely under threat. And in a sense, you could describe the "Four Quartets" as a poem of memory but not the memory of one individual, but the memory of a whole civilization.

CHIARI: The present is best when it is laden with the past, or with dreams of the future. Because then you can bring imagination. The present is perception, it's what you see, what you feel. What you see and what you feel is never half as good as what you can imagine. And it is when you bring imagination to bear on the present, as Dante does it, that you can have great poetry.

ACKROYD: What you have in these poems is a sense of Eliot trying to return to some sort of rootedness in life, whether his own life or that of the culture he attached himself to. So the whole of the "Four Quartets" in a sense becomes a hymn to the memory of an imagined past. You get the sense of nostalgia for childhood certainties.

ELIOT: It is ultimately the function of art, in imposing a credible order on ordinary reality, and thereby eliciting some perception of an order in reality, to bring us to a condition of serenity, stillness, and reconciliation, and then leave us, as Virgil left Dante, to proceed toward the region where that guide can avail no farther.

Excerpt from FOUR QUARTETS

LITTLE GIDDING

What we call the beginning is often the end
 And to make an end is to make a beginning.
 The end is where we start from. And every phrase
 And sentence that is right (where every word is at home,
 Taking its place to support the others,
 The word neither diffident nor ostentatious,
 An easy commerce of the old and the new,
 The common word exact without vulgarity,
 The formal word precise but not pedantic,
 The complete consort dancing together)
 Every phrase and every sentence is an end and a beginning,
 Every poem an epitaph.

We shall not cease from exploration
 And the end of all our exploring
 Will be to arrive where we started
 And know the place for the first time.
 Through the unknown, remembered gate
 When the last of earth left to discover
 Is that which was the beginning;
 At the source of the longest river
 The voice of the hidden waterfall
 And the children in the apple-tree
 Not known, because not looked for
 But heard, half-heard, in the stillness
 Between two waves of the sea.
 Quick now, here, now, always--
 A condition of complete simplicity
 (Costing not less than everything)
 And all shall be well and
 All manner of thing shall be well
 When the tongues of flame are in-folded
 Into the crowned knot of fire
 And the fire and the rose are one.

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