THE ART OF
T. S. ELIOT

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The more immediate source is a short course of lectures delivered in the University of Oxford in the spring of 1948. For these lectures and for the writing of this book I did not re-read any of Mr Eliot’s critics, but it will be plain that I owe much, even if no definite reference is made, to what I have learnt from them in the past. I should like to make here a general acknowledgment to Professor F. O. Matthiessen and Dr F. R. Leavis in particular, who many years ago helped me to a better understanding of Mr Eliot’s work. I hope they will accept this expression of gratitude in place of specific acknowledgments of agreement or disagreement.

The critic to whom I owe most, however, is Mr Eliot himself, whose criticism I have drawn on largely to interpret his poetry, and have had in mind even where no direct quotation is made. I have to thank Mr Eliot and Messrs Faber and Faber Ltd for permission to quote from his poetry and prose.

I should like to express my gratitude to Dr Janet Spens for stimulus and encouragement, and to Mrs Duncan-Jones of the University of Birmingham for discussions going back
over many years, and particularly for helping me towards an understanding of Ash Wednesday. My greatest debt is to Mr John Hayward who first suggested I should write this book and has been most generous in his assistance in both large and small matters.

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THE APPROACH TO THE MEANING

And approach to the meaning restores the experience
In a different form, beyond any meaning
We can assign to happiness.

The Dry Salvages

‘After sharpe shoures’, quod Pees  ‘moste shene is the sonne;
Is no weder warmer than after watery cloudes.
Ne no loue leuere ne leuer frendes,
Than after werre and wo whan Loue and Pees be maistres.
Was neuere werre in this worlde ne wykkednesse so kene,
That ne Loue, and hym luste to laughynge ne broughte,
And Pees thorw pacience  alle perilles stopped . . .
For impossible is no thyng to hym that is almyghty.’

Piers Plowman, B xviii

But that his care conserveth
As Time, so all Time’s honours too,
Regarding still what heaven should do
And not what earth deserveth.

BEN JONSON:

The Golden Age Restored

THE APPROACH TO THE MEANING

Each of the four poems takes its title from a place, and
the experience of each is expressed in imagery which arises
from a deeply felt sense of place and time. In Burnt Norton,
as has been said, the place has no particular associations.
The time has no particular significance either; it is any
summer afternoon. East Coker is a Somersethshire village,
from which in the seventeenth century Andrew Eliot set
out for the New World. The poet is staying there in the late
summer, and his mind is full of the thought of his family
and ancestors. The Dry Salvages are a group of rocky
islands off the coast of Massachusetts, part of the landscape
of the poet’s childhood, and part of the new experience of
his ancestors after they had crossed the seas. This poem is
not about a place visited, but a place once lived in, remem­
bered with the peculiar vividness with which we remember
the landscape of our childhood. Little Gidding, on the other
hand, has historic not personal associations. It is a village in
Huntingdonshire to which Nicholas Ferrar and his family
retired in order to lead a common life of devotion. It is
visited by the poet on a winter’s afternoon. He goes there
to pray in the chapel.

Burnt Norton is a land-locked poem; its whole feeling is
enclosed. It builds up by suggestion rather than statement
a picture of a house and formal garden, and of a way of life
which is social and civilized. The picture gradually given
is of shrubbery and alley-walk, rose-garden, box-edgings,
and a pool. There are sunflowers in the borders and clematis
hanging from the wall and clipped yews. The references to
dust on a bowl of rose-leaves, to a Chinese jar, and to the
music of the violin give the same impression of a way of
life that is cultured and refined. The image used at the
climax of the children laughing among the leaves of the
garden is an image of human happiness, of ‘la douceur de la
vie’. It has been suggested to me that the setting of the
poem and the image of the laughing hidden children may have been caught from Rudyard Kipling’s story *They*. The children in that story are both ‘what might have been and what has been’, appearing to those who have lost their children in the house of a blind woman who has never borne a child.

The poem opens with a meditation on the relation of past, present and future, and on the persistence in memory of what might have been as well as of what has been. The first image that occurs is of footfalls that

\[
\text{echo in the memory} \\
\text{Down the passage which we did not take} \\
\text{Towards the door we never opened} \\
\text{Into the rose-garden.}
\]

What the purpose of such memories is the poet cannot say; they disturb the ‘dust on a bowl of rose-leaves’, stirring something dead and buried in the present. The garden also is full of echoes, and in the garden what might have been and what has been, for a moment, are. In stillness, silence and light, what never was, and what was, is, for a space, real; the dream of innocent human happiness is felt again as truth. Then the moment passes. The bird’s call, which had been an invitation, becomes a warning: ‘Go, go, go, said the bird.’

The second movement opens with a passage of great poetic beauty, in which the unity of experience is conveyed by the juxtaposition of contraries. This passage is not susceptible of too close analysis. Its opening line: ‘Garlic and sapphires in the mud’, inspired by Mallarmé’s jewel imagery, is an image of the variety contained in a single sense impression: the soft and the hard, vegetable and mineral, the living and growing and the petrified and glittering, the common and the precious, the scented and the scentless. The ‘trilling wire in the blood’, the nervous tingling in our veins, runs on below old wounds, healed and not healed, and the movement within our bodies, which are ever in flux, is akin to the movement we perceive among the stars, drifting in the milky way like the atoms of Democritus, and to the flow of summer sap in the trees. We are at the same time aware of the dance of light upon the leaves from above, and of the pursuit of boar by boarhound below, and of this same pursuit and flight among the stars. At once all is flux, yet all is pattern; and from the thought of pattern the poet turns to think of how we apprehend pattern: from a point. This ‘still point’ is the theme of the second half of the movement, where the relation of stillness and movement, of the moment that is not in time and of living in time, is considered. We come back at the close to memory with which the meditation began.

In the third movement there is an abrupt change. We have left the garden and the images of nature for a world which is in every way different. The first paragraph reminds us of *The Waste Land’s* vision of the crowd flowing over London Bridge, the slaves of time, each one imprisoned in his own solitude. Here we are in the twilight world of the London Tube. This image of passengers is central to *Four Quartets*; it occurs at this point in each of the first three poems. At this first use of the image we are shown travellers borne along in what is neither daylight nor darkness, their ‘time-ridden faces’ ‘filled with fancies and empty of meaning’. Passing from one station to another, they find no meaning in the present, it is only a stop between where

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1 Mr Eliot seems to have had in mind two phrases of Mallarmé: ‘Tonnerre et rubis aux moyeux’ from the poem ‘M’introduire dans ton histoire’, and ‘basant bonne et rubis’ from the sonnet ‘Le Tombeau de Charles Baudelaire’.

I believe the passage beginning ‘At the still point of the turning world’ owes something to the description of the magical dance of the Tarot figures in *The Greater Trumps* by Charles Williams.