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Signifying Nothing: Plenitude and  
Vacancy in T.S Eliot's  
*Four Quartets* and *The Waste Land*.

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis focuses on nothingness (vacancy) in T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets* and *The Waste Land*. Nothingness is both a theme and a technique of Eliot's poetry. As a theme nothingness may be elucidated by both existential and mystical models since both theories have nothingness as a central theoretical concept. As a technique nothingness invites the reader's response by suggesting the possibility of final meaning, simultaneously demanding and undermining interpretation. Existing in a mutually exclusive and mutually defining relationship with nothingness is the "plenitude" of signification. An underlying aim of Eliot's poems becomes to capture in language the paradoxical combination of vacancy and plenitude which will allow a subject to transcend the relativity of signification and, in the case of *Four Quartets*, know God and Self directly, or in the case of *The Waste Land*, to finalise meaning.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

FQ	<i>Four Quartets</i>
BN	<i>Burnt Norton</i>
EC	<i>East Coker</i>
DR	<i>The Dry Salvages</i>
LG	<i>Little Gidding</i>
WL	<i>The Waste Land</i>
BD	"The Burial of the Dead"
GC	"A Game of Chess"
FS	"The Fire Sermon"
DW	"Death By Water"
TS	"What the Thunder said"

## INTRODUCTION

The words in the title of this thesis are borrowed. "Signifying nothing" is, of course, the closing line of Macbeth's speech in V.iii., a quote which is apt in many ways. "Plenitude" and "Vacancy" are Eliot's words (*Burnt Norton* 99) and I use them here as general terms synonymous on the one hand with the density of language, symbols, and allusions in the world-text, and on the other hand with the emptiness, nothingness, or absolute, which remains beyond signification. The argument of this thesis is that nothingness, in its various forms, is central to the poetry of T.S. Eliot. I examine nothingness from several perspectives: mystical, existential, and mythological, and from the point of view of reader-response criticism, particularly that of Wolfgang Iser, which itself has the gap or indeterminacy in the text (another kind of nothingness) as a central theoretical concept.

In Chapter One I explore the possibilities of interpreting *Four Quartets* (FQ) from both mystical and existential points of view in order to show that the poem itself seems not to choose one over the other, but instead argues towards the equation of the two apparent opposites. What is at issue in FQ is not how transcendence is achieved, but rather, whether or not it can be achieved. The paradox of the relationship between necessarily relative, fluctuating discourse, where knowledge (including knowledge of self) is created, and absolute reality (or nothingness) which is necessarily beyond discourse, is a problem shared by both mysticism and existentialism. Both the religious and the philosophical perspective are integrated in Eliot's unique treatment of this paradox. Parallel to the thematic duality of transcendence and immanence is the stylistic alternation between stasis and flow, through which Eliot attempts to

create the Hypostasis which will resolve the dilemma, and unite the mystical and existential solutions to the same problem; the problem of authority and authenticity is the problem of meaning.

In Chapter Two I argue that *The Wasteland* (WL) relies heavily upon themes and techniques of emptiness. Like FQ, WL deals with the problem of meaning. Where FQ concentrates on personal identity and religious truth, WL is more abstract. The latter poem focuses on semiotic and hermeneutical processes themselves, especially with regard to literature. Emptiness is a key element in these processes because it is emptiness which ensures the possibility of choice, and motivates the continued questioning of the text. The first part of Chapter Two examines the various ways in which Eliot's text produces emptiness as a stylistic phenomenon. In contrast with the vacancy of WL's style is the plenitude of its symbolic content. In the second half of this chapter I discuss the development of symbolic networks in WL. As the chain of allusion from any one point in Eliot's poem draws the reader further into the text and the tradition behind it, and the self-reflexivity of the allusions binds each part of the poem in a hermeneutic circle, an interrelated network of signs grows.

Chapter Three follows the development of one key symbolic network in WL, namely, that of myth. It is particularly the myth of the grail which is central to the organisation of WL. Silence, another form of vacancy, appears as a recurring theme in the grail myth. This silence is a way of suggesting the presence of fundamental experience or absolute meaning, which cannot be expressed by an always incomplete sign or network of signs. The grail becomes a symbol of the failure of symbols, and paradoxically, of that which it fails to signify. As both an object and

a symbol the grail unites the unsignifiable with signification (the timelessness with time and so on); it is a still point.

Throughout my thesis I assume a pre-understanding of Bradley's division of experience into three stages: immediate, relational, and transcendent. Brooker and Bentley describe these stages as follows:

Immediate experience is pure consciousness; it is consciousness but consciousness of nothing; it comes prior to intellectual consciousness. It is a state in which subject and object have not yet separated into related entities. Relational experience is intellectual consciousness, the state in which structuring activities must be continued from moment to moment entirely from within the closed system of one's experiencing consciousness. Transcendent experience is the result of a mode of consciousness capable of perceiving both diffusion and unity by contriving a unifying point of view.<sup>1</sup>

Emptiness does not stand alone as the informing principle of Eliot's work. In all cases where emptiness occurs it is in contrast to plenitude. The movement of both FQ and WL is towards reconciling the two incompatibles. This must occur at a meeting place which is neither one nor the other: "Neither plenitude nor vacancy" (BN 1.99). Brooker and Bentley argue that the gaps in WL represent a fourth dimension or transcendent perspective where these opposites are reconciled by a reader who accepts the possibility of a both/and relationship which undercuts the paradox of Hypostasis.<sup>2</sup> I believe that this might be Eliot's ideal, but that both FQ and WL recognise the impossibility of this situation. In FQ he argues not that transcendence is the goal, but that transcendence and immediate experience equally realise a position of vacancy in which the possibilities of synthesis ending in transcendent knowledge and contradiction ending in aporia themselves co-exist. WL depicts the impossibility of a knowing self (and hence a reader) outside the relational stage of experience. Transcending this stage leads into emptiness which

**may** be unifying. If we accept the possibility of the both/and relationship necessary for Bradley's third stage, however, we must also accept that transcendence is both a unified perspective, and no perspective at all. The gaps in Eliot's text, thematic and structural, must therefore remain nothingness, which cannot be transcendent, but exists somewhere between transcendent and immanent as a point of intersection. From the perspective of a poet, a poem, and a reader, who interact only within the relational discourse of the world-text, this dimension must remain an unresolved paradox. The transcendence that the reader of Eliot's poems must achieve is not a transcendence of relational discourse but elevation into awareness of the reading process, and thus into recognition of our entrapment in language.