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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.¹

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.² 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.

CHAPTER ONE: *FOUR QUARTETS*

1.1 *Four Quartets* and Mysticism: The Empty God

...whichever direction you go ... the crudest experience and the abstrusest theory end in identity, and this identity, I call the absolute. If you choose to call it nothing I will not dispute the point. But whichever it is, it is both beginning and end.

3

Contrary to Murray's claim in *T.S. Eliot and Mysticism* that the mystical attitude of *Four Quartets* can be characterised as a doctrine of Transcendence (258), stillness not motion, and a rejection of Bergsonian philosophy (36-37), I will argue that Eliot rejects neither the sceptical, irrationalist, existential tradition (of which Nietzsche was an ambassador and Bergson an apogee), nor the Neoplatonic Christian doctrine of Transcendence. Rather, Eliot effects a synthesis of these two traditions ("This is the one way, / and the other is the same" BN III ll.123-24), so that his concept of God is of an Absolute immanent in the process of history but one which, nonetheless, remains beyond conceptual thought and language. Eliot asserts the reality of both an horrific, changing world and a transcendent Absolute, but for Eliot each assertion collapses into the other. I do not deal with the validity of this argument, or present my own philosophical views as a solution to Eliot's poetry, but merely suggest that Murray's reading is selective, and that the evidence of the poem does not support his conclusion that Eliot rejects the theory of Bergson "out of hand" (36) in favour of the doctrine of Transcendence or overt commitment to the *via negativa*.

In FQ T.S. Eliot fuses a style of "abstruse theory" and one of "crude experience". Generally the former can be said to represent the

Neoplatonic way, and the latter to represent the Bergsonian, but this useful binaristic division belies the polymerous nature of Eliot's technique, which synthesises the two in a stylistic parallel to the union of the Neoplatonic and Bergsonian philosophies. This duality is parallel to others that have been noticed in FQ. For example, Romantic/Victorian and moral/aesthetic dualisms are discussed by C.K. Stead⁴, who also describes a stylistic dialectic between imagistic and discursive language which is similar to my own divisions of style. Attention to style and structure reveals that the poem is, from the beginning, questioning the Neoplatonic mystical tradition, even as it indulges in the effects of that tradition. By recognising this we avoid Murray's problem, in part three of his book, of explaining why Eliot seems to be "questioning ... his own original theory" (105). What Eliot's own original theory was we cannot know, but the theory of the poem is never as dogmatic or didactic as Murray supposes. I intend to use Murray's book as a springboard for my own investigation of *Four Quartets* by providing criticism of his analysis and building that criticism into an alternative reading. My criticism of Murray is twofold.

First is a criticism of his method. Since it is a small, but important, point I will deal with it in its entirety here. Despite his regular claims that "the philosophy or *mysticism* of the poem cannot be reduced merely to the poet's own abstract theorising prior to composition, or to certain abstract, intellectual theories of the poet's chosen masters in philosophy" (38), Murray continues to rely heavily upon knowledge of Eliot having read, criticised, or heard about Neoplatonic, mystic and Christian works, within a similar time-frame to the composition of FQ, as evidence of his interpretation of FQ as a mystical poem. Very rarely is the poem the starting point for Murray's analysis of *Four Quartets*.

One of the major preoccupations of *Four Quartets* is the difficulty of language. This is an element of the poem which Murray largely ignores in his pursuit of the mystical sources and nature of Eliot's poetry; this is my second criticism of Murray's work. Although Murray recognises "the dialectical process of statement and counter-statement in the poem" (53) he does not explore in depth the way in which this dialectical form works at both micro- and macro-structural levels. Such an exploration reveals the relationship of the mystical way to the difficulties of language. Although it may be claimed, quite reasonably, that in any study of literature limits must be set in order to focus on a certain aspect or area, there are cases in which we must yet be careful to observe elements of the work which modify our interpretation. *Four Quartets* is definitely one such case, since language is not only a key to understanding the mystical view which Eliot puts forth but a part of that mystical view itself. Also, a key to understanding Eliot's method is to see what effect it has on the **reader**. It is not enough, that is, to show that Eliot's method is mystical (which it is not entirely), we must also show how that method works.

My thesis, as far as FQ is concerned, is that transcendence and immanence collapse into each other at a point where signification is at issue. The hardship of gaining union with the One expressed in FQ is a problem directly related to language, for it is a union which requires the connection of a self and a world which are constituted in language with a divinity which is essentially outside signification. Hence, the incursion of that divinity into the world is paradoxical and the elevation of a self outside the world to the place beyond where the divinest dwells requires the destruction of that self. This loss of self is of course what the *via negativa* requires ("In order to arrive at being everything / Desire to be nothing". St. John of the Cross, quoted in Murray 89), yet the possibility of knowing

God once the knowing self is destroyed is, at least, an unsatisfactory kind of knowledge, if not an impossibility. It is a paradox similar to that of committing suicide. The world is a flow of infinite signification in which meaning is never finalised, a world of infinite possibilities. In this world Hermetic semiosis is the rule; every sign signifies every other sign, every Self is constituted in language, a collection of signs which cannot be delimited, since its context is ever expanding. By commitment to the world one becomes assimilated, indistinguishable (since signifying All denies differentiation), and so one also signifies nothing. By "suppressing desire" and "denying the game of life"⁵ or as Eliot puts it in BN, by descending into the "World not world / Internal darkness... / Evacuation... / Inoperancy..." (III ll.116-121) one can transcend the flux and uncertainty. By doing so, however, the Self goes outside signification (or context) and renders itself meaningless; signifying Nothing. In nothingness we must recognise two possibilities, one of which is that it is genuinely nothing, but the other is that it is Absolute: a transcendental signified, which signifies all. Also, signifying nothing is nonetheless an act of signification, which in itself draws us back into the sphere of semiosis. Thus FQ is a text which speaks both the "univocal discourse of God" **and** the "irrational and ambiguous discourse of Hermes." ⁶

I divide the style of FQ into two radically different modes. The first, the language of the first ten lines of the poem, I label the Pseudo-Dionysian mode. This is the form of paradox and "abstruse theory" which places Eliot in the mystical tradition. The Dionysius to whom the appellation refers is Dionysius the Areopagite, or Pseudo-Dionysius in Eco and Murray, who claims to be St. Paul's Athenian convert Dionysius. Because of the anachronisms, particularly the rampant Neoplatonism, in his works, it is generally agreed that he is not the Dionysius he claims to be.⁷

The identity of the author is of little import, as it is the similarity of Eliot's style to the style of *The Mystical Theology* and other mystical works (such as those of St. John of the Cross), which gives rise to this choice of label. This mode is repetitive and seems to be circular, referring back to itself, and so is static, but moving in its stillness.

The second mode is Bergsonian. It is opposite to the "conceptual" language of the Pseudo-Dionysian mode. Bergson "like Nietzsche ... used metaphor and poetic imagery because he believed that conceptual thought does not best communicate the nature of reality" (Stromberg 162). This mode is flowing and rich, making use of rhyme and rhythm more than repetition, and its sentences develop, pointing onward and outward, rather than backward and inward. The Bergsonian mode is thus the mode in which Eliot imitates poems from our familiar poetic tradition. Gray's "Elegy", for example, is echoed in this way ("Time and the bell have buried the day" BN IV l.127).

That Eliot is writing in either of these modes is, of course, no guarantee that he is agreeing with the philosophy of the tradition each mode implies. However, the way in which FQ combines the two, or deals with the content of, for example, Bergson's philosophy, in the Pseudo-Dionysian mode, or treats of mystical theology in a Bergsonian mode, suggests the philosophy of the **poem**. Murray claims to be establishing the philosophy of the poem but, based on what Eliot has said elsewhere, believes Bergson to have already been discounted and proceeds to interpret FQ only with regard to "the Neo-Platonic literary tradition" (37). Thus Murray, whilst arguing well for the Neoplatonic influence, fails to interpret parts of the poem which modify his argument. Eliot shows how two

apparently mutually exclusive modes express each other, and in doing so he facilitates the synthesis of form and content that I describe above.

Burnt Norton begins in the Pseudo-Dionysian mode. Although the initial theme is time (the nature of time -- *durée* -- is a theme central to Bergsonian philosophy), the structure of the contemplation is ritualistic, repeating the objects "time", "time present", "time past", and "time future" in different combinations to slow down and frustrate the reader. By this repetition sentences which make grammatical sense are yet woven back into themselves, denying the movement towards a conclusion in which meaning is made clear. Eliot creates a stasis in the poetry which suggests a deadlock in the speaker's thought. Murray treats the conditional nature of some of the opening sentences as a mark of T.S. Eliot's uncertainty about the Bergsonian view of time. The "perhaps" (l.2), and the "If" (l.4), I suggest, work in a more sophisticated way. They are as much a part of the structure of the poem as its content. By making the sentences conditional Eliot allows both truth and falsity to co-exist as "perpetual possibilities" and thereby enhances the operation of the *via negativa*. This static section of poetry is a meeting place of contradictions; the propositions that Bergsonian philosophy is true, and that it is false, are equally present. That Eliot is attempting to create such a meeting place in his poetry suggests that, whilst using the negative way, he yet believes possible the immanence of the absolute in language, and thus, in the relational stage of knowledge. Rather than negate his own self, Eliot sets up a poetic structure in order to evacuate/negate/empty it. This structure cannot transcend the world of signification/language but through the gaps or emptiness in the structure the poem suggests a timeless place beyond, intruding in the flow of time; perhaps incarnate in art. This is a more modern technique than that of medieval Neoplatonism, which, as Eco says, "was not strong enough

because it was emasculated -- or made more virile -- by a strong idea of the divine transcendence" (18). Already, in the first few lines of *Burnt Norton*, we find that the poem itself contains the suggestion that treating Eliot's style as mystical is inadequate. At the still point of Eliot's poetry the positive and the negative ways converge and cancel. There is an emptiness in the first segment of BN which, for Eliot, is also absolute.

The next segment of BN contrasts sharply with the first ten lines. Firstly, the soft sounds of line 11, after the intense repetition of plosives and harsh "t" sounds in the first section, change the tone considerably -- the speaker is pensive, reflective, rather than argumentative. "O" sounds in various combinations create a steady drone, on which the other sounds float. The sentences are directed forward by the adverbial "Down" and the prepositions "Towards" and "Into". This sense of linear, rather than circular, movement is an aspect of the Bergsonian mode. In these few lines (ll.11-15) the speaker also moves from "abstruse theory" to more concrete experience -- yet there is a continuity in theme between this segment of BN and the first. The specific objects of these lines are of "the world of speculation" (l.8). Although we may infer that the rose-garden, the door, the passage, are specific places at Burnt Norton, the manor house in Gloucestershire which Eliot had visited (Ackroyd 229), they are a passage not taken, and a door unopened, and are thus "abstractions", references to "what might have been" (l.6). Once more, although in another style, Eliot has fused a moment in time with the timeless possibilities which attend it.

The last sentence of this segment deserves special attention, since it functions in several ways. Firstly, it returns to the beginning of this segment (ll.11-15) by reasserting the virtual nature of the path Eliot describes (one function of the repeated "echo"). Secondly, for the first time

in the poem not only a speaker, but a speaker, a reader, and an analysis of the relationship between them is offered: "**My words** echo thus, in **your mind**". Eliot suggests a distinct speaking personality interacting with a reading mind. In this relationship it is neither the speaker, nor the reader who is active; it is the text. There is of course a certain ambiguity involved. Although the words are possessed by the speaker ("**My words**"), the way in which these words echo could be due either to the words themselves (the words act on the mind), or to the nature of the mind (the mind acts on the words). Furthermore, the echo of the words in the reader's mind is of the same order as the echo of the speaker's memory ("**My words** echo **thus** in your mind"), suggesting that the reader's understanding of the text takes place in a similar world of "speculation" and "perpetual possibilities". Here, at any rate, the reader is explicitly implicated in the text.

The next segment that I separate is the single sentence, "But to what purpose / Disturbing the dust on a bowl of rose-leaves / I do not know" (l.16). Here the speaker disavows authority, perhaps not over his own meaning, but over his purpose in speculating. A space of time is implied by the reduction of a rose-garden to rose-leaves, and the probing of memory becomes a disturbing of the dust gathered on the leaves. The speaker is thus established in "time present". This is what Eliot describes as the "second voice" of poetry (Stead 142); the voice of the poet addressing his audience. The line is set apart from those around it by its unusual position on the page, leaving physical gaps between it and the surrounding sections, further enhancing its position as a meta-criticism of the rest of the text, drawing the speaker closer to the level of criticism at which the reader operates. The poem thus becomes an active process of

speculation, and the motive that may drive the reader on is to discover, with the speaker, what the purpose of this speculation is.

The beginning of the next and longest segment of Part I of BN repeats, albeit in plural form, the root word "echo", and the word itself, aptly, **becomes** an echo. Through simple repetition Eliot has thus married form and content. The word performs in two ways. Firstly, in the linear flow of the immediate sentence, "echo" is attached to its concept or meaning (in the dictionary-definition sense of "meaning"). Secondly, by referring back to previous occurrences of the same word, "echo" transcends syntax to become part of the superstructure of the poem. Rather than working as a verb or a noun (functions that require the immediate context of a sentence) "echo" becomes part of a non-linguistic pattern, relying upon sound. This kind of echo inhabits not a garden, but a virtual world, where "words fail, though meaning still exists"⁸ and in which it moves towards becoming a disembodied paradigm, the Platonic "Form-of-echo". With the poem as frame of reference "echo" occupies a new ontological space, the same as that occupied by the "blank", "gap", or "negative" of reader-response theory, and one which, as I have noted above, Eliot identifies with absolute meaning. It is important to note that Eliot has posited his absolute reality in a timeless virtual space, a stillness in which disembodied paradigms are possible, through a repetitive style which cannot work outside language and therefore operates within time -- "Only through time time is conquered" (BN II l.89). Through this style BN **enacts** the process which self also undergoes. By adherence to life in the world, one reaches a state of self-negation, through absorption into a larger pattern, a world-text, as much as if one attempts transcendence directly. The theoretical source of this version of self-negation can be discovered in Georges Poulet's criticism of *Four Quartets* (which I call on

in detail later), but more importantly, in Hans Georg Gadamer's existential theory of textual interpretation. Gadamer points out in *Philosophical Hermeneutics* ⁹ Heidegger's concepts, "the 'event' of being, the 'there' as *the clearing of being ...* " (50, my emphasis). Putting this point of view, then, beside the mystical, we can see that Eliot's acceptance of the life of the moment as a valid path to union with the timeless is both explicit in the content of his poem, and, more powerfully, implicit in its style and structure.

The poem itself, however, is within another context -- that of history, and literary tradition. These cannot be transcended so easily for tradition requires the reader's response to a much larger pattern, and history to a pattern which is perhaps too large to be comprehended as a whole. Eliot does attempt a similar technique with these larger contexts, but uses allusions of complex significance rather than simple words. For example, the pattern of Ecclesiastes which enters "East Coker":

... 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.

(EC I 9-13)

The topic of the whole book of Ecclesiastes, the vanity of worldly achievement, is here mingled with the movement of the world. The repetitive Pseudo-Dionysian mode and the flowing Bergsonian mode are working together. Despite the assertion of the acceptability of worldly existence -- "living and generation" -- the lines above depict a scene strangely devoid of human presence. There is only the wind, mice, and a decrepit habitation of some sort. It is an image of barrenness. The

pleasing music of such poetic phrases as the "tattered arras woven with a silent motto" contrapuntally arranged with the insistent biblical phrase produces an ambiguous message. The whole section, while denoting the value of the immersion in the transient world yet connotes, by the form not the content of the allusion to Ecclesiastes, the futility of this same immersion. The mere fact of alluding to the Bible elicits a certain response in the reader: the recognition of a larger historical, and religious, framework.

The phrase that functions similarly to the "echo" is "and a time for", which, instantly recognisable, points beyond the immediate text (unlike the "echo", the primary function of which is to point back to itself). The allusion need not be understood in specific terms to function within the poem, for it is by recognising that it is an allusion that we join the poem to the greater context and realise that there is no escaping text. If it stood on its own as a phrase "and a time for", repeated in such a way, would evacuate its own sense in precisely the same way as "echo". As it is, however, the phrase acts as signpost, pointing us horizontally (ie. towards other horizons) as opposed to vertically, towards transcendence. The mounting burden of allusions to other texts sets in play a kind of Hermetic semiosis, whereby every sign signifies every other sign, and a network of interrelated texts -- a tradition -- fabricates itself behind the immediate text. This is a different effect to that of the stasis and transcendence created in the recurrence of a single word or phrase. In *The Waste Land*, where nearly every line connotes rather than denotes, and points beyond the immediate text, an atmosphere not of meaninglessness but of meaning which cannot be penetrated or pinned down is created. Meaning is located, that is, in the gaps of the whole tradition, the blanks in the context of existence. In FQ where the method of allusion is not so heavily utilised

this effect cannot be generated with the same success. There is, instead, the implication that meaning rests within text. The Absolute, that is, is immanent rather than transcendent. This conclusion also contradicts Murray, who claims that in Eliot the doctrine of Transcendence is dominant. Eliot's style suggests that transcendence and immanence are equally viable options, or even that they are indistinct, if knowledge of the Absolute is the goal.

An incarnate Absolute, however, presents the companion paradox to that of transcendence. If meaning rests in the text, or rather in **text** (which is fluctuating and relative, like the world of Bergsonian experience) then that meaning is constantly deferred as one signifier gives way to the next. In a poem of more complex allusive patterns, such as *The Waste Land*, the suggestion of Hermetic semiosis is strong, and so, since every sign does not merely point somewhere else, but everywhere else, an incarnate Absolute is thus signified by every word. This may well be the kind of God which Eliot seeks to convey to his readers in FQ: a God which can be known by transcending the flux in a moment of vision, in which the self is paradoxically raised above the world-text, but also by adherence to that world in which the unsignifiable God is paradoxically incarnate. Eliot expresses this view in *East Coker*, describing a pattern of life thus:

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.

(EC V ll.192-6)

Murray identifies "the intense moment / Isolated, with no before and after" with a Bergsonian philosophy, but I suggest that this is equally a

description of the transcendental moment of vision which Murray argues is Eliot's ideal doctrine. Through the acceptance of the world-text, an acceptance which may also be associated with Bergson's "life-of-the-moment" (Murray 35) and Eliot's own view of "tradition", one can lead a "lifetime burning in every moment" as part of the pattern of history, and thus become part of the All. Georges Poulet describes the Totality derived from this view of history thus:

Now all seems linked together in so dense a fashion that no moment can escape any other, and each appears to have to assume the responsibility for the whole duration ... From the beginning to the end of time our actions depend one upon another. They adhere to each other, and so very closely that between the beginning and the end of the series which they constitute, there is no break and, it would seem, very little difference. Like a reverberating echo whose sound returns to the same place, all the beings we have been and shall be, form one uninterrupted being that unceasingly receives its heritage from its own hands.

(The Metamorphoses of the Circle 345).

I quote this passage at length because it elaborates perfectly this point in my interpretation of FQ. The image of the echo is apt, and ties my discussion of the structural function of the "echo" in BN with Eliot's view of the Absolute in the pattern of history (or time, since it includes the future also). These lines also make available new understanding of the very first section of BN, in which the nature of time is discussed in very conceptual language. Here future, present, and past are melded into a continuum ("Time present and time past / Are both perhaps present in time future..."[BN I ll.1-2]). This being the case, each moment, and each being, becomes responsible for the rest. Indeed, in FQ as in Poulet, the ability to discriminate is lost: "These men and those who opposed them / And those whom they opposed / Accept the constitution of silence / And are folded in a single party" (LQ III ll.188-91).

When Eliot says that, under these circumstances, "All time is unredeemable" (BN I 1.5), this is what he means. The adherence to a worldly view leads us into a responsibility for the whole of time. Even though a world of multiplicity, it gains a kind of static permanence when viewed as a whole. Lastly, Poulet's description displays the "historical consciousness" of which Eliot writes in "Tradition and The Individual Talent", and the passage from *The Metamorphoses of The Circle* quoted above corresponds to Eliot's own description of tradition as dynamic:

The existing order is complete before the new work arrives; for order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the whole existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered; and so the relations, proportions, values of each work of art toward the whole are readjusted.

(Selected Prose 23)

The image of "old stones which cannot be deciphered", which I take to be a symbol of this holistic view of history, is doubly significant. Firstly, though somewhat by the way, the literal referent of the stones seems most likely to be the standing stones or rune stones which are found all over Europe.¹⁰ Secondly, it is most important to note that they cannot be deciphered. Taken literally and naively the description of the stones means something like "they are so old that nobody can read them any more", but they may also provide one more allusion to a place beyond signification, a place of mystery. The stones, that is, although presumably carved with the symbols of a language (if they are not, then the stone as a symbol itself will equally provoke the curiosity about meaning), are incomprehensible, and thus elicit the assumption that there **is** a meaning, but to an ignorant modern that meaning is inaccessible. The stones suggest a form of meaning, but no content; they point to a meaning beyond language -- a transcendent source. Eliot at once associates the Absolute (unsignifiable)

with a pattern in the world-text (represented by the stones), and suggests that the absolute cannot be brought within that text explicitly (since we cannot decipher the stones). Yet by their mere presence the stones provide a symbol of the ineffable. Once more we are turned full circle by Eliot, who seems to be asserting both a doctrine of transcendence and a doctrine of immanence. This technique is not so baffling if we consider one of the Heraclitean epigraphs to the *Four Quartets*, fragment 60, which translates "The road up and the road down are one and the same".¹¹ Eliot means us, it seems, not only to **accept** both views of God, and the concomitant ways of achieving unity with the Absolute, but to **equate** them. It is not only that it makes no difference which path we choose, but that there is no difference between the paths, since either way we are involved in the same paradox of trying to achieve the combination of that constituted within signification and that which transcends signification. Mysticism, as it is used in FQ, is thus not an assertion of the superiority of the doctrine of Transcendence, as Murray would have it (258-9), but is an explication of the paradox of knowing God from within discourse.

Umberto Eco divides the Neoplatonist tradition into "strong" and "very strong" stages. The mystics whom Murray examines as sources of Eliot's poem are medieval, and so fall into the first category of "strong" Neoplatonism, one which, as I quoted earlier, requires a "strong idea of the divine transcendence" (Eco 18). This is why Murray comes to argue that the doctrine of Transcendence "can be said to characterise the mystical vision of *Four Quartets*" (258). Eliot's attempts within the poem are to unite with God through a technique more advanced than the paradoxical statements of Neoplatonists such as Pseudo-Dionysius. His style is that of the "very strong" Neoplatonist, a kind of structural symbolism which "sends one back to a mysterious and self-contradictory reality that cannot

be conceptually expressed" (Eco 18). If we explore the way in which Eliot uses the mystical style, and how he does not use it, we can see that, in accordance with his own poetic (revealed as long before FQ as "Tradition and the Individual Talent"), he synthesises many ideas from the past, one of which is mysticism, and remakes them in a form of his own. This is what Gadamer would describe as the "renewal and transformation of mythical tradition by great poetry" (58).

1.2 *Four Quartets* and Existentialism: The Empty Self

... human consciousness, as it exists in our minds every moment, *now* ... is ... *pour-soi*, in Sartre's terminology. It is actually not being at all, but a kind of "hole in being" -- a nothingness 12

Being modes of thought that appear as products of the same tradition, there are many similarities between existentialism and the philosophy revealed in Eliot's poetry. Although I do not claim that Eliot is an "existentialist", there are many useful parallels to be made between his work and that of, for example, Jean-Paul Sartre and Hans Georg Gadamer. In Particular, Sartre's seminal essay *The Transcendence of the Ego*, which first appeared in 1937, is readily comparable to *Four Quartets* since, though it supports my argument against Murray's claims for the mysticism of FQ, it yet takes place within the same sphere of the relationship between transcendence and immanence. In this case, however, the transcendence is that of the creative-self to a state of personal authenticity; an evacuation of the ego moulded by social norms. Furthermore, Bergson is an acknowledged predecessor of both Eliot and existentialism, his influence emerges explicitly and often in both primary existentialist texts (such as Sartre's essay) and well-known secondary works such as Barret's *What is*

Existentialism? as well as playing an important role in the philosophy of Eliot's early years.

Existentialism, like much modernist art, arose in the period between World Wars One and Two. It seemed a time of desolation when the traditional ideals of religion and civilization were breaking under the weight of modern war; it was a world without meaning "marked by the almost total breakdown of civilized process and political rationality" (Stromberg 223). Eliot's poetry, most obviously *The Waste Land*, reflects this atmosphere of hopelessness. Like the existentialists, though, Eliot, however sceptical, was yet optimistic. Ackroyd notes that "in a paper to the Harvard Philosophical club, he [Eliot] stated that pessimism of this kind encouraged a kind of 'cheerfulness'".¹³ This kind of cheerfulness, I suggest, is precisely that Nietzschean "joyful wisdom" or *amor fati* which existentialism inherits. Eliot shared with Virginia Woolf, and many others of their generation, a fear of "the void" (Ackroyd 104) or in Woolf's words, the "nothingness" (Hussey xv-xviii). This nothingness seems to suggest a connection between the mystical and the existential interpretations of FQ. That is, the connection between the nothing of my epigraphs to 1.1 and 1.2; the mystical Absolute which is also nothing, and the existential self, which is also a "hole in being". In the sense that existentialism is a "philosophy of the abyss" (Stromberg 224), Eliot's fear of the void, and his attempt to deal with it in literature, may fall within the bounds of existentialism.

The association of Eliot's thought, as revealed in his poetry as well as his critical work, with existentialism, both as a theory of self and the related problem of language, is played out in FQ as a process of self-realisation (which is also a process of self-negation). Coincident with the

search for the absolute in FQ is the search for self-identity. Indeed, in FQ these two searches are inseparably involved in one and the same process. Language, central to the problem of knowing God, is likewise central to the problem of knowing oneself. By his synthesis of these two processes Eliot seems to be following what Northrop Frye calls "Paul's conception of Jesus as the genuine individuality of the individual."¹⁴

Many of the moments of vision in FQ can thus also be interpreted as moments of simple "existence", an empty self, prior to the inevitably relative construction of meaning or "personality". This is the state of being that the mystic aims to end in, but for the existentialist, it is also the beginning, pervading all experience, if not consciously experienced. Eliot describes such a state as both beginning **and** end in FQ. The lines at the end of *Burnt Norton* seem only to describe the consciousness of a child living in the moment (" ... There rises the hidden laughter / Of children in the foliage / Quick now, here, now, always ...", BN V ll.171-174), but when this last line reappears at the end of *Little Gidding* its deeper significance is revealed, having been developed through the whole of FQ:

And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started ...
Quick now, here, now, always --
A condition of complete simplicity

(LG V ll.240-253)

The uncomplicated state of a child's (un)consciousness, aware only of the here and now, is the beginning of the self's journey through life. This is a state of *pour-soi*, a "condition of complete simplicity", in which the self is not conscious of itself, but simply exists in its consciousness of objects that are "here" and "now". There is no transcendent ego present as

a subject. The ego is the "object of consciousness" (Sartre 97), constituted in the act of apprehension: "I am then plunged into the world of objects; it is they which constitute the unity of my consciousness ... but *me*, I have disappeared; I have annihilated myself" (Sartre 49).

There arises, then, an alternative explanation of the speaker's experience in the rose-garden. Murray surmises that "due to some *failure of nerve or attention* in the poet, the meaning of his experience in the rose-garden, and even that experience itself, seems hardly to be realised" (49, my emphasis). This meaning, from the retrospective point of view of the speaker, is impenetrable, as *The Dry Salvages* explains: "We had the experience but missed the meaning, / And approach to the meaning restores the experience / In a different form ..." (DS II ll.93-5). The meaning of the moment in the past for the speaker in the present is necessarily "speculation"; a constructed meaning which replaces the experience itself. The past consciousness of the speaker was constituted in his apprehension of the garden. The shared ontological status of the consciousness and the objects in the garden is recognised by the speaker for whom "the roses had the look of flowers that are looked at" (BN I ll.28-9). Here the intentionality of experience is revealed -- the speaker, by looking, participated in the objectivity of the rose. There is no "I" in this initial experience of the rose-garden. The ego ("My words..", "I do not know" (BN I ll.14,16) appears in the speaker's act of **reflection**; the speaker in the present is conscious of his own consciousness in the rose garden in a way that he was not at the time of the experience. Thus, that the speaker in the present cannot fully realise the original experience is "not a matter of chance, due to a *momentary lapse of attention*, but happens because of the very structure of consciousness" (Sartre 49, my emphasis).

The empty self is described by Eliot through a process of negation -
 - one which in the mystical argument is the way to become one with the
 absolute being:

Descend lower, descend only
 Into the world of perpetual solitude,
 World not world, but that which is not world,
 Internal darkness, deprivation
 And destitution of all property,
 Dessication of the world of sense,
 Evacuation of the world of fancy,
 Inoperancy of the world of spirit...

(BN III ll.114-121)

Once more Eliot's repetitive method comes into play. Each of the lines 118-121 has a similar form. These lines are constituted by a verb which denotes a process of negativity or lack, the phrase "of the world of", and the final different, but similar, parts of the subject clause (sense/fancy/spirit). The combination of this repeated sentence form with other negative words (darkness, deprivation, destitution) and the now familiar Pseudo-Dionysian paradox ("World not world, but that which is not world") tends to evacuate the poem itself, leaving no differentiable objects or process of meaning, but only a sense of lack. It is not only the world of "sense" and "property", or objects, which is negated, but also the "fancy" and even the world of "**spirit**". Thus, by this process of elimination, or "reduction", we have not arrived at a central transcendental self, but at a nothingness: "It does not seem to us", says Sartre, "that we could find a skeletal pole if we took away, one after the other, all the qualities ... we would have to undertake an infinite plundering ... And, at the end of this plundering, nothing would remain" (78).

Hans Georg Gadamer, who was a pupil of Heidegger, formed a theory of textual interpretation from his teacher's philosophy. The basic

tenet of Gadamer's Heideggerian philosophy is "that temporality and historicity -- a stance in one's present that looks back to the past and anticipates the future -- is inseparably a part of each individual's being; that to understand something involves an act of interpretation, not only in the reading of a text but in all individual experience; and that language, like temporality, pervades all aspects of that experience" (Abrams 87). From such a synopsis of his position it is already easy to see how important Gadamer's philosophy is to understanding FQ, since it is precisely the relationship of individual experience to the whole of time and history which Eliot struggles with throughout the poem. For example, the speaker suggests the presence of the past in the opening sections of both *East Coker* and *The Dry Salvages*. In EC the suggestion extends to a kind of reciprocal action, where the past dictates the possibilities of the future, and the future reshapes the past, as in the following line: "And the deep lane insists on the direction / Into the village, in the electric heat / Hypnotised" (EC I ll.18-20). Its depth suggests firstly, and simply, that this lane is a groove which is difficult to get out of, but more subtly indicates that this road has been worn by ages of travel, and that the whole force of history is behind the current travellers (both speaker and reader) pressing them towards the village. Further adding to the sense of determinism in this line is the hypnotism of the "electric heat". "Electric" is a double-edged adjective, indicating a certain dry heat that occurs naturally and the undulating sheets of heat that rise from the ground on very hot days (like, for example, a snake being hypnotised). In this sense, the heat adds to the mounting impression that the past is inescapable, since whoever stands on the road is hypnotised, deprived of their autonomy. It seems reasonable to assume that the most obvious subject of the hypnotism is the speaker of the poem, but since any suggestion of one discrete speaking voice is conspicuously absent from this paragraph of EC, it appears the point is

being universalised. This is a picture of everybody's position: we are all standing in the present, looking back to the past, and anticipating the future. "Electric" may also connote technology in general, and so represents a future which draws us towards it as inevitably as the past pushes us on. The lane thus becomes a metaphor for the urge of the past towards the future in that the village is on the "horizon" of the speaker's journey, but since the village is presumably, at the level of literal denotation, East Coker itself, then the road forward is also the road back, into Eliot's past. Also, almost personified by the imperative "insists", this lane seems to allow no choice but to follow it, both forward and backward. The opening of EC in this way upholds at least half of Gadamer's existential viewpoint "that temporality and historicity ... is inseparably a part of each individual's being" (Abrams 87). Total determinism is avoided because it is not only the past which determines the future, but the future which alters the past. Just as a new poem will alter our understanding of the tradition, a new action or event will change the whole body of history, since, as Poulet says, "no moment can escape any other" (345). Eliot agrees: "For the pattern is new in every moment / And every moment is a new and shocking / Valuation of all we have been" (EC II ll.85-7).

Gadamer provides a description of what I have called the world-text which is very like Poulet's. He sees "human linguisticity as a limitless medium that carries everything within it ... because everything (in the world and out of it) is included in the realm of 'understandings' and understandability in which we move" (Gadamer 25). The use of "world" should be clarified here. Perhaps this is best done by considering the distinction between the "world" and the "World" in the section of BN that I quoted above. Carefully considered, the World-not-world does not function merely as a formal device designed to elicit a certain feeling of

impenetrable meaning, or of what Gadamer might call "the strange" (*atopon*). The apparent paradox has a content which can be followed as well, and functions to develop in Eliot's poem a sense of two realities: "The world", and the "World not world". The capitalisation, which seems at first merely coincident with the beginnings of lines, takes on rather more significance. The "world" with a small "w" is the world-text of which I have been speaking, the realm of human linguisticity and understanding, in which an idea of discrete personality makes sense; the common world of objects. The "World" (not "world") is that which is not part of this world-text, that is, that which is beyond signification. The World, at this stage of Eliot's poem, is a higher (or lower -- in the sense that it is more fundamental) kind of reality. It is the stillness of the "still point" (BN II ll.62) and of Divine reality across which the "world" moves horizontally "on its metalled ways / Of time past and time future" (BN III ll.125-6). When Gadamer says "both in the world and out of it" he is not referring to the "world" of Eliot's poem, but only to the physical world. Eliot's "world" includes this physical world, but goes beyond it to all that is experienced, and thus is more aligned with the "limitless medium which carries everything within it", the "realm of understandings". The "World not world" is what is outside that realm of understanding, namely the being-for-itself (*pour-soi*) and the absolute, and both are also nothing.

To understand something is to bring it within the linguistic world (Gadamer 32). Gadamer describes the business of understanding as "the game" and once more notes that it is a "dynamic whole *sui generis* that embraces even the consciousness of the one who plays it" (53). This "game" is yet another way of describing the world-text, or more precisely, of describing the acts and interpretations that take place within it. The all-encompassing quality of the world-text, and hence of the "game", suggests

a connection between the "game" and the "dance" of FQ, since "there is only the dance" (BN II ll.67). Another similarity to be noted between the "game and the "dance" is their linguisticity. Eliot recognises "the primacy of language" (Ackroyd 118-19) and argues in his thesis on Bradley's philosophy that an object can only be said to exist in its **relations**.¹⁵ This is an issue foregrounded in FQ, even though it is his latest poem and one written after he had disassociated himself from the theories of his earlier work. In BN, for example, it is "Only by the form, the pattern / that words or music reach the stillness" (BN V ll.140-43), suggesting that Eliot still believes, at least, his assertion in "Tradition and the Individual Talent" that it is not the content, which cannot be new, but the "intensity of the artistic process ... that counts" (*The Sacred Wood* 55). Eliot, throughout his career, that is, evinces a commitment to form, structure, and process in poetry which he here transposes to the metaphysical realm, so that we reach the stillness of both spiritual accomplishment and self-definition through a pattern. This is another facet of existential thought which arises in FQ, as can be seen by comparing Eliot's assertions in his theoretical works, the lines from *Burnt Norton* quoted above, and Gadamer's explanation of the role of language in the functioning of the "game": "the primacy that language and understanding have in Heidegger's thought indicates the priority of the 'relation' over against its relational members -- the I who understands and that which is understood" (50). Gadamer describes the form of social interaction between two men, within the "game", as a relinquishing of autonomy which allows "free play". It is a free play determined not in the attitude of the participants but in the relation itself: "it is the unified form of movement as a whole which unifies the fluid activity of both" (54). This kind of interaction is also one which will govern the attempt to interact with divinity -- to understand the ineffable by bringing it within the linguistic world -- "for absorption into

the game is an ecstatic self-forgetting that is experienced not as a loss of self-possession, but as the free buoyancy of an elevation above oneself " (55). Participation in the "game" thus leads to an elevation which is strikingly similar to the moment of illumination or mystical vision. Transcendence can be gained through the pattern of the world-text which unfolds over time. The self is absorbed into a larger structure of signification in which it becomes a signifier for the whole dynamic mass of history.

The distinction between the two worlds is also a distinction between two kinds of time: clock time, which is a construct of human civilization and hence belongs in the "world" as one way of structuring contexts of interaction, and the real time (*durée*) which is the time of God. This latter time is of the "World" though it may be argued, I believe, that it does not transcend human experience altogether, but represents the time of tradition in which we move but cannot recognise because it trails into the forgotten past and a future that has not yet unfolded. That is, it is time-as-a-whole viewed from the end of time, a position that, in the present, only God can look from. The notion of two time-schemes is one central to Bergson's philosophy and this suggests that Eliot, although sceptical, does not entirely abandon Bergson as Murray argues. Eliot describes this difference in kinds of time quite explicitly in DS:

The tolling bell
 measures time not our time, rung by the unhurried
 Ground swell, a time
 Older than the time of chronometers, older
 Than time counted by anxious worried women
 Lying awake, calculating the future,
 Trying to unweave, unwind, unravel
 And piece together the past and future....

(DS I ll.34-42)

Here the division of the two types of time is obvious. On the one hand is the time of mankind, measured by instruments of our own creation. It is within this scale that we manipulate the world-text (unweaving, unwinding and unravelling), or as Gadamer would put it, take part in the "game". This attempt to bind the past and the future in a coherent tapestry, to take the knowledge and experience of the past and rework it so that it has meaning in the present, is the task of every self. Since it is a task which takes place in language, the poet is not alone in the "intolerable wrestle with words and meanings" (EC II l.70). The other time-scheme is here represented as a natural one, rung by a "ground swell", an image which brings to mind earthquakes or waves (connecting this part of the poem, in a typical Eliotic fashion, with another image of the world-text, the sea: "the river is within us, the sea is all about us" DS I l.15). But, and here is my argument that this other time may yet remain immanent rather than transcending the world-text altogether, this time passing is yet signified within the world, since it is known by the bell ringing. Not only this, but the other time is described as "older" than that which is measured by humanity. To be thus placed within a relative scale of time as we know it is not to transcend our time-scheme but to be brought back within it.

Finally, in considering the role of existential thought in FQ, perhaps the most obvious part of the poem to examine is the meeting of the speaker with his past self in LG section II, which draws together the main themes of the poem: language/poetry, Self-identity, and the religious goal of union with the absolute. The "stranger" whom the speaker meets "hurried / As if blown towards me like the metal leaves / Before the urban dawn wind unresisting" (LG II ll.86-8) through streets which are reminiscent of such poems as "Prufrock" and the "Preludes", streets which are obviously modern, and yet strangely silent, capturing a twilight-zone tone of eeriness

(here accentuated by a lack of punctuation and regular strong stresses). The figure also seems, as if in the "deep lane" of *East Coker*, to have little choice in this course, since he is blown like a leaf "unresisting". This part of the poem is thus set in the virtual universe of the Eliot canon. Upon closer inspection the speaker recognises this stranger to be himself, although in a vague way:

I caught the sudden look of some dead master
Whom I had known, forgotten, half recalled
Both one and many; in the brown baked features
The eyes of a familiar compound ghost
Both intimate and unidentifiable.

(LG II 1.92-6)

The clues here are many. Although it is impossible to say that Eliot is introducing himself as the speaker of this poem, a merging of his life with that of the poem certainly takes place as we recognise the "stranger" as a caricature of Eliot's past identity, the poet of *The Waste Land* who has been acclaimed the "master" of modern poetry, if not all twentieth-century poetry. It is a **dead** master, however, whom the speaker encounters here -- indicating that this success is relegated to the past (an interpretation verified by dialogue following the description quoted above). The description of the stranger as "Both one and many" or a "compound ghost" is an apt description of a poetic voice or speaker, particularly the speaker of *The Waste Land*: a polyphonic, compound entity, which is intimate and personal (in the first person) and appearing to address the reader directly, yet a "ghost" in that its identity is fugitive.

The relationship of this past voice of the poem and the present voice of the poet is a relationship complicated by the fact that the "poet" is represented here by the speaker of FQ, a speaker who must therefore assume "a double part" (LG II 1.97). From the perspective of T.S. Eliot

this line is highly ironic, applying at a many levels, since Eliot himself, in the writing of the poem is now, assuming a quadruple part: himself, poet, speaker, and poet/speaker/self of past poetry. The point is, I believe, that it is not so easy to discriminate between the poet, the speaker, and the "real" self ; the world of the poet and the world of the self have "become much like each other" (LG II l.122) since the goal of both, according to Eliot, is an emptying of the self.

The past self is "a face still forming" since it is, in Sartrean terms, an ego being created by the speaker's act of reflection upon his past consciousness. In dialogue the "compound ghost" speaks words that could well be Eliot's, and definitely reflect his attitude to his past poetry, described in one case as "benign neglect" (Ackroyd 309). In this dialogue Eliot dramatises the reflective self conjuring an ego by objectifying its past consciousness:

... I am not eager to rehearse
 My thought and theory which you have forgotten
 These things have served their purpose: let them be.

(LG II ll.111-13)

This is the voice of the past (I), whose "thought and theory" has been forgotten by the present consciousness (You) but which is "restored" and "revived" (DS II l.94,97) by retrospective thought, in a new form as part of the present self. The meeting of these two is at "this intersection time ... no before and after" (LG II ll.105-6) and is thus an occasion of the same order as the meeting point of the transcendent absolute with the world-text ("the intersection of the timeless with time" DS V ll.201-2), and experience of oneself is here shown to be like experience of the world: new

in every moment, but no moment escaping any other, and each new experience altering the identity of the whole.

The final lines of Part II of *Little Gidding* are comprised of a double-allusion, which draws together Eliot's attitude towards the meeting of the past and present selves, or again, in existential terms, the furbishing up of an ego in the consciousness of past consciousness, and his poetic technique. The lines are as follows: "In the disfigured street he left me, with a kind of valediction, / And faded on the blowing of the horn." The first allusion is to Donne's "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning" which is itself alluded to in Browning's poem "Childe Roland to the Dark tower came", which poem is also alluded to in the line "And faded on the blowing of the horn." The title of Browning's poem is an allusion to Shakespeare's *King Lear*. The network of references thus serves as a structural reinforcement of its content -- as the past self fades, rather than attempting closure, Eliot sends the reader on a chase, potentially infinite, deeper into the tradition of literature behind FQ. Once more a parallel is drawn between self and poem, they both occur in, are influenced by, and influence the dynamic process of the world-text.

CHAPTER TWO : THE NECESSARY FUTILITY OF INTERPRETATION IN *THE WASTE LAND*

2.1 Empty Secrets and Patterns of Negativity

Since the process foresees the unlimited shifting from symbol to symbol, the meaning of a text is always postponed. The only meaning of a text is "I mean more." But since that "more" will be interpreted by a further "I mean more," the final meaning of a text is an empty secret.

16

In the same way that, in *Four Quartets*, the Bergsonian and Pseudo-Dionysian modes counter each other to create a tension which motivates interpretation of the poem, so in *The Waste Land* (WL) the density of allusion and symbolism is countered with nothingness, negativity or lack of significance. The poem is a pattern of phrases and images, much like the holistic, interrelated dynamic of history which Poulet describes. It leads the reader in circles seeking an elusive meaning, a meaning which remains an "empty secret". The response of the reader, I suggest, is to strain against this bondage, desiring a way out of the deadlock of going through an interpretive process without advancing towards final meaning.

Eliot's technique effectively sets its own limits by intensive self-reflexivity, which turns the lengthy chain of allusion in WL into an hermeneutical circle. The hermeneutical circle depends for its cohesion on the occurrence of emptiness, as well as the thickness of thematic and imagistic connections, because it is "the presence of absence which keeps interpretive possibilities virtually limitless."¹⁷ The effect of circling, coupled with the "relentless negation" which Eliot's language undertakes, creates "negativity" of the same kind as that which Wolfgang Iser describes as the central effect of Beckett's prose. Negativity is one kind of gap in the poem where the reader may hold his own interpretation together with the

multitude of possibilities. This gap is a structural parallel to the place of mystery beyond signification which, I argue in Chapter One, FQ associates with the transcendent absolute, and simultaneously with nothing. The emptiness of the gap is not transcendent in the sense that it is a site of absolute meaning, a transcendental signified upon which the whole system of meaning in Eliot's text is based, but only in that it is the point of infinite possibilities for interpretation. However, emptiness thus necessarily represents the **possibility** of a transcendental signified which "since it is not part of the system of signification ... cannot be known except as absence or concealedness."¹⁸ Emptiness, that is, can provoke from the reader a sense of meaninglessness, or a sense of meaning which cannot be reached. I will discuss, in this chapter, the techniques which initiate and perpetuate the deferral of meaning, and create emptiness in *The Waste Land*. Within this discussion I will also suggest a strategy for reading the poem, which focuses on process rather than end.

One technique which induces emptiness in WL is the operation of reference items. David Trotter defines these as "words -- possessives, demonstratives, comparatives -- which instead of being interpreted in their own right, refer to something else for their interpretation."¹⁹ Apart from the pedantic observation that any word could be said to refer to something else for interpretation, particularly in a poem such as WL, where words tend to connote prior to denotation, Trotter's definition draws attention to the interpretation of some kinds of words especially useful in understanding Eliot's technique. It is particularly the demonstrative use of "this", "that", "here" and "there", which provides a means of forcing a gap in the text of both WL and FQ. In spoken dialogue these reference items would commonly be accompanied by some gesture, but in a poem this is not possible. Thus, used in the poem as external references (that is,

references to objects which have not previously occurred in the textual context) such words give a sense of specificity and immediacy which is "unfulfilled" (Trotter 14) and provoke the reader to project an image of the object. This device functions in several, fairly evenly spaced, places in WL (I ll.25, 46, 69, II 1.99, III 1.243). The first of these is a good example: "There is shadow under *this* red rock / (Come in under the shadow of *this* red rock)" (I ll.25-26 my emphasis). Whilst the demonstrative pronoun implies a specific and immediate object, the poem cannot provide us with that object, nor does it provide us with a distinguishing representation which may provoke the idea of a specific rock. The only description we have is that it is a red rock, and in the urge to fulfil for ourselves the unfulfilled sense of immediacy we can only summon a general, generic idea of "red rock". To enhance the distinction which is thus created between the particular **experienced** world, and the universal **known** world, Eliot further thwarts us with the imperative to interact with this strangely present/absent rock. That is, the reader is invited in under the shadow of the rock. Faced with this impossibility it is natural to imagine an auditor for the speaker, a "Son of man" existing between the speaker and the reader, addressed to whom the speaker's invitation makes more sense. Such an auditor is not suggested in any other way, however, so that any "implied" or "virtual" audience remains so transparent as to leave no clues for interpretation of the poem. Eliot's suggestion, and then retraction, of such an implied reader, creates further emptiness in the text. Our attention is drawn to the disparity between perspectives, a disparity which causes us to question the nature of our interaction with the text by pointing out the difference in ontological status between the world of the speaker, the implied reader, and the real reader (Iser 35-37). The auditor which the reader projects, that is, is another mystery, creating only further emptiness in the text.

A more complex play of demonstratives is provided by Madame Sosostri's Tarot **reading**, where they combine in an overpowering manner:

*...Here, said she,
 Is your card, the drowned Phonician Sailor,
 (Those Pearls that were his eyes. Look!)
 Here is Belladonna the Lady of the rocks,
 The Lady of situations.
 Here is the man with three staves, and here the wheel,
 And here is the one-eyed merchant, and this card,
 Which is blank, is something he carries on his back,
 which I am forbidden to see. I do not find
 the hanged man. Fear death by water.*

(BD ll.47-55, my emphasis)

A tarot reading is a fairly familiar context for the interpretation of signs, where our expectation is that Madame Sosostri will interpret the cards which she presents, joining them in some kind of coherent, if enigmatic, narrative to provide the subject of the reading with some advice about a course of action. The clairvoyant, however, does not tell the meaning of the cards. Her language connects them paratactically, in much the same way that they would be juxtaposed if placed on the table in silence. They are, once more, indicated with the demonstratives "here" and "this" so that the sense of unfulfilled immediacy effectively renders every card "blank". The cards are named with the iconographic simplicity peculiar to Tarot cards ("the wheel", "the man with three staves") and thus provoke a straightforward pictorial projection from the reader (in the same manner as "red rock"), but they convey nothing beyond the promise of significance, by pointing to other places in the text (including Eliot's footnotes). This is one instance of Iser's "negativity". Iser specifically discusses negativity which is produced as a result of "a relentless process of negation" (140). The density of emptiness in this passage, created by the continual functioning of reference items, is a form of negativity, and has the same effect as intense negation: a "suction effect" which "stimulates communicative and constitutive activities within us by showing us that

something is being withheld and by challenging us to discover what it is."²⁰ Of particular importance when considering negativity in the tarot reading is the process of negation centred on the blank card. Beginning with the reference item "this", line 53 offers us a further card which may help us to make sense of the tarot reading, but then immediately cancels that offer, as we discover that the card is blank. This is a peculiar situation because, despite its lack of a symbol, the card yet signifies. In the absence of any content, the card itself, by virtue of its very blankness, comes to stand for something.²¹ The sentence carries on, as though to further define this blankness, by saying it is "something which he carries on his back". Yet again however, this promise of meaning is negated, since it is something which Madame Sosostris is "forbidden to see". This process of negation continues in the next sentence: "I do not find the hanged man". The object, the hanged man, is presented last, so that we are left with an image of something which has already been cancelled. There is thus a great gap in the text where a suction effect takes place. The information which the poem reveals is consistently immediately revoked.

Iser's "relentless process of negation" is a key way of producing negativity in WL. Like "unfulfilled specificity", negation is an "oppressive cancellation of what we *have* been given" (Iser 140). As with Beckett, where the reader is not confronted with no statements, but with statements that are no longer valid (Iser 140), so in WL, which, once again, leaves the reader with the sense not that there is no meaning, but a meaning which cannot be penetrated. The process of negation begins early in WL, occurring first in "The Burial of the Dead": "And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief, / and the dry stone no sound of water" (BD ll.24-25). Here, as Iser describes, there is the oppressive cancellation of what we *have* been given. The line offers to give, since the tree "gives",

but its offer is already undercut (it is a dead tree), and instantly negated: "the dead tree gives **no** shelter". And so with the cricket and the stone: they make the reader aware that something is missing by presenting that thing, but then negating it. This same technique is used often and almost inconspicuously throughout WL (some examples are III 1.240, 1.299; V 1.331), thus *The Waste Land* creates the "suction effect" which Iser finds in Beckett's prose. This suction effect, the result of a gap in the text, is what motivates the reader's interpretation of the text, and draws us into the hermeneutical circle from which the only escape is back into the same emptiness or indeterminacy from which we sought escape.

Eliot also combines relentless negation with relentless repetition. Repetition in WL works in exactly the same way as in FQ, voiding the content of a word so that it acts only as a sound effect, as in "What the thunder said":

Here is no water but only rock
 Rock and no water and the sandy road
 The road winding above the mountains
 Mountains which are of rock without water
 If there were water we should stop and drink
 Amongst the rock one cannot stop or think
 Sweat is dry and feet are in the sand
 If there were only water amongst the rock

(ll.331-338)

The concentrated repetition of "water" and "rock" (as well as "mountains", "road", and "sand") does not allow meaning to progress at all, but only restates in different combinations the same message: "Here is no water but only rock". It is as if, to compensate for the inadequacy of the words to signify exactly how desperately dry it is, Eliot uses them repeatedly. This has several effects. Firstly, it highlights the inadequacy of language and enforces our recognition that we, nonetheless, gain

knowledge, over and above immediate experience, through constructing it for ourselves. Secondly, it reduces our interaction with the poem to immediate experience, since the words begin to function not as signs but as sounds, with no distinction between form and content. The more a single word is used the closer the sentence comes to having no syntax, until there is only one word written, and for all it expresses it need only have been written once. The effect is frustration, an effect well suited to the lack of water -- the reader thirsts for progress towards meaning. This section of the poem is particularly successful at producing this effect because it combines repetition with a sophisticated use of the reference item "Here". Once again "Here" creates expectations of a specificity which is unfulfilled, doubly so because we find that the specific object which we are supposed to experience is not an object at all, but the lack of an object: "no water". This lack is more than a simple emptiness, it is a negation. The water is set up as the subject of the sentence by the reference item and as we see the noun it is simultaneously negated by the negative "no". The reader is thus confronted with a statement which is immediately rendered invalid, "but as the negated statements [water] remain present in his mind, so the indeterminacy of the text increases, thus increasing the pressure on the reader to find out what is being withheld from him" (Iser 141).

Repetition also serves to combine immediate experience and knowledge in the reader's experience of Eliot's text. Whilst engaging in a process of interpretation at one stage of reading, those parts of the poem which create emptiness, and those which evacuate the content of the words and reduce them to sound effects, as the section above does, allow us to experience a stasis in the poem which is pre-, or post-linguistic (this is also part of the function of common devices such as alliteration, rhyme and rhythm). Thus WL (along with FQ) falls into Eliot's own category, that of

the "musical poem". It is a poem, that is, "which has a musical pattern of sound and a musical pattern of secondary meanings of the words which compose it, and ... these two patterns are indissoluble and one."²²

A simple variant on the application of negatives is used in "The Fire Sermon" to describe the sexual encounter between the typist and the clerk who "endeavours to engage her in caresses / Which still are *un*reproved if *un*desired" (ll.237-38 my emphasis). The typist herself is vacant. She does not desire his caresses, but is passive. The caresses remain the subject of the sentence and the typist's reaction is described so that her agency is denied. The reactions themselves are not actions but lack of action; what we are given is the typist's reaction in terms of negation, through the prefix "un". Desire and reproof are the key elements of this sentence, but like water and shelter, they are denied the reader; their activity is stifled so that the potentially fertile sex act becomes stagnant, impotent. The emptiness of this encounter is emphasised by further use of negatives: "Exploring hands encounter *no* defense; / His vanity requires *no* response" (ll.240-41, my emphasis).

Empty people are a common motif in WL. A prime example is the woman referred to only as "she"/"her" in the opening sequence of a "A Game of Chess". The traditional expectation is that any person referred to in a poem is bound to be of importance, whether as the dramatised speaker, or as the consciousness which is the object of the speaker's inquiry. This woman, however, remains without a personality, marginalised by the continuation of the sentence, mentioned in passing. Yet the woman's presence seems central to the passage -- her emptiness is made conspicuous because the rest of the room is described in such voluptuous detail. Since "she signifies nothing herself and no signifier

refers to her" ²³, she is defined by her difference -- the described room is full of the flux and signification of the world-text, therefore, the unsigned woman is empty: negation is definition.

Sartre's understanding of self once more provides insight into the nature of such empty identity in *The Waste Land*, as it did for FQ. The title of his book alone, *Being and Nothingness*, is enough to suggest the connection. For Sartre negation and nothingness are necessary for the interaction of the self and the world. In the case of WL Sartre's model can not only be applied to the interaction between the personae in the text and their surrounding objects, but also to the interaction of the reader with the text. The woman of "A Game of Chess" is like Pierre in Sartre's example.²⁴ Pierre's "absence fixes the whole café in its evanescence ... This figure which slips constantly between my look and the solid, real objects of the café is precisely a perpetual disappearance". Sartre also stresses the importance of his own role in the discovery of Pierre's absence: "I myself expected to see Pierre, and my expectation has caused the absence of Pierre to happen as a real event concerning this café". In the case of Eliot's poem, the expectation which causes the emptiness of the woman is that of the reader. Our expectation of her narrative importance, or at least, her symbolic importance, is one which is not fulfilled. Although she is not missing in the same way that Pierre is simply not present in the cafe, the woman functions in the same way. Her appearance is a necessary part of Eliot's technique; the reader is aware of her emptiness precisely because Eliot makes us aware of her presence, evoking expectations which are not fulfilled. Once we know that there is a woman present, she cannot be isolated, but exists merely as a gap, "slipping constantly" between the objects of her room. As with my discussion of existentialism in the chapter on FQ I do not mean to suggest that Eliot was an existentialist or that an

entirely existential model will yield a consistent interpretation of *The Waste Land*. It does seem however, that Sarte's discussion of being and negativity applies helpfully to such instances by providing a meeting place where the techniques and structures which create emptiness in the text and this specific theme of emptiness (the "empty" self) converge.

Brooker and Bentley place the woman at the centre of the picture, a point of view which is supported by the first line of "A Game of Chess" ("The chair she sat in, like a burnished throne"). In this sentence she is physically central. Brooker and Bentley focus on the image of the woman with hair "spread out in fiery points" which "Glowed into words" (GC 109-10). In this image the woman is indeed at the centre, surrounded by words, and this leads to the assumption that the woman, surrounded by signification in the hermeneutic microcosm of her room, is also therefore a central absence upon which the whole system of signification depends. This assumption divinizes absence itself. There is a distinction to be made between the centre which is a foundation, origin, or transcendence, and that which is merely geographical. Brooker and Bentley take the woman's geographical centrality in the image as a symbol of her foundational nature. I have stated that she is marginalised in her first occurrence and her second is at the end of the description of her surroundings; she thus literally provides a "margin" for the unfolding of the room's ceaseless shifting. At the beginning and the end of a passage devoid of central subjectivity there is the image of a subject at the centre of her context ("she" is in the middle of the first sentence and is the face surrounded by words in the last lines). The consciousness represented both surrounds and is surrounded by signification. While the woman is neither geographical nor transcendental centre to the picture, it is her emptiness which acts with the density and fluidity of the room in **mutual** definition. However, this does not place her

as centre (origin) either, since, in true hermeneutical fashion, she is equally as defined by the other objects as they are by her; the emptiness (the self) is as dependent upon the objects of consciousness as the objects are dependent upon the emptiness.

Another instance of the empty person in WL is in section V, "What the Thunder said":

Who is the third who walks always beside you?
 When I count, there are only you and I together
 But when I look ahead up the white road
 There is always another one walking beside you
 Gliding wrapped in a brown mantle, hooded
 I do not know whether a man or a woman
 -- But who is that on the other side of you?

(ll.359-365)

Interpretations of this passage seem to centre around answering the initial question; discovering the identity of the illusionary third person. Like all other negations and gaps in Eliot's poem however, the "empty" person of this passage allows multiple possibilities to co-exist. Brooker and Bentley, for example, treat the elusive third party as a "shadow", and thus link it with the "Son of man" passage in Part I. They also point out that the line "I do not know whether man or woman" refers back to Tiresias and degrades the seer, leaving only an abstract and insubstantial image (179). Furthermore, it is possible that this figure is identified with Christ on the road to Emmaus, who is not recognised by his disciples. Further still, this lack-of-a-person can be associated with the Hanged Man, who is not present in Madame Sosostris' tarot reading ("I do not find the hanged man"). All these interpretations are reasonable, but the focus on discovering the significance of the missing person distracts from other important questions about this passage. The identities, for example, of the speaker and his auditor, are as much in question as the identity of the

person whom they cannot locate. In the line "When I count, there are only you and I", who is "I" and who is "you"? Coming, as it does, in the middle of a largely impersonal, repetitive description of a barren and waterless wilderness, this "I" is peculiarly disconnected from any idea of discrete ego. It seems likely, then, that this passage is a particular dramatisation of a universal experience, in which all identities remain unspecified precisely so that they may be associated with anybody. All of the subjects here are empty. They are even less specifiable than the woman of "A Game of Chess", since we at least know that she is a woman; here the ambiguity is explicit.

Like the invitation to "Come in under the shadow of this red rock" in Part I, this voice, directing its conversation towards a "you", ruptures the hidden compact between the reader and the text. Is this a direct address to the reader, or is there another auditor within the text? By positing an auditor who is in the middle, neither the speaker, nor the reader, Eliot calls into question the assumption that the speaker has been addressing us directly during section V of WL. We thus share the feeling that there may be a third person, but like the speaker of the poem, whichever way we turn we cannot look directly at this persona. Since we cannot be sure this "you" is an invitation to step into the role of the implied reader we are caught in a dilemma which necessitates our recognition of the distinction between the implied reader and ourselves, the real readers, and prevents us from too readily accepting the role which the text offers.

Iser defines the "implied reader" as follows: " ... the concept of the implied reader designates a network of response-inviting structures, which impel the reader to grasp the text. No matter who or what he may be, the reader is always offered a role to play, and it is this role that constitutes the

concept of the implied reader" (34-5). The operation of response-inviting structures, and specifically the role of emptiness in and as such a structure, is precisely what I have been discussing in this chapter. In Eliot's poem, just as it is impossible to pin down one speaker, so too the role which the text offers the reader is an indeterminate one. Response-inviting structures can remain open to any kind of real reader, and work regardless of how that reader perceives the text. The reader of WL is thus still offered a role to play, but is not offered any one "particular" role. In WL, as in many modernist texts, the fragmentation and range of perspectives along with the complimentary multitude of gaps and indeterminacies primarily draw attention to the interpretive reading process itself. As Iser says: "In this very act [of gap-filling] the dynamics of reading are revealed. By making his decision [the reader] implicitly acknowledges the inexhaustibility of the text; at the same time it is this very inexhaustibility that forces him to make his decision."²⁵ Here, once again, we encounter a hermeneutical relationship like that between the woman of GC and her room, the emptiness and density of Eliot's poetic technique, and the transcendence and immanence of the absolute in FQ.

2.2 Hermetic Drift and the Hermeneutic Circle

End of the endless
Journey to no end

("Ash-Wednesday" ll. 80-1)

In the section I have called the "Tarot reading", the obvious symbolism, the simplicity of the signs, and the immediate context, suggest to the reader that the cards do mean something. However, because of the emptiness of the text ("unfulfilled specificity" and "negativity" created by reference items and the process of negation respectively), we are unable to

decipher a situation apparently pregnant with meaning. In the absence of explanation by the Tarot "reader", Madame Sosotris, we are drawn in by the suction effect, and follow the allusions to a second site of interpretation.

"The drowned Phonician sailor", for example, foreshadows "Death by Water", and since this card represents the speaker ("This is *your* card"), this section of the poem also connects the speaker with Phlebas. This connection is reified by the only sentence of interpretation or prediction which Madame Sosotris gives: "Fear death by water", which is Phlebas' fate, and also by the allusion to Ariel's song in *The Tempest*: "(Those pearls that were his eyes. Look!)", which points to both "Death by Water" because of the apparent drownings in *The Tempest*, and "The Fire Sermon", where other lines from Act 1 scene II of Shakespeare's play are quoted. It is worth noting that the Shakespearean allusion undercuts Madame Sosotris' prediction, since the death by water of Ferdinand's father, the King of Naples, is illusory. The plot of the play can also be linked to the vegetation rites which Eliot claims as sources for the progress of his poem. The order of the Aristocratic world is set right during the course of the play by the symbolic "death" of the stagnant *status quo* and "rebirth" of Prospero as Duke, Alonso as king, and the political marriage of Ferdinand and Miranda. *The Tempest* also links the speaker of "The Burial of the Dead" with the speaker of "The Fire Sermon" through a chain of allusion that runs as follows: the Fisher King (according to Eliot's footnote, represented by the "man with three staves") connects with the speaker of FS who was "*fishing* in the dull canal" and is royalty by implication (since through the words of or words like those in *The Tempest* he claims that both his brother and father were kings). Further still, *The Tempest* connects this part of the play with the end of "A Game of Chess",

which alludes to Ophelia (who drowned in *Hamlet*) by quoting her last words: "Good night ... sweet ladies ...". In general, both *The Tempest* and *Hamlet* reflect the atmosphere of fragmented experience and the necessity for the reader of questioning the process of interpretation, suggesting that from some point of view (Prospero's in the case of *The Tempest*), all of the apparent mysteries which plague the other characters can be rendered meaningful.

It is possible to chase down these allusions to a virtually infinite extent. Following the connections between the passages of such a reflexive and self-referential poem, in an attempt to elucidate the meaning of the original symbol is, I suggest, a fruitless effort, which leads deeper into a web of signs which all point to each other. Even the thread of allusion to other works does not end, but is woven back into the texture of WL so that the parameters of Eliot's poem become blurred. Rather than interpret these allusions as symbols, which promise to lead us to a final symbol where the meaning of the sequence of allusions is finalised, we may refuse to interpret, as does Madame Sostostriis, and treat these cards/symbols only as images. The search for meaning, by plotting the relationship between symbols, then gives way to a simpler process of recognising the connection of images. We no longer, then, desire to attain vertical transcendence to the paradigmatic which Eliot's poem denies us. We cannot discover, on the spot, the meaning of any sign; we must leap the gaps between one section of the poem and the next, recognising a relational pattern which we cannot hope to encompass. It is in the recognition of the pattern than we understand Eliot's poem, for it is thus that we appreciate the "intensity of the artistic process". Just as, in FQ, absorption in the world and transcendence become one and the same thing, so, in WL, the form of the poem becomes the content. The juxtaposition

of cards in Madame Sosostris' reading, like all other juxtapositions in the poem, presents us with "a bundle of meanings which merely coexist. They cannot be analyzed into pure message, and that is the poem's pure message."²⁶ Eliot himself explains Edward Lear's nonsense verse in comparable terms: "His non-sense is not vacuity of sense: it is a parody of sense, and that is the sense of it" (*Selected Prose* 54). The parallel is that the "message" or "sense" in both cases is located in the structure or the style of the poem; the form of the text becomes the subject of its own inquiry. Whilst Lear maintains a sensible syntactical structure but fills it with unusual words, Eliot uses straightforward words but dismantles the structure which produces sense. WL, that is, is a poem which shifts our focus from the end (meaning) to the process (interpretation) itself.

This shift from end to process is that "widening of focus" which Brooker and Bentley describe. Their reading of *The Waste Land* proceeds upon six principles which I have found describe succinctly my attitude towards interpreting Eliot. It is particularly their fifth and sixth principles which characterise my perspective. Principle five is that the reader must be open to texts that both insist upon and defeat interpretation, and principle six is that WL involves a hermeneutical circling which leads the reader around the text, its tradition/history, and back to the beginning of the interpretive chain ("a return with a difference, a difference made by the process of trying to interpret", 12). To these I add a further principle, namely that Eliot's technique is one "whose foreseen interpretation is part of its generative process."²⁷ It intends to generate an effect; requiring the reader to enter an interpretive process, but also to recognise the futility of this process, and to feel the frustration of trying to establish finality in completely relative sign-system. In this way the hermeneutical circle is escaped; the reader attains the limited transcendence of perceiving the

structure and process of meaning, clearing the way for metahermeneutical investigation. We recognise, that is, that the poem is a poem about reading, language, and interpretation, and it asks us to interpret our own interpretations. In the following section I will consider the hermeneutic circle of Eliot's poem, and how the process of trying to interpret makes a difference.

As I have been arguing, Eliot's poem defies interpretation. This is not to say that we should not interpret the poem at all. Indeed, in order to grasp the point about interpretation we must first experience the subversion of meaning, and to transcend the chain of interpretation necessitates having first been within it. The structure of WL is one which induces reader-participation, demanding interpretation and at the same time eluding any interpretation given, by constant proliferation of symbols and allusions. This structure binds the elements of WL so that none can escape any other -- a structure which is both static, because it is comprised of words on a page which literally do not move, and moving, because interpretation of the poem is dependent on shifting and multifarious meanings and allusions. A model for the binding operation is the opening of Part II of WL, "A Game of Chess":

The chair she sat in, like a burnished throne,
Glowed on the marble, where the glass
Held up by standards wrought with fruited vines
From which a golden cupidon peeped out
(Another hid his eyes behind his wing)
Doubled the flames of sevenbranched candelabra
Reflecting light upon the table as
The glitter of her jewels rose to meet it,
From satin cases poured in rich profusion.

(ll.77-86)

This is a very visual passage which moves the reader's attention from one object to the next quickly and smoothly by the means of adding complex adverbial/adjectival clauses and conjunctions which introduce further objects and suspend the resolution of the sentence. It is as though we follow a light beam as it is reflected from chair, to marble, to glass (mirror), to candelabra, to table, to jewels. Yet it is impossible to locate a central object, orbited by the others, since each seems to act upon the other in a mutual relationship. The mirror is active, "doubling" the flames of the candelabra, which itself (or themselves) might otherwise seem, following the "beam of light" theory, to be the centre of the attention from which light, and hence the viewer's attention, emanates. The glitter of the jewels, however, does not seem to be created by the light of the candelabra, but is also active: "rising" and "pouring in rich profusion" from satin cases to meet the reflected light from the mirror. Likewise, the chair "glows" of its own accord.

This passage provides, in microcosmic form, a model for the functioning of the whole poem. The reflection of one object to the other is exactly like the deflection of the reader's attention from one place in Eliot's poem to another through the network of integrated allusions. Allusions to places outside the poem such as other works of literature, and actual locations (Margate Sands and the various "unreal" cities for example) are a part of this function. By integrating them so thoroughly with each other in the body of his poem, however, Eliot reduces the distinction between that which is in the poem and that which is without to nothing. Although WL has a beginning and an end, the reader yet travels the distance between them many times in a reading of the poem because the allusions and imagery fold back upon one another. The same pattern explicit in lines 77-86 (quoted above) is repeated time and again in every section of WL.

Eliot's technique has thus established that, in the same way that every element of historical process is dependent upon, or even indistinguishable from, every other element, so too every part of the poem and the poetic tradition is linked; there is nothing which can escape text, but within text no meaning can be finalised: every sign points to some other sign. This is a similar situation to that described by Umberto Eco in the epigraph to this chapter and in his discussion of "Hermetic drift" where the focus is on the process of shifting:

Connotations proliferate like a cancer and at every step the previous sign is forgotten, obliterated, since the pleasure of the drift is given by the shifting from sign to sign, and there is no purpose outside the enjoyment of travel through the labyrinth of signs or of things.

(Eco 31)

It seems, thus, that the model which Eliot provides, either for the working of the world-text, or for interpreting it, is a Hermetic one. The possibilities, however, which Eco goes on to discuss are relevant here because they are possibilities which elucidate the problem of interpreting *The Waste Land*. The similarity between Hermetic drift and Charles Sanders Peirce's idea of unlimited semiosis gives rise to the possibility that it is the latter rather than the former which WL is enacting. According to Eco, for Peirce a sign "is something by knowing which we know something more" (28), compared to the principle of Hermetic drift which is that a sign is "something by knowing which we know something *else*". The question to be asked of "Eliotic" semiosis is thus whether each sign signifies something **more**, in which case each deferral pads out the meaning of the original sign so that the chain of interpretation approaches a condition of finality, or whether each sign refers us to something **else**, in which case "Eliotic" semiosis is Hermetic, and the chain of interpretation we follow will lead everywhere, and hence nowhere, because the universe

becomes "a mere linguistic phenomenon" but one which "devoids language of any communicative power" (Eco 27).

"Eliotic" semiosis will, at most, represent an imperfect version of Hermetic drift, since interpretation is limited by the strictures which the text places upon the reader. Even though the context for interpretation expands to the whole literary tradition, in keeping with Eliot's theory, the interpolations or extrapolations of the reader are, in many cases, prefigured in the poem already. That is, the destination of our inference (as, in the example above, from the tarot reading to "Death by Water") is not provided by a interpretative projection on behalf of the reader, but is already contained in the poem. The meaning, or the function of each connotation may remain open, but to a large extent Eliot plays the role of Tiresias and "foresuffers all" which the reader enacts. As readers our job is not to provide the connotations of the poem, but to activate them. Because of the great degree of self-reflexivity of WL, the proliferation of connotations quite often leads us back to the same place, or at least the same theme/motif (the cyclical passage of time, for example, in FS: "Summer nights", "On a winter evening", "year to year", "in the spring", "the moon shone bright", "on a winter noon", "At the violet hour", "the evening hour", which connect back with BD l.60 "a winter dawn"). Each may be said to contribute to a broadening sense of meaning, in which case a padding out is occurring which is typical of Peircean rather than Hermetic semiosis. Is this recurrence of reference to the passage of time adding **more** to our understanding of this theme, or is it merely adding something **else**? It is certainly adding more through the slight change from, for example, "Under the brown fog of a winter dawn" in BD to "Under the brown fog of a winter noon" in FS, and then on to "the evening hour", since the change in time of day coupled with the otherwise static context

produces the sense that time is indeed moving forward, as opposed to the complicated double time-scheme of FQ. The other references, which involve a change of season, further add to our understanding of the theme of time by suggesting its cyclical nature. The allusion to *The Tempest* in BD, in the same way, opens a new field of interpretation **without** obliterating the old. *The Tempest* is also alluded to from GC and FS, so that the play provides a meeting place of allusions -- another dimension to the poem from which each section of WL is glued to other. The themes, characters, and action of *The Tempest* are not incidental to the adhesive quality it has (although any text so constantly utilised would perform in a similar way by virtue of repetition) but, as I explained above, they provide further examinations of the cycles of social power, and the nature of interpretation, which add to our understanding of WL.

From these examples it seems as if the model of signification and interpretation which WL exhibits cannot be Hermetic because, rather than each sign pointing to something **else** and "obliterating" the last sign, each new deferral adds **more** significance to the whole symbolic network of the poem. To use Eco's words, "there is a sort of growth of the global content" (32). Also, in Eliot's poem the chain of signification turns back upon itself and this turning back is a central technique for the unity of Eliot's poem. WL is a carefully formed Hermeneutical circle. That is, the meaning of the various fragments of WL and the meaning of the whole are mutually dependent. We understand each part by its relationship to the whole, and yet we understand the whole by knowing the meanings of its parts. Although it seems paradoxical, it is only so, in the case of most poems, if we assume only one reading of the poem. Further readings allow a "mutually qualifying interplay between our evolving sense of the whole and our retrospective understanding of its parts" (Abrams 86). Given a

poem such as WL, which is so deliberately circular that, as I noted above, the reader travels the length of the poem many times in just one reading, our sense of the "evolving whole" or the "growth of the global content" will be more intense.

However, because the circling does not stop with one revolution, the deferral of meaning still takes place. In the cases of Hermetic and Peircean semiotics which Eco discusses, the chain of interpretation is typically linear, and the deferral therefore implies teleological motivation, the reader is still allowed to feel there is some place where the deferral will end, even if it is beyond the scope of his or her own reading. In the case of WL's hermeneutic circling, however, we are soon led back to where we started with a sense of depth of signification behind that site of original interpretation (that is, a more developed understanding of its significance), yet meaning is still deferred, as the sign will send us back along the same circular chain. In the first case meaning is indefinitely deferred, in the second it seems ever present within the circle, but also ever-elusive. It is the very inability to pin down a final signifier/signified which constrains our interpretation to a certain context. The growth of the global content only goes so far and there is a point at which, by the intensive co-mingling of allusions and self-reflexivity of WL, we are denied access to anything outside the (albeit extensive) bounds of the selected tradition. As the allusions proliferate, that is, the possibilities for meaning asymptotically approach a final condition so that even whilst **the** meaning of the text is deferred, the tradition from which we may draw a meaning becomes more clearly defined, setting the limit to our interpretation. The form of drift which occurs in WL is thus a combination. To begin with each further sign adds more to the development of the whole symbolic network. This process appears to be a kind of Peircean "unlimited semiosis". Even as this

network approaches a fullness of symbolic content, though, the signs continue to proliferate, so that they are redundant -- wasted. At this point, the symbolic network becomes static; a self-supporting structure in which all signs point to each other. The symbols of a given tradition join tightly under hermetic rule; each adding no more but referring to something else, a something else which is identical to itself. In itself suggesting a deep and ubiquitous symbolic order, the closure of the symbolic network provides a feeling of profound meaning, but the incompleteness of each symbol leads to the incompleteness of the whole network, which, though self-supporting, comes no closer to finalising meaning than each of its constituent parts.

**CHAPTER THREE: MYTH, SILENCE, AND THE FAILURE OF
SYMBOLS IN *THE WASTE LAND*.**

The most obvious symbolic network which develops in *The Waste Land* is that which belongs to the myth of the Grail. Despite the many discrepancies from version to version which Weston describes, it is unnecessary to isolate one as the version which Eliot follows since the symbols of the myth are common to all, he "builds his poem on the predicament which the myth embodies."²⁸ From the themes that arise in WL itself it is possible to tell that Eliot picks out those qualities of the grail myth which suit his purpose, and adapts them to a perspective on the twentieth century, rather than letting the details of one grail story guide his poem. Thus, for example, the atmosphere of the very early "Gawain" version, where the hero has "no clear idea of the task before him" (Weston 12) mingles in WL with the "Perceval" versions in which the Fisher King comes to the fore.

One of the details of the grail myth which Eliot draws on, although it appears only in some versions, is, significantly, the inability of the hero to speak, to ask a question, or inquire after either the health of the king, or the meaning of the grail. In the "Gawain" story the hero "ought to have enquired concerning the grail, and ... this enquiry would have resulted in the restoration to fruitfulness of a Waste Land" (Weston 12). Once more the actual question is of little importance to Eliot; it is the form, the process or the act of questioning, not the content, that occupies the central position in the development of WL. The silence of the hero when he should speak is of great significance in Eliot's poem, perhaps even more so than in the grail myths. Indeed the inability to speak, and specifically, to

ask a question has been a factor in Eliot's poetry since *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, in which the "hero" wonders if he dare squeeze "the universe into a ball" and "roll it toward some overwhelming question".²⁹

The importance of the inability to speak in my analysis of WL is twofold. Firstly, silence can be treated as a further kind of nothingness which adds to the development of emptiness as a theme. Secondly, a quest which, like Gawain's, involves a disoriented hero seeking without knowing what he is seeking for or why he is seeking, and in which success depends upon asking questions, provides a suitable metaphor for the reading process, in which the reader becomes the quester who asks questions of the text, and also answers them. The quester may thus be treated as a type of model reader, the one whom Eliot had in mind as he constructed his poem. This model shows how the grail myth provides not only thematic and symbolic material for Eliot's poem, but also a structure and analysis of interpretation which further reinforces the poem's self-awareness and its anticipation of a reader.

Aside from the images, themes, and characters from myth which Eliot employs as pieces of the fabric of his poem, there is a structural continuity between WL and the tradition of grail romance. When Eliot says "Indeed, so deeply am I indebted, Miss Weston's book will elucidate the difficulties of the book much better than my notes can do" (*Selected Poems* 68), he is not suggesting that the content of the book will provide an explicit map for the reader of WL, who may then transfer his or her understanding of the grail symbols to the task of interpreting the poem. The key which Weston's book provides, I believe, lies not in the details of the grail myth. The key is firstly in the way *From Ritual to Romance*

reveals the development of a tradition, and secondly, in the aims (and flaws) of Weston's argument itself.

Just as Eliot claims that Weston will "elucidate" his poem, so her aim is a "genuine *Elucidation* of the grail problem" (1). Weston claims not to analyse the story "as a connected whole" (11) or "discuss the ... interrelation of the different versions", but aims to prove the "origin of the grail" (5). Given WL's preoccupation with "interrelation" (of signs, sounds, myths, literature) and denial of "original" meaning, and taking into account Eliot's theory of "tradition", it seems likely that what Eliot recognised and drew from the grail myth was precisely the "interrelation of the different versions". As a fragmented and shifting collection of interrelated stories centred around the quest for the "secret" of the grail, the grail tradition provides an ideal reservoir of ambiguous symbols for WL, which is itself fragmented and shifting. Eliot's claim for Weston's usefulness in "elucidating" his poem thus takes on a tone which is both truthful and extremely ironic.

The many versions of the grail myth which Weston outlines chronologically in her second chapter, "The Task of the Hero", have such an assortment of discrepancies that from one to the next the whole focus of the story may change. In some, as Weston points out, The Fisher King's illness is related by sympathetic magic to the Waste Land, while in others the King himself is healthy, but a wounded knight must be healed, not by inquiring about the grail, but by avenging him. Sometimes the wasted land is due entirely to the hero himself, in others the Waste Land disappears and the focus is on the Fisher King only. Some versions are started by one author and finished by another. Robert de Boron Christianised the story, Malory Anglicised it. There are versions in German, French, and English.

The grail myth, then, can be construed as a living and compelling example of an hermeneutical literary "tradition" which Eliot "develops and procures".³⁰

Perhaps the most important instance of silence in WL is that which appears first:

*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.

(I ll.37-41)

The mutually defining relationship of silence (emptiness) and knowledge or discourse about it, which I explored in the previous chapter, is echoed in the style and the mythological themes of this part of WL. The difference between the framing German quotes (even further foregrounded by italics) and the English, creates a gap in the text which is widened by the ensuing sequence of negation. The meaning of the German is withheld from the reader (unless (s)he speaks German); even upon discovering its translation we must try and understand its relevance. Immediately after the lines from Wagner we are confronted with speech from a persona who is not present, and we must then find its relationship to the words of the speaker. The speaker begins a sentence with the conjunction "Yet", which implies an explanation, but none is given. Instead we are lead into a breakdown of senses, a limbo which is neither life nor death, and each time the first person "I" appears, it is with a verb, but it is either a negative

verb ("could not") or the action we expect is rendered void: "I knew *nothing*" (my emphasis). The language of this excerpt thus works to disorientate the reader, and create the same sense of emptiness that the speaker describes. The reader, to understand, must not merely receive a narrated plot, but actively and constantly question the text: What do these words mean, what is their contextual significance? This questioning is not peculiar, but happens in any reading of any text. What is important about WL is that it both exaggerates and dismantles the functions of language so that we become highly aware of our participation as readers.

At first the context does not appear particularly mythological. The dialogue and the first two lines thereafter are strikingly contemporary in style; the speaker, since his speech is not in quotations, is either thinking rather than responding directly to the woman, as in "A Game of Chess", or, judging by the reminiscent tone, recalling her words now that she is no longer present. (The latter seems to be more likely considering the first quote from *Tristan und Isolde*, which is a sailor's song of a lover he has left behind.)³¹ The quotes from Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* which frame this small excerpt enhance the modern tone by contrast. This contrast "reveals myth as a frame for temporal life" (Brooker and Bentley 69). It is easy to infer that these lines depict a failure of love, and thus set the tone for the almost obsessive preoccupation with lust which WL embodies. If the contrast of the German myth and the contemporary one is to hold, however, it seems that this situation is one where both language/knowledge and love fluctuate between triumph and failure. In *Tristan und Isolde* the language is very poetic: "*Oed' und leer das Meer*" (l. 42, "Desolate and empty the sea"), but it disguises (by interpreting) the vacancy of the ocean. The servant who runs to look for signs of Isolde's ship arriving reads the sea, like a language, but finds it empty; a blank

medium which carries no meaning. It is the very language used which causes the "desolation" of the sea, which, because of its emptiness, may yet represent the hope of Isolde's arrival. According to the myth itself (as opposed to Wagner's interpretation) Tristan dies before he can see the ship's sail. At the point of his death the colour of the sail, signifying success or failure, is suspended between white and black -- it is both, and neither -- since, like the speaker, Tristan **cannot see**.

In the situation described by the quote above, the lover's language fails because of the inability of a relational system of signification to encompass immediate/transcendent experience. The attempt to enclose love within language fails and, since love remains transcendent, the success as well as the failure of love remains a possibility. As the speaker tries, in retrospect, to reconstruct his experience of "the hyacinth girl" he can use only abstract and paradoxical language which connects this encounter to the religious experience of FQ: "I was neither / Living, nor dead." He depicts that "Desiccation of the world of sense" (BN III l.119) which FQ describes as a way of transcending the flux of the world-text, and from this position he paradoxically **sees** the "the heart of light, the silence". This phrase is like that which Pseudo-Dionysius uses to describe the transcendent One ("... the luminous dimness, a silence which teaches secretly ... which is not in a place and does not see").³² The inability of Eliot's persona to speak is thus linked with the transcendent silence of the absolute, which according to mystics can only be described by paradox or negatives, and also with the gap in a text where all possibilities for interpretation exist. Here, then, is a point of entry for the grail myth. Although it is not specifically referred to as content, the myth of the grail is summoned by the inability to speak, which in this instance stands not for the failure of the speaker, but rather for the inadequacy of language.

In many stories of the Grail those who view it are struck dumb, in a moment of rapture: "Awestruck the priests hushed their songs and looked rapturously at the marvel before them", and, just as Eliot's speaker's eyes fail, Titurel's ears fail as "in his rapture he hardly heeded the cries of a number of knights"³³ The significance of silence here has little, if anything to do with the Fisher King, or even a waste land. What Eliot is capturing is something that he will go on to explore in much more detail in *FQ*: the rapturous moment. This moment is one which can be experienced, but not described, since it occurs as transcendence, either above or beneath the constructions of signification.³⁴ Eliot describes a rapturous moment of his own as an experience of silence, in an unpublished poem of 1910, entitled "Silence". The encounter with the hyacinth girl constitutes such a moment, just as an encounter with the grail.

Silence is a factor of myth specifically related to the Fisher King in *FS*. Eliot depicts the Fisher King (presumably the speaker here) by the "dull canal" waiting, expectantly, to hear something. But there is no sign whatsoever, "the wind crosses the brown land, *unheard*" (ll.174-5 my italics), and in the river there is no "testimony of summer nights" (l.179). A mythological source for this scene is, I suggest, one of the early forms of the grail legend, Chrétien de Troyes' *Perceval*, in which the hero comes across a man fishing, whom he does not know to be the King, and asks where he may lodge for the night. The Fisher King directs the unknowing Perceval to the Grail Castle. In *WL*, this scene itself is incomplete; Perceval does not arrive (neither do any other grail knights) and the Fisher King hears nothing: "But at my back in a cold blast I hear / The rattle of bones, and a chuckle spread from ear to ear" (ll. 189-90). The effect of these lines is surreal, eerie, and almost filmographic. Just as, in a movie, tumbleweed or a riderless, but harnessed, horse crossing the screen in front

of a ghost-town does not fill, but rather enhances the emptiness of the town, so the rattle and chuckle behind the Fisher King foregrounds the absence of a quest(ion)er and a meaningful question.

The build up of mythological significance in "The Fire Sermon" once more includes Wagner. Eliot refers us to Spenser for the origin of line 176 ("Sweet Thames, run softly, till I end my song"), and Southam extends this claim so that Spenser is also the source of the nymphs (80). The picture of the river which Eliot provides, however, is in obvious ironic contrast to the pastoral perfection of *Prothalamion*. The refrain "The nymphs have departed" also alludes, with deeper significance, to the water-nymphs -- the Rhinemaidens -- who appear in Scene I of the first part (*The Rhinegold*) of Wagner's opera cycle, and whose songs Eliot's "Thames-daughters" imitate later in "The Fire Sermon". In the opera, Alberich the Nibelung, an ugly dwarf, makes his way "down into their watery realm where he lustfully and fruitlessly pursues the teasing nymphs" and is "overcome" by the "brilliant golden glow" of the Rhinegold.³⁵ Although these details of the opera represent an allusion twice-removed from Eliot's poem, they yet contain two motifs which are central to WL. One is the "rapturous moment" associated with a "heart of light" ("golden glow"), which has already occurred in "The Burial of the Dead". The other is the "lustful and fruitless" pursuit of carnal pleasure, which is played out several times more in "The Fire Sermon". These two motifs are intimately related, since carnal experience, or merely pursuing it, leads to a transcendent moment of rapture as surely as the spiritual experience of the heart of light. Once in the nothingness beyond language, two kinds of transcendence are "indissoluble and one."

As the title of "The Fire Sermon" (Buddha's sermon against the fires of lust) suggests, these scenes, contemporary, historical and mythological, are all sexual: Verlaine's Parsifal conquers his lust (l.202), Tereus rapes Philomela (ll.205-6), Mr. Eugenides makes his unsavoury invitation, the clerk "assaults" the typist, and the relationship of Queen Elizabeth and the Earl of Leicester is "stale pretence."³⁶ The shared meaningless sexuality of these allusions binds them together under the theme which the title evokes. A wide variety of styles, reflecting historical periods, the sounds of birds, and the italicised french, all foreground the universality of the theme, which is continuous despite the fragmentariness of the language. FS does not develop towards a conclusion which analyses the theme of barren sexuality, but merely gathers together more and more instances until, it seems, the burden is too much for language to bear. In the end syntax breaks down completely, leaving no conclusion, but the suggestion of the continuation of the fires of lust which Buddha preached against:

la la

To Carthage then I came

Burning burning burning burning

O Lord thou pluckest me out

O Lord thou pluckest

burning

(ll.306-11)

As Southam points out (72), lines 307 and 309 are from St. Augustines *Confessions*. (In *Confessions* line 307 continues: "... where a cauldron of unholy loves sang all about mine ears." This line is thus another oblique reference to lust.) The convergence of the eastern and western perspectives further reinforces the pervasiveness of lust, which itself overflows description, leaving us "burning". The inability of language

(symbols) to represent experience is applied to the low as well as the high. That is, just as transcendent moments, such as those which occur when the speaker encounters the hyacinth girl, or the hero encounters the grail, raise us outside the sphere of relational discourse, so lust leads us to a downward transcendence. On the one hand there is a self-negation through spiritual enlightenment, on the other is self-negation through physical immediacy. Eliot deals with this point more explicitly from the calm and complete perspective of FQ, yet it is present in embryonic form in WL.

The approach to the Chapel Perilous, the final stage of the grail quest, is one of three themes which Eliot identifies in "What the Thunder said", the final part of his poem. Southam describes this part of the grail quest as one in which "the knight is tested with the illusion of *nothingness*" (88-9 my emphasis). In the legends of the grail the Chapel is filled with demonic visions, and nightmarish wailing.³⁷ Eliot's surreal and horrific imagery in Part V captures the tone of the Chapel Perilous rather than following the story:

A woman drew her long black hair out tight
And fiddled whisper music on those strings
And bats with baby faces in the violet light
Whistled and beat their wings

(ll. 377-380)

This same section of the poem undertakes a reversal of previous images. The walls of Magnus Martyr, which once "held inexplicable splendour of Ionian white and gold" become "a blackened wall", and the church bells of St. Mary Woolnoth merge with those of upside down towers in line 382. This paragraph concludes with an inversion of the line

from Verlaine's *Parsifal*, which Eliot inserted in "The Fire Sermon" ("*Et O ces voix d'enfant, chantant dans la coupole*"). In the nightmare vision of the Chapel Perilous, the line is transformed: "And voices singing out of empty cisterns and exhausted / wells" (ll.384-5). Verlaine's line is extremely well balanced about the pivotal comma. The repeated "an" sound of *enfant, chantant* and *dans* creates a compelling rhythm, and the long "O" sounds of "O" (suggesting rapture) and "coupole" at either end provide symmetry. Eliot, by his insertion of emptiness and exhaustion, negates the hope and beauty which Verlaine seems to portray. The emptiness is associated with cisterns and wells, holes, in other words, which are inversions of Verlaine's word "dome". The line is paradoxical and another form of negation. The voices imply singers, but the source of the singing is "empty", indicating that, not only are there no singers, but that there is also no singing. By allowing us first to hear Verlaine echoing in the beginning of line 384, and then cancelling the information already given, Eliot once more intimates to the reader that something is being withheld through the double action of allusion and disillusion.

The empty cisterns of line 384 are one corner of a triangle of empty structures. The "empty chapel" (l.388) and the "empty rooms" (l.409) complete the triad. Because this is the final section of the poem, and correlated to the last stage in the grail myth, we expect closure. The hero completes his quest, and the meaning of the poem is finalised. The chapel is empty, however. There is not even a mysterious sign or horrific image such as those which appear to Gawain. From a mythological perspective such signs are readily interpreted as visitations, divine or diabolical. Emptiness, however, is "untranslatable" or "endlessly translatable, from an infinitude of perspectives."³⁸ There is no answer in the chapel, it may be

argued, because there is no question. The wind, once more, is the harbinger of silence, as it was in FS (ll.174-5, 185).

Countering the emptiness of the chapel is the multitude of interpretations raised by the voice of the thunder. This is the other side of the problem, as Eliot sees it, of knowledge within relational discourse. In order to explain anything adequately, one must include as many perspectives as possible, but as explanation approaches the complexity necessary to explain, explanation ceases, and the solution becomes only a restatement of the problem.³⁹ Just like silence, endless translations are also untranslatable. According to the Indian legend of the thunder, three groups approach the god Prajapati, and ask him to speak. He answers "DA" to each group, and each group interprets his response differently.⁴⁰ Eliot's answers, reduced versions of those in the legend, cunningly extrapolate whole words from the single meaningless sound, to suggest how the syllable might imply different words to different auditors. Thus, for the first auditor, "DA" suggests "Datta" (give), for the second, it suggests "Dayadhvam" (sympathise), and for the third "Damyata" (control). The extrapolated words are also reinterpreted by the speaker. "Datta", for example, rather than an imperative, is taken as a question: "What have we given ?" (l.401). The question mark thus signifies **two** questions. In the first case it is connected with the assumption of an inquiry ("What have we given [-- is that what you are asking me] ?") and in the second, the speaker is either unaware of his own assumption and merely interprets the word as a question, or knowingly takes the liberty of developing a question that he wants to answer from the theme of "give". This question is, once more, arbitrarily interpreted as something like "what have we experienced?" or "what is it to exist?", in order to be answered with the distinction between knowledge and reality. We have existed by

unalterable moments (moments of surrender) outside the constructions of the world-text (the language of obituaries or sealed wills, and the retrospective images of memory). Because of the fragmentariness of WL (all perspectives are included), no one perspective can be properly isolated. The chain of arbitrary connections which move us from the voice of the thunder to the speaker's response betrays the controlling consciousness of a poet using myth and philosophy as organising principles. It also, of course, suggests a reader, who, recognising the mythological and philosophical principles and motivated by the sense of something withheld (which implies a meaning to be reached), enacts the organisation of the poem.

Silence goes through two further metamorphoses in TS. The first explores the structure of silence: "There is not even silence in the mountains / But dry sterile thunder without rain" (ll.341-2). This development is a complex one which blends images from several of Eliot's mythical sources into a metaphor for the process by which he creates emptiness in his poem. The element of thunder is from Hindu mythology. The mountains recall both the mountains of "The Burial of the Dead" and the mountains where the Chapel Perilous is traditionally located (an ironic contrast since the mountains in Part I are part of a romantic cliché: "In the mountains, there you feel free" and here one is not free to do anything: " ... one can neither stand nor lie nor sit" [ll.340]). Dryness and sterility suggest the vegetation rites, the images of which Eliot uses abundantly. (Weston claims these are the rituals from which the grail romances grew.) These lines are thus a powerful concentration of allusions to the central sources of the "incidental symbolism of the poem" (*Selected Poetry* 68). The involvement of the material of the whole poem seems to indicate that the point being made can be generalised, so that this one line becomes

representative of the activity of WL. Like the response-inviting structures which constitute Eliot's poem, the effect of the thunder on the speaker relies upon the expectation of the connection of thunder and rain -- the thunder is a **sign** that rain is to follow -- but in this case there is no rain. The thunder, that is, may be taken as a metaphor for reference items, leaving the speaker and the reader with a sense of unfulfilled specificity, at the absence of the implied rain. There is not even silence in the mountains. In the mountains there is negativity.

In the second metamorphosis the silence has come full circle, and becomes the common silence; not the silence of the inability to speak, but of simply not speaking: "The jungle crouched, humped in silence" (l.398). This silence does not signify the failure of relational discourse to represent transcendent meaning. There is no process of negation associated with the occurrence of the word, as there is, for example, in the "hyacinth girl" episode.

The final passage of WL also consists of the contrasting elements of frantic and fragmented discourse, and the calm of the emptiness beyond. It is a powder keg of allusions which explodes outwards, threatening the reader with a further chase towards meanings:

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 falling down
Poi s'ascose nel foco che gli affina
Quando fiam uti chelidon -- O swallow swallow
Le Prince d'Aquitaine à 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

(TS ll.423-433)

Because the passage is so concentrated, however, and comes after we have already discovered the futility of such a chase, the real challenge which Eliot puts to us is perhaps **not** to interpret, but yet recognise that the pattern continues beyond the apparent edges of this poem. The myth of the Fisher King is connected with the history of England, captured in a state of decay by the nursery rhyme which, like most nursery rhymes, carries with it a heavy burden of tragic meaning. Assorted quotations in Italian, Latin, and French expand this to the history of Europe. These lines recall personae who are fallen and praying for escape, the first from the fires of purgatory (where the lustful are punished), the second from the anonymity of the poet who longs to be heard like the swallow, and from the inheritance of a broken tradition. The speaker's answer is one of heroic existentialism. In the face of a chaotic world where nothing is absolute he manufactures his own meaning by manipulating the remains of a fragmented tradition: "These fragments I have shored against my ruins". He is like the speaker of FQ, and those to whom he refers, who are "only undefeated / Because we have gone on trying" (DS V l.228-9). Once more we see that it is structure which is most important. It is not the nature of the act performed, but the performance itself that defines a self. Also, following the parallel between self and poem which developed in my analysis of FQ, it is in the performance (that is, the reading) of the poem that its meaning is generated. The scatter of allusions in which WL ends is thus not, as Brooker and Bentley describe it, "a rejection of the quest" (201), but rather the acceptance of "a world of desire and death where questing is a way of life which continually discovers only the necessity of the quest."⁴¹

The solution of shoring fragments is not an optimistic one, but it is not utterly despairing. The success or meaningfulness of such a solution is, of course, questionable. The speaker's tone is resigned; given that he

inhabits a waste land, this is all that can be done. Like Hieronymo in Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*, his acceptance is "double-edged" (Southam 93); the allusion to Kyd is also an allusion to madness and murder. If all meaning is constructed, with form prior to content, then moral judgement is as much a matter of interpretation as anything else; madness and murder are valid positions. The repeated Sanskrit words remind us once again of the variety, and the possible contradictions, of interpretation. This time they are not italicised, but have been appropriated for this text, physically as well as conceptually. This drawing together of the keys to previous parts of the poem seems an ironic attempt at formal closure. By employing a technique of structural finality in a place where meaning is obviously scattered Eliot indicates that, though the structure of the poem **can** be closed off, it is not in this plane that the text continues. It is, rather, in the emptiness of the text where all possibilities for interpretation are suspended. The text is still, but still moving.

The poem ends on a note of emptiness. The repeated Sanskrit "Shantih shantih shantih" signifies, again, a "formal ending" (*Selected Poetry* 74). But it is also a sound effect, and a reference to nothingness. As a sound effect it echoes both the previous line in its triple repetition, and contrasts with it through the unvarying alliteration of soft sounds, which suggest restfulness and completion. Eliot tells us in his own footnote that "'The peace which passeth understanding' is our equivalent to this word" (*Selected Poetry* 74). The way he has phrased this note is very telling, for it implies approximation. He does purport to tell us, that is, what the word **means**. There is no word in English which maps directly onto this concept, only an "equivalent". The suggestion that the conceptual thought and language of English speakers and Sanskrit speakers are somehow out of phase stimulates an awareness in the reader

of yet another gap and calls us to question the possibility of any kind of communication at all. The phrase "The peace which passeth understanding" is also another description of a dimension beyond relational discourse (the dimension of the rapturous moment), if "understanding" can be read as a kind of knowledge. Knowledge, recalling Eliot's Bradleyan division of knowledge and experience, occurs in the second (relational) stage of human interaction, in which language intrudes and subject/object dualism is forced upon the individual, so that experience remains immediate and unapproachable. The peace which "Shantih" signifies is one which "passeth" this stage, and as such is a transcendence into emptiness where discordant viewpoints may be reconciled.

Myth is yet another way that Eliot explores the difficulties of language, self-identity, and meaning, because it too focuses on the relationship between plenitude and vacancy. Ironically, plenitude produces waste and barrenness, while emptiness holds the promise of finality which motivates continued quest(ion)ing. Experience of the grail, according to the legends, is of such a fundamental nature (immediate and transcendent) it defies description. The grail signifies a secret which either cannot or must not be told: "There is a secret connected with it, the revelation of which will entail dire misfortune on the betrayer" (Weston 137). The blank card of the tarot reading, the "old stones which cannot be deciphered" of *FQ*, and the grail are thus three tokens of the same type. They are symbols which signify that which transcends symbolism and also, therefore, signify the incomplete nature of every symbol. In Christian symbology this role is normally occupied by the cross ("all symbols are incomplete, but the cross reminds us of this and so is the symbol of symbols themselves" [Grant 11]), but in the grail myth the grail itself represents the highest achievement of

Christianity. The significance of the cross is thus transferred directly to the grail: "above all [the grail] is a symbol of symbolism itself."⁴²

From the inability of a persona to speak, silence has become the failure of symbolism generally. The grail, because it symbolises this failure also, paradoxically, becomes the symbol of that which it fails to symbolise - - transcendent experience -- a rapturous moment which, one way or the other, remains outside the possibilities of discourse about it. The hero of the myths fails (not because he does not know the meaning of the grail but because he does not **inquire** about the meaning of the grail) or in success cannot express the secret of the grail; meaning overflows the attempt to bind it within a symbolic network, and in its failure every symbol also comes to mean "I mean more." This "more" can only be suggested by emptiness (gaps in the text, unfulfilled specificity, and negativity) which is both uninterpretable, and endlessly interpretable.

CONCLUSION

And the end of all our exploring
 Will be to arrive where we started
 And know the place for the first time.

(*Little Gidding* ll.240-42)

Four Quartets and *The Waste Land* share a basic tenet of Eliot's philosophy: the division of human interaction with the world into knowledge and experience. This division gives rise to a mutually exclusive but mutually defining relationship between an entirely relative world-text, and the emptiness beyond. His style parallels this philosophical theme as it is a style of "plenitude" and "vacancy", thick with symbolic content, but also creating emptiness. Reader-response criticism is well suited to an analysis of these two poems since the concepts of the "gap" or "indeterminacy" in the text, Iser's "process of negation", and Eco's preoccupation with the limit of interpretation, arise out of the same concern with language that Eliot's poetry exhibits. The two poems I have analysed do not just "say" something or "mean" something but, I believe, are an attempt to do and to be. In my analysis I have been attempting to answer the question "what does the poem do?" rather than what does it mean, and this is precisely the question that Stanley Fish, as a proponent of reader-response theory, suggests is the question to be asked of any text.⁴³ Eliot himself desired readers of WL to "endeavour to grasp what the poetry is aiming to be" ⁴⁴

Existentialism suggests several possibilities for the elucidation of nothingness in Eliot's poetry. It is a "philosophy of the abyss" in which self is a "hole in being", motivated by fear of the void to struggle against a lack

of essential reality. The theme of self-identity, which often seems peripheral in both of the long poems, is nonetheless ever present. Since an essential self would be another form of absolute meaning, the debate over self-identity is conducted in the same arena as that where the problem of knowing God from within discourse takes place. Sartre's existential explanation of self, like Eliot's poetry, revolves around a consciousness which exists in relationship to the objects of the world, and what is beyond: "the Ego is a 'synthesis of interiority and transcendence.'"⁴⁵ Like the negative way of Christian mysticism, existentialism focuses on the relationship between plenitude and vacancy. The two share the process of negation as a theoretical construct, but whereas Murray identifies the product of the process with transcendence, Sartre identifies it with nothingness. Hans Georg Gadamer's critical theory, based on an existential model, provides an explanation of existence very similar to that which FQ describes. The parallel between Gadamer's "game" and Eliot's "dance" as metaphors for the necessarily linguistic process of human existence reveals that the focus of both is on process, relationship, and "the primacy of language".

The style of FQ reflects (and produces) the themes. The Bergsonian is a flowing, lyrical mode of metaphor, (it is figurative language that Bergson believed came closest to expressing truth or reality). The Pseudo-Dionysian is a static mode; an attempt to describe absolute reality in conceptual language, which leads to repetition. The two modes are held together in opposition, their functions collapse together, and they are shown to be equally capable of representing "crude experience" and "abstruse theory". While Pseudo-Dionysian language is an attempt to capture the most "crude" (fundamental) experience of transcendence to union with the divine, through repetition and contradiction it becomes

"abstruse". The lyrical Bergsonian mode is often an attempt to express an "abstruse" existential philosophy, but through its rhythm and sound effects it becomes "crude", experienced by the reader, as well as read. In both cases the form of the language triumphs over the content. When used in isolation, the inherent weakness of both kinds of language cause their collapse, but when used together the weaknesses become the strength of Eliot's style; for it is in the weakness that the reader makes a comparison.

The central problem of FQ is that of knowing God, or knowing an essential self, from within discourse. This is a problem that cannot be solved purely by the doctrine of transcendence because the knowing self, which would encounter either God, or itself, is a being reliant on the fragmented world-text to construct identities and meanings. Once removed from this relational stage of experience, where self is defined by its relations, there is no self to undergo the experience. Experiences of anything beyond relational discourse, like the moment in the rose garden, whether they are immediate or transcendent, can only be approached in retrospect, in memory. From the mystical perspective language is completely inadequate; it cannot contain the absolute truth of God. The only way to express this truth is to express the inadequacy of language by saying something contradictory and to suggest, thereby, that there is something beyond language, beyond our power to conceive and express. The tension between opposites creates a gap in the text, which for the mystic is Absolute, but which Eliot admits, is equally nothing. Since, from within a relational system of signification, anything beyond discourse can only appear as nothingness, and since author, reader, and text, are necessarily within discourse, the paradox remains unresolved. The combination of the vacancy of the gap, and the plenitude of language is only achieved by the reader's activation of the paradox. The reader thus

performs a kind of transcendence, but one of a different order than transcendence of the restrictions which language puts upon experience. It is recognition of these restrictions, an awareness of the structure self-awareness, its relativity and its dependence upon language. It is a synthesis of aporia and the possibilities which attend it, existing in the gap between one way and the other. It is this awareness that Eliot's style, particularly in WL, aims to force upon the reader.

Both FQ and WL aim to create the emptiness which is their subject matter so that the reader does not only encounter the idea of emptiness conceptually, but also experiences it. This is the function of the gap or indeterminacy in the text which in FQ is caused mainly by paradox and the disparity of the Pseudo-Dionysian and Bergsonian modes. In WL these gaps are more in number, relentlessly generated by constant retractions, repetition, negations, and fragmented, allusive language. FQ is a more certain poem, the post-conversion and post-modern poet, it may be suggested, having decided that absence is a definite indication of divine presence. But Eliot remained a sceptic and a Bradleyan until the end, and even the later, more certain poem continues to suspend and withdraw meaning. In FQ Eliot suggests that, though absolute meaning cannot be contained in relational experience (and hence in language), through patterns and forms in language as basic as rhythm and repetition a blank can be created, a blank which suggests, but only suggests, both absolute and nothing. In both poems, through these forms and patterns ("the music of poetry"), relational knowledge and transcendence reach a quasi-synthetic stasis, held in aporia with the tension of opposites. The grail, along with the blank tarot card, the undecipherable stones, and also the Chinese jar, which moves in its stillness, are symbols of this aporia. These symbols themselves are syntheses of the failure and success of symbolism;

they succeed in suggesting the nothingness beyond discourse because in signifying (and failing to signify) the failure of all symbols, they become self-negating.

ENDNOTES

- 1 J.S. Brooker and J. Bentley, *Reading The Wasteland: Modernism and the Limits of Interpretation*, (Boston: U of Massachusetts Press, 1990), 58. Brooker and Bentley hereafter.
- 2 Brooker and Bentley 68. Some or all of this argument is reinforced in the conclusion of every chapter in their book, but see especially ch.2 and ch.3.
- 3 "Degrees of Reality", MS, 1913. Quoted from *Essays from the Southern Review*, ch.16, "Eliot's Philosophical Notebooks".
- 4 C.K. Stead, *The New Poetic* (London: Hutchinson and Co., 1964) ch. 6-8.
- 5 Schopenhauer quoted in Roland N. Stromberg, *European Intellectual History since 1789* (New York: Meredith, 1968) 154. Stromberg Hereafter.
- 6 Umberto Eco, *The Limits of Interpretation* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1990) 20. Unless otherwise stated all reference to Eco is to this work.
- 7 Rolt's into to *The Divine Names and The Mystical Theology*.
- 8 "The Music of Poetry" in *Selected Prose* 55.
- 9 Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, Ed. and Trans. David E. Linge, (Berkeley: U of California Press, 1976). All further reference to Gadamer is to this work.
- 10 Walter Skeat, *The Concise Dictionary of English Etymology*, (Ware: Wordsworth, 1993). "Rune" is the derivative of the Anglo-Saxon *rûn* (see also Gothic *runa* and Old High German *rûn*) meaning *mystery*. Also, R.W.V. Elliot discusses Bishop Wulfilla's Gothic translation of St. Mark's "Mystery of the kingdom of God" as "runa" in *Runes* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1959) 1.
- 11 W.K.C. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy*, vol. 1, (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1971) 443. Matthiessen translates this same fragment "The beginning and the end are common"(39).
- 12 Stromberg, 225.
- 13 Peter Ackroyd, *T.S. Eliot* (London: Penguin, 1993) 119. All references to Ackroyd are to this biography.
- 14 *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982) 101.
- 15 *Knowledge and Experience in the Philosophy of F.H. Bradley* (London: Faber and Faber, 1964) 84 -.
- 16 Eco 27
- 17 Davidson 74.
- 18 Harriet Davidson, *T.S. Eliot and Hermeneutics: Absence and interpretation in*

- The Wasteland (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1985) 39. Davidson hereafter.
- 19 David Trotter, *The Making of The Reader* (NY: St. Martin's Press, 1984). All further reference to Trotter is to this work.
 - 20 Wolfgang Iser, *Prospecting* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1989), ch.7, "The pattern of Negativity in Beckett's prose" 140. All further reference to Iser is to this work.
 - 21 It is interesting to note that in the Viking Runic Oracle there is a blank rune, which represents "The Unknowable", but also the god Odin (who is, incidentally, one-eyed). Ralph Blum states, in a way very reminiscent of Eliot's early philosophical writings, that "Blank is the end, blank is the beginning" (*The Book of Runes*, London: Angus and Robertson, 1982) 106. Here is also a connection to the undecipherable stones of FQ.
 - 22 *Selected Prose*, "The Music of Poetry" 57.
 - 23 Brooker and Bentley 102.
 - 24 Sartre, J.P., *Being and Nothingness*, Trans. Hazel E. Barnes, (London: Methuen, 1957) 10.
 - 25 Jane P. Tompkins (ed.), *Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1980), ch.5 "The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach" 55.
 - 26 Brooker and Bentley 64.
 - 27 Umberto Eco, *The Role of the Reader* (London: Hutchinson, 1979) 9.
 - 28 Helen Gardner, *The Art of T.S. Eliot* (London: Cresset Press, 1949) 87.
 - 29 *Selected Poems* 14.
 - 30 "Tradition and the Individual Talent", *Selected Prose* 25.
 - 31 Southam 74.
 - 32 Eco 9-10.
 - 33 H.A. Guerber, *Middle Ages* (London: Studio Editions, 1993) 246-248.
 - 34 Transcendence, according to Bradleyan philosophy, goes both ways; down, into immediate experience, and up, into a unity where the dualistic assumptions of language are overcome. Brooker and Bentley call these transcendences "Up" and "Down" (125). Eliot's comment in FQ is, of course, that of Heraclitus: "The way up and the way down are the same."
 - 35 David Day, *Tolkien's Ring* (London: HarperCollins, 1994), ch.15, "Wagner's Ring" 162.
 - 36 F.O. Matthiessen, *The Achievement of T.S. Eliot* (New York: Oxford UP, 1959) 39.
 - 37 See Weston 174.
 - 38 Jeffrey M. Perl, "Eliot's Philosophical Notebooks" in J. Olney (ed.),

- Essays from the Southern Review* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988) 175.
- 39 *Essays from the Southern Review* 168.
- 40 Southam 91.
- 41 Davidson 104.
- 42 J. Matthews and M. Green, *The Grail Seeker's Companion*, (Wellingborough: The Aquarian Press, 1986) 78.
- 43 Jane P. Tompkins, *Reader-Response Criticism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP) 72.
- 44 Hugh Kenner, *The Invisible Poet: T.S. Eliot* (London: Methuen, 1965) 130.
- 45 Hazel E. Barnes, Trans. intro to J.P. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* (London: Methuen, 1957) xi.

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