CHAPTER FIVE

FOUR QUARTETS: POETRY OF AFFIRMATION

The wrestle with words that the writing of this thesis involves, the struggle involved in such an apparently simple act of writing the title of this chapter, is actually a part of the whole work, the complete 'meaning', but unfortunately most of it cannot be written down, cannot be adequately expressed. The title of this chapter describes Four Quartets as Eliot's 'poetry of affirmation', but this title is given with the knowledge that Four Quartets does not actually imply clear and unambiguous affirmation, although it is concerned with affirming Christian dogma. The affirmation involves quite a lot of struggle with what can be thought of as disbelief or scepticism. Suppose, to avoid misunderstanding, one were to explain again and again each word or expression used here, but even then—besides the fact that it would be extremely tedious—it would not be possible to be satisfied with what is ultimately conveyed. Words have a way of defeating 'meaning'. This is the problem with language: my utterance conveys things I do not wish to convey, and does not convey things I would like to express. This problem with language, uttered by Prufrock and referred to earlier in this work—

It is impossible to say just what I mean!

(The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock)
finds expression with more serious emphasis in *Four Quartets*. The poet's—and everyone else's—constant struggle with words and meanings is one of the central concerns of *Four Quartets*, and in expressed in different ways in different places. Sometimes, the difficulty or near impossibility of communication is dramatized:

> My words echo  
> Thus, in your mind.  
> But to what purpose  
> Disturbing the dust on a bowl of rose-leaves  
> I do not know.

("Burnt Norton' I)

At other times, words are shown as living, independent entities, rebellious and not given to discipline or obedience. The Word as the Saviour also gets mentioned in *Four Quartets*, immediately connecting the poem's utterance with elements in such poems as *Gerontion*, *Song for Simeon* and *The Waste Land*:

> Words strain,  
> Crack and sometimes break, under the burden,  
> Under the tension, slip, slide, perish,  
> Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place,  
> Will not stay still. Shrieking voices  
> Scolding, mocking, or merely chattering,
Always assail them. The Word in the desert
Is most attacked by voices of temptation,
The crying shadow in the funeral dance,
The loud lament of the disconsolate chimera

('Burnt Norton' V)

The poet's wrestle with words, his attempts at gaining control over them and the temptation of the Word in the desert are placed together. The poet's constant struggle with words and meanings is shown as an incomplete and unsatisfactory exercise. His engagement with words and meanings perhaps just cannot have a final conclusion:

That was a way of putting it—not very satisfactory:
A periphrastic study in a worn-out poetical fashion,
Leaving one still with the intolerable wrestle
With words and meanings.

('East Coker' II)

The most productive years of his poetic activity are shown to be rather futile attempts at getting the better of words. The suggestion is that his engagement with words will never empower him with control over them, and all he can do is remain a learner forever. He cannot hope to be a master of words. The humility implied in his remaining a learner cannot be suspected of being false, for there is a certain earnestness in what he says:

So here I am, in the middle way, having had twenty years—
Twenty years largely wasted, the years of l'entre deux guerres—

Trying to learn to use words, and every attempt

Is a wholly new start, and a different kind of failure

Because one has only learnt to get the better of words

For the thing one no longer has to say, or the way in which

One is no longer disposed to say it...

('East Coker' V)

The humility does not, however, prevent him from airing his views about

the paramount importance of the poet's task, an activity which
distinguishes the poet from the rest of the community. Perhaps the most
solemn statement on this issue is to be found in Little Gidding:

Since our concern was speech, and speech impelled us

To purify the dialect of the tribe

('Little Gidding' II)

The poet has a special burden, the grave responsibility of purifying 'the
dialect of the tribe'. This very special concern with speech requires nothing
less than the dedication of a life time. As a whole, the problem with words
that Eliot talks about is something that suffuses the entire poem with a
relentless scepticism about the very possibility of conveying any meaning

The last section of 'Little Gidding', however, seems to suggest a
certain resolution of this issue:

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

('Little Gidding' v)

But of course, this can be seen more as a description of a desired state of
perfection that an acquired one. The very perfection implied in the passage
makes it difficult to take it as an achieved state or even an entirely possible
condition. The passage actually has the effect of pointing towards an ideal.
Helen Gardner's comment on this portion of the poem is worth noting:

In *Little Gidding*, in the last tranquil and beautiful movement, the
mysterious union of words in poetry, to create a poem, is thought
of as a symbol, or rather another manifestation, of the process by
which past and future are woven together into meaning in our
personal lives and in history. The word and the moment are both
points of which meaning is apprehended. The dance of poetry and
the dance of life obey the same laws and disclose the same truth.²
As far as an exposition of these lines is concerned, Helen Gardner's account must be considered one the best possible ones. It must be noted, however, that Eliot has not provided us with a solution to the problem of language, and 'the mysterious union of words in poetry' is a condition that the poet strives for, without the least guarantee that it will be achieved. Commenting on the later part of the quoted passage, Cleanth Brooks says that 'These beautiful lines celebrate the poet's victory over disorder, the peculiar triumph possible to a master of language. They describe what Eliot actually achieved again and again in his own poetry.' Brooks is without doubt one of the most perceptive readers of Eliot's poetry, and his comment here is a fair account of the poet's strivings as enacted in the lines from *Four Quartets*. At the same time, however, his comment involves the presupposition that the poet *can* acquire mastery over language. Perhaps it would be more accurate to talk of the poet's need to and Eliot's desire to acquire a certain mastery over language. Perhaps the effort, rather than any victory is emphasized by Eliot's lines. The *Little Gidding* passage suggests a certain state of perfection which the poet needs to aim at, but which can rarely be actually achieved. This effort of the poet to achieve perfection in the use of language is, of course, analogous to the wrestle with scepticism to attain some sure ground of faith, a process that does not seem to end at any point of time.
The problem of words and language that *Four Quartets* addresses can be recognized in different ways. A. D. Moody feels it is about getting the better of words:

Getting the better of words is one of the essences of *Four Quartets*. Its major design is to use words as to make them mean what is beyond words; or to put the same idea another way, to so transform the understanding of the world which is in words that it will be perceived as the divine Word in action.  

This might imply that the poem ultimately does get the better of words, but, as Moody adds later,

The poem does not state its ultimate meaning, or not in the form in which we are likely to look for it. It offers neither a doctrine nor a revelation.

The poem is more of an exploration of meaning—the meaning of words, art, life—than the attainment of some kind of final meaning. It strives for wisdom, with the emphasis on the striving. Seen from the perspective of our study, it is a very special sort of struggle between scepticism and belief, and in not offering a doctrine or a revelation, the poem actually escapes being limited as a poem with a more or less fixed connotation.

One very powerful technique Eliot used to question not only the smug wisdom of most ordinary, worldly-wise, prudent people, but also to
continually comment on and criticize his own utterings, is to place the two quotations from Heraclitus right at the beginning of the first Quartet:

Although the Word (Logos) is common to all, most people live as if each of them had a private intelligence of his own.
and--

The way up and the way down are one and the same.6

Thus, a note of scepticism about ‘private intelligence’ and the need to understand the Logos, a difficult task, virtually undermine all possible conclusions about meaning. Heraclitus is known for yoking together opposites, as he is doing in the second quotation here, and yoking opposites together is one of the ways in which Eliot achieves subtlety and complexity of meanings in his poetry, particularly in Four Quartets.

In the previous chapter, it was suggested that Eliot moved away from humanism and towards an acceptance of religion because the humanist position, to him, had certain limitations that made it unacceptable for a person of his temperament. Dorothea Krook, in the introduction to her Three Traditions of Moral Thought, compares the Humanist and the Christian understanding of things. Discussing the common ground between Christianity and Humanism, she refers to a remark by T. S. Eliot:

The formula that perhaps best expresses the Humanist’s attitude is that applied by T. S. Eliot to the Catholic: in respect to the moral
life he, too, like the Catholic, has ‘high—indeed, absolute—ideals
and moderate expectations’. 7

Krook’s references to Eliot’s comments on Humanism and Christianity—
another is quoted later in this chapter—in the brilliant Introduction to her
book, is in a way, an acknowledgement of the precision of Eliot’s thought
on this issue. Simply stated, an important part of her argument is that both
Christianity and Humanism agree that man is not naturally good, and that
there is much that is vile in him, but he can receive and give love. And the
redemptive power of love alone can save him. This is the common ground
between Christianity and Humanism.

The point where there cannot be any meeting ground between
Christianity and Humanism also happens to be the meeting ground between
Humanism and the Utilitarian/Secular tradition of moral thought discussed
by Krook: The Humanist denies the metaphysical reality and the logical
necessity of the supernatural sanction postulated by historic Christianity as
the only certain foundation of the order of values which transcends the
inferior perishable values of the world. For a Christian, God is the source of
all transcendent values, and it is only through the grace of divine
providence that these values—love, charity, and hope—are made available
to men and women for their salvation. For the humanist, transcendent
values are transcendent within the human order.

Eliot, as he declares in his ‘Second Thoughts About Humanism’, is
not an enemy of Humanism; he very much appreciates its worth. This is
evident from what he says in answer to the adverse criticism that his essay ‘The Humanism of Irving Babbitt’ received. He says:

Having myself begun as a disciple of Mr Babbitt, and feeling, as I do, that I have rejected nothing that seems to me positive in his teaching, I was hardly qualified to ‘attack’ humanism. I was concerned rather to point out the weak points in its defences, before some genuine enemy took advantage of them. It can be—and is already—of immense value: but it must be subjected to criticism while there is still time. 8

Thus, Eliot is eager to acknowledge that there is some common ground between Humanism and Christianity; that they are not exactly in opposition to one another. In the end, however, Humanism is unable to satisfy him. For him, God is the repository of all transcendent values and God’s grace is absolutely necessary for attaining salvation. His is the perfectly Christian attitude in which prayer, intercession and grace are necessary if one is to be saved at all. Thus, while in his early poems there is a preoccupation with the imperfections of human beings, his last major poetic work, *Four Quartets* concerns itself with the need to attain grace and salvation—despite those imperfections—through arduous effort, prayer and intercession.

To reiterate something suggested earlier in this work, the humanist and the religious aspirations of creative artists ought to be seen as very similar aspirations. John Wain has noted how many poets in England after
the nineteen thirties expressed religious sentiment or something akin to it in
their different styles. He talks of Eliot's orthodox Anglo-Catholicism, of
the 'home-made constructions of Yeats or Graves', the intense reverence
for life in Dylan Thomas, and Auden's experience of Christian conversion.
He notes the common ground in the attitudes of all these poets:

There need be no quarrel here between 'Christians' and
'humanists'. All these poets, by expressing their instinctive belief
that life is not a mere biological accident but a sacrament, were
pointing to the path that man must follow if he is to avoid being
swallowed up by his political systems and enslaved by his
technology. The attitude they share, a fundamentally religious
approach to the wonder of life, is not merely the best way, but the
only way, of giving back dignity and meaning to human
existence.¹⁰

One way in which Eliot tries to indicate the direction of his
consciousness—towards an acceptance of the dogmas of the Anglican
Church—is to poetically enact his criticism and rejection of other doctrines,
particularly the doctrines of spiritualism and theosophy. And there is a
continuity in this. He has been doing this throughout his poetic career. If he
tried to expose the spiritual emptiness of people like Mr. Silvero, Madame
de Tornquist and Fräulein von Kulp in Gerontion and 'Madame Sosostris,
famous clairvoyante' in The Waste Land, he has not forgotten this tribe in
Four Quartets:
To communicate with Mars, converse with spirits,

To report the behaviour of the sea monster,

Describe the horoscope, haruspicate or scry,

Observe disease in signatures, evoke

Biography form the wrinkles of the palm

And tragedy from fingers; release omens

By sortilege, or tea leaves, riddle the inevitable

With playing cards, fiddle with pentagrams

Or barbituric acids, or dissect

The recurrent image into pre-conscious terrors—

To explore the womb or tomb, or dreams; all these are usual

Pastimes and drugs, and features of the press:

And always will be...

(‘The Dry Salvages’, V)

Anyone who surrenders himself to the collective wisdom of the Church cannot have anything to do with occultists and others who claim to have some sort of esoteric power or knowledge. Eliot has been consistently mocking the pretension of occultists and spiritualist, suggesting his impatience with these questionable forms of popular belief. His way is the way of the true Christian. It is a path much more difficult then these byelanes of spirituality. It is a way requiring the devotion of a life-time:

But to apprehend

The point of intersection of the timeless

With time, is an occupation for the saint—
No occupation either, but something given
And taken, in a lifetime’s death in love,
Ardour and selflessness and self-surrender
(The Dry Salvages, V)

He is sceptical of the short-cuts, the bye-lanes. He trusts the established way of the Church, the way of saints and martyrs. Considering the fascination for occultism that people like W. B. Yeats had, it seems that such choices may well be simply temperamental. By temperament one is drawn towards a certain system of belief and not another. Temperament itself is, of course, a complex of inherited character and learnt behaviour. Without going into the psychological details of such choices, however, it is sufficient for our discussion here to note that Eliot always had a certain disposition to doubt the validity or usefulness of ‘irregular’ systems of belief like Occultism, and to affirm Christian belief instead.

While he was disposed to reject occultism, however, he was strongly influenced—as is well known—by the Hindu and Buddhist religions. The Waste Land, with its ‘Fire Sermon’ and the voices of the Thunder, is perhaps the closest Eliot went in appreciating these religions. Four Quartets, again, has references to Krishna and his utterances in the Bhagawat Geeta, but whether in The Waste land or Four Quartets, Eliot never really detaches himself from his Christianity. His attachment to Hindu or Buddhist modes of thought remains limited. He appreciates them and uses them, but only up to a point, and only to serve his argument which
is essentially Christian. The cosmopolitanism of his psychological make-up seems to be chastened and subdued by a set of imperatives basically Christian and poignantly affirmed in the body of the text.

Recalling his study of Sanskrit and Buddhist texts for two years at Harvard, Eliot realized that to fully comprehend the Oriental systems, he would have to forget his own roots, which he did not want to do:

...my only hope of really penetrating to the heart of that mystery would be in forgetting how to think and feel as an American or European: which, for practical as well as sentimental reasons, I did not wish to do.12

The apparent resistance towards Oriental thought that Eliot expresses here is evidence of his strong rootedness in the Christian tradition. It should be noted, however, that his realizing the fact that he must forget how to think and feel as an American if he ever wanted to fully comprehend Oriental thought is an indication of his deep understanding of Eastern thought.

When he came to write *Four Quartets*, the assimilation of all that was acceptable to him in Eastern thought was complete. The felicity of expression and the unobtrusiveness of the references prove our point. When the *Bhagawat Geeta*’s doctrine of detached effort (*karma*) gets echoed in ‘East Coker’, for instance, the smoothness of expression is truly remarkable:

There is only the fight to recover what has been lost.
And found and lost again and again: and now under conditions
That seem unpropitious. But perhaps neither gain nor loss.
For us, there is only the trying. The rest is not our business.

('East Coker' V)

It is possible that in the act of composing *Four Quartets*, Eliot could achieve an attitude of accepting Oriental wisdom with much more sympathy than is evident from his comment in *After Strange Gods*. Vinod Sena has suggested that Shri Purohit Swami, instrumental in evoking W. B. Yeats’ interest in Indian thought, might very well have had a similar influence on Eliot.  

In *Four Quartets*, the attitude of submission to the Christian way occasionally has a certain note of finality about it. The poems discussed in the previous chapter—the *Ariel Poems* and *Ash Wednesday*—also deal explicitly with Christian belief, but there the struggle between doubt and belief is pronounced, enacted in the words and rhythms of the poems while in *Four Quartets* there are occasions when self-surrender rather than the questions of the sceptical self become somewhat more important. There is an attempt to silence the voice of the sceptic with the help of a deliberate gesture of belief:

...You are not here to verify,
Instruct yourself, or inform curiosity
Or carry report. You are here to kneel
Where prayer has been valid. (‘Little Gidding’)
One can suspect something like fideism here, and one is reminded of Kierkegaard for whom unquestioning acceptance of God and God's ways is of prime importance in human life:

What is enviable about human life is that one can assist God, can understand him, and in turn the only worthy way for a human being to understand God is to appropriate in freedom everything that comes to him, both the happy and the sad. Or do you not think so? This is the way it appears to me—indeed, I think that to say this aloud to a person is all one needs to do to make him envy himself.14

Such apparently unquestioning submission is, however, rare in Eliot, and even in *Four Quartets*, the 'ultimate sense'—if such a phrase may be used—is not of fideistic acceptance, but of a meditative, contemplative exploration of issues like belief, the meaning of history, and the problem of language. The poem seems to focus on a consciousness that has not exactly arrived at a point of conclusion, but is straining towards a goal:

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

('Little Gidding' V)
The tension between scepticism and belief that we have been tracing in Eliot has attained a peculiar subtlety in *Four Quartets*. If the sceptic in him was loud and clear in some of the early poems, here the tone is subdued; but the thought is more penetrating, more profound, and less suitable for exposition and confident analysis.

One of the remarkable qualities of *Four Quartets* is that it is a Christian poem that even a non-believer can appreciate. The element of Christian belief in it does not make it parochial, and the poem transcends the limitations imposed by a definition like 'Christian'. Martin Jarrett-Kerr notes this lack of narrowness in *Four Quartets*:

*Four Quartets*, however, is safe from criticism, early or late. It stands one of the supreme products of this century. And it is one of the great merits of the poem that, steeped though it is in Christian doctrine, imagery, mystical theology, it has an appeal far beyond confessional, let alone denominational, boundaries.15

Jarrett-Kerr also mentions F. R. Leavis' description of Eliot's poetry from *Ash Wednesday* onwards as not the poetry of attained belief but as 'a searching of experience, a spiritual discipline, a technique for sincerity.'16 Leavis does not here see the poet's affirmation of a particular system of belief as important, but notes his arduous and honest effort at arriving at the truth, the quest for certainty, as of prime importance.

It is a mark of Eliot's greatness as a poet that no labelling of the different stages of his poetry can be entirely true. And in discussing the
scepticism and belief in his poetry, too, one needs to be guarded against the temptation of calling certain poems the creation of the sceptic and others of the believer. Also, we cannot trace a smooth transition from unbelief to belief. Things seem much too well-mixed or blended for any such explanation. One certainly needs to read his poems synchronically, with the early and the later styles and preoccupations interacting among themselves.

Bernard Bergonzi notes the ‘deliberately abstract and philosophic poetry’ which is there in *Four Quartets*, and which ‘is not philosophical in the sense that it attempts to versify pre-existing ideas, but in making poetry out of the actual process of thinking rather than its results’\(^\text{17}\)

This seems to us quite an accurate statement about *Four Quartets*, for the poem is a poem about the actual process of thinking—thinking about time, experience, language, the need to transcend time, and so on. All this makes it a great exercise in contemplation for all, not just Christians. Christians like Reinhold Neibuh, have of course, ‘regularly used’ the poem ‘as devotional reading’\(^\text{18}\)

There are, however, certain elements in *Four Quartets* which can have full meaning or relevance only to a practising Christian. At least this is how the poet himself seems to have felt, if we can draw such a conclusion from an incident reported by William Turner Levy, a priest and a long-time friend of T. S. Eliot. Levy wanted Eliot to explain the meaning of the lines.

*You are here to kneel*
Where prayer has been valid.

('Little Gidding’ V)

Levy’s account of Eliot’s response is this:

Then he looked up and said, “What I mean is that for some of us, a sense of place is compelling. If it is a religious place, a place made special by the sacrifice of a martyrdom, then it retains an aura. We know that once before a man gave of himself here and was accepted here, and it was so important that the occasion continues to invest the place with its holiness. Of course, William, I am aware that not all persons have a sense of place (as I describe it), nor is it necessary for it to exist to make prayer valid.”

From this it is quite clear that here Eliot is not talking about everyone but only about Christians, and then specifically of Christians who have a compelling sense of place, a religious place. Despite such apparently narrow target audience of some—very few, in fact—of the lines of Four Quartets, the poem as a whole does succeed in speaking to everyone, believer or non-believer. Besides, one cannot condemn a poet if he at times seems to speak only to a select audience. After all, it is not necessary that the artist must create art that is universally and easily understood. It is quite natural for him or her to have experiences that are not within the scope of common secular experiences, and to be so influenced by them as to give artistic expression to them. So-called universality and contemporary
relevance cannot be demanded of the artist, although it is true that these qualities can endear the artist's work to more people.

In any case, *Four Quartets* is not a religious poem in any narrow sense, and that is why it continues to be appealing to all, including people without any avowed religious position or agnostics. The general experience that this poem deals with cannot be described as purely Christian or even religious. Lillian Feder rightly observes that—

...in this work neither Eliot's tone nor language is primarily that of Christian worship. There are brief sections which imitate prayer or evoke ceremony but, essentially, Eliot attempts to reveal the consciousness of the supernatural within the human mind, not as it is manifest in public worship but as it emerges in private exploration and illumination.  

Had *Four Quartets* been a poem of total and unsullied affirmation of religious belief, it would perhaps be a lesser poem, much that is of engaging interest in it would perhaps be lost. Something similar is suggested by Denis Donoghue when he says that to readers who do not share Eliot's Christian belief, *Four Quartets* still communicates "by giving us the sense of an existence with character and texture and power." Donoghue is using words from William James, who, in discussing the character of sanctity, particularly its ascetic quality, says that while some people instinctively seek 'the easy and the pleasant', others seek the arduous:
Some men and women, indeed, there are who can live on smiles and the word “yes” forever. But for others (indeed for most) this is too tepid and relaxed a moral climate... Some austerity and wintry negativity, some roughness, danger, stringency, and effort, some “no! no!” must be mixed in, to produce the sense of an existence with character and texture and power.

One cannot put a finger on exactly where the ‘wintry negativity’ of *Four Quartets* is, but that is perhaps because it is so well diffused. The reassurance at the end of the poem that ‘all shall be well’, for instance, is only a reassurance about the future, and that too conditional: all shall be well when—

All shall be well and
All manner of thing shall be well
When the tongues of flames are in-folded
Into the crowned knot of fire
And the fire and the rose are one

(‘Little Gidding’ V)
NOTES

1. This is one of the most important and interesting aspects of Eliot’s poetry. No poem seems to have its complete meaning alone. Besides their dependence on other works by other writers, all his poems have a certain interdependence among themselves for attaining complete meaning. Thus, poems from the early period can be related to poems from the later period. This is one reason why no period can be conveniently described as solely conveying the poet’s doubts or beliefs.


9. It has been pointed out in the previous chapter, for instance, that although most twentieth century intellectuals are generally understood to be secular in their outlook, some poets have turned to religion or something similar, and the Christian understanding of things has not been entirely uncommon.


11. It must be noted that Eliot had the highly civilized capacity of fully respecting another individual and respecting his/her work while completely disagreeing on issues of belief. He had a very regard for the poetry of W. B. Yeats, for instance, although the two men held considerably different systems of belief. While praising Yeats, he acknowledged the differences: ‘It is a pleasure to me to praise him. But to be able to praise, it is not necessary to feel complete agreement, and I should not think it right to dissimulate the fact that there are aspects of his thought and feeling which to myself are unsympathetic. I say this not in order to express my own beliefs, which I shall leave in silence, but rather to indicate the limits which I have set to my criticism. The question of difference, objection and protest arise in the field of doctrine, and you have no need to be reminded how vital they are.’ (The Permanence of Yeats. Ed. James Hall and Martin Steinmann. 1950. New York: Collier Books, 1961 307.)
London: Faber and Faber, 1933. 41.


