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# **Poetry and Exile: T. S. Eliot, 'Four Quartets' Transcript**

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**Poetry and Exile:  
T.S. Eliot, Four Quartets**

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Good evening and welcome.

We have been listening to Beethoven's beautiful Quartet in A minor and this is why.

In 1931, T.S. Eliot wrote to his friend, the writer Stephen Spender:

"I have [Beethoven's] A minor Quartet [No. 15] on the gramophone, and I find it quite inexhaustible to study. There is a sort of heavenly, or at least more than human gaiety, about some of his later things which one imagines might come to oneself as the fruit of reconciliation and relief after immense suffering; I should like to get something of that into verse before I die".

Eliot did "get something of that into verse" some ten years later, in *Four Quartets*.

They were published in 1944. But the collection is made up of four previously published poems: *Burnt Norton*, the first of the *Four Quartets*, was first published in Eliot's *Collected Poems 1909 - 1935*; the second, *East Coker*, was published in 1940, *The Dry Salvages* (pronounced, Eliot tells us, to rhyme with 'assuages'), in 1941, and *Little Gidding* in 1942. Yet despite this serial publication history, they belong very much together.

In my blurb for tonight's lecture, I described the famous 'difficulty' of Eliot's work and I would like to reflect briefly about what we mean by 'difficulty' in relation to poetry.

The American writer Joyce Carol Oates, along with many other writers, sees difficulty as part of the definition of poetry, as opposed to prose. She writes:

"Prose, —it might be speculated—is discourse; poetry ellipsis [from Gk, omission, falling short]. Prose is spoken aloud; poetry overheard. The one is presumably articulate and social, a shared language, the voice of "communication"; the other is private, allusive, teasing, sly, idiosyncratic as the spider's delicate web, a kind of witchcraft".

The Welsh poet, Dylan Thomas, wrote something very similar:

"You're back with the mystery of having been moved by words. The best craftsmanship always leaves holes and gaps . . . so that something that is not in the poem can creep, crawl, flash or thunder in".

What both these quotations point to is the omissions; what Oates calls and Thomas the 'holes and gaps' in poetry. It is these that give the reader a degree of creative freedom in terms of 'constructing meaning', as opposed to 'being told something'. This, in turn, accounts for what a poet whom I find particularly 'difficult', Geoffrey Hill, perhaps surprisingly, calls its 'democracy'.

He argues that, I quote, "difficult poetry is the most democratic, because you are doing your audience the honour of supposing that they are intelligent human beings. If you write as if you had to placate or in any way entice their lack of interest, then I think you are making condescending assumptions about people. I mean people are not fools. But so much of the populist poetry of today treats people as if they were fools".

Another obvious difficulty with poetry is the way in which the poet uses words so as to re-invigorate language.

A poet's words mean something other, or more, than what a dictionary would tell us. Eli Khamarov writes:

Poets are soldiers who liberate words from the steadfast possession of definition.

And Mallarmé claimed, 'It is the job of poetry to clean up our word-clogged reality by creating silences around things'

So if difficulty is a *sine qua non* of good poetry, how do we engage with it and, in particular, with *Four Quartets*?

As the quotation from Eliot's letter to Stephen Spender which I started with this evening suggests, Eliot was fascinated by the parallels between poetry and music. And, of course, the title of the *Quartets* is an explicit reference to musical form. Music is often described as the most *abstract* art form. Eliot liked the word and uses 'abstraction' in the sixth line of the first Quartet, as we will see in a moment. If music is more abstract than poetry then how is it that we tend to speak less of its difficulty? Would we describe a Mozart symphony as 'difficult', or Beethoven's extraordinary quartet in A minor? I think we need to engage with Eliot's poetry in part

as we engage with music. We can delight in pattern, theme, tempo and mood – and above all, perhaps, form. As Eliot writes in the poem:

...Only by the form, the pattern,  
Can words or music reach/ The stillness....

And these patterns may suggest emotional correlatives – melancholy, gaiety, anxiety, fulfilment, peace.

In his essay *The Music of Poetry* (1942), Eliot emphasises that both poetry and music involve rhythm and structure:

'The use of recurrent themes (my emphasis) is as natural to poetry as to music. There are possibilities for verse which bear some analogy to the development of a theme by different groups of instruments; there are possibilities of transitions in a poem comparable to the different movements... of a quartet; there are possibilities of contrapuntal arrangement of subject-matter.' (On Poetry and Poets, p.38)

So let us start with the idea of 'recurrent themes'. *Four Quartets* is often described as a collection of poems which explore time. And music, similarly, could be said to explore time in terms, say, of exposition, repetition (which could also be called 'rediscovery') – and resolution. Poetry and music exist in time – they are temporal progressions – in a way that painting, sculpture or photography, say, are not. Novels are not designed to be read in one sitting and in that sense have a much looser relationship with time.

And the way images and themes come and go – in time – is analogous to movements of departure and arrival, of exile and return home. For Eliot perhaps, at the close of *Four Quartets* – from alienation from God to reconciliation with God, or alienation from the 'heavenly' or 'something more than human', to reconciliation.

*Four Quartets* explore our relationship with time, space and the divine. In relation to the last, Eliot, an Anglo-Catholic, blends other religions too with mystical, philosophical and poetic works from both Eastern and Western religious and cultural traditions. There are allusions to the *Bhagavad-Gita* and the Pre-Socratic philosophers as well as the Spanish mystic, St. John of the Cross and the Christian mystic Julian of Norwich.

But poetic language does not *tell* us about certain events or experiences, or theories, or feelings. Poetry provides linguistic prompts which dispose the reader to experience something similar to what the poet experienced or imagined along with its accompanying emotional mood. This technique Eliot termed the 'objective correlative'. Eliot described it thus:

"The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an 'objective correlative'; in other words a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked".

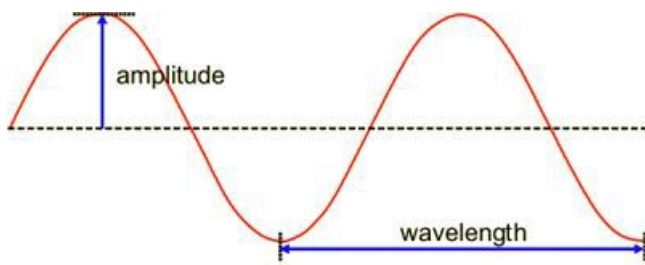
Eliot's 'objective correlative' bears resemblance to the techniques of the French symbolists. And Eliot's greatest debt was not to an English-language poet but to the French symbolist poet Jules Laforgue. Eliot wrote, "Of Laforgue I can say he was the first to teach me how to speak, to teach me the poetic possibilities of my own idiom of speech." ('What Dante Means to Me' (1950). And a decade later, in 'To Criticise the Critic' (1960), he wrote: "I have written about Baudelaire, but nothing about Jules Laforgue, to whom I owe more than to any one poet in any language". Laforgue's use of philosophical ideas in his poetry and his cool detachment in relation to emotion are both present in much of Eliot's work.

Of his early work, Eliot has said: "The form in which I began to write, in 1908 or 1909, was directly drawn from the study of Laforgue together with the later Elizabethan drama; and I do not know anyone who started from exactly that point." Elsewhere he said: "The kind of poetry that I needed, to teach me the use of my own voice, did not exist in English at all; it was only found in French", and Leonard Unger concludes that, "insofar as Eliot started from an *exact point*, it was exclusively and emphatically the poetry of Laforgue".

But it is Eliot's debt not only to Laforgue, but also to Baudelaire and Dante that I want briefly to consider. And I would like to approach the importance of these poets work, in relation to the idea of 'exile'. Our 'mother tongue' is our *home*. It is the language that articulates the culture and wisdom of what Eliot would have called 'our tribe'. The corollary of this is that our individuality can easily be subsumed. We speak, in other words, the 'group speak'. To read in a language other than our own is, in some sense, to be 'exiled'. And when Eliot's poetry describes linguistic failure it is often in a language that suggests an 'exile' from language: 'That was a way of putting it – not very satisfactory:/A periphrastic study in a worn-out poetical fashion' (*East Coker*). Or 'one has only learnt to get the better of words for the thing one no longer has to say' (*East Coker V*). Here the poet could be said to have been exiled from language, sense, meaning.

The first movement of the first Quartet, *Burnt Norton*, begins by proposing various possible ideas about time, and about 'what might have been' in a language reminiscent of philosophical discussion. This is followed by a rendering of the same theme but this time couched in poetical and figurative language. This pattern recurs in the other quartets. As Eliot wrote, 'In a poem of any length, there must be transitions between passages of lesser and greater intensity, to give a rhythm of fluctuating emotion essential to the musical structure of the whole; and

the passages of lesser intensity will be, in relation to the level on which the total poem operates, prosaic - so that, in the sense implied by that context, it may be said that no poet can write a poem of amplitude unless he is a master of the prosaic'. (*The Music of Poetry, On Poetry and Poets*, p. 32). Amplitude is the objective measurement of the degree of change (positive or negative) in atmospheric pressure - the compression and rarefaction (the opposite of compression) of air molecules - caused by sound waves.



We experience a sense of exile from the poetic and later a return to it.

I would like to consider further the idea of 'exile' as a way in to *Four Quartets*.

It is an extraordinarily emotive term in all its forms: to be sent into exile, to be living in exile, to be an exile, to be an exile in your own land. The last is perhaps the most emotionally powerful of them all. It has a long classical history. The word comes from the Latin, *exul* = banished person, *L*, *exilium* = banishment.

Seneca's *Medea* blames Jason not just for exiling her but for sending her off into exile without providing a place: 'you order exile but you do not give a place for exile [*exul exilium imperas nec das*] (*Medea* 459-60)

St Augustine, whose writings Eliot knew well, wrote 'I found, myself wandering far from You in a region of unlikeness'. [*region dissimilitudinis*]

In Christian theology, the idea of exile plays a huge part: exile from the Garden of Eden, those sent into exile, Jesus's chosen periods of exile in the desert, but above all an idea that we are exiled from God and that our spiritual journey is one from exile to an ultimate home-coming.

Eliot was himself an expatriate although he became a naturalised Brit. He was born in St Louis Missouri.

In his memoir of Eliot, his friend Robert Sencourt comments that the young Eliot "would often curl up in the window-seat behind an enormous book, setting the drug of dreams against the pain of living". Secondly, Eliot credited his hometown with fuelling his literary vision: "It is self-evident that St. Louis affected me more deeply than any other environment has ever done. I feel that there is something in having passed one's childhood beside the big river, which is incommunicable to those people who have not. I consider myself fortunate to have been born here, rather than in Boston, or New York, or London."

He was on study leave in Marburg, Germany, when Germany invaded Belgium on August 3, 1914. Eliot packed his bags and headed for London. He spent a brief period at Oxford, which he disliked, and returned to London where he spent the majority of his life.

So back to the poetry and back to *Burnt Norton*.

The title refers to a manor house in Gloucestershire, near Campden, which Eliot visited in the summer of 1934.

Time, the obvious central organising subject of *Four Quartets* is introduced at the outset, and the manner in which it is broached is quasi-philosophical and prosaic:

Time present and time past

Are both perhaps present in time future,

And time future contained in time past.

If all time is eternally present

All time is unredeemable.

Ideas are then further developed, again prosaically, in a single, grammatically complete sentence:

What might have been is an abstraction

Remaining a perpetual possibility

Only in a world of speculation.

And then a final sentence which brings time and place into relationship: [slide 9]

What might have been and what has been

Point to one end, which is always present.

We can find convincing paraphrases for these final lines. What is 'always present' is our awareness of our own mortality, perhaps, that our end point is death. And at the point where we contemplate our death we will no doubt be aware of 'what might have been' as well as 'what has been'.

In terms of objective correlatives, the opening eighteen lines of the first Quartet we have ideas and images and their associated emotions. I would suggest: thoughts of what might have been (mood regret), lack of understanding (intellectual anguish), the memory of happiness (sense of loss and accompanying melancholy). We feel as though we, like the poet, have been exiled from the rose garden.

But such is the structure of *Four Quartets* that themes recur in slightly altered forms and these frame the theme as first iterated.

The first movement of the first Quartet ends:

Time past and time future

What might have been and what has been

Point to one end, which is always present.

So here we have an inversion, 'Time present and time past' (line 1), have been re-iterated through an inversion and variation (terms used to explicate musical form), 'Time past and time future', three lines from the end of the movement. The modifiers, 'perhaps' and 'if', no longer occur. This allows for another interpretation; I quote:

"Such a view of time follows logically, inexorably, from the idea of an omniscient God - whose omniscience necessarily entails knowing the future, as Calvin's concept of predestination was ready to acknowledge".

This is Craig Raine's reading from his excellent book entitled simply, *T.S.Eliot*, first published by OUP in 2006.

But as Raine also points out, Eliot has explored ideas of time past, present and future elsewhere. In *The Waste Land* he has Ethelbert famously declare:

There's some new notion about time, what says that the past - what's be'hind you - is what's goin' to 'appen in the future, bein' as the future 'as already 'appened. I 'aven't'ad time to get the 'ang of it yet.

Valerie Eliot reported that Eliot also thought of adding an epigraph from Dickens' *Pickwick Papers* to *Four Quartets*: 'What a rum thing time is, ain't it, Neddy?'

These are both affirmations of a world ordered by an omniscient God, and an affirmation of something not unlike Quantum Theory.

What really matters, however, is how these ideas generate what Eliot described as 'fluctuating emotion', which is also a fundamental effect of music.

After the opening lines (1 to 10), 5 lines follow:

Footfalls echo in the memory  
Down the passage we did not take  
Towards the door we never opened  
Into the rose-garden. My words echo  
Thus, in your mind.

So we move from the prosaic, speculative philosophical register to a poetic, figurative register and from the abstract to the quasi-concrete. But the two are closely related. 'Footfalls' are the sound of our feet as we move from place to place through time; an 'echo' is a trace, the tangible presence of an absence (the original sound that is no longer), 'the passage we did not take' and 'the door we never opened' are metaphors for 'what might have been' (lines 6 and 9). The syntax here is intriguing. The second and third lines describe negatives - 'the passage we did *not* take, 'the door we *never* opened', and yet they could be read as parenthetical, leaving two parallel statements in the affirmative:

'Footfalls echo in the memory... Into the rose-garden'

'My words echo/ Thus, in your mind.'

The 'rose-garden' is one of Eliot's key 'objective correlatives'. The rose-garden or roses or petals occur numerous times in *Four Quartets* and become an objective correlative for an ordered place that has existed for some significant time and in which epiphany, beauty, tranquillity, bliss and an unearthly ecstasy is experienced.

So the quasi-philosophical words of lines 1-10 are succinctly transposed in lines 11-15: 'time present and time past' exists in the idea of the 'echo' which is the present manifestation of something past. The idea of a 'perpetual possibility' is enacted in the syntax of lines 11-15 where 'the passage we did not take' and 'the door we never opened' nevertheless lead the reader into the rose-garden. But this is not the culminating point of the lines. There is a coda:

Disturbing the dust on a bowl of rose-leaves

I do not know.

The subject of the verb (in its present participle form) 'disturbing', is 'my words': 'My words echo... disturbing the dust...'

How can the 'echo' of words disturb dust? In terms of causal effect this is tenuous indeed, but not physically impossible. And the section ends with the ultimate epistemological negation, 'I do not know'. Syntactically this can be read as the conclusion of the expression 'to what purpose... I do not know', or 'a bowl of rose-leaves/I do not know.'

So what do we make of these opening eighteen lines?

Structurally we have identified lines 10 (lines 1-5 and 6-10) as a unit which explores, twice over, in quasi-philosophical, prosaic, conversational language, time - past, present and future - and non-event and event - what might have been and what has been.

Lines 11-15 and lines 16-18 form two further units. Lines 11-15 open with the quasi-tangible 'footfalls' which are in strong contrast to the abstractions of the first 10 lines, but the tangible is immediately dispelled by their existence only as 'echos in the memory'. The memory provides the experience in the present of experience in the past; it is the past made present. And an 'echo', as I said earlier, is a trace, the tangible presence of an absence (the original sound that is no longer).

'The dust on a bowl of rose-leaves' is redolent both of time past - dust accrues over time - but also of how matter breaks down. The 'rose-leaves' are presumably those of a *pot pourri* (literally 'rotten') leaves that are now dead and, in effect, decaying. Both the dust and the rose-leaves are *vestiges, traces*, as is an echo.

So, in brief, we move from 'abstraction' and 'speculation' to a language of largely concrete nouns - 'footfalls', 'the passage', 'the door', 'the rose-garden', 'the dust', 'the bowl', the 'rose-leaves'. Yet the way in which these concrete nouns work within the syntax of the poem their existence is, perhaps, only a 'perpetual possibility' (line 7), because the 'footfalls' are only an 'echo' and the passage and the door were *not* taken, *not* open. And the echoing of words may be *without* purpose and the dust on a bowl of rose-leaves *unknown*. These negatives 'not', 'without', 'un-known' undermine the status of the nouns as *concrete* nouns.

In the second movement of *Burnt Norton* the mystical experience of time is explored by means of the simile, 'the still point of the turning world' (line 16).

Time past and time future  
Allow but a little consciousness.  
To be conscious is not to be in time  
But only in time can the moment in the rose-garden,  
The moment in the arbour where the rain beat,  
The moment in the draughty church at smokefall  
Be remembered; involved with past and future.  
Only through time time is conquered. (II)

Mystical experiences may take place apparently 'outside time' but we are only conscious of them when we return to the mundane time-bound world.

In *Burnt Norton* the fleeting nature of time is associated with the experience of children. Here are the final lines of the Quartet:

Sudden in a shaft of sunlight  
Even while the dust moves  
There rises the hidden laughter  
Of children in the foliage  
Quick now, here, now, always --  
Ridiculous the waste sad time  
Stretching before and after.

Repetition here is an objective correlative for the extreme excitement experienced by children. 'Quick *now*, here, *now*, always - '

This is the last clear statement of what 'Burnt Norton' is about; but it echoes what we experienced in the second half of the first movement, as a shaft of sunlight suddenly emerges from the clouds, and the deserted garden seems to come to life:

Dry the pool, dry concrete, brown edged,  
And the pool was filled with water out of sunlight,  
And the lotus rose, quietly, quietly,  
The surface glittered out of heart of light,  
And they were behind us, reflected in the pool.  
Then a cloud passed, and the pool was empty.

Time and the bell have buried the day,  
The black cloud carries the sun away

There is a story about the pools or ponds at Burnt Norton. The story tells of a child drowning in one of them and that they were then filled in. And here is a photo of a lotus flower.

So on to 'East Coker'

Time is again central to 'East Coker'. The title refers to a manor house in Somerset, near Yeovil, from which Eliot's ancestors left for America in 1667. The house symbolises a new beginning in the poem and raises ideas of the circularity of time. Mary Queen of Scots' motto 'en ma fin est mon commencement' is inverted. The Quartet begins:

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

[An Arras is a wall hanging made of a rich tapestry fabric, typically used to conceal an alcove.]

These lines allude to Ecclesiastes II, 1-7, often used at funeral services - for obvious reasons!

'To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven: a time to be born and a time to die...'

So again, these lines are essentially about time, and human life as a passage through time.

The idea of exile returns again in 'East Coker', III:

O dark, dark, dark. They all go into the dark,  
The vacant interstellar spaces, the vacant into the vacant,  
The captains, the merchant bankers, eminent men of letters,  
The generous patrons of art, the statesmen and the rulers,

Distinguished civil servants, chairmen of many committees,  
Industrial lords and petty contractors, all go into the dark,  
And dark the Sun and Moon, and the Almanach de Gotha  
And the Stock Exchange Gazette, the Directory of Directors,  
And cold the sense and lost the motive of action.

[ *The Almanach de Gotha*, a handbook containing information about the Royal, Princely and titled families of Europe.]

This is death as the ultimate exile from life. Here Eliot draws on Milton's *Samson Agonistes*:

O dark, dark, dark, amid the blaze of noon

Irrecoverably dark, total Eclipse

Without all hope of day!...

The sun to me is dark

And silent as the Moon,

When she deserts the night

Hid in her vacant interlunar cave.

In East Coker time is also explored in terms of its relationship with space (at the end of the first movement):

Dawn points, and another day

Prepares for heat and silence. Out at sea the dawn wind

Wrinkles and slides. I am here

Or there, or elsewhere. In my beginning.

Is this a reference to the same sea that his ancestors crossed to the New World? The 'dawn wind' suggests the possibility of travel.

There are also passages (these are the final lines of the 5<sup>th</sup> movement of East Coker) that are more explicitly confessional:

Old men ought to be explorers

Here or there does not matter

We must be still and still moving

Into another intensity

For a further union, a deeper communion

Through the dark cold and the empty desolation,

The wave cry, the wind cry, the vast waters

Of the petrel and the porpoise. In my end is my beginning.

Here the suggestion is that our true reality exists only in 'a deeper communion', perhaps with God (if we are believers), perhaps with ourselves (if we aren't).

So we come to 'The Dry Salvages'. These were a group of rocks that Eliot boated to as a child.

By the end of this quartet, the exploration of time is located in consideration of men's futile attempts to transgress the boundaries of time:

Pastimes and drugs, and features of the press:

And always will be, some of them especially

When there is distress of nations and perplexity

Whether on the shores of Asia, or in the Edgware Road.



'Pastimes, drugs, and features of the press' are presented as equally pernicious. We read sensational news stories in part as an escape from the worries of our own lives.

This passage picks up on an idea first introduced in 'East Coker': 'Distracted from distraction by distraction'; here is the line in context:

Neither plenitude nor vacancy. Only a flicker  
Over the strained time-ridden faces  
Distracted from distraction by distraction  
Filled with fancies and empty of meaning  
Tumid apathy with no concentration  
Men and bits of paper, whirled by the cold wind  
That blows before and after time,  
Wind in and out of unwholesome lungs  
Time before time and after.

Resolution of the puzzle of time comes in Little Gidding. The 5<sup>th</sup> movement begins:

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.

Intimations of perfection or completion, or the ecstasy of salvation, are conjured by means of analogies with poetry:

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).

In 'Burnt Norton' we read, 'Human kind cannot bear very much reality', but by 'Little Gidding', progress has been made, and we reach a point of resolution:

A condition of complete simplicity

(Costing not less than everything)

The enigma of sin and suffering is resolved:

When the tongues of flame are infolded

Into the crowned knot of fire

Here we have echoes of Eliot's translation of Dante's *Paradiso*:

Within its depths I saw ingathered, bound by love in one mass, the scattered leaves of the universe: substance and accidents and their relations, as though together fused, so that what I speak of is one simple flame.

I would like to finish with some tributes to the *Four Quartets*, some taken from a very large number of quotations brought together in The Poetry Society's excellent entry on *Four Quartets*, available on the society's website [[www.poetryfoundation.org](http://www.poetryfoundation.org)]. We will then hear a recording of Eliot reading the closing lines of Little Gidding.

Igor Stravinsky described Eliot, 'not only as a great sorcerer of words but as the very key keeper of the language.'

McLuhan summarizes: 'To purify the 'dialect of the tribe' and to open the doors of perception by discovering a host of new poetic themes and rhythms was the especial achievement of T. S. Eliot. He gave us back our language enlivened and refreshed by new contacts with many other tongues.' [ <http://www.respectpoint.com/profile/marshall-mcluh...>] Here, McLuhan refers to these lines in 'Little Gidding':

Since our concern was speech, and speech impelled us

To purify the dialect of the tribe

And urge the mind to aftersight and foresight,

Let me disclose the gifts reserved for age

To set a crown upon your lifetime's effort.

Eliot presents us with a pattern which, as Frank Kermode writes, 'the poet retreats to it. But the poem is a great poem because it will not force us to follow him. It makes us wiser without committing us.... It joins the mix of our own minds but it does not tell us what to believe.... The poem resists an imposed order; it is a part of its greatness that it can do so.' [ *Continuities* (Routledge Revivals), page 74]

B. Rajan writes, "the birth of meaning ... takes place in a manner both creative and ancient. Poetry cannot report the event; it must *be* the event, lived through in a form that can speak about itself while remaining wholly itself. This is a feat at least as difficult as it sounds, and if the poem succeeds in it, it is because, however much it remembers previous deaths by drowning, it creates its own life against its own thrust of questioning." [Rajan, B. "The *Unity of the Quartets*." T. S. Eliot, *A Study of His Writings by Several Hands*, Focus Three, edited by B. Rajan, pp. 78-95. London]

But Alvarez (A. Alvarez, *The School of Donne*), who calls Eliot "a supreme interpreter of meditated experience," provides perhaps the most lucid analysis of Eliot's "method." "The moments of greatest intensity have, as Eliot presents them, certain obliqueness, allusiveness, a controlling detachment... It is a poetry apart.... He is, in some ways, a meditative poet. But this does not mean a poet who deals in abstractions; Eliot's meditations are meditations on experience, in which the abstractions belong as much as the images; they are all a part of his particular cast of mind, the meaning he gives to past experience. .. His direct affirmations are always summings-up of this style, concentrations for which the rest of his verse appears as so many hints."

And at moments when *Four Quartets* truly baffle us we can be comforted by Dame Helen Gardner's words:

"It is better, in reading poetry of this kind, to trouble too little about the 'meaning' than to trouble too much. If there are passages whose meaning seems elusive, where we feel we are 'missing the point,' we should read on, preferably aloud... We must find the meaning in the reading ..."

*The Art of T.S. Eliot* (1949) Cresset Press.

So bearing in mind these lines from 'Burnt Norton': 'Only by the form, the pattern/ Can words or music reach the stillness' I suggest that you close your eyes, and listen to Eliot reading the last movement of *Little Gidding*, the fourth of the *Four Quartets*.