

TOWARD THE STILL POINT: T. S. ELIOT'S *FOUR QUARTETS* AND THOREAU'S
WALDEN

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Abstract

This thesis explores ways in which T. S. Eliot, when he wrote his most autobiographical poetic work *Four Quartets*, might have been influenced by Thoreau's famously autobiographical prose work *Walden*, written nearly a century earlier. Much evidence suggests that Eliot knew of the earlier writer and his work. Not only did Eliot assign *Walden* as suggested reading in a course he taught, but as time went on Eliot also admitted that he was influenced by the New England literary tradition. Reading *Four Quartets* in light of *Walden* and its context not only helps a reader understand the connections between the two works, it also gives a reader a better understanding of *Four Quartets*' fundamental meanings. Although Eliot in *Four Quartets* adds another layer of his spiritual goals beyond those expressed in *Walden*, he expresses his religio-philosophical quest for Incarnational "still point[s] of the turning world" (*Burnt Norton* 62) using autobiographical aspects and poetic tropes that are in many ways strikingly similar to the expressions also present in *Walden*.

The chapters of this thesis unfold these concepts. My Introduction highlights some of the key connections. Chapter One sets the stage for the discussion of the Incarnation by explaining how *Four Quartets*' spiritual round-trip journey from England to America is grounded in real world places and experiences. This chapter also explains how this guardedly autobiographical re-collection of an almost-real journey includes a response to Eliot's personal history and to his literary ancestors, including Thoreau. In Chapter Two, I unpack the similarities and differences between many of the religio-philosophical questions asked in the two works, focusing in on Eliot's and Thoreau's complex handlings of such themes as simplicity versus complexity, Incarnation, stillness versus activity, and the difficulty of achieving spiritual goals. Finally, these religio-philosophical questions are incarnated in very similar poetic devices and tropes within both works; in Chapter Three, I describe the most important of these. The "still point of the turning world" (Eliot, *Burnt Norton* 62) and the "mathematical point" (Thoreau, *Walden* 1.100) are rich metaphors that form the heart of this chapter.

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For ST; and for Jared

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CITATION NOTES (LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS)

<i>Burnt Norton</i>	BN
<i>East Coker</i>	EC
<i>The Dry Salvages</i>	DS
<i>Little Gidding</i>	LG

The individual quartet names have been italicized in honor of their originally having been published as independent poems.

To make the references of major works edition-independent:

Four Quartets references are listed by line number, starting with the first line of that particular quartet.

Walden and *Nature* references are listed by chapter number, followed by paragraph number: e.g., 1:1.

“This is the Emerson-Thoreau Award: it brings to mind Concord in particular and New England in general. I...asked myself whether I had any title to be a New England poet...and I think I have.... I hope that my words will shed some light upon the poem I am about to read.”

—T. S. Eliot (1959), in an award-acceptance address, just before reading
The Dry Salvages (“The Influence of Landscape upon the Poet” 421-422)

Introduction

Toward “The Still Point of the Turning World”

As I was reading through T. S. Eliot’s *Four Quartets* one day, it struck me that Eliot’s famous quotation from the final passage of that work—“A condition of complete simplicity / (Costing not less than everything)” (LG 253-254)—seemed quite Thoreauvian. Having studied Eliot in both British and American literature courses as an undergraduate, I knew of his penchant for heaping allusions into his poetry. It seemed entirely possible that Eliot was dialoguing with Thoreau’s *Walden* on some level. Seeing that the placement of the lines was at the end of the sixty-page poem, they were definitely part of the culmination of what the speaker of the *Quartets* was trying to say. This awareness cued me to look at the two works again, placing the speaker of the lines “A condition of complete simplicity / (Costing not less than everything)” next to the writer of *Walden*, who in his concluding chapter said that “In proportion as [a man] simplifies his life, the laws of the universe will appear less complex” (18.8). Was it possible that there was a deeper connection dealing with this “condition of...simplicity” towards which the bulk of the *Quartets* and the bulk of *Walden* were both straining, even if the writers meant different things by this “simplicity” and the conditions under which it could be reached? And had anyone else noticed?

I looked closer in light of this possible correspondence. The speaker of *Four Quartets* seemed less preachy and prosy than the narrator of *Walden*, and although both works used the elements as symbols, they clearly did it in a different way: the speaker of *Four Quartets* was using them more symbolically, whereas it was obvious the author of *Walden* actually had tried to strip his life down to the basic elements. Even the “simplicity” spoken of in *Four Quartets* seemed a much less literal sort of simplicity than that of *Walden*. It was hard to imagine the author of *Four Quartets* being comfortable camping out at Walden Pond with Thoreau, much less urging others to do the same. And yet it seemed clear from the way he spoke that the narrator of *Walden* did not mean these things to be completely literal either—or if he did mean them literally, the concept of simplicity was part of a broader religio-philosophical search; that is, part of an ascetic

desire to clear away all that was not essential, no matter what it cost, so that one had a chance to glimpse an essential simplicity underneath it all. Even if the authors seemed to disagree on the tactics that were necessary to get to that goal, and to some extent on the broader theological framework that informed the context of the spiritual quest, they seemed to agree on this desire for reaching their spiritual goals and the importance of clearing away the non-essential things that stood in the way.

Besides the concept of simplicity, there were other echoes connecting to the theme of what it meant to achieve this variety of spiritual progress in life. Both works, for instance, dealt with the question of whether “old men” have learned anything of use through their lives. Earlier in *Four Quartets*, Eliot wrote

What was to be the value of the long looked forward to
.....autumnal serenity
And the wisdom of age? Had they deceived us
Or deceived themselves, the quiet-voiced elders,
.....
[Their] wisdom only the knowledge of dead secrets
Useless in the darkness into which they peered
Or from which they turned their eyes. (EC 73-76, 79-81)

then a few lines later, he adds: “Do not let me hear / Of the wisdom of old men, but rather of their folly, / Their fear of fear and frenzy” (EC 93-95). Thoreau wrote in *Walden*:

Age is no better, hardly so well, qualified for an instructor as youth, for it has not profited so much as it has lost. One may almost doubt if the wisest man has learned anything of absolute value by living. Practically, the old have no very important advice to give the young, their own experience has been so partial, and their lives have been such miserable failures... I have yet to hear the first syllable of valuable or even earnest advice from my seniors. (1.10)

Considering that Eliot was in his late forties and fifties when he was writing *Four Quartets* whereas Thoreau was in his late twenties and thirties during the writing of *Walden*, I was intrigued to find that these artistic reflections on the futility of old age as an imparter of wisdom could be so resonant. One expects Thoreau, with his reputation as a cocky young rebel, to be dismissive of the instructions of his elders, but it was more

surprising to also find dismissal, even if a more meditative one stemming from disillusionment, from Eliot, an author I knew appreciated tradition. Although these themes are very common ones, the words were so similar in the two passages that it seemed possible that Eliot was purposely alluding to these words for a reason. His passage seems to have more empathy for “the old” than Thoreau. His choice of “quiet-voiced elders” to describe them seems to illustrate this empathy, as does his addition of several potential motivations for their deception, their “folly”: (1) this “darkness” both ahead of them and behind them, and (2) the “fear of fear and frenzy” seemingly stemming from that darkness. Eliot admits to personal uncertainties and failures along the way: he implicates himself in the “we” that “had the experience but missed the meaning” (*Dry Salvages* 93) and says he has personally failed at “Trying to learn to use words” (EC 174). Eliot repeatedly—as Thoreau does—rejects these motivations, saying towards the end of *East Coker*, for instance, that “Old men ought to be explorers” (202), but he is closer to being an old man himself, and is therefore less quick than Thoreau seems to be to use words like “*miserable* failures” (1.10, emphasis mine) to refer to elders’ lives. Then again, Thoreau is not against admitting to uncertainty, mistakes, and failures of his own, as illustrated by his statement a few paragraphs after the one quoted above, referring to the truth that the earth was just one of many planets: “If I had remembered this, it would have prevented some mistakes” (1.13). His rhetorical strategy in the above passage is straining towards a point very similar to that of Eliot’s “Old men ought to be explorers” (EC 202)—that men, young or old, shouldn’t be deterred by precedents from attempting to be original or to find things out for themselves.

Another echo of these themes, occurring later in *Four Quartets*, intrigued me further, particularly as it seemed to indicate a further interplay between the two works. Eliot, in part III of the final quartet, *Little Gidding*, follows a recitation of moments from English history he seems to be claiming for his own with the following words:

Why should we celebrate
These dead men more than the dying?
.....
We cannot restore old policies
Or follow an antique drum.

.....

Whatever we inherit...

We have taken from the defeated

What they had to leave us—a symbol. (LG 180-181, 186-187, 192-194)

These words, particularly the phrase “an antique drum” (LG 187), seemed almost to be a response to Thoreau, who said “as for England, almost the last significant scrap of news from that quarter was the revolution of 1649” (2.19); “If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer” (*Walden* 18.10) and “Read your fate, see what is before you, and walk on into futurity” (4.2). Since Eliot is otherwise claiming British history as his own and is therefore celebrating the “dead men” he has mentioned in the previous passage, the passage quoted above seemed almost to be a conscious remembering of how the voices of his American background, particularly that of Thoreau, would react to such a claim. This reaction to American impulses on the part of the *Four Quartets* speaker is highlighted by the strength of the poet’s change in emphasis at this point in the poem: he moderates his claim on British history to the point where he claims only to “inherit... / a symbol” (LG 192, 194) from the “dead men” (LG 187), even if it is the powerful symbol of love perfected in death. In this passage as well as among others in *Four Quartets*, I began to glimpse what seemed to be a complex interaction between these two works and the writers who produced them.

A variety of critics have briefly noted some connections between the two authors—connections that in places seemed suggestive, but on the whole each commentary presented a less complex picture than the relationship I was beginning to glimpse. There are many extensive studies noting that Thoreau and Eliot were each influenced by some of the same writings of Eastern religions as well as Christian writings.¹ Both *Walden* and *Four Quartets* use the seasons for imagery.² Both poets are

¹ Many of these seem to have been undertaken in the mid-1980s: See, for example, Kearns’ *T. S. Eliot and Indic Traditions* (1987) and Pillai’s *Transcendental Self: A Comparative Study of Thoreau and the Psycho-Philosophy of Hinduism and Buddhism* (1985).

² The seasons have been treated extensively between studies of the individual authors (see Anderson for Thoreau and Gardner for Eliot), but also in works that briefly mention the two together. For instance, George S. Lensing said in his 2004 work *Wallace Stevens and the Seasons* that “The seasons as signs and settings of human suffering and human

Americans with New England connections; both were Harvard graduates; both mention New England scenery in their works.³ F. O. Matthiessen, who wrote book-length works on Eliot and on the Transcendentalist period, connects the two briefly, but only in their “resoluteness” and “New England heritage” (*American Renaissance* 98, 157). Very few longer works have been written, however, comparing Thoreau and Eliot in-depth. In the only article-length study that I am aware of, Sam Baskett, primarily using the New England landscape connection, compares Thoreau’s *Cape Cod* with Eliot’s *The Dry Salvages* (the third of the *Four Quartets*, whose title refers to a set of rocks off Cape Ann, Massachusetts) (“Fronting the Atlantic”). To this point no scholar, including Baskett, who also wrote an article connecting Eliot with other American authors such as Hawthorne, Twain, and Faulkner (“T. S. Eliot as an American Poet”), has published a study of any length connecting *Four Quartets* with *Walden*.

Comments such as Matthiessen’s (“There are not many points of contact between Thoreau and Eliot”) (98) and Lensing’s passage in which he represented the usage of seasons as a narrow bridge over a wide chasm of differences—“works as diverse as Thoreau’s *Walden Pond* and T. S. Eliot’s *Four Quartets*” (14)—made me pause to think more deeply about the differences between the two. Was it possible the two works and their authors were more antagonistic than my individual analysis had taken into account? I was intrigued by the compelling interplay I was finding between the two works, but the wide-ranging differences between them made me wonder if the correspondences were deep enough to sustain the possible objections. After all, besides the difference in their ages and orientations to nature, Thoreau was a Romantic known to be against organized churches, while Eliot was most definitely modernist, and at the time the *Four Quartets* were written, firmly Anglican in his religious orientation. Thoreau was firmly American, scorning his friend Emerson’s trip to England; Eliot had left the United States and rejected his citizenship in favor of British citizenship. Thoreau was quite anti-war; Eliot, while he was writing most of the *Four Quartets*, was an air-raid warden in the WWII London Blitz. And beyond the authors’ lives and orientations towards the world, the

consolation are commonplace in the poems of Dickinson, Hardy, Frost, Nemerov, and Ammons—just as the progression of the seasons played crucial roles in works as diverse as Thoreau’s *Walden Pond* and T.S. Eliot’s *Four Quartets*” (14).

³ See works by Eric Sigg, Lyndall Gordon, and others.

works themselves seemed, in ways, wide apart. *Walden* was an unabashedly cocky (and a bit preachy) autobiographical work written by a man who was at the beginning of his career as a writer; *Four Quartets* was a seemingly non-autobiographical poem written by an already-famous poet-critic who sought to efface himself in his poetry. And then, of course, there was Eliot's documentary silence on the matter of being influenced by Thoreau: as Baskett points out, "If Eliot considered Thoreau to be...a [literary] relative [to respond to], he kept it to himself" ("Fronting the Atlantic" 201).

And yet, as I studied the connections I'd found more closely, many of the echoes seemed to fall into a pattern clustering around this idea of "the good life" or "condition of...simplicity" and the way to get to it. Both works spoke repeatedly, for instance, in terms of life as a voyage to a spiritual vantage point from which the world could be seen more clearly. For example, Eliot follows up the passage about "old men" with the lines "Old men ought to be explorers / ... / We must be still and still moving / Into another intensity / for a further union, a deeper communion"; in his conclusion, just before he speaks about the ratio of simplicity and universal laws, the writer of *Walden* reports on what he's learned from his two years living at Walden Pond, which he's been comparing throughout to a journey:

I learned this, at least, by my experiment: that if one *advances confidently in the direction of his dreams*, and endeavors to live the life which he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours. He will put some things behind, will pass an invisible boundary; new, universal, and more liberal laws will begin to establish themselves around and within him; or the old laws be expanded, and interpreted in his favor in a more liberal sense, and he will live with the license of a higher order of beings. (18.5, emphasis added)

These journeys were both clearly spiritual journeys towards a vantage point from which the adventurer will see the world from a simpler (yet paradoxically also deeper and broader), more spiritually aware perspective. Both writers struggled to describe these vantage points in words, which leads them to paradoxes such as Eliot's above: "we must be still and still moving" (EC 204). For both writers these points required stillness, yet are not static. Both writers used similar tropes to express the relationship of these vantage points to the unaware world outside of those vantage points. For Eliot, the recurring

image was most often that of the center of the earth with the world rotating around it: “the still point of the turning world” (BN 62). Eliot’s still points were moments of Incarnation located at various times and places in history. For Thoreau, the image is remarkably similar to Eliot’s: the journeys to be taken to get to this point are expressed as “radii from a single center” (*Walden* 1.15). He associates his “still point of the turning world” primarily in three locations: (1) the sky, particularly in the celestial bodies (sun, moon, and stars); (2) the center, or at least the “roots” or “bedrock” of the earth; and (3) in natural settings where one can focus well, particularly at Walden Pond.

The bridging echoes, once I started finding them, were too many and varied to be ignored: echoes of imagery, of theme, of subject matter, and so on. These, together with the sheer volume and variation of brief critical connections, encouraged me to look again at the seeming antagonisms between the two works. Indeed, more research revealed that many of the seeming antagonisms between the two are shallower than some have believed: the many small bridges between the two works were connecting with other half-built bridges to create firm ground for a connection between the two, a connection that was rooted primarily in central themes and their expressions in the works. For there were remarkable thematic echoes, ones that I understood better and better over time. Both authors were dealing with this question of simplicity and how it was connected to spiritual success or failure. As Baskett perceived in his article-length comparison, the speaker of *Four Quartets* seemed less self-confident than the narrator of *Walden*, but both authors seemed to recognize that those spiritual acts reaching toward spiritual revelation did not mean that it was always easy to reach those spiritual goals (“Fronting the Atlantic”). Partially because of this difficulty, both seemed to question—but also to appreciate—the place of the material world in a strongly spiritual quest. And both seemed to embrace the paradoxes involved in the meeting of flesh and fleshless, time and eternity, each setting as their spiritual goal the aim of finding these “still points of the turning world” in which the spiritual met the temporal and the earthly. This primary religio-philosophical quest, found to be a central theme of both works, was supported by documentary and critical evidence, and supported and illumined the nature of many of the other connections between the two works.

Two of the most key of these supplementary connections had to do with the autobiographical and poetic similarities in the two works; these connections were strong enough to each suggest their own chapter, one that logically fit before the religio-philosophical chapter and one after. Eliot's work, below the surface, was, like Thoreau's, very much grounded in his own experience and his personal past, and that made sense in a work speaking about enfleshment and the incursion of the eternal in the midst of the temporal. Eliot's biographical and autobiographical background set the stage for a connection between the works and for the religio-philosophical quest, and so this information seemed to fit best in a chapter preceding one on the religio-philosophical connections. This next chapter lays open the critical connections from Eliot to New England and to Thoreau and other Transcendentalists, especially in connection with *Four Quartets*, which as critics agree, is his most autobiographical poem. Biographers and critics (as much as they are able with limited and only gradually-increasing access to Eliot's papers) have explored quite thoroughly the Americanness of the expatriate poet; a few have even laid open some details about Eliot's knowledge of Thoreau. Eliot was aware of Thoreau and the other Transcendentalists; during his 1916-1919 stint as a university extension lecturer, he lectured to a university class about Emerson and Thoreau, assigned *Walden* as suggested reading, and recommended a paper topic on the Transcendentalist circle. Ronald Schuchard, who first published Eliot's syllabi for these lectures in 1974, having traced many essays and poetic allusions stemming from the works mentioned in the syllabuses, noted how deeply his preparations for these classes affected his writing both during this time and in the rest of his writing career. Schuchard did not focus on the references to the Transcendentalists in doing this, but mentioned that

the authors and subjects studied, the works chosen, the editions used, the specific and summary comments made in his syllabuses, reports, and letters will suggest to scholars familiar with different aspects of Eliot's work important and hitherto unverifiable sources, influences, and relationships to explore and reveal, especially when they enlarge our comprehension of one of the most synthesizing minds of the twentieth century. (304)

Schuchard's assumption that this syllabus would "suggest..important and hitherto unverifiable sources, influences, and relationships to explore and reveal" (304) certainly

seems to track when applied to Thoreau and the other Transcendentalists. After his teaching of these classes, Eliot often mentioned Thoreau and other Transcendentalists when he approached the question of the Americanness or the New Englandness of his poetry: he writes about them in his August 1918 essay “On Henry James” (108) and wrote a review in 1919 in which, responding to a critical work about American literary history, he commented briefly on Thoreau but more extensively on other American writers of the period, particularly Hawthorne. Much later, in his 1953 speech “American Literature and the American Language” (43), he discusses them again. By the end of that same decade, in his acceptance speech for the Emerson-Thoreau award, he was willing to claim the title “New England poet” (“Influence of Landscape” 421) when thinking of Concord and its literary denizens. These references within his critical writings and speeches showed that Eliot stayed interested in the Transcendentalists throughout many decades and associates them with his references to America and his American past. This certainly opens possibilities that there might be, as Schuchard noted, hitherto undiscovered allusions to them in the intervening poetry, such as *Four Quartets*, where Eliot uses American autobiographical details. The path of the expatriate Eliot’s connections to America in general and to New England in particular has been well-trodden by Sam Baskett and Eric Sigg, among others. Sigg and others point out that Eliot’s Unitarian grandfather knew Emerson before moving to Missouri; Eliot’s family regularly summered in New England, and in fact he was distantly related to a number of the Transcendentalists, including Hawthorne (“Eliot as a Product of America” 14-17). There has been much critical work done asking the question as to whether Eliot’s writings are influenced by various Transcendentalists in ways or is a reaction to them at times. Eliot himself indicated in his 1953 lecture—delivered in America—that influence and reaction were not mutually exclusive: “Any young writer must be aware of several generations of writers behind him... He will recognize the common ancestry: but he needn’t necessarily *like* his relatives” (“American Literature and American Language” 56). In the first chapter of this thesis, I will explore *Four Quartets* as an autobiography, then look at the autobiographical connections and craftings by both authors more closely.

As already mentioned, the primary connection between Eliot and his work *Four Quartets* and Thoreau and *Walden* deals with the area of the authors’ and the works’

connections to religio-philosophical quests; this is the content, besides that which has already been noted above, that fills the second chapter. Since *Four Quartets* is laden with religious allusions and is arguably Eliot's finest poetic work after his famous 1927 conversion to Anglicanism, much critical work has been done on the religious beliefs expressed (though perhaps in part also temporarily suspended) in *Four Quartets*. Much of this work might seem on the surface to set him apart from the very anti-church Thoreau. But the strands dealing with his interests in the paradoxical mystery of the union of the spiritual and the physical exemplified in the Incarnation provide fascinating analogues to a Transcendentalist who also seemed to struggle, more than his friend Emerson, with the questions of how the spiritual and the physical are united. Since Eliot was well known as an intellectual and had been a doctoral candidate in philosophy,⁴ some work has been done connecting *Four Quartets* and the rest of his work to the intellectual and philosophical traditions, but most connect him with philosophical traditions that are newer than the Transcendentalist movement. More significantly to this study, several works, particularly Stanley Cavell's *The Senses of Walden* and David M. Robinson's 2004 book *Natural Life: Thoreau's Worldly Transcendentalism*, have nearly captured Thoreau's religio-philosophical quest and its desired object as described in *Walden* in terms very similar to that which seems to be described in *Four Quartets*. These religio-philosophical connections, and their implications for the echoes I have discovered between *Walden* and *Four Quartets*, are what I intend to explore in the second chapter of this thesis, together with the way they are connected with the scriptural genre allusions in both works.

Finally, these themes seemed to be embedded, or perhaps I should say incarnated, in each work using remarkably similar tropes; this is the material that will be covered in the third chapter. I easily discerned these poetic and symbolic connections when reading both works closely, particularly when accompanied by critical explications of their meaning. Both works seesawed back and forth between more concrete imagery, used more like an objective correlative, and more abstract usage of language. This dialectic seemed logical in light of Leo Marx's connection between Thoreau's generation's

⁴ Eliot's dissertation was accepted, but he didn't return to America for the oral defense—World War I conditions made crossing the Atlantic difficult in 1916. He never received his degree (Shusterman 33).

response to mechanization, connecting it to an attempt to overcome a state very like Eliot's concept of "dissociation of sensibility" (Marx 36). Most importantly, I saw that what Eliot called "the still point of the turning world" (BN 62)—the central motif which *Four Quartets* seemed to be struggling to express and be centered on—had a corresponding motif in *Walden*. Thoreau also seemed to be straining to discover similar sorts of "still points" in the midst of change happening around it. Walden Pond itself, as expressed in "The Ponds" chapter, was one such item described as a "still point" from which the rest of the world's energy and activity were seen more clearly. I could also see that both works used the seasons as a framework and as an important motif, and that both Thoreau and Eliot referred symbolically to the four elements: earth, air, fire, and water. I could see that both works spoke in terms of both linear and circular motions. The final chapter will include the most important of these and other points within a discussion of *Walden* as poetry, showing how Eliot and Thoreau, despite their very different personalities, pasts, and worldviews, used similar poetic and rhetorical figures within *Four Quartets* and *Walden*.

Chapter One

(Auto)biography: Lives into Literature in Four Quartets and Walden

James Longenbach, writing about the allusions in Eliot's later poems, draws attention to the fact that Eliot de-emphasized the more personal/family history aspects of his allusions within *Four Quartets*, saying that the more obvious poetic differences were more important:

Eliot explained that the "public intention" of the quotation from Sir Thomas Elyot "is to give an early Tudor setting, the private, that the author of *The Governour* sprang from E. Coker." In Eliot's terms, the "public" aspect of the reference (its diction and tone) mattered more than the "private" aspect (awareness of Sir Thomas Elyot's connection with East Coker). (185)

Longenbach was seeking to show that the "private" parts of Eliot's allusions were less important to understanding the poetry than they were in the poetry written earlier in Eliot's career, stating that he agreed with Christopher Ricks' suggestion that Eliot, around the time he wrote *Four Quartets*, was less arrogant and aggressive and elitist about his poetic allusions than he was before he became an Anglican Christian. I would add that this ease of reading in *Four Quartets* and other poems written around this time not only points to the effects of Eliot's conversion, but also contains its own subtext, underlining the speaker's explicit spiritual struggle in *Four Quartets* for "The only wisdom we can hope to acquire /...the wisdom of humility" (DS 97-98). This does not mean, however, that the poem's "private" meanings, some of which were personal and autobiographical, are not worth explicating, the more so because Eliot himself often explained them in interviews and letters and used them to emphasize his New England and more broadly American roots as expressed in this poem. Indeed, Eliot's openness to sharing the personal and American subtexts of his poem shows another side of his newfound humility. Not only was he making some of the poem's text easier to understand, he was giving his critics and readers material with which to decode the subtexts as never before—subtexts that, importantly, would be difficult to decode otherwise, and give, as Longenbach points out, extra layers of meaning to the poem. Since these "private" layers

of meaning in *Four Quartets* often touch on the personal— often specifically to Eliot’s remembrances of and reactions to his travels and to the American, New England, and the ancestrally Puritan and Unitarian parts of his background, all of which emphases bring Eliot closer to Thoreau’s ground in *Walden*—a discussion of the connections between *Four Quartets* and *Walden* is best begun by discussing their shared connection to biography and autobiography. Indeed, it is important that within the broader context of this thesis, both works also describe quests toward the still point of the turning world that are founded not just in shared symbolism and in a context that comprehends Americanness, but also in each author’s personal experiences of the meetings of flesh with the fleshless in the sensual world. Both the experiences themselves out of which the poems grew and the process by which those experiences were turned into the final artistic product illuminate the quests toward the still point of the turning world *Walden* and *Four Quartets* share. In each work, the author took considerable time and effort to craft his experiences into the final version of each work, re-visioning his experiences as he worked to incorporate them into a broader vision.

In both works, this re-visioning process has led to what Lyndall Gordon, in her book *Eliot’s New Life*, has called a “guarded” approach to autobiography:

[Eliot] shares with Emerson, Thoreau...[etc.] a guarded mode of confession.

Unlike St. Augustine or Rousseau, who draw us into intimacy, these Americans throw the onus of introspection back [onto] the reader. (234)

Although it takes different forms in each work, this “American” guardedness Gordon mentions is certainly present in *Walden* and *Four Quartets*. On the surface the narrator of *Walden* seems more open, in using the first person, whereas the speaker of *Four Quartets* seems to avoid the word “I” at all costs, moving instead toward what Helen Gardner calls “a rather uneasy use of ‘we’ or ‘one’” (29). The writer of *Walden*, on the other hand, addresses this issue very differently, self-consciously noting towards the beginning of the book:

In most books, the I, or first person, is omitted; in this it will be retained; that, in respect to egotism, is the main difference. We commonly do not remember that it is, after all, always the first person that is speaking. I should not talk so much about myself if there were anybody else whom I knew as well. Unfortunately, I

am confined to this theme by the narrowness of my experience. Moreover, I, on my side, require of every writer, first or last, a simple and sincere account of his own life, and not merely what he has heard of other men's lives; some such account as he would send to his kindred from a distant land; for if he has lived sincerely, it must have been in a distant land to me. (1.2)

Here the narrator of *Walden*, in a few lines, both implies that what he is writing “a simple and sincere account of his own life” and then promptly undercuts that statement by implying at the end of the passage that he has not lived sincerely. That implication could be self-deprecation, but its very contradiction reveals the true guardedness of the seemingly open narrator, asking the readers to look more closely as they read the work. This guardedness, as many critics have shown, is a key ingredient to some of the puzzling aspects of that book; indeed, as Charles Anderson said, Thoreau’s experiences were so re-visioned in the published version of the book that “the full [factual] story of Thoreau’s residence at Walden Pond is hard to come by” (10). Readers of Eliot’s work, on the other hand, are called to the opposite kind of detective work, for despite Eliot’s openness with some of the personal details behind his later work, it is still even more challenging to decode the personal details behind them without further gloss than it is to decode the literary details. As Gardner quite rightly states, however, despite the avoidance of “the egoism of a continual use of the first person singular” (29), *Four Quartets* “are meditations on the experiences of a lifetime, and any study of their sources must begin with biography” (29). As mentioned above, the task here is difficult for the unaided reader, as perhaps Eliot in part intended it to be, being humble in one way but also perhaps seeking to best Thoreau’s use of the word “I.” While it seems that *Four Quartets* has been more successfully guarded, it is clear that as Gordon states, the author of each work is quite guarded in his own way. But the guardedness in these works—whether expressed in the “impersonal confessionality” in *Four Quartets* or in the unreliable narrator of *Walden*—does not cancel out the autobiographical references or make them less significant. In fact, it actually enriches the overall depth of each piece and highlights its expressions of the difficulty of a spiritual quest for a “still point” that is difficult to pin down, even while it makes them somewhat more challenging to decode.

The challenge of decoding the “experiences of a lifetime” (Gardner 29) that inspired the words is certainly there in *Four Quartets* even more than in *Walden*, and that complexity seems to have drawn scholars to the autobiographical aspects of this “impersonal poet’s” most autobiographical poem. In the past thirty-five years, Eliot scholars have seemed as quick to claim the genres of autobiography and spiritual autobiography for this poem as *Walden* scholars were previously anxious to establish that prose work’s claim to be studied as poetry.⁵ As early as 1952, Thomas Moser predicted this movement, stating that “A new approach might find myth to be as much a disguise as a method for Eliot, might find Eliot’s vision...to be a more personal vision than it is usually considered” (104), and then accurately (if in a slightly overstated way) predicting another trend—of which this study is a part—by saying that future scholars could just as conceivably find “that Eliot’s chief influences are in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries” (104). Twenty years later, James Olney fulfilled part of Moser’s prediction by including a chapter on the autobiographical aspects of *Four Quartets* in his 1972 work *Metaphors of Self: The Meaning of Autobiography*, explaining that “there is, in a reciprocal sense, considerable autobiography, both individual and universal, behind the art of a poem like *Four Quartets*” (261), and that “*Four Quartets*, representing and recreating the philosophic quest, comes in the end to be both the meditative autobiography of the poet and a spiritual autobiography for his readers” (264). Olney’s chapter including *Four Quartets* as an autobiography seemed to be quite controversial in autobiographical circles, especially in the 1970s: Renza and Sayre, for instance, debated Eliot’s inclusion in the ranks of autobiographers. In his review, Renza concedes Olney’s point that the goal of the poet and the goal of the autobiographer are similar, but finds difficulties in expanding the definition to include works like Eliot’s, even though he also finds that the visions of self in works like *Walden* are as much a construction as that in *Four Quartets*. Sayre reacts even more strongly, asking “whether these books, if they are *Metaphors of Self*, are still autobiographies. If they are, then is not all literature with some authorial presence—in style, personal information, philosophy, or vision—also autobiography?” (“Sense of Self” 192). The circles of Eliot scholarship have subsequently largely disregarded these concerns of autobiography scholars, freely using

⁵ For *Walden*’s poetic aspects, see chapter three.

the words “autobiography” and/or “spiritual autobiography” for *Four Quartets*. They have also worked to supplement Olney’s picture of Eliot as “Everyman in meditation” with “that other self, Mr. T. S. Eliot, the public figure who [other] readers...find firmly embedded in time, place, and a personal past” (Stone 166) by digging up concrete life details behind *Four Quartets*.

Whether or not *Four Quartets* is, strictly speaking, autobiography, it certainly is his poem with the most autobiographical aspects, despite the complexities of Eliot’s attitudes towards divulging these aspects. As nearly every Eliot scholar mentions, the poet himself generally encouraged de-emphasis of both the process and the man behind the poetry, even later in his life when he was more open about the sources of his poetry. In a letter to a librarian, he notes that “As a general rule, to which...my own work [is not an] exception,... posterity should be left with the product, and not be encumbered with a record of the process, of such compositions as these” (letter, qtd. in Gardner vi). And as Jewel Spears Brooker points out, “Eliot added a note to his will [fifteen months before he died] stating that he did not want his executors ‘to facilitate or countenance the writing of any biography of me’” (242), which has led to difficulty in tracing some of the more personal connections. Indeed, Eliot’s wishes were so strong on this matter that his letters to his friend (and most likely also sweetheart) Emily Hale have been sealed until 2019 (Gordon 50), and other documents and letters have only been published in chunks—the first volume of letters was published in the late 1980s, the second not until 2000. Most of the letters he wrote during the time of *Four Quartets*, along with Hale’s letters, remain as yet unpublished. Since around the time of Olney’s study, however, various critics and biographers have gradually asked for and received access to a significant number of Eliot’s previously unpublished papers, and have cumulatively therefore said with increasing confidence that *Four Quartets* is the most autobiographical of Eliot’s poems. Paying close attention to the biographical source material available to them, they have interpreted this poem in light of this material, propounding on a range of details, among which are the personal significance of the places in the titles, the links between Eliot’s roots and his new British citizenship, and the impact of the last three poems being written during World War II.

It is unclear whether Eliot would have unreservedly disclaimed this attention to the life details behind this poem; his openness about *Four Quartets* complicates the question. Gardner points out that “Eliot, who was often evasive in comments on his earlier poetry, was never evasive about *Four Quartets*” (3), that “The poet who refused to divulge whether Pipit was ‘a little girl, an innamorata, a female relative, or an old nurse’ was quite ready to say which shrine ‘on the promontory’ he had in mind and what places he had thought of as being ‘the world’s end’” (3-4). She accounts for this openness both by the fact that Eliot saw *Four Quartets* as his best poem and by the fact that “the painful and deeply troubling experiences which lie behind the earlier poetry, and to which he could not give direct expression, were now in the past” (4). These motives for Eliot’s frankness about these poems may or may not be correct—Gordon in *Eliot’s New Life*, who draws a picture of turmoil and guilt in Eliot’s life during the period from which the material for the *Quartets* is drawn, would most likely disagree with this statement, drawing attention to the emotional difficulties behind this poem. It is perhaps more likely that, as Longenbach and indeed *Four Quartets* itself implies, Eliot’s openness—and, in fact, his guardedness as well—can be more closely attributed to the effects of his Christian conversion and the difficulties inherent in seeking to attain the newfound goal of humility that went with it. But no matter which scholar (if any of them) is correct, it seems clear that Eliot’s motives and thoughts in this matter were complex: he was glad to talk about these poems, but still sealed off many of the biographical details behind the poems by sealing many of his papers till long after his death.

Regardless of what Eliot would have thought of the attention, the life connections are there. As already mentioned, even he, the “impersonal poet,” admitted many of them in the documents, manuscripts, and letters that have become available to scholars. Not only did Eliot choose the titles of his poems based on personal significance (and nearly named the whole poem after the place he was living in while writing them), but during 1934-1937 he had actually visited all the “title places” in the poem, three of which had personal significance to him (Gordon 78-79). Both Gordon and Helen Gardner make it clear he saw his emotional experiences of each of those places as key to interpretation of the poem. In his letters, for instance, when asked about the symbolism of certain things (such as the seasons), he emphasized the experiential explanation for their inclusion in

the poem: that it was autumn, for instance, when he visited Little Gidding (Gardner 29). This does not mean, of course, as will be discussed in chapter three, that the imagery or the seasons could not also have other meanings, but it gives the poems an experiential quality and a concreteness that a reader might not otherwise notice without this awareness. Besides the seasons, Eliot scholars have drawn attention to other such connections. For instance, those who have visited Burnt Norton have found that there is an actual garden there with a rose garden in it (BN 15), with birds hidden overhead (40-42), roses that actually “Had the look of flowers that are looked at” (BN 29) and a drained pool (BN 33); Eliot had also experienced another setting with a clematis (BN 128-130) and a kingfisher (BN 134-135) around that time. (Gardner 37-39) Likewise, Eric Sigg points out what Eliot himself alluded to in “The Influence of Landscape upon the Poet”—that the river and the house mentioned at the beginning of *The Dry Salvages* was a recollection of Eliot’s childhood home in St. Louis near the Mississippi River and that as a child whose family had a summer home on Cape Ann, Massachusetts he had also been out sailing near the Dry Salvages (“Eliot as a Product” 14).

As mentioned above, the actuality of these images does not preclude their also being used as symbols, or their use in expressing a particular experience of spirituality that the poet is recollecting. But it demystifies them a bit and helps a reader to understand that Eliot was, at least on one level, merely describing his relived experience of actual settings he had experienced within a definite point in history. It also brings Eliot’s poem a bit closer to *Walden* and its more overt, if still guarded, form of autobiography. Although Eliot disclaimed personal family connections with Burnt Norton and Little Gidding, he still visited all of his “title places,” and therefore had personal experiences of all of them. He was, from all accounts, seeking to be true to those realities even while he was seeking to understand and shape those realities from a later point, and to incorporate references to other settings and realities associated with those places in his mind and heart.

The significance to this study of Eliot’s artistic recollection of his experiences lies not only in their authenticity as recorded in the poem. It also heightens the effect of the materiality of his spiritual quest to understand that Eliot was seeking to reshape his understanding of the world by describing in detail a series of “still points of the turning world,” moments in which he had personally glimpsed a broader spiritual reality. It is

these personal experiences—ones in which Eliot the man glimpsed an incursion of the timeless into time—that the poet is recollecting in order to seek to understand the way in which, as he says in *Little Gidding*, “history is a pattern / Of timeless moments” (234-235). These moments, like the similar kinds of moments described in *Walden*, are drawn from a wider range of recollection than the author’s stated biographical timeframe, which in the case of *Four Quartets* means Eliot’s visits to the four framing settings from 1934 to 1937. For instance, there are references to his childhood (evoked by his 1936 crossing of the Atlantic which frames *The Dry Salvages*), there are scenes of an unspecified date set in the London tube and in and about London (in a variety of *Quartets*), and there’s a scene from his fire-watching duties during the 1940/1 London Blitz (in *Little Gidding*). But critics agree that the questions Eliot is seeking to answer in and through the poem were ones that arose in his life during a finite period of time in the mid-thirties. Eliot’s travels during that time comprised much more than the four settings, so it is important that he chose the following as his points of reference: (1) his 1934 visit with Emily Hale to the hidden garden of the house called Burnt Norton located in the English countryside; (2) his 1937 visit to East Coker, from which some of his Eliot ancestors departed for the New World in the late 1600s; (3) his 1936 Atlantic crossing and subsequent visit to various areas of his homeland, to which those ancestors had emigrated; and (4) his May 1936 visit to the chapel of Little Gidding, again in the English countryside, a church whose founders had formed a religious community that had survived a sacking by Oliver Cromwell’s men.

Even these short descriptions of the metaphorical reimagining of an almost-completely real—as well as spiritual—journey among these places illustrates why those making a clear connection between Eliot and his native land are among the most fervent in exploring the connections between *Four Quartets* and Eliot’s life. That makes sense since *Four Quartets* (*The Dry Salvages* in particular) contains the most explicitly American connections of Eliot’s major works. *The Dry Salvages* is of course the most completely American setting, with its many American references: to the shoal of rocks off Cape Ann for which the section is named; to the Mississippi River of his St. Louis upbringing; to the house in which Eliot was raised; and to the New England places with which Eliot had so much personal knowledge from his childhood summers and his

residency at Harvard. The American connection is made even more explicit by the fact that the previous quartet, *East Coker*, was set in the town in which Eliot investigated some of the Puritan ancestors who first left for the New World. And the “off-camera” biographical detail that Eliot visited the country house of Burnt Norton, the setting that began the series, with American Emily Hale, with whom he might have been in love at the time of the visit, only adds to the intrigue. This latter detail makes the impetus for the round-trip journey to the New World all the more thought-provoking, particularly when put together with the facts that Eliot was newly separated from his erratic British wife Vivienne (who may have been suffering from psychological illness) and under a vow of celibacy he had taken a month after his 1927 conversion to Anglicanism. As Lyndall Gordon argues,

The actual years in which he visited the scenes of *Four Quartets*...were years of upheaval, torn between nostalgia for unfulfilled love and the fury of tormented conscience. At the core of *Four Quartets* are the compacted memories of four years during which Eliot's new life was taking a decisive shape. (127)

Gordon is referring to Eliot's life after his conversion to Anglicanism as his new life. The primary upheaval she emphasizes is a choice between Emily, who was still living in America, and his newly-estranged wife Vivienne, who still resided in England.

Lyndall Gordon's case for Emily Hale's part in the poem's New World/Old World conflict is fairly compelling, but seems to overestimate the impact of Eliot's romantic struggles and its attendant spiritual questions on the poem while underexplicating some of the other factors behind the poem's questions. The poem itself seems to show that his questions extend beyond those of romantic love, guilt, or even spiritual desire to be a better person. It also deals, for instance, with Eliot's struggles with the American and English sides of his identity. It illustrates Eliot's concerns about his ancestors' and his own personal choices about religion and spirituality. It reveals his questions about the histories of his native and recently adopted countries. And it highlights his questions about his personal connections to both America and England in the midst of a wartime crisis in his new country—a crisis that could either draw him to or away from his new country and religion. The fact that Emily Hale was an American—and the wife from whom he had been recently separated was British—would

naturally have played a part. But there is no reason that it need have provided a greater source than his other struggles of the period. Some of these struggles may well have included that of reconciling his relatively new Anglican religious beliefs with previous beliefs held by himself—such as skepticism—and those held by others connected to him: for example, his Unitarian grandfather, the Transcendentalists (including Thoreau, whose work *Walden* he'd assigned in his extension classes), or his Puritan forebears. Or, after having enjoyed reunions of his family in the land of his birth in recent years, his struggles with feeling called to the war effort in his adopted country. Having embarked on, as Gordon puts it, a “new life” as an Anglican Christian and a British citizen, he also seemed, paradoxically, to be struggling with the very American desire to leave his “Old World” to seek out new metaphorical frontiers, in and beyond the New World. As Thoreau puts it at the end of *Walden*, Eliot may have been questioning how best to, metaphorically,

Start now on that farthest western way, which does not pause at the Mississippi or the Pacific, nor conduct toward a wornout China or Japan, but leads on direct, a tangent to this sphere, summer and winter, day and night, sun down, moon down, and at last earth down too. (18.2)

Thoreau, using a real place and life experiences at Walden Pond as a base, was seeking to go on a spiritual journey to the frontier; Eliot felt the desire to do the same. Lyndall Gordon points this out, and even notes that Eliot echoes another mid-nineteenth-century American writer in so doing, saying that “The urge to ‘fare forward’ echoes Whitman and, through him, Columbus, voyagers with inextinguishable visions in their heads” (117) and that “It is not before the world but out of sight ‘between the rocks’ that a convert [such as Eliot] must test the authenticity and reach of his faith... His venture is always to confront [spiritual] ‘reality’” (116). The playing out in *Four Quartets* of Eliot’s autobiographical and spiritual urge to “fare forward” or, as Thoreau puts it, to “start on that farthest western way,” like Thoreau’s autobiographical and spiritual journey in *Walden*, does not focus strongly on a physical place or a physical west (certainly not by the time he returns to Little Gidding in the east at the end of the poem). On the contrary, its ultimate goal is a Transcendent meeting with reality that takes place within the world despite the fact that it also comprehends spiritual echoes coming in from outside the

world. So, despite the overemphasis Gordon seems to put on Eliot's romantic struggles, the round-trip journey from England to America and back would have been personally significant for Eliot on many levels, particularly once, as Gordon notes, war broke out and Eliot felt the need to imaginatively return from his native land to rally round his adopted country. In the end, he discovered that "that [part of the earth from] which was the beginning" (LG 244-245) could contain the "condition of complete simplicity" (253) for which he was looking—in other words, he decided or discovered that the country left by his ancestors could also represent a spiritual frontier for him.

The fact that the poem represents a round-trip journey to the America Eliot left behind coupled with the fact that whenever Eliot mentioned his American roots he mentioned Thoreau, even if just in passing, strengthens the possibility that Eliot was responding in the poem to Thoreau, a fellow New Englander, fellow rebel against Unitarianism, and fellow spiritual traveler seeking to encode those journeys within words. Above and beyond these reasons for Eliot to respond to Thoreau, Longenbach suggests that references to nineteenth-century writers are more likely later in Eliot's career:

This eradication of the aggressive edge of his allusions was part of a general shift in Eliot's career. While he was composing the essays that went into *The Sacred Wood* (1920), Eliot depended on Whitman and Tennyson in his poetry but, for political reasons, could not acknowledge his debts in his essays. In the later poems, Eliot alludes more openly to poets whom he loved: he is no longer engaged in that struggle to justify his generation's "pantheon of literature." (185-186).

This thoughtful suggestion, that Eliot was more humble in including nineteenth-century authors in his allusions in the later poems, need not only apply to poets, but also to prose works of the nineteenth century as well, particularly since Eliot commented extensively on Hawthorne, another nineteenth-century American prose writer, and in 1961 wrote regarding his influences that "I include...any writers, whether of verse or prose, whose style has strongly affected my own" (*To Criticize the Critic* 20).

A commonly-accepted allusion to Whitman, Thoreau's contemporary (who Eliot also frequently mentioned when he referenced Thoreau in his essays) towards the

beginning of *The Dry Salvages* seems to confirm Longenbach's statement as it applies to *Four Quartets*, laying groundwork for deeper connections to other nineteenth-century American authors. The allusion is an obvious, yet intriguing one: "The rank ailanthus in the dooryard bloomed" (DS 12) is clearly an echo of Whitman's poem title "When Lilacs in the Dooryard Bloomed." Eric Sigg incorporates an autobiographical dimension to this quotation, noting that ailanthus did indeed bloom outside of Eliot's childhood home in St. Louis, where the scene in the poem is set ("Eliot as a Product of America" 24)—but there is no reason Eliot, who often multiply alluded to literary sources, would not have deftly incorporated his personal history, American literary history, and American history, represented in Whitman's poem about the death of Lincoln, all at once. The reference to "the river[']s cargo of dead negroes" (116) only one hundred lines later seems to further confirm that the allusion to Lincoln and his freeing of the slaves was an intentional allusion, even while he was tying it to his actual experience of his personal past at the same time. And if he was able to do that, there is no reason why he would not have been alluding to his life and the famous autobiography of one of Whitman's anti-slavery contemporaries in the same poem, even if no one has traced these connections before. This is particularly possible when one considers Eric Sigg's explication of the grapes that appear in the line directly after the Whitman allusion:

The aromatic "grapes on the autumn table" were an American cultivar, the Concord, known for its pungent, "foxy" fragrance and named for the Massachusetts village (with literary and Revolutionary War associations) where it was discovered. ("Eliot...Product" 24)

As Sigg suggests, these Concord grapes, a variety introduced by Ephraim Bull in the year *Walden* was first published ("Eliot...Product" 30 n19), have literary associations—Thoreau would be one of those associations.

Derek Traversi notes that an awareness of the "rank ailanthus" and other personal references helps to illuminate the poem for its readers just as much, if not more, than an understanding of its literary allusions does, noting that "The poet's concern with the beliefs he has incorporated into his poems begins to operate...at the point at which they touch life as lived" (88). Helen Gardner says something very similar, highlighting the way Eliot repeatedly drew attention to the real-life connections as sources when asked

about the poem (29-30). Both of these cautions are worth keeping in mind. But whether or not the experiential allusions actually illuminate an understanding more than the literary allusions is debatable—in fact, an awareness of Eliot’s life experiences can illuminate further the literary allusions, and vice versa. This interplay can be seen from the fact that Eliot was struggling with America’s literary past at the same time he was exploring his personal past. But whether or not they are more important than the literary allusions, these life connections certainly do illuminate both the meaning of the poem and its personal and literary connection to Thoreau—a connection made all the more possible by the fact that Thoreau’s *Walden* was also a carefully crafted autobiography of a “guarded” nature about a quest toward the still point.

That, of course, does not mean that Eliot and Thoreau’s biographies do not illuminate some key differences between them as well as their commonalities, producing the kind of mix of influence and reaction which Eliot may well have been referring to in his 1953 lecture on “American Literature and American Language,” when he said that “Any young writer must be aware of several generations of writers behind him... He will recognize the common ancestry: but he needn’t necessarily *like* his relatives” (56). Eliot’s “defection” to Britain and his famous 1933 statement that he was “an Anglo-Catholic in religion, a classicist in literature, and a royalist in politics” (qtd. in Hall 89) sets off the differences between the two men nicely. After all, Thoreau was an avid American libertarian—far from “a Royalist in politics.” And, as Archibald MacMechan said in the 1919 *Cambridge History of American Literature* article—to which Eliot responded in a review—Thoreau also had a reputation of being against organized religion and against war: “That the soldier and the religious had something valuable to which he was a stranger, never occurred to him. In other words, he was blind to the romance of war and the poetry of faith” (11). It seems on the surface, then, that in some ways, Thoreau would not have gotten along well with his New England literary descendant, particularly after Eliot’s spiritual quest led him to join the English state church in 1928, and when he later decided to help out with the war effort during the decade during which *Four Quartets* was written.

Eliot seemed clearly aware of these differences, and most likely did not like quite a few things about his American ancestor, who had so much in common with his

Unitarian relatives even though Thoreau too was a dissenter from Unitarianism. Eliot clearly saw these differences from himself, and had long since accepted them, though perhaps he was responding to them. As Kermit Vanderbilt points out, Eliot made clear in his *Atheneum* review of the *Cambridge History of American Literature* that “MacMechan was good on Thoreau though he had no 'fresh or surprising point of view'" (Vanderbilt 181). Other references by Eliot to the Transcendentalists illustrate that he would not have duplicated their modes of Transcendental lifestyle reform if he could help it. He said, for instance, in his essay “On Henry James” in 1918 that

There seems no easy reason why Emerson or Thoreau or Hawthorne should have been men of leisure; it seems odd that the New England conscience should have allowed them leisure; yet they *would* have it, sooner or later. That is really one of the finest things about them... Of course leisure in a metropolis, with a civilized society..., with exchange of ideas and critical standards, would have been better; but these men could not provide the metropolis, and were right in taking the leisure under possible conditions. (113)

This sort of statement makes the imagined picture of Eliot, the urbane Anglicized poet, camped out with the narrator of *Walden* at Walden Pond a humorous one—one imagines that Thoreau would spend much of the time lecturing Eliot for his attachment to the “metropolis,” while Eliot asked to be taken back to London. All the same, though, Eliot here put his finger, several decades before he wrote *Four Quartets*, on something that later Thoreau scholars have noted about Thoreau’s life. David Robinson, commenting on Thoreau’s move with his family to a new house in 1850 which afforded him the “privacy...and space” in which he was able to complete his final few revisions of *Walden*, notes that “The irony, for those who know Thoreau principally through *Walden*, is that he seems eventually to have realized that his pursuit of natural life might be conducted most effectively from Main Street in Concord” (128). This awareness of the details of Thoreau’s life outside of *Walden* not only illuminates a tension within *Walden*, belies at times the cocky persona of the narrator, and highlights the “guardedness” of this work, but also shows that the real Thoreau would more thoughtfully engage with a statement like Eliot’s than is commonly thought.

Biographical studies of Thoreau and documentary studies of *Walden* particularly call out this “real,” more mature Thoreau. In the case of *Walden*, there are at least seven fragments of manuscripts, not to mention the many volumes of journals in which Thoreau drew vertical pencil lines through passages he repurposed for *Walden*.⁶ The careful study of these journals and the manuscripts has made it a critical commonplace that *Walden*, in its published form, reflects much more of Thoreau’s life and personal journey than his two years at Walden Pond. Indeed, much of the material for *Walden* is pulled from Thoreau’s journal entries from his post-1847 experiences of the pond and its surroundings. It is illuminating to those seeking to look beyond *Walden*’s cocky narrator that the jauntier passages were written in earlier drafts. Robert Sattelmeyer, building in 1990 on Shanley’s earlier bibliographical work, asserts that in the later years of composition, in which Thoreau was entering his mid-thirties, Thoreau’s deepening understanding of life was reflected in the work, which was becoming both subtler, more symbolic, and more universal in nature. Although Thoreau’s experiment lasted from 1845 to 1847, it was not until the drafts of 1852 to 1854 that “the pond itself becomes a major character” and

In contrast to his [earlier] stance...[Thoreau] no longer seems to have a maddened hand and splintered heart turned against the wolfish world;...he turns instead to a journey in which meditation and water are wedded and which has as its aim the discovery of the ungraspable phantom of life. (Sattelmeyer 63)

This “personal quest,” Sattelmeyer explains, increasingly involves “doubt and uncertainty as well as discovery” (62). It is in these later revisions that, as Sattelmeyer and other Thoreau scholars have noted, the work was transformed from a more self-assured work to one that admitted of doubt and therefore of personal spiritual growth. It was also at this time that the manuscript began to, on a symbolic and poetic level, include a cyclical seasonal framework, but one that admitted of linear forward spiritual movement:

at the level of seasonal change in the narrator, ... the second spring is of a different order of magnitude than and not merely a repetition of the first, and comes of a result of his having sent down his “tap-root into the centre of things.”

⁶ One such journal, open to the loon-chase passage from which the one in *Walden* seems to have been culled, could be seen in the public display at the Pierpont Morgan Library in New York as of summer 2006.

By doing so, [Thoreau] succeeds...the self that was “comparatively near the surface” in understanding the phenomena of his own life. (Sattelmeyer 68)

This older, more doubtful Thoreau who finished *Walden*, rather than the younger Thoreau writing the “chanticleer” passage, seems more likely to have had a good deep conversation with the Eliot who wrote *Four Quartets*, particularly the one who finished the *Quartets* from the midst of the uncertainty of the Blitz, who, as Longenbach notes, had also turned from his early vehemence towards nineteenth-century authors. Eliot did seem to have had such a conversation with this later writer of *Walden* within *Four Quartets*, even if the ancestor did not have a chance to talk back. Beyond the autobiographical similarities, the religio-philosophical similarities to be discussed in chapter two and the poetic technique similarities to be discussed in chapter three make this discussion all the more likely.

Whether or not Eliot and Thoreau would have actually liked each other, there is clearly a “common ancestry” between them, one that both comprehends the obvious and literal facts and goes beyond them. The following facts are both verifiable and suggestive: Eliot’s Unitarian grandfather knew Emerson; Eliot was indeed related to half the Transcendentalists including Hawthorne and Whittier (see Sigg, “Eliot as a Product” 16-17); Eliot followed up his childhood summers in New England with an education in the Boston area (like Thoreau, he attended Harvard). These connections are significant in that they point to a part of Eliot’s spiritual journey in *Four Quartets*. And the fact that some of the settings from Eliot’s American past show up within *Four Quartets* is proof that Eliot’s spiritual journey would not be complete without an awareness of his American literary ancestry, an ancestry he nearly always associated with Thoreau and his contemporaries in his speeches and critical writings. The fact that Eliot towards the end of his life famously called himself “a New England poet” (“The Influence of Landscape” 421) seems to show that the personal questions Eliot posed about his American connections in *Four Quartets* were—at least in part—resolved favorably, leaving a greater possibility that Eliot’s earlier disavowals of his American heritage were at least softened, and possibly changed, later on. This allows for a greater possibility that any engagement of Thoreau’s *Walden* within *Four Quartets* would combine, perhaps, some dislike and one-up-man-ship of Thoreau with a sense of solidarity with Thoreau’s

spiritual mission to apprehend the “still point of the turning world” and to urge others to do the same. The fact that Eliot’s *Four Quartets* were made up of a series of his personal experiences of eternity coming into his own history, as Thoreau’s were in *Walden*, brings the two works closer together.

Eliot’s religio-philosophical quest in a way both comprehended and reacted to Thoreau’s quest while reacting to various stages of his own and his family’s understanding of religion. Indeed, part of the speaker’s point in the poem is to resolve these varying parts of his spiritual background, including the voices of the Puritans, the Transcendentalists, the Unitarians, and the skeptics with the newer-to-him voices of traditional Anglican beliefs and of medieval Christian mystics. In his essay on Eliot, religion, and society, Cleo McNelly Kearns shores up the idea that struggling with Eliot’s Unitarian family’s beliefs also comprehends a struggle with Thoreau:

[Eliot’s] family were Unitarians, members of a Boston-based elite...with a long tradition of resistance to the more hierarchical and mystagogic forms of the religious life, as well as to the rebarbative dogmas and internecine quarrels of their Puritan and Calvinist forebears. Spiritual heirs of Emerson and Thoreau, these people had struggled hard for relief from the effects of...such oppressive and divisive dogmas as original sin, hell and damnation, the nature and function of the trinity, and the literal truth of the incarnation (87).

As Kearns points out later in the article, Eliot, of course, once he accepted Christianity, embraced it in its “hierarchical and mystagogic” form, fully accepting doctrines, such as those of the Incarnation, that his Unitarian forebears could not stomach. Once he had become a Christian, therefore, he began reading authors such as Dante, St. John of the Cross, and other ascetic Christian mystics and incorporated them into pieces such as *Four Quartets*.

However, interestingly, Eliot’s acceptance of Christianity does not set him apart from Thoreau. In some ways, it brings him closer to this similarly questing, also ascetic fellow author who worked harder to understand the physical side of the intersections of the spiritual realm with the world than it does to Thoreau’s friend and mentor Emerson or even, in some ways, to some of the emphases of the Christian mystics or Puritans. Eliot’s insistence on a strongly Incarnational theology counters Emerson, who famously wished

merely to become a “transparent eye-ball” (*Nature* 1.4). Not only does Emerson have fewer concrete images than Thoreau to appeal to Eliot as an influence, but he is also less concerned with nature itself than as its use to achieve a higher sense of spirituality. As Robinson notes, Thoreau separated from his mentor on this and other issues: “As their relationship grew, and strains became more and more prominent, Thoreau developed his own distinctive approach to the set of intellectual issues that Emerson had addressed in his early works” (*Natural Life* 71). As Robinson and others note, one key way in which Thoreau differed from Emerson was in the area of favoring the physical world alongside the spiritual. *Four Quartets*, in its emphasis on real-world settings for spiritual encounters, seems to land Eliot on the side with Thoreau in this matter. Eliot also differs in this area from Christian mystic St. John of the Cross, who wrote that

The will cannot contain within itself both passion for created things and passion for God. What does the created thing have to do with the Creator? What does the sensual have to do with the spiritual? The visible with the invisible? The temporal with the eternal? (23)

Again, *Four Quartets* seems, in its insistence on the real world giving humanity “hints and glimpses” of the Creator, to disagree with that statement. Finally, there is the question of the Puritans. Lyndall Gordon argues that Eliot in *Four Quartets* rejects his Unitarian background by accepting his Puritan forebears’ determination to start a new community in the New World with a similar amount of forcefulness and rigor (26, 84, 102-103). Eliot certainly seems to allow for that possibility in *Four Quartets*, especially in his departing from England with his Puritan ancestors at the end of *East Coker*. But the echoes of and commonalities Eliot finds with Thoreau in the piece, strongest in the American quartet *The Dry Salvages*, seems to remind Eliot that there are dangers in accepting that form of Christianity wholeheartedly as well. Ultimately he returns in the last quartet to England and to the Anglican fold—if to Little Gidding, a setting that is a reminder Anglicans have at times separated themselves in an almost Puritan or Thoreauvian way—at the end of his spiritual journey.

Derek Traversi has implied that Eliot’s multiple literary, philosophical, and intellectual resources have in *Four Quartets* been so redirected into a single endeavor that it can reflect “a sense of the poetry as proceeding from a single voice reflecting a

continuous but expanding point of view” (89). However, that doesn’t mean that the single point of view does not, as Longenbach suggests, conceal many private subtexts and meanings. Nor does it mean that single point of view is not in the midst of an internal argument within the piece, allowing, as Moody argues, the various voices, as in a musical piece, to vie for ascendancy throughout the piece. The spiritual side of that internal argument seems to include at least the voices mentioned above, plus those of the occult and Buddhist readings both Eliot and Thoreau were fascinated by. As Moody points out, the voices with which Eliot disagrees the most receive the least stylistically appealing passages, leaving the passages of greater beauty to the viewpoints with which he most strongly assented (146-147). But it is also fascinating that, as Kearns quite rightly states, the speaker of *Four Quartets* allows all sides of the internal argument a place in the poem:

It matters, and matters greatly not only that the poet of these works had made up his mind on certain issues, but that the voices he summoned into being expressed the convictions of other and different minds too, and that he was able to give powerful articulation to skepticism as well as belief, to individuality as well as tradition, and to the points of view of many cultures and times as well as those of his own. Aesthetic achievement of this order requires primarily neither dissent nor endorsement but rather something of what Eliot himself, speaking of Dante, tentatively termed “poetic assent.” This assent, Eliot argued, entails less a “suspension of disbelief” than a “suspension of belief,” a mobile receptiveness and attention that moves beyond though it is not indifferent to matters of faith and doctrine. (“Religion, Literature, and Society” 92)

Eliot’s internal spiritual struggle for a common comprehensive spiritual identity, then, is made transparent in the poem through a sort of “suspension of belief” (92). As Kearns states, the Eliot who wrote *Four Quartets* had made his mind up on certain spiritual matters—he was, for instance, firmly sticking by his decision to join the Anglican church and accept its doctrines. But within the poem Eliot allows himself to empathize with other spiritual perspectives that had formed him in various ways, including skepticism, in an attempt to throw out the bad parts of them and to try to incorporate the good parts into what Traversi called “a continuous but expanding point of view” (89), a single spiritual

identity oriented in the right direction that was in alignment with the traditional Anglican beliefs he had come to hold.

The question remains as to whether Eliot and Thoreau shared Christianity in common, or whether Eliot was really differing from Thoreau's anti-church and anti-doctrine attitudes, as Kearns suggested when he called Eliot's Unitarian family "heirs...of Thoreau" (87). Certainly Thoreau referred frequently in *Walden* to—and was fascinated by—extra-biblical scriptures. But then, an author's frequent reference is not necessarily an assent, as is shown by Eliot's "suspension of belief." Some critics rightly doubt whether Thoreau really shared Eastern beliefs. Robinson, for one, states that while Thoreau was for a time "fascinated by the alternative image of the purely withdrawn and contemplative East, yet understood it finally as a compelling but limited answer to the question of how we should live" (*Natural Life* 55). Thoreau certainly, as Cavell and Robinson both emphasize, parodied the inflexible form of Christian practice that he saw in New England, rejecting the thoughtlessness with which his neighbors failed to let it truly affect their lives. Cavell states this well in an explication of Thoreau's "living deliberately" passage, which quotes the beginning of the Westminster catechism:⁷

In religion, our hymn books resound with a cursing of God because the words are used in vain. We are given to say that man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever. But we do not let the words assess our lives, we do not mean what they could mean, so what we *do* when we repeat those words becomes the whole meaning of [the words]...in our lives; and that is a curse. (63-64)

Thoreau's passage seems blasphemous on the surface—Thoreau's church-going neighbors would likely be appalled that he would say that "most men...have somewhat hastily concluded that it is the chief end of man here to 'glorify God and enjoy him forever'" (1.10). But as Cavell here points out, the writer of *Walden* in this passage is not so much attacking the meaning of the first question and answer of the Westminster catechism itself as he is criticizing his neighbors' lack of thoughtfulness or application of

⁷ The Westminster catechism is a mid-seventeenth-century statement of belief, widely adopted by English-speaking Presbyterian and Congregationalist churches, which would have been well known by New England Calvinists and those, such as Thoreau, who lived among them. The first question and answer states: "Q.1. What is the chief end of man? A. Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever" (Schaff).

the catechism. Robinson agrees with this assessment of Thoreau's stance towards Christianity, going on to say that

The meditative and contemplative religious orientation that Thoreau associates with the East becomes, as his analysis continues, the basis for a different claim on the meaning of Christianity, one in which Jesus is presented as an agent of change and reform rather than the founder of the present order of things. (56)

Whether or not Thoreau's spiritual experiences in *Walden* are the result of a "different claim on the meaning of Christianity" or an extra-Christian spiritual experience of nature leaning towards pantheism, it seems that Thoreau, like Eliot, was willing to undergo a "suspension of belief" in writing works such as *Walden*, something that Eliot surely would have appreciated and perhaps was inspired and motivated by.

Whether or not that voice was Christian, one of the "many cultures and times" Eliot gave voice to was the voice of the spiritual longing of the Thoreau who wrote *Walden*. And Thoreau, even while Eliot disagreed with him fundamentally at times, was not one of the voices that Eliot chose to entirely jettison during the journey he takes in *Four Quartets*, even after leaving the American setting that would have most strongly reminded him of it to move back across the sea to Little Gidding in England. The speaker of the *Quartets*, by returning to his original location of England from "the ends of the earth," affirms one of Thoreau's main points in *Walden*: that in order to travel spiritually, one need not travel far geographically. Stanley Cavell notes this in *The Senses of Walden* when he says that "Evidently [the writer] has heard that all the elements of an apocalyptic Concord, a new city of man, are present. We need nothing more and need do nothing new in order that our change of direction take place" (77). The speaker of *Four Quartets*, even while he re-collects his actual journeys throughout the work, comes to this belief in the end—the same country, England, that housed the Edenic garden of Burnt Norton and the town of East Coker, from which he longed to set out with his ancestors for the New World, also contains Little Gidding, a "[place] / Which [like the Dry Salvages in Massachusetts] also [is] at the world's end" (LG 35-36) where one looking for spiritual progression can find "pentecostal fire / In the dark time of the year" (LG 10-11). The speaker found it necessary to make the "exploration" he mentions at the end of *Little Gidding* (239) to all the places he journeyed to both physically and in remembrance, but

in the end he was refreshed and ready to rejoin England and the Anglican church on his return. This means that David M. Robinson, referring to *Walden* and other works by Thoreau, might as well have also been referring to *Four Quartets* when he said that “In all of these works, the removal from society paradoxically generates a renewed sense of presence and belonging in it” (47). Thoreau, while he ultimately realized that he was able to be spiritually alive from a residence in Concord, also needed to journey outside of Concord to live at Walden Pond to discover that everything he needed for a literary and spiritual life was available within Concord.

There are both biographical and autobiographical clues, then, that show Eliot was engaging with Thoreau within *Four Quartets*. These clues show a complex kind of engagement with Thoreau that may or may not have been intended by Eliot himself, who in his critical writings warned against over-explicating poetry on the basis of the poet’s life, saying that “For myself, I can only say that a knowledge of the springs which released a poem is not necessarily a help towards understanding the poem: too much information about the origins of the poem may even break my contact with it” (*On Poetry and Poets* 112). This statement, however, is not to be taken too literally: he preceded his statement with a caution against oversimplifying it: “The question of how far information about the poet helps us to understand the poetry is not so simple as one might think...for it may be more important in the case of one poet and less important in the case of another” (111). And there are cues that he saw the American springs of his own work to be important. A few years later, in the early 1960s, he implied that understanding the springs of his poetry might help to understand it a bit better (“The Influence of Landscape”). In that speech he implied that the springs of his poetry were tied to America, but around the same time, he said the same thing directly. In response to a question about whether his poetry was connected to the American past, he said that his poetry “wouldn’t be what it is if I’d been born in England, and it wouldn’t be what it is if I’d stayed in America. It’s a combination of things. But in its emotional springs, it comes from America” (Hall 110). In the case of *Four Quartets*, study of the “springs” of its connection to America—specifically to Thoreau’s *Walden*—most certainly is warranted in that it leads to a greater understanding of the religio-philosophical quest for the still point of the turning world at the heart of the poem.

Chapter Two

Scripture, Thoughts, and Beliefs:

Religio-Philosophical Quests in Four Quartets and Walden

“It is no accident,” Cleo McNelly Kearns argues in his book *T. S. Eliot and Indic Traditions*,

that almost every example Eliot gave of deep poetic influence as opposed to conscious imitation came from the romantic poets or the poets of the American sublime. Here Eliot met poetry he deeply distrusted, against which he erected multiple defenses, yet that...exerted a strong and even a hypnotic effect on his style.... Only in his later work did he begin to move out from behind this defensive mask and allow their voices consciously to inform his own. (178)

Kearns ties this “hypnotic effect” (178) of writers of the mid-nineteenth century in part to the authors’ engagement with Indic traditions, which also interested Eliot. Whether or not this common fascination played a part in Eliot’s choice to echo the Transcendentalist Thoreau is unknown, but it’s clear that in *Four Quartets* Eliot is allowing Thoreau’s voice, one that emerges from a similar religio-philosophical quest, “to consciously inform his own” (178), although he is also going beyond it.

Although Eliot and Thoreau have many differences, they certainly have a “common ancestry” as well. Many of the two men’s strongest similarities can perhaps be best explained using Thoreau’s famous self-identifying statement (which Eliot would have read in the *Cambridge History of American Literature* on Thoreau): “I am a mystic, a Transcendentalist, and a natural philosopher” (MacMechan 15). While Eliot may not share Thoreau’s exact meaning for the “natural” part of “natural philosopher,” he shared with Thoreau an interest in philosophy. Although it is important to note that they are expressed as emotions, images, and thoughts rather than as philosophical statements, both works are clearly filled with philosophical questions about the nature of “the good life,” about God, and about man’s place in the world—religio-philosophical questions all. These questions intersect in the most fascinating ways when they surround the quest for the “still point of the turning world” (BN 62). While Eliot would not likely have called

himself a Transcendentalist, his quest for the “still point of the turning world” as expressed in *Four Quartets* could certainly be explained as a semi-mystical quest for Transcendent moments in the real world, in much the same way that *Walden* tells the story of Thoreau’s pursuit of the Transcendent moments in the real world. Eliot’s religious framework may have landed him inside of the Anglican church, while Thoreau’s spiritual quest landed him in moonlight walks, but that does not mean that Eliot was not hearing, responding to, and agreeing with parts of *Walden* when writing *Four Quartets*. In fact, he may have been seeking to comprehend what he saw as the best parts of Thoreau’s—and by extent his homeland’s—vision within his new cultural and religious identity, as well as seeking to understand, as did Thoreau, how his still-forming spiritual and cultural identity fit together with his continuing identity of being a writer. The “still point of the turning world” (BN 62) is not merely a strong motif or an enactment of autobiography within both works, although it is that. This concept functions at the center of religio-philosophical quests on the part of both authors. These quests and their works’ themes that inform them share many points of contact in their questions and their goals: as a sampling, they ask about the helpfulness of asceticism; about the simplicity and complexities of spiritual moments experienced within the flesh (a.k.a., Incarnation); about time and timelessness; stillness and activity; words and the Word. A comparison between these two works’ handlings of these points, along with their connection to the ways the authors deal with the question of “holy writing” (i.e., scripture), highlights some differences, but also striking similarities, on how these themes are dealt with in the two works.

First, the authors have in common a yearning towards asceticism that is paired with a questioning of its results for spiritual growth. A. David Moody has recognized a pull between the poles of simplicity and complexity in *Four Quartets*:

There are contradictory imperatives in human existence, one being the need for and impulse towards “a condition of complete simplicity.” There is also a profoundly limiting tendency—manifest in *Four Quartets* itself—to exalt one of these as an absolute imperative and to repress the other. But both imperatives exist, and both belong to humanity, the ascetic “negative” no less than the life-affirming “positive.” (155)

The absolute exaltation of the “ascetic ‘negative’” that Moody sees in *Four Quartets* is something to be questioned in light of the poem itself, Eliot’s Anglicanism, and in light of the presence of the Thoreauvian subtext to the poem. If Eliot seeks in the poem to reach for an ascetic simplicity, he, like Thoreau, does it not to repress the “life-affirming ‘positive,’” but to “put to rout all that was not life” (*Walden* 2.16), to live a fuller life in the place of the things and activities that do not advance spiritual progress. Moody complains—and rightly so, if his reading is completely accurate—of what he sees as Eliot’s reductionism, that in the last movement of *Little Gidding*

The whole of history is...condensed to those few significant moments (which are essentially all one and the same moment). Picked out in what has become an otherwise featureless web they appear to constitute the sole pattern of temporal existence. (154)

Yet, as Moody points out later, assuming he’s caught Eliot in an anomaly, Eliot’s descriptions of these “intersections of the timeless / With time” (DS 201-202), as represented by the description at the beginning of *Little Gidding*, can be quite beautiful and concrete. The spirituality is clearly there in the moments, bending their temporality to make them “renewed, transfigured, in another pattern” (LG 165), and Eliot must temporarily give up his attachment to the original moments to see them that way, but in the end, they are restored to him, not just in “a pattern / Of timeless moments” (LG 234-235) but, as he said in *Burnt Norton*, as moments remembered 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...

Only through time time is conquered. (BN 86-90)

Rather than reducing these complexities to “one and the same moment” (Moody 154) or seeking to remove them from time, Eliot is likely using the final passage of the poem as a sort of shorthand meant to point back to the original “intersection[s] of the timeless / With time” (DS 201-202)—moments which, while spiritual, are also firmly embedded in time as long as Eliot himself is embedded in time.

In assuming that Eliot is trying to remove the time-bounded-ness and earthliness of the still point moments to dwell only on their timeless and spiritual portions, then, Moody is bringing an idea to the poem from the outside that is not consistent with its contents or with the Anglican doctrines, including that of Incarnation, that are a subtext of the poem. Although, as John Xiros Cooper puts it in his book *T. S. Eliot and the Ideology of Four Quartets*,

Eliot attacks explicitly the scientific materialism and instrumental rationalism of the Enlightenment...[by positing] against it the subterranean pull of the organic community, a pattern of life “controlled by the rhythm of blood and the day and the night and the season,” which...make the earthly analogue of the “hidden” pattern of the redeemed life in *Four Quartets*. (71)

This earthly pattern of life, however, is not only an analogue or a rebuttal to the Enlightenment, it is also a real-world setting in which Eliot experiences “the redeemed life” (71) that rebuts the Gnostic favoring of spirit over matter—a setting into which, as orthodox Christian doctrine makes clear, God descended to take on human flesh to save humanity. This “pattern of life ‘controlled by the rhythm of blood and the day and the night and the season’” (71) recalls the very physical world of Thoreau’s *Walden*, and rightly so. Eliot focuses in, it is true, on a series of moments at the end of *Little Gidding*. But his accurate descriptions of his real-life, time-bound experiences of the spiritual and the timeless in very different real-world places show that his focus on those moments does not reduce them to “one and the same moment” (Moody 154) with the same scenery.

In fact, Eliot’s focus on these “still points” highlights the variety of settings in which one can experience these still points—after all, as the speaker of the poem emphasizes, there are many “places / Which also are the world’s end” (LG 34-35). The speaker of the poem hastens to clarify that geography makes little difference to spiritual apprehension of the still point and the rich surrounding world of the dance that can only be properly glimpsed from such “world’s end” (35) places, but only to explain why he stayed close to home, not to discount the richness of the other still point settings. It is logical, he implies, that he chose “the nearest, in place and in time” (LG 38) from which to see the recurring image of the beautiful dance of the union of heaven and earth that one

can see from the still point—a dance in which “The dance along the artery / The circulation of the lymph / Are figured in the drift of stars” (BN 52-54). This dance adds richness to Eliot’s still point images and their surroundings, richness of imagery that falls far from Moody’s charge that life surrounding the still points is “an otherwise featureless web” (154). This dance is not always brought out explicitly when a still point is mentioned, but it is clear from references throughout the poem that the dance is always there to be viewed from the still point.

The orthodox Christian doctrines of the Incarnation, in which God entered human flesh and died in that flesh, then was raised with a touchable body, and the corresponding idea that this enfleshed person of the Trinity will return not to take humans to heaven but to establish a heavenly kingdom on a new earth, when placed as a subtext to Eliot’s imagery, reinforces the idea that Eliot’s poem affirms not just the timeless or the heavenly but, as the speaker of the poem states, both aspects coming together in the true paradox of the “intersection of the timeless with time” (DS 201-202), of heaven with earth. In fact, Eliot’s moments, like Thoreau’s (and unlike Emerson’s and those of the Eastern scriptures both Eliot and Thoreau referred to in their works), never take one out of the earthly context in which he experienced them. On the contrary, Eliot’s accurate descriptions of his real-life still point moments—in his visit to the house of Burnt Norton, at the town of East Coker, on his way across the Atlantic, at a church in the English countryside—reaffirm and give greater richness and understanding to aspects of these earthly surroundings. These accounts give concrete details the viewer may never have remembered as clearly without the experience of the timeless which entered time at that place and time. An example of this phenomenon is Eliot’s questioning reference in *Burnt Norton* as to whether “the sunflower [will] turn to us, will the clematis / Stray down, bend to us” (129-130) or “Chill / Fingers of yew be curled / Down on us?” (132-134) In other words, he is asking, will heaven (in the guise of the sunflower, the clematis, and the yew) meet humans on earth? The implication is that he had a glimpse of that possibility in his historical past encounter in the garden at Burnt Norton, the spirituality of which encounter has persisted in his memory and shapes the way he writes about it and the images he remembers from that time. However, as Helen Gardner and others have noted, these are not images that are only used symbolically—they are references to actual things

Eliot had seen and was now remembering clearly because he had experienced them at the time he'd experienced the still point moment around the time he visited Burnt Norton, when these plants acted as part of Eliot's Incarnational "still point of the turning world" moment. The earthly realities of these moments blended with the spiritual aspects so completely as to be fused in the way Eliot presents the moments, producing a much more complex vision than the "tendency...to exalt [the ascetic 'negative'] as an absolute imperative" Moody sees (155). Eliot has stripped away all that was not essential to show those moments as clearly as he could, but the rich texture of his depictions of these Incarnational moments—moments he likely would not have noticed had he remained one of the "time-ridden faces / Distracted from distraction by distraction" (BN 100-101)—shows that he is far from exalting "the ascetic 'negative'" over the "life-affirming 'positive'" (Moody 155).

As Eliot may well have noticed, the same is very much true of Thoreau's moments—without his ascetic practices, Thoreau may never have noticed the connections between the spiritual and the physical that he did. But by stripping away the excess portions of things that are not life, the writer of *Walden* finds himself free of the external commitments that would keep him from being still, observant, and therefore receptive to another complex understanding of life, particularly the nature of the pond, the birds, and so on. While he's working at understanding life better, he, like Eliot, finds himself in the midst of still points in which the timeless infiltrates time and heaven infiltrates the earth, resulting in a paradoxical situation in which these things are fused. Like Eliot's, Thoreau's written presentation of his memories of his still point moments is affected by the timeless as much as by their earthly parts: thus, in Greene's phrase, *Walden* "uses the phenomenological world as symbol rather than as *Ding an sich*, and deliberately bends to its own needs the temporality and spatiality of actual experience" (Greene 2). Greene's statement, despite itself, contains the elements that are fused in Thoreau's writing: "the temporality and spatiality of actual experience" may be "deliberately [bent]" through Thoreau's retelling, but he is presenting them in this way in part to illustrate the way in which "temporality and spatiality" were bent in the moments when he saw the temporal fused with the eternal. Despite this bending of time by the timeless, there is no moment in *Walden* when, like Emerson, the writer is completely

removed from that which is around him to be “uplifted into infinite space” (*Nature* 1.4). As an example of these aspects of, in Eliot’s phrase, the many “intersection[s] of the timeless / With time” (DS 201-202) in *Walden*, here is one such passage, in which one of these real-life moments is used in a symbolic way to introduce the topic of time and timelessness: “Time is but the stream I go a-fishing in. I drink at it; but while I drink I see the sandy bottom and detect how shallow it is. Its thin current slides away, but eternity remains. I would drink deeper; fish in the sky, whose bottom is pebbly with stars” (2.23). Here, the writer of *Walden* describes how the reflection of the stars on the surface of a stream unites with his view of the shallow “sandy bottom” to see the union of time and eternity—both occurring simultaneously. As in the passage quoted above, Thoreau says he wants to glimpse more of eternity, but also finds himself quite enjoying the glimpses he has of the earth into which heaven occasionally descends—he appreciates, for instance, the irony of “fish [appearing as though they were] in the sky” and notes the fact that the flesh-bound fish remain in the part of the image representing the eternal of which he “would [like to] drink deeper” (2.23), although the “thin current slides away” (2.23). He seems to be as entranced by the fact that the depth of eternity is for the moment incarnated in a shallow stream, “whose bottom is pebbly with stars” (2.23), as he is with eternity itself. As Robinson points out repeatedly in his book *Natural Life: Thoreau’s Worldly Transcendentalism*, Thoreau’s vision wasn’t, like Emerson’s, merely about finding the spiritual in the rest of the world only to discard the world once the spiritual is found, seeing the physical world as something that is “made to serve...receiv[ing] the dominion of man as meekly as the ass on which the Saviour rode...until the world becomes, at last, only a realized will,—the double of the man” (Emerson *Nature* 5.11). On the contrary, Thoreau saw that something of the spiritual was incarnated in the world when the eternal entered into it. As Thoreau wrote in *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, which he wrote while at Walden Pond: “Man would desecrate [nature] by his touch, and so the beauty of the world remains veiled to him. He needs not only to be spiritualized, but *naturalized*” (*Week* 379) and that “We need pray for no higher heaven than the pure senses can furnish, a *purely* sensuous life” (*Week* 382). This experience Thoreau describes of a union of the purified spiritual meeting with the purified physical radically departs from Emerson’s, but in its physicality comes very

close both to Eliot's vision in *Four Quartets* and to an orthodox Christian understanding of the radical union of the purely spiritual and the purely physical in such doctrines as the Incarnation and in the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. As such, Eliot's summoning of Thoreau in the poem unites with Eliot's orthodox understandings of Christianity quite nicely.

In this way, the simplicities striven for through spiritual disciplines in *Walden* and *Four Quartets* are not reductionistic simplicities, although Moody tends to read them that way. Rather, they are simplicities that contain their own complexities within them. Cavell eloquently describes this aspect of simplicity in *Walden* when discussing the numbers included in the text:

The endless computations of the words of *Walden* are part of its rescue of language, its return of it to us, its effort to free us and our language of one another, to discover the autonomy of each. For the word to return, what is necessary is not that we compute complexities around it, and also not exactly that we surround it with simplicities, but that we see the complexities *it* has and the simplicity it may have on a given occasion if we let it. (*The Senses of Walden* 63)

Although Cavell is speaking specifically of the numbers in "Economy," he might as well be speaking of any number of still point moments in either *Walden* or *Four Quartets*. The writer of *Walden*, by moving out of town into a more solitary location, has won himself the simple possibility to feel the complexity and kinship he has with other parts of the world:

Every little pine needle expanded and swelled with sympathy and befriended me. I was so distinctly made aware of the presence of something kindred to me, even in scenes which we are accustomed to call wild and dreary, and also that the nearest of blood to me and humanest was not a person nor a villager, that I thought no place could ever be strange to me again. (5.4)

In this passage, Thoreau is able to see the "kindredness" of other things by removing the distractions present to him in the town and watching out for them. He is able, as Cavell puts it, to "see the complexities" each pine needle "has and the simplicity it may have on a given occasion" (63), and then is able to show us the simple complexities of what he's noticed about pine needles through the slippery medium of words.

The speaker of *Four Quartets* is more Thoreauvian in his view of asceticism and its linkage to a complex simplicity, therefore, than Moody would think. Contrary to Moody's opinion that "The natural world figures positively only in very simplified terms, and even so it is consistently denatured" (152), Eliot portrays nature in connection with his "still point" experiences very similarly to Thoreau, expressing both their individual complexities and the simplicities. As Moody suggests (152), the four elements are connected to a lyric section involving mortality in *Little Gidding* part II. But, contrary to Moody's suggestion, the sense of that section is not that the elements themselves die, much less that all of nature is comprehended with them. Certainly things die in that passage, but only to make room for a later rebirth, and the elements themselves preside over the deaths rather than being comprehended in them. For instance, "Dust in the air suspended / Marks the place where a story ended" (LG 56-57) seems to suggest that dust is there, presiding over the end of a story, not dying itself. And "Water and fire succeed / The town, the pasture and the weed" (LG 72-73) implies the same thing. Beyond continuing the reference to Thoreau (who, as previously noted, heavily emphasizes the four elements within *Walden*), the speaker in this lyrical section illustrates the passage of time and nature on human effort, illustrating the speaker is seeking to live up to his earlier statement, quoted from St. John of the Cross, that he should "be still, and wait without hope / For hope would be hope of the wrong thing" (EC 123-124). The speaker, in his passage describing deaths presided over by the elements, is sacrificing, in the name of humility, his personal memories—"See, now they vanish, / The faces and places, with the self which, as it could, loved them" (163-164)—in the hope that they will "become renewed, transfigured, in another pattern" (165).

This sacrifice, however, doesn't cancel out his earlier recordings of his experiences in the poem—it simply shows Eliot's shifting from his personal history to his new country's history, successively adopting those moments (LG 175-179) as his own history so that his personal history will be able to fuse with it in a new pattern. It seems that Eliot at this point in writing the poem pauses, hearing the ghost of some of Thoreau's points in *Walden*: that "as for England, almost the last significant scrap of news from that quarter was the revolution of 1649" (2.19); that "If a man does not keep pace...., perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music which he hears,

however measured or far away” (18.10); and “What is a course of history or philosophy, or poetry,...compared with the discipline of looking always at what is to be seen?...Read your fate, see what is before you, and walk on into futurity” (4.1). Eliot responds quickly to these points, within a few lines, by allowing that “We cannot.../...follow an antique drum” (LG 186-187) and explaining that humans must not cling to the past, but only take from the past lessons that “all shall be well” (196) if one seeks “the purification of...motive[s]” (198). Ultimately, though, both England’s and his own still point moments are restored to the speaker of *Four Quartets* in all their glory in part V. The fact that they are referred to briefly does not mean that the speaker isn’t still on earth, knowing places (242) on earth (244) in a new way because he sees them now within a new pattern. This “condition of complete simplicity” (254) is one that contains a new complexity, in that the speaker’s memories of his natural experiences of nature are restored to him, but in a new form.

This moment of Incarnation at the end of *Four Quartets* (at the “end of all...exploring”) (240) is found in stillness (251) and in a union of now and always (253). This stillness and presentness has been a condition of the “still point” throughout *Four Quartets*, and these conditions are also pervasive throughout *Walden*. Thoreau says, for example, that

God himself culminates in the *present moment*, and will never be more divine in the *lapse of all the ages*. And we are enabled to apprehend at all what is sublime and noble only by the perpetual instilling and drenching of the reality that surrounds us... Let us spend our lives in conceiving then. The poet or the artist never yet had so fair and noble a design. (*Walden* 2.21, emphases added).

This quote makes the point that God is both now and always and can only be glimpsed, much less “apprehended,” through our constantly observing and seeking to absorb the reality around us, something that can only be done, to a certain extent, if a person actively stays still to absorb it. This *Walden* passage is key in that its sense, its words, and its call to action are all echoed many times in *Four Quartets*. The most notably analogous *Four Quartets* passage is the one at the end of *The Dry Salvages* when the speaker of the poem seeks to describe the way he sees humans being able to intersect with the divine at these still points. This passage emphasizes many of the points about Incarnation and its

apprehension as the *Walden* passage above, even using some of the same words (e.g., “moment” and “apprehend”):

Men’s curiosity searches past and future
And clings to that dimension. 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.
For most of us, there is only the unattended
Moment, the moment in and out of time (DS 199-207)

The speaker’s statement here that the still point is not part of the normal curiosity about “past and future” implies that the still point’s intersection is at the corner of “now” and “always,” something which the Thoreau quote also emphasizes. The speaker here also echoes the use of “apprehend” in a very similar context to Thoreau’s—they both are referring to an apprehension of the Incarnation; that is, the “God [who] culminates,” not just in eternity, but also “in the present moment” (*Walden* 2.21). Eliot agrees as well that this calling is more than an occupation. And yet Eliot’s conception here goes beyond the conception present in the passage from *Walden*, seeming to say that Thoreau’s “fair and noble design” is well enough for “the rest of us” (*Walden* 2.21), who must pay attention to catch “the unattended / Moment in and out of time” (DS 206-207), but that there is another layer of faithfulness on top of that for those who seek to achieve it. This layer of faithfulness is represented by Eliot’s saints. These saints go above and beyond Thoreau’s ultimate vision, which seems to only comprehend being present enough to occasionally glimpse eternity. Eliot’s saints actually re-enact the “Ardour and selflessness and self-surrender” (205) of Christ, not merely glimpsing his Incarnations, but becoming Incarnations themselves of Christ’s self-sacrificing love. In this way Thoreau’s vision is a strong thread in *Four Quartets*, but one of which the best parts become incorporated within Eliot’s own, broader and yet more orthodox vision, helping Eliot to resolve the tension between his present spiritual understanding and the understandings of his past,

and helping to form the “single voice reflecting...[an] expanding point of view” of which Traversi speaks (89).

By favoring love over truth, Eliot provides a different answer than Thoreau to the question of how the “condition of complete simplicity” (LG 253) is reached. Eliot’s “saint” would with the writer of *Walden* say “Rather...than money, than fame, give me truth” (18.15), but would not assent to Thoreau’s full phrase: “Rather than love, than money, than fame, give me truth” (18.15). Eliot’s point seems to be that Thoreau is limited here; as a good Anglican Christian he therefore says that “a lifetime’s death in love, / Ardour and selflessness and self-surrender” (DS 204-205) are more important than a search for truth. That does not mean that Eliot didn’t see that truth wasn’t important—that, as the writer of *Walden*, puts it, “For the most part, we are not where we are, but in a false position” (18.12). Much of *Little Gidding* is concerned not only with love but also meaning it. In fact, the speaker of the poem is so concerned with “the purification of the motive” (LG 198) that he states this purification as the means by which “All shall be well and / All manner of thing shall be well” (LG 196-197). But although ultimately love and truth are mingled in Eliot’s “condition of complete simplicity / (Costing not less than everything)” (LG 253-254), it is love that is the more important of the two. This love the speaker summons is not just human love, but also divine love—love that by its purifying fire can create human love and draw it to itself (“With the drawing of this Love”) (LG 238). Eliot agrees with Thoreau that “Humility like darkness reveals the heavenly lights” (*Walden* 18.13) and that “faith in resurrection and immortality” (18.18) is truly important; but he adds to Thoreau’s vision this layer of divine love etched into human lives. Thus, Eliot’s version of “simplicity, simplicity” (*Walden* 2.17) is that of Christ’s loving sacrifice for humanity and the occasional God-inspired ability of saints to emulate that sacrifice.

However, this difference doesn’t mean that the authors don’t have many things in common, not the least of which is their struggle to encapsulate in words their glimpses of how the spiritual uniting with the physical; this shared struggle leads both into the realm of the scriptural. The fact that Thoreau is struggling autobiographically (within a framework of writing) with his own ability as a writer to capture and appropriately organize his personal still point moments may have been another of the sources of

kinship that led Eliot to give voice to Thoreau in *Four Quartets*. Both authors were clearly concerned with their ability to capture truths in words, seeking after, comparing, and contrasting their words with the Word, which quest has led many critics to link both *Four Quartets* and *Walden* to the genre of scripture. As many critics have noted, Thoreau seems to be questing for meaning in the written word in his chapter on “Reading” and through the act of writing the work itself, in which he seeks to record his moments of transcendence. The speaker of *Four Quartets* is even more self-conscious about the difficulty of seeking to capture “still points” in writing—it’s a recurring theme in *Four Quartets*. This theme about the difficulty of writing even persists into the last section of the last quartet, where he sees the possibility that each “phrase / And sentence that is right” (LG 216-217) can itself be an Incarnational still point, around which “The complete consort [of words] danc[es] together” (LG 223). As Moody quite rightly points out in his essay on *Four Quartets*, the theme of the importance of recording meaning in the right words recurs even in *The Dry Salvages*, the one quartet in which it is not readily apparent (147-148).

Critics have noticed that in these works the authors’ dealings with words are part and parcel of the authors’ spiritual quests; both pieces, therefore, have been compared to scripture. Stanley Cavell points out many authorial strategies tying *Walden* to scriptures that are not present in Lyndall Gordon’s short analysis of the *Four Quartets* as scripture. Cavell says:

This writer is writing a sacred text. This commits him, from a religious point of view, to the claim that its words are revealed, received, and not merely mused. It commits him, from a literary point of view, to a form that comprehends creation, fall, judgment, and redemption; within it, he will have discretion over how much poetry to include, and the extent of the moral code he prescribes; and there is room in it for an indefinite amount of history and for a small epic or two. From a critical point of view, he must be readable on various, distinct levels. (14-15)

This examination is an intriguing one when applied to both works, especially the part about “a form that comprehends creation, fall, judgment, and redemption...[and that is] readable on various, distinct levels” (15). Cavell explains how the framework holds true within *Walden*, in that the work can be read on the level of autobiography or philosophy,

but on another level uses the seasonal framework as a metaphor for creation, fall, and rebirth; *Four Quartets* fits the pattern even more cleanly, in a way. *Four Quartets*, which can also be read on many levels—for instance, as a musical poem, an autobiographical journey, or as a series of thoughts and poetic reformulations—can also be read as a scriptural creation/fall/redemption story. It begins, like the Bible, in a garden, even if a remembered, post-Edenic one, and moves on to remembrance of very earthbound, cyclical existence in *East Coker*, out of which man emerges in a journey to a New World in *The Dry Salvages*, but there, too, is defeated by his difficulty in accepting the openness and the (lower-case g) gods of the sea. In the end the speaker (in *Little Gidding*) sees a possibility of redemption through prayer and purifying fire that allow saints to sacrifice their own agendas in order to become, like Christ, “a lifetime’s death in love” (DS 204).

Cavell’s analysis of Thoreau’s task of producing scripture is rather more extensive than Gordon’s account of scripturality in *Four Quartets*, but that does not mean the two critics’ accounts do not have a common ground. Although Gordon spends much time describing Eliot’s quest in *Four Quartets* as an autobiographical spiritual journey, she does not connect this journey in this way to the scriptural journey (though she could have). Instead she briefly says later on that

In [Eliot’s] later poetry, words are potentially the Word; the power to write potentially a sacred power. “The Word in the desert,” language as authoritative and durable as scripture, remained a kind of mirage of perfection. Towards this Eliot set his course. (*Eliot’s New Life* 237)

Gordon’s definition of *Four Quartets* as a kind of scripture contains fewer criteria than Cavell’s. And yet there is common ground in Gordon’s and Cavell’s disparate analyses of the scriptural aspects of these works: it lies in their assumption that the writers of these widely disparate works are seeking a scriptural authority for their individual works, and that both are making the question of whether they have achieved that authority a subject of their works. As Cavell says, “The writer of *Walden* is not counting on being believed; on the contrary, he converts the problem or condition of belief into a dominant subject of his experiment” (19). This self-conscious strategy—bringing to the reader’s attention the question of trust in the work’s authority—is also one employed by the author of *Four Quartets*. Gordon suggests that Eliot, after his 1927 conversion to Anglicanism, saw “the

power to write [as] a potentially sacred power” (237). If this is so, Eliot would have been holding to an essentially orthodox Christian belief: that since God had incarnated himself as the Word in Christ and had inspired Holy Scripture, writing by those carrying the image of God and seeking to follow Christ, the “Word [who] became flesh and made his dwelling among us” (John 1:14, NIV) had the power to show God’s image in a sacred way through the use of the gift of writing.

Gordon rightly states, however, that Eliot seems to have seen this power as a “kind of mirage of perfection” (237) rather than something he had attained within the text of *Four Quartets*. The speaker’s many statements about writing within *Four Quartets* reflect this awareness. In *East Coker*, the speaker says that like Christ, the (capitalized) “Word in the desert” (EC 155), (lower-cased) words are assailed by “voices of temptation” (156) as Christ was tempted for forty days in the desert (Matt. 4: 1-11); unlike Christ, who was able to withstand temptation, these fallen words

strain,

Crack and sometimes break, under the burden

.....

...will not stay in place,

Will not stay still. (EC 150-154)

This passage shows the speaker’s awareness that words, unlike the Chinese jar that manages to become a still point of the turning world just before this passage, have difficulty achieving “still point”-ness—in other words, becoming true, unbroken intersections of God with humanity, or in still other words, achieving scriptural status. Earlier in the same *Quartet*, the speaker had admitted that one of the poetic passages he’d just written was more like the lower-cased words than the capitalized Word: “That was a way of putting it, not very satisfactory: / a periphrastic study in a worn-out poetical fashion” (EC 68-69). In other words, the speaker feels that his words in the *Quartets* have not achieved that “mirage of perfection” (Gordon 237) he’d like them to. He feels his distance from becoming like Christ, from achieving redemption on earth by being a conduit for one of the “still points of the turning world.” And yet, despite these perceived self-failures in the world of writing to achieve a “phrase / [Or] sentence that is right” (LG 116), “For us, there is only the trying. The rest is not our business” (DS 189).

This question of words and the Word, therefore—the question of scripture—serves to illustrate the poet’s personal quest for scriptural authority and his ultimate feeling that although in the end “All shall be well and / All manner of thing shall be well” (LG 255-256), he hasn’t gotten there yet. The speaker would like *Four Quartets* to be a kind of scripture, but feels they are not. In so doing, Eliot is practicing what he preaches, seeking to acquire “The only wisdom we can hope to acquire[, which] / Is the wisdom of humility: humility is endless” (EC 97-98). He is seeking to be a conduit for God’s grace, but seems to, with Paul the biblical apostle, perceive another orthodox Christian dilemma: “I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out” (Rom. 8:18 NIV). Eliot’s answer, like Paul’s, is to recognize that he cannot be good on his own, therefore allowing God “endless” space to work within him. Whether Eliot managed to create scripture or Scripture in the process, he certainly managed to create at times within the poem what the poem itself defines as some beautiful poetry, with “every word...at home, / Taking its place to support the others, / ... / The complete consort dancing together” (LG 217-218, 223). The word “dancing” in the passage reminds a close reader of the dance from *Burnt Norton* that appears around the “still point,” without which “There would be no dance, and there is only the dance” (BN 67). In the final discussion of words in *Little Gidding*, Eliot is once again connecting right words to “the Word.” He is also unsure, once again, as to whether his words are part of an earthly cycle of ends and beginnings, or whether they are part of an incarnated spiritual cycle in which physical death (“Every poem an epitaph”—225) leads to physical resurrection and rebirth (“We are born with the dead”—230). With his Christian vision of Christ’s sacrificial death followed by resurrection, they could be both—or they could fall short of Eliot’s goal to emulate Christ’s incarnational sacrifice.

The cocky voice of *Walden* seems on the surface to show a greater confidence in his subject matter, and yet he raises the question of men’s uncertainties frequently throughout the book, backing up Cavell’s reading that “The writer of *Walden*...converts the problem or condition of belief into a dominant subject of his experiment” (19). Richard Schneider seems to agree, pointing out that Thoreau’s puns illustrate both new truths and ambiguity: “For Thoreau...language is both a hard bottom and a slippery surface. The more our guide tries to lead us to [the] hard bottom of truth with language,

the more mysterious and distant that truth sometimes becomes” (96). Charles Anderson, in his study of the poetic aspects of *Walden*, notes that Thoreau was indeed aware of how far short his work fell from Scripture, although that was his goal:

[*Walden*'s] real theme is the search for perfection, for a life of holiness, though it is certainly not rendered in Christian terms. Thoreau's own words state the paradox. In a letter of December 1852, at the very period when major revisions were transforming *Walden* from a factual to a symbolic book, he said: “My writing is at present profane, yet in a good sense, and, as it were, sacredly, I may say; for, finding the air of the temple too close, I sat outside.” (17)

It seems then, that Thoreau recognized the complexities of the idea of scripture when connected to his book, as well as the difficulties of attaining the holiness for which he was questing. In the chapter “Higher Laws,” the writer of *Walden* certainly showed he was unable at times to live up to his principles, as in the following passage about whether it is right to fish:

There is unquestionably this instinct in me which belongs to the lower orders of creation; yet with every year I am less a fisherman, *though without more humanity or even wisdom*; at present I am no fisherman at all. But I see that if I were to live in a wilderness I should again be tempted to become a fisher and hunter in earnest. (11.5, emphasis added)

In this passage, Thoreau seems to exhibit the same amount of humility as Eliot does in his passage on writing and in the passage in which he classes himself, not with the “saints,” but with the “rest of us” who rely on “hints and guesses.” Thoreau exhibits his humility by admitting not only to an “instinct...which belongs to the lower orders of creation” but that the excision of the practice coming from the lower instinct does not necessarily take away the instinct or even make him a better person. In so doing, he questions whether he is supposed to like “the wild” or “the good” better (11.1), thus questioning, like Eliot and Paul, his ability to do what he should be doing, and by extension, his qualifications to produce a scriptural document.

Both authors, then, find that they have a desire for Incarnational moments as expressed through a certain amount of tempered asceticism mixed with stillness, but they have difficulty apprehending both these moments, and keeping their desires for them

under control. These difficulties are most clearly revealed through the slipperiness of language each writer has experienced, though they are also revealed in the difficulties with reaching his goal that each author admits to. Each author, then, is seeking to apprehend the still point in which the eternal meets with the temporal, but only occasionally has achieved this goal. This does not deter either author. The writer of *Walden* and the speaker of *Four Quartets* are not only on quests for the still point themselves, but encourage others to join them in their quests. As the writer of *Walden* writes towards the beginning of the book:

I would have each one be very careful to find out and pursue his own way, and not his father's or his mother's or his neighbor's instead. The youth may build or plant or sail, only let him not be hindered from doing that which he tells me he would like to do. It is by a mathematical point only that we are wise, as the sailor or the fugitive slave keeps the polestar in his eye; but that is sufficient guidance for all our life. We may not arrive at our port within a calculable period, but we would preserve the true course. (1.100)

Here the writer of *Walden* encourages others to pursue this journey in their own way, just to be guided by the same stable goal—the “mathematical point”⁸ or still point. In his own words, the speaker of *Four Quartets* also urges toward a “mathematical point” that stays still, when he says that

Old men ought to be explorers
Here and there does not matter
We must be still and still moving
Into another intensity
For a further union, a deeper communion (EC 202-206)

and that

For most of us, this is the aim
Never here to be realized;

⁸ “That which is conceived as having position but no extent, magnitude, dimension, or direction (as the end of a line, the intersection of two lines, or an element of a topological space)” (OED point n1 9a). Another OED entry cites Hume as having used the term as a metaphor in 1739 (OED mathematical, II 7 8a), which draws attention to the fact that Thoreau's usage falls into an earlier tradition.

Who are only undefeated

Because we have gone on trying (DS 226-229).

Although the speaker of *Four Quartets* is directing his urging to old men and the writer of *Walden* primarily to the young, the two statements are remarkably similar, illustrating some of the key similarities of these religio-philosophical quests towards spiritual goals. Both authors admit that it is important to explore, or to find one's own way: "Old men ought to be explorers" (EC 202); "I would have each one be very careful to find out and pursue his own way" (*Walden* 1.100). Both agree that the location or exact occupation is not so important: "Here and there does not matter" (EC 203); "The youth may build or plant or sail, only let him not be hindered" (*Walden* 1.100). For both, it is not just reaching the object, but also keeping it in sight that matters: "We must be still and still moving / Into another intensity" (EC 204) even though "[we might be] only undefeated / Because we have gone on trying" (DS 228-229); "We may not arrive at our port within a calculable period, but we would preserve the true course" (*Walden* 1.100).

Indeed, the two authors' religio-philosophical themes are highlighted further by the way they incarnate themselves in the language present in each work. When it comes to the still point and its associated themes, the authors' language and meanings—and use of tropes and poetic devices—have the sort of combined similarity one would only expect from an author who is consciously or unconsciously echoing another. In both works, the themes are incarnated in tropes and poetic devices that spread throughout the fabric of the work like dye working its way through cloth. These devices are worth a closer look not just because of their poetic nature and because of their pervasiveness within and between the works (though those reasons are good ones in and of themselves), but also because of the various ways they illustrate themes such as Incarnation. It is these similar but also different wranglings with words, meanings, and image and trope that incarnate the authors' autobiographical religio-philosophical quests into similar but different works of art; this combination of poetic devices—and their meanings—is the topic of the next chapter.

Chapter Three

Four Quartets and Walden: Poetic Devices and Tropes

Many critics drawing attention to Eliot's sources—Longenbach and Kearns, for instance—mention the nineteenth-century poets who might have influenced Eliot, but pay less attention to “prose poets” such as Thoreau. However, beyond the obvious fact mentioned earlier—that Eliot himself pointed out that he was influenced by prose as well as poetry (*To Criticize a Critic* 20)—it is a very real possibility that the poetic strategies and tropes within *Walden* may well have attracted Eliot to this work. This would mean that he anticipated the many writers who have supplemented the criticism describing *Walden*'s autobiographical and prose aspects by drawing attention to its poetic aspects. In his 1981 *The Senses of Walden*, Cavell notes that *Walden*'s “literary ambition to shoulder [poetry's] commitment” “to total and transparent meaning, every mark bearing its brunt” (31) sets a high standard for a prose piece. Eliot, with his awareness that “Every phrase and every sentence” (LG 224) can be as important as “a step to the block” (LG 226), would surely have appreciated this ambition. As highlighted earlier, it is also quite intriguing that he chose to assign *Walden* as suggested reading in the same course unit that the class was discussing Emerson as a poet (Schuchard 294). This means that Eliot saw the poetic elements present in *Walden*, and opens up the possibility that Eliot did indeed see in *Walden* the kind of extended poetic work which he might reference in an extended way in a long poem like *Four Quartets*—one in which he was contemplating some of the same big questions about life in some of the same terms. As mentioned earlier, Eliot may also to have appreciated, then, that, as Greene put it in 1966, *Walden* “uses the phenomenological world as symbol rather than as *Ding an sich*, and deliberately bends to its own needs the temporality and spatiality of actual experience” (Greene 2) or, as Charles R. Anderson put it two years later, that “To read *Walden* as a poem is to assume that its meaning resides not in its logic but in its language, its structure of images, its symbolism—and is inseparable from them” (Anderson 17). Eliot, starting a poem in which the “temporality and spatiality of actual experience” (Greene 2) was also being bent by its connections with the divine and in which the meaning so clearly resided in its “language, its

structure of images, [and] its symbolism” (Anderson 17), may well have drawn on this earlier “prose poem” as part of his fundamental framework.

It may have been, in part, the concreteness of the way in which *Walden* used “the phenomenological world as symbol” (2) that drew Eliot to it; he may have seen in *Walden* a use of symbol that was a precursor to his own use of the objective correlative, and in turn saw the concreteness of the imagery as a very instance of Incarnation. That Eliot found Thoreau’s concrete imagery appealing is suggested, once again, by Eliot’s extension course syllabus. Eliot pointed out towards the end of the syllabus for his extension course on “modern literature” (which started with a unit on Emerson) that Emerson’s ten-volume *Journal* was “well worth reading parts of, to gain a more intimate knowledge of the man” (Schuchard 296). This awareness of Emerson’s journal opens up the possibility that Eliot knew the entry in which, as David Robinson so well describes it, “The year after Thoreau’s death, Emerson praised, with a touch of envy, his gift for concrete metaphor and vivid description” (110):

That oaken strength which I noted whenever he walked or worked or surveyed wood lots, the same unhesitating hand with which a field-laborer accosts a piece of work which I should shun as a waste of strength, Henry shows in his literary task. He has muscle, & ventures on & performs feats which I am forced to decline. In reading him, I find the same thought, the same spirit that is in me, but he takes it a step beyond, & illustrates by excellent images that which I should have conveyed in a sleepy generality. (*Journals* 15:352-353)

Doubtless, Thoreau would have taken issue with Emerson’s assumption that he expressed “the same thought, the same spirit that [was] in” (15:353) Emerson. Regardless of what Thoreau would have thought of the statement, the “illustrat[ion] by excellent images that which [Emerson] should have conveyed in a sleepy generality” could not fail to appeal to the symbolist modern poet who popularized the objective correlative⁹ and appreciated “immediacy and particularity” in writing (Weinig ix), even

⁹ Eliot famously popularized the term “objective correlative” in his 1919 essay on *Hamlet*: “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

if it took him decades to find a poem in which to allude to some of these nearly proto-modernist “excellent images.” Whether or not Eliot ever read that passage in Emerson’s journal, it seems that he shared Emerson’s view of Thoreau’s writing. His act of assigning it in the same class in which he lectured on “Emerson as a Poet” suggests as much. It could very well have been, in part, the combination of tropes he found in *Walden*—and the ways they could so excellently illustrate the same questions and themes that haunted him—that influenced him to write *Four Quartets* the way he did.

The more distinctly and traditionally poetic devices within *Walden*, however, are not the only thing that may have drawn Eliot to *Walden* as an influence; Eliot was not afraid of genre-bending, so mixing elements of a more “earth-bound,” logical genre such as prose with a more “flighty” one such as poetry may well have appealed to him in light of the work’s Incarnational themes. As Weinig noted, Eliot “sounded [warnings] against...the artificial dichotomy of poetic versus prose diction,” pointing out that “while we are ready enough to accept a classification of ‘poetic prose,’ we ‘appear to have overlooked the right of poetry to be ‘prosaic’” (ix). Eliot’s recognition that poetry and prose often were unfairly dichotomized certainly allows for the possibility for the deep influence by a work of poetic prose such as *Walden* on a work of poetry that has at times been accused of being too prosy (see, for example, Traversi 90). However, it should also be emphasized that, as Gordon notes, Eliot once distinguished between the kind of abstraction he used in his poetry and that used in prose rhetoric: “[Eliot] once said, ‘I suspect that what is often held to be a capacity for abstract thought, in a poet, is a capacity for abstract feeling— something much more properly the poet’s business’” (116).

Whether or not the abstract language others have accused of being “prosy” in *Four Quartets* is that of abstract thought or abstract feeling, there are clearly shifts from more abstract language to more concrete images within *Four Quartets*—a strategy which, among others, illustrates the kind of union present in the Incarnation. As many critics of *Walden* point out, Thoreau makes similar shifts between the concrete and the abstract in

evoked” (*Selected Essays* 145). There is a critical debate about whether Eliot actually created the concept; John Duffy, for example, traces this concept back to Emerson and other nineteenth-century authors. Thoreau’s use of Walden Pond and other descriptions in *Walden* to evoke emotion certainly closely corresponds to this description.

his work—between philosophical passages that use images and wordplay to illustrate points and more reportorial, concrete retellings of experiences that give glimpses of connections to larger themes and tie in to overall motifs at times. Richard Schneider explains that “*Walden* progresses in dialogic pairs of chapters on contrasting topics,” warning of the danger of “oversimplifying Thoreau’s scheme” by ignoring that “within chapters still other contrasts occur” (96). It is certainly true that Thoreau’s contrasts are complex: not only do they occur between chapters and within chapters, but they also occur in the way the same kind of imagery is treated in very different parts of the work. For instance, in the stream image Thoreau directly draws the link between the image of his experience and the broader connection to the spiritual—here he is speaking in a way that unites the “abstract” (heaven/ideas) with the “concrete” (earth/experience), as it were. But later on in “The Ponds” and other more subtly symbolic chapters, he tells about similar transcendent moments that also use very concrete terms for his experience without making as obvious a connection to the abstract principles, although it seems that he still makes a similar connection. At other times still, he talks about time and eternity using language that seems to be further divorced from his personal experience, using imagery that is more idea-oriented—talking, for instance, about the “mathematical point” towards which his readers should be straining in their lives although they can’t see it. Whether or not, as Sattlemeyer suggests, most of the more concrete imagery was added later in the composition process, all these kinds of images were allowed to remain there, uniting the unseen with the visual in a variety of ways. In *Four Quartets*, Eliot’s similar dialectical shifts between more idea-based and experience-based language were almost certainly caused, at least in part, by the twinings of themes, methods, and poetic styles required by the musical motif the work’s title emphasizes. Yet this dialectic, in the way it seeks to bring together abstract ideas with concrete experience, excellently illustrates the common motif of the union of an eternal heaven with a time-driven earth; therefore, it’s not surprising, considering the authors’ shared themes, that this dialectic would be so strongly present in both works.

But beyond this dialectical movement, *Four Quartets* and *Walden* share remarkably similar tropes and symbols, each expressing the authors’ themes in “language,....structure of images,...[and] symbolism” in such a way that the meaning is

nearly “inseparable from them” (Anderson 17). The most important of the tropes shared between the two works is that of what the speaker of *Four Quartets* terms the “abstention from movement” (BN 124) without which “There would be no dance” (BN 66)—the “still point of the turning world (BN 62). The “still point”—or, in Thoreau’s formulation, the “mathematical point”—trope is the one which best incarnates the themes present in both works: not only Incarnation and stillness vs. movement, but also faith vs. sight. The striking similarities of the *Walden* imagery to the still point referenced in *Four Quartets* are therefore well worth exploring further.

Naturally, critics have suggested other literary sources for the still point, which is to be expected with such a central image of Eliot’s. Traversi traces the “still point” image to Dante and scholastic philosophy (110n), Gardner to the Charles Williams novel *The Greater Trumps* (85).¹⁰ While these allusions may well have been intended, the combination of the factors already mentioned show that Eliot was most likely also alluding to Thoreau’s still point imagery. As was discussed in chapter one with the line in *The Dry Salvages* referring simultaneously to Whitman and to Eliot’s personal history, Eliot referred to multiple sources with the same words frequently within *Four Quartets*; the same is definitely the case with multiple literary sources as well. As already mentioned, Traversi implies that this multiplicity of allusions is even more possible in *Four Quartets* than in Eliot’s earlier long poems because the speaker of the poem has so absorbed and redirected its multiple literary, philosophical, and intellectual resources into a single endeavor that it can reflect “a sense of the poetry as proceeding from a single voice reflecting a continuous but expanding point of view” (89). Traversi seems to imply, however, that this singleness of voice lessens, in a way, the depth gained by a reader who works to understand the “private” meanings to which Longenbach draws attention

¹⁰ Derek Traversi (and others as well) refer to Canto 28 of Dante’s *Paradiso*, Traversi particularly quoting lines 41-42: “From that point / dependent is the heaven and nature all” (Traversi 110 n26; trans. from Longfellow’s translation of Dante, as noted in the works cited and consulted). In contrast, Helen Gardner traces the still point back to Eliot’s earlier work *Coriolanus I. Triumphant March* published in 1931), from there to Charles Williams’ novel *The Greater Trumps*: “Charles Williams told me, and Eliot confirmed, that the image of the dance around the ‘still point’ was suggested by Williams’s novel *The Greater Trumps*, where in a magical model of the universe the figures of the Tarot pack dance around the Fool at the still centre. Only Sybil, the wise woman of the novel, sees the Fool as moving and completing all the movements of the dancers” (Gardner 85).

(Traversi 89; Longenbach 185). But that is simply not true, even in Traversi's explication of the poem, in which he takes time to explain, for example, both the up-down models presented by Heraclitus and St. John of the Cross (Traversi 116). The same, that multiple allusions may concurrently enrich the understanding of the text, is almost certainly true of the still point, one of the most central images in the poem. In the same way that learning about Heraclitus and St. John of the Cross deepens a reader's understanding of the poem, understanding the writer of *Walden's* handling of the "mathematical point" (18.2) does the same.

As was briefly explained in Chapter Two, in the *Walden* model, it is a "mathematical point," like the "polestar," that can guide a person to stay on the linear path to eternity. Further explication of the imagery present in Thoreau's passage from the concluding chapter of *Walden* will draw out its connection to Eliot's still point and the close connection of this imagery the overall themes of both pieces. The passage reads as follows:

I would have each one be very careful to find out and pursue his own way, and not his father's or his mother's or his neighbor's instead. The youth may build or plant or sail, only let him not be hindered from doing that which he tells me he would like to do. *It is by a mathematical point only that we are wise*, as the sailor or the fugitive slave keeps the polestar in his eye; but that is sufficient guidance for all our life. We may not arrive at our port within a calculable period, but *we would preserve the true course*. (18.2, emphases added)

The writer here is also using the metaphor of a mathematical point, which intriguingly is described as something that has a position but no "extent, magnitude, dimension, or direction" (OED point, n1 9a). It therefore has a stable position, but cannot be seen in and of itself, to stand in for a sort of North star for those on the difficult spiritual journey he's calling his readers to—a way to "preserve the true course" (18.2). Derek Traversi's explication of Eliot's first still point passage could be applied to Thoreau's image as well as to Eliot's passage:

The direct apprehension of the "point" itself is beyond our grasp, and only in so far as we can identify ourselves with it reflection in the "dance" of time-conditioned movement can we aspire to understand something of its nature. (112)

While Traversi may well be overstating a bit when he says the apprehension is “beyond our grasp”—after all, in *The Dry Salvages* the speaker says that saints may ultimately apprehend it (DS 200-202)—he raises a difficulty that is present in both works. The *Walden* analogy to the North Star shows the stability of this guide, but complications occur because of the unseen nature of his “mathematical point” metaphor—how, indeed, may one be guided by something that is unseen? Eliot, who recognizes that “For most of us, there... / are only hints and guesses, / Hints followed by guesses” (DS 206, 212-213) of this still point, faces the same problem in pursuing his formulation of a “still point.” Saints may ultimately be able to apprehend the still point, he says, but he humbly admits that he’s part of the other group, the “most of us” (DS 206), the majority of humans that only have occasional moments of illumination on their journeys. Then again, for Eliot, faith is more in the attempt than in the results: “For us, there is only the trying. The rest is not our business” (EC 109). This is one of the many references to the problem of retaining faith raised in *Four Quartets*.

By proposing his “mathematical point” metaphor, Thoreau (well known for his puns and plays on words) could well be drawing attention to the passage in the Bible that “faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see” (Hebrews 11:1 NIV). If so, this is not the first time that Thoreau used a biblical passage as a gloss on one of his puns (see Anderson 22). Nor is it the first time within the work Thoreau addresses the topic of faith using an angle on a still point metaphor. He raised it as early as the first chapter of *Walden*:

How vigilant we are! *determined not to live by faith if we can avoid it*; all the day long on the alert, at night we unwillingly say our prayers and commit ourselves to uncertainties. So thoroughly and sincerely are we compelled to live, reverencing our life, and denying the possibility of change. *This is the only way, we say; but there are as many ways as there can be drawn radii from one centre*. All change is a miracle to contemplate; but it is a miracle which is taking place every instant. (1.15, emphases added)

Thoreau here draws attention to the problem of retaining faith, though from a slightly different angle than Eliot. Interestingly, he uses “we” here as he joins the ranks of those who strenuously try to keep themselves safe from change and danger, by staying “on the

alert” and overly reverencing the way things are. He also draws attention to the end goal of such faith, and of such journeys, as a sort of mathematical point which is the ending point of a variety of line on which a variety of people are coming from a variety of starting points—“as many ways as there can be drawn radii from one centre” (1.15).¹¹ This idea is strikingly similar to that of the speaker of *Little Gidding* when he says that “If you came this way, / Taking any route, starting from anywhere, / At any time or at any season” (LG 38-40) the indeterminate “you” would reach, ultimately, “Here, the intersection of the timeless moment” (LG 54). Thoreau’s motif seems, like Eliot’s, to show that his attentive readers are all (even while they’re fighting to avoid moving forward) taking linear journeys that have a common destination. Although it here shows the journeys extending out from the still point, Thoreau’s image still shows his awareness that the spiritual travelers are moving toward a single absolute point, an end point toward which all the journeys are moving from a variety of starting points on straight geometrical lines. Thoreau, unlike Eliot, seems to be primarily admonishing people against judging other people’s starting points or their ways of moving towards a common end point destination (the still point). But the imagery remains remarkably consistent.

Like Eliot’s still point, without which “There would be no dance, and there is only the dance” (BN 67), the *Walden* “one centre” (1.15) from which radii extend also seems, like the polestar, to be still in and of itself—or at least stable. But that stillness, much like the eye of a tornado, only emphasizes the frenetic movement of the activity moving around it—movement which, Thoreau seems to imply, is linear, but may not seem linear, or even patterned, until one has reached the end point of one’s journey. Thoreau’s further use of the “stillness emphasizing movement” trope elsewhere in the book shows his belief that glimpses—or in *Four Quartets* language, “hints and guesses” (LG 212)—of mini-still points are possible before one’s reached the end of one’s journey to the “mathematical point” towards which one should be headed out of slavery (or, in other words, the center to which the many radii lead). David M. Robinson points out that many

¹¹ Radius: “A straight line drawn to the circumference of a circle or the surface of a sphere from the centre, all lines so drawn being equal in length.” (OED radius, n. 3a) Thoreau here seems to be imagining the journeys to the “mathematical point” moving from the outside of a sphere to the point at the center of the sphere. His emphasis here seems to be in encouraging his readers to focus on reaching the center rather than quibbling on which exactly identical, but slightly differently angled, path they are taking.

of Thoreau's descriptions of Walden Pond, especially those in "The Ponds" and "The Pond in Winter," emphasize this trope of frenetic movement surrounding the stillness: "Thoreau's descriptive argument extends to his portrait of the remarkable power of the pond's surface to record all the life and energy around it, its even, smooth plane a medium that can disclose the smallest presence and the finest movements above and below it" (121). An example follows:

The bullfrogs trump to usher in the night, and the note of the whip-poor-will is borne on the rippling wind from over the water. Sympathy with the fluttering alder and poplar leaves almost takes away my breath; yet, like the lake, my serenity is rippled but not ruffled. These small waves raised by the evening wind are as remote from storm as the smooth reflecting surface. (5.1)

Here, the writer draws a word picture of an instance in which his spirit participated in the way the "smooth reflecting surface" of the pond highlighted the activity of the bull-frogs, the whip-poor-will, and the fluttering leaves above it. If the writer of *Walden* can have such awareness of "mini-still points" during the course of his time-bound journey, he suggests, others can also discover and enter such meetings of time with the timeless on the way to the ultimate still point. As with Eliot's awareness that although "hints and guesses" (LG 212) are all that is possible for most humans, the possibility is open to those who work at it: "to apprehend / The point of intersection of the timeless / With time, is an occupation for the saint" (LG 200-202). One in Thoreau's world, as in Eliot's, can live in such a way as to encourage these glimpses, even if not actually, like Eliot's saint to become incarnations of divine love, sacrifice, and selflessness themselves; thus his emphasis on "simplicity, simplicity" (2.17) throughout *Walden*.

Returning to the still point passage from *Walden*'s conclusion, Thoreau's emphasis on the polestar—a star which stays still while other stars rotate around it—provides another emphasis for comparison with Eliot's still point. As Eliot puts it in his initial passage on the still point in *Burnt Norton*, "at the still point, there the dance is, / But neither arrest nor movement. And do not call it fixity, / Where past and future are gathered" (63-65). Like Thoreau's "polestar" (18.2), Eliot's still point moves that which is around it, even though it is still. The image seems to be like that of the center of the world, or perhaps the sun, which is still itself, in a way, but always rotating the things

around it—itself and anything encompassed in its gravity. Thus there is neither “arrest”—because so much is moving around the still point and it is, in a way, the cause of much of the movement—or “movement”—because the point itself has a stability and a stillness despite the movement around it. From the vantage points of these “still” points, the seemingly conflicting up-down, forward-backward, and circling/cycling movement tropes present in both works—conflicts that seem to have confused Richard J. Schneider in his article about *Walden* (97)—seem temporarily harmonized in some ways, but suspended, in some ways, at the point itself, as they are when Thoreau sees the stillness of the surface of Walden Pond. As Eliot puts it in his passage introducing the still point, at the still point there is “Neither movement from nor towards, / Neither ascent nor decline” (BN 65-66), a “release from action...release from the inner / and the outer compulsion” (71-72). And so the still point is a point at which the confusions of the non-linear (or temporal) journey slip away and a person who has reached a still point can see the true pattern, or “dance,” that is taking place around the still point, in the same way that Thoreau could see the pattern of the stars in the stream or the pattern of the activity around the surface of Walden Pond. From the still point, which in and of itself is not “fixity,” one can see the world and its patterns, its interconnections, clearly. That, in both works, is something to be striven for.

An overview of the place of each of the movement tropes mentioned above within both works will illustrate how they, too, fit within the patterns around the Incarnational still points each author is seeking to convey. It will also show how they illustrate different aspects of the themes discussed more in depth in chapter two. One starting point for this overview is the up-down paradox raised in the second of Eliot’s Greek epigraphs to *Four Quartets* (which as epigraphs, draw attention to overriding themes of the piece). According to John Burnet’s translation of the Greek for the second epigraph, this fragment from Heraclitus reads “The way up and the way down is one and the same” (Preston viii). This passage not only draws attention to Eliot’s use of paradox within the poem, but also the motif of connections between heaven and earth. Raymond Preston in his commentary on the *Quartets* points out that this line reappears in a very similar way in *The Dry Salvages*, where it reads “And the way up is the way down” (viii). This theme and imagery is extended later through Eliot’s use of the Christian mystic St. John of the

Cross, whom Eliot alludes to several times: he mentions his “ten stairs” (BN 161) in *Burnt Norton* and closely quotes him in *East Coker* (135-146). As Helen Gardner appropriately explicates, the “ten stairs” “refers to the ten steps of the ladder of love” (89). She also notes that St. John used the image of a ladder “because a ladder is used for ascent and descent, and communications from God simultaneously exalt and humble the soul” (89). Thoreau’s paradoxical up-down imagery further complicates the “private” levels of Eliot’s trope.

A *Walden* reader with an eye for this up-down motif, as Eliot seems to have shown himself to be in *Four Quartets*, certainly finds up and down imagery repeated throughout *Walden*, echoing a similar central theme in a more concrete, Incarnational way than either Heraclitus or St. John of the Cross. In “Economy,” for instance, Thoreau writes

The soil, it appears, is suited to the seed, for it has sent its radicle *downward*, and it may now send its shoot *upward* also with confidence. Why has man *rooted himself thus firmly in the earth*, but that he may *rise in the same proportion into the heavens above?* (*Walden* 1:20, emphases added).

This paradoxical union of down and up, of rooting in the earth and rising into the heavens, can be found throughout *Walden*. Thoreau seems to be seeking for and recording natural instances of such unions in his book. The stream passage first mentioned in Chapter Two, for example, folds in the theme of time and eternity along with the ideas of up and down: “Time is but the stream I go a-fishing in. I drink at it; but while I drink I see the sandy bottom and detect how shallow it is. Its thin current slides away, but eternity remains. I would drink deeper; fish in the sky, whose bottom is pebbly with stars” (2.23). Thoreau is fascinated that, in looking *down* to a stream, he sees the heavens *above* him—thus heaven and earth are momentarily united.

In *Four Quartets*, Eliot uses imagery very similar to Thoreau’s to evocatively describe his understanding of such unions of that which is “down” and earthy with that which is “up” and heavenly: “The dance along the artery / The circulation of the lymph / Are figured in the drift of stars” (BN 52-54). The speaker of the poem joins together here an understanding of the limited and physical—blood and lymphatic systems—with the seemingly eternal—the stars. Although Eliot here doesn’t draw out as carefully the

“stairs” yoking the temporal and earthly to the eternal and heavenly as Thoreau does in his stream passage, his syntax and line length poetically yokes images of time and eternity in a strikingly similar way to Thoreau’s prose passage. A few lines later Eliot reinforces this yoking with another similar image, more clearly pulling out the up-down paradox: “Below, the boarhound and the boar / Pursue their pattern as before / But reconciled among the stars” (59-61). Here Eliot’s image diverges a bit from Thoreau’s by introducing the idea that the temporal version of the “boarhound and the boar,” in which these two creatures compete, has a more perfect eternal counterpart in the constellations. It is the humans that “ascend...in the tree” (55), suspended between the two aforementioned connections of heaven and earth, who see the comparison and the contrast between the temporal and the eternal and long for a bridge between the two. Thoreau does not include such a competitive version of time-bound hunting creatures in his up-down stream image, yet his note on the shallowness, or limitedness, of the stream’s sandy bottom, its thinness, and his desire to “drink deeper” also show his awareness of the limitations of time in comparison to eternity even as he’s amazed at the entrance of eternity into time. Throughout Eliot’s work these “earthly” and “heavenly” images continue in his symbolic use of the four “earthly” elements, many of which at times are referred to as a symbol for or a vehicle for heavenly intrusions into earthly matters.

Beyond the push-pull of the up-down paradox in *Four Quartets* and *Walden*, there is a tension in both works between linear and circular/cyclical imagery, illustrating the difficulty of understanding an eternal perspective from within a temporal viewpoint. Images of the linear journey (and progression through time) compete with cycles and other circular tropes throughout each work. Schneider calls attention to this oft-noted tension in *Walden*: “Thoreau’s circular metaphor contrasts with a linear concept of travel...[T]hough the reader is a pilgrim who is to progress to a new destination, Thoreau reminds us that finally ‘Our voyaging is only great-circle-sailing’” (97). Schneider and others have pointed out the seasonal framework of *Walden* emphasizes this tension—the cycles emphasized by and within the strong seasonal framework highlight the other cyclical tropes, yet at the same time, time is moving forward in a more or less linear manner through the narrative. This linear-versus-circular push-pull is emphasized by the

clustering of the book's chapters so that, as Charles Anderson points out, the chapter "The Ponds" is at the center of the book, emphasizing that Thoreau ultimately rearranged his experiences to keep Walden Pond central in a very structural way, even while he shows himself to be growing spiritually between the beginning of the book to the end. Before and after his central chapter, Thoreau records himself as repeatedly leaving from, circling around, and returning to his central place and central circular image: Walden Pond. His journeys may be linear and progressive in many ways but the fact that he is always returning to the pond emphasizes a round-trip, circular quality in both his physical and spiritual voyaging, leaving a reader with questions about whether the meeting of the eternal with the temporal is represented by the linear or the circular or a mix of the two.

In *Four Quartets*, this tension between the circular and the linear is played out in Eliot's "In my beginning is in my end" and "In my end is my beginning" statements, which also bring attention back to the tension of heaven meeting earth emphasized by the way up and the way down paradox. Throughout his piece, Eliot emphasizes temporal beginnings that imply deaths, or ends, and temporal ends that imply new beginnings, showing the cyclical nature of temporal life: "We, content at the last / ...nourish / ... / The life of significant soil" (DS 231-234). This soil the speaker mentions is the same kind of soil which others before him formed, as earlier mentioned in *East Coker* ("Mirth of those long since under earth / Nourishing the corn") (EC 37-38). Eliot therefore plays with these phrasings to show a very linear life progression through the temporal. But, as Lyndall Gordon points out, he also uses some of the same words and related imagery to emphasize that "Mere physical existence...finds its alternative in an ideal pattern of existence that leads to the final triumphant claim to eternal life: 'In my end is my beginning'" (*Eliot's New Life* 112). This progression from temporal life to eternal life, from life to death to resurrection, for those who experience it linearly, is at odds with the cyclical nature of temporal experience. The same could be said of the spiritual "voyage" represented by the titles of Eliot's *Four Quartets*: as was explained in Chapter One, many have emphasized that the place names of each quartet emphasize a journey from England to America and back. Clearly Eliot's voyage is also "only great-circle-sailing," and, considering that Eliot himself, before the travels that form the primary basis of *Four Quartets*, was born in the New World before adopting his ancestors' home, it is confusing

“great-circle-sailing” at that. And yet the journey in *Four Quartets* represents the speaker’s roughly-linear journey through a specific time—1934-1937—as well as a physical, personal round-trip journey (implying circularity). As on Thoreau’s journey, this push-pull tension provides the sort of paradox that highlights the challenges of mixing the temporal with the eternal, and illustrates the difficulties inherent in temporal beings actually being able to get more than “hints and glimpses” of the still point or the surrounding dance in its true form.

These journey metaphors in both works illustrate people in the midst of movement—both circular and linear—participating in journeys that contain the at-times-inexplicable (or at least difficult to describe for both authors) blending of earth and heaven, time and eternity. This blending often leads to seemingly-paradoxical suggestions between stillness and forward movement as well as between the linear and the circular. Judging from the difficulties presented, both authors seem to think it is difficult to stay on the course linearly, and it’s clear that to both authors this linear course is not the mechanical one the world has laid out. The writer of *Walden* addresses this issue in his famous train passage: “To do things ‘railroad fashion’ is now the byword; and it is worth the while to be warned so often and so sincerely by any power to get off its track.... Every path but your own is the path of fate. Keep on your own track, then” (4.10). Keep going straight, the writer is saying, keep your linear course towards the goal, but make sure you don’t make that path the path of commerce, the path society and the makers of the railroad have laid out for you. Get off the railroad’s track and find a straight one of your own. Intriguingly, Eliot concludes the third section of *Burnt Norton*, which has been set in the trains of the London Underground, with a similar image: speaking of getting to the spiritual goal of one’s journey not by following “the world[, which] moves / In appetency on its metalled ways / Of time past and time future” (BN 124-126) but through “abstention from movement” (124). This abstention from movement, the speaker of *Four Quartets* later explains in the “Old men ought to be explorers” passage at the end of *East Coker*, does not exclude movement, but is paradoxically part of the movement: “We must be still and still moving / Into another intensity / For a further union, a deeper communion” (EC 205-207) he says. Since the setting of the voyage in this passage, after all, is in a boat on the sea, the paradoxical “still

and still moving” image could perhaps be meant to make one think of an image similar to that of a ship that’s technically staying still but is caught in a current—still, but still moving in a linear fashion towards a goal of deeper union and communion, which is ostensibly expressed by “belonging to another, or to others, or to God” (EC 96). It is interesting that Eliot’s “still and still moving” image at the end of *East Coker* is a more passive and a more communal image than that presented in the *Walden* train passage: passive because of the stillness involved in the movement, communal because of the pronouns and the emphasis on “union” and “communion” (207).

Stillness and “loafing” as part of the journey are topics Thoreau frequently raises and advocates elsewhere in *Walden*, but the difference between “you” and “we” is a more striking difference. This difference isn’t incidental—the tone of each excerpt shows a greater sense of community in Eliot’s passage, and indeed, in *Four Quartets* as a whole, over and against a greater sense of individuality in the passage from *Walden* as well as in that work as a whole. It’s not that the writer of *Walden* doesn’t depend on the community around him—in fact, he admits at the beginning that he borrows the axe with which to start building his cabin—and it’s not that Eliot isn’t laying out his individual experience in *Four Quartets*. But on the whole, the *Walden* experimenter’s stated goal is to be less dependent on the society around him so that he can see how he is dependent on the broader world of nature. The writer of *Walden* divides himself from other journeyers in this process (thus giving Thoreau the misogynistic and curmudgeonly reputation he retains today), whereas the speaker of *Four Quartets* is explicitly joining himself to the “Old men [who] ought to be explorers” (EC 203) in his quest to love others and to avoid being classed with those who fear “belonging to another, or to others, or to God” (EC 96). Thoreau’s attitude may well be a pose, but whether or not he is, it is striking that both authors encourage their audiences to depart from the world’s ways to keep on the track toward a spiritual goal using similar images of the world’s track versus the right track.

Critics of both works have frequently commented on the seasonal trope, which illustrates one of the stronger temporal cycles in both works. Charles Anderson’s words about the thematic import of *Walden*’s seasonal cycle—and its anomalies—are apt when comparing the use of the seasons in the two works:

The annual cycle is an important part of the total design of *Walden*, but it is no mere mechanical formula of seasonal progression. True, the first ten chapters...deal...with summer activities, and the last five spin through the other seasons. But just as the titles of some of the latter contain the word “Winter” or “Spring”..., the titles of some of the former, such as “Higher Laws”..., suggest excursions out of this time scheme and out of time itself into the Eternal Now. (Anderson 39)

Besides this fascinating suggestion linking the titles of *Walden*'s chapters to the time and eternity theme, many have noted the “death-and-resurrection” theme present in *Walden*'s seasonal progression from summer to winter and back to spring, highlighting a linear spiritual progression within Thoreau's life and complicating, once again, a single image by calling out in it both temporal and eternal, earthly and spiritual, aspects. Anderson's words about seasonality and “excursions out of this time scheme and out of time itself” (39) and the other symbolic tensions inherent in *Walden*'s seasons become particularly intriguing when comparing *Walden* to *Four Quartets*. Eliot's take on these tensions involved in the seasonal trope are most interesting at the beginning of *Little Gidding*. According to Gardner, Eliot emphasizes in his *Four Quartets* correspondence that the seasonal references were there not for any allusive or symbolic reason, but because he was mirroring his experience. The symbolic side of the actual is emphasized, however, when the still points occur during seasonally ambiguous times, such as the “Midwinter spring” (LG 1) of *Little Gidding*: “This is the spring time / But not in time's covenant” (LG 13-14). The next few lines of the poem further emphasize the mix of the “now” with the “not yet” involved in the odd season the speaker experienced on his journey to his still point:

Now the hedgerow
Is blanched...with transitory blossom
Of snow, a bloom more sudden
Than that of summer...
Not in the scheme of generation.
Where is the summer, the unimaginable
Zero summer? (LG 15-20)

This particular season the speaker is describing is nearly miraculous, containing “pentecostal fire / In the dark time of the year” (10-11) alongside the unexpected “transitory blossom[s] / Of snow” (16-17) but from this vantage point the speaker still longs for the true bloom of summer, or a full unqualified experience of the still point, both blessings he can hardly imagine at this point of the year (and perhaps, from a more broadly biographical standpoint, blessings that Eliot is having trouble imagining at this point in the London Blitz). The quartet quickly moves to springtime—“If you came this way in may time, you would find the hedges / White again, in May, with voluptuary sweetness” (LG 23-24)—but then the speaker breaks out of the seasonal pattern altogether. He notes that although all the journeys take place within time, the season or time of day isn’t key to the experience of the timeless at the end of the road:

It would be the same at the end of the journey,
If you came at night...,
If you came by day...,
It would be the same. (25-28)

The speaker here points out that the eternal transcends seasonality and time itself; a human being is clearly within time and within specific instances and at specific places on earth when one is approaching the “intersection of the timeless moment” (LG 52), but at the “still point” itself, the human steps out of time temporarily into the eternal, so a particular season or time of day doesn’t matter when approaching a place where the timeless intersects with time. From that vantage point the human experiencing the “timeless moment” can see time and the dance performed within it more clearly.

It is clear, then, that the depth and combination of the similarities, as well as their illumination of similar themes, between *Four Quartets* and *Walden* is so striking as to make a comparison of the poetic devices used in the works an embarrassment of riches, particularly when it comes to the centrality of the image of a quest for the still point of the turning world, and the difficulty of that quest. On a purely poetic level, other Transcendentalists, particularly Thoreau’s mentor and friend Emerson, share a few of Thoreau’s tropes—for instance, Emerson used several references to celestial bodies and circular patterns in *Nature* and essays such as “Circles.” Some could use this material to argue that Eliot could be referring to Emerson as well, particularly since Eliot’s extension

course unit on the Transcendentalists was primarily focused on Emerson. It is possible that Eliot in part was choosing to allude to both: after all, he said in his 1919 essay “On Henry James” that among “Emerson, Thoreau...and Lowell... None...[is] individually very important” (*Question of Henry James* 113). But it seems unlikely that Eliot would have chosen Emerson rather than Thoreau in this case. Beyond the already-mentioned religio-philosophical differences and the lack of an autobiography in Emerson’s canon, Emerson had no work, as Thoreau did in *Walden*, in which he used as many concrete metaphors and motifs that are so strikingly similar to those in *Four Quartets*. And so it is likely that if, as Longenbach suggests, “In the later poems, Eliot...no longer engaged in that struggle to justify his generation’s ‘pantheon of literature,’” “alludes more openly to [writers] whom he loved” (185-186), or, as Kearns put it, “[began] to move out from behind this defensive mask and allow [the] voices [of the nineteenth century] consciously to inform his own” (*T. S. Eliot and Indic Traditions* 178) in his later work, Thoreau seems the obvious choice for *Four Quartets*. The dance of metaphor, symbol, motif, and other poetic devices between the two works is extremely suggestive that Eliot was not only autobiographically and religio-philosophically, but also poetically influenced by *Walden*.

Conclusion

I started out in my quest for a connection between *Four Quartets* and *Walden* half-expecting to find only “hints and guesses, / Hints followed by guesses” (DS 212-213), so I was very pleased to discover such compelling materials for bridging the chasm between these two very different writers. Although I have been unable to conclusively settle the question of whether Eliot meant to point to Thoreau’s *Walden* in *Four Quartets*, I was glad to discover that a reading of *Four Quartets* in light of *Walden* illuminated themes, biographical links, and poetic strategies at the heart of *Four Quartets*. The resulting thesis has highlighted many of the primary connections that suggest that Eliot, when writing *Four Quartets*, may indeed have been engaging with Thoreau’s work among other voices from his spiritual background. As I have expressed, that connection seems probable for many reasons on many levels. I focused on the ones that seemed the strongest from the viewpoint of literary scholarship and sought to keep close to the text of the works themselves at all times. Most of these reasons ultimately pointed to—and seemed to culminate in—the authors’ shared quests for “the still point of the turning world” moments where they see the divine as meeting humanity. And so it was around that concept that I organized the chapters of this study. In honor of the autobiographical aspects of the each work I was studying, I chose to describe the unfolding of my research in the introduction and conclusion using the first person (honoring Thoreau’s choice), leaving it out in the body chapters (in honor of Eliot’s).

Although I sought to include most of the key material in the preceding pages, this study has necessarily excluded intriguing connections that did not seem to be the ones that were the most central to the connection between the two works. In my quest to understand and to express the quest toward “the still point of the turning world” (BN 62) I found at the heart of both works, I found myself tempted by many equally-strong alternate research directions that I or others may one day wish to pursue. As many others have discussed, Eliot was strongly influenced by other authors. There are other questions present within *Four Quartets* beyond those of Eliot’s religio-philosophical quest. *Four Quartets* stands as only one part of an entire body of Eliot’s poetic, critical, and dramatic

work, leaving other works by Eliot to be explored along similar lines. This study's scope required that these facets of *Four Quartets* scholarship were necessarily excluded, but that does not mean that many fruitful explorations along these lines may not build on this work in the future. In fact, it would be fascinating to expand ideas not covered by this project using its framework. It would be interesting, for instance, to pursue the other theological, philosophical, and spiritual threads to which Eliot responded in *Four Quartets*; to pursue more of how the British side of Eliot affected the poem and how that side of him was affected by the American/Transcendentalist thread; or to pursue the idea of how Eliot's part in the British war effort affected the religio-philosophical quest expressed in the poem. These and many other possibilities for scholarship may be built around the connection built in this thesis, but this study was not able to comprehend all of them.

So, despite the firm grounding I discovered between *Four Quartets* and *Walden*, this thesis is, in itself, appropriately enough, only "hints and guesses" of other possible works of scholarship. These authors and their contexts are so incredibly rich, and their clarion calls to pay attention to the things that matter are so increasingly important for society to heed in an age of information overload, that I need add no more at present. I will only say, with Eliot, that "For us, there is only the trying. The rest is not our business" (EC 189). After so much time spent contemplating Eliot's and Thoreau's quests, I like Eliot, am content for now to seek "the wisdom of humility" (EC 98) by concluding this thesis.

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