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FIRE TRANSFIGURED IN T. S. ELIOT’S
FOUR QUARTETS

the communication
Of the dead is tongued with fire beyond the language of the living.
“Little Gidding,” I, 52—53

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It has been fairly well established that one of the organizing principles
Eliot used when he wrote Four Quartets was to equate each of the
poem’s parts with one of nature’s four elements:

‘Burnt Norton’ is a poem about air, on which whispers are borne, intangible itself, but
the medium of communication; ‘East Coker’ is a poem about earth, the dust of which
we are made and into which we shall return; ... ‘The Dry Salvages’ is a poem about
water ... [while] ‘Little Gidding’ is a poem about fire, the purest of the elements, by
which some have thought the world would end, fire which consumes and purifies.

What happens in the Quartets is, however, a bit more complicated. B.
Rajan, I think, correctly assessed the situation when he said that

‘Burnt Norton’ is concerned with constructing concepts, ‘East Coker’ and ‘The Dry
Salvages’ with the application of those concepts to a steadily widening area of experi­
ence, and ‘Little Gidding’ with the transfiguration of the facts within that area.

The unity of the four separate poems into one poem is, moreover,
crucial to our understanding of its individual parts. Perhaps it would
not be too inaccurate to declare that individually the poem’s four
movements or quartets are ineffective compared to the experience of
the greater poem. And Eliot’s method is perhaps not so strange or
remote if we consider it against his own experience reading Dante’s
Divine Comedy as he described the experience in his essay, “Dante”
(1929). Eliot tells us that “the Purgatorio begin[s] to yield its beauty”

only when we have read straight through to the end of the Paradiso, and re-read the
Inferno.

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His understanding of the *Inferno* is, likewise, revealing:

I insist that the full meaning of the *Inferno* can only be extracted after appreciation of the two later parts.⁶

It would seem to follow, then, given Eliot's purpose in writing "Little Gidding", namely, that:

The intention, of course, was . . . to present to the mind of the reader a parallel, by means of contrast between the *Inferno* and the *Purgatorio* which Dante visited and a hallucinated scene after an air-raid,⁷ that "Little Gidding" — the fourth poem in the quartet — would unite the separate poems into a single unity and resolve the major issues of what *Four Quartets* is about.

In general, *Four Quartets* is about time and history; in particular, the *Quartets* are about Eliot's position in time and his relation to the kindred — whether they be blood-kin or spiritual kin — who peopled the space before him. Eliot's preoccupation was to an "utter and relentless fidelity to the event" of the poetic past — to a "single intelligence speak[ing] across those years."⁸ Eliot, moreover, seemed *only* to be able to think of himself as a poet whose own significance was heavy with the presence and tradition of all who came before him. This notion is self-evident in Eliot's definition in "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1919) of what he called the "historical sense." The "historical sense" was a

sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together . . . it is at the same time what makes a writer most acutely conscious of his place in time, of his own contemporaneity.⁹

In short, a poet's "significance . . . is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists."¹⁰

In *Four Quartets* Eliot once again attempted to articulate his private feelings on the subject of Love — love not only secular and erotic, but religious and devotional, as well. The very fact of the poem's reflexivity (i.e., the poem is about its own production), however, is what enabled Eliot to meditate on the use of language as he tried to use it writing "Little Gidding":

The language has to be very direct: the line, and the single word, must be completely disciplined to the purpose of the whole.¹¹