“The End of All Our Exploring”: The Gift Half Understood and *Four Quartets*

**Abstract:** Understanding the meaning and significance of Incarnation—the universal pattern of which the Incarnation of God in human flesh stands as paradigmatic instance—sheds valuable new light on *The Waste Land*. Reading the earlier poem not so much through the perspective of *Four Quartets* as with the later work as an other, critical, eye confirms the wastelanders’ mistake in seeking water to relieve their plight (instead of fire). At the same time, our new awareness of the satirical character of the earlier poem alerts us to problems with some of the speakers in *Four Quartets*, especially the lyrical voices in the fourth sections and thus enables a fresh understanding of the thematic and rhetorical uses of writing as subject in the fifth and final sections.

Incarnation is a form of paradox, and at the same time so much more. Eliot defines it simply, eloquently, succinctly in “The Dry Salvages,” third of Four Quartets: “The hint half guessed, the gift half understood, is Incarnation.” Pointedly omitting the expected definite article before “Incarnation,” he deconfines that paradox, making it a timeless, universal pattern of which the historical event—of the “impossible union” of God and man, transcendence and immanence—stands as the paradigmatic instance. By insisting on our “half” guessing correctly and only “half” understanding, Eliot returns us, with difference, to such two-ness as marks The Waste Land, some twenty years before.

In Four Quartets, “fire” wins out, the necessary refining or purifying force, which is not to be confused, although it often is, with the pagan notion of purgation. The dead speak with “flames of fire,” and the last line of the poem reads, “And the fire and the rose are one.” In that vein, the “familiar compound ghost,” in “Little Gidding,” makes clear that we must be “restored by that refining fire / Where you must move in measure, like a dancer”—every word here charged with meaning.

The clearest depiction of fire—as well as the most surprising, in a part built around the unexpected—is the fourth, lyrical section of “Little Gidding.” The “dove” familiarly symbolizes the Holy Ghost, but here represents the German Nazi Luffwaffe in its horrible nightly descents upon London, whose streets the poet patrolled as fire warden: “incandescent terror.” Yet the speaker declares it the “one discharge from sin and error,” adding that our only hope—otherwise we face despair—is to “be redeemed from fire by fire.” Thus faced with far greater—physical, material—horror than that existential sort immediately enveloping the wastelanders, including the speaker of The Waste Land, the speaker here engages in neither hand-wringing nor lament, but instead accepts—without resignation—fire as that through which we must proceed. We all have a “choice.” This poem goes further, connecting fire with “rose”: it is “Love” that “devised the torment.” Rather than relief, cessation, or transcendence, the speaker here, the virtual opposite of him in The Waste Land, looks not for metaphorical “water” but for perspective. His is faith that “Love” in an incident of supreme paradox provided the “fire” as the medium in, through, and by means of which we may come to salvation. In this sense, here at least, Four Quartets appears to play positive to the negative that is The Waste Land.

In connecting with the other passage, the lyrical section of “East Coker” expands on the implications of this embrace of “fire” and figures a whole