



Making the Intangible Incarnate: The Aesthetics of T.S. Eliot

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Throughout the history of aesthetics, one quality of art that continually resurfaced among critics is *transport* – the sensation that art is taking you away into its own world. The aesthetics behind this transport have continually shifted with each new generation and culture, and each with their own respective effect of this transport. T.S. Eliot’s *Four Quartets* are a prime example of art as transportation – it is almost impossible to comprehend the work if you do not let it take you into its own dimension; it cannot be analyzed logically like an essay, it must be felt and experienced as its own reality. However, the way that T.S. Eliot used transport in his epic poem differs from aesthetic theories which preceded him or followed him – such as the ones by Clive Bell and Crispin Sartwell. After analyzing these theories for their perspectives on aesthetic transport and contrasting them against Eliot’s aesthetic theory, I will investigate Eliot’s *Four Quartets* for a mode of aesthetic transport that is not about abstract separation from our world, or the organic fusion of our psyches and our environment, but one that uses transport as an incarnation of the intangible.

The philosopher Clive Bell argued in his book *Art* (1914) that “in pure aesthetics we have only to consider our emotion and its object” (3). To him, human emotion is the only way to distinguish between art and non-art, and furthermore the production of emotion is the purpose and

function of art. The emotion transports the viewer out of this world and into another, so that they “inhabit a world with an intense and peculiar significance of its own; that significance is unrelated to the significance of life. In this world, the emotions of life find no place. It is a world with emotions of its own” (Bell, 6). Art comes with its own emotions that pull us into the world belonging to art. This world is apart from the lives of men, and stems from the almost abstract ideals akin to Plato. According to Bell, the state of dwelling in these perfect and unearthly ideals is the ultimate goal of art – to move beyond this is an abuse of the nature of art.

Bell’s twentieth century aesthetic thought developed in the wake of eighteenth and nineteenth century industrialization, consumerism, secularism, and individualism. Art was freed from cloistered aristocratic homes and from the representation of ideal truths, morals, or meaning of any kind, and became the representation of the average, the day to day, based on the individual experiences and lives of the middle and low classes. Arts became a daily “occasion for nonpractical cultivation of taste” rather than the practical product of culture (Sartwell, 123). This distinction of art as inherently *non-practical* and *non-meaningful* carried heavy dualistic implications into aesthetics, which we see evidenced in Bell’s aesthetics – the world of art was divided from the actual world; the object was divided from meaning and purpose.

Crispin Sartwell offered an aesthetic theory that challenged Bell’s dualism in art in his book *The Art of Living* (1995). In opposition to Bell’s stance, Sartwell claimed that “There *is* no purely internal state in virtue of which I experience the world” but that rather “The mind is ... an *organism* in an *environment*” (125, 121). As opposed to experiencing art through an emotion singular to the aesthetic experience and separate from the human experience, Sartwell’s concept of aesthetics relies upon the human environment as an essential aspect in the experience of art. In a person’s aesthetic experience “this is what environment *means*: a fusion of organic awareness,

of meanings both conscious and unaware, or geographic location, of physical presence, personal time, pervasive movement” (Sartwell, 124). In Sartwell’s aesthetics there is a *fusing* of the environment and the art with the emotional, cognitive, and physical parts of that person. Sartwell describes this as an “autotelic” process in which one is “*made whole* in the activity itself...literally as the absorption of oneself into the ‘external object.’ Through the loss of self, one achieves the expansion of self: as one becomes identified with what surrounds one, one encompasses it even as it encompasses one” (129). By becoming made whole through the aesthetic experience, merged with environment and personal history, the viewer of art experiences an aesthetic encompassing of their highly personal reality resulting in an aesthetic *transport* into their own selves. There is, then, a similarity between Bell and Sartwell in that both agree on the property of transport as a function of art. However, Sartwell argues against Bell’s abstract emotional perspective. Art does not offer transport to a world with emotions disconnected with the emotions of our world, but rather allows us an aesthetic transport that fosters a deeper integration with our embodied and environmental reality.

In between both of these publications, T.S Eliot grappled with the act of making art through poetry. Through the effervescent nature of Eliot’s free verse poetry, Bell and Sartwell aesthetic theories are merged into a new expression. In his poems, Eliot is not merely concerned the escape from or fusion of the individual and their environment, but he is focused on the unity of the *individual*, their *environment*, and the nuances of *time*. In Eliot’s poems the individual indwells and encompasses the world as the world indwells and encompasses the individual. The concept of the embrace of the whole world in the whole individual is something that Sartwell and Eliot had in common.¹ However, as a poet, Eliot not only personally brought an individual into the aesthetic

¹ Eliot and Sartwell both find their roots in Eastern philosophies. The ancient Japanese art of tea exemplifies the embrace of the whole world in an individual. The entire arduous process seeks to aid the individual experiencing the

experience, but additionally used the aesthetic experience to render tangible the intangible internal world of the individual.

In her article, *The Art of T.S. Eliot*, Helen Gardner outlined Eliot's task to find a "word common to all." That is, a language that could access the private worlds of individuals and draw them into with the world of his poetry, and thereby, into their own worlds. As a poet specifically concerned with the sacred and beautiful, Eliot's difficulty was to write on religious experiences and truth in an age that had "no universally or even widely-held conscience formulation of belief; and even more important for a poet (for poetry has more in common with worship than with philosophy and theology) no accepted tradition of worship" (Gardner). Eliot had to express ideas of sacredness and truth without relying only on religious language. Eliot became one of the first modern Christian artists to speak to a secular world in secular terms.

In Eliot's article, *Tradition and the Individual Artist*, we can gain a glimpse into the working aesthetic with which Eliot crafted his poems. He writes that when seeing a new piece of art, the majority usually seeks to find the one spark of difference that separates that artist from the rest that they have seen. Then this special characterization becomes the point of praise for that artist in our minds. However, Eliot asserts that "we shall often find that not only the best, but the most individual parts of [an artist's] work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously" (*The Sacred Wood*). In other words, it is not what makes that artist different from previous artists that makes that artist's work great, but rather the points

whole of the universe in a single cup of tea – in the water is every ocean, in the powdery matcha is every green mountain, and in the steam arising from the surface is every cloud hovering over an ocean. In one sip the whole of the environment, and the whole of an individual are synchronized together.

that show connection to and inspiration from previous artists. The value of any artist can never be evaluated apart from the larger context of humankind.

Eliot sought to be an artist that listened to this context of tradition, but this context was not simply gained through knowledge but rather through a whole attitude. Eliot described the attitude of the perfect artist as *impersonal*. He sees the calling of the artist as a calling to self-sacrifice, to “a continual extinction of personality” so that he may become a more perfect creator to his specific context (Eliot, *The Sacred Wood*). Eliot uses the example of a chemical reaction between platinum, oxygen, and sulfur dioxide to illustrate this sacrifice. The platinum, representing the mind of the poet, reacts with the oxygen and sulfur dioxide as a catalyst – causing a reaction but undergoing no essential change in itself.

Eliot held the opinion that “the more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates; the more perfectly will the mind digest and transmute the passions which are its material” (*The Sacred Wood*). Eliot saw the artist’s responsibility as that which makes personal inspiration subservient to the greater context of humanity, and the greater heritage of art. To Bell, Eliot might say “The emotion of art is impersonal. And the poet cannot reach this impersonality without surrendering himself wholly to the work to be done” (*The Sacred Wood*). What makes artists like Eliot great is that they do not make their own emotional transport of the art the ultimate goal, or even their own personal opinion of what art is. That is important, but art serves a higher goal than mere emotionality or personal expression. In subjugating the personal to the communal, art connects humanity from generation to generation by singing all of the joys and sorrows of the human condition.

Eliot’s *The Four Quartets*, written in part during the London Blitz, exemplify Eliot’s use of aesthetic transport in times of great human suffering by fusing the experience of the individual,

the communal, and the environmental with the reality of eternity. Eliot's approach to poetry invites the whole person into the world of the poetry, merging the private world of the person (including the emotional, contextual, intellectual, spiritual, and genealogical aspects) with the private world of the poem. In this way, his poetry prods people to take deep hidden things, things that cannot be explained with logical thought, or captured purely in an essay – the intangible – and make them incarnate. Eliot tasks art with revealing the incarnation of the intangible. While the fullness of Eliot's vision cannot be captured in a single essay, I will attempt to outline a few of the motifs used in his poetry that help him achieve this sense of incarnation: the fullness of time, power of ancestry, and the paradox between love and death.

Eliot opens the *Four Quartets* with these well-known and ambiguous words: "Time present and time past / Are both perhaps present in time future" (Burnt Norton, I.1-2). Immediately our brains start working furiously, trying to figure out what he means. It is gibberish apparently. For the first 10 lines it all seems like beautiful non-sensical words. However, then the poem shifts "Footfalls echo in the memory / Down the passage which we did not take / Towards the door we never opened" (Burnt Norton, I.11-13). These lines throw a halt on our furious thinking and plunges us into life, whether lived, or dreamed. Eliot walks us through this memory which is full of the sweet images of childhoods and adolescents – gardens, birds, vibrant heat. Eliot masterfully weaves together images and thoughts about time, almost like an internal dialogue, so that the images of life mixes with the platitudes about time. We are caught up in his dance. Each image triggers an image, a memory, a dream, and each to a different time (different for each reader perhaps).

To try to put into words what Eliot *means* by his motif of time which we have just touched upon would be a foolish endeavor, it is not something that I believe is supposed to carry meaning,

but rather to convey an attitude – an emotion as Bell might say. However, for the purposes of this exploration the meaning of the emotion that Eliot creates is, put rudely, one which detaches us from the present moment, and shows us the present moment in light of the past, and in the shadow of the future. Caught in that place, we are not merely living in the present, but in the fullness of times at all times. Revealing Eliot’s religious background, it makes us see time as God does – raw existence filling all moments, past, present, future, and culminating into the ever glorious *now*. It is a fullness without pressure, without haste, without anxiety. It is stillness that “Moves perpetually in its stillness. / Not the stillness of the violin, while the note lasts, / Not that only, but the co-existence, Or say that the end precedes the beginning, / And the end and the beginning were always there / Before the beginning and after the end. / And all is always now.” (Burnt Norton, V.141-148). Living in the co-existence of the end and the beginning gives us the ability to live in the constant *now* – a full and rich *now*, conscience of past and future that extends beyond our personal experience of time.

However, Eliot holds this concept of “all is always now” in tension with moments of suspension. He often uses phrases and imagery that captures the awkward time between times. In the first section of *Little Gidding*, the last quartet, he uses paradoxes to frame these times of suspension: “Midwinter spring is its own season/... The brief sun flames the ice.../ Between melting and freezing / The soul’s sap quivers” (*Little Gidding*, I.1,5,11-12.) It is our fate as humans to live in the beautiful suspension of past and future. This is the tension and beauty that Eliot captures – how we embody all that we ever were, and all that we ever will be, while seemingly paused in the present. Our lives are made of moments of suspension – the anticipation of the second before the sun dawns, the hush between two waves of the sea, the experience of a moment of beauty in between past and future. Eliot’s poetry revels in moments of suspension which signify

the fullness and the immediacy of time not just in the individual's sphere of time and existence, but in the sphere of communal time and existence.

One of the most powerful ways Eliot shows us the communal power of the fullness of time is through ancestry. In *East Coker I*, Eliot muses on the land of his ancestors: "In that open field / If you do not come too close, if you do not come too close, / on a summer midnight, you can hear the music / ...mirth of those long since under earth / Nourishing corn. Keeping time" (I.24-26, 39). In the land of his forefathers, Eliot senses them in the air, sees them in the fields, and feels them underfoot in the earth. They are not trapped in the past, decisions made, and outcomes determined, but they live alongside and wit him – their time and his of equal consequence. Together, he and his ancestors form a pattern, but "the pattern is new in every moment / And every moment is new and shocking / Valuation of all we have been" (*East Coker*, II.85-87). He is part of the pattern of his ancestors, a pattern which is affected just as much by his actions as by theirs.

Eliot's vision of ancestry stresses that we are not single entities responsible only for ourselves – we can pretend so, but that is to neglect the fullness that is inside us and around us. Eliot's imagery in *East Coker* cycles through generations rising and falling, nature overtaking and being cut back – "Old stone to new building, old timber to new fires, / Old fires to ashes, and ashes to the earth / Which is already flesh, fur and faeces, / Bone of man and beast, cornstalk and leaf" (I.5-8). To ignore our ancestors is to ignore the earth around us and our connection to it – not just for our sustenance, but as the remains of our ancestors dancing under the hill. At the end of the first section of *East Coker*, Eliot ties this theme of ancestry back to that of time, saying "I am here / Or there, or elsewhere. In my beginning" (I.49-50). We are our ancestors, they are us, and some fragment of us is with them, trapped in the earth. They are our beginning, but they also signal our end – it is our fate to follow those who are now dirt.

While this is a grim point, it builds into Eliot's philosophy of fullness pulled through the whole poem, in this case that one only knows oneself fully in the subjection of the self to the unknown. He states, "In order to arrive at what you do not know / You must go by a way which is the way of ignorance. / In order to possess what you do not possess / You must go by the way of dispossession" (East Coker, III.138-141). In accordance with his aesthetic theory, surrender of the personal is required to achieve an expanded personal perspective. Often, Eliot urges that knowledge is found by wrestling with paradoxes such as this knowledge that one can necessarily write an essay about, but a knowledge of awareness that reaches far deeper than logical thought.

If that is where Eliot stopped, we would still have a fantastic work of poetry, but it would not have fully completed the task of art as the incarnation of the intangible. If all the fullness of the intangible can be held in the multiplicity of times and our ancestral bonds to the earth through time, there is fullness, but it is a dead fullness. There is no motion in these two themes, there is only death and life, doomed to repeat through time. Death and life cycling through generations, forming strata in the earth. For any hope of incarnation in his art, Eliot had to wrestle with death.

Death is the opposite of incarnation – it is the decomposition of our bodies back into the earth. It is a human being made into unbeing "flesh, fur and faeces" (East Coker, I.7). But for Eliot, as a Christian, death is not quite the unbeing that it could be. In East Coker, after wrestling with the fragment of his ancestors living within him, he then wrestles with their death "O dark, dark, dark. They all go into the dark" (East Coker, III.1). Then Eliot follows them: "I said to my soul, be still, and let the dark come upon you / Which shall be the darkness of God," (East Coker, III.14-15). The Christian's state of unbeing in death is held in being by God. It is upon God they rest in death, in 'sleep' as the Old Testament often puts it. However death is not a passive experience in Eliot's poem: "I said to my soul, be still, and wait without hope / For hope would be hope for hope

for the wrong thing; wait without love / For love would be love of the wrong thing; yet there is faith / But the faith and the love and the hope are all in the waiting” (East Coker, III. 125-128). Here, in this in between suspension between being and unbeing, Eliot identifies death as the meeting place of faith, hope, and love.

Eliot’s connection of death with love is very potent in the *Four Quartets*. Love is the power of stillness. He writes “Love is itself unmoving, / Only the cause and end of movement, / Timeless, and undesiring / Except in the aspect of time / Caught in the form of limitation / between un-being and being” (Burnt Norton, V. 164-169). Ironically, love offers the final key to aesthetic transport because it is, by nature, immovable. Love then is what enables us to experience the fullness of the present moment, for love is not subjected to time. Eliot writes that “Love is the most itself when there here and now cease to matter” (East Coker, V. 200-201). Love itself is an escape from time and from the damning cycle of death and life. In loving our ancestors that have passed away we are escaping the solidity of time that had separated us. The fact that they are no longer living in the “here and now” does not inhibit our ability to love them. Death is overcome by love.

Eliot’s poems urge us to live in the fullness of time, living in the full history of our families and environments, and loving them in and through death. In experiencing this fullness, we touch intangible heights – we escape our mortal ties to time, the separation between generations, and we gain the power of the stillness of love as the ultimate vehicle of transport, even through death. Grasping such fullness is the goal of Eliot’s aesthetics, a goal far greater than Bell or Sartwell. While Eliot’s poem is art, and not a theory on aesthetics, several lines from the *Dry Salvages* capture the heart of his aesthetics: “But to apprehend / The point of intersection of the timeless / With time, is an occupation for the saint – / No occupation either, but sometimes given / And taken, in a lifetime’s death in love” (*Dry Salvages*, V.200-205). For Eliot, the transport of art is sought

over a lifetime of personal subjugation to death through love in order to search out the “intersection of the timeless” Eliot claims that time, ancestry, and death are meant to be wrestled with, and in the wrestling great love is discovered.

While arguably offering a much more ethereal aesthetic theory than Bell or Sartwell, Eliot’s poetry reflects the multifaceted world we live in, where art and life are not fully segregated or integrated, but rather mix in unpredictable measures. Eliot’s poetry pushes and prods us to consider wide vistas or small microcosms in their complete spheres of influence without any pressure to articulate exactly *what* you gained—only to submit yourself to the experience. All you know is that you saw art, were *transported* by it, and because of that you are different. Art does not require anything more. This lack of full and immediate comprehension is the glory of art, because it does not communicate to the surface of our mental faculties, or to the surface troubles of the heart, but to some deep place, so deep we do not know what is down there, or what the art is communicating. We rather feel the art, connecting dots together, sewing together a larger picture of humanity in our experience, in the other’s experience, and in the experience of the collective human race. Through art, these intangible things are made real and incarnate in our lives. After experiencing the kind of aesthetic transport Eliot utilizes, we are equipped to recognize the intangible realities all around us. Art refuses to be limited, whether that is to a singular emotion, as Bell claimed, or to the strict world of human experience, as Sartwell proposed. Eliot helps us see that art is not threatened by the paradoxes or contradictions of the human condition, but rather revels in the suspension between different experiences as merely two shimmering parts of the larger image of truth:

For most of us, there is only the unattended

Moment, the moment in and out of time,

The distraction fit, lost in a shaft of sunlight,
The wild thyme unseen, or the winter lightning
Or the waterfall, or music heard so deeply
That it is not heard at all, but you are the music
While the music lasts. These are only hints and guesses,
Hints followed by guesses; and the rest
Is prayer, observance, discipline, thought and action.
The hint half guessed, the gift half understood, is
Incarnation.

(The Dry Salvages, V. 206-15)



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