

Ars Lyrica

Journal
of the
Lyrica Society for Word-Music Relations



Volume XIII

2003

The Music of T. S. Eliot's Four Quartets

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

("Burnt Norton," V)

I: "Music"?

The most common critical assumption concerning the "music" of Eliot's *Four Quartets* related Eliot's structures to recognizable musical forms—especially sonata allegro form.¹ Here is a typical attempt:

The first movement of the quartet (that is, the first numbered section of his text), answering to the musical sonata form, is in three divisions; the two divisions at the beginning correspond to the exposition and development of the themes, the initial division being complemented or modified by the second; the third is a recapitulation. In "Burnt Norton" the first is attached to the second by a bridge passage, and the third is a brief *da capo*.²

There are many reasons why this kind of formal parallel will not withstand close scrutiny. It oversimplifies sonata allegro

¹ Of the many such attempts, see especially Grover Smith, *T. S. Eliot's Poetry and Plays: A Study in Sources and Meaning*, 2nd ed., (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1974); Stephen Spender, *The Destructive Element* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1936); Hugh Kenner, *The Invisible Poet: T. S. Eliot* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1959); Helen Gardner, *The Art of T. S. Eliot* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1959) and *The Composition of the Four Quartets* (London: Faber, 1978). For an interesting treatment of the effect titling this work "Quartets," see Robert C. Schweik, "T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets* and the Uses of 'Referred Forms,'" *Cithara* 28 (1989): 43-64.

² Smith, *T. S. Eliot*, 253.

form by suggesting its equivalence to any rounded binary (or ABA) arrangement. The macrocosmic view of sonata allegro form

(Introduction):	(optional)
Exposition:	(Theme I–bridge–Theme II–closing)
Development:	(of any of the above, whole or in fragments)
Recapitulation:	(same as the Exposition, with a different key relation between the two Themes)
(Coda):	(Optional)

is helpful mainly in painting a distant prospect of a musical piece, allowing music appreciation students and concert goers to be aware of their general location at any given moment. The real interest of the form is in its microscopic aspects—in the way it allows the listener backward linkage, forward leaning, and an ever-thickening sense of the way a large number of musical materials are being offered for digestion. When we attempt to discover Eliot's supposed use of sonata allegro form, either we find ourselves stretching too far to keep the form intact, or, once having succeeded in identifying the form, we find it was "not very satisfactory."³

Not is it sufficient merely to note Eliot's life-long interest in music, as demonstrated by his frequent use of musical terms in his poem titles or by his use of music as a metaphor.⁴

Taking the clues offered above as to the sonata allegro form of the first movement of "Burnt Norton," the first of Eliot's *Four Quartets*, we find the following seeming correspondences:

³ For one of the most helpful discussions on how Eliot's work is essentially "musical," see Harvey Gross, "Music and the Analogue of Feeling: Notes on Eliot and Beethoven," *The Centennial Review* 3 (1959): 269-288.

⁴ Musical terms or references appear in his poem titles throughout his career: "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock", "Preludes", "Rhapsody on a Windy Night", "A Song for Simeon", "Coriolan" (inspired by Beethoven's overture), "Five-Finger Exercises," and "Four Quartets." For an exploration of Eliot's use of music as metaphor, see Leonard Unger, "T. S. Eliot's Images of Awareness," in *T. S. Eliot: The Man and His Work*, ed. Allen Tate (New York: Deli Publishing, 1966), 203-230.

Exposition:	Lines 1-18	[A number of efforts to relate past, present, and future]
Bridge:	Lines 19-24	[An invitation into the garden]
Development:	Lines 25-43	[The moment in the rose garden]
Recapitulation:	Lines 44-46	[Recasting of Lines 1-18 in three lines]

This suggested formal parallel raises a number of insuperable problems:

- The "Exposition" here actually works more like a Development section. Instead of presenting two different but related themes, it makes a number of attempts to find the best way of saying one thing.
- A "Bridge" in a sonata allegro movement is usually used to connect the two themes of the Exposition, enacting a modulation so that the second theme is in a different but related key to the first. In the classical use of the form, the Exposition usually comes to some kind of full closure, after which the Development starts immediately, with transitional "bridge" material.
- The "Development" section here presents the experience in the rose garden—a single episode, complete unto itself; it would be both cohesive and coherent even if read without the "Exposition" that preceded it. Most of the development sections in classical and romantic music do not "exemplify" at all; rather, they choose mere particles of the two themes, bridge material, and closing material of the Exposition to vary through recognizable methods of repetition and recasting.
- The "Recapitulation" here is far too short for a sonata allegro movement. The proportionate sizes of expositions and developments changed radically in the imaginative hands of Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Brahms, Mahler, and a host of others; but none of these composers would allow a "brief da capo" to represent the counter-balancing weight of a recapitulation.

Eliot had little or nothing to gain from trying to adapt a form that essentially allows listeners to know where they are. That form works extremely well in a medium where individual notes do not have the same kind of communicative potential as individual words. He had, however, a great deal to gain by trying to harness the way music goes about dissecting, repeating, connecting, and varying material—the characteristics that apply in even greater intensity to poetry than they do to prose. They are the ways in which poetry “leans” away from prose and towards music.

There *is* form, but not in the way that Stephen Spender presumes:

Four Quartets consists of four long poems written in a form analogous to the late “posthumous” quartets of Beethoven... [which] provided him with an example of form at once fragmentary and having a unity of feeling and vision. For the late quartets are fragments held together by a mood of suffering which becomes transcended in joy beyond suffering. Out of intense suffering gaiety emerges.⁵

The insight concerning fragments takes us down a promising path; but the fulfillment of that promise cannot be a “delivery” of a mood or a perception equivalent to the effect of Beethoven’s “Hymn of gratitude in the Lydian mode from a convalescent to the Divinity” that he portrays in the third movement of his Opus 132 quartet. Beethoven represents a sense of “gaiety” (or at least relief) that releases the “intense suffering” of the illness by the emotive powers of melody and tonal resolutions and tempo changes. The direct sense of experience that we can grasp from the music and perhaps share is not available in the same way from the developmental powers of language. Eliot’s paths are different. Some emanate from his particular and unusual uses of fragmentation (see below in Part II); others are formal, but not in the way presumed by those who have chased after analogies to sonata allegro form (See Part III below); and yet others are transformations of poetic form through what Marjorie Perloff calls “musication” (see Part IV below).

In *The Waste Land* Eliot tries to shore his fragments against his ruins, representative, perhaps, of his state of mind (and the state of whatever psychotherapy he might have been undergoing) in which he attempted to put together the fragments of his life

⁵ Spender, *The Destructive Element*, 154.

and the fragmented culture of Europe that had been devastated by World War I. In *Four Quartets*, his use of reconvertible bits (decidedly *not* the “piths and gists” of Ezra Pound) is a musical one—building, as Beethoven did in his late quartets, whole movements from the smallest of musical phrases. (See, for example, the complex variation and development of any of the brief but controlling musical movements of Beethoven’s Op. 131 quartet.) The musical construction has to do with the repetition of recognizable atoms into molecules and then into compounds, but retaining electric potential that permeates membranes and reaches across distances.

In *Four Quartets*, Eliot works this out in a “musical” fashion in a great many different ways:

- He recapitulates certain images throughout the four poems, developing them as a composer might recognizable motifs or motions (*cf.* his roses, his gardens, his subway trains).
- He develops images into symbols, as in his constant use of the dance and dancing.
- He builds repeating structures, making the numbered “movements” in each of the Quartets “speak” to each other, both by their forms, their modes, and even by repeating images in similar locations (*e.g.* the British Underground reappears in the third movements of three of the four quartets).
- He repeats concepts and even specific articulations throughout—sometimes even calling explicit meta-discursive attention to the act of repetition:

You say
I am repeating
Something I have said before. I shall say it
again.
Shall I say it again?
(“East Coker” III, 135-137)
- He repeats a number of basic philosophical tenets as recognizable “themes” throughout the whole work: “The way up is the way down” appears as an

introductory Greek epigram, as the descent into the Tube, as musing on Krishna, and as philosophical negatives made positive (as in his adaptations of St. John of the Cross or Julian of Norwich).

- And he repeats himself by qualifying himself in the negative: "Not the stillness of the violin, while the note lasts,/Not that only. . ."

But there are other kinds of attempts—successful ones—to adapt musical relationships for use in poetry:

- He "modulates" from one key to another as he changes the verse format within a movement or between movements:

*Comets weep and Leonids fly
Hunt the heavens and the plains
Whirled in a vortex that shall bring
The world to that destructive fire
Which burns before the ice-cap reigns.*

*That was a way of putting it—not very satisfactory;
A periphrastic study in a worn-out poetical fashion,
Leaving one still with the intolerable wrestle
With words and meanings.*
(“East Coker” II, 63-71)

- He shifts not only from movement to movement but also from tempo to tempo (e.g., he changes verse form in the middle of each of his second movements).

- He employs noticeable accelerandi and retards, even without marking them explicitly as a composer can so easily do:

[moderately]:

*The association of man and woman
In daunsinge, signifying matrimonie—
A dignified and commodious sacrament.*

[slightly faster]:

*Two and two, necessarye coniunction,
Holding eche other by the hand or the arm
Wich betokeneth concorde.*

[yet faster]:

*Round and round the fire
Leaping through the flames, or joined in
circles.*

[broader]:

*Rustically solemn or in rustic laughter
Lifting heavy feet in clumsy shoes*

[marcato]:

*Earth feet, loam feet, lifted in country mirth
Mirth of those since long under earth
Nourishing the corn.*

[begin accelerando]:

*Keeping time
Keeping the rhythm in their dancing
As in their living in the living seasons*

[intensify the accelerando]:

*The time of the seasons and the consellations
The time of milking and the time of harvest*

[greatest intensity]:

*The time of the coupling of man and woman
And that of beasts.*

[molto retard]:

Feet rising and falling.

[further retard]:

Eating and drinking.

[yet further retard]:

Dung and death

[pause; then solemn, controlled]:

*Dawn points, and another day
Prepares for heat and silence.*

[yet slower, approaching a standstill]:

*Out at sea the dawn wind
Wrinkles and slides.*

[pause]:

I am here

[pause again]:

Or there,

[pause again]:

Or elsewhere.

[greater pause]:

In my beginning.

[coming to a halt]

— He makes the same kind of changes in dynamics:

[piano]:

*First, the cold friction of expiring sense
Without enchantment, offering no promise
But bitter tastelessness of shadow fruit
As body and soul begin to fall asunder,*

[crescendo to mezzo-forte]:

*Second, the conscious impotence of rage
At human folly, and the lacerations
Of laughter at what ceases to amuse,*

[crescendo to forte]:

*And last, the rending pain of re-enactment
Of all that you have done and been;*

[crescendo to più forte]:

*The shame
Of motives late revealed, and the awareness
Of things ill done and done to others' harm
Which once you took for exercise of virtue.*

[crescendo to fortissimo]:

Then fools' approval stings, and honour stains.

[crescendo to più fortissimo]:

*From wrong to wrong the exasperated spirit
Proceeds,*

[decrecendo to mezzo-forte]:

Unless restored by that refining fire

decrecendo to mezo-piano]:

Where you must move in measure, like a dancer.

[decrecendo to piano]:

*The day is breaking. In the disfigured street
He left me, with a kind of valediction*

[decrecendo to pianissimo]:

*And faded on the blowing of the horn.
("Little Gidding" II, 131-149)*

— He recapitulates material through allusion and variation:

*And the bird called, in response to
The unheard music hidden in the shrubbery.
("Burnt Norton," 26-27)*

*Go, said the bird, for the leaves were full of
children,
Hidden excitedly, containing laughter.
("Burnt Norton," 40-41)*

*The wild thyme unseen, or the winter lightening
Or the waterfall, or music heard so deeply
That it is not heard at all.
("The Dry Salvages," 209-211)*

*At the source of the longest river
The voice of the hidden waterfall
And the children in the apple-tree
Not known, because not looked for
But heard, half-heard, in the stillness
Between two waves of the sea.*

("Little Gidding," 246-251)

The final twenty-one lines of "Little Gidding" use this kind of recapitulative effect, synthesizing much of the richness of the poem's imagery as a whole, to the point where one could add an interlinear poem of backward referentiality to other moments in the earlier text:

*We shall not cease from explorations
(Old men ought to be explorers)
And the end of all our exploring
(Here and there does not matter)
Will be to arrive where we started
(For us there is only the trying)
And know the place for the first time
(The silent motto of its tattered arras).
Through the unknown, remembered gate
(Into the rose garden, never opened)
When the last of earth left to discover
(Whether Ragnarok or the reign of the ice-cap)
Is that which was the beginning
(In my beginning is my end;)
At the source of the longest river
(The strong brown god, destroyer, reminder)
The voice of the hidden waterfall
(But you are the music while the music lasts)
And the children in the apple-tree
(Hidden excitedly, containing laughter)
Not known, because not looked for
(For hope would be hope for the wrong thing)
But heard, half-heard, in the stillness
(At the still point of the turning world)
Between two waves of the sea
(The distant rote in the granite teeth.)
Quick now, here, now, always—
(At the intersection of the timeless moment)
A condition of complete simplicity
(Not that of the child, but that of the saint)
(Costing not less than everything)
(By detachment from things, from self, from persons)
And all shall be well and
(By the purification of the motive)*

*All manner of thing shall be well
(In the ground of our beseeching)
When the tongues of flame are in-folded
(With flames of incandescent terror)
Into the crowned knot of fire
(Of Pentacostal, zero summer)
And the fire and the rose are one.
(Da capo, to the point of understanding.)*

As John Xiros Cooper noted: "Music denotes that state of aesthetic integration which *Four Quartets* proposes as the summit of human cognition."⁶ For Hugh Kenner, "the finale of 'Little Gidding' . . . is a nearly unprecedented triumph of style."⁷

II: The Varied Theme: "Burnt Norton" I

The same critic who offered the unhelpful parallel of the first movement of "Burnt Norton" to sonata allegro form preceded that analysis with an insightful short statement (and he is usually highly insightful) about Eliot and music:

Yet "music in *Four Quartets* does not denote speech alone as such. It implies the sound and rhythm of spoken words, but it also signifies the structure of interrelation among different kinds of speech and other poetic materials. In "The Music of Poetry" (1942) Eliot remarked, "There are possibilities for verse which bear some analogy to the development of a theme by different groups of instruments; there are possibilities of transitions in a poem comparable to the different movements of a symphony or quartet; there are possibilities of contrapuntal arrangements of subject-matter." As fantastical as the first of his considerations may seem, it is valid.⁸

The first movement of "Burnt Norton" does indeed harness the energy of a musical form—not sonata allegro, but rather theme and variations form. The latter, usually considered less versatile

⁶ John Xiros Cooper, "Music as Symbol and Structure in Pound's *Pisan Cantos* and Eliot's *Four Quartets*," in *Ezra Pound and Europe*, ed. Richard Taylor and Claus Melchior (Amsterdam and Atlanta: Rodopi, 1993), 182.

⁷ Kenner, *Invisible Poet*, 323.

⁸ Smith, *T. S. Eliot*, 252.

than the former for the writing of music, adapts itself far more effectively to the writing of poetry.

For my first twenty years of reading *Four Quartets*, I was always uncomfortable with its opening eighteen lines.⁹ The passage did not “sing” for me. It seemed overly cerebral, overly in the mode of philosophy. It seemed a mixture of bad eighteenth century didactic poetry (Blackmore, not Pope), incipient Modernism, and haiku. But when I undertook to teach a whole course on this poem and music, I began to look at the passage differently—no longer trying to fashion linearity or narrativity from it, but rather seeing it as a poetic version of a musical theme and variations movement. As soon as I conceived of those eighteen lines as a three-line stated “theme” accompanied by five “variations” of that theme, it made sense in a new way—and a way that for me set not only the “tone” but the “agenda” for the rest of the poem. It has ties to the Buddhist view of life experience; it concords with St. John of the Cross and Julian of Norwich; it accommodates Dante; and it establishes the importance that repetition will have in the poem—to the point where the whole work can climax and resolve simultaneously with the hope of arriving where we started and “knowing” that oft-visited place for the first time.

Here are the first eighteen lines, dispersed into theme and variations form:

<i>Theme</i>	Time present and time past Are both contained in time future, And time future contained in time past.
<i>Variation 1</i>	If all time is eternally present All time is unredeemable.
<i>Variation 2</i>	What might have been is an abstraction Remaining a perpetual possibility Only in a world of speculation.

⁹ Eliot liked the unit of eighteen lines as an opening gambit for a long poem. That is the length of the first numbered section of “The Hollow Men.” It is also the length of the famous opening verse paragraph of “The Waste Land.” It is possible he was influenced by Chaucer’s having written an even more famous eighteen-line opening sentence to begin *The Canterbury Tales*—especially since Eliot begins his “Waste Land” by echoing Chaucer’s opening line. I do not suggest any relevance in Brahms’s first Sextet being “Opus 18”—but that was a pleasant coincidence.

Variation 3 What might have been and what has
 been
Point to one end, which is always present.

Variation 4 Footfalls echo in the memory
Down the passage which we did not take
Towards the door we never opened
Into the rose-garden. My words echo
Thus, in your mind.

Variation 5 But to what purpose
Disturbing the dust on a bowl of rose-leaves
I do not know.

Each of the “variations” is another “pass” at restating the same difficult time concept articulated by the “theme.”

To teach theme and variations form in my course, I have used the second movement from the Brahms Sextet, Op. 18, long a personal favorite. The selection was fortuitous: I discovered that the Brahms and the Eliot could essentially be performed simultaneously; that is, each of the five variations in the Sextet changed the “nature” or “texture” or “presentation” of the original theme in ways that perfectly concorded with the way I heard Eliot “varying” his original theme. Here are some brief indications of the kinds of parallels that suggest themselves:

Eliot: Theme

Time present and time past
Are both contained in time future,
And time future contained in time past.

Brahms: Theme

The structure of this theme is $||:A:||B:||$, with each section containing eight measures. Symmetry dominates, from the micro to the macro: The first measure balances the second; those two together balance the third and fourth; those four together balance the remaining four measures of the A section; that section balances itself because it is repeated; the repeated A sections balance the repeated B sections; and the theme and each of the variations, being precisely the same length and usually the same chord progressions, balance each other. The general motion of the music suggests a search for something that always sounds just around the corner; but even when that sought for place seems to be reached (three-quarters of the way through the B section), the music turns back from a sense of complete fulfillment, thus leaving some-

thing for each succeeding variation to “accomplish” somehow. That “accomplishment” will have to wait until the final restatement of the theme after the variations are complete.

Here is the first statement of the theme’s A section (Example 1):

Example 1. Brahms, Sextet, Op. 18, main theme, A section.

One might note the “reaching” quality of the first viola’s melody, and the sense of frustration or “turning back” at the end of each successive upward move. It accords well with Eliot’s theme of present, past, and future, with all forward motion looping backwards from “future” to “past.” Brahms’s B section (Example 2) pushes even harder and higher than the A section, only to “fail” or “resolve” in the same fall-back way at the end.

Example 2. Brahms, Sextet, main theme, B section.

Eliot: Variation 1

If all time is eternally present
All time is unredeemable.

Brahms: Variation 1

Example 3. Brahms, Sextet, Variation 1

Compared to the circling and circular fall-back motions of the theme in both the Eliot and the Brahms, the first variation is dominated by a relatively straightforward parallelism: Eliot’s “all time” anchors his lines, as does Brahms’s four-note chords played by the cellos. Both seem a natural first response to the call for variations.

Eliot: Variation 2

What might have been is an abstraction
Remaining a perpetual possibility
Only in a world of speculation.

Brahms: Variation 2 (from the A section):

Example 4. Brahms, Sextet, Variation 2.

The first two measures begin this variation sounding something like Eliot's "abstraction;" at least, they raise a question different from the neatly parallel variation that preceded them. The fourth and fifth measures "wander" away from the original theme (the first ones to do so in the piece) and produce a perspective of "speculation."

Eliot: Variation 3

What might have been and what has been
Point to one end, which is always present.

Brahms: Variation 3 (from the A section)

Example 5. Brahms, Sextet, Variation 3

This third variation "simplifies" in its contours compared to its predecessor. Just like the poetry, the music settles for a set of balances of two. In the poetry, hemstitch balances hemstitch, the first line balances the second line, and the non-present times balance the present. In the music, the upward-moving pairs of notes in the upper four voices balance the ensuing downward-moving pairs of notes; and those isolated note pairings in the upper four voices are balanced against the rolling scales in the cellos. One might note that the cellos contrast with the upper voices (scales versus two-note phrases); but they also resemble them (the scales moving symmetrically up then down, just like the two-note phrases reversing their direction).

Eliot: Variation 4

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

Brahms: Variation 4 (A section)

Example 6. Brahms, Sextet, Variation 4

The music changes to a sentimental major (marked *molto espressivo*), and to an andante feeling of a smooth forward progression—a stroll to the garden. The original “melody” reappears somewhat, especially compared to the foreign wanderings of the preceding variation, producing something like an “echo . . . in your mind.”

Eliot: Variation 5

But to what purpose
Disturbing the dust on a bowl of rose-leaves
I do not know.

Brahms: Variation 5 (A section)

Example 7. Brahms, Sextet, Variation 5

In this fifth variation, the thematic material seems to disintegrate, leaving something like dust particles in the air, for a “purpose” that is hard to “know.”

By no means am I suggesting that Eliot knew this piece of Brahms chamber music and used it as a model. Nor does it matter if Eliot was consciously adopting theme and variations form here as a “musical” experiment. Rather, I mean to suggest that Eliot’s manner of developing his material at the beginning of “Burnt Norton” is essentially musical in both form and content. This represents not a “form” being mimicked, but rather a “technique” being used to position and reposition material so that multiple appearances of it in varying contexts will enrich and complicate the concepts of experience and meaning. This is the philosophical and aesthetical concern most central to the poem as a whole—and one most natural to the writing of music.

Eliot and Brahms both put forward a “theme”—not something to be led from, but rather something to be revisited, in as many guises as the ear can conceive or the mind reconstruct in a short reading/listening span. It is the process of viewing the same thing over and over from different perspectives, until finally something akin to an essence begins to appear from under its surface. That essence is that which remains the same despite the variability of

the variations. It accords well with Eliot's self-negating non-negative assertions:

*And what you do not know is the only thing you know
And what you own is what you do not own
And where you are is where you are not.*
(“East Coker,” III, 144-146)

The “knowledge” of this essence is in part mystical, in part theological, but above all essentially musical.

Eliot follows theme and variation form for yet an additional step in “Burnt Norton” I. In many Romantic theme and variations movements (of which the Brahms Sextet is an excellent example), the variations lead the ear further and further away from the original theme, only to recapitulate that theme in a simplified manner (usually without the repeats) as the final statement of the movement. In the Brahms Sextet, that restatement is both a completely recognizable and at the same time totally transfigured re-experiencing of the original theme (see Example 8).¹⁰

The affect of such a structured return has something to do with the same affect achieved by the return of the “A” section in rounded binary form (ABA): Having established, clearly, a “home” from which we have come (e.g., the original theme), we are led further and further away from it (by the variations, or in ABA form by the related foreignness of the B section), so that our return “home” will be (as in Mozart or Beethoven) pleasing and fulfilling in all the ways in which recognition makes us comfortable. But Brahms and Eliot do not allow us that overly

¹⁰ Of the several recordings made of this piece, one stands out for me—that of the Casals Prades Festival of 1952, with Isaac Stern and Alexander Schneider, violins, Milton Katims and Milton Thomas, violas, and Pablo Casals and Madeleine Foley, violoncellos (Columbia Records ML-4713). Casals’ final restatement of the theme is for me one of the greatest moments in recorded chamber music. It is well worth the trouble of finding the re-issue on compact disc.

Example 8. Brahms, Sextet, Final Restatement of the Theme

simplified sense of “return to comfort.” The show us that when we arrive “exactly” at “where we started,” the place is strange, but knowable in a new way. We know the place for the first time.¹¹

So when “Burnt Norton” has finished digressing into the epiphanal incident in the rose garden (II, 18-43), we return at the movement’s end to a restatement of the original theme:

¹¹ Taking his cue from Beethoven’s Symphony No. 7, Brahms often makes it impossible to know exactly *when* one is arriving at the beginning of the recapitulation in sonata form, even though it is manifestly clear after a few more moments that one *has already* arrived there. For an example, try to find the beginning of the recapitulation of the first movement of his Piano Trio, Op. 8.

*Time past and time future
What might have been and what has been
Point to one end, which is always present.*

One should note that although this restatement varies the opening three lines, it is curiously close enough in sound and far away enough in distance to appear an exact reproduction. (The same is true of the final restatement in the Brahms Sextet.) The Eliot final restatement is made more complex by its use of the figure of speech chiasmus—the restatement of two or more recognizable elements in reverse order. The XYYX form of chiasmus often, in the hands of an incompetent writer, produces a lame effect: if the second X is essentially the same as the first X, and the second Y the same as the first Y, then we risk being subjected to a tiresome and uneventful repetition. A good chiasmus, on the other hand, often succeeds because of what has *happened* to the second X as a result of its having encountered the second Y. A famous example would be:

*Ask not what your country [X] can do for you [Y]; ask
what you [Y] can do for your country [X].*

Why so famous a statement? Because the second X has been transformed (heroically, patriotically) by the second Y. Translated, this means:

Ask not what your country [the pork barrel] can do for you [you overly self-conceited, greedy worm], but what you [a noble citizen of this great land] can do for your country [that transcendent concept that can lift us all above and beyond ourselves for the common good].

So your country is transformed from pork barrel into transcendent virtue by your transforming yourself from selfish worm into altruistic servant for the general good.

Eliot uses chiasmus heavily throughout the poem—suggesting that the way up and the way down are both wholly divergent from each other and at the same time exactly the same. His restatement of the original “theme” of the first movement of

“Burnt Norton” not only returns us at the end to our beginning, it also helps us to know the place for the first time by presenting itself backward chiastically. It is the same as the original, but just the opposite of the original. Here is the *five*-element chiasmus Eliot has constructed:

Lines 1-3	<i>Time present [V] and time past [W] Are both contained in time future [X], And time future [Y] contained in Time past [Z].</i>
Lines 44-46	<i>Time past [Z] and time future [Y] What might have been [X] and what has been [W] Point to one end, which is always present [V]</i>

So the return home has happened in two ways simultaneously: taken as two units, the last three lines articulate the same theme as the first three; but the last unit is built as a retrograde variation of the first. Some of the repetitions are exact (the [V]-element “present” and “present”; others are themselves variations as recapitulations (the [W]-element, “time past” and “what has been”). One cannot put one’s tow into the same articulation twice, no matter how “recognizable” it may seem to be. This point is made by Eliot throughout the poem scores of times in a variety of ways.

*You are not the same people who left that station
Or who will arrive at any terminus,
While the narrowing rails slide together behind you;
And on the deck of the drumming liner
Watching the furrow that widens behind you,
You shall not think “The past is finished”
Or “the future is before us.”*

(The Dry Salvages,” 139-145)

And as he “states” the point here, embellishing it with variations even as he states it, one might notice the recurrence of chiasmus:

- X: *You are not the same people who left that station
Or who will arrive at any terminus,*
- Y: *While the narrowing rails slide together
behind you;*
- Y: *And on the deck of the drumming liner
Watching the furrow that widens behind you,*
- X: *You shall not think "The past is finished"
Or "the future is before us."*

The Xs are the two similar/self-similar/varied philosophical concepts, while the Ys are the transportation examples from daily life summoned to make the point available from common experience.

For Eliot, variation and chiasmus become two essentially "musical" elements of the presentation of material in *Four Quartets*. One can note how these techniques differ from his earlier use of variation and repetition in *The Waste Land*, where he was summoning "fragments" to "shore against" his "ruins;" there he was collecting the shattered ruins of a culture to form a mosaic or collage, much like those clergy in nineteenth century England had reconstructed stained glass windows in proto-Cubist fashion from the shards gathered and hidden in the sixteenth century after Henry VIII's vandal-like henchmen had departed from the monasteries. *The Waste Land* was a patchwork assembled from the remains of a wounded culture; *Four Quartets* is a musical chamber work, interstitially fashioned not by "piths and gists," but by meaningful strains, visible fibers, and perceivable essences, woven and re-woven until they speak because of, not in spite of, their multiple articulations.

After the rose garden epiphany, and only after it, can the original theme reappear, transformed in one sense, but in another sense revealed in its original power—a power that cannot be sensed, perceived, or "read" on its original appearance.

Eliot had allowed the original theme and five variations to "struggle" to get its message across. The very struggle suggests the impossibility of grasping the concept by mere intellectuality.

The episodic example of the empty/filled pool allows a different, experiential light to shine; and the final restatement of the theme can therefore "mean differently"—not "completely" or "clearly," but "differently."

To understand more fully the impact/effect of the progression of those first five variations (lines 4-17) on the original theme (lines 1-3), one can "de-write" the passage to see what differences can be achieved by reordering the materials.¹² Here is the opening eighteen-line passage "de-written" twice. One should note how substantially and substantively the affective "meanings" have changed.

Reordering 1: [V3; V2; V1; Theme; V4; V5]

*What might have been and what has been
Point to one end, which is always present.
What might have been is an abstraction
Remaining a perpetual possibility
Only in a world of speculation.
If all time is eternally present
All time is unredeemable.
Time present and time past
Are both contained in time future,
And time future contained in time past.
Footfalls echo in the memory
Down the passage which we did not take
Towards the door we never opened
Into the rose-garden. My words echo
Thus, in your mind.
But to what purpose
Disturbing the dust on a bowl of rose-leaves
I do not know.*

¹² "De-write" is a term I have coined for use in the teaching of composition. One way of "de-writing" is to restate all of the original materials of unit discourse but in a different ordering, for the purpose of discovering how much effect the original ordering had on a reader's perception of meaning.

Reordering 2: [V4; V5; V2; V3; Theme; V1]

*Footfalls echo in the memory
Down the passage which we did not take
Towards the door we never opened
Into the rose-garden. My words echo
Thus, in your mind. But to what purpose
Disturbing the dust on a bowl of rose-leaves
I do not know.
What might have been is an abstraction
Remaining a perpetual possibility
Only in a world of speculation.
What might have been and what has been
Point to one end, which is always present.
Time present and time past
Are both contained in time future,
And time future contained in time past.
If all time is eternally present
All time is unredeemable.*

These reorderings each hang together well enough—especially the second one; but how stunningly different from the original and from each other the tone and substance has become. The arrival at the end of the second “de-writing” on the “unredeemable” makes the word summative in a way that makes the whole passage differ dramatically from either the original or the first “de-writing.” It lends a feeling of linearity, of progress to a goal. The second’s narrative opening, and its Shakespearean “short line” of “I do not know,” are completely recognizable as a sermon’s narrative-first-analysis-later procedure. How fresh each of these “de-written” re-orderings appears because of its recontextualizations. What a surprise it is, as each of the next variations begins, to encounter an old friend, but not the expected old friend. And then, having just read the first “de-writing,” what a reverse expectational shock there is in the second, in which Variation 2 is followed by Variation 3: It sounds so *familiar*—and it should, since that is the order of the original; but it also sounds so *strange*—and it should, since the first switched that order and mad us adapt to the reality of its revised expectations.

Derek Traversi does right, I think, be referring a great deal to Proust while discussing the rose garden moment in “Burnt Norton” I. But the ways in which the mind is transported by the cue of sensation (be it by a madeline or by a ghostly/illusionary/deceptionary/visionary pool in a rose garden) are yet more easily made available through music than through any wrestle with words. The music *is* the experience itself, while it simultaneously provides the reference for that experience. It is the difference in the immediacy of accessibility between a poem of Wordsworth and a piece of Beethoven. In order to be completely in touch with

*When all at once I saw a crowd
A host, of golden daffodils;
Beside the lake, beneath the trees,
Fluttering and dancing in the breeze,*

the reader has to make reference to a great deal of extra-poem experience, and be willing and able to re-summon that experience in an intense way; and that intensity is the product of the reader’s own effort, more than an involuntary surrender to the present artistic experience. You have to *remember* daffodils you have seen in the past—or at least pretend that you have such a memory—in order to be affected by these paper daffodils. But a moment of Beethoven is the *thing* itself. It might well also be a “reference;” but it does not depend for its very substantiality that you recognize or wish to depend on the referentiality. The poetry is, to a great extent, an *animadversion*; the music is, to a great extent, the *animus* itself. (“For you are the music while the music lasts.”) The vision produced by the mystical moment, or by the prose/poetry that tries to capture it, is, as Traversi says so nicely, “unextendable”:

Proust, as befits his much larger canvas, is more explicit, more analytic in point of detail, that Eliot is, or needs to be [re: the “Burnt Norton” rose garden moment]; but the final conclusion is evidently the same. For both writers, the vision can only be momentary in its duration, for to seek to extend it in time

would be to annihilate the present and so to make human life impossible.¹³

Music, however, *does* “annihilate the present,” at least while the music lasts. Jonathan Kramer talks about this interestingly in his opening chapters of *The Time of Music*. The momentary vision can actually be extended in the non-semantic but meaningful experience of the listened-to music. And the theme and variations form is ideal for bringing back the past into the present to re-make the experience as if it were future; it constructs the possibility of the “might have been.” It is the same, but not the same. What you hear is what you do not hear. Music can therefore be constantly “redeemable,” albeit in a different manifestation—not so much because of the *passage* of time, but rather because of the *order* of time which has produced a particular configuration that functions for the whole both as horizontal progression and as contextualization—both the linear and the non-linear. Such is the new effort—the new “musical” effort—that Eliot offers in *Four Quartets*, making this poem so essentially and availably “musical” in our experience of it. That music creates an ineffable kind of “knowledge” by its creation of pattern—the same theme, but varied through time:

*The knowledge imposes a pattern, and falsifies,
For the pattern is new in every moment
And every moment is a new and shocking
Valuation of all we have been.*
(“East Coker,” 84-86)¹⁴

¹³ Derek Traversi, *T. S. Eliot: The Longer Poems* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976), 106.

¹⁴ We know for a fact that Eliot was aware of Albert Einstein’s two articles on relativity, since he translated Charles Mauron’s essay “On Reading Einstein” for *The Criterion* in 1930. Einstein’s space-time continuum is intriguingly intertwinable with Eliot’s struggling with the concept that all time is present. See Ole Bay-Petersen, “T. S. Eliot and Einstein: The Fourth Dimension in the *Four Quartets*,” *English Studies*

III: *The Non-linearity of “Dry Salvages” II*

Eliot varies his variations throughout the poem. The variety is exemplified by comparing the recognizable progression of the “theme and variations” form of “Burnt Norton” I with the highly technical variational structure of “Dry Salvages” II. The technicalities are of Eliot’s own making, as he varies another old variation form—one that approaches the straight-jacket of a formula—by ignoring the letter of its laws while summoning and developing its spirit. We move, then, from the sextet of “Burnt Norton” I to the modified sestina of “Dry Salvages” II.

The sestina is a complex and demanding poetic form. It requires six stanzas of six lines each, in which the end-words of each line of the first stanza reappear as the end-words of the six lines of all the other stanzas—but in a different order. That different order, however, is derived in an orderly fashion. If the end-word of the sixth line of the first stanza appears as the end-word of the first line of the second stanza, then the sixth line end-word of every stanza must reappear as the first line end-word of the stanza that follows it. That requirement is repeated for every line in every stanza. The pattern can be traced from stanza to stanza with regularity; but the order of the end-words in any given stanza strikes the reader as random (or “chaotic”) when compared to the order of those words in the preceding stanza. Like chaos science, however, there is an underlying self-similarity that holds the structure tightly together—whether the reader can perceive it or not.

There is usually an additional three-line envoi, into which the poet should put as many of the six end-words as possible—with three of them ending the three lines. Eliot ignores this requirement for reasons which will become apparent once his variation of the form is made clear.

For those unacquainted with the sestina form, an example might prove helpful. Here is the “Sestina: Altaforte” of Eliot’s friend, supporter, and discoverer, Ezra Pound:

Loquitur: *En Betrains de Born.*

Dante Aligheri put this man in hell for
that he was stirrer up of strife.

Eccovi!

Have I dug him up again?

The scene is at his castle, Altaforte. "Papiols" is his jongleur.
"The Leopard" is the device of Richard Cœur de Lion.

I

*Damn it all! all this our South stinks peace.
You whoreson dog, Papiols, come! Let's to music.
I have no life save when the swords clash.
But ah! when I see the standards gold, vair, purple, opposing
And the broad fields beneath them turn crimson,
Then howl I my heart nigh mad with rejoicing.*

II

*In hot summer have I great rejoicing
When the tempests kill the earth's foul peace,
And the lightnings from black heav'n flash crimson,
And the fierce thunders roar me their music
And the winds shriek through the clouds mad, opposing,
And through all the riven skies God's swords clash.*

III

*Hell grant soon we hear again the swords clash!
And the shrill neighs of destriers in battle rejoicing,
Spiked breast to spiked breast opposing!
Better one hour's stour than a year's peace
With fat boards, bawds, wine and frail music!
Bah! there's no wine like the blood's crimson!*

IV

*And I love to see the sun rise blood-crimson.
And I watch his spears through the dark clash
And it fills all my heart with rejoicing
And pries wide my mouth with fast music
When I see him so scorn and defy peace,*

His lone might 'gainst all darkness opposing.

V

*The man who fears war and squats opposing
My words for stour, hath no blood of crimson
But is fit only to rot in womanish peace
Far from where worth's won and the swords clash
For the death of such sluts I go rejoicing;
Yea, I fill all the air with my music.*

VI

*Papiols, Papiols, to the music!
There's no sound like to swords swords opposing,
No cry like the battle's rejoicing
When our elbows and swords drip the crimson
And our charges 'gainst "The Leopard's" rush clash.
May God damn for ever all who cry "Peace!"*

VII

*And let the music of the swords make them crimson!
Hell grant soon we hear again the swords clash!
Hell blot black for alway the thought "Peace!"*

The six line-ending words in the first stanza—"peace", "music", "clash", "opposing", "crimson," and "rejoicing"—end all the lines of all the other stanzas, with their order being varied in an orderly fashion. The ear does not necessarily "hear" most of these repetitions—especially if the reader is not aware the formal requirements of a sestina; and neither the ear nor the eye can distinguish with any accuracy the overall pattern in which these six words appear. Here is a chart that reveals that ordered but seemingly disordered pattern:

*Schema for Rotation of line-end words
in Ezra Pound's "Sestina: Altaforte"*

	I	II	III	IV	V	VI	[stanzas]
peace	1	2	4	5	3	6	
music	2	4	5	4	6	1	
clash	3	6	1	2	4	5	
opposing	4	5	3	6	1	2	
crimson	5	3	6	1	2	4	
rejoicing	6	1	2	3	5	3	

The progression of any given end-word from stanza to stanza is regular, even without seeming so. "Peace," for example, travels, seemingly arbitrarily, from the first line to the second line, then to the fourth line, then the fifth, then the third, and finally the sixth (1, 2, 4, 5, 3, 6). But all the other repeated words follow exactly the same progression, no matter from what line they have started in the first stanza. "Clash," for instance, begins its appearances in the third line of the first stanza and proceeds from there to loop through the same progression as did "Peace" (3, 6, 1, 2, 4, 5).

Interestingly, there is a flaw in Pound's pattern, noted by boldface in the above schema. In the fourth stanza, "music" appears in the fourth line and "rejoicing" appears in the third; to make the pattern whole, those two placements should have been reversed. Though it is impossible to know, I rather suspect that Pound included this flaw intentionally, for perhaps a number of reasons: 1) perhaps, in accordance with his anti-establishment leanings, once he had bound himself with antique restrictions, he was determined to demonstrate his freedom by ignoring one of them; 2) perhaps he included a flaw in the pattern to make it more human; and/or 3) perhaps he left the inconsistency there as a prize for those who are knowledgeable enough to know the

technicalities and thorough enough to check the details. Then again, he may just have lost track of the progression.

So the sestina imposes a pattern, but falsifies it at the same time. The pattern is traceable but not often audible. Each stanza seems to choose a new and seemingly random order for the presentation of the line-end words; but the order is there. It can be heard clearly only in one repeated case: the line-end word of the sixth line of one stanza becomes the line-end word for the first line of the next stanza. That word, therefore, ends two consecutive lines in the poem. Such an "echo" can be perceived after two or three stanzas and can be expected by the reader thereafter.

Once having bound himself with this formula, Pound then had the task of making it all sound unbound, free, narrative, natural. The sameness yearns for variation—just like the repeated terms in the chiasmi considered above. He therefore set about to vary the contexts enough to make the repeated words "mean differently" each time they appeared. Note, for example, how the end-word "music" changes its contours when the context in which it appears varies:

I: *You whoreson dog, Papiols, come! Let's to music.*

"Music" here=the playing and singing of notes.

II: *And the fierce thunders roar me their music.*

"Music" here=metaphoric of the sound of thunder.

III: *With fat boards, bawds, wine and frail music!*

"Music" here=something frail and self-indulgent, combined with and offset by the "fatness" of its neighbors.

IV: *And pries my mouth with fast music*

"Music" here=metaphoric for the joy felt at the prospect of slaughter.

V: *Yea, I fill all the air with my music.*

“Music” here=metaphoric of his bellicose sentiments and message.

VI: *Papiols, Papiols, to the music!*

“Music” here=perhaps recapitulative of the meaning of the word in the first stanza, returning to the original theme, as is often the case in musical theme and variations forms.

VII: *And let the music of the swords make them crimson!*

“Music” here=recapitulative of all the above meanings, an effect of the kind of synthesis that is the primary purpose of a sestina’s envoy.

So here we have a technique elegantly capable of presenting Eliot’s Heraclitian-cum-Buddhist insight—that anything which remains the same cannot remain the same. As Eliot puts it in the second movement of “Dry Salvages” (the third of the *Four Quartets*): “the pattern is new in every moment/And every moment is a new and shocking/Valuation of all we have been.”

In that movement of “Dry Salvages,” just before the passage quoted above, Eliot suggests a sestina form by creating six stanzas with repetitions in the line-endings, but varying the form markedly: Instead of repeating the same word, he repeats a rhyme sound for his identifiable line-end word. In order to keep that sound more identifiable, he does not vary the positioning of it from stanza to stanza; that is, the rhyme sound that ends the first line of one stanza appears in that same location in all other stanzas. Having opted for rhyme-sound repetitions instead of semantic repetitions, he quite reasonably omitted the three-line envoi. He creates, therefore, what can be called a modified sestina form.

II

*Where is there an end of it, the soundless wailing,
The silent withering of autumn flowers
Dropping their petals and remaining motionless;
Where is there an end to the drifting wreckage,
The prayer of the bone on the beach, the unprayable
Prayer at the calamitous annunciation?*

*There is no end, but addition; the trailing
Consequence of further days and hours,
While emotion takes to itself the emotionless
Years of living among the breakage
Of what was believed in as the most reliable—
And therefore the fittest for renunciation.*

*There is the final addition, the failing
Pride or resentment at failing powers,
The unattached devotion which might pass for devotionless,
In a drifting boat with a slow leakage,
The silent listening to the undeniable
Clamour of the bell of the last annunciation.*

*Where is the end of them, the fishermen sailing
Into the wind’s tail, where the fog cowers?
We cannot think of a time that is oceanless
Or of an ocean not littered with wastage
Or of a future that is not liable
Like the past, to have no destination.*

*We have to think of them as forever bailing,
Setting and hauling, while the NorthEast lowers
Over shallow banks unchanging and erosionless
Or drawing their money, drying sails at dockage;
Not as making a trip that will be unpayable
For a haul that will not bear examination.*

*There is no end of it, the voiceless wailing,
No end to the withering of withered flowers,
To the movement of pain that is painless and motionless,
To the drift of the sea and the drifting wreckage,
The bone’s prayer to Death of its God. Only the hardly, barely*

prayable

Prayer of the one Annunciation.

As in the theme and variations form of “Burnt Norton” I, Eliot again reconstructs the original at the end of a long line of variations: he repeats the words that end the lines of the first stanza for the sixth stanza, but (with one exception) nowhere else. This creates a sense of the musical “return home,” with the elevation of the lower case “a” of the first stanza’s “annunciation” to the upper case “A” of the final line’s “Annunciation” performing the act of cadential closure. Like Pound, he includes a single exception to mar the perfection of the pattern: the word “annunciation” appears in the third stanza as well as the first and sixth. Eliot, who surely knew the Pound sestina well, may have been moved by whatever motivations had moved Pound; or perhaps Eliot chose to highlight the word because of its central importance to the poem. (In the Annunciation, Eliot perceived the intersection of time and the timeless.)

This repetition through rhyming rather than through semantics produces a rhyme scheme—not one that forms the internal structure of each stanza, as is usually the case, but rather one that links stanza to stanza.

As a result, each stanza’s (e.g.) third line can recall to the mind through the ear the third line of the previous stanza—or at least the memory of having experienced the previous third line. A particularly retentive ear might be able to “hear” in each successive third-line rhyme *all* of the previous third lines. It has at least a reminiscent ring or sense to it; and it has an even greater quasi-musical feel to it, as the ear recognizes a previous encounter with a notable sound, placed in the stress position of the line and therefore producing a delayed rhyme. Rhyme juxtaposes two words at some distance from each other by auditory memory; it makes them “speak to each other” across a distance in ways that the intervening words do not.

Given the formal requirements he placed on himself, Eliot would have had to be consciously aware of each previous (e.g.) third line of a stanza while he was in the process of deciding on the content of the identically-placed line for a new stanza. The

same would occur for the creation of each line of all six stanzas—even if only to avoid duplicating a previous rhyme word. It makes some sense, therefore, that reading those identically-placed lines as a new continuum has some relationship to the poet’s making of them. Since the same is probably the case for a composer, who must always be aware, at any given moment of composition, of all the previous moments of composition in the piece, Eliot has managed to utilize a trait of music composition in the making of his modified sestina.

The recognition of this probably compositional method suggests that we might find it interesting to take a look at all six of the rhymed third lines as a group. These are:

- I: Dropping their petals and remaining motionless;
- II: While emotion takes to itself the emotionless
- III: The unattached devotion which might pass for devotionless,
- IV: We cannot think of a time that is oceanless
- V: Over shallow banks unchanging and erosionless
- VI: To the movement of pain that is painless and motionless.

Considering these six lines together, we discover that they share no only a rhyme sound repetition, but also a thematic linking and a sense of doubling. Each has a seemingly contradictory plus-and-minus combination, common throughout the entire *Four Quartets*, which had begun with its introductory epigraph from Heraclitus: “The way up is the way down.” In some lines, the self-contradictory doubling is even semantic—“emotion/emotionless”, “devotion/devotionless,” and “pain/painless.” In the sixth stanza, that recapitulatory last statement of the theme, he constructs a powerful chiasmus, which utilizes the doublings twice, in reverse order, as a kind of climax to the progression of these six third lines taken as a unit.

VI: To the movement [X] of pain [Y] that is painless [Y] and motionless [X].

Once again he has used a chiasmic reversal as a device of closure.

Because of the nature of this modified sestina rhyme scheme, these third lines “talk” to one another over the din of all the other lines. They become a kind of vertical “found poem” (lines 3, 9, 15, 21, 27, and 33), woven into the fabric of the ongoing horizontal narrative (lines 1-36). Here are those lines printed as that found poem:

3

*Dropping their petals and remaining motionless;
While emotion takes to itself the emotionless
The unattached devotion which might pass for devotionless,
We cannot think of a time that is oceanless
Over shallow banks unchanging and erosionless
To the movement of pain that is painless and motionless.*

Allow for a few changes in punctuation, and the found poem becomes relatively convincing as a sub-poem in itself:

3

*Dropping their petals and remaining motionless;
While emotion takes to itself the emotionless,
The unattached devotion which might pass for devotionless;
We cannot think of a time that is oceanless,
Over shallow banks unchanging and erosionless,
To the movement of pain that is painless and motionless.*

This is essentially a *musical* technique—repetition at some distance which suggests itself as repetition only because the ear has a memory. The coagulation of such auditory moments in music “means” without “meaning”—as here. It becomes a developed musical “theme” or “motif”—recognizable and cohesive, even if not entirely coherent. It tantalizes with a suggestion of coherence, especially because its syntax is on occasion incomplete. And, I

would argue, it actually *functions* as a part of the poetic/musical communication experienced by a careful reader.

Were that the case only for the third line in each stanza, the effect would be quirky, unbalanced, and perhaps not much worth the trouble to notice; but this same rearrangement can be made for all six new stanzas created by the collating of all the first lines, all the second lines, etc. The punctuation of the original lines is maintained.

1

*Where is there an end of it, the soundless wailing,
There is no end, but addition; the trailing
There is the final addition, the failing
Where is the end of them, the fishermen sailing
We have to think of them as forever bailing,
There is no end of it, the voiceless wailing.*

2

*The silent withering of autumn flowers
Consequence of further days and hours,
Pride or resentment at failing powers,
Into the wind's tail, where the fog cowers?
Setting and hauling, while the North East lowers
No end to the withering of withered flowers,*

3

*Dropping their petals and remaining motionless;
While emotion takes to itself the emotionless
The unattached devotion which might pass for devotionless,
We cannot think of a time that is oceanless
Over shallow banks unchanging and erosionless
To the movement of pain that is painless and motionless,*

4

*Where is there an end to the drifting wreckage,
Years of living among the breakage
In a drifting boat with a slow leakage,*

*Or of an ocean not littered with wastage
Or drawing their money, drying sails at dockage;
To the drift of the sea and the drifting wreckage,*

5

*The prayer of the bone on the beach, the unprayable
Of what was believed in as the most reliable—
The silent listening to the undeniable
Or of a future that is not liable
Not as making a trip that will be unpayable
The bone's prayer to Death its God. Only the hardly, barely
prayable*

6

*Prayer at the calamitous annunciation?
And therefore the fittest for renunciation.
Clamour of the bell of the last annunciation.
Like the past, to have not destination.
For a haul that will not bear examination.
Prayer of the one Annunciation.*

Here is that “de-written” poem once again, this time with the punctuation changed to accommodate the new line relationships:

1

*Where is there an end of it, the soundless wailing?
There is no end, but addition; the trailing;
There is the final addition, the failing.
Where is the end of them, the fishermen sailing?
We have to think of them as forever bailing;
There is no end of it, the voiceless wailing.*

2

*The silent withering of autumn flowers,
Consequence of further days and hours,
Pride or resentment at failing powers;
Into the wind's tail, where the fog cowers,*

*Setting and hauling, while the North East lowers;
No end to the withering of withered flowers.*

3

*Dropping their petals and remaining motionless,
While emotion takes to itself the emotionless,
The unattached devotion which might pass for devotionless;
We cannot think of a time that is oceanless,
Over shallow banks unchanging and erosionless,
To the movement of pain that is painless and motionless.*

4

*Where is there an end to the drifting wreckage—
Years of living among the breakage
In a drifting boat with a slow leakage,
Or of an ocean not littered with wastage
Or drawing their money, drying sails at dockage.
To the drift of the sea and the drifting wreckage?*

5

*The prayer of the bone on the beach, the unprayable—
Of what was believed in as the most reliable;
The silent listening to the undeniable,
Or of a future that is not liable—
Not as making a trip that will be unpayable;
The bone's prayer to Death its God. Only the hardly,
barely prayable*

6

*Prayer at the calamitous annunciation—
And therefore the fittest for renunciation.
Clamour of the bell of the last annunciation,
Like the past, to have not destination,
For a haul that will not bear examination..
Prayer of the one Annunciation.*

Movement II of "The Dry Salvages," I am suggesting, reads horizontally and vertically at the same time throughout the entire thirty-six lines. Each line connects not only to the lines that immediately precede and follow it, but also to the lines in the five other stanzas with which it rhymes. This kind of complex palimpsest rarely is accomplished in stanzaic poetry, but is commonplace in the composition of chamber music, where reoccurring tonalities, themes, intervals, and rhythmic units speak to each other even though they are many measures apart, while the horizontal progression continues unabated. In other words, Eliot has managed to *construct* this movement both linearly and *non-linearly*. Non-linearly becomes here not only an experience of the reader, but a tool of the writer.¹⁵

One should note, however, that the stanzas of the "de-written" poem do not all read consistently smoothly: The correlations, developments, and variations of cohesion and coherence sometimes work significantly better for lines 1, 2, 2, and 6 in each "de-written" stanza than they do for 4 and 5. Those two lines, 4 and 5, reconstruct for us stanzas IV and V of the original poem and suggest that those two stanzas may offer something that differs from the offerings of the other four original stanzas. That turns out to be the case.

Stanzas IV and V of the original function as an "interlude" in the otherwise relatively strict structural relationships. They concern the lives of actual fishermen, while the other four stanzas deal with abstractions. Eliot talks about our being able to appreciate the agony of others, nearly experienced and involving ourselves, better than the agony of ourselves. That is in part the function of this two-stanza interlude concerning the fisherman.

¹⁵ At this point one has to marvel at the pronouncement of the usually astute Hugh Kenner that: "There is nothing in the last three-quarters of 'The Dry Salvages,' not the materials handled, the mode of ideation, nor the process by which instance yields formulation, that is beyond the scope of a sensitive prose essayist." In light of the formal complexity of this modified sestina, Kenner's judgment becomes a quintessential revelation of Eliot's mastery of *sprezzatura*.

The human example allows us the pragmatic metaphor: We too are always bailing, setting, and hauling. The example is descriptive of the fishermen, but emblematic of us.

This "real life" interruption might recall for us the similarly positioned interlude of the rose garden in "Burnt Norton" I—a short vacation from the intensity of considering the abstract connections. The fishermen thereby become the human example of the abstract problems discussed in the other four stanzas. Real people have—or at least perceive themselves to have—starts and stops in life, tied in with practical problems that do not admit of leisurely, philosophic contemplation in the midst of their happening. These two stanzas, therefore, present the problem as flatter, as more quotidian, more quantifiable. So we feel the *return* to the original pattern of abstract contemplation in stanza VI to be a powerful restatement, worthy of bearing the recapitulative weight of the direct repetition of the line-end words from the first stanza. Once again Eliot has prepared us for the return to an initial and by now much varied theme, just as he did in the first movement of "Burnt Norton," and just as Brahms does at the end of the theme and variations movement of the Opus 18 Sextet. Like stanza six of the modified sestina of "The Dry Salvages" II, the cello solo at the end of the Brahms offers up the one trace of hope that can be found—the "hardly, barely prayable Prayer of the one Annunciation." It is hard to imagine a better phrase with which to describe a first-rate performance of that sixteen-measure cello solo.

There is "no end" here—"end" both in the sense of "conclusion" and "purpose"—even though the exacting attention necessitated by the modified sestina form would seem to dictate such a sense of purpose. Eliot proposes "addition" as a substitute for the concept "end." Perhaps we should hear a Gallic pun in that word "addition"—it being the French word for the bill at the end of a meal. It is a "fine" (deriving from the Latin *finis*); but it is not an "end." There is even a *final* addition, but it is again no end. Then the fishermen appear. Then we recapitulate the beginning of this part by its own end, showing that the end is indeed the beginning, and suggesting we know the place for the first time. It also sug-

gests another good reason for omitting the three-line envoi, which normally brings such effective closure to a poem in sestina form: Eliot does not want closure here. There is no end, but addition.

So the sestina form actually *does* what it says. The form is a quasi-musical way of our living or experiencing that same non-linearity of which he speaks. It is constantly the same but never the same. It can continually shift its order in an orderly way that appears to have no order. The verticality of the found poem becomes “another pattern,” which “ceases to be a mere sequence”—those quoted words coming from the two lines that follow directly the end of the sestina. He goes on to speak of “moments of happiness,” but distinguishes them from “the sense of well-being. . . or even a very good dinner”—perhaps extending the pun on the French meaning of “*l’addition*.” As Eliot mentions later in the same movement of “The Dry Salvages”, “we had the experience” of reading the sestina, but “we missed the meaning.” By reconfiguring the modified sestina into stanzas of similarly rhymed lines, we created an “approach to the meaning” that restored “the experience in a different form.”

Eliot, I think, concentrates on repetition and variation as the two most important “musical” elements of *Four Quartets*. I think it is no accident that one of the earliest critical works on the poem was a concordance: it served the need of recognizing the force of repeated words and fulfilled the compulsion to collect the various and variable recapitulations of word choice. In both music and poetry, the transformation of repetition into variation plays a central role in creating that vexed concept “meaning.”

This can lead us to a definition of the word “meaning” where music is concerned. In a concert performance by a string quartet of a late Beethoven work, one could freeze the action after the playing of, for example, the first four-note chord in the twenty-first measure of the second movement. At this frozen moment in time, each listener has a unique set of expectations as to what the next musical moment will produce. These expectations are constructed by a number of different forces within the individual listener: they have to do with how well (or poorly) the listener

knows music in general, or chamber music in general, or late Beethoven in general, or this particular piece; and they have to do with how this particular group has performed the first movement and the first twenty measures of the second movement; and they have to do with how warm it is in the concert hall and what the listener had for dinner and whether the listener had an altercation over dinner with the person sitting in the next seat; and with any and every other condition that has any influence on how the listener is listening at that particular moment. All of these forces produce for that listener a unique set of expectations of what is to come next. One can now unfreeze the moment and allow the performers to play the next chord. The “meaning” of that next chord for any particular listener, I would argue, is the sum total of all the ways in which that listener’s expectations have been fulfilled and/or violated.

The next step is perhaps a bold one: I would argue that there is essentially no difference between the ways in which notes and words go about having “meaning.” True, one can look up a word in a dictionary, and one cannot do that for a note. But in that dictionary (if it is a good one), one will find *too many* “meanings” listed; and one would lack all sorts of “meanings” that cannot be listed because the word by itself lacks context. The *Oxford English Dictionary* is a tribute to its compilers, who made the ultimate lexicographical attempt to overcome this problem; but their attempt at being exhaustive is itself doomed to defeat. Take, for example, the *OED*’s treatment of the word “horse,” which requires more than 35,000 words, the length of a monograph. As a result, there are *too many* “meanings” for “horse” for it to have “a meaning.” Context controls “meaning”—both for notes and for words. (Moreover, certain composers insist that individual notes do have dictionary-style “meanings” attached to them—even colors, on occasion. Rachmaninov thought of G# as purple; and anyone with an ear and a memory can understand what Haydn thought of C major as a key.)

Whether my extreme statement is acceptable or not, the concept of a repeated element (word or note, phrase or chord) being in some sense controllable and therefore variable by context is

central to Eliot's attempt to make his last, greatest poem "musical."

The modified sestina of "The Dry Salvages" II represents not only the first half of that movement (thirty-six of its seventy-five lines). This lyrical portion of Movement II, through its form, is a non-linear experience; the second half of the movement becomes commentary on that experience—*itself* rather than lyrical. And that is much the same construction for the second movements of the other three *Quartets*, creating yet another vertical, non-linear reading experience, unlike most other poetry, but very much like a late Beethoven quartet. All four first movements "talk" to each other, as do the second movements, etc.

The theme and variations of the opening of "Burnt Norton" and the modified sestina form of "The Dry Salvages" II are but two of a vast number of examples in Eliot's "musication" of poetry. It is not necessary to find mirror images of the macro-structure of Beethoven or Bartók quartets; and were they to be found, they would probably fail to tell us something we did not already know from the poem. It is, rather, the way Eliot goes about using his materials and the resulting complexity of intimacy that makes the "quartet" title/metaphor so appropriate. An understanding of this allows us to dispense with the cynicism sometimes generated about the poem's title:

Perhaps the only conclusion we can come to is that the title finally chosen for the whole work, and which we all know too well, was at the worst a result of ignorance and presumption, and at best another example of the poet's failure in "the intolerable wrestle with words and meanings," and no more than "a way of putting it—not very satisfactory." . . . We should use the title as the merest label, for convenient reference.¹⁶

¹⁶ W. G. Bebbington, "Four *Quartets*?" *Essays in Criticism* 39 (1989): 241.

and allows us to bring the matter to rest with the highly insightful summary statement of John X. Cooper:

The ground from which the poem conveys what it knows, is musical. Music is not a metaphor of a superb and rare *variety* of cognition, it is cognition itself, the primary structure through which cognition recognizes and represents experience.¹⁷

¹⁷ John Xiros Cooper, "Music as Symbol and Structure in Pound's *Pisan Cantos* and Eliot's *Four Quartets*," in *Ezra Pound and Europe*, ed. Richard Taylor and Claus Melchior (Amsterdam and Atlanta: Rodolpi, 1993), 187.