

## T. S. Eliot's Sense of Place in *Four Quartets*\*

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The word "place" in the *Oxford English Dictionary* is allotted fourteen categories under four general headings (twenty-nine under seven general headings, if special uses in phrases and hyphenated words are counted). The word "locus" in Lewis and Short's *Latin Dictionary* is allotted nine categories, plus six kinds of transferred meanings. The word τόπος (*topos*) in Liddell and Scott's *Greek-English Lexicon* is allotted eight general categories, before coming to class II, "topic or commonplace." Greek *topos* in its literal significations is instructive, not least because the citations are arranged in chronological order, and go back to Aeschylus: (1) place, region (including geographical position); (2) place, position; (3) place or part of the body; (4) place, passage in an author; (5) burial-place; (6) district, department; (7) room in a house; (8) position in the zodiac. Lewis and Short divide the classes of signification a little differently, but Latin *locus* includes all the above and more. For example, *locus* comes to include in its literal meaning "a place, seat, in the theatre, the circus, or the forum" (B. 1). The *OED* again follows chronological appearance. All the main entries date from the fourteenth century or earlier, apart from technical uses (1605) and the meaning of "office, employment, situation" (1558). The need to place ourselves in various senses of the word "place"—to think of ourselves in terms of place—appears to be a longstanding human need.

There must be few other works of art to match Eliot's *Four Quartets* in its rich and suggestive sense of place, as Inge Leimberg implies in the very structuring of her article. One of the pleasures of reading dictionaries, as of reading poetry, is that we read across from one category to another.

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\*Reference: Inge Leimberg, "The Place Revisited in T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*," *Connotations* 8.1 (1998/99): 63-92.

So also we read through and then across the different categories of place in this article, first visiting and then revisiting its places. Professor Leimberg also considers aspects of place that lexicographers cannot. For example, as she points out, place cannot be defined except in relation to time. Her thoughtful laying out of different ways in which we apprehend place is itself remarkably wide-ranging. In particular, she is aware of what Eliot himself brooded over: the relation of earthly place and time to the eternal in a Christian scheme of things. Her grasp of this relation is so well grounded and so sensible of implication that I have only one general observation and a few small queries.

The one general reflection on this admirably thorough exposition of place revisited in *Four Quartets* is a matter of reader's preference as to emphasis. Eliot is one of those authors capable of so describing an actual place that it comes sharply to our eyes and ears and nose and tongue and skin. This place could not be other. It is as if we had been transplanted there. Professor Leimberg is very aware of the importance of the here and now for Eliot (and the there and then, as well, for place revisited). It is of a piece with his theology.

But something more is involved. It is the particular immediacy of Eliot's four places in these place-named *Quartets* that strikes me first and foremost when reflecting on his sense of place: that formal English garden in *Burnt Norton* whose plan we could sketch from Eliot's description, a plan we must enter imaginatively to make any sense of what happens there; the village of East Coker, to which I shall come, the great River (as Eliot called the Mississippi when writing of *Huckleberry Finn*) and Eliot's tour de force of the journey down to and out to sea, here at Cape Ann in Massachusetts, Little Gidding, the chapel once a community, in Huntingdon farm country. It is not simply the choice of telling detail that accounts for Eliot's immediacy, though it is partly that: "the empty alley . . . the box circle . . . the drained pool . . . dry concrete, brown edged"; "the deep lane / Shuttered with branches, dark in the afternoon, / Where you lean against a bank while a van passes"; "the whine in the rigging, / The menace and caress of wave that breaks on water, / The distant role in the granite teeth"; "It would be the same, when you leave the rough road / And turn behind the pig-sty to the dull façade / And the tombstone." Here, in his apprehension of landscape, we find Eliot's own form of sensuousness.

Eliot's acute response to and pleasure in the physical did not extend to the human body. Its force is expended on landscape and its flora and fauna, even more on seascape. James Merrill was once asked: "Your own way of veiling the first person there has to do with the way you present the landscape, doesn't it?" Merrill replied:

You hardly ever need to *state* your feelings. The point is to feel and keep your eyes open. Then what you feel is expressed, is mimed back at you by the scene. A room, a landscape. I'd go a step further. We don't *know* what we feel until we see it distanced by this kind of translation.<sup>1</sup>

Merrill is right. In *The Waste Land*, human disgust and metaphysical extremity darken the palette and color the landscape itself. Only once in *Four Quartets*, I think, does Eliot's difficulty with the creatureliness of humankind impinge on his sense of place. In *East Coker I*, a faery vision at midnight shows

. . . dancing around the bonfire  
The association of men and women  
In daunsinge, signifying matrimonie—  
A dignified and commodious sacrament.

Eliot is quoting his ancestor, Sir Thomas Elyot, and he goes on to extend the trope of dancing (a central one in *Four Quartets*, as Professor Leimberg makes clear). Dancing provides a pattern for the rhythm of the seasons, of the harvest. And then of

The time of the coupling of man and woman  
And that of beasts. Feet rising and falling.  
Eating and drinking. Dung and death.

The words of Sir Thomas Elyot, themselves "dignified and commodious," echo oddly against this catabasis. What possessed Eliot to shut down his rustics this way? When I actually visited East Coker, I was slightly surprised to find it a very well-to-do elegant small village. Somehow Eliot's "dung and death" had spilled into my sense of the place—something that would have surprised the high-toned inhabitants I met. Great Gidding

is much more rustic, a down-to-earth farming community, and even there "dung and death" would feel out of place.

Still, Eliot could not unmake himself and his ascetic vein ran deep, at least in its longstanding distaste for human flesh. It is all the more remarkable that he responded so fully to landscape and seascape. Those actual places come alive in Eliot's poetry, even considered simply as loco-descriptive poetry.

Interestingly enough, place in *Four Quartets* is virtually all outdoor until the visit to the chapel in "Little Gidding." To be sure, there are vehicles of transportation, and a number of them (the London Tube, boats, a train, a ship). But indoor scenes, no. There is nothing here like Eliot's tour de force of the dressing-room in *Waste Land* II ("The Chair she sat in . . . The glitter of her jewels . . . the coffered ceiling . . . the antique mantel"). Nor of the quick telling detail that evokes a room and an atmosphere, as in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" ("tea and cakes and ices . . . the cups, the marmalade, the tea, / Among the porcelain") or "Portrait of a Lady" ("four wax candles in the darkened room") or "Preludes" ("raising dingy shades / In a thousand furnished rooms"). Only in a passing glimpse do we see "the wainscot where the field-mouse trots" ("East Coker" I) or "the evening circle in the winter gaslight" ("Dry Salvages" I). It is a question whether Eliot's knife-edge fastidiousness about human flesh perhaps extended to rooms that humans ordinarily inhabit.

Some smaller observations follow, where Professor Leimberg's remarks elicited pleasure, further thought, and a query or two.

(1) The passing observation about *re-* words is a happy one. "Visions and revisions" from "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" immediately comes to mind. *The Waste Land* maps itself through *re-* words, most coming in Part V: "respondebat" ("respondebat illa: ἀποθανεῖν θέλω"), "remember" ("I remember / Those are pearls that were his eyes"), "resent" ("What should I resent?"), "reverberation," "reforms," "reminiscent," "retract," "responded . . . responded." This last is one of the rare glimpses of possible human happiness that includes the physical in Eliot's poetry (ll. 418-22):

... the boat responded  
 Gaily, to the hand expert with sail and oar  
 The sea was calm, your heart would have responded  
 Gaily, when invited, beating obedient  
 To controlling hands

The two "responds" themselves respond to the Sibyl's terrible opening whisper. Professor Leimberg later notes "restore" (whose immediate etymology is Latin *restaurare*), a word memorably used by Milton in the opening lines of *Paradise Lost*.

(2) "That poetry and music are the same . . .": Professor Leimberg, who earlier used the precise term "analogy" of the relation between poetry and music, here means "the same" in a manner of speaking. Because much confusion can arise if we forget that music and poetry are different arts, that Mozart was not following the art of Shakespeare when he composed, it is worth re-emphasizing that word "analogy."

(3) On the objective correlative: Professor Leimberg has elucidated the metaphysical force that lay behind Eliot's idea of the objective correlative, his insistence on the here and now. It may be worth noting that, in the first instance and in context, this idea from his early essay on *Hamlet* reads like good practical advice for an imaginative writer. *Objective*, not merely subjective or personal. *Correlative*, not merely a diary. How much bad writing would never appear in print if writers followed such discipline. In fact, as Merrill suggests, working out a correlative such as Eliot's "set of objects, a situation, a chain of events" can actually light up what is personal for a writer.

(4) Professor Leimberg's remarks on "home" are finely observed. Words too, as Eliot says in some of his best lines, can be home if we structure such a place for them: "(where every word is at home, / Taking its place to support the others, / . . . The complete consort dancing together)" ("Little Gidding" V).

(5) The memorable recognition scene in "Little Gidding" II does indeed evoke Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, though of course it also evokes *Hamlet*, given the ghostly ending and the echo of Shakespeare's text. I wonder if the meeting-place perhaps recalls the crucial place revisited in *Oedipus*, the place where Oedipus met and slew Laius. That intersection was one of those portentous places "at the meeting of three roads" (*Oedipus Rex* 730). "Between three districts whence the smoke arose / I met one walking,"

Eliot writes. Considering the several poetic fathers recalled in this episode, as well as the crucial father-son relationship in *The Waste Land*, this junction of three roads is a place well revisited. Eliot alludes to the ghost of Hamlet's father at the end of this scene, which itself honours many ghosts. Yet I would argue against a tragic patterning here, for Eliot seems well past such a patterning at this stage. Or, if a tragic sense remains in this remarkably calm dream-scene, is it closer in spirit to *Oedipus at Colonus*?

Recognition or *anagnorisis* in the sense of a crucial self-recognition is frequently connected with a specific place. Sometimes recognition of a certain place itself brings about such a recognition. This is one of Wordsworth's great themes, of course, but it is elsewhere too. "Burningly it came on me all at once, / This was the place!"

We paused before a House that seemed  
A Swelling of the Ground . . .

Since then—'tis Centuries—and yet  
Fells shorter than the Day  
I first surmised the Horses' Heads  
Were toward Eternity—

"Whose woods these are I think I know." "This is where the serpent lives, the bodiless." "Heavens, I recognise the place, I know it!"

Each place visited in *Four Quartets* had strong personal significance for Eliot, as Professor Leimberg notes. Each is also a place revisited, if only in memory and under pressure of poetic composition (and so hardly "only"). A place revisited is a place doubly translated, in Merrill's sense of "translation." Little wonder there is a peculiar intensity to all Eliot's places in *Four Quartets*, even before we start to consider the dimension that Professor Leimberg so richly brings to bear.

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#### NOTE

<sup>1</sup>"On 'Yānorinā': An Interview with David Kalstone," *Recitative: Prose by James Merrill*, ed. J. D. McClatchy (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1986) 22.