

Notes on the Poetics of Time

From:

Temporality in Life as Seen Through Literature

Contributions to Phenomenology of Life

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Notes on a Poetics of Time

Prefatory Remark

The idea of contrasting a *poetics* with an *aesthetics* of time is intended to focus on the productive possibilities of imagination in configurations of time. An aesthetics of time focusing on sensuous experience is clearly a basic resource of creative imagination in literature. But the concept of a poetics of time, taken from the root meaning of *poiesis* in classical Greek thought—to make, or to bring forth—enables an inquiry into conceptions of human life and thought brought forth in various creative configurations of time in the making of literature. This essay will analyze some of the ways in which poetic imagination opens and structures time and space to extend the possibilities of human experience and understanding.

Aristotle investigated three different kinds of human intelligence which he designated in terms of *poiesis*, productive intelligence concerned with the possibilities of imagination; *praxis*, practical intelligence concerned with predictive action; and *theoria*, theoretical intelligence concerned with exact explanation. It is useful at the outset to point out that each of these modalities of human intelligence makes a legitimate claim to a configuration of time: all are true in the context of their appeal to a different need of human life and culture. Our focus on a poetics of time, then, is an attempt to see the range of creative possibilities open to imagination in the configuration of time.

I

Man, so far as we know, is the only creature that knows it is going to die. In that important sense, only human beings die; a corollary of this is that only human beings are creatures in the grip of time. Time is the fire in which we burn. This haunting imprint of consciousness is present in the human project of self-understanding long before philosophical arguments begin to debate the nature and character of reality within the appearance of time. The first movement of thought that identifies time in its relation to life and death suggests also that the archaic mind is already deep in what will later become the metaphysics of time; more simply, it speaks to the fact that Man is in his nature a metaphysical animal.

“What is time?” St. Augustine asks, and he answers for all of us: we know well enough what time is until we put the question, and then only confusion attends our thinking about it. Aristotle, sensibly of course, put it that time is the measure of motion. But *which* motions? The motions of the planets? The turning of seasons? Or, on another metaphor, should the metabolism of time and life be measured in the beating of the human heart? Or in the variable movements of mood or thought? Cultures continue to be defined in different and distinct patterns of thought and movement that correspond to no fixed measurement of time. The cultural anomalies of Native American tribal peoples are enough to show that time is not the singular and immutable constant that Newton supposed, nor the clock time which is the ordinary of Euroculture. E.T. Hall in *The Dance of Life* cites his experience working as a young man in a government program among the Hopi and Navajo:

I soon learned that I was dealing with at least four different time systems: Hopi time, Navajo time, government bureaucratic time, and the time used by the other white men (Indian traders) living on the reservation. There was also Eastern tourist time, banker’s time when notes were due...

There is a rhythm in the metabolism of life in a given people and culture that is resonant with the environment that surrounds it. The Navajo grounded in a continuing present and for whom the future is uncertain and in a certain sense unreal, finds neither interest nor motivation in promises of future reward which is the cultural ground of government programs. Similarly, the Hopi feel no compelling force of closure of projects, or in the point of scheduling anything in the ordinary course of life that would reduce it to routine. They reserve such important measures to the sacred, in the scheduling of religious ceremonies determined by lunar cycles, etc. Such anomalies argue against a general concept of time that is ubiquitous, and suggest that any particular system of measurement is stipulative, contextual and arbitrary, or at least relative to the needs, understanding, and consensus of a given culture.

What we normally regard as the everyday understanding of time as a succession of moments leaves open the question of meaning. Do we mean discrete and iterated moments, as if stretched out in space, or is this just an optional if convenient idiom, a linguistic frame that fails to express the seamless flow of consciousness? Even within the dominant culture of the West, conceptual time is broadly depicted in conflicting

ways: linear metaphors assimilate time into discrete space, as if past and future have independent existence, are names of places separate from the place of presence, while a contrasting discourse of/ in/ and about time is framed in metaphors of motion that depict time as a flowing river.

The problematic of time in the history of philosophy is a labyrinth of tangled explanations and speculations, giving accounts of the nature of time in various frames of metaphysical and ontological reference, and in the conceptual idioms of psychology, biology, history, physics, etc. Henri Bergson's dynamic concept of the reality of time is a singular and modern version that describes time as continuous moments of eternal presence in contrast with the more usual spacialized concept of time that segments moments along a line of past, present, or future. But if, in Bergson's analysis, reality *is* time, the individual self, otherwise lost in the flux of time, is redeemable only through memory. The value of this conception of remembrance within authentic time—the *duree reelle*—is that it describes the conditions for an authentic self. Real duration, for Bergson, consists in an eternally flowing present that contains the whole of its own past; it is a conception that brings a depth to the human issue of time resonant with central themes in world literature. It is also a view of time that has influenced the work of important modern writers either directly, as in the case of Proust, or indirectly in the case of others that we will discuss.

A deep and consistent concern with time has been a fixture of fictive literature from its inception; poets, dramatists, and novelists have been drawn to or driven by the intensity of the realization that human beings are caught in its web, are confined within it, isolated by it, condemned to it, measured against it. Literature as a comprehensive form of cultural expression is arguably a fundamental response to the human need of meaning in and against time. The creative activity of imagination is directed toward finding a sense of unity in the flux of time, some constant feature in the current of existence that threads through the random occurrences of thought and feeling of the "inner" world of consciousness consonant with the broken images that constitute an "external" world. Some way, in short, for a creature caught in time—not between past and future, but between dust and dust—to transcend time.

Whether or not we can conceive of time in a way that avoids spacializing it, there is no question that our conception of ourselves in the world, with others, toward death—whether in the ordinary discourse of everyday life or in the languages of science, religion, and art—must acknowledge the invariable axes of space and time. If life itself is understood simply as motion, that is, as time, a concept of world requires space. The human mind is a concrete manifestation in the interstices of time and space, and human culture a manifestation of activity held in a tenuous relation between time and place.

Consciousness of time, and so of life and death, has seemed to destroy any permanent sense of human meaning. The existentialists have made a virtue of such contingency, but a great deal of literature has responded in opposition to the dominion of time, seeking to achieve a sense of place, however fragile in passing. Literature has thus conceived of its possibilities as both transcending and transfiguring time in an effort to overcome its devouring maw.

II

In what follows I will try to set out ways in which literature figures in and transforms human consciousness through transfigurations of time. Time as understood and used in this essay is figurative, an essential metaphor in its various configurations and conceptual expressions. The most commonly contrasting conceptions of time depict it as either linear, or as cyclical. Depending on cultural perspective or felt need, time is either, or both—or of course, neither. We take time, pass time, mark time, share time, lose time, and suffer time. Human time, in contrast with natural time, is the life blood of consciousness, a continuing and variable mode of understanding and experience so pervasive that there seems no rule that would limit the domain or extent of its expression.

Human beings first framed and marked occurrences in terms of movement experienced in the natural environment. Cultural life in time so experienced is expressed as cyclical: movement and motions are measured in the rhythm of turning seasons, and as the moon traverses its cycles from full to dark and returning to cast pale shadows on the earth, measuring patterns both of transience and eternity. As culture became progressively literate and began to narrow its primary concerns to and through human life, a new configuration of time developed. As interest focused more and more on

individuated lives independent of the natural metabolism of repetitive recurrence, the cultural paradigm of time shifted to metaphors of linear progression. Time becomes a line of advancement, from birth to death, from beginning to end, from conception to fruition. But this paradigm shift of metaphor does not annul the earlier metaphor of cyclical time: the sun also rises and the seasons move in their recurring glory and endurance, no less than Man is born to die. The truths of time, coordinate with the lives and needs of human beings, are several. So what is there to choose between such claims or perceptions of time? Does our conception and understanding of reality suffer from contending metaphors of time? Does it matter if we measure our lives in the recurring seasons or in the linear terminus of actions and events? Do we lose a secure sense of reality if we trade on the ambiguities between the current of consciousness and the delineation of Calendars, untroubled by differences of conceptions of time in the computations of physics and the fictions of imagination? What is the philosophical consequence of an acknowledgment that the reality that is time is both form and flow?

These are only the most obvious expressions that characterize our collective concerns with consciousness and the phenomenon of passing life and in which cultures have defined themselves in the configuration of and comportment toward time. It is not difficult to defend the idea that the whole of human culture is in some or another way an attempt to deal with consciousness as, of and in time. Clearly the contingency of human life, the finality of individual consciousness in the terrible intimacy of the knowledge of our own death, is an existential framing of time. What can we do to shore up our lives against the relentless pull and fatal reach of time? The pyramids of ancient Egypt stand as weathered monuments to the desperation of would-be gods to escape time; even the magnificent sphinx, majestic and solemn, staring with stone dead eyes across a desert waste into eternity, is subject to the corroding elements in service to time.

But for men below the horizons of the gods, there will be time, the weary voice of Koheleth assures us, for all the days and hands of men. For to every living thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven:

A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted; A time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; A time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; A time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time

to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing; A time to get, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to cast away; A time to rend, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak; A time to love, and a time to hate; a time of war, and a time of peace.

But even as the sun also rises and passes away, there is only vanity in the days of men. Wisdom is but recognition of the dominion of time—‘Be not over much wicked, neither be thou foolish: why shouldest thou die before thy time?’ An ancient Asian tale on this theme counsels that there is but a single resolution for every season, good or ill: ‘This too shall pass.’ But if time heals all things, the poet Eliot reminds us that Time the healer is Time the destroyer.

Whether the culture is classical or modern, ironic or tragic, the dominion of time frames its lament:

‘Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow...’ is the familiar paradigm of tragic self-realization at the convergence of overweening ambition and the retributions of destiny. This expression has become an indelible inscription of the paradox of time within human consciousness. The sequence of tomorrows creeps in petty pace for a despairing Macbeth; but in the consciousness of another, tomorrow may still be alive to possibility, the pace of its rhythm may race or skip to its last syllable. For some, tomorrows may weary and all recede into yesterdays, or else they may actively strive to match the energy of youth. Whether our projects bleed together into a continuing space of hope or into an intensity of despair in which neither yesterday or tomorrow exist, the insistence of tragic literature, voiced in another mood in the lamentations of Ecclesiastes, is that in time, consciousness falters finally into oblivion.

The time of our lives can be and is transfigured in the many ways in which we put events into stories, and in turn transform our lives. The self-life-writing of autobiography, for example, can begin with genealogy and birth, presenting a recorded sequence of accomplishments, or it can begin with a remembered event or situation that has become a touchstone for the ensuing re-construction of the continuing story of one’s life. That story remains an open one and without an ending: one can offer a summing up of her life that may or may not be accurate or believable, but the final ending can only be told by another. The individual’s story simply trails off; even if the last gesture is suicide, the

detail of its telling requires a survivor, and the story then becomes the teller's story in the time-line that continues life

It is not only our individual lives which are transfigured in the telling and taleing; time as a fictive reality is transfigured as well. The narrative time of literature is normally sequential and may seem to mirror the irreversibility of linear time; but an event may be narrated and a story told through several voices attending the vagaries and regressions of character and memory. In Faulkner's *Sound and the Fury*, time expands and contracts, ebbs and flows, stills and swirls in family voices and characters differently regressed, obsessed, and defeated, all drawn into recalling a distant erotic vision of the muddy underwear of a little girl in a tree, a lost sister, a dissembled family whose history and heritage is both sustained and shackled by the antebellum values of a lost time.

Poets write within and against the measured passion of life and death in time. The two great themes of world literature, Love and Death, celebrate in their separate and synchronous ways the reality of consciousness. In each case, Life and Death, or rather Love and Death, are metaphors of transcendence in the transfiguration of time. The familiar line of Dylan Thomas discovers the point of convergence of these two great passions beneath the ease and bloom of youth: 'Time held me green and dying/ though I sang in my chains like the Sea.'

The mythic impulse in both Hebraic and Hellenic literature records the founding relationship of time and life—time *as* life in the genesis of human consciousness. *Deus Faber*, the Creator God, requires 6 days to fashion a universe, and the Hebrew testament proceeds to record generations of men from the moment of creation. As the drama of human life unfolds, the promised greatness of a people is traced through their captivity and exodus, and in time forms the germ and genius of their continuance, always in the hope of future deliverance. The literature of this tradition thus comprehends both divinity and humanity in the meaning of time—there is a beginning of time, and a Being outside time: 'In the beginning...God created...and it was Good.' A portrait in a sentence of time in eternity. Recall that in the Psalms, however, we are presented with another sense of time, not of generation and promise, but of passing and loss:

As for man, his days are as grass. As a flower of the field, so he flourishes. For the wind passes over it, and it is gone, and the place thereof shall know it no more.

Hellenic literature discovers no initial creator or creative moment of world and life, but rather marks the generations of life forms that emerge out of the yawning abyss of *Chaos*. The mythic narrative of consciousness that forms Greek literature traces the becoming of desire and destiny through their manifestations, growth, and transformations of gods, until contending forces coalesce into a stable universe that provides the stage for the drama of human life. The timeless gods of Olympus whose dominion culminates the movement from chaos to cosmos represent both a stage limit and interactive audience for a continuing human drama of desire and destiny, of life and time. In the archaic drama of the gods, *Kronos*, Time, becomes manifest and remains the eternal enemy of Man, who is a descendent and beneficiary of the Olympians, a lesser god caught in the maw of Time's devouring hunger. The long drawing out of time in Greek myth and epic finally develops into a focused intensity in the high culture of Attic tragedy. These dramas were staged during the festival of Dionysos, in celebration of the dying god, not a god of time but the god in time. Dionysos, as the god of fertility, marks the regeneration of life from death in the recurring cycles of the seasons. Nietzsche persuasively argues that tragic drama developed out of the religious rituals of the worship of Dionysos, in which the singing and dancing revelers—later becoming the chorus at the center of tragic drama—call forth and live for those brief timeless moments in the presence of the god. The theatre then becomes a space in which the drama of the dying god is enacted, in which the audience is drawn into the time of the god; the tragic realization of human existence in time is suspended in the ecstasy of the god's presence, which joins the whole of life in cycles of eternal recurrence.

The whole of human culture is arguably a creative sometimes desperate response to Time's dominion. All life is subject to its authority, but only the human being is acutely aware of its insistent finality and confronted with finding a resolution to its sentence through creative imagination. The easy lyricism of Dylan Thomas is a faint echo of the song of this ancient god: as we are young and easy, a moment's thought brings the truth that time holds us green and dying. But consciousness of the dominion of time also generates the passion of poetic expression: though green and dying, we sing in our chains like the sea. The human life and death sentence of time arguably covers the

whole range of symbolic systems of expression, but the arts in general and literature especially address the possibilities of variance within the bounds and bonds of time.

Whether we celebrate the gift of time in life, or lament its passing in litanies of death, time is a crucible of poetic expression. It is less a theme of literature than its very structure. Philosophical literature records a complex, sometimes contradictory tradition setting out and arguing the meaning(s) of time. Modern discussions of time tend to take their cue from St. Augustine's framing of time in which the present is inclusive of past-as-remembrance and future-as-anticipation, against the background of eternity. Contemporary discussions vary relying on the variations between the categorical distinction of Kant, who considers time the internal order of experience as space is the order of external experience, and H. Bergson, who engages a more elemental metabolism of consciousness and dynamic of time through a foundational *élan vital* of creative evolution. What is invariable and evident in both, however, is the convergence of time and life, energy, motion and consciousness.

III

In the common discourse of philosophy space and time are compared within the differing categories of the organic, physical, conceptual, and cultural.

Organic time is a variable measure in the life metabolism of an organism—metabolic rates vary as do the relational life spans of differing organisms. Time is thus variable in linear measurement as well as dynamic motion, measuring the beating intensity of the wings of a moth as it is drawn into the flame

Physical time is a variable measure, e.g. in the contrasts between geological time of mountain and sea, and the astrological time of light and space.

Conceptual time is variable configuration within the contexts of various theoretical practices and depends on contextual design and purpose (Physics, Biology, Geology, Economics, History...)

Cultural time is broadly the configurations of Symbolic expression that give meaning to shared experience. This includes what we have above called “human” time, and the metaphors that find transformational expression in the creative imagination of the arts.

The development of human culture arguably begins at the stage of *animal laborans*, a creature bound in necessity to the metabolism of life as such—that is, a creature bound within the frame of organic time—and develops gradually through an awareness of physical space and time to a stage of *homo symbolicus*, in which space and time become open to the creative wealth of imagination. A poetics of time discovered in metaphor and symbol generates the means to alter consciousness and culture, creates fissures in the otherwise inexorable logic of time through which the mind can reach into and live within time past in memory and time future in hope and expectation.

Every reader is familiar with the magic of suspension in which time slows, as in the time of the Magic Mountain in Thomas Mann’s novel, or in the vacant if frantic distractions of Becket’s fools, waiting for Godot. In contrast, reading the novels of Dostoevsky, one is cast headlong by the prose itself. As we are drawn into the consciousness of narrator and into the drama of the action and characters, a sense of urgency may well affect a residual urgency about the affairs of life as we are released once again from the time of the novel. In the litany of tragic drama, in which the flawed pride and best laid plans have gone awry, the hurried pace and raging ambition of the hero is reduced to the steady heartbeat of mundane life, in which tomorrows creep in petty pace day to day, to the last syllable of recorded time.

In the metaphysical poetry of John Donne, time variously measures life awakened by bells tolling death, or again, time and life are arrested as the mind is so caught between death before and despair behind that all one’s pleasures are like yesterdays.

As we have noted, Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury* transfigures Macbeth’s soliloquy of weary resignation into the mythic time of a dying Southern Aristocracy caught up in the frayed edges and death throes of a dissolving culture. Neither the anger of offense, nor the agony of the cry and the pitch of its anguish stills the inevitability of decay. Quentin pulls off the hands of his watch so that it no longer marks the measure of

movement, but the internal spring keeps driving the mechanism, a reminder of the relentless force and fate of life, that like his idiot brother's tale, beneath the sound and fury, signifies...nothing. There is, of course in Faulkner as in Shakespeare, a disturbing and seductive fullness in that nothing.

Think of the variations in directions, as well as intensity and tempo of time, of time lost and redeemed, of time within time and time out of time. Proust's *A la recherche* is a recovery through remembrance *du temps perdu*: time lost and dead to the actual present, comes alive again in the imagination of memory and art. There is a paradox at the heart of Proust's metaphor of time, what he regarded as the necessary connection that binds past and present together in a moment out of time. A newer translation corrects the standard earlier translation "*Remembrance of things past*" providing a title for Proust's seemingly interminable search for a beginning as "*In search of lost time.*" The novel is in its reach consumed with a task that seems never to be made complete, one of discontinuous ruminations of constant becoming. The lesson of time in Proust's novel(s) is a complex of remembrance in which life is formed and time redeemed through a plurality of ways and meanings. If there is a truth revealed in time, however, it is only to be found in the diversity and density of its expressions. There is a fullness to the re-emergent discontinuities of thoughts, feelings, moods, words in the process of remembrance that contrast with the modern temper as it emerges in other literatures of time. Camus, for example, may well quote an *Ode* of Pindar which instructs the soul not to aspire to immortal life, but rather to exhaust the limits of the possible. These limits, as we know however, from the mythic and senseless labors of *Sisyphé* and the vacant transactions of *L'etranger* prove to be spare indeed, and depressingly empty of consequence. Similarly in writers like Kafka and Beckett, time is drained of significance; in the former time proceeds apace but apart, for the latter time empties out not into eternity but to indeterminacy. For these writers, there is nothing compelling in either time or place to affirm or oppose.

Time past, in Thomas Wolfe's novels, presents a different aspect—a journey not triggered by an acute perception in present experience (*la madeleine, par exemple*) in which the past comes to life, but rather, the lost time of the past seems to have a persistent life and force of attraction; for all that, it remains unrecoverable in time

present. Time's child, in Wolfe's novels, is lost in the present among the alien dead of the city, but drawn equally backward into a space of unrecoverable distance, haunted by a longing and home-sickness for what is no longer. The mind in memory, reaching back through the flow of time and the river of life, to where the heart feels its home only in the certain knowledge it is lost. For Wolfe, the transience of life in time is reconciled only through a moment of intuition, a lyrical transfiguration of sense that connects to an immutable universe of time suspended from the chronology of past and present—that is, though an act of poetic imagination.

IV

Whatever the creative resources of imagination in literature and art, there is a nagging realization that the order of time is inexorable and omnivorous, that no spirit of resistance in works of transcendence from Shakespeare to Joyce is sufficient to restore a secure vision of existence *sub specie aeternitatis*. The moving hand of time, having writ moves on, nor all thy charm or wit can call back a word of it. Whether modern consciousness betrays an obsession with time, a good deal of modern literature has taken its point of departure from the inferential patterns and paradigms that mark change as given, and rest as anomalous—whether reflected in the physics of motion or the biology of species evolution. The stream of consciousness in Joyce, as well as the intuitive dynamics of Bergson's *duree reelle* attest to a common sensibility that man and god, and all things in between are subject to time, that the universe and its inhabitants exist, in reality, *sub specie temporis*.

There remains in cultural consciousness, however, the idea of a transcendence of time within the space of the sacred, a hope of recovery or rediscovery of eternity. The experience of ecstasy is one such mode of transcendence, an aspiration of poetic imagination as well as religious mysticism. The poet W.H. Auden speaks in a secular voice of the sacred in gardens that time is forever outside. In philosophy, Nietzsche's analytic transvaluation of values includes a poetic transvaluation of time, described in the cyclical cosmology and depth psychology of eternal recurrence. Nietzsche discovers the reconfiguration of time also in ecstasy experienced in the tragic drama of antiquity, in which an audience, in domesticated ritual of Dionysian celebration, is drawn into the time

of the god, and so loses any sense of individuation or iteration of the ordinary commonplace of time. Heidegger's pitched battle against what he regards as the dehumanizing mechanics of time in the modern world requires a similar poetic reevaluation: the concept of Being and the grounding concept of human being is transfigured to gain an authentic and dynamic experience of time in which past present and future all remain open and alive within a human reality that transcends the commonplace of everyday.

T.S. Eliot is the most obvious poet whose work focuses on the philosophical as well as spiritual questions concerning time and transcendence. From his very earliest work Eliot struggles with the paradox and conundrums of time that we have been discussing in an effort first to transcend time, or failing that, to transfigure time. In *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* familiar images embody a lyrical analytic in which time is spacialized, as in the invitation 'Let us go then, you and I while the evening is stretched out against the sky, like a patient, aetherized upon a table.' Against the backdrop of this metaphorical spacialization, Prufrock gives into the muse of time: there will be time, for all the works and days of hands...there will be time to prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet...time to murder and create...time for a hundred visions and revisions...if only to measure out one's life with coffee spoons...as we grow old...

The ironic self-deflating futility of an effort to transcend time is echoed throughout the early poems. *Gerontion*, who hast nor youth nor age, alive as it were in an after dinner sleep, an old man in a dry month, a dull head among windy spaces. The self mocking irony of *Prufrock*, takes a bitter turn in the *Wasteland* where we are shown fear in a handful of dust, to think that we are in rats' alley where the dead men lost their bones, and it continues into the gathering of *the Hollow men*, stuffed men leaning together, headpiece stuffed with straw, where between the motion and the act, between conception and creation, emotion and response, a shadow falls. The journey through time slows to a haunting finality that re-echoes and confirms the *aporia* of wisdom, to the diminishing time when the world ends not with a bang but a whimper. Eliot initiates a new kind of spiritual quest to transfigure time, however, beginning with *Ash Wednesday*: in a resolution, that because I do not hope to turn again, because I do not hope... that culminates finally in a virtual poetics of time in *The Four Quartettes*.

The various and disparate temperaments of writers and thinkers as diverse as Nietzsche and Eliot, Heidegger and Yeats, all respond to the felt poverty of spirit in an age under the anxieties and aegis of time. They do not all share the same sense of resolution, of course, and Eliot may be thought to represent a kind of back-sliding into classical bifurcations of reality and appearance, of time and eternity. There is an advocacy of escape and ascendance in the later poems that mirrors both Plato's liberation and ascendance from the flickering shadows of the cave, and Dante's re-emergence from the dark fires of hell. Each of these stories of liberation intends to depict the possibilities of the human spirit to transcend time, to ascend to a synoptic vision, a god's eye view of the world *sub specie aeterni*. Eliot's version of this journey in *The Four Quartettes* traces a pilgrimage through the cyclical time of *East Coker*, in which the rhythm of dancers resonates with their lives in the living seasons, but comes full circle to death. The cosmic time of *The Dry Salvages* replicates circles of the dance in the eternal return of recurring patterns. Even the linear time of history collapses, in which time present, past, and future become one, toward a final poetics in which time is transfigured into an eternal reality—the journey ends at the still point of a turning world. The Rose Garden into which the soul finds access in *Little Gidding* becomes the symbol of this sacred space of the eternal, the same sense of the sacred that Auden discovered in gardens that time is forever outside.

It is doubtful that Eliot's poetics of time will prove more accessible or durable to the modern temper than the rational idealism of Plato's Forms, or the Christian theology of Dante's muse, but together they attest to a persistent spiritual streak and cultural effort to discover the meaning of human life in a transcendence of time. The poetic journey of imagination within time into eternity is symbolized in the line that becomes a circle. The linear of ordinary time becomes transformed through creative metaphors of imagination, so that what appeared a straight life line proves but a segment of the arc of a circle whose radius is infinity.

The human journey grounded in the poetics of time connects to the same cycle in a circle of self-understanding, in which all our strivings will be but to arrive at the place where we began and (Eliot might add) with wisdom, with effort, and with undying resolution, and with luck we will recognize the place for the first time. As the symbolic

form of time in eternity is the circle, so too with human understanding and spiritual resolution: the rule of integrity requires that we come full circle to ourselves in the fullness of time, life, and world.