'Fare Forward, Voyagers': Arriving at Posthumanism in T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*

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Abstract

The term posthumanism does not come readily to mind in discussions of the modernist writer T.S. Eliot, but the present article argues that applying a posthumanist lens to readings of Eliot might offer up new ways of approaching his work. Critiques of humanism, the de-centering of the human, the notion of the subject as an empty center, and the re-configuration of consciousness are thematic axes where posthumanism and Eliot's *Four Quartets* can be seen to converge. These convergences show how Eliot might be considered as anticipating certain aspects of posthumanist thought. This paper argues that these posthumanist strategies serve the broader scope of Eliot's project in *Four Quartets*, by pointing the way toward the creation of a morally and socially responsible consciousness. It is this consciousness, envisioned by Eliot in response to the devastations of war and social unrest, that, I argue, could be applied to addressing the social upheavals of our own present-day global society.

Keywords: posthumanism, T.S. Eliot, modernism, *Four Quartets,* consciousness, self, autopoiesis

Posthumanism is probably not a term that comes readily to mind when one thinks of the writings of the modernist writer T.S. Eliot. Terms borrowed from systems theory, such as 'functional differentiation' or 'autopoiesis', and an understanding of the ways in which rapid advances in technology have shaped late-twentieth century understandings of how knowledge is formulated—features that undergird posthumanist discourse— seem anachronistic if not entirely alien to discussions about a modernist writer. But it is this seeming anachronism that this paper aims to explore. Many of the salient tenets of posthumanism, namely its critiques of humanism and its emphasis on changing conceptions of the self and consciousness, permeate T.S. Eliot's early philosophical writings. By attending to the elements of posthumanist tendencies that appear in Eliot's philosophy, this paper aims to offer new ways in which to read his poetry and frame the larger scope of his project in *Four Quartets*. The *post* in posthumanism, which suggests that this is at root a discourse that comes *after* humanism and moves away from humanism, makes for the initial impulse to juxtapose Eliot's philosophies with posthumanism. Eliot's critiques of humanism reveal the basic tenets of humanism that he found to be particularly problematic, namely the apotheosis of the human being and the glorification of human consciousness. But identifying the strains of proto-posthumanism in Eliot's writings requires that one go beyond this anti-humanistic stance and consider some of his earlier philosophical writings on the nature of the subject-object relationship and the formation of consciousness. This paper explores these themes in *Four Quartets* and argues that in these poems, Eliot uses strategies that anticipate posthumanist paradigms of consciousness. These poems, I argue, are presented as experiments in autopoiesis that engage the reader in a process of re-configuring his/her own consciousness.

The need for a newly considered model of consciousness was especially exigent in Eliot's time, with three of the poems in *Four Quartets* having been written during the social upheavals of World War II. By identifying the posthumanist strains in Eliot's poems, one is better able to see just how he approached the notion of a newly configured consciousness. It is this conception of a socially and morally responsible consciousness, I argue, that can in turn be applied to discussions about posthumanism and present-day society.

Posthumanism is even now a discourse undergoing revision, the tenets of which remain fluid and contested. For the purposes of this paper, there are four key features that merit elucidation: 1) the reaction against or the critique of humanism, 2) the de-centering of the human subject, 3) the emergent notion of the self as an empty center, and 4) autopoiesis and a re-configuring of the notion of consciousness. These four features of posthumanism also appear to structure *Four Quartets*, allowing Eliot to envision a morally responsible, newly configured form of consciousness, for both the speaker as well as the reader of the poem.

After/ Against Humanism

Posthumanism as a historical discourse positions itself against, or at the very least *after*, humanism. In the 1976 keynote address given at the International Symposium on Postmodern Performance, titled 'Prometheus as Performer: Toward a Posthumanist Culture?', Ihab Hassan announced the twilight of humanism and, along with it, the dawn of posthumanism: 'We need to understand that five hundred years of humanism may be coming to an end, as humanism transforms itself into something that we must helplessly call posthumanism'.[1] Nearly four decades later, Cary Wolfe makes a similar point in *What is Posthumanism?*. While Hassan only tentatively gestured towards a posthumanist future, Wolfe more concretely identifies posthumanism as 'a historical moment in which the decentering of the human […] points toward the necessity of new theoretical paradigms […] a new mode of thought'.[2] For Wolfe, this necessarily involves 'talking about *how* thinking confronts [these] thematics'.[3] The de-centering of the human necessitates a new way of thinking about what it means to be human, but beyond this, Wolfe suggests, it also requires a new way or system of thinking in general. Where posthumanism begins then is with a critique of humanism.

The main aspect of Eliot's anti-humanism lies in its dissatisfaction with the edification of the human subject as morally and mentally enlightened. He penned his critiques of humanism in three essays that were published between 1928 and 1930. In the first of these essays, 'The Humanism of Irving Babbitt', Eliot argues that situating the human at the pinnacle of humanist philosophy potentially threatens to skew the moral compass of this philosophy and its followers. Eliot disavows the notion of an inner 'moral check', or an innate human tendency toward doing that which is morally correct, a notion which Irving Babbitt believed would guide the conduct of the humanist subject. In contrast, Eliot argues that without a guiding force like religion, humanism is

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[1] Ihab Hassan, 'Prometheus as Performer: Toward a Posthumanist Culture?', *The Georgia Review* 31.4 (1977): 843.

[2] Cary Wolfe, *What Is Posthumanism*? (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), xvi.

[3] Wolfe, *What Is Posthumanism*?, xvi.

destined to fail: 'What is the higher will to will, if there is nothing either "anterior, exterior, or superior" to the individual?'[4] Eliot returns to this point in 'Second Thoughts about Humanism', the second of his essays on the subject, where he denounces how 'Humanism depends very heavily […] upon the tergiversations of the word "human"'.[5] Such dependence, in Eliot's mind, allowed humanists to blithely ignore the limitations and weaknesses of the human being, resulting in a weak moral compass and a foreclosing of the ways in which wisdom could be expanded beyond the limits of human intellect. Such critiques may be said to align Eliot with certain aspects of posthumanist thought and position him as a proto-posthumanist.

Eliot's critique of humanism arises out of a belief in the divine and in the necessity to re-think the notion of human consciousness. Eliot's turn away from humanism toward religion is at odds with many present-day discussions of posthumanism and may be equated more with a pre-humanist philosophy of belief. This distinction will be important later on in this article, where I discuss the de-centering of the human subject. But for now, the more salient point in Eliot's critique of humanism is what he reveals about the value of religious influence. In the last of the essays critiquing humanism, 'Religion without Humanism', while still making some concessions to the critical value of humanist philosophy, Eliot asserts that religion still holds a superior position in situating the human experience. In Eliot's view, one of the valuable teachings of religious training rests in its disciplinary function, which allows for the individual to expand the limits of his or her consciousness. Religion requires a disciplining of the mind, a 'most terrible concentration and askesis', that enables the religious subject to seek an understanding or wisdom beyond the limits of human perception.[6] The human mind alone, far from the emancipatory claims of Enlightenment rationale, is limited in it faculties. Eliot notes, 'it is to the immense credit of Hulme that he found out for himself that there is an *absolute* to which Man can *never* attain'.[7] The absolute of which Eliot speaks suggests his belief in a wisdom that lies outside the perceivable realms of human intellect or even consciousness and correlates with what Jūratė Levina identifies as the presence in *Four Quartets* of an 'absolute consciousness of God that apprehends all the universe'.[8] Such notions of the absolute and of God might indeed seem at odds with a posthumanist worldview that perceives the world and human consciousness as a network of environmental interactions that are not overseen by any higher power. However, as Elaine Graham points out, one can detect strains of religiosity 'within discourses and representations of posthumanism'.[9] Rather than define religion as a belief in a divine being, Graham argues for the definition of religion as a 'symbolic system' that has as its core concern the human search for a 'transcendent

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[4] T.S. Eliot, 'The Humanism of Irving Babbit', in *The Complete Prose of T.S. Eliot: The Critical Edition: Literature, Politics, Belief, 1927-1929*, eds. Frances Dickey, Jennifer Formichelli, and Ronald Schuchard (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015), 459.

[5] T.S. Eliot, 'Second Thoughts about Humanism', in *The Complete Prose of T.S. Eliot: The Critical Edition: Literature, Politics, Belief, 1927-1929,* eds. Frances Dickey, Jennifer Formichelli, and Ronald Schuchard (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015), 617.

[6] T.S. Eliot, 'Religion without Humanism', in *Humanism and America: Essays on the Outlook of Modern Civilisation,* ed. Norman Foerster (New York: Farrar and Rinehart, 1930), 110.

[7] Eliot, 'Second Thoughts', 620.

[8] Jūratė Levina, 'Speaking the Unnamable: A Phenomenology of Sense in T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*', *Journal of Modern Literature* 36.3 (2013): 202.

[9] Elaine Graham, 'Religion and Posthumanism', *Critical Posthumanism*, available at http://criticalposthumanism.net/?page_id=498#_ftn2 [accessed October 6, 2016].

meaning' that lies beyond the boundaries of human experience.[10] With regard to Eliot, transcendent meaning constitutes the unattainable *absolute*. Rather than signifying a destination or state of being that the human can reach, the absolute, I contend, points to the existence of alternate forms of consciousness that exceed the capabilities of and are unrecognizable to the human. In Eliot, the notion of an absolute consciousness serves to outline the limits of human consciousness and drives us to recognize that consciousness is not necessarily a solely *human* characteristic.

Eliot's conception of how religious training can discipline the mind and grant it access to that which lies beyond normal human consciousness in some ways harkens back to his earlier philosophies about the poetic process, as outlined in 'Tradition and the Individual Talent'. The language that Eliot uses to describe this 'most terrible concentration and askesis' resonates with his descriptions of the concentration required by the poetic process: 'It is not the "greatness" the intensity, of the emotions, the components, but the intensity of the artistic process, the pressure, so to speak, under which the fusion [of words and images] takes place, that counts'.[11] The emphasis on *process* here, rather than on the individualized experience of the poet's personal emotions, is important because the process of poetic production becomes for Eliot a sort of ritualistic habit akin to that of intense religious concentration. This implies that like religious concentration, the artistic process can involve a kind of spiritual refinement that allows the poet to open up to the receiving of wisdom.

In *Four Quartets*, Eliot invokes religious concentration as a necessary step in striving toward, to use Jūratė Levina's term, absolute consciousness. This intense concentration requires a process of self-annihilation in order for the speaker of the poem to shed any personal attachments of the self. This process of self-annihilation begins in 'Burnt Norton' when Eliot calls on the subject to 'descend lower/ descend only, into the world of perpetual solitude,/ world not world, but that which is not world, internal darkness, deprivation, desiccation of the world of sense,/ evacuation of the world of fancy, inoperancy of the world of spirit'.[12] Discussing the historical and religious contexts of these lines, Cleo McNelly Kearns argues that they invoke the 'via negativa of certain Christian traditions, notably those associated with the Victorines and with the Spanish mystics'.[13] The via negativa, or the theological method of describing the divine through descriptions of what it is *not*, allows the speaker in the poem to eschew language that posits a predetermined notion of the absolute. From a posthumanist perspective, the via negativa offers a way to describe consciousness in a way that does not rely upon a language that ties consciousness to human faculties. The allusion to the Victorines and the Spanish mystics, furthermore, harkens back to Eliot's critique of the limitations of the human in 'Religion without Humanism'. In that essay, Eliot argues that only through the intense concentration of religious discipline, can 'men like the forest sages, and the desert sages, and finally the Victorines and John of the Cross and (in his fashion) Ignatius *really mean what they say*. Only those have the right to talk of

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[10] Graham, 'Religion and Posthumanism'.

[11] T.S. Eliot, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', in *The Complete Prose of T.S. Eliot: The Critical Edition: The Perfect Critic, 1919-1926,* eds. Anthony Cuda and Ronald Schuchard (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press and Faber & Faber Ltd., 2014), 109.

[12] T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971), 15. Hereafter abbreviated as *FQ*, with page refences between brackets.

[13] Cleo McNelly Kearns, *T.S. Eliot and Indic Traditions: A Study in Poetry and Belief* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 237.

discipline who have looked into the Abyss'.[14] Only by annihilating the self can the subject begin to move toward that ineffable notion of a consciousness that lies beyond human experience.

In *Four Quartets*, the striving toward wisdom through the invocation of religious concentration constitutes a decisive movement away from humanism, and here, the poetic process itself becomes analogous to the process of intense concentration that Eliot reveres in the sages. Wisdom, or absolute consciousness, is 'at the still point of the turning world', where there is a 'grace of sense, a white light still and moving', where 'a new world/ and the old [are] made explicit, understood in the completion of its partial ecstasy, the resolution of its partial horror' (*FQ*, 15). The 'still point' represents the absolute, Levina's 'absolute consciousness', a place or state of wisdom never fully perceivable by the human subject, but toward which the self must constantly strive. In a posthumanist sense, this absolute consciousness is the manifestation of a consciousness that is distinctly different in form from, and even incomprehensible to, limited human consciousness. The poem can only attempt to describe this alternate form of consciousness through paradoxical language, as a state of being where one is 'neither flesh nor fleshless', a place where there is 'neither arrest nor movement', a temporal juncture where 'past and future are gathered' (*FQ*, 15). This absolute consciousness is fluid and unfixed ('And do not call it fixity', (*FQ*, 15) the poem warns). It represents a form of consciousness that is incomprehensible, with all of its paradoxes, to the human. But 'there the dance is' (*FQ*, 15)—it is toward this 'still point' that the speaker must strive. What is important is not attaining this state of absolute consciousness, but *striving* towards it. This movement toward wisdom, in Eliot's view, can transpire through the poetic process. Again, the emphasis here is on *process*: 'only by the form, the pattern, / can words or music reach/ the stillness, as a Chinese jar still/ moves perpetually in its stillness' (*FQ*, 19). This is important because as Eliot says, it is not the words that matter, for 'words strain,/ crack and sometimes break […] decay with imprecision [and] will not stay in place' (*FQ*, 19). Even 'the poetry does not matter' (*FQ*, 26). It is only through the pattern and form of poetry, and only through the poetic process that the speaker can hope to move toward the 'still point'. Like the poet in 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', and like the religious sages of whom Eliot speaks in his critiques of humanism, the speaker in *Four Quartets* must shed any pre-configured notions of self and consciousness in order to move forward to the 'still point'.

De-centering the Human

Posthumanist theory draws attention to the de-centering of the human subject through what Wolfe identifies as the human's 'imbrication in technical, medical, informatics and economic networks'.[15] Innovations in technology, particularly, in the area of artificial intelligence, have opened up new ways of understanding consciousness and of what it is that constitutes the human.[16] The effect of these innovations has been to de-center the

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[14] Eliot, 'Religion without Humanism', 110.

[15] Wolfe, *What Is Posthumanism*?, xv.

[16] Hassan observes that '[a]rtificial intelligences, from the humblest calculator to the transcendent computer, help to transform the image of man, the concept of the human' (Hassan, 'Prometheus as Performer', 846).

human, and, simultaneously, to expose how the positioning of the human at the center always has been predicated on myths of human autonomy and agency. Human intelligence is neither the highest, nor even the most effective form of cognitive thinking, and the autonomy of the human subject, proclaimed by reason of intellect, proves a myth when considering the dependence of the human on its environmental factors. As Wolfe notes, posthumanism 'names the embodiment and embeddedness of the human being in […] its biological [… and] also its technological world'.[17] The human being does not develop autonomously and with absolute agency over the course of its own development; rather, it develops in response to and with reliance upon the environment.

The possibility of artificial intelligence and of thinking machines that rival human consciousness was perhaps not as pressing an issue for Eliot as it is for us today. But Eliot did nevertheless witness a different kind of de-centering of the human subject through war, and it is this that constitutes the driving force behind *Four Quartets*. Eliot wrote the *Four Quartets* as a response to growing social unrest and political upheaval in the run up to World War II, and the events following the Munich conference in September 1938 particularly disturbed Eliot in 'a way from which one does not recover', leading him to 'doubt of the validity of a civilization'.[18] The frustration that Eliot feels over the difficult yet pressing need for crafting a new vision of moral consciousness, comes out in 'East Coker', where he bemoans the last 'twenty years largely wasted/ the years of *l'entre deux guerres*/ trying to learn to use words, and every attempt/ is a wholly new start, and a different kind of failure' (*FQ*, 30). But *Four Quartets* is more than a space for Eliot to vent his frustrations over the war. In these poems, he also frames a new way of thinking about the human position, using the language of poetry to understand human conflict and the de-centering of the human subject.

Eliot's response to this de-centering of the human subject is not one of loss or of regret for a bygone era. Instead, *Four Quartets* allows Eliot to make the somber observation that the presumed autonomy and supremacy of the human being has always been an illusion. In 'Burnt Norton', the human being is set against a vast cosmic scale, and the plight of human suffering is shown to be but an infinitesimal occurrence. The wounds of war, 'the trilling wire in the blood/ [that] sings below inveterate scars', are dispassionately described as sacrificial wounds, 'appeasing long forgotten wars' (*FQ*, 15). The human, here, is not a creature raised above nature, but, instead, a reflection of nature. The blood that courses through human veins in 'the dance along the artery/ the circulation of the lymph', is part of a larger cosmic design 'figured in the drift of stars' (*FQ*, 15). In this cosmic dance, the human being witnesses, from 'above the moving tree', the clash of the 'boarhound and the boar', but then sees how it is itself also 'reconciled among the stars' (*FQ*, 15). Whether conflict arises from a human cause, as in the case of war, or occurs within the so-called natural world, as with the boarhound and the boar, the cyclical nature of conflict is shown to be part of a vast cosmic design. Read from a posthumanist perspective, these images serve to de-center the human subject and to re-situate it as embedded within wider biological and cosmological designs.

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[17] Wolfe, *What Is Posthumanism?*, xv.
[18] T.S. Eliot, *The Idea of a Christian Society* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1949), 50-51.

The Self as Empty Center

For humanists, consciousness is inherently linked to the human self. Indeed, for Descartes, consciousness is proof of self, *cogito ergo sum*. But in posthumanism, the yoking of self and consciousness is often debunked. The self is not viewed as a stable, fixed and static entity, but rather, as Hassan states, as 'an empty "place" where many selves come to mingle and depart'.[19] The self exists and develops only through interaction with an environment that is constantly being negotiated as a perceived internal or external part of this same self.

Wolfe describes this process of self-formation as autopoiesis and as taking place through a process of 'functional differentiation'. Eschewing the problematic notions of 'self' or 'subject' — notions that are intricately linked to human experience — Wolfe draws upon the terminology of second order systems theory to describe this process. Pointing to the etymological roots of 'autopoiesis' — from the Greek αὐτο- (auto-), 'self'; and ποίησις (poiesis), 'creation, production' — Wolfe re-conceptualizes thinking as a system of autopoietic formulation that develops through contact with and processing of a system's environment. This process, as Wolfe describes it, involves 'functional differentiation', in which the system interacts with its environment and integrates or rejects features of that environment in order to determine the parameters of its 'self'. Wolfe contends that 'functional differentiation itself determines the posthumanist *form* of meaning, reason and communication by untethering it from its moorings in the individual, subjectivity and consciousness'.[20] Consequently, functional differentiation also calls attention to the ways in which the process of meaning-making is not necessarily a uniquely human characteristic. Functional differentiation is, in a sense, paradoxical, as it relies on a momentarily stable figuration of the 'self' in the process of generation, but that 'self' is presumed to be an empty-centre (not the Cartesian ego) that is defined only through processes of environmental interaction. Wolfe posits, moreover, that far from arising solely out of exclusion and rejection of the environment, functional differentiation in fact operates on a thematics of 'openness from closure', which continuously exposes the system to increasingly diverse environments.

In his early philosophical writings about subject-object relations and the formation of point of view, Eliot develops theories similar to such posthumanist notions of the self and consciousness as constituted through environmental interaction. These ideas were developed during the course of his study at Merton College, Oxford University, and later formed the basis of his doctoral dissertation, *Knowledge and Experience in the Philosophy of F. H. Bradley*. Although these writings pre-date the publication of *Four Quartets* by nearly three decades, they are useful for providing insight into the ontological concerns that interested Eliot. Eliot's observations begin with the assertion that the subject is formed in relation to the object: 'I am aware of it as object, in a sense, but not yet aware of it as an object; for in becoming aware that it is an object, I become aware that I am a subject, and its objectivity is relative to a subject'.[21] The subject, in

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[19] Hassan, 'Prometheus as Performer', 845.

[20] Wolfe, *What Is Posthumanism?*, xx.

[21] T. S. Eliot, 'Objects: Real, Unreal, Ideal, and Imaginary', in *The Complete Prose of T.S. Eliot: The Critical Edition: Apprentice Years, 1905-1918,* eds. Jewel Spears Brooker and Ronald Schuchard (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), 169.

Eliot's view, is formulated only in its relation to an object, much like the functional differentiation that Wolfe views as intrinsic to autopoiesis. Eliot concedes that in order to conceive of objects, one must posit in the first place that there are materials that can be considered external to the subject, but this in no way indicates that a concrete subject exists prior to the self-recursive process of subject-object formation. It is the process of the reciprocal relation between the subject and object that creates their distinction from one another. Subject-object formation, Eliot continues, is ongoing and recursive. 'The element in the experience which we shall credit to the side of the subject, and that which we may accredit to the object', he explains, 'remains undetermined and subject to indefinite revision at the hands of circumstance'.[22] As perceived by Eliot, this process is ongoing and continues indefinitely.

Eliot's philosophy of subject-object formation is crucial to understanding his views of how consciousness develops. Eliot's terminology is interesting here because he eschews use of the term 'subject' or 'self', choosing instead to refer to the subject as a 'finite centre'. The finite centre is itself an empty space, and it is finite only in the sense that it is 'exclusive', formulated as it is through its interaction with objects in its environment. Out of the finite centre, a point of view about the world (or what we might call consciousness) develops. Eliot suggests further that this 'world only *is* a world by its appearance in finite centres'; 'there is no element of pure content or of pure objectivity in the world as it appears to the individual which you can tear off and exhibit; for the "outside world" and the individual's world are constantly rearranging themselves in every new context'.[23] The recursive process that Eliot observes in the making of meaning suggests that not only is this point of view dependent on an interaction with that which appears to be outside of it; this point of view changes and is re-formulated in every new instance of interaction with the world-as-object.

Eliot's philosophies of subject-object relations and of consciousness formation permeate the structure of *Four Quartets*. Levina notes that in the first scene of 'Burnt Norton', where the unidentified speaker leads the reader into the rose garden, the polarizing tension between the 'perceiving eye' and the 'object it perceives' (the ultimate vision of the roses) underscores the reciprocal relationship between subject and object.[24] The thrush leads the reader and the speaker to the garden, where both reader and speaker perceive 'roses/ [that] had the look of flowers that are looked at' (*FQ*, 14).The roses in the garden are only identifiable as such, and as objects, through the act of being looked upon. On a meta-textual level, too, the reading experience plays upon the same polarity of subject-object formation. As Levina states, 'the interpreting consciousness', that is, the consciousness of the reader, 'is not necessarily found *in a poem* […] but is situated *in front of a poem*, facing the poem's text'.[25] The notion of the self or subject as an empty center that is formed through interaction with objects, and whose consciousness develops via these ongoing interactions, is therefore both a thematic and structural element in *Four Quartets*, and it is through this dynamic that Eliot is able to engage the reader. The reader is perceived here as an empty center, and it is through the reading of the poem that he or she is able to become part of the process of

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[22] Eliot, 'Objects', 172.

[23] T.S. Eliot, 'Finite Centres and Points of View', in *The Complete Prose of T.S. Eliot: The Critical Edition: Apprentice Years, 1905-1918,* eds. Jewel Spears Brooker and Ronald Schuchard (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), 176.

[24] Levina, 'Speaking the Unnamable', 205.

[25] Levina, 'Speaking the Unnamable', 198-199.

autopoiesis that is demonstrated in *Four Quartets*. This dynamic allows Eliot to envision a re-configuring of the reader's political consciousness into one that is more morally and socially responsible.

Autopoiesis/ Re-configuring Consciousness

Eliot's conception of the self as an empty center is necessary for his ultimate goal of producing impersonal poetry, an objective that he seems to have taken up with determination and as a moral action. The purpose behind the intense concentration of the poet, like that of the religious sages, is to cleanse the self of personal attachments and to produce the kind of impersonal poetry that Eliot saw as the true form of poetry: 'Poetry is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality'.[26] Doing away with the strappings of egotistic attachments and political biases, the poet can become a messenger to the people. But in doing so, the poet does not become some all-important agent; instead, 'the poet's mind [...serves as] a receptacle for seizing and storing up numberless feelings, phrases, images, which remain there until all the particles which can unite to form a new compound are present together'.[27] Similar to the posthumanist conception of the self as an empty center, as articulated by both Hassan and by Wolfe, Eliot conceives of the poet as an empty center, a receptacle, whose role is to be open to all experiences until the accumulation of those experiences is ready to be expressed as poetry. The poetry that emerges, rather than being the product or will of an individual poet, is generated through the components that accumulate within the poet. The poetry, then, is also self-generated of its own accord. Sharon Cameron notes that the effect of impersonality, figured in the depersonalized voices in 'The Dry Salvages', signals that 'while perceptions, memories, emotions are developed in relation to one another, they are not developed in relation to a motivating center'.[28] The presence of an absolute consciousness in this regard does not constitute a motivating center because it is not the source from which poetry emerges in *Four Quartets*. The phrases, experiences, words, images, etc. that constitute *Four Quartets* are not willed even by the unidentified speaker of the poem, and as Cameron suggests, they are not even presented as a display of the poet's own intentions. Instead, the poet is a receptacle, whose hand allows for the poetry to emerge of its own accord. As a poetic approach, impersonality denies a central agent, human or otherwise, so that what rests at the heart of *Four Quartets* is also an empty center. Around this empty center, the poems develop as experiments in the formation of consciousness.

It is this impersonality that also allows Eliot to present poetry as an engagement in moral action. In 'Little Gidding', Eliot speculates on the movement from the personal to the impersonal and the liberating experience of reaching the impersonal. The self might begin with the personal, with an 'attachment to self and to things and to persons', but ultimately, through an annihilation of itself, it can be detached from these moorings (*FQ*, 55). The impersonal here should not be mistaken for 'indifference', which, as Anita Patterson notes, is a 'cardinal vice of human nature in Buddhism'.[29] Indifference

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[26] Eliot, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', 111.
[27] Eliot, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', 108.
[28] Sharon Cameron, '"The Sea's Throat": T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*', in *Impersonality: Seven Essays*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 145.
[29] Anita Patterson, 'T.S. Eliot and Transpacific Modernism', *American Literary History* 27.4 (2015): 676.

marks an inability for compassion, and in 'Little Gidding', indifference is a kind of 'death'. The personal, the 'love of country', does play a small role, but what 'begins as attachment to our own field of action' becomes less important in the movement toward the universal and impersonal, so that ultimately, personal attachment becomes an 'action of little importance' (*FQ*, 46). It is with the impersonality of poetry, where the poet becomes a 'receptacle', that the process of constructing a morally and socially responsible consciousness can begin.

In *Four Quartets*, after the annihilation of the self is foregrounded in 'Burn Norton', the self that is presented as speaker/poet is ready to realize its autopoiesis. Throughout *Four Quartets,* the speaker and reader are brought into contact with multiple and often contradictory belief systems. It is this interaction and engagement that structures the *Four Quartets* from the very beginning. In the case of 'Burnt Norton', the visions of the pre-lapsarian garden ('our first world') and of the 'lotos rose' suggest the confluence of Christian and Buddhist imagery, while in 'The Dry Salvages', the speaker, unmoored from any personal anchors, is cast out to sea — a 'sea [that] has many voices, many gods and many voices' (*FQ*, 36). With the multi-vocal sound of this sea in the background, the speaker reflects in particular on the wisdom of Krishna and the god's teaching that 'the way up is the way down, the way forward is the way back' (*FQ*, 41). It is through this interaction with oppositional or even contradictory beliefs that the poem moves toward a form of wisdom. The process of autopoiesis here becomes a process of *auto-poetics*.

In 'Little Gidding', the reader is shown to be a part of this autopoietic process. Returned to the streets of London, the speaker meets the 'compound ghost', whose immateriality allows it to speak to both the unnamed pilgrim of the poem and the reader. The ghost's fluidity, described as 'a face still forming' with features that 'recall both one and many', changes in its relationality to the speaker (who is also fluid, being 'still the same, / knowing myself yet being someone other) (*FQ*, 53). The ghost's fluidity is a reminder that the self is an empty center, and the fact that the ghost is composed of compound features that change in relation to the speaker suggests that the self is only constituted in relation to and interaction with its environment. As Sharon Cameron argues, the compound ghost is 'constituted through reiterated dissolutions', and for this reason, 'he is a model for a person's unmaking'.[30] But beyond this, and more specifically, the ghost also models the *reader's* own unmaking and re-making. As Katrin Röder argues, the intertextuality and intra-textuality that structure *Four Quartets* in fact 'encourages readers to participate in infinite processes of meaning construction through acts of imaginative reading'.[31] Through the act of reading and imagining the self-annihilations and autopoiesis that are modeled throughout the poem, the reader is himself or herself also engaged in an autopoietic process of creation.

In the final passages of *Four Quartets*, the enactment of autopoiesis becomes more than an experiment in re-envisioning notions of the self and consciousness: autopoiesis becomes a necessary step toward the creation of a morally and socially responsible consciousness. The compound ghost articulates the importance of autopoiesis to both the speaker and the reader. Moving between the land of the living and the land of the dead, the ghost finds that 'the passage now presents no hindrance'

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[30] Cameron, '"The Sea's Throat"', 154.
[31] Katrin Röder, 'Reparative Reading, Post-structuralist Hermeneutics and T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*', *Anglia* 132.1 (2014): 64.

(*FQ*, 54). The connotation of 'passage' is two-fold and refers to both the passage between the living and the dead, and the passage as a textual divide between the poet and reader. Through this passage, the ghost/Eliot-as-poet addresses the reader, saying that the only way to move toward the 'still point' where wisdom lies is to annihilate the self in that 'refining fire/ where you must move in measure, like a dancer' (*FQ*, 54-5). The use of the second-person pronoun is doubly layered, pointing both to the unnamed pilgrim of the poem and the reader. The ghost invites both to 'move in measure', suggesting here the 'poetic measure' of the poetic process. It is this movement, of continual self-renewal while striving toward the 'still point', that becomes the moral action. The reader must continually strive in this movement, and as with 'Little Gidding', where the self appears as a fluid figure ('See, now they vanish,/ the faces and places, with the self which, as it could, loved them,/ to become renewed, transfigured, in another pattern'), he or she can never presume to be fully formed and can only exist in a process of constant becoming (*FQ*, 55). The poetic process is the textual representation of this movement, where 'every phrase and every sentence is an end and a beginning, / every poem an epitaph. And any action/ is a step to the block, to the fire, down the sea's throat/ or to an illegible stone: and that is where we start' (*FQ*, 58). The path toward creating a morally responsible consciousness, these passages suggest, is to always be in the process of autopoiesis. As the speaker says in 'The Dry Salvages', it is 'not fare well, but fare forward, voyagers' (*FQ*, 42).

Conclusion

It has been my hope to show how T.S. Eliot, from his early philosophical writings and leading up to the culmination of those ideas in *Four Quartets*, anticipated posthumanist notions of the self and consciousness. Eliot's critiques of humanism, his reaction to the de-centering of the human, the notion of the self as an empty center, and his philosophies of the ways in which the self and consciousness develop are thematically and structurally interwoven in *Four Quartets* and arguably make Eliot a proto-posthumanist. Drawing out the posthumanist strains of Eliot's work helps us consider his poetry in a new light and reveals how far ahead of his time Eliot's philosophies truly were. It also demonstrates how Eliot's ideas and his poetry can remain at the forefront of our present-day understanding of consciousness.

The convergence of posthumanism and Eliot's work in *Four Quartets* has much to offer present-day discussions about the human and society. The larger scope of Eliot's project was to point the way toward a more morally and socially responsible way of thinking, particularly as he gazed upon the ruins of war while writing the later three poems of *Four Quartets*. That he used strategies that anticipate posthumanism for the realization of this broader goal suggests that posthumanism also has a central role to play in our contemporary global society where issues of personal attachment (à la nationalism) and the conflict of diverse and sometimes even contradictory belief systems lie at the heart of international conflicts. The notion of autopoiesis, which undergirds Eliot's project in *Four Quartets*, demonstrates the value of continual self-formation as a way of broadening one's understanding of the world. A continued posthumanist engagement with Eliot's *Four Quartets*, I contend, could suggest ways of going beyond mere theoretical formulations of posthumanism to arrive at a more robust understanding of socially responsible ways of thinking and being.

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„Tot înainte, călătorilor”: Ajungând la postumanism în poemul *Four Quartets* al lui T.S. Eliot

Rezumat

Termenul postumanism nu este neapărat utilizat în discuțiile teoretice și critice despre scriitorul modernist T.S. Eliot, însă argumentul prezentului articol este că poezia acestui scriitor poate fi abordată dintr-o perspectivă postumanistă. Criticile umanismului, descentrarea umanului, noțiunea de subiect ca centru gol și reconfigurarea conștiinței sunt axe tematice unde postumanismul și opera lui Eliot *Four Quartets* pot fi considerate convergente. Aceste convergențe arată cum Eliot ar putea fi privit ca precursor al anumitor aspecte ale gândirii postumaniste. Articolul argumentează că strategiile postumaniste servesc unui scop mai larg al proiectului lui T. S. Eliot din *Four Quartets*, prin punctarea modului de a atinge o conștiință responsabilă atât din punct de vedere moral cât și din punct de vedere social. Tocmai această conștiință pe care Eliot o imaginează ca răspuns la devastările produse de război sau neliniștile sociale este ceea ce se poate aplica mișcărilor sociale din societatea globală a zilelor noastre.