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## Looking into the Heart of Light: Considering the Poetic Event in the Work of T. S. Eliot and Martin Heidegger

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DOMINIC GRIFFITHS

LOOKING INTO THE HEART OF LIGHT: CONSIDERING  
THE POETIC EVENT IN THE WORK OF T. S. ELIOT  
AND MARTIN HEIDEGGER

**Abstract.** No one is quite sure what happened to T. S. Eliot in that rose garden. What we do know is that it formed the basis for *Four Quartets*, arguably the greatest English poem written in the twentieth century. Luckily it turns out that Martin Heidegger, when not pondering the meaning of being, spent a great deal of time thinking and writing about the kind of event that Eliot experienced. This essay explores how Heidegger developed the concept of *Ereignis* (“event”) which, in the context of Eliot’s poetry, helps us understand an encounter with the “heart of light” a little better.

Things are not so comprehensible and expressible as one would mostly have us believe; most events are inexpressible, taking place in a realm which no word has ever entered, and more inexpressible than all else are works of art, mysterious existences, the life of which, while ours passes away, endures.

—Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet*<sup>1</sup>

I

IN T. S. ELIOT’S poetry we encounter, on occasion, a moment that defies our ordinary experience of the world. Yet his poetic language conveys the very profundity of this experience in a way that opens it up for us and challenges the limits of our ordinary language, reminding us, to use a phrase from the later Heidegger, “what poets are for.”<sup>2</sup> Eliot calls this moment many things throughout his life, “On the doorstep of the Absolute,”<sup>3</sup> “the bewildering minute,”<sup>4</sup> “the unattended / Moment,”<sup>5</sup>

“looking into the heart of light” (CPP, p. 62), “the moment in and out of time” (CPP, p. 190). His poetry, particularly *Four Quartets*, can be understood as a testament to this moment—an exploration of its meaning, an account of the bewilderment it produces and the transformation it inspires. Once the moment passes, it leaves us with questions about the meaning of our existence and finitude, and brings us toward an examination of things done and things left undone in our lives.

Understanding this moment is something that Martin Heidegger is also attentive to. For him, the moment is understood as an event—one that “transports” and “enchants.”<sup>6</sup> His own thinking is informed by the great Nietzschean Event, announced by Zarathustra’s madman who proclaims the “death of God.”<sup>7</sup> Nietzsche’s words cast a long shadow and Heidegger’s project—deconstructing the history of philosophy—is given its impetus by continuing the Nietzschean maxim, “That which is falling should also be pushed!” (Z, p. 226). The event of the death of God, for Heidegger, heralded the death of metaphysics too. His lifelong dedication to *Die Seinsfrage*, the “question of Being,” was motivated by the knowledge that our prolonged metaphysical substitute for Being, “God,” was no longer an obstacle. Heidegger’s aim was to uncover the meaning of this difficult, intractable word “Being” in order to think authentically and genuinely about existence itself and its *event*-full nature.

A point of intersection for Eliot and Heidegger is trying to understand, in the language of poetry and philosophy, the meaning of “the event.” Both recognize the significance of the moment that *irrupts* into ordinary experience, and reveals a tantalizing glimpse of a reality so full, and yet so mysterious, that it remains almost beyond articulation. The event of the “death of God” prompts a search for a new grounding, authenticating human experience. This search was common to modernist thinkers and artists, among whom both Eliot and Heidegger can be included. Charles Taylor, via James Joyce, interprets this search for the meaning of the “event” as forming part of the Modernist “epiphany,” claiming that it remains a central notion in the study of the work of art. For Taylor the work of art is “the locus of a manifestation which brings us into the presence of something which is otherwise inaccessible, and which is of the highest moral or spiritual significance; a manifestation, moreover, which also defines or completes something, even as it reveals.”<sup>8</sup>

Twentieth-century art problematizes the notion of epiphany by shifting its locus onto the actual artwork itself, unlike the Romantics for whom the artwork, as a symbol, signifies something definite and outside the artwork, such as unspoiled nature or human emotion.<sup>9</sup> In the case of

modern art, such as Modernist literature or nonrepresentational visual art, it is often difficult to say just what is being celebrated.<sup>10</sup> For example, the encounter with the hyacinth girl and “heart of light” in Eliot’s *The Waste Land* (CPP, p. 62), which I shall discuss shortly, presents just such a difficulty, offering a liminal moment that defies description and yet remains unavoidably real.

What is the meaning of this encounter, this elusive, sought-after event, in the works of Heidegger and Eliot? To answer this question I will create a bridge between them, giving an overview of the development of the “event” in Heidegger’s work and then looking to the words of Eliot to complete the crossing.

## II

Part of the narrative of Heidegger’s account of Being is his attention to what he comes to call *Ereignis*. The direct translation of this common German word is “event,” but as this does not convey Heidegger’s meaning adequately, various alternatives have been proposed by translators, including “the event of appropriation” and “enownment.”<sup>11</sup> Like many of Heidegger’s terms, *Ereignis* is a formal indicator, a word to point to something in the nature of existence that defies accurate description in language but which cannot be ignored. The *Ereignis* experience offers a chance of understanding or at least appreciating the fact that there is something, rather than nothing, and that, every so often, for no apparent reason, we are made to encounter this givenness of being in a full and genuine way. Heidegger developed his notion of *Ereignis* gradually, his thought falling into three discernible stages: the early work, from 1919 until after the publication of *Being and Time* in 1927, explores the term phenomenologically;<sup>12</sup> some of the middle works, especially *Contributions to Philosophy (From Enowning)*, written between 1936 and 1938, attempt an evocation of *Ereignis* in florid, ambitious, and ultimately unsuccessful pseudomystical language;<sup>13</sup> and finally the later thought, which emerges about 1943, looks for the meaning of *Ereignis* in the poetry of those more poetically talented than himself.

The word *Ereignis* first appears briefly in Heidegger’s war emergency semester lecture course presented at the University of Freiburg at the beginning of 1919.<sup>14</sup> In this lecture Heidegger takes his students through a phenomenological investigation via the question “Is there something?” Underlying this investigation is an attempt to understand the nature of “total intuition,” the question serving as a mental incentive to allow

access to this “primordial experience” of the “something.” It prompts the conscious enacting of a Husserlian *epoché*—the bracketing of reality in such a way as to allow for its total “comprehension.”<sup>15</sup> What Heidegger concludes is that the interrogative question and the experience it provokes attain a “ground-laying and essential insight,” namely “the characterization of the lived experience as event [*Er-eignis*]<sup>16</sup>—meaningful, not thing-like” (TDP, p. 58).

Heidegger suggests that we do not relate to a “thing-like” part, the world itself (an object) to which the conscious experience of us (the subjects) is attached. Rather, the whole, undivided experience of the “something,” the “non-thingly character of all experiences whatsoever can be brought to full intuitive understanding” (TDP, p. 59). The individual “I,” the Cartesian subject, is *appropriated* by this experience such that it becomes *part* of a being experiencing “the something,” that is, experiencing being. This “total intuition” is thus what gives us access to “primordial experience.” In the early Heidegger’s phenomenological approach, this is the *Ereignis* event. It is an experience of the ground of beings which reveals human existence as a distinct temporal manifestation of this ground, enabling us to consciously perceive “the something” or, to express it clumsily, to become aware of “the event eventing.”

The second early instance of “the event” in Heidegger’s work occurs in the next semester course of 1919. This discussion centers on the “situation in the life-context.” This “situation” has a certain unity or unitary tendency in normal experience. (This is a precursory description of that ordinary experience of being-in-the-world which Heidegger will develop substantially in *Being and Time*.) We are, for the most part, always in our own situation. But then Heidegger says it is possible for this situational context to dissolve. What occurs is that our “nearness” to the situation, our unitary wholeness and involvement with it, dissipates and a *relationlessness* emerges between the objects that make up the situation.

The example he discusses is ascending to the top of a mountain to see the sunrise, at the sight of which we are “totally given over to the event” (TDP, pp. 173–74). In this concentrated, intense experience of the sunrise the “dissolution of the situational context” occurs; the situational character disappears and the “unity of the situation is exploded” (TDP, p. 174). We experience the event “eventing,” but in such a way that it ruptures everyday experience. Heidegger’s description has many phenomenological similarities to Eliot’s own poetic events, such as the encounter with the hyacinth girl from *The Waste Land* and the moment

in the rose garden described in the first movement of “Burnt Norton,” which opens his *Four Quartets*.

In *Being and Time*, published in 1927, many of these ideas from Heidegger’s earlier lectures are merged. The term “*Ereignis*” appears in the book, but in its normal German usage: to refer to ordinary events, such as natural events or the arrival of a friend (BT, pp. 193, 294). It lacks the special connotation apparent in other earlier texts. However, another important term does appear in *Being and Time*, namely *Augenblick*, the “moment of vision” (BT, p. 376). Elsewhere Heidegger explores a complex etymology, which shows that both these words—*Ereignis* and *Augenblick*—in fact share the same root.<sup>17</sup> In the language of *Being and Time* the moment of vision is characterized by our coming to be authentically resolute. By this Heidegger means that the self is “summoned” from its “lostness” in the “they” and grasps itself (BT, p. 345). The “they” [*Das Man*] is Heidegger’s diagnoses of our modern, conforming “herd” instinct—what he calls the “levelling down” of an individual’s own possibilities to those dictated by public opinion.<sup>18</sup>

When I am resolute, I “see” the “situation” I am in, meaning that the current “involvement-character of the circumstances discloses itself to the Self,” and I perceive that I am “there” (BT, p. 346). I attain a transparency and insight into my own being-in-the-world in the “moment of vision.” The “moment of vision” thus affects our temporal relationship with our ordinary existence—we “see” our mortal selves held out to death, which crystallizes our past, present, and future such that we can “see” our fate, recognizing possibilities for our lives, both chosen and unchosen. The theme of time is evidently, in *Being and Time*, a central concern and Heidegger’s focus here is on our futural temporality as the most important of the three ecstatical ways in which our temporality is grounded. We always project ourselves into the future, but the choices of that future are determined largely by the past. Coming to be authentic in our lives is recognizing how this temporal relationship works and our personal *Ereignis*, as a “moment of vision,” gives this insight into our own existence. In this moment our fate is made apparent to us, and our coming to be authentic is a process of reconciling ourselves to this fate.

Authentic recognition also forms a core part of *Four Quartets* and the opening of “Burnt Norton” provides a significant poetic account of the themes that the “moment of vision,” undergone in the rose garden, generates. Because of the fateful nature of the *Ereignis* event, temporality itself is called into question.

When we move forward with Heidegger some twenty years, to *Contributions to Philosophy (From Enowning)*, we encounter a very different way of thinking about the relationship between ourselves, being, time, and the *Ereignis* event. This can be called the “middle” Heidegger, who develops his own hermetic mystical insights centered on Being (*Seyn*) as part of what is known as his “turn,” a radical shift from the positions of his early work. What unlocks these insights now is the Event, “*das Ereignis*.” This singular “Event” is a momentary appropriation and transformation that shifts us beyond the confines of our everyday existence and radically transforms our understanding of Being, making it appear “un-metaphysical” and giving us insights that can “restore beings from within the truth of *Seyn*” (CF, p. 8). It is a moment of “transport” and “enchantment” and has both individual/personal and communal/historical ramifications for human existence.

For the middle Heidegger, the *Ereignis* event radically transforms human destiny. We might think here of Christ’s birth, God’s death, and now the waiting for the coming god that later Heidegger alludes to in *Der Spiegel* interview of 1966.<sup>19</sup> This is the singular “Event” and requires from us a “readiness to wait.”<sup>20</sup> *Contributions* is ambiguous, because by this “readiness to wait” Heidegger seems to mean the same attentiveness to authenticity and resoluteness in the face of fate that he describes in *Being and Time*; *Contributions* merely seems more doubtful that any but a small select group, “the few and the rare” (CP, p. 9), ever reach this insight. In this middle phase, then, Heidegger steps closest to claiming a kind of pseudomystical, gnostic role for the philosopher. This claim also perhaps accounts for the singularly difficult language in which *Contributions* is written, which is replete with desperately confusing puns and neologisms.<sup>21</sup> Since *das Ereignis* takes us to the margins of language, language has to be stretched to the limits of intelligibility to do it justice.

While writing *Contributions*, Heidegger had already begun what was to become a sustained dialogue with the poet Hölderlin, in whose poetry he found a “thoughtful confrontation with the revelation of Being [*Seyn*]” (EHP, p. 9). Heidegger soon realized that his own attempts at a similar confrontation in poetic language, to which *Contributions* bears witness, could safely be abandoned. Instead he began to focus his hermeneutic ability on interpreting the poetry of Hölderlin, who, as poet, was more “equipped” to deal with this struggle.

This is the third and final phase of Heidegger’s thought or, as it is widely known, the later Heidegger. The significant contribution made in this later work is *the role of the poet* in the Event. What the later Heidegger

discovers in the poetry of Hölderlin especially is that the poet's word "is the *Ereignis* of the holy."<sup>22</sup> The understanding of the Event itself remains in essence the same as in the earlier works, but now Heidegger realizes the significance of the work of art as the ultimate—and only adequate—human expression of this experience. The artist's genius is attunement to and ability to convey the *Ereignis*, which Heidegger comes to call "holy" because it transcends, enfolds, and grounds the ordinary. Since language is the "house of Being,"<sup>23</sup> the purest expression of art's capacity is poetry. An ontological tension always remains between the actual experience of *Ereignis* and its expression in words, but this tension is precisely the power of metaphor, and so of poetry itself. Poetic language used genuinely allows us, in the words of Wittgenstein, to feel "the world as a limited whole," which is his definition of the mystical.<sup>24</sup> The poet's words can compel us toward a perception of the world as something mysterious and holy because they offer the possibility of *Ereignis*, meaning the possibility of revealing the world *worlding*, and conveying what it means to witness and partake in this happening.

Thinking about Hölderlin and poetry in general, Heidegger writes that language "is not a tool at man's disposal, but the primal event [*Ereignis*] which disposes of the highest possibility of man's being" (EHP, p. 56). Because of this elevation of language to "Event" it is *language*, not mortals, that discloses Being. Mortals may speak language, but, in fact, "we are already letting language, *from within* language, speak to us, in language, of itself, saying its nature."<sup>25</sup> The nature of language shapes our reality; it is the "house of Being," and though we speak it, in fact, it speaks through us—"In its home man dwells" (LH, p. 217). The poet, in this scenario, occupies a central role because of his or her *nearness* to language. The poet experiences "an authority, a dignity of the word which nothing vaster and loftier can be thought . . . The poet experiences his [or her] poetic calling as a call to the word as the source, the bourn of Being" (NL, p. 66).

### III

The preceding discussion has offered a brief philosophical overview of the Event as it appears throughout Heidegger's corpus. Taking up the later Heidegger's charge that the poet's words are integral to the nature of discerning, expressing, and understanding the Event, I will now consider two highly significant moments in T. S. Eliot's poetry which illuminate how the poetic word can channel and further elucidate the



meaning of *Ereignis*. By way of introduction, I offer a brief overview of Eliot's attentiveness to these moments throughout his life, and how he was constantly trying to give them poetic and literary expression. One of his earliest poems, titled "Spleen," published in 1910, ends with the dramatic lines describing someone waiting "On the doorstep of the Absolute."<sup>26</sup> Continuing this theme of a powerful, mysterious encounter we find in another poem written in the same year, titled "Silence," (published posthumously in *Inventions of the March Hare*)<sup>27</sup> themes that suggest a sudden, intense moment of being:

Along the city streets	1
It is still high tide,	
Yet the garrulous waves of life	
Shrink and divide	
With a thousand incidents	5
Vexed and debated:—	
This is the hour for which we waited—	
This is the ultimate hour	
When life is justified.	
The seas of experience	10
That were so broad and deep	
So immediate and steep,	
Are suddenly still.	
You may say what you will,	
At such peace I am terrified.	15
There is nothing else beside. (IMH, p. 18)	

Lyndall Gordon interprets this poem as recounting some kind of profound experience, rare and difficult to articulate.<sup>28</sup> The temporal, constant becoming of reality, the dynamism of the "garrulous waves of life" (l. 3) experienced in the city streets, is subsumed somehow, stilled by the experience of something mysterious, "the hour for which we waited . . . the ultimate hour" (ll. 7–8). The timeless intersects with temporality and a glimpse of a "terrifying" peace is given (l. 15), which, somehow, gives life its justification. The poem is ambivalent. The experience of this silence is paradoxically peaceful and yet deeply unsettling, somehow like the experience of angst, which is caused precisely because of the experience of the nothing (BT, p. 231). This poem is very much in the lyric style, with a focus on the narrator's own intense inner experience, and is very suggestive of Heidegger's *Ereignis* encounter.

Some years later, in 1931, Eliot in an introduction to Blaise Pascal's apologetic *Pensées*<sup>29</sup> wrote a revealing sentence about mystical experience: "You may call it communion with the Divine, or you may call it a temporary crystallization of the mind" (SPE, p. 238). He offers an explanation that would satisfy both the religious and the skeptic, in the process suggesting how *Ereignis*, that moment of "crystallization," reaches to the deepest levels of human experience, where the most important questions of meaning, truth, and faith are confronted.

In a 1935 letter to the poet Stephen Spender, Eliot connects this kind of experience with art. He talks about what he calls the "bewondering minute" in the experience of reading a work of literature: "You don't really criticize any author to whom you have never surrendered yourself . . . Even just the bewildering minute counts; you have to give yourself up, and then recover yourself, and the third moment is having something to say, before you have wholly forgotten both surrender and recovery. Of course the self recovered is never the same as the self before it was given" (SPE, p. 13).

Eliot identifies three stages in this "bewondering": the surrender, the recovery, and then the need to express what has just taken place, to contextualize it in a meaningful way. He had previously described a similar experience in his essay on Dante (1929), where he writes that meeting a work of literature "is very much like our intenser experience of other human beings. There is a first, or an early moment which is unique, of shock and surprise, even of terror; a moment which can never be forgotten, but which is repeated integrally; and yet which would become destitute of significance if it did not survive in a large whole of experience; which survives inside a deeper and calmer feeling" (SPE, p. 14). The event is always part of the broader experience of a life; the task, after the recovery, is to remain attentive to how such an experience shapes that life and to articulate it.

Leonard Unger characterizes Eliot's understanding of this experience in a number of ways. Unger writes that it is something both obscure and peculiar that is neither uncommon nor restricted to a single period of history. It can be variously interpreted and may be considered significant beyond phenomenal and experiential details.<sup>30</sup> While these characterizations appear vague, they highlight the difficulty of trying to adequately express what such an event means. Evidently throughout his life and career as poet and critic Eliot was attuned to his own sense of *Ereignis*—of those moments of "intenser" experience that irrupt into our ordinary world. Such moments are not forgotten but remain a feature

of our existence; sometimes they are so significant that we perceive our lives within a trajectory understood as the time before and time after the event.

In *The Waste Land* (1922) the early encounter with the hyacinth girl gives us a sense of this:

Yet when we came back, late, from the hyacinth garden,     37  
 Your arms full, and your hair wet, I could not  
 Speak, and my eyes failed, I was neither  
 Living nor dead, and I knew nothing,  
 Looking into the heart of light, the silence (CPP, p. 62)     41

In the context of the poem, which mostly describes an arid, spiritless world characterized by what Heidegger would call “homelessness,” the image of the hyacinth girl offers one of the few moments of marked contrast to this pervasive nihilistic tone. *The Waste Land*, considered *the* Modernist manifesto, expresses the disillusionment of a generation burned out by war and living in the confused upheaval of the modern cityscape. Yet the encounter in the garden irrupts into this disillusionment, offering a wholly other event, marked by bewilderment and wonder. There are strong parallels here with what the early Heidegger describes in the language of phenomenology. In his 1919 lectures, discussed above, Heidegger wants his students to “leap into *another* world” (TDP, p. 53) and experience reality purely and in an untrammelled manner. Eliot’s description of the encounter with the hyacinth girl is an opening for this possibility, but in the language of poetry, a language that the later Heidegger will come to embrace.

In the early lectures Heidegger wants his students to experience for themselves the *eventing* nature of reality, and to allow it to surprise and perplex them. Similarly, Eliot’s image, in the midst of the waste land, reminds us of the possibilities of existence that are undermined in our current condition of nihilism. This “primordial experience” (TDP, p. 186) goes beyond our subjectivity and unites us, momentarily, with the whole of reality, thus the speaker says, confusedly, “I was neither / Living nor dead” (ll. 39–40). The individual “I” is appropriated by this event “knowing nothing,” becoming “anything whatsoever” (TDP, p. 62). Heidegger wants his students to return to the ordinary world and see it with “new eyes,” just as Eliot wants us to ponder the significance of the hyacinth girl in the midst of the dreary cityscape.

Heidegger's phenomenological language accurately describes this surrender that the moment with the hyacinth girl evokes. His description of climbing a mountain to experience the sunrise, described above, includes such details as being "totally given over to the event," experiencing a "different type of totality" (TDP, p. 173) such that the "situational context" dissolves, and the "unity of the situation" explodes (TDP, p. 174). There is the sense of *relationlessness* in the encounter, which is accompanied by silence. Heidegger writes that "everyone experiences silently" (TDP, p. 173), while for Eliot looking into the heart of light is accompanied by "the silence" (l. 41). The awe of the experience provokes silent reverence to enable fuller contemplation, but also suggests an inability to speak, being awe-struck, even paralyzed by trepidation in the face of the event. The "I" of the passage is overcome, crying out "I could not / Speak, and my eyes failed" (ll. 38–39).

Reality is experienced in an unmediated way, with such intensity that even the speaker is left inarticulate. The faltering, stuttering interplay of syntax and prosody expresses this with great immediacy. Our ordinary modes of perception fail and Eliot's poetic language expresses this phenomenological breakdown of ordinary reality. Both the phenomenological and poetic experience of the Event suggests that the "I" has little choice in whether or not to surrender willingly to the event, but is appropriated by it and overwhelmed. Lastly, witness is a significant theme in both experiences and remains integral to Heidegger's *Ereignis*. Both events pass before "the eyes." Heidegger sees "the sun's disc, the clouds, a mass of rocks . . . but not as a specific form that I have just climbed" (TDP, p. 173). The eyes of the speaker, in Eliot's poem, "fail" (l. 39) and yet the "I" is "Looking into the heart of light" (l. 41). Both writers convey the sense of seeing "something" while simultaneously failing to comprehend what it is.

Also, in this passage the water hyacinth holds a similar symbolic meaning to the lotus (discussed shortly) in *Four Quartets*, namely as a flower associated with enlightenment, or, in this case, epiphany. Both flowers bud underwater and rise to bloom on the surface. In Greek mythology the boy Hyacinth is companion and lover of Apollo; the god accidentally kills Hyacinth, and from his spilled blood creates the hyacinth flower. Thus the hyacinth is a symbol of both tragedy and rebirth.<sup>31</sup> This theme of rebirth, new life, is very much evident in the above passage, but accompanying it is also the anxiety of "knowing nothing," for we must face new and unknown possibilities after the event has passed.

## IV

The poetic epiphany of the holy, which Heidegger finds in Hölderlin's poetry, is very close to Eliot's intention in much of the poetry he wrote after his conversion to Anglo-Catholicism in 1927. The ontological tension between the world and poetic language is a theme to which he often refers in this period. In "Burnt Norton," the first movement of *Four Quartets* published in 1936, he offers us his own *Ereignis* encounter, and the self-reflective language of his poetry draws us into appreciating what this moment is, or how it could come to be. While Eliot's account is personal and individualistic, Heidegger's language offers a way to access this experience in terms of its general phenomenological and ontological parameters, to allow us to deepen our access to the meaning of the moment of "transport" and "enchantment," crystallized in poetic expression.

For Eliot, these moments are characterized by an intensity and illumination that create a profound shift in orientation in the person who undergoes them. His depiction of these moments is fundamentally phenomenological, revealing the temporal and ontological dimensions of human existence in its ecstatic relation with itself, its finitude, and its world, and so showing the world up as *there* somehow. Important for my discussion is the first movement of the first quartet, "Burnt Norton." This movement explores a significant *Ereignis* moment, the *momentous* event that was to haunt Eliot's poetry for the next eight years.<sup>32</sup> Eliot describes an encounter in the rose garden of Burnt Norton Manor, which he visited in early September 1934 with Emily Hale, whom he was then considering marrying. The poem reenacts his memory of this event and his coming to terms with its consequences. The moment is framed by a reimagining of the Edenic "first world" and opens by offering a penetrating phenomenological reflection on temporality:

Time present and time past	1
Are both perhaps present in time future	
And time future contained in time past.	
If all time is eternally present	
All time is unredeemable.	5
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. (CPP, p. 171)	10

In the opening of the movement, Eliot, much like Heidegger, understands that human existence is the site of temporality. For Heidegger, “Dasein’s Being finds its meaning in temporality” (BT, p. 41) and Eliot, by beginning the poem with a reflection on time and our ecstatic relationship with it, places the meaning of our temporal existence at the center of his poem. The first lines draw the reader deeper into this reflection by delving into our relationship with time, drawing out how we are caught between the past and the future. The overriding question here is: how do we make peace with the present? How do we reconcile ourselves to “what might have been and what has been”? This question emerges in the context of the *Ereignis* event that the poem moves on to describe, in a manner reminiscent of the meeting with the hyacinth girl in *The Waste Land*. The movement gradually builds up to this encounter, preparing the reader for it by offering a reflection on time remembered and time imagined and then moving into the rose garden, which is the next part of the poem:

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. 15

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

Other echoes

Inhabit the garden. Shall we follow? 20  
 Quick, said the bird, find them, find them,  
 Round the corner. Through the first gate,  
 Into our first world, shall we follow  
 The deception of the thrush? Into our first world.  
 There they were, dignified, invisible, 25  
 Moving without pressure, over the dead leaves,  
 In the autumn heat, through the vibrant air,  
 And the bird called, in response to  
 The unheard music hidden in the shrubbery,  
 And the unseen eyebeam crossed, for the roses 30  
 Had the look of flowers that are looked at.  
 There they were as our guests, accepting and accepting.  
 So we moved, and they, in a formal pattern,  
 Along the empty alley, into the box circle,  
 To look down into the drained pool. (CPP, p. 172) 35

From the opening temporal reflection the poet depicts himself and partner entering their “first world”: “There they were, dignified, invisible / Moving without pressure, over the dead leaves” (ll. 25–26). These are imagined apparitions of their former selves, returned to a past, reliving that moment. There is purity, unstained by guilt, for they are not their bodily selves, which can be defiled by sin; they are freed from the needs and desires of the flesh. Their Platonic form and platonic love are unfettered by bodily desires, but sustained by intellect and spirit. Yet paradoxically nature is receptive to this perfect world and alive to the moment. The air is vibrant and fecund, filled with the smell of the decomposing leaves (l. 26), the birds are attuned and responsive to “The unheard music hidden in the shrubbery” (l. 29), and the roses bear witness to what passes before them, “for the roses / Had the look of flowers that are looked at” (ll. 30–31).

We encounter two sets of couples. One set is a couple reflected in a past where they did not marry and now, in the present, are no longer together. The others, their Platonic forms, are imagined into a different future when the words that echoed in the other’s mind (ll. 14–15) were actually spoken and a different possibility realized. Decisions cannot be unmade because the past, *as it happened*, cannot be reversed by the present, *yet paradoxically it can be redeemed* because one can live in the present, reconciled in the knowledge of both the real and imagined past. This requires resoluteness, and the *Ereignis* event that Eliot goes on to describe is an important means by which the authentic, resolute self, in the language of *Being and Time*, can face up to its thrownness and finitude and become reconciled to itself:

Dry the pool, dry concrete, brown edged,  
 And the pool was filled with water out of sunlight,  
 And the lotos rose, quietly, quietly,  
 The surface glittered out of the heart of light,  
 And they were behind us, reflected in the pool.                   40  
 Then a cloud passed, and the pool was empty.

Go, said the bird, for the leaves were full of children,  
 Hidden excitedly, containing laughter.  
 Go, go, go, said the bird: human kind  
 Cannot bear very much reality.   45  
 Time past and time future  
 What might have been and what has been  
 Point to one end, which is always present. (CPP, p. 172)

When we encounter the *Ereignis* event in the rose garden, ordinary time ruptures. The two couples, their present selves projected into the past, represent “time present” in “time past”; the other couple, their imagined selves, represent the *possibility* of their future selves in “time past.” In this event of revelation where “the pool was filled with water out of sunlight” (l. 37) linear time—the past, present, and future as distinct and irreversible—is collapsed. Not only that, but the self’s own being-in-the-world shows up as such, phenomenologically separated from its world.

In the poem we have the two couples, but we also have the voice of the poet narrating the event, “seeing” himself within the world he depicts—his present self, reflected into the past that happened; an imagined future self, remaining intangibly part of his imagination and memory; *and* his current temporal self, that is, the poet writing “Burnt Norton” in the autumn of 1935 in the presbytery at 9 Grenville Place. The enfolding of different temporal modes shows that in an *Ereignis* moment temporality itself becomes transparent, allowing it in that “moment of vision” to perceive a deeper, more malleable temporal relationship to existence.

The lotus flower, ascending and opening up toward the sunlight in a pool that a moment ago was “dry concrete, brown edged” (l. 36), is a powerful metaphor that expresses the insight that the *Ereignis* moment can bring. The individual circumstances of Eliot’s unique *Ereignis* are conveyed in a poignant personal way in the phrase “for the leaves were full of children” (l. 42), which bespeaks the descendants that he will never have with a woman he will never marry. But the poetry gives us more than just Eliot’s biography; it also conveys the experience of this revelatory event in its phenomenological detail. This fuller, deeper perception into the world is not simple or easy, which is why the bird says: “Go, go, go, said the bird: human kind / Cannot bear very much reality” (ll. 44–45). Yet the Event reorients and clarifies, making one authentically resolute to the present *as it is*, and its past *as it was*—the movement ends in this affirmation, “What might have been and what has been / Point to one end, which is always present” (ll. 47–48), a present now reconciled with the past and future through the event in the rose garden.



## V

T. S. Eliot was clearly attuned and sensitive to moments that irrupt into reality, and looked to the language of poetry as the medium in which to express them best. His poetry, in many ways, offers a testament to the event, conceived of in the general terms that Heidegger's *Ereignis* offers us, while at the same time bringing a moving personal, narrative dimension to this moment. Thus Eliot's poetry enacts the same perceptive understanding of reality that Heidegger discerned in the work of Hölderlin. It offers a language in which the general ontological and phenomenological experiences of our existence are given sustenance and reflected upon in poetry. Eliot's poetic rendering of *Ereignis* moments embodies the living detail that Heidegger's philosophical discussion of it can only sketch. *Ereignis* functions as a formal indicator for an experience that appropriates us. Thus it is a personal experience on one level, a profound and transformative experience to which *I* belong in a unique and intimate way, and yet through the poet and philosopher the meaning of the event can reach beyond this merely personal dimension, giving a language to those rarer, mystifying aspects of human existence.

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1. R. M. Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet*, trans. M. D. Herter Norton (New York: W. W. Norton, 2004), p. 15.
2. M. Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. A. Hofstadter (New York: Harper & Row, 2001), p. 89.
3. T. S. Eliot quoted in L. Gordon, *T. S. Eliot: An Imperfect Life* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2000), p. 44. This is the last line of a poem, titled "Spleen," published by Eliot in the *Harvard Advocate* in 1910.
4. T. S. Eliot, *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*, ed. F. Kermode (San Diego: Harcourt, 1975), p. 13; hereafter abbreviated SPE.
5. T. S. Eliot, *The Complete Poems and Plays of T. S. Eliot* (London: Faber and Faber, 1969), p. 190; hereafter abbreviated CPP. These lines appear in "Dry Salvages," the third quartet of *Four Quartets*.
6. M. Heidegger, quoted in J. Young, *Heidegger's Philosophy of Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 106–7. Young points out that this choice of words, "*Entrückung und Berückung*" ("transport and enchantment"), appears in M. Heidegger, *Contributions to Philosophy (From Enowning)*, trans. P. Emad and K. Maly (Bloomington: Indiana University

Press, 1999), p. 48; hereafter abbreviated CP, as well as in Heidegger's essay on Hölderlin's poem "As When on a Holiday . . .," *Elucidations of Hölderlin's Poetry*, trans. K. Hoeller (New York: Humanity Books, 2000), p. 76; hereafter abbreviated EHP. Since the writing of this paper a new translation of *Contributions to Philosophy* has appeared: *Contributions to Philosophy (Of the Event)*, trans. R. Rojcewicz and D. Vallega-Neu (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012).

7. F. Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1969), p. 41; hereafter abbreviated Z.

8. C. Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989) p. 419.

9. Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, p. 419.

10. Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, p. 429. For a survey of some of these epiphanic moments in T. S. Eliot, James Joyce (1882–1941), Virginia Woolf (1882–1941), and E. M. Forster (1879–1970), see A. Wessels, "'Humankind Cannot Bear Very Much Reality': Modernist Perceptions of Time and Experience" (paper presented as inaugural address, University of Pretoria, South Africa, March 24, 2009), <http://up-za.academia.edu/AndriesWessels/> (accessed October 19, 2011). See also M. Ludwigs, "Epiphanies in Literature and Narrative Meaning" (Ph.D. diss., University of California, 2007) and M. Beja, *Epiphany in the Modern Novel* (London: Peter Owen, 1971).

11. See H. Ruin, "Contributions to Philosophy," in *A Companion to Heidegger*, ed. H. L. Dreyfus and M. A. Wrathall (Malden: Blackwell, 2007), p. 365, for a detailed discussion of the complexities of the term.

12. M. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson (Malden: Blackwell, 1962). Referenced according to English pagination; hereafter abbreviated BT.

13. The most accomplished secondary text on the concept of *Ereignis* and on CP is Richard Polt's *The Emergency of Being: On Heidegger's Contributions to Philosophy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006). There are a number of other texts such as D. Vallega-Neu's *Heidegger's "Contributions to Philosophy": An Introduction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), *Companion to Heidegger's "Contributions to Philosophy,"* ed. C. E. Scott et al. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001) and P. Emad's *On the Way to Heidegger's "Contributions to Philosophy"* (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 2007).

14. These are the earliest extant lectures by Heidegger, given soon after he transferred from the theology faculty to the philosophy faculty at the University of Freiburg. *Towards the Definition of Philosophy: With a Transcript of the Lecture Course "On the Nature of the University and Academic Study,"* trans. Ted Sadler (London: Continuum, 2002); hereafter abbreviated TDP.

15. R. Safranski, *Martin Heidegger. Between Good and Evil*, trans. E. Osers (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 87.

16. This is the first time the term appears in the lecture, possibly the first time in Heidegger's corpus.

17. See volume 71 of Heidegger's *Gesamtausgabe*, titled *Das Ereignis*. It was written in 1941–1942 (after *Contributions to Philosophy*). See also T. Sheehan, "A Paradigm Shift in Heidegger Research," *Continental Philosophy Review* 34 (2001): 183–202.

18. See Heidegger, *Being and Time*, §27.
19. “‘Only a God Can Save Us’: *Der Spiegel*’s Interview with Martin Heidegger,” in *The Heidegger Controversy: A Critical Reader*, ed. R. Wolin, trans. M. P. Alter and J. D. Caputo (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993), pp. 91–116.
20. “Only a God Can Save Us,” 107.
21. For a scathing review of the English translation of CP, see S. Blackburn, “Enquivering,” *The New Republic*, October 30, 2000: 43–48.
22. Young, *Heidegger’s Philosophy of Art*, p. 107.
23. M. Heidegger, “Letter on Humanism,” in *Basic Writings*, ed. D. F. Krell, trans. F. A. Capuzzi and J. Glenn Gray (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), p. 217; hereafter abbreviated LH. See also M. Heidegger, “What Are Poets For?” in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. A. Hofstadter (New York: Harper & Row, 2001), p. 129.
24. L. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness (London: Routledge, 1974), p. 88.
25. M. Heidegger, “The Nature of Language,” in *On the Way to Language*, trans. P. D. Hertz (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), p. 85; hereafter abbreviated NL.
26. T. S. Eliot quoted in Gordon, *T. S. Eliot*, p. 44.
27. T. S. Eliot, *Invention of the March Hare: Poems 1909–1917*, ed. C. Ricks (San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1998); hereafter abbreviated IMH.
28. Gordon, *T. S. Eliot*, p. 23.
29. B. Pascal, *Pensées* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1958).
30. L. Unger, “T. S. Eliot’s Rose Garden,” in *T. S. Eliot: A Selected Critique*, edited by L. Unger, pp. 374–94 (New York: Rinehart, 1948), p. 375.
31. Apollo’s hyacinth is a land plant, not a water hyacinth, but Eliot draws this allusion into the poetic image.
32. Gordon, *T. S. Eliot*, p. 266.