POETRY AS DECREATION: IMPERSONALITY AND GRACE IN T.S. ELIOT AND SIMONE WEIL

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ABSTRACT

This thesis posits that however separated T.S. Eliot and Simone Weil are by circumstance, political affinity, and Church affiliation, their thoughts intersect at a crucial point. While Weil’s theory of decreation and Eliot’s notion of impersonality are often cast as theological and poetic innovations, they both hearken back to the Christian mystical tradition – specifically, the aspect of via negativa. Placed alongside one another, Weil’s poetic mysticism and Eliot’s concern for the spiritual reveal the capacity of poems to decreate and bring the reader to a moment of void that awaits the fulfillment of grace. This thesis will study these topics with express consideration of Eliot’s *Four Quartets* and Weil’s notebooks, especially *Gravity and Grace*. 
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“There is only the fight to recover what has been lost
And found and lost again and again: and now, under conditions
That seem unpropitious. But perhaps neither gain nor loss.
For us there is only the trying. The rest is not our business.”

– T.S. Eliot

“We have to rediscover the original pact between the spirit and the world in this very civilization of which we form a part. But it is a task which is beyond our power on account of the shortness of life and the impossibility of collaboration and of succession. That is no reason for not undertaking it. The situation of all of us is comparable to that of Socrates when he was awaiting death in his prison and began to learn to play the lyre. . . . At any rate we shall have lived…”

– Simone Weil
Introduction:
“Genius akin to that of the saints”: T.S. Eliot and Simone Weil

“We must simply expose ourselves to the personality of a woman of genius, of a kind of genius akin to that of the saints.”

– T.S. Eliot

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When T.S. Eliot learned that after her death in 1943 the French philosopher Simone Weil was buried in an unmarked common grave in Ashford New Cemetery, he formed a special committee to purchase a gravesite and stone, which her family engraved. While the two thinkers never crossed paths, Eliot maintained a deep respect and even reverence for Weil, writing in the foreword to her posthumously published work *The Need for Roots* that Simone Weil was a great soul, “one who might have become a saint” (*NR* vii) had it not been for her premature death at the age of 34. Indeed, when he was commissioned to write the review, he asked his editors if they could pass the task to someone more qualified than he, writing: “a preface or introduction to a book by Simone is about the most serious job of the kind that one could undertake. One is so impressed by this terrifying woman that one wants do to something that at least would not risk her disapproval of it.”

Among his other compliments for her, Eliot astutely named the admirable contradictions that were at the heart of her political thinking, stating: “she appears as a stern critic of both Right and Left; at the same time more truly a lover of order and hierarchy than most of those who call themselves Conservative, and more truly a lover of the people than most of those who call themselves Socialist” (*NR* ix). By contrast, Eliot’s own affinities were clearly defined in his own

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2 Weil’s death from tuberculosis is said to have been exacerbated by her refusal to eat (Yourgrau 105).
tripartite declaration – “classicist in literature, royalist in politics, and anglo-catholic in religion”\(^4\) – that situated him firmly on the right. Weil on the other hand is known for her Marxist tendencies, laying her body down on the line as a volunteer in the Spanish Civil War and working in production assembly line at a Renault car factory for over a year. Eliot was an institution while Weil was an outsider, yet despite their apparent differences their writings betray similar intuitions. In the circuitous paths their lives individually took, they both arrived\(^5\) at the idea of kenosis – self-emptying – which manifested itself in the concept of decreation for Weil and the notion of poetic impersonality for Eliot.

Approaches to understanding Simone Weil and T.S Eliot are impoverished when they ignore the profound religious component in each thinker. Eliot and Weil’s respective religiosities are not betrayals but fulfils of their earlier “estranged” periods – “Prufrock” and The Waste Land are spoken for and integrated into Eliot’s final work Four Quartets, and Weil’s later Christian mysticism similarly absorbs her early periods of radical leftism. Readers of Weil and Eliot who are allergic\(^6\) to their religiosity are unable to fully appreciate the radical nuance that each thinker presents – a nuance that lies at the heart of their meaning for us today. I will focus on Weil’s Gravity and Grace and Eliot’s Four Quartets.

Not surprisingly, their bibliographies often overlapped. Both Eliot and Weil admired the English metaphysical poets, the Bhagavad-Gita, and St. John of the Cross. The influence of the

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\(^4\) This statement originates from the “Preface” to For Lancelot Andrewes in 1928.

\(^5\) Lines from “Little Gidding” suggest a universal destination at the end of journeys commenced at no matter what starting point: “If you came this way, / Taking any route, starting from anywhere, / At any time or at any season, / It would always be the same” (LG, I, 41-44).

\(^6\) To name a few names, Bertrand Russell, Ezra Pound, Conrad Aiken were each unenthusiastic, to say the least, about Eliot’s religious turn. See the “Introduction” to T.S Eliot: The Contemporary Reviews (pages xxv-xxvii) for a more comprehensive treatment of the critical response to Eliot.

\(^7\) The filmmaker Julia Haslett in her movie “An Encounter with Simone Weil” goes as far as to hire an actress to method-act Simone Weil so that Haslett may interrogate her. In one sequence she narrates: “I’m not a religious person, and can’t help but feel betrayed by Weil’s turn towards God. Did this mean she was giving up on political struggle altogether? I’m trying to make sense of Weil’s move towards Christianity… Was faith her last bulwark against existential loneliness?” (49:46-51:00).
latter figure infused their thought with the vocabulary of negative theology,\(^8\) that way of contemplating the divine through negation instead of affirmation, borne out of an unremitting fidelity to the notion of an ultimately unknowable God. Such a theology is liable to cross into every aspect of a person’s thought, even to the secular realm of poetics. My salient concern is Eliot and Weil’s shared conception of poetry as a decreation.

In Chapter 1, I engage Eliot’s canonical essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent” to tease out the mysticism nascent in his fascination with poetic impersonality. Eliot’s early propensity to reject romantic aesthetics and describe the artist’s calling as “a continual extinction of personality” presages his later poetry, in addition to forming a point of contact with Weil. Themes from *Gravity and Grace*,\(^9\) a posthumously grouped collection of Weil’s writings from her private notebooks, are deeply congruent with ideas concerning impersonality. She takes the mandate of impersonality to its fullest extreme in her conception of decreation.

In Chapter 2, I examine the two thinkers’ accounts of conversion and try to shed light on the role of poetic language in their respective moments of divine encounter. I try to understand Eliot and Weil’s moments of religious arrest using decreation as my theoretical framework, supplemented with a consideration of the dark night of sense from St. John of the Cross. By closely studying passages from *Four Quartets* I claim that Eliot locates a kenotic effect in poetry that bears similarity with Weil’s notion of decreation. At the same time, the heavy metapoetic element in *Four Quartets* suggests that the poetry is inherently limited, even ultimately expendable in the larger religious project at hand.

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\(^8\) This is sometimes referred to as “via negativa.” I use the term somewhat interchangeably with “the Christian mystical” or “neoplatonic” tradition.

\(^9\) When Weil escaped France in 1942, she bequeathed her journals to Gustave Thibon. After her death, he grouped extracts from her journals by theme rather than by the order in which Weil composed them.
By Chapter 3, I magnify my scope and zoom in on what Eliot calls “the moment,” and what Weil calls “the instant.” This, I speculate, is the moment that kenotic poetry has prepared the reader for – the moment when decreation is momentarily complete. For Weil the instant is marked by passionate, even violent descriptions as the subject is seized by the divine. The mechanics of this moment are also tied to Weil’s notion of descending grace, which finds a compelling image in Eliot’s “heart of light” moment in “Burnt Norton.”

In the conclusion, I gesture Weil’s concept of metaxu, a word that refers to the radical means oriented status of all things ultimately towards the divine. I also draw a connection between poems and churches, and gesture towards the status of Eliot’s “still point” in our present moment.

I am in the happy position of comparing two figures whose writings have certainly impacted my life. As I dove into the research, I was surprised to find that although Eliot’s remark about her “genius akin to that of the saints” is regularly cited in publications about Weil, and despite the fact that they are often grouped together along with other prominent Christian intellectuals of the twentieth century, T.S. Eliot and Simone Weil have not yet been explicitly connected in any major scholarly work to date. I hope that this work marks the start of a fruitful comparison.

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11 A search on WorldCat, an extensive database for scholarly publications, yields just four results for works containing “T.S. Eliot” and “Simone Weil” as subjects, only one of which (an essay collection, at that) is in English.
Chapter 1:
“Halt at the Frontier of Metaphysics or Mysticism”:
Impersonality in Eliot and Weil

“We must continually suspend the work of the imagination filling the void within ourselves”
– Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*

“The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality”

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Eliot’s poetological essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent” was published early in his career, before *The Waste Land*. In elevated prose, he gives a philosophical account of his theory on poetic impersonality. Eliot’s attack on personality and praise of the ideal of impersonality is a corrective against the Romantic impulse to celebrate, in his words, “what is individual, what is the peculiar essence of the man.” Instead, Eliot appeals to a much older allegiance to which he believes the artist should cohere – tradition. This impulse will ultimately graduate Eliot from tradition to the firmer embedding of religious faith. However, as of 1919 his essay will “halt at the frontier of metaphysics or mysticism,” confining itself to the realm of aesthetics. At this early stage in Eliot’s career, the religious stakes of his poetical thinking are not yet explicit, though they will later emerge in full form, especially in *Four Quartets*. Eliot’s early ideas about poetic impersonality presage the outright mysticism of his life’s culminating poem, a mysticism in conversation with Simone Weil. His own words reflect his progression as a writer and pilgrim best, repeated throughout in “East Coker”: “In my beginning is my end.”

Impersonality is a strong theme that unites Eliot and Weil together. Eliot’s theory of poetic impersonality is deeply compatible with Simone Weil’s theory of religious decreation. A question that arises, however, is how a poetics of self-annihilation can coexist with artistic

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12 Compare Eliot’s poetics to Wordsworth’s claim in his preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* that “poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings.”
creativity. I find a solution to this tension within the tradition of negative theology, which is instrumental as a framework to this chapter, since its discourse resolves the inherent tensions between negative apophasis and affirmative cataphasis. In my study, I hope to tease out the religious stakes of poetic impersonality as well as the poetic stakes of decreation. Using Simone Weil’s philosophical writings in *Gravity and Grace* and T.S. Eliot’s essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent”, I will show that self-annihilation and creativity are falsely opposed, and that they are actually engaged in a dialectical relationship. The friction these forces produce is generative of poetry, and well demonstrated by Eliot’s magnum opus *Four Quartets*.

Upon first glance an emphasis on impersonality seems antithetical to poetic creation, yet as Eliot works out in his grand essay, impersonality is shown to be the mark of the mature poet whose mind is “a more finely perfected medium in which special, or very varied, feelings are at liberty to enter into new combinations.” The mature poet is contrasted with the immature one who values “personality,” and thinks that the task of poetry is judged by being more interesting or having more to say. Eliot defines personality as that which is self-consciously exceptional – either in interest or novelty – about an individual. Personality is that which defies or marks an artist’s “difference from his predecessors,” and by extension, his or her isolation from the larger entity of tradition. Eliot calls it a prejudice to celebrate the personality defined as such, for in his view “the most individual parts of [an artist’s] work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously.” In the same vein years later in “Little Gidding” the mature Eliot demonstrates the continuity of his thought as he writes: “the communication / Of the dead is tongued with fire beyond the language of the living” (I, 52-53).

To channel this “communication,” the poet must become “finely perfected” as a medium, entailing a process of “depersonalization”, a shift away from the “peculiar essence” of a person
towards a more passive consciousness that is mindful of the “historical sense.” In this move, Eliot immediately begins to resonate with the discourse surrounding the mystical emphasis on the transcendence of self, even though he ends his essay explicitly “halt[ing] at the frontiers of metaphysics and mysticism.”

Simone Weil’s writings in *Gravity and Grace* make no such commitment to halting at the doors before which the young Eliot balks. It is a mystical text, a compilation of writings taken from Simone Weil’s notebooks that reflect her deep concern with metaphysical questions, and show her poetic thought process. As different as their tasks are at this point, the most salient common quotient between Eliot’s poetology and Weil’s philosophical theology is a strong insistence on impersonality. As an example, Eliot’s wariness of unbridled personal emotion or feeling maps neatly on to Weil’s discourse on the “Imagination Which Fills the Void.” In her philosophy, the popular connotations of imagination and void switch valences. The imagination, which may normally be thought of as positive (in the sense of good) and generative, is revealed as a “liar.” Conversely, the void, which may normally be thought of as negative (in the sense of bad) and something to be avoided, is revealed as the precious, liminal space in which God may be encountered. To use terminology from via negativa, Weil holds that the imagination is positive, in that it *posits* or affirms content in an act of cataphasis, and that the void is negative, in that it *negates* or denies content in an act of apophasis. She reveals imagination and void at their etymological roots, and in so doing changes their preferentiality with respect to their religious stakes. She writes: “The imagination is continually at work filling up all the fissures through which grace might pass” (*GG* 16), demonstrating the void-filling qualities of the imagination that are counterintuitive for divine encounter. She compares grace, a key facet of Christian theology and counterpart to gravity in her title, to a kind of gas, which can “fill empty spaces… where
there is a void to receive it, and it is grace itself which makes this void” (GG 10). Like the imagination, grace is a “filler up of the void,” but the key difference is that grace is valid, supernatural, whereas the imagination is not only false, but capable of enabling great “degradation.”

Read in a certain light, both Weil and Eliot seem to demonize the imagination, and in this case from Weil quite literally so: “What comes to us from Satan is our imagination” (GG 54). The question must be asked whether such overwhelming censures against the imagination can coexist with the project of artistic creation itself. To answer this in the affirmative, first Eliot’s demand that the artist “shall conform, that he shall cohere” must not be taken too literally or uncharitably. By this I mean that the critic should avoid resorting to the intentional misunderstanding that Eliot desires poetry written in the 20th century to imitate or “conform” to standards proper to the 16th century. This would be artificial, and comprised of the very reality-denying imagination that Eliot and Weil so detested. For as much as Eliot admired and was inspired by the cantos of the Dante and plays of Shakespeare, he fully inhabited his moment and cannot be said to have shied from it within the carapace of tradition or religion. Eliot remarked that in the context of the “great variety and complexity” that characterized the early 20th century, the modern poet could only respond with “various and complex results”13 – hence: The Waste Land. Far from catalyzing the production of monotonous work, Eliot highlights the creative potential of impersonality: “great variety is possible in the transmutation of emotions.” For all of Eliot’s censure against the personality, his essay is not a cruel creativity-stifling mandate, but an attempt to activate a poetics of the impersonal.

Eliot conceives of poetic impersonality as enabling a crucial transmutative aspect in poetry, which itself makes possible the unleashing of great poetic variety. To clarify a term used by Eliot and referenced earlier, transmutation involves the changing of the mundane or arbitrary into something altogether more interesting or meaningful. The word “transmute” is found twice within Eliot’s essay – both times used to describe the transmutation of “passions” or “emotion,” which are the “material,” into poetry. Curiously, Eliot analogizes the poetic reaction to a chemical experiment – describing the formation of sulphurous acid and the role of platinum. Eliot contends that just as platinum must be present to facilitate the transmutation of oxygen and sulphur dioxide into sulphurous acid while not imparting itself to these elements, so the poet must become “a more finely perfected medium in which special, or very varied, feelings are at liberty to enter into new combinations.” This line from Eliot’s critical essay resonates with a different kind of “medium” who deals with varied combinations in The Waste Land. “Madame Sosostris, famous clairvoyante” (line 14) with her “wicked pack of cards,” is herself a version of Tiresias, who Eliot proclaims to be the “most important personage in the poem, uniting all the rest.”14 If we are to take Eliot’s word, the figure of Tiresias may be said to take on the role of “the mind of the poet… the shred of platinum” as described in “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” since Tiresias’s presence lends the entire poem resonance with the Western tradition, unifying disparate its parts to his singular witness: “What Tiresias sees, in fact, is the substance of the poem.” In The Waste Land Tiresias serves as a model for the impersonal poet, “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.” As a prophet Tiresias’s role involves self-emptying in order to make room for his powers of

clairvoyance, a role identical to Eliot’s idea in his essay that the poet has “not a ‘personality’ to express, but a particular medium… in which impressions and experiences combine in peculiar and unexpected ways.” Without Tiresias, according to Eliot, *The Waste Land* would lose the coherence that his “medium” lends – without his impersonal, transmutative influence, perhaps the poem would remain exactly and merely that – a collection of “numberless feelings, phrases, images,” disparate “fragments” shored against a ruin (line 431).

Weil, too, cannot be misunderstood as simply encouraging a level of despotic censorship against the artistic imagination. Works of literary art, especially poetry, figured heavily in her life and occupy a prime importance in her philosophy. Indeed the text of *Gravity and Grace* is strong evidence that writing – and often writing inspired by literary works – was how she thought through theological tangles. Furthermore, she often uses similes and metaphors to elucidate her graspings to herself and the reader. Poetry, in particular, was of such prime importance to her that she writes: “Workers need poetry more than bread. They need that their life should be a poem. They need some light from eternity. Religion alone can be the source of such poetry” (*GG* 181). These statements are not stated glibly, considering that Weil’s experience working in a car factory stunned and changed her forever afterward. She would never trivialize an experience that forever left her with the impression that she was a slave (*WG* 67). So what can she and Eliot mean in their hostility to the imagination? How can fiction survive this criticism, this contradiction? I venture to claim that as far as Weil and Eliot are concerned, poetry is not fiction, per se. Although it itself may not be the Real – the “reality” that humankind cannot

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15 Thibon: “Saint John of the Cross in the religious order, and Shakespeare, certain English mystical poets and Racine in the literary one, also left their mark on her mind” (*GG* xi).

16 Perrin: “Simone’s usual method of working was to examine a question, not only when she thought it to be doubtful, but even when she knew it to be false. In order to discover the force of an affirmation, she immediately tried to find out what truth was contained in the opposite negation” (*Simone Weil As We Knew Her* 77).
bear very much of (BN, I, 45) – it, nevertheless plays some vital, real role in quickening to the
Real.

Another answer to solve the contradiction must be found in the differentiation between
the personal and the individual, especially in the case of Eliot. A close reading of his essay
reveals that while he consistently denigrates the personal, the category of the individual occupies
a different standard – the most valuable parts are also the parts through which a larger entity is
most evident. Weil also cares deeply about the individual. At the same time as she is against
individualism, Weil concedes that the religious encounter is profoundly individual:

He [God] enters into contact with a human individual as such only through purely
spiritual grace which responds to the gaze turned towards him, that is to say to the exact
extent to which the individual ceases to be an individual (GG 112).

The caveat she provides at the end is of the utmost importance to the understanding of Weil’s
idea of the individual. The individual is valuable precisely insofar as the individual can return the
divine gaze, and cease to be an individual. Because the individual is an element that is
prerequisite to the most meaningful event in Weil’s cosmology – that of surrender – it is crucial.
Most paradoxically, the individual or “I,” to use Weil’s language, must be fiercely protected
from destruction from the outside, in order than the “I” be able to kill itself from the inside. It is
like protecting an animal destined for slaughter, until the ceremonial date. It would seem a
pointless enterprise to all those but perhaps poets, who know better than others the resonance of
timing, of readiness. This external destruction takes its most ready form in that of violence.

Now we come full circle to the discussion regarding the imagination, for “War. Crimes.
Acts of revenge. Extreme affliction,” Weil writes, all constitute events, which “while they do
indeed happen, yet remain in a sense imaginary” (GG 17). Weil puts this case forward perhaps
most compellingly in her essay “The Iliad or the Poem of Force,” in which she links the
imagination to violence, to force, as demonstrated through the Homeric epic. She puzzles over the question of how people find it possible to murder in war, and comes to the conclusion that the imagination plays a vital role. It “turn[s] a human being into a thing while he is still alive.”

So closely linked to force, the imagination petrifies human beings until “the lives you destroy are like toys broken by a child, and quite as incapable of feeling” (ibid.). Rather than playing an empathetic role, the imagination, for Weil, aids and abets crimes against humanity. It is on the side of gravity – a force, which, opposed to grace, “fill[s] an emptiness in ourselves by creating one in someone else” (GG 6) in a false search for equilibrium, an equilibrium which can only be satisfied by supernatural grace. For Weil, the imagination is not a good or even neutral force – it is ethically charged, and dangerous. She has shown that the imagination, which in Eliot’s vocabulary might be classed under “personality,” is fundamentally disfiguring – or, as Eliot would say in The Waste Land: “Unreal.”

By 1919 Eliot has not yet made explicit the religious matrix of his artistic theory, though he hints at it strongly. Towards the end of “Tradition,” he leaves a quotation from Aristotle’s treatise De Anima (On the Soul) untranslated from the ancient Greek, thereby obscuring its significance. Roughly translated, it reads: “Perhaps then the mind is something more divine.” Despite the allusion hidden in plain sight, there are plenty of explicit signs of the religious within the essay. For example, Eliot uses religiously charged words to describe the process of depersonalization. He calls it “a continual surrender of [the artist] as he is at the moment to something which is more valuable,” and in another turn of phrase, he terms it as “a continual self-sacrifice.” Eliot’s word choice here reflects the very bedrock of the “tradition” he constantly cites, but never fully explains within the essay. This tradition is the Christian mythos as it has

developed over the centuries, mingling with neoplatonism, and forming the mystical tradition that is so closely linked to poetry. Surrender and self-sacrifice strongly resonate with the founding event of Christ’s incarnation and crucifixion, after all, moments during which Jesus emptied or negated himself of his own will. To use Eliot’s framework in “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” we may say that Christ “depersonalized” himself – in order to become entirely receptive to the will of God the Father. While Eliot’s essay alludes to the kenotic, or self-emptying, impulse of Christ, he “halt[s] at the frontier” of what this depersonalization could mean on a metaphysical plane. Instead Eliot refers to depersonalization only insofar as it is salient for a theory for poetic creation.

Earlier in the essay I mentioned the seer Tiresias, as featured in The Waste Land as a model of impersonality for the poet. Eliot’s trajectory mirrors that of the Dante’s pilgrim as he progresses from Inferno to Paradiso, whose guide through hell Virgil is succeeded by Beatrice. Eliot begins with treating poetic impersonality as a theory useful simply for easing the creation of art that is in dialogue with the vaguely termed “tradition,” and, of course, he ends up somewhere quite different by the time he arrives at Four Quartets: Tiresias is succeeded by Christ – but not yet. After all, poetic impersonality in this essay may even be crudely read in this essay as a mere technique for the artist so that he or she may function as a “a medium and not a personality, in which impressions and experiences combine in peculiar and unexpected ways,” since there is otherwise no explicit theological ethic to ground his discussion. Eliot tries very hard to stay within the artistic matrix of his theory, even though the religious dimension of poetic impersonality looms over his essay. However, at this point in Eliot’s philosophy, “at the frontier of metaphysics or mysticism,” the poet simply surrenders to “the work to be done,” to the poetry, and by extension to the vast literary canon. His attitude in 1919 prioritizing poetry as the subject
of surrender will shift notably by the time he publishes “East Coker” in 1940, and makes way for a more divine muse. In this work he writes that, left “still with the intolerable wrestle / With words and meanings,” he concludes strikingly that “The poetry does not matter” (II, 20-21), which immediately leads the reader to an overwhelming question: what does?

For Simone Weil, it is clear that what matters is God. In fact, following her conception of decreation – a term she has invented – God matters so much that impersonality is taken to the extreme of self-annihilation: “If we find fullness of joy in the thought that God is, we must find the same fullness in the knowledge that we ourselves are not, for it is the same thought” (GG 37). Weil takes this intuition to an extreme degree in her chapter on “Self-Effacement,” as she speculates about what it would be like if she could disappear so as to no longer “deprive” even the ground beneath her feet that the fact of her body blocks from God’s love. She wonders what it would be like: “To see a landscape as it is when I am not there…” (GG 42). Comparing Weil’s writing above with the voice in “Burnt Norton,” we find the same curiosity with lines documenting “The unheard music hidden in the shrubbery, / And the unseen eyebeam crossed, for the roses / Had the look of flowers that are looked at” (I, 29-31). Both authors strive to see that which they are prevented from seeing by their very facticity. Through speculative verse the voice of “Burnt Norton” pushes language to describe a world around it that is elevated, functioning on a higher plane of reality, perhaps, and not directly sensible. These lines are evidence of a latent decretive impulse within Eliot’s poem. A formidable philosophical thinker, Weil answers many of the theological questions that Eliot’s theory of poetic impersonality poses implicitly, and that his later verse, especially, demonstrates implicitly. As promised, I will show that impersonality is not counter to creation, whether it be the cosmological creation of worlds or
the artistic creativity that produces a poem. At this point, I want to foreground the poetic stakes of impersonality by highlighting the poetic aspect of decreation.

For Weil, God matters so much that he ceases to matter so that we can matter – that is, so that we can literally be matter, so that we can exist. To explain this mystifying statement, I defer to Weil’s cosmology, for in order to explain what she means by decreation, one must first understand what she means by creation. Gustave Thibon explicates her meaning in the introduction of *Gravity and Grace*: “God who is Being has in a sense effaced himself so that we can exist: he has given up being everything in order that we might exist” (xxi). Accordingly, creation may be understood as a perpetual act of love: “It is God who in love withdraws from us so that we can love him.” God’s take on creation, then, shares an element of similarity with Eliot’s conception of poetic creation: both acts contain the element of impersonality, of the sacrificial receding of the creator’s will or presence so that the created may come into existence as freely as possible. Weil holds that this God, the God of self-extinction, is visibly not the Yahweh of imperious might and fearsome potency, but something rather more akin to the “wounded surgeon,” the “dying nurse” spoken of in “East Coker,” who heals us morbidly: “…to be restored, our sickness must grow worse” (IV, 6-10). Like Eliot’s idealized impersonal poet in “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” the creator God in Weil’s cosmology effects a “continual surrender of himself” in order that his creation may exist with autonomy.

This similarity produces an extended metaphor that suggests a deep congruence between divine creation and artistic creation; God as artist, artist as God. Weil writes: We are obliged to imitate the act of creation, and there are two possible imitations – the one real and the other apparent – preserving and destroying” (*GG* 70-71). Weil is sensitive to this relationship, even stating that some fatalism determines humans to “imitate the act of creation.” She is also aware
of the blasphemous potential of the suggestion of artist as God. The key difference, she asserts, is that just as grace, not imagination, is the only valid “filler up of voids,” there is only one real way to imitate God’s act of creation: the act of preservation. All other attempts to imitate creation are botched, and take the form of destruction, which is the false lookalike of decreation (GG 32). Indeed, Weil’s entire thought, and Eliot’s too, is characterized by dualities: the real thing and the “blameworthy substitute” that mimics it.

And so the religious and artistic matrices begin to organize themselves around a fundamental hierarchy in which the divine is irrevocably the higher – indeed the only Reality. Weil is very clear on the difference between the two options: “There is no trace of ‘I’ in the act of preserving. There is in the act of destroying. The ‘I’ leaves its mark on the world as it destroys” (GG 70). Egoism marks the difference. In congruence with this, in “East Coker,” the poetic project is ego-less, and defined as “…only the fight to recover what has been lost / And found and lost again and again…” (V, 15-16). Under this vision of poetic creation “there is no competition” (line 14) – indeed, it is a recovery mission, with no guarantees. The speaker will conclude: “For us there is only the trying. The rest is not our business” (line 18), illustrating the drive of the poetics of the impersonal, and highlighting its difference from personal poetics.

Impersonality emerges as a counterpart to the act of preservation, as opposed to the destructive capacities of the “I,” the personality. Weil’s preference for preservation over destruction (botched creation), reflects Eliot’s idea that the poet should act as a medium, not as a creator in his or her own right: “Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality.” These are lines that resonate well with Weil’s own thinking, as she writes: “Not to exercise all the power at one’s disposal is to endure the void” (GG 51). At this point, it may become a temptation to effect
a facile negativa, as it were – to give up at the start and write or say nothing. The issue with this understanding is that via negativa challenges someone interested in describing the indescribable not through total negation, but the negation of negation, which paradoxically demands prolixity.\(^{18}\)

To misunderstand Weil’s call for us “not to exercise all the power at one’s disposal to endure the void” as not to exercise any of such power would be a grave misunderstanding of the project of negative theology. Such an understanding would preclude, for instance, the composition of *Four Quartets*, or for that matter, *Gravity and Grace*. The prolixity mentioned above is where the poetic becomes possible, even necessary. The moment of surrender demands some substance capable of consenting to such surrender. “But, of course, only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to want to escape from these things,” Eliot writes in the essay. Poetic impersonality needs personality, and will simply not function with nonpersonality – a condition Eliot explores in “The Hollow Men.”

As I have shown, Weil’s cosmology copes with capacities that are restricted, or ordered, by the absolute nature of the Christian omni\(^{19}\)-attributed God. As such, Weil’s God “can only be present in creation under the form of absence,” (*GG* 109), for, as Weil states in an earlier chapter, “God could create only by hiding himself. Otherwise there would be nothing but himself” (*GG* 38). In this vision, God can also be said “Not to exercise all the power at [God’s] disposal,” which seems to contradict God’s omnipotence, or all powerfulness. To this, Weil writes that “God gives himself to men either as powerful or as perfect – it is for them to choose”

\(^{18}\) Denys Turner: “…the way of negation demands prolixity; it demands the maximisation, not the minimisation of talk about God; it demands that we talk about God in as many ways as possible, even in as many conflicting ways as possible, that we use up the whole stock-in-trade of imagery and discourse in our possession so as thereby to discover ultimately the inadequacy of all of it, deserts, silences, dark nights and all” (Turner 17).

\(^{19}\) The traditional three: omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent leave something to be desired in the omnibenevolent department.
(GG 91). The choice made here would reflect more about the person making the choice – imagining God in this way – than about God Godself. This Weil would confirm: “For the essential truth concerning God is that He is good. To believe that God can order men to commit atrocious acts of injustice and cruelty is the greatest mistake it is possible to make with regard to Him” (“Letter to a Priest,” 4). Weil seems to be prioritizing or hierarchizing the omni-attributes of God, with omnibenevolence at the top, in order to save God from the classic theodical attack: how can an all-good, all-knowing, all-powerful God permit the existence of evil in the world?

While the questions of the traditional problem of theodicy are not within the purview of my thesis, I will venture to say that impersonality is a compelling answer. Just as the impersonal poet practices a kenotic restraint upon himself as he composes, in order not to overwhelm the poem with speech, unfettered expression and emotion, so too God practices kenotic restraint upon Godself, in order not to overwhelm the universe with God’s sheer power. Both Eliot and Weil extol the virtues of restraint, both poetic and spiritual, as a necessary function of impersonality.

A polymath, Weil often alludes to the physical sciences to analogize her theology, as she has done in describing grace as a gas. She makes full use of the implications of the law of conservation of mass, which shows that the amount of matter cannot change. Under this analogy, it would contradict the absolute nature of God if God had not somehow consented to become less, or restrain Godself, so that humanity could exist. After such an explanation of creation, so governed by necessity, which Weil terms as “the screen set between God and us so that we can be” (GG 33), the only thing left to do, “our only good,” is renunciation, specifically the “imitation of God’s renunciation in creation,” otherwise known as decreation. Decreation consists of a “double operation,” a mirror act in which humankind as God’s creation withdraws in order to make way for him, just as he has done so for us in order that we may exist. The whole
enterprise may seem redundant, as Weil is aware, parsing out the meaning of her theology with a simile: “… it is like a father giving his child something which will enable the child to give a present on his father’s birthday” (GG 41), but this paradox comes with the territory of mysticism.

It should be noted that Weil’s agonizing mandate to self-annihilation brought about by her impressive theological acrobatics does not serve merely as mental posturing. Her writing has an explicitly religious stake, and her concepts are to be realized existentially in a life. This is perhaps where she differs the most from Eliot – she embodied self-annihilation, not just poetically, “halt[ed] at the frontiers of metaphysics or mysticism”, but in her life and death. Where both Eliot and Weil cease to be merely poet or philosopher is also where they depart towards religion. Furthermore, the key marker of this move towards religion is the use of the word “love,” complete with its explicitly Christian inflections. The word has ceased to be merely conceptual – as spoken by a poet or philosopher – but for Weil and Eliot it has gained some real, lived, even supernatural, purchase when it enters the realm of the religious. Both Weil and Eliot view Love as the culminating reason behind all of the struggle, all of the seeming redundancy, the autonomy given in order that it may be returned back. The late Eliot terms it well in his last quartet: “Love is the unfamiliar Name / Behind the hands that wove / The intolerable shirt of flame” (LG, IV, 8-11), illustrating the paradoxical union of painful mortification with the highest form of love.

The radical theological implications of Weil’s cosmology are congruent with Eliot’s conception of poetic impersonality, although she takes these implications to their lived extreme, while Eliot, at least in “Tradition and the Individual Talent” and his earlier career confines himself to poetic creation. It is my claim that Eliot’s ideas about poetic impersonality necessitate some greater entity for the depersonalized artist or soul to adhere. Early in Eliot’s career, with
The Waste Land most notably, this entity is the Western canon, but his allegiance shifts later in his life. *Four Quartets* contains numerable instances of the poet’s disillusionment with poetry in and of itself: “Trying to use words, and every attempt / Is a wholly new start, and a different kind of failure” (*EC*, V, 4). The emphasis at Eliot’s last stage of poetic endeavor is on what the poetry itself mediates or makes possible: “Only by the form, the pattern, / Can words or music reach / The stillness…” (*BN*, V, 4-6). The entire effort to arrive at this mysterious “stillness” seems to be governed, like Weil’s universe, by necessity – “*Only* by the form, the pattern” (emphasis mine).

To be clear, Eliot does not negate poetry here, just as in “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” he does not negate emotion wholesale. Rather, Eliot clarifies the purpose of poetry. Eliot’s intuition as a younger writer in 1919 is apt in stating that the poet should act as a medium, but what he would clarify later is that even the poetry itself is a mere medium. Weil would term this “medium” of both the poet and poem a “metaxu,” her idea that “Every separation is a link,” and furthermore that by extension that “The essence of created things is to be intermediaries” (*GG* 146). Weil and Eliot ultimately agree on the ideal of impersonality and the dangers of imaginative personality, but to return to the initial qualm I raised regarding the tension between the self-annihilating implications of impersonality and creative, generative acts such as writing poetry, I want to make clear that for Weil and Eliot, the religious moment is an essentially poetic movement. Lest my claims invalidate the role of poetry in all of this business, I wish to claim that not only is decreation a poetic event, but that in some instances, poetry itself can be said to decreate.
Chapter 2:  
Poetry as Decreation

“We are born and live in inverted fashion, for we are born and live in sin which is an inversion of the hierarchy. The first operation is one of reversal – Conversion.”
– Simone Weil

“You are not here to verify,
Instruct yourself, or inform curiosity
Or carry report. You are here to kneel
Where prayer has been valid”
– T.S. Eliot

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In the summer of 1926 during a visit to the Vatican, T.S. Eliot’s relatives observed him suddenly falling on his knees before Michelangelo’s Pietà. In the following months and to the great shock of many of his contemporaries, Eliot converted to Anglo-Catholicism. About twelve years later in 1938 as she spent ten days at the Solesmes Monastery, Simone Weil met a young Anglo-Catholic who urged her to read the English metaphysical poets. She later committed George Herbert’s poem “Love (III)” to memory, reciting it often during her severe and chronic headaches. In a letter to a friend, she recounted the experience:

I used to think I was merely reciting it as a beautiful poem, but without my knowing it the recitation had the virtue of a prayer. It was during one of these recitations that, as I told you, Christ himself came down and took possession of me (WG 68-69).

20 Theresa Garrett Eliot, interview in BBC production, ‘The Mysterious Mr Eliot’, televised 3 January 1971: “Tom to our surprise fell on his knees right at the front entrance.”
21 See Appendix 3 for a photo of The Pietà.
22 In a letter to her sister regarding Eliot’s conversion, Virginia Woolf wrote: “I have had a most shameful and distressing interview with poor dear Tom Eliot, who may be called dead to us all from this day forward. He has become an Anglo-Catholic, believes in God and immortality, and goes to church. I was really shocked. A corpse would seem to me more credible than he is. I mean, there’s something obscene in a living person sitting by the fire and believing in God.”
23 Not Eliot, although that would have been convenient for the purposes of my thesis. See: Seventy Letters, p102: “Mr. Charles G. Bell, now of St. John’s College, Annapolis, visited Solesmes for the Easter services in 1938, when he was an Oxford undergraduate. He remembers meeting there ‘a thin, intense young woman’ who read Marlowe and was deeply interested in the English metaphysical poets.”
24 Like St. Augustine, Weil followed the call to “Tolle, lege! Tolle, lege!” or “take up and read.”
25 See Appendix 4 for a scanned page of Weil’s notebooks into which she copied the text of “Love (III)” by hand.
In perhaps the absolute fruition of a literary work’s “objective correlative” – to use an Eliotic term – the Herbert poem produced in Weil a mystical experience that is in dialogue with Eliot’s own.

Eliot’s conception of the objective correlative, which he defined in his essay on Hamlet as “a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion,” is expedient in explaining the moment of arrest that both Eliot and Weil experienced before works of art. Eliot theorized that “The intense feeling, ecstatic or terrible, without an object or exceeding its object,” unknowable as it is, may nevertheless be expressed objectively in certain works of art. When an objective correlative functions in an artwork, “exact equivalence” of emotion is communicated to the reader “by a skilful accumulation of imagined sensory impressions.” In much the same way one can speculate that for Eliot, the object of the statue of the Virgin Mary cradling the dead Christ in all of its stony inertia nevertheless was able to correlate a feeling in him that was so intense that it brought him to his knees. For Weil, similarly, her repeated encounters with a poem whose opening lines are “Love bade me welcome” resulted in, as she unequivocally recounts, Christ taking “possession” of her. Something in the combination of phrases unfolding in time, deeply meditated upon, accomplished this in her – just as something in the sculpted white marble of The Pietà, coming into Eliot’s field of vision, provoked his collapse.

Insofar as Weil writes that conversion is the first step in “an operation of reversal,” we may nominate these two encounters as significant turns in the lives of Eliot and Weil. Thenceforth for Eliot, poems like “Ash Wednesday” and “Journey of the Magi” reflected his newfound faith, while Weil’s social philosophy became modulated by her indefatiguing

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emphasis on the spiritual. This chapter will treat Eliot and Weil’s moments of arrest not merely as experiences of strong aesthetic wonder, but as ecstatic religious encounters that were viscerally felt and judged to be so. It is of note, however, that neither Eliot nor Weil waxed prolific on the topic. Although Eliot indirectly incorporated his experiences of the mystical into *Four Quartets*, the two accounts of religious arrest that this paper mentions were observed and noted by witnesses, not popularized by Eliot himself. Similarly, Weil’s description of her experience of Christ taking possession of her is one of two brief accounts found in letters written to two acquaintances, one of whom noted: “it seems as though she kept the great secrets of her deeper life in an inviolable silence… her most intimate companions had no suspicion of it and she confided it to none of her notebooks” (Perrin 77).

Both Eliot and Weil reacted to these formative events with such silence, unwittingly in keeping with the famous statement found in Ludwig Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*: “Whereof one cannot speak thereof one must be silent.” Yet, it may confidently be said that it was precisely about the inexpressible that Eliot and Weil could not cease thinking and writing. Taking a postsecular approach to understanding the moment of Eliot before the Pietà and Weil before “Love (III)” requires a deep examination of what each thinker believed poetry was capable. While each thinker was “silent” about their own mystical experiences, I argue that *Four Quartets* and Weil’s writings in her notebooks – artificially distilled in *Gravity and Grace* – are attempts at both documenting and achieving something like an objective correlative for the decreating mystical encounter in the reader. These texts reach beyond serving as sources of mere aesthetic pleasure or intellectual curiosity, and towards the achievement of true presence – inflected as absence – and religious actuality.

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27 Perrin: “it seems as though she kept the great secrets of her deeper life in an inviolable silence. As far as I am able to know, she only spoke to Joë Bousquet and myself of the great light which changed her life; her most intimate companions had no suspicion of it and she confided it to none of her notebooks” (*Simone Weil As We Knew Her* 77).
To start with what one may observe on a basic level, we find that both figures’ accounts of “conversion”\(^{28}\) share an element of unexpectedness.\(^{29}\) Eliot shocked his relatives when he knelt before the *Pietà*, and Weil thought she was “merely reciting” a beautiful poem when, she writes, “Christ came down and took possession of me.” Part I of “Little Gidding” echoes the moment of prostration both Eliot and Weil\(^{30}\) experienced physically. The lines suggest a traveler that has arrived, by contingency, before an altar – as Eliot before the Pietà and Weil at her nth recitation of “Love (III).”

> You are not here to verify,  
> Instruct yourself, or inform curiosity  
> Or carry report. You are here to kneel  
> Where prayer has been valid (I, 45-48)

The tone is severe, commanding even. The lines categorically reject all motives – “to verify, / Instruct yourself, or inform curiosity / Or carry report” – except abject devotion before the sacred: “You are here to kneel.” Indeed, for both Eliot and Weil, even as it bespoke the ultimate love, the moment of divine seizure physically overwhelming, even annihilating. During a later documented mystical experience, Eliot was witnessed falling to the ground with “a heavy thud…flat on his face in the aisle, with his arms stretched out,”\(^{31}\) illustrating the abnegation of even Eliot’s bodily autonomy before contact with the divine, let alone permit him to even consider the menu of options provided in lines 45-47. Weil’s first-person account in her *Spiritual Autobiography* describes a kindred moment of divine encounter, during which she felt able to

\(^{28}\) While Weil never officially converted, she saw her vocation as being “a Christian outside the Church” (*Letter to a Priest*, 3).

\(^{29}\) *EC*, II, 21-22: “The poetry does not matter / It was not (to start again) what one had expected.”

\(^{30}\) In 1937 at a chapel in Assisi, Weil writes that “something stronger than I was compelled me for the first time in my life to go down on my knees” (*WG* 67).

\(^{31}\) “At the time of communion Eliot had risen and come up to the altar to receive. The priest and I had turned back to the altar, and I could hear Eliot rise and return to his place. At that moment there was such a heavy thud, as if Eliot had fallen, that the priest and I turned around. Eliot was flat on his face in the aisle, with his arms stretched out. It was obvious at a glance that he had not fallen… I realized that Eliot had just undergone a mystical experience” (Fowlie 138).
“rise above this wretched flesh, to leave it to suffer by itself, heaped up in a corner, and to find a pure and perfect joy in the unimaginable beauty of the chanting and the words.” In these lines Weil does not even use possessive pronouns to refer to herself, illustrating the near complete detachment such a moment achieved in her. To speak of possession in such a moment is to speak not of possessing but of being possessed – of being firmly grasped and annihilated by a supernatural reality dimensionally larger than oneself. The only role given to the “you” in those lines from “Little Gidding” is to “kneel.” Every other verb ascribes a level of self-importance to the person. Kneeling is the only verb that sets the subject in proper relation before the divine.

The cosmic proportions of the inexorable compulsion to kneel appear to render any act of volition completely insignificant to this moment, yet I claim that poetry plays a crucial part in the process. Weil attests that poetic encounter goes beyond mere recital. While it may not constitute the moment of possession, the reading of poetry practices the self-emptying that makes the flashing moment of complete extinction possible. For all their substance and content, poems effect a partial kenosis in their readers because they channel readers’ attention towards the words of a poem instead of other phenomena that would otherwise fill their mental space. For Weil, this “attention” is not simply the banal focus asked of schoolchildren by impatient teachers, but mental effort of the highest quality. As Weil switched from reciting “Love (III)” to the Christian “Our Father,” she writes: “If during the recitation my attention wanders or goes to sleep, in the minutest degree, I begin again until I have once succeeded in going through it with absolutely pure attention” (WG 71), demonstrating her commitment to a notion of reading poetry that verges on the attitude of prayer.

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32 Weil: “Often, at the culminating point of a violent headache, I make myself say it over, concentrating all my attention upon it and clinging with all my soul to the tenderness it enshrines” (68 WG, emphasis mine).
The quality that the two endeavors – poetry and prayer – share in common is that of the attention, which Weil writes, “taken to its highest degree, is the same thing as prayer” (GG 117). What Weil demands is “attention which is so full that the ‘I’ disappears” (GG 118), lending specific meaning to the experience of reading attentively. The successive lines of a poem demand, according to Weil, the reader’s continual consent to essentially void herself before the text, creating a partial vacancy that may be filled when the poem’s words themselves subside to make room for the unknown. The statue of Mary and Christ coming into Eliot’s field of vision and the lines of “Love (III)” that similarly occupied space in Weil’s mind as she repeated the poem again and again may have, despite their plenitude, evoked vacancy – just as the interminable bulbs of successive rosary beads signify as of yet unsaid prayers, which in their recitation dominate the mental space of the penitent who hopes for divine intercession.

In Chapter 1 I establish the kenotic aspects of poetry as the writer’s discipline, according to Eliot’s concept of poetic impersonality. This chapter hopes to establish the kenotic aspects of poetry as the reader’s discipline, furnished by Weil’s concept of decreation. “Decreation” would not have been a term that Eliot was familiar with, considering that Weil’s writings only began to be published in the early 1950s. However, in the sense that decreation refers to the renunciation of self in order to make room for the divine, I show in the previous chapter that Eliot was conversant with these ideas as early as at the start of his career. His theories regarding poetic impersonality are prototypical of the ancient school of Christian mystical thought that both Eliot and Weil would come to deeply study and adhere.

Eliot, the decorated poet who outstandingly fulfilled the modernist dictate to “Make it new” with The Waste Land, would come to write these lines in a poem at the end of an

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33 I say “partial” because true void is empty even of the words of which poetry consists.
illustrious career: “There is only the fight to recover what has been lost / And found and lost again and again” (EC, V, 15-16), suggesting the wisdom that the lifelong “fight” of an individual’s search is ultimately to assert not difference, but fidelity. After all, originality and innovation in and of themselves are not valued traits in the universe of Christian mysticism. What is desired in this context is not novelty for its own sake, but a rather curious conformity to the kerygmatic truth of God, a truth that Weil writes is “transmitted from generation to generation.”35 In this context, the “truth” that that both Eliot and Weil stumbled upon and honed within their own contexts is that of decreation, what Weil calls “our only good” (GG 33). That Weil writes “only” indicates her conviction that there is no other way for human life to resolve itself. She repeats: “Our existence is made up only of [God’s] waiting for our acceptance not to exist” (GG 32).

To be clear, however, there is a fine distinction to be made between the “our only good,” decreation, and destruction, its “blameworthy substitute.”36 The difference between them is consent, yet each choice has the person’s ultimately unavoidable undoing in common. Worlds turn on the question of how a person loses his self, not whether. The decreation and destruction resemble each other as flames of purgation imitate hellfire, as Eliot writes: “We only live, only suspire / Consumed by either fire or fire”37 (LG, IV, 13-14). Decreation is the radical truth that lies at the summit of the mountain we must all scale – only to find, perhaps as many of the negative mystics found: “nada, nada, nada, nada, nada, nada, nada, nada, nada y en el Monte nada,”38 the

35 As Weil writes in NR: “the sole earthly reality which is directly connected with the eternal destiny of Man is the irradiating light of those who have managed to become fully conscious of this destiny, transmitted from generation to generation” (7).
36 “Decreation: to make something created pass into the uncreated. Destruction: to make something created pass into nothingness. A blameworthy substitute for decreation” (GG 73).
37 The lines just above it are also illuminating: “The only hope, or else despair / Lies in the choice of pyre or pyre – To be redeemed from fire by fire” (LG, IV, 5-7).
38 “Nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing and even on the mountain nothing” (Kavanaugh 45). See Appendix 5 for a scan of the Sketch of Mount Carmel by St. John of the Cross.
prevailing nothingness that besets our senses when the conditioned human subjectivity comes across the unconditioned, transcendent source of all being. The reason why negative mystics like St. John of the Cross and Pseudo-Dionysius envision God as a dark nothingness is because of the strong tendency humans have to declare what we cannot conceive to be nothing. Our sense of God, the unconceptualizable, therefore hovers between overwhelming presence – incalculable power and otherness – and the very opposite of that: nothingness.

If God is above all conceptuality and condition, then it would appear that any language about God would be reductive. The privilege that both Eliot and Weil claimed for poetic language is that it somehow is able to evoke the unreducibility of God – not through positive content, but a different “language game” that operates through form and negation. Returning to the word “only,” which occurs a substantial forty times in *Four Quartets*, Eliot writes:

Words move, music moves
Only in time; but that which is only living
Can only die. Words, after speech, reach
Into the silence. Only by the form, the pattern,
Can words or music reach
The stillness (BN, V, 1-6)

“Only” recurs four times in this short passage, quadruply emphasizing both the limitations and privileges of what is “only.” In the former sense, what is “only” is limited, in a way maimed: “Words move, music moves / Only in time,” the line reads, almost disappointingly – as if yearning for the words and music to wriggle precisely beyond their limitation in time. The passage gestures towards the musical ambitions of the work’s title *Four Quartets*, which highlights the factor that both poetry and music share: duration, or movement in time.

Lines 2-3 feature two “only”’s of limitation: “that which is only living / Can only die,” illustrating the moribundity that is the ultimate limit to life. However, the fourth “only” changes its tenor: “Only by the form, the pattern, / Can words or music reach / The stillness.” The “only”
changes here from its emphasis on unfortunate limitation in the sense of inadequacy to an “only” that denotes the singular pathway that is able in its limitation to liberate, nevertheless: “The stillness,” a rare sensation that bears likeness to the seven nada’s of St. John of the Cross in precisely the withholding of sense that it engenders. By paradox, the constricted nature of what is “only” in this case gives access to the inaccessible, the unconstricted. And “the form, the pattern,” which is so reminiscent of poetry, is given the privilege to reach the unformed, unpatterned “stillness” through the echo it sounds in its absence.

In a statement taken from her notebooks, Weil writes the following: “Poetry; passing through words into silence, into the nameless,” nicely mirroring the lines from Eliot that were just analyzed. This short aphorism encompasses a micro-poetology in itself, the compact semicolon accomplishing in one character the entire theoretical legwork of my thesis. It deftly suggests a special relationship between poetry and the action of “passing through words into silence, into the nameless.” The phrasing and syntax are familiar for Weil also uses this pattern to define “Decreation: to make something created pass into the uncreated” (GG 32). The similarity between these two statements, both culled from her notebooks, suggests the likeness of poetry and decreation. Whereas poetry brings words into silence, decreation brings the created into the uncreated. For both Weil and Eliot poetry serves as a medium through which – and perhaps “only” through which – the reader may arrive at what Eliot terms “the stillness,” and what Weil calls “silence” or “the nameless.”

Having mentioned the negative mystics, I find that the writings of St. John of the Cross are especially relevant for discerning the decretive role of poetry in Weil and Eliot’s philosophies. In his theory on the dark night St. John of the Cross offers a vital framework for

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39 The Notebooks of Simone Weil: Volume 1, page 120.
understanding the mechanisms to which both Eliot\textsuperscript{40} and Weil\textsuperscript{41} lent credence. The “dark night” as St. John of the Cross conceived it in his dialectical works \textit{The Ascent of Mount Carmel} and the eponymous \textit{The Dark Night}, is, crudely-put, a guiding process of spiritual progression. Although the two parts are similar, the former is classed as the beginner’s way and the latter for proficients. During the dark night, the believer undergoes a period of purifying darkness, deprivation, silence and absence from God after the initial dart of joy following initial contact with the divine.

\textit{The Ascent of Mount Carmel} is occupied with the renunciation, penance, and descent that comprise the active “human initiative preceding the divine response” (Kavanaugh 46, emphasis mine). Whereas \textit{The Dark Night}, as a work that complements \textit{The Ascent}, concerns itself with passivity instead of activity, for in this movement it is \textit{divine} love that acts and moves the soul towards union. Significantly, in both texts poetry plays a central, didactic role as St. John of the Cross uses his poems as the basis for his commentary on the subject of divine union. I claim that Eliot and Weil also allot to poetry a deep instrumentality within the process of divine union, an instrumentality in line with Eliot’s strict insistence that it is truly “only” through poetry, or else something very like poetry that stillness is reached.

An important caveat must be denoted first. In his work \textit{T.S. Eliot and Mysticism} Paul Murray has rightly pointed out what many critics miss in their accidental conflation of the two distinct phases – two separate nights – that comprise the dark night as St. John of the Cross and Eliot conceived it. Murray claims that \textit{Four Quartets} deals almost exclusively with the first night – the dark night of \textit{sense} expounded upon in \textit{The Ascent of Mount Carmel} – as opposed to the

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{40} Eliot so admired St. John of the Cross that \textit{EC}, III, 84-97 contains a whole passage that is lifted, almost verbatim, from \textit{The Ascent of Mount Carmel}.
\item \textsuperscript{41} Weil references the dark night on pg 15 of \textit{GG}: “It is [God] who, through the operation of the dark night, withdraws himself in order not to be loved like the treasure is by the miser.”
\end{itemize}
second night – the dark night of the soul expounded upon in *The Dark Night* – which is only given a brief nod in *Four Quartets*. The difference between these two nights is that the first night is active – man moving towards God by reducing himself – while the second night is crucially passive – God moving towards man, *after* man has reached the point of nullity, “the still point,” achieved by the first night.

A passage in “Burnt Norton” makes brief allusion to the second night, contrasting the two:

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Descend lower, descend only
Into the world of perpetual solitude,
World not world, but that which is not world,
Internal darkness, deprivation
And destitution of all property
Desiccation of the world of sense,
Evacuation of the world of fancy
Inoperancy of the world of spirit;
This is the one way, and the other
Is the same, not in movement
But abstention from movement
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The dark night of sense is represented by the call to “Descend lower, descend only / Into the world of perpetual solitude” (III, 25-26). This impulse, explicitly commanded to the reader in “Burnt Norton,” carries into Part III of “East Coker,” in which the opening line reads evocatively: “O dark dark dark” before the setting submerges, it seems literally, into the underground tube in London – a fitting vehicle for a modern expression of a “world of perpetual solitude.” Negative prefixes such as de-, e-, in-, ab- abound as the passage sketches a figuration of privation in the abstract. There is little mention of the second night, apart from the gesture in lines 33-35: “the other[^42] / Is the same, not in movement / But abstention from movement,” highlighting the passivity characteristic of the dark night of the soul. Lines in Part III of “East

[^42]: The second night – the dark night of the soul. Eliot punts any further discussion of this night. One almost gets the sense that it is not to be spoken of.
Coker” also strike a chord of resonance with this moment: “I said to my soul, be still, and let the dark come upon you / Which shall be the darkness of God.”

However, besides these superficial remarks, Eliot leaves this “way” largely untreated, suggesting that it is not in the purview of his, or possibly any, poetry. His reticence regarding the dark night of the soul is connected to lines from Part V of “The Dry Salvages” that state that “to apprehend / The point of intersection of the timeless / With time, is an occupation for the saint,” (lines 19-20) an occupation that Eliot as foremost a poet, appears to humbly deny as his task. The upshot of the fine distinction between the two nights is that while poetry, as an active endeavor, would naturally have little role to play in the passive dark night of the soul, it is nevertheless greatly involved with the dark night of sense and its associated deprivation.

The dark night of sense may not at first appear to have its lot cast with poetry – an inherently sensual endeavor. The triplet\(^{43}\) quoted earlier seems like it is at odds with any optimistic poetic project that imagines\(^{44}\) the worlds of sense, fancy and spirit in joyful abundance. However, recalling that for Eliot and Weil not “imagination,” but “void,” or “reality”\(^{45}\) is at the heart of artistic endeavor, the dark night of sense is right at home with *Four Quartets*. For one, the poem cannot be said to be optimistic about the end – “the stillness” – it hopes to achieve. The poet constantly undercuts his own ability to succeed with words, writing that:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{…every attempt} \\
\text{Is a wholly new start, and a different kind of failure} \\
\text{Because one has only learnt to get the better of words} \\
\text{For the thing one no longer has to say, or the way in which} \\
\text{One is no longer disposed to say it.}^{46}
\end{align*}
\]

\(^{43}\) “Desiccation of the world of sense, / Evacuation of the world of fancy / Inoperancy of the world of spirit” (*BN*, III, 30-32).

\(^{44}\) I use “imagination” in the meaning intended by Chapter 1.

\(^{45}\) *BN*, I, 45.

\(^{46}\) *EC*, V, 3-7.
This sentiment repeats itself throughout *Four Quartets*, as Eliot, the master poet of his age, describes each attempt to write as “a different kind of failure,” suggesting that for all of his establishment venerability not the poetry, but what the poetry brokenly tries to realize remains elusive. In these lines “sense” incarnates itself as “the general mess of imprecision of feeling, / Undisciplined squads of emotion” (lines 10-11), or, in other words: nothing helpful. Hence, poetry is not, for the author of *Four Quartets*, the site of orgiastic catharsis – but of that of the unrealized struggle that must be struggled:

> There is only the fight to recover what has been lost  
> And found and lost again and again: And now, under conditions  
> That seem unpropitious. But perhaps neither gain nor loss.  
> For us, there is only the trying. The rest is not our business.\(^{47}\)

The penultimate sentence of the last line brings the reader close to something very like St. John of the Cross’s dark night of sense. Poetry is conceived not as the triumphal flowering of sense into artefact, but a “fight,” a losing battle, even. It is in the sense of the poetic endeavor as a constant effort, or “trying,” that *Four Quartets* conforms to the first dark night, in which poetry is a mortification.\(^{48}\)

To take liberties on a line\(^{49}\) that Eliot himself riffed from St. John of the Cross, I observe that a poem bids its reader go by a way that is not her own, just as each line of “Love (III)” thematically bids a reluctant soul welcome, each line also actually bids the reader to submit to each descend line of the poem. In “Little Gidding,” Eliot writes that:

> prayer is more

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\(^{47}\) *EC*, V, 15-18.

\(^{48}\) Insofar as “mortification” carries the meaning of the voluntary infliction or toleration of bodily pain, I add that Weil thought of poetry as “impossible pain and joy… A joy which by reason of its unmixed purity hurts, a pain which by reason of its unmixed purity brings peace” (*GG* 150).

\(^{49}\) Eliot: “In order to arrive at what you are not / You must go through the way in which you are not” (*EC*, III, 93-94). Compare to St. John of the Cross: “To come to be what you are not / you must go by a way in which you are not” (Kavanaugh).
Than an order of words, the conscious occupation
Of the praying mind, or the sound of the voice praying
and yet, even if prayer, like poetry, is admittedly more than “order of words,” it is always still physically that. On an elemental level, a poem is a composition of words in a fixed order that suggests duration, unfolding in time. As such, the call to “Descend lower” is apt on a meta level, since this is exactly what reader’s eyes do, as they follow the descending lines of a poem. By “fixed,” I indicate that poems are sacrosanct. Unlike thought or speech, the one reading a poem is not given license to spontaneously insert new lines into the text – at that point of difference, it is simply no longer the poem that is being read, but something else. Hence there is a fundamental askesis involved within the simple act of reading a poem because we must interact with it on its own terms, and go by its way rather than our own. Should we be tempted to rebel, we might consider Weil’s words on the correct attitude towards what is “beautiful.”

To soil is to modify, it is to touch. The beautiful is that which we cannot wish to change. To assume power over is to soil. To possess is to soil. To love purely is to consent to distance, it is to adore the distance between ourselves and that which we love (GG 65).

If we consider the poem as a beautiful artefact these compact sentences, which themselves display an affinity with the enjambed lines of a poem, suggest that we “cannot wish to change,” “soil,” “modify,” or “touch” it. Weil’s platonic leanings identify the beautiful, the good and the just together with the divine. It follows that these verbs convey a sense of deep propriety in the form of self-restraint with regards to Beautiful. With a beautiful poem then, Weil assumes a posture of reverence, not before the poem itself, but what it enshrines – what the shard of the beautiful, caught within it, startlingly reflects.
The lines of "Little Gidding," finally settle upon genuflection as the only adequate response, in stark contrast to the listed alternatives – to verify, instruct, inform, or carry report – which, utilitarian by nature, each grant a level of importance to the person. Eliot’s kneeling, like Weil’s consent to distance, reflects restraint, the elected reduction of the person before the divine. In other words, when one reads a poem, or writes one, for that matter – as has been explored in the previous chapter – one endures the void in the sense that one does not “exercise all the power at one’s disposal” (GG 10). Like a pilgrimage, but with and through words, a poem asks a reader to consent to follow a path that has been trodden time and again by others. The pilgrim-reader does not, like a libertine, forge new paths or go where she will, but walks the path devotedly, following the injunction in Eliot’s lines: “In order to arrive at what you are not / You must go through the way in which you are not” (EC, III, 93-94). While the poem, like the path, may be “new” to the reader upon first encounter, the reader does not create it; instead, she is decreated by it. She does not cause the poem to come into existence, but conversely the poem causes her to cease to exist for a moment.

The reader of a poem attains a role much like that ascribed to the intelligence in Weil’s writings. It constitutes the human faculty to consent to give up the ‘I’ during decreation. Weil, heiress to the Enlightenment, drastically reframes the role of the intelligence in her own philosophy, stating: “The intelligence has nothing to discover, it has only to clear the ground. It is only good for servile tasks” (GG 13). Lest this statement be misinterpreted as Weil’s disavowal of the intelligence, it must be made clear that Weil is simply denoting what is in her

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50 “You are not here to verify, / Instruct yourself, or inform curiosity / Or carry report. You are here to kneel / Where prayer has been valid” (LG, I, 45-48).
51 Eliot “stressed the fact that once the poem was published, the poet became simply another reader of his own work” (Fowlie 136).
52 Weil held “servile” tasks in great esteem. A chapter of GG titled “The Mysticism of Work,” informed by Weil’s firsthand experiences as a laborer in vineyards and car factories, attests to her favor for those monotonous activities that instructed the creature of its ultimate creatureliness – to the fact that it is nothing, and yet, as Thibon writes at the postscript, “capable of God” (GG 183).
view the correct purview of the intelligence – not given for bombastic heights afforded it by her precedents, but towards the humble lows of shuffling, peregrine feet and eyes descending down the lengths of poems, again and again. Indeed, the sentiment in the above quotation with its emphasis on “servile tasks” fits well with the notion that the dark night of sense is comparatively simple, consisting of self-evident, active efforts to curb one’s self. In keeping with this sentiment, she writes: “The rôle of the intelligence – that part of us which affirms and denies and formulates opinions – is merely to submit” (GG 130), or as Eliot might have put it: “to kneel.”

The lesson that Weil teaches about the role of the intelligence is one that Eliot seems to have internalized in *Four Quartets*, as the poet often denigrates and disillusioned his own voice. Whereas in another poem, the line: “My words echo thus in your mind,” would remain unwritten, taken for assumed, Eliot seems to feel a compulsion to remind the reader that she is reading a poem. Often, particularly lyric portions of *Four Quartets* are followed by metapoetic gestures that jar the reader, such as these lines in Part II of “East Coker,” lines 18-21:

That was a way of putting it – not very satisfactory:
A periphrastic study in a worn-out poetical fashion,
Leaving one still with the intolerable wrestle
With words and meanings. The poetry does not matter.

In this sequence, the lyrical interlude involving conventionally poetic themes and imagery such as flowers and stars drastically changes to an almost didactic, autocrirical voice by the next stanza. The words “satisfactory” and “periphrastic” instantly kill the romantic mood with their academic tenors. Furthermore, line 21 casts an unflinching aspersion onto the whole endeavor of poetry itself with the contextually stunning sentence: “The poetry does not matter.” The implications that this proclamation has on poetry may be compared to the effect that the

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53 It is simple in comparison to the dark night of the soul, which is passive – in which God moves.
Nietzschean proclamation of the death of God had on theology: for some, it was a death knell; for others, including Weil and Eliot, it is but a purifying dark night, liberation from a longstanding idolatry.

The question must be asked: why poetry? Why proceed by way of an inherently illusory medium? One answer given to us by the poem is that “words or music” are necessary to reach the “stillness,” although they are flawed forms. Eliot responds to the flaw in poetry by jerking the reader awake after sequences of lyric lull, calling attention to poetic ruse and to the weaknesses of his chosen vehicle, all without ceasing to produce poetry. He writes:

Words strain,
Crack and sometimes break, under the burden.
Under the tension, slip, slide, perish,
Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place
Will not stay still.

Words, like humankind, are the fallible ingredients of a decreation. They are subject to a myriad of ways to fail, as exhibited by the verbs in the quotation: they may strain, crack, break, slip, slide, perish, decay, and so on. What we have not yet realized is that by asking “why poetry?” we also ask the larger philosophical question of theodicy. And in our answer we stumble upon the necessity that Weil considered to be the very fabric of the cosmos.

Poetry punctuates Weil’s beginning and Eliot’s end as mystical thinkers. Tethered to poetry in this way, it could not have escaped either thinker that rarefied language plays a role in quickening humankind to the divine, and yet both thinkers also found the limitations of poetry and attempted to clarify its role. For Weil, poetry is a “metaxu,” a radical means towards the divine. In *Four Quartets* the reader witnesses the Eliot’s gradual detachment from poetry itself, culminating in the shocking pronouncement that “The poetry does not matter” that nevertheless eludes nihilism. In its unremitting denial of the importance of poetry in itself, *Four Quartets*
ultimately affirms something deeper and more unknown, and does so, notably, through poetry.

The opening stanza\textsuperscript{54} from Part V of “Little Gidding” reflexively remarks upon the rare circumstance in which words conspire together – \textit{just right}\textsuperscript{55} in every sense – to form a “complete consort dancing together” (line 10). Is this “consort” one that achieves the mystical objective correlative? Does it objectively correlate “The stillness” for which the entire poem yearns? The stanza answers: “Every phrase and every sentence is an end and a beginning, / Every poem an epitaph” (lines 11-12), suggesting that poems like gravemarkers attest to what has passed – the event is over – and yet, hidden among the conspiratorial lines, “The stillness.”

\textsuperscript{54} \textit{LG}, V, 3-10.

\textsuperscript{55} Weil: “If we ask why such and such a word in a poem is in such and such a place and if there is an answer, either the poem is not of the highest order or else the reader has understood nothing of it… In the case of a really beautiful poem the only answer is that the word is there because it is suitable that it should be” (\textit{WG} 176).
Chapter 3:  
The Still Point and the Descending Movement of Grace

“I said to my soul, be still, and wait without hope  
For hope would be hope for the wrong thing; wait without love,  
For love would be love of the wrong thing; there is yet faith  
But the faith and the love and the hope are all in the waiting.  
Wait without thought, for you are not ready for thought:  
So the darkness shall be the light, and the stillness the dancing.”  
– T.S. Eliot

“God wears himself out through the infinite thickness of time and space in order to reach the soul and captivate it. If it allows a pure and utter consent (though brief as a lightning flash) to be torn from it, then God conquers that soul. And when it has become entirely his he abandons it. He leaves it completely alone and it has in its turn, but gropingly, to cross the infinite thickness of time and space in search of him whom it loves. It is thus that the soul, starting from the opposite end, makes the same journey that God made towards it. And that is the cross.”  
– Simone Weil

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The previous chapter makes the case that, for Weil and Eliot, poetry functions as a quasi-dark night of sense. It drew similarities between the purgation of the first dark night as conceived of by St. John of the Cross and readings from *Four Quartets* and *Gravity and Grace*. Even the phenomenology of reading a poem attests to the reader’s partial unselfing, as the reader submits to the unfolding lines of a text. The liminal state that is forged as a result of attentive reading may be described, in simple terms, as waiting.

Waiting was an activity of great significance to Weil’s thinking, as evinced by the title of one of her works: *Waiting for God*. The original French title *Attente de Dieu* contains a nuance within the verb “attendre” – “to wait” – that is lost in translation, that is, the relation of waiting to paying attention. Weil particularly loved the Greek iteration of this word – “ἐν ὑπομένῃ”: “*patientia* is rather an inadequate translation of it. It is the waiting or attentive and faithful immobility that lasts indefinitely and cannot be shaken” (*WG* 196). It was in the concept of

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56 In giving this collection of letters and essays the title of *Waiting for God*, the publisher has sought to suggest a favorite thought of Simone Weil which she expressed in the Greek words ἐν ὑπομένῃ, waiting in patience” (*WG* xi).
waiting that Weil found a way to describe her status as regards the Church: “I have always remained at this exact point, on the threshold of the Church, without moving, quite still” (WG 76). Weil often analogized to this posture that that of a beggar or a slave, waiting in silence.

Waiting implies a subject that is awaited – for the beggar, a morsel of bread or a kind word of acknowledgement. It resembles a state of paradoxical “Inactive action” (GG 45), to be arrived at through the self-emptying and constraint that characterizes the dark night of sense. I claim that Weil’s “waiting” begins when the dark night of sense transitions into the passive dark night of the soul. What is awaited in this seemingly interminable night is the divine. It is during this state of nothingness and void that the moment of divine seizure strikes. It is during this phase of held emptiness that invites the descending movement of grace to fill it.

Both Simone Weil and T.S. Eliot make reference to a decisive “moment” in their respective works. In Four Quartets, Eliot calls it “the still point of the turning world” while in Gravity and Grace, Weil speaks of “Instants when everything stands still” (GG 11). This chapter will follow these moments in order to explore the extent to which Eliot and Weil are postulating the same concept in literary form. The chapter will locate the crucial moment as the telos of Four Quartets, as well as the speculative point of inflection for Weil’s conception of decreation. The last chapter discerned the extent to which Eliot and Weil envisioned poetry as imitating the task of decreation. This chapter will explore the mechanisms of the decreative moment itself.

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At the still point of the turning world. Neither flesh nor fleshless; Neither from nor towards; at the still point, there the dance is, But neither arrest nor movement. And do not call it fixity, Where past and future are gathered. Neither movement from nor towards, Neither ascent nor decline. Except for the point, the still point, There would be no dance, and there is only the dance.

57 WG 133.
I can only say, there we have been: but I cannot say where.
And I cannot say, how long, for that is to place it in time.\(^{58}\)

In the lines above, Eliot gestures towards a paradoxical “still point” that girds “the turning
world” like a center of gravity. He is unable to give it a normative definition, for it is
indeterminable – impossible, it seems, to pin down. The quality of the “still point” is so elusive
that Eliot must describe it by way of negation. Neither/nor pairs in the stanza are, at least, able to
say what the “still point” is not: “Neither flesh nor fleshless; / Neither from nor towards,”
“Neither arrest nor movement,” and so on, conforming to a pattern in in *Four Quartets*, in which
Eliot, rather than describing presence, evokes it negatively through absence. For example, “Not”
appears fourteen times in “Burnt ” alone, not counting other negative words such as “never”,
“neither”, “cannot”, or “nor”. As transcendental “still point” flees from definition, Eliot turns to
techniques borrowed from negative theology.

When the neither/nor pairs are unspooled, one finds that they unite opposites, for
example: “Neither ascent nor decline.” Like koans they confound the mind – *what can be
“neither flesh nor fleshless”*? – challenging the reader to find an impossible mean between
irreconcilable contraries. It is a koan in itself to ask why one would proceed this way if the goal
is to instruct, and not to merely bewilder?\(^{59}\) What could be Eliot’s purpose in proceeding the
apophatic way? Considering that late medieval apophticism arose in order to bring about the
“dethronement of theological idolatries” (Turner 14), perhaps Eliot too quests in these lines for a
truer\(^{60}\) conception of the *Deus absconditus*,\(^{61}\) brought about by what he conceived as the modern

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\(^{58}\) *BN*, II, 16-23.

\(^{59}\) Some claim that the two activities are one and the same. See: Lee Yearley’s “The Ethics of Bewilderment”

\(^{60}\) Meister Eckhart once wrote (in a misattributed quote from St. Augustine): “If I had a God whom I could
understand, I should never consider him God.”

\(^{61}\) The hidden God.
poet’s injunction to “force, to dislocate if necessary, language into his meaning.” What this quotation suggests is that for all of the apparent negation present in *Four Quartets*, the poem does not negate absolutely. Rather, it is through negation the poem seeks tirelessly after some core. It must also be observed that a negation of content does not always translate to a negation of form: the lines *about negation* are not spare, but exhaustively prolix, even, in this case, mildly repetitive.

The poem, in these lines especially, reflects a *negatio negationis*; a negation of negation itself. After all, the passage, equivocal though its neither/nor constructions may be, is resolute when it comes to the reality of “still point”. In one of the passage’s only ventures of confidence, Eliot writes: “I can only say, there we have been: but I cannot say where” (*BN*, II, 22). The “still point of the turning world” functions, for Eliot, as a postsecular byword for the divine – one that, like Paul Tillich’s locution of God as “the ground of our being” avoids the idolatrous baggage of that the word “God” has accumulated over the ages.

Eliot’s procession by way of negation, or via negativa, bears similarity with Weil’s own “method of working,” in which she sought to balance the “force of an affirmation” by immediately seeking “what truth was contained in the opposite negation” (Perrin 77). Not surprisingly, her writings at times openly contradict each other, yet, with the apophatics in mind, I contend that these are not the sign of a deficiency of truthfulness, but of the limitations of language. Weil writes: “When a contradiction is impossible to resolve except by a lie, then we know that it really is a door. One must pause and knock, and keep on indefatigably knocking, in

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63 The line “Neither from nor towards” (*BN*, II, 17) is shortly met with the very similar line: “Neither movement from nor towards” (line) in close succession.
64 Paul Tillich, *The Shaking of the Foundations*.
65 Weil: “A case of contradictories which are true. God exists: God does not exist. Where is the problem? I am quite sure that there is a God in the sense that I am quite sure my love is not illusory. I am quite sure that there is not a God in the sense that I am quite sure nothing real can be anything like what I am able to conceive when I pronounce this word. But that which I cannot conceive is not an illusion” (*GG* 114).
a spirit of insistent, humble expectancy” (FLN 269), relating an image, once again, that is marked by “expectancy,” by waiting.

Curiously, two additional neither/nor pairs surface in the following section of Part III of “Burnt Norton.” They attempt to describe a quality that is “neither daylight…” (line 3) “…nor darkness” (line 7) and “Neither plenitude nor vancancy” (line 10). Although they borrow the same sentence construction as the five neither/nor pairs from Part II, they do not describe the liminal space of possible transcendence, but a no man’s land that recalls “The Hollow Men.”

“Shape without form, shade without colour, / Paralysed force, gesture without motion” (lines 11-12) – these ciphers of pure negation constitute the destruction that apes decreation. The revelation, the “still point”, seems to be totally bereft in such a “place of disaffection” (BN, III, 1), and yet, ironically, such an inhospitable place is where Eliot and Weil would have us wait.

At this stage it would seem that the Weilienne “instant” or Eliotic “moment” could strike at any point. Yet Weil complicates the chronology that assumes that the process is as facile as 1) the individual undergoes a self-imposed kenosis 2) the individual succeeds 3) the moment of encounter with the divine occurs. Because this figuration subtly places the human individual as the arbiter of decreation, it is inaccurate. Calling the void “the dark night,” she restates the absolute contingency upon the supernatural during kenosis:

To accept a void in ourselves is supernatural. Where is the energy to be found for an act which has nothing to counterbalance it? The energy has to come from elsewhere. Yet first there must be a tearing out, something desperate has to take place, the void must be created (GG 11)

These lines also emphasize the unmistakeability of the “instant.” Weil constantly describes it in phenomenological terms that imply a visceral tearing asunder (GG 90), as the irruption of the divine rips through the soul like a lightning strike’s jagged streak. The “instant”, from what I can gather, is the moment when the individual’s meagre attempts to effect a kenosis through a quasi-
dark night of sense merely constitute consent for true divine voiding to enter and engulf the person.

Paying careful attention to the latter half of this quotation, one understands that the instant of ‘tearing out’ is chronologically former to the supernatural acceptance of ‘a void in ourselves.’ The ‘tearing out’ seems to have something to do with the creation of the void in us, almost as a poison-laced nick sows a proliferating seed within its host. She called this seed “a point of eternity in the soul,” writing that “it is necessary to surround it with an armed guard, waiting in stillness, and to nourish it with the contemplation of numbers, of fixed and exact relationships” (GG 119). So again “waiting in stillness” resumes, bookending the experience and reclaiming its utmost importance as an activity. With the coincidental reoccurrence of the word “stillness,” these lines suggest that poetry, which falls under the category of the contemplation “of fixed and exact relationships,” plays a role in guarding the point of eternity that has been sown, feeding it with a long wait in stillness.

Barring the given quality of stillness that Weil’s “instant” shares with Eliot’s “still point,” Weil goes on to describe her “instant” as a “lightning flash” that offers a brief, but brilliant moment of “escape” from the laws of this world (GG 11). This flash of lightning, Zeus-like in its invocation, evokes a similar instance of divine illumination in Part I of “Burnt Norton,” as Eliot describes the empty pool that is suddenly “filled with water out of sunlight” (line 37):

There they were as our guests, accepted 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. 
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 heart of light, 
And they were behind us, reflected in the pool. 
Then a cloud passed, and the pool was empty. (BN, I, 32-41)
In keeping with the utmost brevity of a lightning strike, this moment of illumination lasts for just four fleeting lines, before being dispelled with the haphazard passing of a cloud (line 41). Each line describes a minute observation: that the pool was filled, that the lotos rose, the surface glittered out of “heart of light”\(^{66}\) and the “guests” were reflected in the pool.

One might call this account of a revelation tepid at best in comparison with the grand annunciations immortalized in great works of art. Instead of the archangel Gabriel, “Burnt Norton” tells of a mysterious group of unnamed figures – the aforementioned “guests” – referred to as “dignified, invisible, / Moving without pressure, over the dead leaves” (lines 25-26). Rather than the sky pealing open in a grand display of epiphany as in the biblical account of the baptism of Jesus in \textit{Matthew} 3:17,\(^{67}\) the reader witnesses the momentary, even hallucinatory filling of a grimy pool – a blip that could just as easily have been overlooked. The passage is vague, anticlimactic – the moment is, safe to say, missable. What kind of an “escape” can such a moment serve after all? If anything, the event seems utterly mundane – a trick of the eye, more naturalistic than supernaturalistic – but this same ordinariness is well in keeping with both Weil’s and Eliot’s postsecular conceptions of revelation.

To return the episode in “Burnt Norton,” the “we” of the poem moves trance-like in tandem with these ghostly guests “in a formal pattern” that evokes the form-bound language of poetry itself. Pattern is yet another key word in the \textit{Four Quartets}, often evoked in tandem with “the form” as codes for poetry itself. Appearing ten times throughout the poem, the word “pattern” bears a great affinity to the notion of poetry as a pattern through which – perhaps only

\(^{66}\) The “heart of light” in \textit{Four Quartets} also appears in \textit{The Waste Land}: “…I was neither / Living nor dead, and I knew nothing / Looking into the heart of light, the silence” (“The Burial of the Dead,” lines 39-41). \(^{67}\) \textit{Matthew} 3:16-17 (KJV): “And Jesus, when he was baptized, went up straightway out of the water: and, lo, the heavens were opened unto him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and lighting upon him: And lo a voice from heaven, saying, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.”
through which – the moment of stillness may be reached. By participating in the pattern and overlaying ourselves upon their movement, we see what the mysterious “they” perhaps have seen all along – and have been urging us to see as well, if we would only waltz with them. In conjunction with these pattern-making beings, in a kind of dance, we peer into the empty pool to find it filled with “water out of sunlight.” This substance, in its description, paradoxically combines the ponderous, coalescent quality of water with the weightless, diffuse quality of light. For these mixed qualities Eliot’s “water out of sunlight” is in conversation with Weil’s primary concepts, but which is it: gravity or grace?

Gravity, according to Weil, refers to the natural sinking or downward motion of matter in the universe, which she also extends to the natural movements of the soul (GG 1). When Weil writes that the instant is described as an escape from “the laws of this world,” she is gesturing towards her notion of gravity that the instant defies. The “escape,” then, is classed as grace – the sign of “supernatural intervention” (GG 1). The supernatural lift of grace forms the only exception to the natural sinking or downward motion of gravity. Yet, if gravity was all weight and grace was all lightness, the two would never touch. Grace would float upward as gravity sunk downward, ever away from each other. Aware of this, Weil asks: “Gravity makes things come down, wings make them rise: what wings raised to the second power can come down without weight?” (GG 4). She solves the problem by proposing a descending movement of grace that complements its ascendary function. In characteristic fashion, Weil’s dialectical logic finds its resolution in a point of intersection, of reconciliation between irreconciliable forces. Grace, like a winged seed, descends like gravity but without weight, entering the world, and the pool is filled with “water out of sunlight.”

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68 BN, V, 3-5.
In a list-like fashion, Weil equates “the instant when everything stands still” with “instants of contemplation, of pure intuition, of mental void, of acceptance of the moral void” (GG 11). The common thread between the successive examples is that they are contingent upon the apprehension of the interior mind, rather than upon overwhelming, exterior events like those constitutive of an epiphany as traditionally portrayed in the Christian mythos. The moment of “pure intuition” rings less of a reality that suddenly appeared than one that had existed all along and is suddenly noticed for the first time. Despite Weil’s insistence that grace is the one exceptional and supernatural (God-enabled) “movement of the soul” (GG 1), the bringing about of the instant nevertheless relies upon both the intervention of the supernatural, and the inner consent of the person’s “acceptance of moral void” (GG 11). Weil notes that the shape of these two efforts – human and divine – forms a significant cross:

we cannot conceive of the descent of God towards men or the ascent of man towards God without a tearing asunder. We have to cross the infinite thickness of time and space – and God has to do it first, because he comes to us first (GG 90, emphasis mine).

The key caveat to these lines is that God “comes to us first” (90). The cross that is mentioned in these lines, which tears both God and man asunder, is longer on one side. Since God, who moves first, forms the very substrate of the whole experiment, we in all humility must understand the limited role given to humanity in the “tearing asunder” that is granted to it. Accordingly, we must not misattribute or confuse the vital role given to poetry insofar as it acts as a handmaiden or facilitator of the moment, and not, importantly, the giver of the moment of apprehended grace, which as Eliot writes is already “burning at every moment.”

The moment of revelation, which can never fail to also be the moment of grace, may be rare, but it is not scarce. Indeed, such moments must be radically plentiful in Eliot and Weil’s intersecting postsecular theologies – their theologies demand it. In the world of Four Quartets, at
least, the word “moment” appears in abundance – seventeen times. As Eliot writes at the end of “East Coker,” the true picture of the matter is “Not the intense moment / Isolated, with no before and after, / But a lifetime burning in every moment” (lines 21-23) suggesting that the moment is ubiquitous, although our apprehension of them may be eminently uncommon. Implicit in this cosmology is the idea that grace is always and only supernaturally given, even gratuitously so. And yet, the provision of the graceful moment is differentiated from its receipt, which can perhaps only be prepared for in good faith – never, of course, guaranteed.

Indeed, to even think of, or attempt to calculate grace in these terms would constitute a betrayal of sorts. It would be comparable to treating God in the same way the proverbial miser, referenced in Gravity and Grace, loves his treasure—that is, in a greedy and ultimately unreal way. Instead, as part of Weil’s unrelenting emphasis on purity of intention that verged as far as “purifying atheism,”69 she writes: “when God has become as full of significance as the treasure is for the miser, we have to tell ourselves insistently that he does not exist. We must experience the fact that we love him, even if he does not exist” (GG 15). While to some ears these words might ring blasphemous, they are, for Eliot, well in keeping with the long tradition of negative theology that suffuses Four Quartets. Weil continues, making reference to St. John of the Cross: “It is [God] who, through the operation of the dark night, withdraws himself in order not to be loved like the treasure is by the miser” (GG 15). Her words suggest, like Eliot’s, fidelity so deep that it crosses the threshold of atheism.

For such a radical form of belief, allergic to any whiff of consolation and openly vulnerable to wounding, it is no wonder that one of Weil’s favorite books of the Old Testament was The Book of Job. She held that the love of man for God had to be purified, even to the point

69 See the chapter in Gravity and Grace titled “Atheism as Purification” (GG 114).
of great suffering, so the narrative in Job served to illustrate that:

However deep this love may be there is a breaking-point when it succumbs, and it is this moment which transforms, which wrenches us away from the finite towards the infinite, which makes the soul’s love for God transcendent in the soul. It is the death of the soul (GG 38)

Like so many of her metaphors, this one is also embedded with the concept of decreation, “the death of the soul.” For such a death, which finds its exemplar in the Passion of the Christ, all kinds of violence are licensed. This would explain why many of the verbs Weil uses to describe the decreative moment are phenomenologically violent – pertaining to a visceral, physical and bodily experience. By describing the transforming, decreating instant as a “breaking-point,” Weil highlights the pain inherent in it:

The irreducible character of suffering which makes it impossible for us not to have a horror of it at the moment when we are undergoing it is destined to bring the will to a standstill, just as absurdity brings the intelligence to a standstill, and absence love, so that man, having come to the end of his human faculties, may stretch out his arms, stop, look up and wait (GG 112)

These lines also show that the instant for Weil is also the moment of physical and mental exhaustion that brings a person to wait. In these lines, as in the previous, there is the sense that the “standstill” which finds its companion in Eliot’s “still point” is gotten at the cost of total enervation, at which point the will, intelligence, and even the faculty of love in us is triply depleted so that we have nothing left but to wait.

“Where is there an end of it”? cries the voice in Part II of “The Dry Salvages.” This is a question that one can imagine the “strained time-ridden faces” of “East Coker” asking, or more probably, “wailing.” Eliot describes their faces as “time-ridden,” a verbal invention, which, one gathers, indicates confinement, just as a bedridden patient is confined to her bed. The violence of
time cannot be understated. What Weil calls “necessity in its purest form”\textsuperscript{70} – time – is a prime subject in “The Dry Salvages,” as Eliot describes “a time / Older than the time of chronometers” (I, 39-40), an oppressive, interminable time. In total, the question is formulated three times: “Where is there an end of it, the soundless wailing” (line 1), “Where is there an end to the drifting wreckage” (line 4), “Where is the end of them, the fishermen sailing / Into the wind’s tail, where the fog cowers” (line 19-20). Each question is asked against the backdrop of an ocean motif in keeping with the physical location after which this quartet is named. The specific anxiety behind each question is that of the fears common to a seafaring town – the fear of disaster befalling loved ones at sea. Twice the question is answered in the negative: “There is no end, but addition” (DS, II, 7), and “There is no end of it, the voiceless wailing” (DS, II, 31). These answers appear final. The second, for example, matches the wording of the first question almost to a tee, in order to seemingly most definitively and categorically deny any possible end to the intolerable ‘wailing’. Yet, we observe that the three questions are met with only two answers. Reading into the lack of the third answer, we may postulate an unlikely answer that affirms there is an escape from time, an as of yet undiscovered timelessness. However, this postulation can only be taken in faith, under adverse circumstances during which all evidence points to its contrary.

In Weil’s “Prologue”, a semi-fictional account found in her First and Last Notebooks, an unnamed male character, who appears to stand for God, interacts with the first-person character, who seems to represent Weil herself. The man invites her to follow him as he takes her to a church and calls on her to kneel. They spend some months together in a garret, share bread and wine, and converse like old friends until one day he throws her out, to her immense distress.

\textsuperscript{70} Weil’s note to herself: “Your great temptation: inability to cope with necessity in its purest form, which is time” (FLN 35).
Almost convinced that he has never loved her, the narrator is a wreck, “And yet,” she writes at the end, “there is something deep in me, some point of myself, which cannot prevent itself from thinking, with fear and trembling, that perhaps, in spite of everything he does love me” (FLN 66). The narrator’s timid hope, against all odds, that the man actually loves her is like the postulated third answer that is missing from Part II of “The Dry Salvages” in all of its unlikeliness and disconsolation.

Weil’s “Prologue” is a reliable account of the peculiar love that exists between God and mankind according to the mystics, a love that is sorely tested. Indeed, much of Weil’s thinking follows a pattern inherent to mystical accounts of union with God that hearkens back to the amorous lyric poems of the Old Testament book of the Song of Songs, which describe a bride seeking after the bridegroom who appears to have gone missing. She searches and searches for him: “I sought him, but I found him not,” a plaintive refrain that has often been interpreted along the lines of an extended metaphor of the relationship between mankind and God.

St. John of the Cross found these lines so compelling that he was inspired to write The Spiritual Canticle, which is now itself a part of the tradition. In The Spiritual Canticle, the bride searches anxiously and, it seems, in vain for her beloved, exclaiming:

Why, since you wounded
This heart, don’t you heal it?
And why, since you stole it from me
Do you leave it so
And fail to carry off what you have stolen?

When the bride finally reunites with him, she “begins to interpret her search in a new light,”

71 “By night on my bed I sought him whom my soul loveth: I sought him, but I found him not. I will rise now, and go about the city in the streets, and in the broad ways I will seek him whom my soul loveth: I sought him, but I found him not. The watchmen that go about the city found me: to whom I said, Saw ye him whom my soul loveth? It was but a little that I passed from them, but I found him whom my soul loveth: I held him, and would not let him go…” (Song of Solomon 3:1-4).
72 For an excellent summary of The Spiritual Canticle, see Kavanaugh 213-214.
understanding a previously unknown context that has required her bridegroom, out of love for her, to seem to have abandoned her.

This narrative is one that Weil expresses in her own parables about the divine. In a particularly compelling composition she writes:

God wears himself out through the infinite thickness of time and space in order to reach the soul and captivate it. If it allows a pure and utter consent (though brief as a lightning flash) to be torn from it, then God conquers that soul. And when it has become entirely his he abandons it. He leaves it completely alone and it has in its turn, but gropingly, to cross the infinite thickness of time and space in search of him whom it loves. It is thus that the soul, starting from the opposite end, makes the same journey that God made towards it. And that is the cross.

Motifs from previously discussed passages resurface in this one – from the ‘lightning flash’ to the shape of the cross, which signifies the tragic and cosmic chiasmus that God and humankind effect. This self-sufficient microcosm contains Weil’s theology in a nutshell. Hers is a theology that separates, strikingly, God from power. Hers was a God constrained by “the distance between the necessary and the good” (GG 105), which finds evidence of God’s love for humankind within God’s own limitation and suffering.

That being said, the violence of contact with the divine – the impulsion and even pain felt by the individual who undergoes decreation – cannot be understated. The impulsion that meets the dark night of the soul, as Weil describes it, takes on a decidedly illicit flavor. To impel is to force upon, to push, press, to drive forward. Weil writes: “We should not take one step, even in the direction of what is good, beyond that to which we are irresistibly impelled by God” (GG 44). Paying close attention to the verb ‘impelled’ and the concept of impulsion more generally, one finds that it yields an important significance to her conception of the task that is available to us and that which is not up to us at all, namely consent and decreation. One can surrender the ego, but it is God who reclaims it. Even the fact that she mentions impulsion predicates a force or
entity that is able to impel. Part I of “Burnt Norton” registers especially well with this, since the events that transpire in the poem are prompted by seemingly chance encounters spur the action, rather than by a poetic voice with a clear sense of direction. Tellingly, the galvanizing force or character that prompts is a bird that emerges as a thrush in “Burnt Norton” and a fiery dove in “Little Gidding.”

*Four Quartets* arises out of an abstract, verging on abstruse, consideration of time present, past and future:

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Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future,
And time future contained in time past.
If all time is eternally present
All time is unredeemable.
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
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As the following lines grapple with ever entangling possibilities about the nature of time, the poem seems at risk of incoherence, falling victim to the unstable flux of its enormous meditation until a spurring action occurs to give meaning to the chaos. In an effort to track the spurring action, one finds that the first images given by the poem are that of “Footfalls” that “echo in the memory / Down the passage which we did not take / Towards the door we never opened / Into the rose-garden” (lines 11-14). There are multiple levels of removal present in just this short excerpt, casting doubts as to whether any of these images serve as a satisfying stimulus. The issue is that each noun is plagued by indefiniteness, hypotheticality, and an overriding sense of unreality.

The ‘footfalls’, for example, are not present but mere echoes in a memory that we later find out cannot be a true memory, since it is a memory of a path that we did not take. The
ontological truth of this memory, the untaken passage, the unopened door, the suddenly appearing rose-garden are in doubt, and yet as obedient readers we follow the poem’s irresistible unfolding and encounter a level of reality in spite of everything unreal. The path we did not take somehow has led us to a door we do not open, yet we have reached the hyper-mediated rose-garden and we unfailingly sense flowers. As the next lines toll: “My words echo thus in your mind,” the reader is strongly reminded that she is reading a poem and that she, like any reader, has slowly deceived herself, or more accurately, has let herself be deceived in order to arrive where she is.

At this point, doubt is also cast on the feeling that it is somehow Eliot the poet who is fully in control. The question arises of how we are impelled – how we follow a poem without thinking of its impossibility, of its miracle. Both reader and poet alike follow promptings that occur almost as if out of nowhere. At line 21, a character finally arises out of the first and second stanzas, taking the form of a bird that shifts the agency from the obvious poet’s voice to a creature that has long been the cipher of the Holy Ghost. The bird is the one who urges us like the rabbit from *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*. We, at the bird’s alacritous promptings, are pummeled into the world even more irrevocably than before.

In dreamlike lucidity, we follow “the deception of the thrush” (line 24) and become witness to something divine. The bird urges us into the garden: “Quick, said the bird, find them, find them,” (line 21) – giving us a descriptive and clear task that leaves us with little time to think or prevaricate. At the bird’s call for quickness, the pace of the poem becomes sprightly. Only for a moment does the speaker ask himself and us “shall we follow / The deception of the thrush?” (lines 23-25), but before we have time to consent, and indeed before the line is enjambed, we are already “Into our first world” (line 25). We have been, it seems, compelled in
spite of ourselves. It is telling that it is not the narrator who spurs himself, but the urgent bird that both ushers us in and pushes us out of this strange realm. The bird reappears directly after the event concerning the filled pool and immediately gives us the imperative to “Go, go, go” (line 44), in an effort, it appears, to protect us from annihilation, from the reality “which flesh cannot endure” (line 36).

Is there something off about a forceful illusion occupying the heart of a poem written by a poet who, like Weil, is skeptical of the imagination? Is there a meaningful difference between “the deception of the thrush” and Weil’s conception of the imagination that fills the void? For Eliot, at least, as suggested by lines quoted earlier – there is the sense that it is a necessity: it is “only by the form, the pattern” that the stillness may be reached. As Weil writes: “I must necessarily turn to something other than myself since it is a question of being delivered from self” (GG 3). The question seems to be of how to turn away from self, but not to such an extent that the self is lost illegitimately, as it is when the imagination is stimulated such that it fills the cracks through which grace might pass. The answer, it seems, lies (in both senses of the word) in a lucid illusion, in disciplined thought. It is significant then that the dreamlike, ghostly, divine figures that the reader apprehends before the filled pool are described as dancing in a pattern. A pattern, like the successive lines of a poem—which we in turn follow until we are led to the ledge of an empty pool, a depression in the earth—all in order to receive a tantalizing glimpse that is like a dart, a puncture wound that introduces the Weilienne “point of eternity” in us.

The Eliotic moment finds perhaps its fullest vehicle in the final lines of “Little Gidding” when the fire and rose, at last, are one. The rich image that closes Four Quartets reflects a singular moment when the biological rose indicative of humankind coincides with the flame indicative of devouring divine love for one sole moment – the moment placed at the zenith of the
fire’s incandescent occupation of the rose, whose petals threaten to disintegrate into ash just as it is cloaked in its shirt of flame. Weil claims that the love of God and humankind is a cosmic catch-22. Before this fatal contradiction, poetry arrives as a kind of paradoxical passageway.

The bulk of my thesis has been devoted to negation, which I hold as a key for Weil and Eliot’s sense of the poetic. They express it in many ways, whether it through decreation, impersonality, void, self-emptying, or the dark night of St. John of the Cross. While the kenotic element is central, their philosophies do not end there. The fine distinction is, as mentioned earlier, not negation in itself, but finally, a negation of negation. The sought-after creation of a void within oneself hopes for the void’s literal fulfillment with God’s own being. This pattern is common not only between Weil and Eliot, but also among mystical accounts, Biblical narratives, and inspired works of literature. It is the lesson that there is no ascent without descent. It is a lesson which affirms the notion – contra our Faustian age – that humankind is not given to perpetual growth, cancerous expansion, and unchecked development. It is a lesson that surfaces in “East Coker”, that “humility is endless” (II, 48).

In a similar mood, Eliot takes a reflexive glance at his writing, summarizing:

These are only hints and guesses,
Hints followed by guesses; and the rest
Is prayer, observance, discipline, thought and action.
The hint half guessed, the gift half understood, is Incarnation.

Dismissing his own poetry once again he gestures at something that inherits poetry: “prayer, observance, discipline, thought and action.” In short, religion; a charged and politicized practice that, as it has traveled through history waxed and waned from its speculated original meaning, as a simple word: Re- (“again”) + legere (“read”). What could be more natural?

I am thinking particularly of the Exodus narrative (Egypt, the desert, the promised land), Christ’s passion (life, death, resurrection), The Divine Comedy (Inferno, Purgatorio, Paradiso).

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“The hint half guessed, the gift half understood, is Incarnation,” writes Eliot, referring to the mystery central to Christianity – that of the Christ who is worshipped as fully man, fully God. Eliot’s naming of the specific doctrinal tenet of Incarnation calls to mind the “still point of the turning world” and the verbal acrobatics that surround its description, which may also be described as “half-understood”, “half-guessed” hints. Do these speak to the same phenomenon? Weil certainly extends the Incarnation to also encompass and undergird other theological concepts: the act of creation, the Eucharist, Inspiration. Weil views each of these phenomena and many more outside of the Christian universe as God’s descending movement, which “comes from above, never from below” (GG 88). This what Weil means by “grace.”

At the close of Georges Bernanos’s novel *Journal d’Un Curé de Campagne*, the protagonist utters the line: “Qu’est-ce que cela fait? Tout est grâce” (trans. “What does it matter? All is grace”). These lines from Bernanos, whose novels Weil admired and with whom she shared brief correspondence, at once present a paradox. How can everything be grace if, as we have seen, decreation, or the process by which Weil draws near to it, is so difficult? How can it be, simply, that grace is widely accessible if, when we look around in our present situation, it is not to be found anywhere? Perhaps it requires a paradigm shift of the kind realized by the Bride from the *Spiritual Canticle* at the end of all her searching to see finally that it was she, not her beloved, who was astray, understanding finally that all is grace.

The emptiness hopes to be filled with grace, which Eliot beautifully imagines as “water out of sunlight”. Although grace is a constitutive part of the title of my thesis I cannot treat it at length in part because neither Eliot nor Weil focus on it, and in part because, like Eliot in *Four Quartets*, I discover that for me, too, “there is only the trying.” I can only, like Eliot, gesture

\[ ^{74} DS, V, 32. \]
towards what I do not understand: that grace! And content myself with the negation and negation of negation that is my business.
**Conclusion:**

*Metaxu: The Poem and the Church*

“Two prisoners whose cells adjoin communicate with each other by knocking on the wall. The wall is the thing which separates them but it is also their means of communication. It is the same with us and God. Every separation is a link.”

– Simone Weil

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Although they worked in vastly different forms – for Weil: the private notebook, the occasional article, and for Eliot: the poem, the essay – the two both arrived at the theological imperative of self-emptying. They drew upon the same sources as they distilled a theological poetics or a poetic theology that found in the ego something to be surrendered. For Eliot this manifested itself early in his career within the idea of poetic impersonality, and later in his career through *Four Quartets*. For Weil, her concept of decreation, borne out of a radical cosmology, finds “our only good” in the renunciation of the “I” to God. Eliot extended kenosis into the realm of artistic production, stating: “The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality.” Conversely, Weil found within the reading of poetry itself an experience akin to prayer in its capacity to nourish a void and re-present the divine.

In an age of noise, digital intrusion, and an increasingly narcissistic, mass-consumer culture, the lesson of self-emptying deserves to be re-learned. Yet, it must be remembered that decreation is not self-transcendence. It cannot be tacked onto the person as an enhancement. It cannot be conceptually wrenched into any version of the expansion of self. It is not, re-iterate, self-improvement. It is, simply put, the annihilation of the self. It cannot be absorbed by the capitalist arm of the system the same way “McMindfulness” has. Decreation is not even a choice, since this locution suggests that it is contingent upon the human. Only insofar as the

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person consents\textsuperscript{76,77} unconditionally to be decreated is there anything that resembles human choice – and even this is complicated by more than one theological tangle. What is, at least, clear in Weil’s theory and Eliot’s poem is the unremitting demand for constant purification, for faith to undergo a dark night, and every consolation and compensation to be renounced in love.

In my judgment the biggest difference between Weil and Eliot is that Weil went further than Eliot in renouncing membership in the Church, whose sacraments she loved. Although she loved “God, Christ, and the Catholic faith as much as it is possible for so miserably indequate a creature to love them,” she writes that she could not bring herself to be baptized because she could not bear to be separated from everything that remained outside the Church. In a series of extensive letters to a priest, she wondered whether “God does not want there to be some men and women who have given themselves to him and to Christ and who yet remain outside the Church.” In hindsight, her negative vocation to remain just beyond the threshold of the Church appears to have opened her philosophy to a wider audience and paved the way for a renaissance\textsuperscript{78} of her thought specifically and the ideas she represented.

All the same, while Weil remained outside the Church, she was deep within The Temple. This is the title of the collection of poetry by George Herbert whose closing work “Love (III)” facilitated Weil’s unequivocal interior conversion. The Temple, as its name suggests, is deeply formed by architectural aspirations as Herbert experiments with form through concrete poetry. The opening poems “The Church Porch” and “The Altar” invite the reading that The Temple itself constitutes the spatial dimension of a Church through words. Herbert explicitly illustrates the architectural space that a poem constructs in the reader’s mind. “The Altar,” for example,

\textsuperscript{76} “He who created us without our help will not save us without our consent” (GG 38).
\textsuperscript{78} The graphic representation of scholarly works published on Weil since 1936 in Appendix 6 shows steady growth starting from the year 1989.
imitates the shape\textsuperscript{79} of a Church altar – the structure upon which a sacrifice is offered. The poem also forms, coincidentally, the rough shape of the capital letter “I,” resounding with the core idea of decreation that the ego must be given back to God.

Several of Herbert’s poems suggest, through their literal shape, the idea that a poem creates an immaterial church: a church constituted not of walls, but of words apprehended – even constructed – in real time. With this in mind, the thought of Weil reciting “Love (III)” over and over again suggests not only her gradual familiarization with the poem, but her gradual mental construction of the poem as a spatial zone, a church, in which she, like a parishioner, attends the mass. Examined from this angle, each line serves as architectural support – pillars, perhaps – that support the cavity within a church that is meant to carry the mind to the thought of God’s immensity as illustrated through confined space.

Furthermore, this reading of poetry-reading itself accommodates both the stillness and dynamism that are nested together in the item of the printed poem. To recapitulate the discussion of the “still point” from earlier, perhaps a provisional answer to the riddle posed to us in “Burnt Norton” is that the poem itself is the “still point” that reconciles the flesh and fleshless, arrest and movement, past and future, ascent and decline, dance and no dance (II, 16-23). Until she reads the poem, “Love (III)” is inert, but when she reads it, it dances – but only for her. Paradoxically, this transformation occurs without any apparent change in the poem itself, which, sphinxlike, gives no observable hint to any difference. The poem concretizes its descending movement, just as a music score is mute.

Keeping the notion of a poem as a church in mind, I return to Eliot and Weil at their moments of conversion. The two thinkers had pivotal spiritual encounters in churches that they

\textsuperscript{79} See Appendix 7 for Herbert’s handwritten copy of “The Altar.”
happened upon by chance\textsuperscript{80}, stumbling in unaware of what would transpire. The chapel of Santa Maria degli Angeli in Assisi, the Solesmes monastery, the Vatican, the church at Little Gidding are all houses of worship of varying stature that placed indelible marks on Weil and Eliot. Does it matter that they were churches? Could poems have substituted these encounters?

In 1920, Eliot campaigned against the demolition of nineteen city churches in London, writing:

A visible church, whether it assembles five hundred worshippers or only one passing penitent who has saved a few minutes from his lunch hour, is still a church: in this it differs from a theatre, which if it cannot attract large enough audiences to pay, is no better than a barn.\textsuperscript{81}

Eliot’s vehement opposition to the leveling of those city churches, which took place, in spite of his protests, speaks to the special quality that a church has and a poem does not. Where else in a city is a person able to nondescriptly enter a quiet, holy space meant for prayer – a space where kneeling is appropriate, and an experience of holy void possible? Churches, unlike poems, actualize the poetry of a religion into physical space that lasts for centuries. For centuries churches and the artworks within them aimed at conveying to the illiterate a profound sense of the divine. Of course, not everyone who enters a church has such an experience.

Philip Larkin’s poem “Churchgoing” – like “Little Gidding” – concerns itself with a moment in which the narrator finds himself in a church and speculates about the experience. The difference is that Larkin’s narrator does not sense the austerity and penitence that the narrator of “Little Gidding” demonstrates. Instead, for Larkin, the poem’s skeptical tone casts the little church in a pathetic light. He is, in short, is underwhelmed by the church, but as a consolation prize, Larkin brings the poem to its culmination with a two-cent prize:

\textsuperscript{80} “After my year in the factory, before going back to teaching, I was taken by my parents to Portugal, and while there I left them to go alone to a little village…” (WG 66). Weil chanced upon the day of the festival of the village’s patron saint, and amid the hymns she felt she belonged to Christianity (WG 67).

\textsuperscript{81} “The Churches Again,” (Eliot, Dickey, Formichelli, Schuchard 895).
For, though I've no idea.
What this accoutred frowsty barn is worth,
It pleases me to stand in silence here (lines 52-54)

Larkin’s response in line 54 is far cry from “You are here to kneel / Where prayer has been
valid” (LG, I, 47-48). He describes the church as a “barn,” which, by coincidence, is the same
word Eliot uses to differentiate a sparsely visited church from another defunct public structure.82
For Larkin, however, the distinction does not hold; a church is like a theatre, which becomes like
a barn when people stop going to it. Yet, even Larkin finds compensation for entering such a
“frowsty” place, in his brief moment of simple, if self-indulgent, pleasure, enjoying the church’s
silence.

A poem may be read, as The Temple would suggest, as a church or religious space, but I
think it is more difficult to encounter a poem – that is, to be arrested by it – by accident.83 For
one, poems, for all their elementality, are opaque. They often require multiple readings and the
application of fine attention in order to arrest. Without this, poems thicken, and like walls, the
reader thuds against them, unable to penetrate through to the other side. This metaphor, which I
use to demonstrate the unsuccessful reading of a poem, is nevertheless akin to how Weil
describes the only way it is possible to read a poem.

Metaxu, a concept I have been gesturing towards at the close of each chapter, is a one
that Weil defines, as with most her concepts, through metaphor. Weil comes closest to defining
metaxu as “intermediaries leading to God” (GG 146), but she also compares metaxu to a
“bridge” (GG 147), a “stepping-stone towards God” (GG 147), one’s “home, country, traditions,
culture” (GG 147). The most memorable, and in this case most salient, metaphor of all though is
that which considers metaxu as a wall that separates two prisoners in adjoined cells. In the

82 Eliot: “besides the powerful concurrent reasons for preserving them as ancient buildings, there are powerful
reasons for preserving them as churches” (Eliot, Dickey, Formichelli, Schuchard 4).
83 This being said, the Larkin poem shows that the converse is not necessarily true for experiences in churches.
metaphor, the wall is the object that separates the prisoners from each other, and yet it is simultaneously their only means of communication, for they have, over time, devised a method of communication that consists solely in tapping against the wall in furtive patterns. “It is the same with us and God,” Weil writes, “Every separation is a link” (GG 145). Her statement here about metaxu draws visibly from the source of her extraordinarily capacious cosmology, which is deeply concerned with space (which roughly correlate to “void,” “emptiness”), mass (“imagination,” “existence”), and distance (“love,” “necessity”). Like decreation, metaxu posits a world, which by the very fact of its existing, occludes God. What is there left to do in such a universe? – to see in everything a metaxu, and by extension, to see in everything, somehow, the aching grace of the universe. To close, I quote from final stanza of Eliot’s early poem “Preludes,” which finds this grace for a brief moment:

I am moved by fancies that are curled
Around these images, and cling:
The notion of some infinitely gentle,
Infinitely suffering thing.
EPILOGUE:
Saints of Genius

"Today it is not nearly enough merely to be a saint, but we must have the saintliness demanded by the present moment, a new saintliness, itself without precedent... we have to ask for it daily, hourly, like a famished child constantly asks for bread. The world needs saints who have genius, just as a plague-stricken town needs doctors.”

– Simone Weil

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One month before Weil passed away from tuberculosis exacerbated by malnourishment, she wrote in a letter to her mother that she felt she had within herself “a deposit of pure gold which must be handed on.” This feeling of growing certainty was complicated by her growing sense that among her contemporaries there was “no one to receive it.”

I hope that my thesis constitutes a single receipt – weak and broken though it may be – of the “deposit of pure gold” that Weil hoped to pass on. I hope also to have shown that Eliot, who encountered Weil after having published Four Quartets, received it as well, but more interestingly showed signs of a kindred sensibility that antedates his first exposure to Weil in 1951.

Throughout the composition of this thesis, I have been struggling with the paradox of grace – particularly with two contradicting qualities that it is said to hold simultaneously: rarity and omnipresence. My temptation has always been to privilege grace’s former aspect and to think pessimistically about the human capacity to receive grace.

For all of the supernatural topics my thesis covered – from Weil’s conversion to “Love (III),” Eliot’s collapse before The Pietà, and the thesis that I myself proffer: that poetry can decreate – I find myself in doubt. My research has exposed me to beautiful ideas, truly beautiful

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84 Weil continues: “Some people feel in a confusing way that there is something. But once they have made a few polite remarks about my intelligence their conscience is clear. After which, they listen to me or read me with the same hurried attention which they give to everything, making up their minds definitely about each separate little hint of an idea as soon as it appears” (Seventy Letters 196).
ideas. And I, like the man from *The Gospel of Mark*, feel like crying out: “Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief.”

Is it possible? Is it possible today? Somehow when belief does creep in, I sequester it to their time – the lifetimes of Weil and Eliot – forgetting that they lived in times, at times, more trying than ours.

The first word Weil wrote in her notebooks is “Pédagogie.” Although a friend of hers dismissed the writings in her notebooks as merely “rough drafts of her thoughts” (Perrin 77), I speculate that Weil – the great teacher that she was – desired that her writings would effect what her first word promises: to instruct.

It is the question that confronts mystics and philosopher-kings alike – how to bring the experience of the sevenfold nothings on the top of the mountain back down to earth?

This modest study into T.S. Eliot and Simone Weil, which has taken me through the byway of via negativa, has taught me is that it is precisely that which evades contemplation that demands contemplation – it is exactly that which defies language about which we must speak.

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85 Mark 9:24.
APPENDIX
Appendix 1: T.S. Eliot.
Appendix 2: Simone Weil.
Appendix 4: Weil’s Handwritten copy of George Herbert’s “Love (III).” Source: Simone Weil: A Life by Simone Pétrement.

Love.

Love bade me welcome; yet my soul drew back,
Guilty of dust and sin.
But quick-eyed Love, observing me grow slack
From my first entrance in,
Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning
If I lack’d anything.

A guest, I ans wer’d, worthy to be here.
Love said, You shall be he.
I, the unkinde, ungrateful? Ah, my deare,
I cannot look on thee.
Love took my hand and smiling did reply:
Who made the eyes but I?
Truth, Lord; but I have marr’d them; let my sham
Go where it doth deserve.
And know you not, says Love, who bore the blame
My deare, then I will serve.
You must sit down, says Love, and taste my meat
So I did sit and eat.

George Herbert.
Appendix 5: Source: *St. John of the Cross: Selected Writings* (Kavanaugh 44).
Appendix 6: Source: Worldcat Search Results for "Simone Weil" limited to years after 1936.
Appendix 7: George Herbert’s “The Altar.” From The Temple.

The Altar.

A broken Altar, Lord, thy servant rend
Made of a heart, and cemented with tear;
Whose parts are as thy hand did frame;
No workman's tool hath touch'd the same.
A Heart alone
Is such a stone;
As nothing but
Thy power doth cut.
Wherefore each part
Of my hard heart
Meets in this frame;
To praise thy name.
That if I chance to hold my peace,
These stones to praise thee may not cease.
O let thy blessed Sacrifice be mine,
And sanctify this Altar to be thine.
BIBLIOGRAPHY

ABBREVIATIONS

WG  Waiting for God
NR  The Need for Roots
GG  Gravity and Grace
BN  “Burnt Norton”
EC  “East Coker”
DS  “The Dry Salvages”
LG  “Little Gidding”

WORKS CITED


