

Towards a Visionary and Historical Consciousness: Rowan Williams's *Four Quartets* Lectures (1974–1975)

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Abstract

The aim of this essay is to provide a critical exposition of Rowan Williams's unpublished lectures on T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*. A thorough examination of these texts has been lacking in various interpretations of Williams's writings, and this essay aims to remedy this paucity, making available the argument and content of the lectures open to scrutiny and historical investigation. As will be seen, Williams's interpretation of the poems is robustly theological, and seeks to articulate a radically incarnational reading of the *Four Quartets*. Such an interpretation seeks to assert creation's fundamental historicity and often tragic contingency, while at the same time suggesting that it is only when reality is seen for what it is that a vision of redemption may be truly glimpsed.

Keywords: Rowan Williams; T.S. Eliot; poetry; Christology

Beyond Redemption?

Leo Bersani, in his sophisticated literary-critical work *The Culture of Redemption* (1990), has sought to criticise the various attempts made by artists, novelists and literary critics to “redeem” history, that is, to transfer the brute fastidiousness of historical fact into a transcendental order of meaning. For Bersani, the attempt to redeem history is in some sense to forget history, and the attempt to discover any kind of truth behind it all, save the illusion of its permanence, fails to take account of the radical contingency of human experience.



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Bersani's sentiments echo the controversial statement made by Theodor Adorno (at the end of his essay on "Cultural Criticism and Society") that "To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric" (Adorno 1967, 34). Adorno's much-debated aperçu has been interpreted as saying, namely, that the stylising effects of poetic and aesthetic creation are part and parcel of an attempt to give form and meaning to the catastrophic. They constitute just one more subtle permutation of the attempt to control or absorb the unruliness of the world (cf. Adorno 1992, 76–94; Horkheimer and Adorno 2002).

The Anglican churchman and theologian, Rowan Williams, has himself tried to enter this fray, to the extent that he sought to create a space in theology for this unruliness; for the *difficulty* of reality as it continues to present itself.¹ For Williams, re-presenting reality involves never-to-be-finalised modes of complex description and re-articulation.² This is largely because reality, at its most profound compass, is a reflection of the divine mystery.³ But it is also due to the insight that the world manifests an intractable array of human suffering and disaster that defies simple explanation, thus inviting us to patient modes of lived interpretation and hope.⁴ It is my contention that Williams's perspectives on these matters have never really undergone serious mutation, even though they have certainly matured and become more circumspect in regard to certain excesses. Drawing on the influence of his teacher Donald MacKinnon, Williams from early on was particularly sensitive to a form of tragic realism which required the response of theology, as it needed to apprehend (for the sake of spiritual coherency) how one might redemptively reimagine the world in the light of these realities. This was something which came out particularly in his reading of Eliot's *Four Quartets*, though it can be found in other contemporary texts,⁵ and is certainly present up to today.⁶ The aim of this essay is to provide a critical exposition of these unpublished lectures, since a detailed examination of these texts has been lacking in various interpretations of Williams's writings, and so this exposition aims to remedy this paucity, making available the argument and content of lectures open to the scrutiny and historical

1 For more on Williams's account of "difficulty," and how it relates to his reading of "the tragic," see Delpont, (forthcoming). On the philosophical trope of "difficulty," see Diamond (2008, 43–89).

2 For a discussion of this, see the appendix on representation to be found in Williams (2014, 186–197).

3 For a brief précis of his understanding, see Williams (1995, 99–104).

4 For his sustained reflection on this, see Williams (2000, 148–166). The concept of "lived interpretation" is drawn from the work of Nicholas Lash, particularly his essay entitled "Performing the Scriptures," to be found in Lash (1986).

5 See his discussion on tragedy as the context of eschatological hope in Williams (1974).

6 A recent example of this can be found in his reflections on fairy tales (see Williams 2015), and most extensively in his most extensive work on tragedy, namely Williams (2016).

investigation of those engaged in research on Williams's earlier thought. As will be seen, Williams's interpretation of the poems is theological, and seeks to articulate a strongly incarnational reading of the *Four Quartets*. Such an interpretation seeks to assert creation's fundamental historicity and often tragic contingency, while at the same time maintaining that it is only when reality is seen for what it is, rather than repressed, that a vision of redemption may be glimpsed.

The “*Four Quartets*” Lectures

A Brief Background

At the outset of our detailed reading, a little more background should be given before we engage the texts.⁷ Biographically-speaking, the choice of T. S. Eliot as the subject matter for these lectures was by no means an arbitrary one, since it was Eliot (more than any other poet) who influenced and absorbed Williams's concentration during his early twenties and thirties (Cunningham 2002, 29). Regarding the dating of the lectures themselves, it was in 1974 that he was invited to deliver lectures on the *Four Quartets* at the General Theological Seminary situated in Manhattan, New York (where he managed to meet George Florovsky, an important conversation partner in Williams's early doctoral work on Eastern Orthodoxy). He also delivered the same lectures later to the sisters at Fairacres in 1975. This was an important time for Williams since it was also during this period that he was completing his doctoral dissertation under Donald Allchin at Oxford, and preceded his ordination in 1977.

The textual summary to follow, presumably, is based on the second cycle of these lectures.⁸ While the analysis below will be the most sustained engagement I am aware of, this is not the first to attempt an interpretation of these texts. Rupert Shortt in his biography of Williams (Shortt 2014, 89–91) deals with them in a cursory manner, and Benjamin Myers engages with them rather briefly in his book on Williams (Myers 2012, 21–27). There are also some references to them in Brett Gray's work on Williams's Christology, where he argues that this lecture cycle exemplifies Williams's penchant for an *incarnational historicism* (Gray 2016, 44–49). With due consideration to these treatments, it should be said that none of the above

7 It should also be said here I am not ultimately concerned with whether Williams is successful in his interpretation of the *Four Quartets* or not. When it comes to assessing his exegesis of Eliot's poetic vision, I am more concerned with Williams as a thinker and a theologian, and how those dynamics influence his reading.

8 The manuscripts in my possession are dated 18 February–11 March 1975. This means that these are the lectures delivered to the sisters at Fairacres.

attempt to unpack the entire sequence of lectures in the detail that is to follow. And since these lectures remain as of yet unpublished (and are not readily available), this essay aims to give access to the content of these texts, especially emphasising the ideas that continue to inform and illuminate Williams's theology up to the present day. In many ways, these lectures form a pivotal moment in Williams's early development, since they help explain the presence of similar ideas in his more juvenile forays, but also his more recent writing as well.

On "Burnt Norton"

Williams's opening remarks in the lecture lay out an ambitious project to depart from the "majority of opinion among literary critics" (*Four Quartets* I, 1).⁹ Williams understands the *Quartets* to be an attempt to think about the meaning of the incarnation within history, how this event opens up "meaning" and "vision" within time. Williams does make a concession that the language of the *Quartets* is not "religious" and that it is "very rarely dogmatic," but he does believe that the incarnation is "constantly presupposed" throughout the series. He even suggests that the *Quartets* offer Eliot's "most serious attempt to work out the consequences of incarnational religion," and goes as far to suggest that Eliot is doing nothing less than "proclaiming the gospel" (FQ I, 1).¹⁰ In line with this countervailing move of poetic reading, Williams aims to dissent from the opinion that the *Quartets* represent a unified, worked-out theme. He objected to the notion that Eliot was unpacking, within the cycle as a whole, an idea which he had already stated *in nuce* within the argument of "Burnt Norton." No doubt this is true in some aspects as Williams knows,¹¹ but to say that the remaining *Quartets* are simply a variation on "Burnt Norton" is a mistake. To support his case, Williams states the well-known fact that Eliot published "Burnt Norton" as an individual poem before he even conceived the tetralogy, and that later he decided to include it in the series.¹² The

9 From here on, the manuscript shall be abbreviated to FQ. Numerals refer to the lecture numbers, and the numbers refer to the pagination.

10 On this point, Williams has not changed his opinion even in the 30 years since he delivered these lectures. In his interview with David Cunningham (2002, 29), he said: "I spent a long time mulling over the *Four Quartets* in my 20s and 30s." Ultimately it seems what he is doing is quite the opposite of what he has sometimes said to be doing: he is giving a very deep valuation of the self in time, an incarnational picture, with all the ambivalence that incarnation entails.

11 For example, in Williams's opinion, the insight that "Only through time time is conquered" is an idea that carries on throughout the series, and lays bare the central problematic that Eliot is dealing with.

12 For more on this, see Gardner (1978, 14–28). However, Williams would probably not be in agreement with Gardner's own interpretation of "Burnt Norton." The marginalia for this passage suggests that it is written "contra Helen Gardner."

Quartets may express “a unity, but they are not¹³ one poem.” Instead, Williams suggests that the continuation of the series after “Burnt Norton” implied that Eliot saw it as “inadequate in itself, not only inadequate in expression, but inadequate in content, needing not expansion or revision, but the kind of correction, or perhaps, the kind of reply which only another poem can provide.” For Williams then, the *Quartets* thus constitute an experiment in *dialogue* where “statements are proposed, explored, and sometimes, if not rejected, at least qualified seriously” since it is only through “a multiplicity of possible and provisional statements” that “a poet [can] point with any precision and integrity to what he [sic] is saying” (FQ I, 2).¹⁴ This emphasis on what could be called a *dramatic* reading of the poem, already at this point in time, is reflective of Williams’s tendency to read texts in light of their unfolding and differing voices. One could speculate that Williams’s emphasis on the dialogical reading of texts *might* also be linked to intensive reading of Russian thinkers, including Dostoevsky. Mikhail Bakhtin’s seminal text on Dostoevsky’s poetics was only translated into English in 1984, but Williams might have been familiar with the French edition which was already published in 1929. There is the possibility that he was familiar with the original Russian, but would have struggled a bit from a linguistic perspective—as he has admitted in regard to Lossky and Bulgakov during his doctoral studies (Breyfogle 1995, 307). However, his French was more than adequate since he translated Pierre Pascal’s *The Religion of the Russian People* (1976) during this period. Whether this influence was entrenched at this stage is somewhat speculative, but nonetheless, in light of his more recent work, it seems clear that Bakhtin has been decisive in his reading of Dostoevsky (Williams 2008a), and therefore could have had an influence earlier. These points aside, we do know that the *Four Quartets* themselves have been influential in Williams’s hermeneutics, and in his reading of the Bible, for example, as can be seen in his reference to the *Quartets* in his plea for a “diachronic” or

13 For the sake of accuracy, I have underlined those words exactly as they are in the text since there are no italics in the typed manuscript.

14 Cf. Cunningham (2002, 29):

“...what I love about the Quartets is precisely what their title indicates: they’re meant to be different voices. Some of those voices are wonderfully lyrical; Eliot has this Shakespearean facility for the memorable compressed lyric...And then he will quite deliberately scramble it, as if you pressed a ‘scramble’ button, and you’ll go into an abstract, clumsy mode as if to say, as he does say at one point in the Quartets: ‘That was a way of putting it.’ Don’t listen to the music—just shuffle, clatter, and hear the words going around—don’t hang onto that. And that alternation between the lyrical and the fragmented, I think, takes you so close to the edge, and to the niche of real poetry.”

“dramatic” reading of particular texts, especially the Holy Scriptures (Williams 2000, 45–47).¹⁵

After these initial reflections on method, Williams moves onto an exegesis of the text of the *Quartets*. From the opening lines, Williams says we are presented with an understanding of “the present moment” that is “limited and bleak,” a moment that is “utterly immutable, necessarily what it is.” If the future is contained in the present and amounts to “innumerable determined moments” then time cannot be transformed, there is no redemption or salvation possible: “the vision of freedom and contingency is an illusion” because we continue to return to “the immutable present” (FQ 1, 2).¹⁶ As the poem continues, Williams says that the second part suggests (more optimistically) that the present itself might offer some kind of “release” since it contains within itself “the complete moving pattern of things”; “the circling pattern of the cosmos”; “the dance”; “the still point of the turning world.” But ultimately this vision provides little comfort since it merely protects us from “heaven and damnation,” as we are held between the “partial ecstasy” and “partial horror” of the moment. As such, the second section of “Burnt Norton” provides a reply to the first section: “the present is fixed but there is release; not through a deliberate evasion of the present into the ‘world of speculation,’ but through the grasping of the present for what it truly is” (FQ I, 3).

The third section describes “a flickering succession of meaningless happening, at once boring and distracting” in which “the intense awareness of the present moment” described in section two of “Burnt Norton” is rejected. In light of such a perspective, Williams suggests that Eliot is experimenting with the idea that “the present moment” is not “a vehicle for ‘meaning,’ but the utter static isolation of knowing one is not free to change the world, knowing that to act or not to act makes no difference.”¹⁷ While the second section might imply some meaning in which we are reconciled with a cosmic rhythm and pattern of the universe, the third section implies that “The descent into the real darkness of the present moment reveals a void, a total helplessness in the face of an impersonal and unstoppable cosmic process” (FQ I, 4). As we can see, already within “Burnt Norton,” there is a reply and response pattern that is mirrored in the rest of the *Quartets*.

15 It should be said that Williams is not the only one to make such a suggestion regarding the *Quartets*. Postmodern interpreters of Eliot have also noticed this point. On this, see Spanos (1990) for some Heideggerian reflections on this theme.

16 Cf. “Burnt Norton” I: “If all time is eternally present/ All time is unredeemable,” in Eliot (1963, 177).

17 Cf. “Burnt Norton” III, in Eliot (1963, 181): “This is the one way, and the other/ Is the same ...”

The section that follows thereafter is the shortest in “Burnt Norton,” and constitutes a kind of summary of what has been debated so far. Some have sought to find religious undertones in some of the imagery used in this section (e.g. “the kingfisher’s wing”; here presumably a reference to Hopkins’s “As kingfishers catch fire”). But ultimately Williams does not decide either way. At this stage, he suggests, the language still has a “cryptic and ambiguous character” (FQ I, 4). In the last part of the poem, Eliot confronts us with “the actual problem of poetic language, of communication itself” and furthermore, as regards the conclusion of the poem, Williams argues that we should “not look for straightforward resolutions ... but accept its provisional character.” The occurrence of speech brings us “decisively back into the world, into time; and it is released into silence by the emergence of form” (FQ I, 4–5), a form in which the end and beginning “co-exist” in the present and offer a “total explanation” of “the whole historical process.” Unfortunately, the present cannot bear this burden since “The detail of the pattern is movement” (to quote “Burnt Norton”). The present seeks to impose form because it seeks meaning, but this remains elusive since the present *itself* implies movement (and so cannot remain still), and redemption can only be found beyond the world in the realm of the timeless (“Love is itself unmoving, / Only the cause and the end of movement, / Timeless, and undesiring / Except in the aspect of time ...”).¹⁸ As a result “there is no hope of ... perceiving a total pattern” within time (FQ I, 5). Language, in its attempt to impose form continues to break down, and remains fluid and fungible, thus escaping attempts to circumscribe a solidified pattern.¹⁹

After bringing his detailed reading to a close, Williams goes on to draw some conclusions and gives some additional theological commentary. In “Burnt Norton” he says we are confronted with “bewildering tensions and paradoxes, dissatisfied and uneasy” (FQ I, 5). Meaning seems to be found in “the timeless moment of ecstasy,” but from where does it derive meaning if it is cut off from time? Time remains unredeemed, cut off from its source of salvation. Eliot (as well as Williams) is unsatisfied with such a conclusion, which is why “Burnt Norton” marks both a beginning and an end, namely, an end to a certain understanding of the relation between “historical consciousness” and “visionary consciousness,” and a beginning to a series of reflections which will constitute the remainder

18 “Burnt Norton” V in Eliot (1963, 182).

19 “Burnt Norton” V in Eliot (1963, 182): “... 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 ...”

of the *Quartets*. The dualism present in “Burnt Norton,” in which time is considered to be a “waste,” is at odds with a Christian doctrine of incarnation. Echoing the sentiments of the Orthodox theologian George Florovsky (whom he met in New York while delivering the first set of lectures), Williams says that “Christianity is the justification of time” (FQ I, 6) because it is within the framework of the incarnation that history is given a pattern to which all other moments are related. According to Williams, it is precisely within this incarnational symbolism that Eliot seeks to work out in the rest of the *Quartets*. The implications of this for understanding Eliot are significant because it implies that we cannot take what Eliot has said previously (in “Burnt Norton” or “Ash Wednesday” for example) as representing Eliot’s viewpoint, since the *Quartets* themselves constitute a kind of challenge to Eliot’s own previous sentiments on this matter. Williams even uses the language of *μετάνοια* (repentance) to describe the artistic process of the *Quartets*, implying that he considers it to form a continual process of reformation and self-questioning which destabilises any static or “totalised” perspective. And this repentance implies the taking of time.

For Eliot, humanity cannot be saved outside of time (“Only through time time is conquered”), and any attempt to understand redemption unhistorically must be rejected because it offers “a false picture of man’s subjectivity” and leads to “an almost schizophrenic cleavage between the historical and non-historical consciousness” (FQ I, 8). There will be no meaning to a Christian understanding of redemption unless history is taken into account. And so, “Burnt Norton” poses important theological questions around the issue of faith and history and how redemption, or “the absolute,” can appear in time.²⁰ However, at the end of the poem, we are left with “a blank wall of paradox,” an unsatisfactory conclusion which has to be teased out further in the remainder of the series.

On “East Coker”

According to Williams, “East Coker” provides “a very comprehensive statement of the cyclic character of human enterprise of all kinds” and “the death that is implicit in every ‘generation’” (FQ II, 1). The patterns of birth, sexual reproduction and death are presented as symbolising the rhythms of life, which rather than providing liberation are “an intensification of imprisonment.” Eliot, however, conveys such patterns with a lyrical adeptness that is ultimately “an unkind sarcasm at the expense of the reader” (FQ II, 1–2). This is because

20 Williams is referring here to Ernst Troeltsch, though Hegel is the ultimate point of reference.

Eliot is deliberately stylising his text in such a way to see if we are “hypnotised” by the form while, simultaneously, missing the actual content of the poem. The conscious style of section one (Eliot’s attempt at “a deliberate tour de force”) is followed by section two in which Eliot ostensibly countervails against his stated lyric. In distinction from the first section, the part that follows is eminently prosaic and even intentionally clumsy²¹—the point being that language can bewitch us, acting as “a cushion against the threat of the cosmic vortex, the progress towards destruction” (FQ II, 2). For Eliot, at this stage of his argument, the attempt to impose form onto experience always fails, because experience and nature continually outstrip form, and any attempt to impose structure on what is fluid and moving entails suppression of nature itself. Regularity and security are the result of fantasy because we cannot deal with “the terrifying emptiness of the world” (FQ II, 2).²² At the end of this stanza, Eliot seems to suggest that the only response to such a reality is an acknowledgement of “what is there,” avoiding the temptation to fly into “a world of speculation,” thereby entering into an arena “where there is no secure foothold.”²³ In such a context, the only wisdom we can endorse is humility, because “humility is endless” (FQ II, 2).²⁴

The third poem begins by expounding the fact that everything we do is unreal and doomed if we think we can “impose meaning by our achievements” (FQ II, 2). This is because, for everyone, there is a silence and emptiness around which we constantly circle, a vortex (“the darkness of God”), and death is a lifting of a veil, like in a theatre, which reveals the nothingness which illuminates our existence, an emptiness that is ever-present in everything we do. Within an environs like this, hope and love alone cannot provide escape; instead they are included in a kind of “faith,” which on Eliot’s reading is little more than “a blind non-rational commitment, waiting for what we do not and cannot know” (FQ II, 3).²⁵ In this context of quasi-nihilistic language, the theme of *ekstasis* (and negative theology) returns to the fore, but this time with a firmer rooting in reality, in “the way things are,” in a move that

21 There are sentences that explicitly confirm this opinion: “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,” “East Coker” II, in Eliot (1963, 186).

22 “There is, it seems to us,/ At best, only a limited value/ In knowledge derived from experience./ The knowledge imposes a pattern, and falsifies,/ For the pattern is new in every moment / And every moment is new and shocking / Valuation of all we have been,” “East Coker” II, in Eliot (1963, 186).

23 “East Coker” II, in Eliot (1963, 186).

24 Williams suggests (FQ II, 2) that such a response has similarities with Simone Weil’s concept of “attention.” For representative example of this in her work, see Weil (1951). Weil has remained an important thinker for Williams, as can be seen in Williams (2007, 203–227).

25 Cf. “East Coker” III, in Eliot (1963, 188): “... wait without hope ... wait without love.”

does not “soften the impact of the present” (FQ II, 3). The language of St John of Cross becomes clearly evident in this section, especially as regards his reflections on “the dark night of the soul.”²⁶ The recurrence of this theme here cannot be equated with Eliot’s reference to the ecstatic moment in “Burnt Norton” because Eliot has gone through a process whereby the earlier experimentation with the timeless moment, in which time is gathered up into a redemptive event *outside* of time, has been rejected as a false solution that leaves us with an unredeemed temporality. Here, at the end of the third poem, despite moving through the experience of darkness and meaninglessness, Eliot seems to be articulating the most affirmative statement we have seen so far in the poem. The negative path of the “dark night” offers us a potential avenue for making sense of life’s apparent emptiness. As such, the connection between the *Quartets* and negative theology seems undeniable at this point.²⁷ And one should mention that Williams can engage similar language of spiritual dereliction especially in more recent times that echo this mystical tradition.²⁸

The fourth section continues by suggesting that we accept that death is “the precondition of our salvation” because God himself shares the same sickness and is vulnerable to “the destructive force of the historical vortex” (FQ II, 3). God bleeds as we do, and this opens us to the reality of God’s compassion and co-suffering.²⁹ The imagery of the cross, Good Friday, and Eucharist pervade this section of “East Coker.” In the cross, God has subjected Godself to time, change, and death—and as such our faith, our waiting, is grounded upon God’s own submission to “darkness and meaninglessness” (FQ II, 4), because in order for God to heal our wounds, God must be wounded. This means that it is only through enduring the pain and darkness of history that we find healing (“Our only health is the disease ... to be restored, our sickness must grow worse”).³⁰ On this note, Williams seems to be rather partial towards the language of “divine suffering,” and possibly a bit incautious in his rhetoric. The influence of Hans Urs von Balthasar on the youthful Williams might be lying in the background here

26 Cf. “East Coker” III in Eliot (1963, 188–189): “You must go by a way wherein there is no ecstasy ... You must go by a way which is the way of ignorance ... You must go by the way of dispossession ... You must go through the way in which you are not.”

27 For more reflections on the relationship between the *Quartets* and negative theology, see Cearns (1993, 131–157).

28 For more of Williams’s reflections on the “Dark Night” see Williams (1983a, 103–105) and Williams (1995, 80–84; 99–104). The rhetorical stringency of these sermons is even more heightened here than in his lectures.

29 “East Coker” IV, in Eliot (1963, 189): “The wounded surgeon plies his steel / That questions the distempered part;/ Beneath the bleeding hands we feel / The sharp compassion of the healer’s art / Resolving the enigma of the fever chart.”

30 “East Coker” IV, in Eliot (1963, 189).

(particularly his theology of “Holy Saturday”). At this stage, Williams would have already been introduced to Balthasar through his teacher, Donald MacKinnon, in the late 60s and early 70s, and was later instrumental in translating his work for English readers. Sergei Bulgakov could also be an additional source in this regard since his work played an important role in Williams’s PhD dissertation (he translated a significant amount of Bulgakov’s work during 1990s). But it should be emphasised that Williams would be more uncomfortable today in using the language of divine passibility. Thus, in contrast to the earlier period, Williams’s later work seems to have deepened his Thomistic account of God as *actus purus*, a trajectory that has been combined with Cusa’s plea for the *non aliud* (cf. Gray 2016, 5–28). Such a metaphysical tradition resists any account which implies that God acts on the same plane of reality as other beings, as if God was an agent among other agents. Therefore, God cannot “suffer” in the same way that finite entities do (Williams 2005). However, at this stage of his development, Williams’s metaphysics is still not at its maturity.

The fifth poem commences with an autobiographical note, referencing the wasted “twenty years” in which he has tried to use language to grasp a “wholeness of vision” (FQ II, 4), and seems to have failed. According to Williams, there is a deeper “humanism” to these lines than almost anywhere else in Eliot’s poetry. The imagery of a continuing journey that starts from where we are at,³¹ and goes on to acknowledge “Not the intense moment / Isolated, with no before and after, / But a lifetime burning in every moment” in which there is “perhaps neither gain nor loss ... there is only the trying ...” thereby moving into “another intensity ... a further union, a deeper communion / Through the dark cold and empty desolation.”³² The “tragic” quality of the whole poem is acknowledged by Williams (here echoing the sentiments of Helen Gardner): according to this vision, there is an opening to “a possibly hopeful future” but it involves our “casting out into the deep, leaving cheap and facile explanations behind,” in which “risk and real insecurity” must be faced (FQ II, 5).

On “The Dry Salvages”

Williams accords the theme of “risk” a significant place in this poem, a fact which should be seen as “a protest” against the drastic implications of “East Coker” (FQ III, 5). The opening of the initial poem again plays with the themes of cosmic rhythms, this time alluding to the

31 Cf. “East Coker” V, in Eliot (1963, 190): “Home is where one starts from.”

32 “East Coker” V, in Eliot (1963, 190).

imagery of a river and the sea. The river “within us” points to “the constant and constantly forgotten movement of a sub-rational pattern in ourselves” which awakens us to “an alarming vision of the chaotic and inexhaustible life of the ‘sea’ outside us” (FQ III, 5). Thus:

The conscious mind, in its attempts to discern a pattern intelligible to itself, succeeds only in immobilising “subjective” time, so that past and future become equally meaningless, swallowed up in a blank, featureless and interminable present; while the progress of the sea’s time continues relentlessly. Only the bell out at sea marks any kind of advance, and it is a movement which has nothing to do with us, with our consciousness and volition. (FQ III, 5–6)

Here, the disaffection found in “Burnt Norton” is recalled, and a question is raised in relation to the problem of how a “wholeness of vision” (“East Coker”) remains possible when there is “too deep a dissociation between conscious human subjectivity and the rhythms of non-conscious life” (FQ III, 6).

The following poem in the cycle has been criticised for its “forced rhythms and unnatural or even meaningless locutions” but Williams suggests that we should consider “the occasional weakness or carelessness as an intensification of the overpowering sense of lassitude, helplessness, and defeat in the lyric.” These lines are meant to be “incantatory, even soporific, an almost dreamy lament” which continues until we are woken up by “the monosyllabic roughness of the penultimate lines” (FQ III, 6), as it utters the words “Clangs / The bell.”³³ Here the seeming pointlessness of human endeavour is manifest, and (in a rather shocking inversion) death itself is described as “God,” because it is physical death which provides “the only imaginable liberation” from this scene of profound dereliction. The existential solace of the “Annunciation”—here acting as a synecdoche for the incarnational event—is questioned because if “the movement of the world is so separate from human life, thought, aspiration, the existence of God-as-man can hardly be supposed to make any difference” (FQ III, 6). However, in the second part of this section, a more complex picture seems to be forming. For him, it appears that history is not merely a sequence of ecstatic moments:

33 “The Dry Salvages” I, in Eliot (1963, 193).

The impersonal rhythm of the river does ... preserve a human history, even if it is only a history of failure and agony and meaningless “wreckage” ... There is something, and not merely the ensemble of ecstatic moments, which the encroaching of the “sea” does not destroy or render trivial and futile: a more complex history, of varying subjective significance, but unquestionably there, “given,” just as much as the sea is “given.” (FQ III, 7)

The third poem reflects further on the movement of time: “The pattern is movement, movement, change, is our mode of existing” (FQ III, 7). Thus, there is no healing provided by time (“... time is no healer”³⁴) because “the mere passage of time does not wipe away sorrow or hurt” (FQ III, 7). And so, we are given the injunction to “Fare Forward,” that is, we are “moving from moment to moment in a continuous awareness that does not project fantasy on to past or future; a self-renouncing contemplation of the temporal world of which we are part, in every moment” (FQ III, 7). Such a moment opens us to the experience of death and abandon (“... the time of death is every moment”³⁵) in which we refuse “to hold on to the illusion of being static subjects with a ‘real’ existence in an extended ‘present’ from which we can survey the present moment with detachment. This is what we are called to do: not to be detached in this sense, not to try and stand out of our lives, but to live in the moment, to abandon ourselves to the present moment” in which we trust that the “renunciation of system-making is our only road to sharing in the life of our fellows” (FQ III, 7).³⁶

The next part is the shortest section in the poem and constitutes a prayer for the casualties of the sea. The prayer is addressed to the Virgin (“the Queen of Heaven”), the one who saw her son go the way of the cross. In his reading these lines, Williams sees Eliot as saying that the event of the incarnation opens up the possibility that every moment, each portion of history, is now open to “the real presence of God.” This does not change what history is: “the sound of the bell does not change, it is only heard in a different context, a different world of meaning” (FQ III, 8). The incarnation does not permit us to view the world through the eyes of fantasy, but it does allow us to employ history within a metaphysical context that makes allowance for patient and reticent meaning-making.

34 “The Dry Salvages” III, in Eliot (1963, 196).

35 “The Dry Salvages” III, in Eliot (1963, 197).

36 The influence of Weil and de Caussade is influential regarding what Williams has to say here. Williams makes reference to the fact that Eliot read a lot of Weil, especially in his later years.

The last section of the poem seeks to list various “fantastic” interpretations of history. The language covers fields that range from psychoanalysis, fortune-telling, and drug use. All of these are exemplary of attempts to escape historical experience, to impose a pattern which is not there. And yet, reference to the “saint” and the “The hint half-guessed, the gift half-understood, is Incarnation” does point to the possibility of a *telos*, a directionality, which will probably not come to complete fruition in our time, but nonetheless does intimate an objective hope—even if that hope is nothing more than laying a foundation for future generations (what Eliot calls “The life of significant soil”³⁷). And so, for Eliot, we continue to journey, since “For most of us, this is the aim / Never here to be realised; / We are only undefeated / Because we have gone on trying.”³⁸

Williams concludes the lecture by summarising the themes of the *Quartets* thus far. As mentioned previously, within the *Quartets* themselves, there has been a movement away from the ecstatic solution of “Burnt Norton”: in “East Coker” the solution to the problem of time is a sheer waiting in “hope” and “love” while “The Dry Salvages” points towards an abandonment of security, and entering a path of risk that has its basis in the incarnation. There is “the threat of sheer chaos, of meaningless and all-engulfing flux,” and yet we are promised something more: “the vision of time in the hands of God, as the means of our purification, the apparently impersonal rhythms of the non-human and pre-human environment as reflecting, pointing to God’s action in history”—and more significantly—“God’s passion in time” in which “time is revealed as ‘in the hands of God’ not by any unquestionable, perspicuous and triumphant epiphany, but in the shipwreck of a human life” (FQ III, 9). Expounding this theme of “divine passion,” he says:

God, wounded as we are wounded, existing as a human being in time, is revealed as compassionate, in the strict sense of the word: he suffers fear, darkness, and meaninglessness, exactly³⁹ as we do. And if God is seen as voluntarily joining us in our condition, His whole activity, of creation as well as redemption, is revealed as “compassionate.” The “kenotic” impulse which brings God into time as man reflects the “kenosis” of creation, the initial self-abandoning of God to darkness, to a freedom

37 “The Dry Salvages” V, in Eliot (1963, 200).

38 “The Dry Salvages” V, in Eliot (1963, 200).

39 As mentioned already, this “exactly” is problematised by Williams’s later metaphysics.

which He makes to be other than Himself out of love. The darkness of created temporal existence is sustained at every point by this kenotic compassion of the Creator. God's "acceptance," in creation and incarnation, calls men to respond, by themselves accepting the same darkness, the same death, mirroring the self-renouncing act of God: so that through the darkness we may touch the hands and know them as healing ... God is present beyond the chaos of temporality, withdrawn on the far side, yet with us in our own launching into the deep. God's effectual absence from temporal process, the absence of an overruling power evident in the contingencies of history, is, paradoxically our reason for accepting, embracing this history, grounded in the paradoxical presence and absence of God in the life of Jesus—present only as hidden and ineffective, in the last analysis, hidden on the Cross. (FQ III, 9)

On "Little Gidding"

Williams writes that "Little Gidding" has "a certain finality" about it—not only because it concludes the cycle of poems but also because it was one of the last poems Eliot wrote.⁴⁰ Williams suggests that it represents Eliot's closest approach to "a reconciliation with language" (FQ IV, 1). More than the other poems, "Little Gidding" attempts to assert a strong emphasis on historical particularity, respecting the fact that even though "history in itself is silent about God," it does obliquely point to God. Through some Wittgensteinian lenses,⁴¹ Williams argues that preserving the "silence" of history may in itself be revelatory because it allows God to make Godself manifest. Such an opinion finds basis in what the earlier poems have said about the darkness and silence of God in history, and further, how the incarnation and death of Jesus point to God, even within absence and apparent Godlessness. Such a silence can be "revelatory if it is allowed to be itself and not distorted through the prism of system-making and 'explanation,' the struggle of the ego for conceptual control of the world" (FQ IV, 1). Further, the emphasis in the poem on historically particular places and events has provoked many readers to see the poem as an "icon" of "sacramental Christianity" (FQ IV, 1).

40 It should be mentioned here that while the first three poems were written in a relatively short space (a couple of months collectively), "Little Gidding" itself took more than a year to write. For more details on this, see Gardner (1978, 1428).

41 The Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus*, it should be mentioned. On this score, one can compare the following statements: "What *can* be shown, *cannot* be said" (4.1212). Also: "There are, indeed, things that cannot be put into words. *They make themselves manifest*. They are what is mystical" (6.522). The edition I am using is Wittgenstein (1974).

The poem opens with a reflection on “Midwinter spring” on a moment of unexpected and salubrious weather, in a particular time and place that render it surprising. Such an occurrence seems to provoke the conclusion that, generally-speaking, it is possible to find some solace within the coldness and apparent deadness of things. The “Midwinter spring,” while remaining a part of the seasonal changes and the natural cycles still could point, potentially at least, to a particular event from which comfort may spring—a “pentecostal fire / In the dark time of the year.”⁴² Such an event can thus in its “concrete form” become “the indispensable vehicle of the unchanging significance. Independently of our approach, when we come and where from, there is an objective continuity of meaning in this place: objective because it is in no way our creation” (FQ IV, 2). In the words of the poem itself, this particular occasion is not a construct of our fancy because:

... what you thought you came for
Is only a shell, a husk of meaning
From which the purpose breaks only when it is fulfilled ...
If you came this way,
Taking any route, starting from anywhere,
At any time or at any season,
It would always be the same.⁴³

With a view to this event, we are invited to abandon “Sense and notion” and go the way of prayer and attention to the “intractably given.” The way of prayer is the way of surrender because it constitutes “a non-conceptual response” to the “given,” one that is “deeper than any ‘conscious ... act’” (FQ IV, 2). Through attention to the “given” the sheer historical “thereness” of the world, we can discover that “... the communication / Of the dead is tongued with fire beyond the language of the living.”⁴⁴ Here again we have a reference to “the timeless moment” which “Is England and nowhere. Never and always.”⁴⁵ But again we cannot equate this with sheer ecstasy or a fantastical abstraction, because the “moment” is

42 “Little Gidding” I, in Eliot (1963, 201).

43 “Little Gidding” I, in Eliot (1963, 201–202).

44 “Little Gidding” I, in Eliot (1963, 202).

45 “Little Gidding” I, in Eliot (1963, 202).

rooted to a specific time and locale, namely England, and in the here and now of historical cumulation.

Here again, Eliot's language of "givenness" or "objectivity" touches upon similar sentiments that Williams himself would have garnered from his teacher Donald MacKinnon, who sought to strenuously affirm a kind of "pluralist realism" in his metaphysics. MacKinnon, under the influence of G. E. Moore, sought to emphasise the priority of *discovery* and externality as regards our intellection of truth itself.⁴⁶ Williams, in his more recent thought however, has expressed some disquiet regarding "atomist realism." In his view, this philosophical tendency has trouble accounting for the constructivist element of truthful discovery, and displays an overly "modern" theory of subject-object dichotomy (Williams 2000, 154). This criticism of "atomist realism" is deepened in his Gifford Lectures, where he says that we need "to avoid speaking of a 'world' beyond language," which for him would encourage a "word/world dualism," as if language was simply "the labelling of a passive environment" (Williams 2014, 92). This is in tune with his mature contention that "metaphysics" should think of "matter itself as invariably and necessarily communicative" (Williams 2014, xi). Therefore, we need to be wary of a certain naïve "objectivity" that assumes we have access to reality apart from the contributions of language and constructive representation.

Returning to our main theme, the poem (in section two) sustains this theme of historical particularity, and draws its imagery from Eliot's experience as an air-raid warden during World War II. Eliot alludes here to certain Heraclitean repertoires (air, wind, fire, earth) to make a slightly different point (than Heraclitus that is) about "the destitution of human existence and human effort" (FQ IV, 2). The section describes Eliot meeting "a familiar compound ghost" (an amalgamation of various poets and voices),⁴⁷ who along with Eliot had a concern for the project of language itself. And it is such speech that "impelled us / To purify the dialect of the tribe,"⁴⁸ an attempt which is ultimately revealed to be a "frustration and waste" (FQ IV, 3) since time has shown—retrospectively—that all attempts to purify

46 See MacKinnon (1940–1941). Also compare this following statement: "The pluralist will always insist that it is better to attempt an inventory of the different sorts of things there in the world, and eschew any attempt at premature reduction, than seek to reveal the irreducibly diverse as in their diversity somehow expressive of a unitary whole" (MacKinnon 1974, 134–135). As regards G. E. Moore, MacKinnon has said "Moore made it possible for me to be a realist . . . for the logical atomist, there were things with which men [sic] were coming to terms; the world was not simply an expression of their immanent rationality, but something given" (MacKinnon 1968, 64). Also see his discussion of Moore in MacKinnon (1965, 99ff).

47 It is also well-known that this section of the poem is influenced by Dante (particularly the "Inferno").

48 "Little Gidding" II, in Eliot (1963, 205).

language end in failure. Hidden motives or tragic dynamics are revealed subsequently herein which damper our attempts at purification. We cannot extract ourselves from time in the attempt to achieve a non-perspectival grasp of reality, one that is taken from God's point of view, one that denies our sinful humanity. Our attempts at self-reformation or the complete sanctification of language have thus fallen short.

Commencing on the third poem, Eliot returns to the theme of historical particularity in which we "recognise things as significant in themselves, as not depending on us for their importance" (FQ IV, 4). This note of realism and objectivity is coupled, however, with the sense that entities do not exist as atomised units. As Williams says: "Particularities, concrete finite realities, of necessity have their imperfections, yet they unite, in a pattern of unified beauty" (FQ IV, 4). Such a perspective of aesthetic harmony is only seen, however, as we look back, since unity is "a function of our perspective as heirs of the world." Meaning is "present in every moment of time; but it is for others, it is never accessible in the present to the individual subject"—a theme that, undoubtedly, has resonances with Hegel's "Owl of Minerva," or Vico's so-called heterogenesis of ends. As such, this section constitutes one of Eliot's "most careful and honest passages, a decisive turning away from any kind of archaism, while affirming most positively the authentic value of the past" (FQ IV, 4), as it impinges on the present moment.

In light of some of our comments above, one could ask here, in passing, whether these sentiments already point away from the atomist realism of his teacher, and thus anticipate some of his later views. However, one should not place too much weight on this evidence, since it remains slight, but it remains suggestive nonetheless.

The fourth poem is, in Williams's estimation, the "finest of the many superb lyrical passages" to be found in the *Quartets*. The imagery here points both to the events of Pentecost and the bombing of London during the war.⁴⁹ As such, here speaking metaphorically, we are given two choices in our reading of history: is it "the vortex of annihilation" or "the cauterising iron of the divine surgeon?" (FQ IV, 4). We cannot escape the question, nor find solace in some

49 "Little Gidding" IV, in Eliot 1963, 208: "The dove descending breaks the air / With flame of incandescent terror" in which we are placed with "... the choice of pyre or pyre — / To be redeemed from fire by fire."

ecstatic moment removed from history; rather “We only live, only suspire / Consumed by either fire or fire.”⁵⁰ There is no other choice before us, since, as Williams says:

The Incarnation validates history, indeed; but what this means in practice is that it condemns us to history, to unresolved tensions, to the clash of apparent absolutes, to puzzlement and darkness, failure, death, all seen as the only mode of created existence possible, and to the only vehicle of salvation possible. (FQ IV, 5)

For Eliot, this is a manifestation of God’s loving action towards us, but not in the usual romantic or Hollywood version of cheerful reconciliation. Here love appears as something strange and alien, because Eliot thinks that “our expectations are wellnigh [sic] bound to stand in the way of clear and true vision” (FQ IV, 5).

In the final section of “Little Gidding” the themes of the “beginning” and the “end” resurface again, alluding particularly to “East Coker.” Reference to “the end is where we start from” implies that “death, silence, darkness” are “our initiation into the world of meaning,” are “our birth out of the womb of humility” (FQ IV, 5). Through our internalisation of these dynamics, our reconciliation with language becomes possible because it can “dance” to “the measure of the world, reflecting and respecting its ambiguities and silences,” thereby reflecting “a kind of death” (FQ IV, 5): “Every phrase and every sentence is an end and a beginning, / Every poem an epitaph.”⁵¹ Williams goes on to say that, according to Eliot, we must “accept and share the flux of the world, the process of generation and corruption, accepting and sharing even in moments of utter failure, destitution, and extinction” since it is through this process that we can experience “our redemption from the prison of temporality” (FQ IV, 5). This redemption does not, however, amount to “the abrogation of history.”⁵² These “timeless moments” form a “totality” of “all possible historical configurations, each one significant,” and are “timeless” in the sense that they constitute “meaning for others” outside of its “form of limitation.” Taking this into account implies that even when past historical events, people,

50 “Little Gidding” IV, in Eliot (1963, 208).

51 “Little Gidding” V in Eliot (1963, 208).

52 “Little Gidding” V in Eliot (1963, 208): “A people without history / Is not redeemed from time” because “... history is a pattern / Of timeless moments.”

and individuals seem to end in failure, they have made “the place what it is for those who succeed” and have created through their death “a vehicle of meaning” (FQ IV, 5).⁵³

Thereafter, Williams moves to a conclusion of the lecture series. He writes that throughout the *Quartets*, we have “learned to recognise the hand of love in history, drawing us onwards towards death which will ‘fructify in the lives of others’; calling us to continue on our way in ‘unknowing’ and trust,” in a continued “exploration” which will find its goal in “the full acceptance of our starting-point—our selves [sic] in our present condition.” Williams goes on to say there is “a final ‘retour-en-soi,’ in which we learn fully to ‘live our own subjectivity’ in each moment, to live in full awareness of where and who we are, which is the root of all our action and speculation” (FQ IV, 5). Such a subjectivity, as should be realised now, is not an attempt of escape into a timeless moment since even that timeless ecstatic moment is now included in “the crowned knot of fire” along with other moments and events. As Williams has reiterated throughout the lectures, there has been a movement away from the vision of “Burnt Norton” as providing the solution to the redemption of time. “Burnt Norton” was characterised by “a sense of fatality in the fixed, given character of the present moment” which results in “the need for redemption outside this structure.” But as Eliot moved through the series, he realised that this conclusion was unsatisfactory. As Williams summarises: the *Quartets* constitute “an extended exploration of man’s historical consciousness; and the significant modification that occurs in the course of this exploration is that man [sic] ceases to be seen ... as a subject ‘over-against’ his historical environment.” Instead, Eliot offers “a picture of man as irrevocably bound to this environment” in which “authenticity” is not found by “the act of the heroic individual defying the enmity of circumstance, but by living through and with circumstance” (FQ IV, 6). And all this is grounded upon the fact—in Williams’s view—that the *Quartets* move towards “the acceptance of historical ambiguities by way of an incarnational theology” (FQ IV, 6). However, as we have already mentioned before, this is done without explicit reference to “God” (only “East Coker” does this). In Williams’s opinion, this points to the fact that the “theology” of the *Quartets* is “pre-eminently, negative, apophatic” not only because there are allusions to St John of the Cross in the poem itself, but also because “they are themselves, in their entirety, an essay in ‘apophatic’ statement” that the entire sequence of poems constitute “a search for the silence within speech” (FQ IV, 7).

53 It is difficult not to find echoes here of Walter Benjamin’s famous “On the Concept of History,” (in Benjamin 2003). I am not saying that Benjamin influenced Williams directly, though he certainly could have had access to an earlier version of this essay, as found in the early *Schriften* (published 1955), for example.

But does all this talk of negative theology ignore “the revelatory aspects of the Incarnation?” In Williams’s opinion, Eliot refuses “to operate with any simple notion of revelation that might solve this problem” and the paucity of explicitly theistic language is a testament to his “success” in dealing with the problem, since:

[T]he explicit introduction of theistic language would be, in his terms, an attempt to “get behind” the world to a God uninvolved in it, and thus a denial of the incarnation itself. If God is involved in the world, then it is a world in which there are no absolutely self-authenticating marks of His presence; and if we are to be true to the world, we must represent it as it really is, in its practical “Godlessness.” (FQ IV, 7)⁵⁴

For Eliot, “the place of ‘meaning’ is the senseless flux of history, and the place of the Incarnation is the place where God is overwhelmed, defeated, by time. God is known as active in time only in His passion in time” (FQ IV, 7).

Williams also reflects on what this lack of theistic imagery means for our interpretation of the poem. Some interpret Eliot’s *Quartets* as little more than a thinly-veiled Manichaeism. Others, however, take the opposite route and interpret the poems as a “labyrinthine Christian cryptogram” in which every line must contain some hidden theological “message” (FQ IV, 9). In a median fashion, Williams seeks to move between these two poles, and suggests that Eliot has “imaginatively embodied his belief so faithfully that its theological or dogmatic structure is left almost totally unspoken.” However, even if the theological presuppositions are accepted, some may consider Eliot’s interpretation of the incarnation to be “bleak and pessimistic.” Nonetheless, Williams argues that what Eliot is attempting to do is to expound a *theologia crucis* in which “darkness and defeat” are used for our liberation, in which in spite of everything “we call this Friday good”⁵⁵ so that while admittedly the vision of *Quartets* is ultimately “tragic” it is not finally “pessimistic” (FQ IV, 9) in its outlook.⁵⁶

54 Williams makes reference in this context to Bonhoeffer, and his concept of “religionless Christianity.”

55 “East Coker” IV, in Eliot (1963, 190).

56 This distinction between “tragedy” and “pessimism” can be found in his most recent work, namely Williams (2016, 108–136).

Such reflections lead Williams to talk about the contemporary situation of the church within the world: the church has to be awakened again to its call to “poverty and humility” in which theology has to take into account “the ambiguities inherent in faith” without seeking refuge in “rationalism” or “reductionism” that seeks to eliminate “the incarnational paradox.” For him:

[I]f we are ready to look honestly at the world’s dereliction and understand what is involved in claiming that this is the theatre of God’s action, can we begin to talk about transfiguration and healing; only when we have some idea of how difficult it is to speak of God’s action at all can we intelligibly speak of His saving action. (FQ IV, 9)

Conclusion

In this essay, I have attempted to lay out comprehensively the argument of Williams’s lectures on Eliot’s *Four Quartets*. Williams’s argument unfolded along robustly theological and incarnational contours, in which “historical consciousness” opened up towards a redemptive “visionary” consciousness. For Eliot, time could only be redeemed through time since any other avenue (“the timeless moment” in “Burnt Norton” for example) leaves the meaninglessness of history’s flux and movement as it is, without recourse to a redemptive re-imagining of history itself. Only an incarnational faith can: (1) articulate a thoroughly historicist approach as regards time’s redemption, taking in all seriousness its contingent and impermanent quality; while (2) also allowing us to glimpse, in fragmented and angular ways, the redemptive possibilities contained therein.

It has not been the substance of this essay to debate Williams’s interpretation of the *Quartets*, but simply to critically and contextually repeat its argument, so that scholars of Williams’s thought may be able to trace more clearly certain trajectories in his writings that continue up to the present day. By way of example, we can trace this influence in his reflections on poetic creation as an expression of the religious impulse to create form and meaning in recalcitrant circumstances (Williams 1977b), and also in his emphasis on the fact that Christ does not abolish the open-endedness of history (Williams 2000, 29–43, 93–106).⁵⁷ Some of his

⁵⁷ See an early review essay on Christology which also reveals a similar tone found in the lectures. For this, see Williams (1976, 259).

poems⁵⁸ and sermons⁵⁹ reflect a similar modality of tone and voice, but it is most supremely manifest in his general plea—here taking his cue from Donald MacKinnon—that “tragedy” must be taken seriously within theological reflection (Williams 2000, 148–166; Williams 2016). But while there are significant connections, one should also mark the developments and differences. The early Williams, under the sway of his teacher (and possibly other thinkers such as Hans Urs Von Balthasar and Sergei Bulgakov) allowed too much space for a rather mythological rendering of divine suffering (as can be seen most pointedly in his reading of “The Dry Salvages”). As his later work shows, this language would gradually subside and become replaced with a more classical account of aseity.⁶⁰ In addition to this, there appears to be an overly-emphatic deployment of “negative” tropes, especially ones that relate to the experience of “Godlessness” and “dereliction” as these in turn refract our various proclivities towards imaging the divine in idolatrous ways. Within Williams’s youthful lyric, there is a lack of counter-balancing these concerns with a more “positive” or cataphatic sense of imaging that is not fatefully destined to end in the illusions of fantasy (cf. Milbank 2013, 158–161n.2). It is possible that Williams has given too much sway here to a post-Freudian or Feuerbachian critique of religion,⁶¹ a move which is broadly dependent on Kant’s criticism of metaphysics. This is distinguished from the Thomistic prioritisation of intrinsic attribution, which does allow a more positive account of divine naming.⁶² These imbalances are, to some extent, partially muted in his more mature writings, but not to the satisfaction of all (e.g. John Milbank). Whatever conclusions one draws, the above essay’s emphasis has not been primarily concerned on whether Williams’s theological response is adequate or not, since it has been primarily historical in focus. However, one could scarcely deny that the central question contained therein, namely the relation of temporality to redemption, are of heightened concern for any reflective Christology today.

58 There are several instances where tragic sensibilities and the problems of time and redemption are expressed in his poetry. One thinks of “Twelfth Night”; “Great Sabbath”; “Dream”; “Penrhys”; “Curtains for Bosnia”; in Williams (2002)— just a few examples of this trend.

59 His sermon “Lazarus: In Memory of T. S. Eliot” (delivered in 1984) can be taken as a summary of the *Four Quartets* lectures. This sermon can be found in Williams (1995, 186–191). One could also reference here the early sermon found in Williams (1977a).

60 We have already referenced his article in Williams (2005), but one could also consult his Liddon Lectures (1998), which have been published in Williams (2008b, 21–27). These pages deal specifically with Bulgakov.

61 Williams’s interest in Freud can be seen in Williams (1983b).

62 Rudi te Velde (2006, 65–93).

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