BERGSONIAN MEMORY AND TIME IN T.S. ELIOT’S BEGINNING AND END

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BERGSONIAN MEMORY AND TIME IN T. S. ELIOT’S BEGINNING AND END

A Thesis

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In “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” Eliot describes how the poetic mind—and his own mind—works in a fragmentary manner in the process of literary creation. In this essay he states that

The poet’s mind is in fact a receptacle for seizing and storing up numberless feelings, phrases, images, which remain there until all particles which can unite to form a new compound are present together. (SP 41)

Not only do these words contain a measure for understanding the creative process, but they also contain fragments of Eliot’s beginning, his early interest in the philosophy of French philosopher, Henri Bergson. Author of such influential books such as *Creative Evolution, Mind and Memory*, and *Time and Free Will*, Bergson’s ideas were pervasive and conspicuous in the writing of the early twentieth century. Paul Douglass asserts that “Bergson played an important, perhaps decisive role in the development of an expressly ‘modern’ philosophy and literature” (1). Bergson’s philosophy, while popular during the
modernist period, is little known or explored by most graduate students today. Yet, without knowledge of Bergson’s philosophy, a scholar lacks full understanding of this period’s writing.

Bergson viewed time’s spatial representation by science and mathematics—that of an unalterable, irreversible time line—as unsuitable and illusory for the actual human experience and event of time and memory. Instead, Bergson’s idea of time and memory posits that a moment in the present leads us to a surviving memory which leads to another memory in a free flowing association and movement from present to past, past to present. In Bergson’s complex philosophy of time and consciousness, he noted two types of memory—Practical and Pure. For us to achieve Bergson’s almost mystical Pure Memory, we must separate ourselves from the demands of our practical bodies and our practical worlds. Only in this separation can we become conscious of Pure Memory. If a memory has survived, it has survived for a purpose. When we are in the midst of a consciousness that allows for Pure Memory, time past and time present become one in a type of synchronicity, wherein time bends and folds back on itself freely and seems to lengthen. We then become one with time and memory on a universal level. There is, however, the potentiality for memory and time to cause effects of inaction and inarticulateness that can have debilitating effects—as when a person turns away from the present and looks so far towards the past that he or she become filled with sorrow. The poetry of T. S. Eliot is filled with such temporal concerns because of his early interest in Bergson.
Indeed, the influence of Henri Bergson’s philosophy on T.S. Eliot’s early poetry has been explored and documented by scholars Donald Childs, Philip LeBrun, Lyndall Gordon, and Piers Gray. Evidence of Bergson’s enduring and perhaps unconscious influence on Eliot’s poetry remains explored to a significantly lesser degree—particularly in reference to his post-conversion poetry. Childs’ final assertion is that “Bergsonism, to quote Eliot’s mother, becomes in his thought a ‘diminishing quality,’ [yet] it nonetheless endures in its pseudo-mystical dimension as an important quality of Eliot’s poetic and religious sensibility” (488). My thesis looks at Bergson’s influence in Eliot’s poetry in his early and late work, in other words, his beginning and his end. In particular, I evaluate evidence of Bergson’s philosophical influence in “Rhapsody on a Windy Night,” “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” “The Hollow Men,” and Four Quartets. Even in these last poems, the echo of Bergson’s intuition and duration, pure memory and practical memory, reverberates as “Time present and time past” intertwine, leading to the illumination that “In my beginning is my end.” I will not only explore evidence of Bergson’s philosophy in Four Quartets, but also examine Bergson’s influence throughout a representative scope of Eliot’s work because, after extensive research and careful analysis, I find it plausible that Bergson became part of Eliot’s poetic voice. As scholar Phillip Le Brun states in his essay on “T.S. Eliot and Henri Bergson,” “had he not known Bergson’s philosophical writings, Eliot’s major formulations about poetry—about tradition, the associated sensibility of the artist, and the work of art as objective correlative—would have been quite different from what they are” (10). And so would his poetry have been vastly different had he not been forever altered by Bergson.
Focusing on time, memory and the Bergsonian, memory-related consequence of inaction and inarticulateness in Eliot’s poetic voices, my thesis analyzes the artistic evolution of Eliot in an effort to show how his poetic mind arrived at a “new compound.”

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In 1941, T. S. Eliot published the third poem of *Four Quartets*, “The Dry Salvages,” while he struggled to write “Little Gidding,” the last quartet that would mark the culmination and ending of his poet career and a poem in which exists Eliot’s “compound ghost” and “dead master.” Three days into the beginning of 1941 marked an ironic end to another iconic life. French philosopher Henri Bergson, one of Eliot’s old masters, “died in occupied Paris from pneumonia contracted after standing for many hours in a queue to be registered as a Jew” (Kolakowski ix). Several years before, Bergson’s last will declared that “he would receive baptism in the Catholic Church were it not for the growth of anti-Semitism,” opting instead to “remain among the persecuted” (viii). The irony of such an end to this celebrated life lies not only in Bergson’s philosophy but also in the famous words of T. S. Eliot. For Bergson, the past is always in our present. Eliot has a similar philosophy. The first line to “East Coker,” the second poem in *Four Quartets*, Eliot’s poetic “swan song,” reads, “In my beginning is my end.” Indeed, the need for Bergson to hold onto the heritage of his past, his beginning, provided the single, causal event leading to his ultimate end, his death. In Bergson’s beginning was his end. In Eliot’s end was his beginning. And Eliot’s beginning was Bergson.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, many critics hailed Henri Bergson, a Nobel-prize winning author and philosopher, as one of the most innovative, influential thinkers and writers of modern times. Staffan Bergsten asserts, “Bergson seems one of the chief sources of the modern philosophy of time. His work did much to arouse the
interest of the intellectuals of the period” (30). However, as the century progressed, Bergson drifted out of vogue. But just because one falls out of fashion does not mean one ceases to exist. Paul Douglass asserts that “Bergson played an important, perhaps decisive role in the development of an expressly ‘modern’ philosophy and literature” (1). Although Bergson remains little known in the halls of university classrooms today, his current obscurity neither negates his philosophical influence on our past and our present nor equates to his disappearing from our shared consciousness. As Loretta Wasserman notes in an article on Bergson, “It is difficult now to recapture the freshness Bergson had for his original audience, since many of his lines of speculation have entered common thinking” (228). I assert that Bergson’s ideas of time and memory still exist in our collective consciousness and that they have merely evolved with our times and continue to be perpetuated with our movement through time. It is only through our awareness and knowledge of his philosophy that we are able to clearly discern Bergson’s enduring presence in our current philosophical juggling of time, memory, and meaning. In this same manner, T.S. Eliot’s poetic mind and voice worked in just such an evolutionary progression.

In his essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” T. S. Eliot states that “the poet’s mind is in fact a receptacle for seizing and storing up numberless feelings, phrases, images, which remain there until all particles which can unite to form a new compound are present together” (SP 41). This seemingly simple description provides more than a means for understanding the complex process by which a poetic mind works; it proves pivotal in establishing how Eliot’s own mind collected, combined, and created the
phrases and fragments for his poetry. Of the numerous items stored in T. S. Eliot’s poetic receptacle, philosophy became a natural attraction for a young intellectual such as Eliot, the avid collector.

Piers Gray depicts the young Eliot who left for Paris as being a “blossoming Laforguiste,” eager to “experience the world,” and, in my opinion, to continue the evolution of his “poetic mind” (1). Gray links Eliot’s “intense reading of French symbolist, Laforgue” and his “growing acquaintance with Baudelaire” with Eliot’s continued pattern of seeking evolution and “supplementation” to his ongoing intellectual and poetic development (3). Just as Eliot elucidates, his mind was engaged in an ongoing quest to seize, to store, and not to yield in his journey, a journey in which Bergson became the next step. Gray states that “what Laforgue had offered, Bergson naturally developed from” (38). Lyndall Gordon points out that Eliot attended Bergson’s lectures at the College de France every week for more than a month in the beginning of 1911 (TSE: AIL 55). Gordon also notes that Bergson “was at this time ‘the most noted figure in Paris’” and that “this was the only time that Eliot was ever converted by the influence of any individual” (55). Gordon further states that during the time Eliot attended those lectures, his mind undoubtedly absorbed Bergson’s ideas in an enduring manner (55). It remains indisputable and inevitable that early influences in our lives are powerful forces not easily shaken from the core of our existence.

Like many writers and thinkers of his generation, Eliot read Bergson’s popular books, Creative Evolution, Time and Free Will, and Matter and Memory, and, in similar fashion to writers Willa Cather, Edith Wharton, and F. Scott Fitzgerald, Eliot could not
help but be influenced by Bergson’s philosophy—in a manner of indeterminate depth and undoubted longevity. Though Eliot ultimately appeared to lose interest in Bergson’s philosophy, publically calling his ideas “weakling mysticism,” Eliot’s mind no doubt retained Bergson’s ideas of time, memory, and consciousness in the way he describes in his “Tradition” essay—even though he openly criticized Bergson. Phillip Le Brun designates Eliot’s denouncement of Bergson as “an actual failure on Eliot’s part to recognize what he gained from Henri Bergson” (285).

Yet Eliot’s words become a conscious and open admission to how his unconscious mind stored, combined, and waited for memories and moments of Bergson to reemerge. Analyzing Eliot’s own philosophy on the creative process offers insight into Eliot, the collector, and, more importantly, advances the case for fragments of Bergson in Eliot’s poetry—from his beginning to his end.

In a letter from Charlotte Eliot to Bertrand Russell, dated 18 January 1916, Eliot’s mother, his literal beginning, refers to Henri Bergson’s influence on her son as having “a diminishing quality” (L 130). Scholars from Phillip Le Brun to Donald Childs to Lyndall Gordon have cited this portion of Charlotte Eliot’s letter as evidence of Bergson’s significance in the development of T. S. Eliot’s poetry, but other remarks in that same letter prove additionally illuminating to the mind of Eliot. What Charlotte Eliot goes on to say elucidates her personal attitudes and values towards the study of philosophy, which further suggests an origin for T. S. Eliot’s own interest in the philosophical pursuits that helped direct his poetic voice. In a correspondence, Charlotte Eliot admits that “My personal experience (has) been that mere reading of philosophy stimulates the mind and
increases its creative powers, so that I have sometimes read Philosophy as a preparation for writing” (L 130-31). Eliot, too, became stimulated and influenced by the ideas of philosophers like Santayana, Laforgue, F. H. Bradley, and Henri Bergson, and Eliot’s mother nurtured his intellectual beginnings and his pursuits by raising him in a home filled with her own literary and academic interests.

Eliot’s mother undoubtedly fostered this same sense of scholarly reverence that followed her son from his childhood to his adulthood. More importantly, Eliot’s background allowed for the susceptibility of mind that opened itself to the ideas of Henri Bergson. Indeed, shadows of Bergson’s time and memory flow almost as freely throughout Eliot’s final poetry as they did his early work. Eliot was a collector of images and past poetic voices, and he was also a collector of philosophies—all to be sorted, analyzed, and retained until his creative mind combined the particles into “a new compound” as he willed it. Both consciously and unconsciously, Eliot appropriated fragments of philosophies that interested him for his own literary devices. Eliot developed in just such a manner as Bergson suggests when he states that “our personality shoots, grows and ripens without ceasing” (CE 8).

Interestingly enough, in that same letter from 1916, Charlotte Eliot expresses a desire that never saw itself to fruition but supports the idea of a progressive pattern to Eliot’s collecting of philosophies: “I hope Tom will be able to carry out his purpose of coming on in May to take his degree” (L 131). The fact that Eliot never returned to America in 1916 to defend his doctoral dissertation on Bradley leads to an intimation that, like his “diminishing” satisfaction with Bergson’s ideas, Eliot may have also found
Bradley’s philosophy ultimately unsatisfactory. Eliot was still collecting, sifting, and sorting through images and ideas to make meaning of his world. Hence, ten years later, Eliot had yet another conversion that further reveals his pattern of collecting and evolving. As Gordon notes,

When Eliot visited Rome in 1926 he fell on his knees before Michelangelo’s *Pieta*, to the surprise of his brother and sister-in-law who were with him. His entry into the Church of England the following year astonished many friends and readers, but for Eliot there was no dramatic change, only ‘an expansion of interests.’ (192)

Eliot’s religious conversion served as further “expansion,” another step in the evolution of a man, a mind, and an artist who constantly sought answers to the questions that concerned him as a person and a poet. Inasmuch as his poems contain fragments of images used and reused, Eliot’s intellectual and spiritual interests were also of a cyclical and fragmentary nature. From Laforgue to Bergson to Bradley to Anglicanism, Eliot continued collecting different philosophies of the intellect and of the spirit and integrated them into his mind and his poetic voice.

In tracing evidence of Bergson’s philosophy, which Eliot weaves like musical phrases into his poetry, I focus on Eliot’s beginning and end: “Rhapsody on a Windy Night,” “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” “The Hollow Men,” and *Four Quartets*—all poems whose titles reflect musicality or semblance to the chanting of Greek Chorus, drawing our minds back and forth in time between the poems themselves, echoing Bergson when he describes, “. . . the piling up of the past upon the past goes on
without relaxation . . . It follows us at every instant . . . leaning over the present which is
about to join it, pressing against the portals of consciousness” (CE 7).

Eliot spent his career as a poet, composing voices that sought to elucidate the
song of his visions—a symphony more of cacophony in his beginning and evolving to
songs of harmony in his end. As Eliot notes, later in “Tradition and the Individual
Talent,” one must remember that “no poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning
alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead
poets and artists” (SP 38). I extend Eliot’s thought to include that of the philosophers of
his time present and his time past—and Bergson in particular. Even when speaking in “A
Talk on Dante,” Eliot acknowledges, “the greatest debts are not always the most evident”
(179). Evident or camouflaged, acknowledged or denied, by resonating his own
philosophy, Eliot subtly credited the debts he owed that found themselves stored in his
memory, waiting to emerge in another poem, another time—from early notes of discord
to final stanzas of accord. In Eliot’s beginning was his end, and, conversely, in his end,
was his beginning—and Bergson had little choice but to travel that path alongside Eliot
because his philosophy had been collected, stored, and evolved in Eliot’s mind. Life, as
Bergson puts it, “appears in its entirety as an immense wave which, starting from a
center, spreads outwards, and which on almost the whole of its circumference is stopped
and converted into oscillation: at one single point the obstacle has been forced, the
impulsion has passed freely” (CE 290). Bergson’s ideas of time and memory started just
such “an immense wave” that spread “outwards” throughout the course of Eliot’s writing
career. For both Bergson and Eliot, time, memory, and consciousness propelled the creation of their literary works.

Yet it is impossible to recognize evidence of Bergson’s influence on Eliot’s early and late work if one is not familiar with Bergson’s theories of time and memory. Bergson theorizes that a moment in the present triggers a surviving memory from the past, which leads to yet a different memory in a free flowing association; thus, we enjoy movement from present to past, past to present. In this same manner, our prior knowledge of each of Eliot’s poems and poetic images follow us at any given moment as we read his work, and we cannot help but move back and forth consciously and unconsciously, thus finding ourselves affected by the past in the present. For instance, one image or memory can lead to another moment in time, which can lead to numerous others, traversing back and forth in and out of time in a free-flowing movement of indeterminate length. In *Four Quartets*, we see images from Eliot’s past poems reemerge to form new compounds—just as he describes in “Tradition and the Individual Talent.”

In “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” fog, personified as rubbing “its muzzle on the window-panes” (16) in a manner that conceals and inhibits vision and approximates action connects with “the oppression of the silent fog” (37). Yet this fog as seen in “The Dry Salvages” quickly frees itself as it connects with an active ocean, and we see far less inaction and inarticulateness as we come to Eliot’s later work. Here, Eliot reveals and enacts movement and sound in symphony with the sea, and there are “many voices,” “The sea howl / And the sea yelp, are different voices / Often together heard” (29-31). These voices pull us back in time and connect to other voices in “Prufrock,” to the “sea
girls” and to the “human voices” that “wake us, and we drown” (32-3), images of finality and despair that Eliot sufficiently replaces with more hopeful lines in “The Dry Salvages” such as “There is no end, but addition” (58). “The Dry Salvages” further melds ocean imagery in more moments of memory when it offers

. . . the beaches where it tosses

Its hints of earlier and other creation:

The starfish, the horseshoe crab, the whale’s backbone;

The pools where it offers to our curiosity

The more delicate algae and the sea anemone.

It tosses up our losses, the torn seine,

The shattered lobster pot, the broken oar (18-24)

And suddenly, Eliot has stretched our memory back in time to “Rhapsody on a Windy Night” and connects us with the broken off piece of

A twisted branch upon the beach

Eaten smooth, and polished

As if the world gave up

The secret of its skeleton,

Stiff and white.

A broken spring. (25-30)

With the image of “lobster” and “pool,” Eliot creates conscious connection to the “old crab with barnacles on his back,” “in a pool,” clinging to “the end of a stick” (43-5). These moments of images between poems in Eliot’s early and late work become endless
refrains and interplay when one begins closely listening for them. Memory and time remain connected and in constant flux for Eliot in his beginning and his end—and for Bergson.

As for the nature of time, Bergson divides it into two categories: “clock time” and “internal time.” Bergson found clock time, the artificial, spatial representation created by man, unsatisfactory for representing our true, human experience. Instead, Bergson looked to a more “real” time, internal time, also referred to by Bergson as “dureé” or “duration.” Internal time does not exist on a fixed, rigid, one-directional movement with absolute intervals; rather, duration owns moments of varying degrees of length. For Bergson, this way of perceiving time was the only real way of measuring time. In other words, time is real and boundless in length. One might note that in Bergson’s philosophy, time, memory, and consciousness are all tightly interwoven.

In the same way that Bergson noted two types of time, he also noted two types of memory: pure (spontaneous) and practical (habitual). The manner of duration, of allowing internal memory to flow back and forth between past and present, enables us to attain a certain connectivity with the universe around us in that we possess a heightened consciousness that permits us to enjoy what Bergson called “intuition,” a connection of synchronicity. It is this state of being that Bergson calls “pure” memory. The way to achieve this duration and intuition, which comprise pure memory, lies in our ability to separate ourselves from the other kind of memory that Bergson found inhibiting, “practical” memory. All of the obligatory habits and details of daily life, all those practical memories that must be brought to the surface of our consciousness, cause a
disconnection with the pure memory of our internal selves, our real selves. Thus, for us to achieve Bergson’s almost mystical pure memory, we must separate ourselves from the demands of the practical world and its practical demands. Only in this separation can we become conscious of pure memory.

If a memory has survived, it has survived for a purpose. When we are in the midst of a consciousness that allows for pure memory, time past and time present become one in a type of synchronicity, wherein time bends and folds back on itself freely and seems to lengthen. We then become one with time and memory on a universal level. Memory of the past can also prove to be a variable not only of disconnection but also of disaffection. When one becomes too focused on the past, one becomes filled with a sorrow that has adverse effects on one’s consciousness.

As Bergson states in *Time and Free Will*,

> Sorrow begins by being nothing more than a facing towards the past, an impoverishment of our sensations and ideas, as if each of them were now contained entirely in the little which it gives out, as if the future were in some way stopped up. (11)

Tom Quirk asserts that “Bergson himself was not blind to the darker implications of life” (57). Daryl Palmer concurs, noting that “The past may inform our every action but our imperviousness to its influence leads to certain pathology, to ‘a wooden thing amongst living people’ (128). Bergson himself asserts, “To act freely is to recover possession of oneself, and to get back to pure duration” (TFW 231). Being burdened by memory to the point of lacking word and action robs one’s spirit of any real freedom, and this element
becomes key in Eliot’s early poems as he explores men consumed with sorrow as they face the past. The speakers in “Rhapsody on a Windy Night,” “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” and “The Hollow Men” all hover in an uncertain state of limbo, “stopped up” as Bergson would explain it, because they are obsessed by memory, leaving them men of inarticulate inaction, trapped by time and memory. However, by the time Eliot has arrived at *Four Quartets*, the effacement toward the past, which remains conspicuous in his beginning, has evolved to an ending of looking forward towards the future—and a newly evolved optimism for that future.

Our state of consciousness in and out of time and memory, and the context of our inner and outer worlds are all thematic variations for Eliot and for Bergson. In the upcoming chapters, I offer analysis of Eliot’s work, beginning and end, in order to show the evolution of his mind as a mutable collector of Bergson’s philosophy. Both Nobel prize-winning authors, T. S. Eliot and Henri Bergson remain inextricably linked in time, in memory, and in our collective consciousness.
Chapter 2

APPROXIMATION OF ACTION IN “RHAPSODY ON A WINDY NIGHT”

In “Rhapsody on a Windy Night,” Eliot assigns time a significant role in directing a course of action—or, perhaps more accurately, an approximation of action. As Nancy K. Gish notes,

“Rhapsody” presents a relationship between the street and the mind which perceives it against a background of time measured by clocks . . . [and] the speaker, like all in the 1917 poems, does not act or create; he responds to what he observes. (8)

What the speaker observes is laden with memory and sorrow, creating inaction and inarticulateness as we see a man whose future appears truly to be “stopped up” as Bergson suggests, offering, at best, an abysmal, violent ending with “the last twist of the knife.” However, before this dismal ending, the speaker of “Rhapsody” reveals a series of time-related visions of the inner and outer world, which mingle and join in and out of time. These visions echo Bergson’s élan vital, the union possible between man and universe when intuition separates itself from the world of the practical and habitual, when duration allows for pure memory to emerge; such is the case in “Rhapsody on a Windy Night.” Gish observes that the world in which “Rhapsody” takes place, “like that of Bergson, is one of constant flux . . . split between an inner and outer self corresponding to inner duration and external clock time [with] the emphasis on memory as the only source of unity” (3). Thus, time and memory become the unifying force in establishing
action because, despite his hourly movement, the speaker only offers an approximation of action. He moves with memory and with each stroke of the clock’s nightly chorus.

Piers Gray determines “the ‘plot’ of ‘Rhapsody on a Windy Night’ is worth noting, for the poem works through an obvious set of chronological progressions, taking us from midnight to four o’clock” (44). Time—both clock and internal—as I have mentioned—becomes Eliot’s on-going theme for exploration, yet the “action” in “Rhapsody” remains merely imitation of deliberateness in that the speaker wanders, hour after hour—and connects intuitively with the unsavory side of life in the modern world, with “a crowd of twisted things.” Gray notes that “the sequence of perceptions” represented in “Rhapsody” reflects actions “of a highly undesirable kind” (44). This reflection bears particular note because here Eliot appears to present his reader the ultimate message of Bergson: clock time is not as real as internal time. Therefore, Eliot’s emphasis on the hourly progression of time and the unattractive nature that lies within these city images supports Bergson. Time is meaningful only when internally derived—not externally.

Stanza one establishes a temporal representation of duality as the hour hovers at midnight, a passing of the torch from one day to the next. Eliot immediately draws our consciousness to a moment of Bergsonian pure memory as,

Whispering lunar incantations
Dissolve the floors of memory
And all its clear relations,
Its divisions and precisions. (4-7)
From the moment time’s representation of the “fatalistic drum” sounds, the speaker in “Rhapsody” embarks on a journey, “twisted,” man-made, and fragmented, progressing in Bergsonian flux between past and present, even as the illusion of time propels the speaker and the poem.

“Midnight” or “clock time” proves in Bergsonian terms to be insufficient for real representation of human existence and experience—and this philosophy is evidenced in the comparison Eliot makes, allowing for “midnight” to shake “the memory / As a madman shakes a dead geranium” (11-12). The geranium is not alive, thus, it belongs to the past—a memory—and the one shaking the past is not rational, but rather described as a madman. Thus, we have clock time represented with two images, that of the dead past and of a man lacking logic, which illustrates Bergson’s philosophy towards man-made time: clock time lacks as a logical explanation for our existence, and it is madness to think otherwise. Piers Gray notes, “memories of the individual consciousness are confused and disjointed” (47). By combining time and memory in this manner, Eliot reinforces his Bergsonian connection. Gray also suggests that “the poem has so forced the reader into a tracery of strangely disturbing sensations . . . . indeed an exploration of the strange logic of consciousness” (47). Memory of the past and consciousness are not always logical or beneficial, and in this image of madman and flower, Eliot illustrates this human condition.

For Bergson, focus on the past can either benefit or inhibit. In *Matter and Memory*, Bergson indicates, “Do we turn to memory? We note that memory’s primary function is to evoke all those past perceptions, to recall what preceded and followed
them, and so to suggest to us that decision which is the most useful” (303). Even further, we can analyze that, as Gray reflects on Bergson’s ideas, “recall that memory is directed towards useful action” (47). Indeed, Bergson values the past when used in this manner to effect an informed, rational decision, but he warns of the debilitating effects of a habitual backward vision. Bergson defines sorrow as

being nothing more than a facing towards the past, an impoverishment of our sensations and ideas, as if each of them were now contained entirely in the little which it gives out, as if the future were in some way stopped up. And it ends with the impression of crushing failure, the effect of which is that we aspire to nothingness. (11)

This perpetual backward glancing and sorrowful fixation on the past in preference to active participation in the present establishes its early chords in “Rhapsody” and will subsequently crescendo later in “Prufrock” and “The Hollow Men.”

Stanza two serves much the same function as “the light of the door,” which opens our eyes to the “grin” of a presumed prostitute, as the door to memory opens. Here, Eliot sets forth images in this doorway to memory that will emerge in other stanzas and in the memory of our consciousness. Personification of the streetlamp further supports the existence of Bergson’s *élan vital* in that the light giver not only illuminates the urban scene before our eyes, but also speaks to us and informs us of not only what we see, but also how we see it:

The street-lamp said, ‘Regard that woman

Who hesitates toward you in the light of the door
Which opens on her life a grin.

You see the border of her dress

Is torn and stained with sand,

And you see the corner of her eye

Twists like a crooked pin. (16-22)

The images in the first two stanzas—“eye,” “sand,” “twists,” “memory,” “street-lamp,” “corner,” and “geranium”—each become metamorphic in nature as the speaker proceeds in his nighttime “action” of wandering with little purpose other than to connect with disconnected images that evoke memory. This mutability in images becomes, according to Donald Childs, an example of “the remarkable extent to which Bergsonism informs Eliot’s poem . . . and work(s) to establish another level of discourse” (481). This “discourse” is advancing the poem’s nightwalker toward a fleeting moment of Bergsonian pure memory. Gish asserts, “whatever Eliot believed about time, he places his characters here in a world of Bergsonian flux and intensifies their isolation from each other and the world” (6). In truth, the speaker is little more active than Prufrock in the sense that he merely moves and observes, and he remains primarily isolated from the world around him save for brief moments of pure memory that occur in stanza six before practical memory returns to consciousness. The only action other than walking and watching that the speaker participates in is when he “mount(s)” the stairs, “put(s) [his] shoes at the door, sleep(s), and prepare(s) for life.” And even then, it remains unclear if the speaker performs these actions of practical memory or if he is merely reminded of them by an omniscient narrator.
The matter and determination of action has little bearing on the nightwalker’s course, however, for there appears to be no conscious decision to make or action to take. Rather, as stanza three would suggest, “a crowd of twisted things” is thrown up “high and dry” in his memory. Here, stanza three begins its exploration of Bergson’s pure memory explicitly. The “border of her dress,” in stanza two, which is “stained with sand” and the “corner of her eye” that “twists,” connect and merge with another memory of “a twisted branch upon the beach” (25). The branch itself is the memory of the living tree, which subsumes rapidly in the next four lines and becomes a skeleton, signifying death, which flows into the final image of stanza three—“a broken spring in a factory yard” (30). Ruined waste discarded. Eliot has, in stanza three, effectively twisted memory into a place of unconscious inanimateness, for nothing in this stanza lives—all things are dead, broken, discarded, and useless. All images are inactive and, obviously, inarticulate. As Donald Childs asserts, “Experience of useless memory is the poem’s goal . . . . Eliot’s point is that . . . if Bergson’s mystical vision of . . . duration is to be at all possible, it must be possible in such a world . . . of prostitutes and alley cats” (477). By the end of stanza three, the reader is primed for stanza four, where things discarded become desperately desired in the modern world.

Gray points out that life in stanza four is “intentionally drab” because the drabness here is expressive of life below reflective consciousness (42). Gordon notes that “Rhapsody marvelously evokes a mood and a state of mind, the poet’s almost painful sensitivity to his impression of the deserted, vaguely sinister streets of Paris” and that “from a philosophical point of view, Eliot’s experiment [with Bergsonism] failed” (41).
Childs disputes Gordon’s assertion by saying, “the point of the poem is to acknowledge how difficult a task it is to escape the confines of practical intellect” (487), and I concur. “Rhapsody” illustrates the manner in which practical memory conflicts and deflects one from enjoying the intuition one can experience, and stanza four reflects the way in which memory of the practical inhibits the synchronicity of being joined with the \textit{élan vital}.

Rife with want and need on a practical level, all subjects in stanza four are unable to engage in pure memory. We see “the cat,” pursuing a practical need—hunger—as it “slips out its tongue / And devours a morsel of rancid butter” (36-7). It is important to note the degree of desperation in this act as Eliot uses the word “devour” rather than eat and that the butter is not fresh and desirable but “rancid.”

Eliot follows this action of need with one of want as “the hand of the child, automatic, / slipped out and pocketed a toy that was running along the quay” (38-9). Pure memory, which accounts for the melting of one image—the slipping out of a cat’s tongue to the slipping out of a child’s hand is marred by practicality. Here, practical memory impedes the progress of pure memory and prevents it from happening. As Childs points out, “the images from memory seem to associate freely, but they are actually quite practical . . . . Furthermore, not only the movements but also the motivations are similar” (482). Want overrides purity, and we see, again, desperation, with the deliberate use of “automatic’ and “pocketed,” both words representing stealth and deception. Like stanza three, with its discarded, broken spring, the toy in stanza four, we presume, is equally broken and discarded—or at least soiled—as it floats “along the quay.” As Gray notes, this stanza effectively illustrates that “Eliot’s purpose is here to imagine the world
without imagination . . . In Bergsonian terms, without reflective memory [life is] seemingly dry and uninviting: there is nothing behind that child’s eye” (42). Though the crab is laden with the past, that is, memory, by virtue of having “barnacles on his back,” it “gripped the end of a stick,” holding onto life in the same type of desperation as the cat and the child (45). Memory connects with memory. We might presume this crab has emerged from the same “beach” memory seen in stanza three, just as the “lighted shutters” house the prostitute’s eye, twisted “like a crooked pin” (22).

Gordon asserts, “in ‘Rhapsody on a Windy Night,’ Eliot experiments with Bergson’s method of grasping truth not by means of analysis but by casting oneself on a current of immediate perception as it flowed through time” (40). Stanza five brings together the flow of three elements of light in suggestion of movement towards illuminating Bergson’s idea: the street-lamp, the moon, and the prostitute who stands in the lighted doorway. As Childs observes, here, the street-lamp no longer speaks with the ‘clear relations, / . . . divisions and precisions’ of the previous street-lamps. Instead, it hums. The voice of practical intellect is dissolving . . . . we begin to see that the moon has lost its practical memory, and to lose practical memory is to gain pure memory. (484) The musicality of the street-lamp’s newfound “hum” cannot be overlooked because this “humming” reflects a musical accord, an intimation and movement toward intuitive synchronicity and conscious communion with the élan vital, the life force. Yet the connection remains as incomplete as the moon’s eye is “feeble,” its memory “lost,” its face “washed-out” with “smallpox cracks.” The rose is not real, only an approximation
of a rose, an imitation. The desperation of stanza four has become the desecration of the moon in stanza five, which flows directly into the penultimate stanza.

Here, in stanza six, desperation and desecration collect as memory after memory forms the final picture on the poetic score. “Smells of dust and eau de cologne,” memories of “old nocturnal smells” drift “across her brain.” The geranium shaken by the madman three hours ago is covered in dust. Smell, the memory of things, permeates stanza six. “Chestnuts,” “female smells,” “cigarettes,” and “cocktails” form a set of images, none of which are of a practical nature—all are of a pure, if not base and raw, nature. If we are to analyze this set of memories some three hours into this “whispering of lunar incantations,” are we to assume that, at least for a moment in time, the speaker does arrive at pure memory, unhampered by memory of the practical? Possibly, yet the final stanza and the tolling of clock time shatter pure memory. The final lines are all of a practical nature. Child observes,

The speaker, therefore, must do now what has in the past ensured the preservation of life: he must brush his teeth, put his shoes at the door, and go to bed. So the day ends, not with a mystical Bergsonian bang, but with a practical whimper. (486)

As Gray indicates, there is “nothing rhapsodic about these lyrics as they develop the ironic and highly unromantic vision of nocturnal existence” (44). Yet Gray also deftly illuminates that “Rhapsody” is also “an ironical triumph of human consciousness that its richest life thus appears in a state of apparent inactivity” (43). Indeed, “Rhapsody’s” midnight wanderer merely provides the illusion of action, an approximation of action and
inarticulateness. Seemingly in opposition to Prufrock’s inability to act, to “go,” and the repetitious pondering of “Do I dare,” the man who walks through night in “Rhapsody” has at least dared to go forth into the streets that we later see Prufrock will dare not tread. Yet “Rhapsody’s” speaker waits silently, compliantly for death in “The last twist of the knife” as we will see Prufrock do. Regardless of the façade of his hourly movement, the night wanderer in “Rhapsody” remains little more than wordless observer, a man of inaction and inarticulateness, a theme Eliot collects and develops in a far more evolved pattern. In “Rhapsody,” Eliot composes the underscore for “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” a poem that defined a type of literary character echoed profoundly and pervasively throughout modernist literature.
As the speaker in “Rhapsody on a Windy Night” traverses silently through time and memory, approximating action, he illustrates Bergson’s philosophy. The metered, man-made units of clock time are not an adequate expression of our mind’s actual travels through real time. The clock ticks constantly forward, never backward, but our minds traverse freely in and out of time—just as we witness in the mind of “Prufrock.” As Piers Gray observes, “Prufrock” opposes “the possibility of action with that of inertia” (59). This “inertia” is the force that truly propels “Rhapsody’s” observer, but this inertia is the force upon which “Prufrock” deliberates endlessly and avoids ultimately. Thus, “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” becomes the next movement in Eliot’s Bergsonian evolution because we have a speaker who has switched roles with that of “Rhapsody’s” speaker. The latter travels in wordless silence, the former stays immobile, drowning in a chorus of words. In “Prufrock,” Eliot enacts Bergsonism by creating duration when he uses phrases like “decisions and revisions,” which connect our consciousness with “Rhapsody’s” phrase, “divisions and precisions”; thus, Eliot allows us to form a metrical and rhythmical connection between the time and memory of his previous poem. David Spurr reflects, “from the beginning [of “Prufrock], the speaker’s repeated statements of purpose or destination are always countered by images of spatial disorder, meaningless repetition, fragmentation, isolation, and mental distraction” (4). For Bergson, this type of internal time is far more real than the clock time we hear tolling in “Rhapsody.” We can
easily extend this reflection from Rhapsody’s wordless speaker who merely observes “images of spatial disorder” to illustrate Eliot’s next evolution of character into the immobile “Prufrock” who is filled with many words that mean little.

T. S. Eliot’s theory of how the poetic mind collects and creates reflects Henri Bergson’s idea, as presented in *Creative Evolution*, that “the intellect is characterized by the unlimited power of decomposing according to any law and of recomposing into any system” (173). Eliot composed “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” while still under conscious influence of Bergson. And of all Bergson’s ideas, his temporal ones, in which sorrow is generated from being bound to the past, appear to have been ineluctable for the mind of Eliot. David Spur notes, that in “Prufrock,” Eliot “establishes a dialectic between constructive intellect and disordered elements of consciousness that builds to a climax late in the poem, finally yielding to the flight into an inner world of visionary union” (4).

In *T. S. Eliot: An Imperfect Life*, Lyndall Gordon notes, “throughout his career, Eliot tried to interpret this release from a time-bound world” (AIL 57). However, Eliot’s pursuit of release from the past is not one of full release, but partial, for it is impossible to attain a complete release from the power of memory because, as Bergson asserts and as Eliot concurs in “Prufrock,” the past is always with us. Bergson suggests that memories are a powerful part of our present—in particular those memories of sorrow. Indeed, memory and sorrow are the very causes for inaction and inarticulateness in “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” because Prufrock is continually “dragging behind [him]” his
sorrowful past—and Eliot continues to make note of the interplay between external time and internal time.

Grover Smith states in *T. S. Eliot’s Poetry and Plays*,

Eliot’s “Prufrock” is a tragic figure. Negligible to others, he suffers in a hell of defeated idealism, tortured by unappeasable desires. He dared not risk the disappointment of seeking actual love . . . Prufrock . . . has a tragic flaw . . . he is incapable of action. (15)

Similarly, in *Time in the Poetry of T. S. Eliot*, Nancy Gish observes of *Prufrock and Other Observations* that “though drama arises from opposing voices or conflicting emotions, there is almost no action . . . Passive or listless but acutely aware, the characters perceive but do not act” (1). The power of the past has a strong, debilitating pull on Prufrock, both consciously and unconsciously. Unfortunately, Prufrock has allowed memory to control him, thus turning him away from his present and the potentiality of his future—making him a man filled with sorrow because of the past. Eliot demonstrates this pull of the past in the present both thematically and structurally, emulating Bergson’s theory of duration and the flow of time as he moves us from stanza to stanza, backwards and forwards, and even between Eliot’s poems, connecting with the consciousness of what we have previously read. Grover Smith also makes note that the “action” in Prufrock is “limited to the interplay of impressions, including memories, in Prufrock’s mind” (16). If so, Prufrock’s actions are merely endless contemplation over what might have been if he had dared. Gish also states that “a kind of sadness pervades, evoked not only by images but by these lonely, empty watchers” (4).
Prufrock is one such “lonely” watcher who wonders the ultimate question; “And would it have been worth it, after all, / Would it have been worth while, . . .” (100-1). Such is the overwhelming question many ask themselves when contemplating the value of their existence—as does J. Alfred Prufrock as he looks back at a life of disappointment, disagreement, and disillusionment. Indeed, the worth of life is a central theme in Eliot’s “Prufrock” and becomes the very question he begs his reader not to ask in the first stanza—“Oh, do not ask, ‘What is it?’” In one breath, Prufrock demonstrates his inability to act and to be articulate. David Spurr notes, “the language of discourse, like the language of spatial movement, leads deceptively toward what appears as a destination in the “overwhelming question” before shutting the door in our faces” (5). The reality of Prufrock’s inability to engage in true communication in the past and in the present creates a cycle of futility. Among the fragments of images that drift in and out of Prufrock’s consciousness like the ocean waves we see at the poem’s conclusion, there exists a sense of urgency—albeit futile. “Was life worth anything?” This remains the ultimate question Prufrock ruminates when he declares, “I have measured out my life with coffee spoons” (51). Does life boil down to nothing more than trivialities and cups of coffee, which indicate both practical memory and external “clock time”? Is that all there is? Eliot’s repetition of words and phrases support this futile, defeated approximation of urgency because they draw the reader’s attention and keep it focused, and Eliot’s metrical features help further support the poem’s thematic stream of consciousness and emphasis on time.
On a metrical level, the steady heartbeat of “Prufrock” is iambic with a high degree of line-length variation, offering longer lines of hexameter, heptameter, and even octameter when Eliot desires to stretch out time or action, adding metrical interest to his form via continually revising the metrical expectation of the reader, thus further illustrating Prufrock’s constant equivocations. Annie Finch, author of The Ghost of Meter: Culture and Prosody in American Free Verse, expounds, “Prufrock’s response to the overwhelming question is, metrically, a retreat into several irregular lines” (102). In other words, he avoids the question and the answer both thematically and metrically. All the while Eliot’s use of the iambic resembles the ticking away of external, clock time, which becomes linked to the central theme of Prufrock looking back at time and evaluating the worth of his life.

Eliot’s use of repetition supports the urgent reckoning of Prufrock’s soul, past and present, the review of his self-worth, his ultimate inaction and inarticulateness, and his crushing failure. In stanza one, Eliot’s first lines of “Prufrock” create a theme of inaction and inarticulateness in the present “when the evening is spread out against the sky / Like a patient etherized upon a table” (2,3). The memory of this absolutely passive, immobilized patient lying prone on a table evolves later, in stanza eight, when Prufrock ponders how he will measure out the meaning of his existence “when I am pinned and wriggling on the wall” (57), a question for the future. Both images contrast time in terms of past and future and reflect wordless immobility, and we connect both images in our consciousness. While the first image of the sky represents inaction in a more absolute way, the second image of Prufrock evokes a similar feeling of helplessness
with an increasing sense of desperation as the poem advances towards its hopeless conclusion. Thus, Eliot provides what Piers Gray deems, “an expression of consciousness contemplating the possibility of bodily movement” (58).

Eliot’s use of repetition also begins in stanza one and acts as a vector in driving his verse, propelling it back and forth in time. Harold Bloom notes of Eliot’s repetition, “these lines repeat, emphasizing the tedium of the chic but superficial world Prufrock inhabits” (17). In stanza one, he implores three times “let us go then, you and I,” using the quickness of an initial anapest to push the urgency of desire forward. However, given the “etherized sky,” an image that reflects powerlessness, it remains uncertain that Prufrock will go anywhere. External time, with all its pressures, ticks mercilessly away in “Prufrock.” Later, in stanza four another repetition of “clock” time emerges as Prufrock insists, “And indeed, there will be time” (23). The word “time” repeats ten times, pushing us to recognize its ever-ticking presence. It also suggests, as Bloom points out, that “Prufrock has too much time on his hands” and that he is engaging in “a thought process that gets nowhere” (18). Eliot utilizes and frequently repeats other time-related words like “minute,” “evenings,” “mornings,” and “afternoons” from beginning to end to support his temporal theme and to create Prufrock’s dilemma of mundane powerlessness in the external world of time.

“Do I dare?” and “how should I presume?” are also repetitious questions that suggest Prufrock is as powerless to effect change in his world as the “etherized sky” that lies motionless above. Eliot pairs these phrases with haunting fragments of women and nameless voices that Prufrock asserts he has “known them all” many times. Grover
Smith states that Prufrock “suffers in a hell of defeated idealism, tortured by unappeasable desires. He dare not risk the disappointment of seeking actual love, which if he found it and had energy enough for it, still could not satisfy him” (15). Prufrock’s professions to “have known them all” indeed allude to this man’s failure at having ever been able to dare, presume, or act effectively in his interpersonal relationships with women. Prufrock’s equivocations become resignation as he questions whether he will ever be understood at all by “one, settling a pillow or throwing off a shawl” (110).

As Bergson notes in his theory, the past begins to flow into Prufrock’s present consciousness; thus, his world becomes a life of dédoublement, moving between outer and inner, both seemingly futile and empty. Stanzas two and five consist of only two lines of repetition, both containing polysyllabic feet, which create movement: “In the room the women come and go / Talking of Michelangelo.” The dactyl in “Talking of Michelangelo” (13) also brings us to question the flesh and blood existence of the women who twice come and go in the room—or is the room merely part of his past as the dactylic foot that descends, as though falling back in time, might suggest, flowing dream like, back and forth, as a mind shifting focus between past and present? Based on Bergson’s theory of the fluidity of time wherein past and present intertwine, it is not altogether certain if these women are existing in the present or in the past. Of note, however, is that these women, even if they exist solely in Prufrock’s memory, are talking in a hollow, empty manner about an artist of the past, Michelangelo, “the sculptor of a strength and magnitude with which Prufrock cannot compete” (Smith 18). Nancy Gish states that “Prufrock” is
primarily concerned with the split between Prufrock’s inner and outer life, 
with his inability to take the chance of living according to his own feelings 
and desires, and hence with his surrender to time in the form of an empty 
round of events. (11)

Additional support for Prufrock as a man of inaction and inarticulateness lies in the fact 
that none of these women (who come and go) speak to him—nor does he speak to them. 
Instead, Prufrock’s memories of women flow through time past, present, and future, and 
all become unified into a central theme of misunderstanding and indifference. Just as 
Bergson’s flux of time suggests, one memory of woman leads to other memories—and all 
act as a foil for illuminating Prufrock’s silent sorrow and inability to act.

By personifying the “yellow fog” in stanza three, Eliot creates another effective 
foil to Prufrock, one that Harold Bloom characterizes as “both domestic and disturbing,” 
but I consider counterpoint to Prufrock’s inaction. The fog in stanza three engages in 
much movement—albeit wordless. The fog “rubs its back” and “muzzle on the window 
panes,” and it “ lingered,” “ licked,” let soot “fall upon its back” (15, 16, 17-9). It “slipped 
by the terrace, made a sudden leap” before becoming, like Prufrock, inactive when it 
curls “ once about the house,” and falls asleep (22). However, unlike Prufrock, the fog 
acts—and, significantly, all its action takes place out of doors, leaving Prufrock locked in 
a room of his own invention and inaction where he never even allows the “overwhelming 
question” to be asked—which, in turn, means the question can never be answered, thus 
maintaining Prufrock’s wordless stasis.
Stanzas four and six take a mental leap into the future. Eleven out of twenty-four lines in these two stanzas repeat the word “time,” which holds significance. Rather than act in the present, Prufrock chooses to relish in the past and the possibility of the future in which “there will be time.” In Bergson’s philosophy,

The idea of the future, pregnant with an infinity of possibilities, is thus more fruitful than the future itself, and this is why we find more charm in hope than in possession, in dreams than reality. (TFW 10)

At first glance, Prufrock seems to be applying to Bergson’s philosophy of finding more pleasure in the idea that he has all the time in the world to “dare disturb the universe” (45). Even the metrics of the verse fall into a steady iambic pentameter, which duplicates the ticking of a clock: “There will be time, there will be time” (25). This steady metrical rhythm both supports Prufrock’s rationalization that “there will be time” and brings to our consciousness the realization that there will not be enough time if Prufrock fails to take the time to act.

Stanza four finds Prufrock contemplating an abundance of action in his attempt to convince himself that time is not running out. Smith considers that this preoccupation Prufrock has with his surroundings are “distractions . . . [ultimately] illustrating his terrified self-consciousness” (18). The active “yellow fog” from stanza three has become “yellow smoke,” the memory of fire, as it “slides along the street” and rubs “its back upon the window-panes” (23-4). Prufrock contemplates that “there will be time to murder and create,” which becomes a significant dichotomy of action (27). “Murder” means putting a life into the past through an intentional act of violence, while “create”
constitutes bringing a new life into the future filled with potentiality. Murder and creation stand side by side in diametrical opposition to one another, yet both reflect passions and potentials of hate and of love. “A hundred indecisions” plague Prufrock, and even his “visions” are rapidly “revised” because he does not have the confidence to create a vision, take definitive action, and stand by that decision.

Prufrock does not possess the confidence to do more than ask, “Do I dare?” In stanza six, his inaction mingles with memories of the future and the damage time’s toll takes on the human body, bringing into consciousness Prufrock’s insecurity. Rather than accept the passage of time as inevitable, Prufrock allows time to become debilitating, and he laments the lost youth of his past when he notes “a bald spot in the middle of my hair” (39). Craig Raine asserts, in his biography of Eliot, that “Prufrock feels physically inadequate (‘how his arms and legs are thin!’), socially disadvantaged, nervous, romantically charged, reluctant to imperil a relationship—and physically impure. So he fails to act” (71). Prufrock not only imagines the thoughts of others who will view his altered physicality disparagingly, but he allows these thoughts to combine with memory of the past, creating more inaction and inarticulateness. These parenthetical voices offer taunting commentary on Prufrock’s thinning arms, legs, and hair, and it seems no coincidence that these voices appear after the women who speak of Michelangelo have come and gone twice in stanzas two and five. These feminine voices that speak of a great past artist may have evolved into the critical voices in stanza six, which supports the presence of Bergsonism as past leaps into the future. Thus, conjured voices connect with memory of the past and merge, forming the basic foundation for Prufrock’s inability to
act, to speak. Indeed, the future flows back into the past as stanzas seven through eleven see Prufrock contemplate past regrets. Time, like Bergson’s duration, fluctuates between past, present, and future within the stanzas, not just in between them, so we experience a temporal conflation that reflects Prufrock’s inability to exist successfully and fully in the present.

In a breath, in a moment of duration, we, as readers, hover in the past as Prufrock notes, “For I have known them all already, known them all—“ (48). Then, rapidly, these women of the past become women of the present who criticize his appearance as they fix Prufrock “in a formulated phrase,” only to transform into women of the future when he is “formulated, sprawling on a pin” (48, 55-6). In the space of merely four lines, we exist in past, present, and future with all women melding into one critical mass in the mind of Prufrock. As Smith points out, “by indulging in daydreams . . . he has allowed his ideal conception of woman (the sea girls at the end) to dominate his transactions with reality . . . and [it has] paralyzed his will and kept him from turning desire into action” (17). Inasmuch as the voices of the women find fault in Prufrock—his thin arms and legs—so does he note their faults. He has known all these women in the past and their “arms that are braceleted and white and bare” (62). Emulating the voices that criticize his future in stanza six, Prufrock echoes his disdain for these women by also enclosing his commentary on them in parentheses when he notices, “(But in the lamplight, downed with light brown hair!)” (63). Both his criticisms of the women and theirs of him end with exclamation points, which further illustrate the emphatic nature of these criticisms—yet what is a criticism but empty words lacking action? What better way to subvert
words than to enclose them with parenthesis? Their memory exists parenthetically, as a barely audible whisper.

Prufrock asks, “Is it perfume from a dress / That makes me so digress?” (64-5).
The memory of a smell allows Prufrock not only to “digress” but also to pass seamlessly from present to past. David Spurr explains, “the digression is from the kind of purposive action that could conceivably free him from the squirrel cage of his existence” (5). Yet, Prufrock remains bound by memory of the past, and therefore cannot be freed from the cage in which he remains trapped. In fact, his digression spirals further downward to greater depths of inaction and inarticulateness. Stanza twelve finds us back to personification and to the present time. Prufrock begs question after question, lamenting a stream of consciousness that reveals his inability to make decisions. “Shall I?” and “Should I?” form repetitions which confirm Prufrock’s condition of inaction and inarticulateness. Craig Raine observes, interestingly, “Part of Prufrock feels unworthy, an unworthiness he articulates only indirectly” (70-1). Not even Prufrock’s equivocations are decisive then, but merely tentative. The only answer Prufrock has for what should have been is the ultimate digression, the defining devolution for his existence, an image of synecdoche. He “should have been a pair of ragged claws / Scuttling across the floors of silent seas” (72-3). Not living actively in the present, Prufrock wishes to have lived in silence, moving sideways as a crab rather than forward towards a future of promise. Prufrock will not “squeeze the universe into a ball” because he does not dare. He has “seen the moment of [his] greatness flicker,” and, therefore, he cannot “force the moment to its crisis” (79, 84, 92).
In stanzas thirteen and fourteen, Prufrock repeats, “And would it have been worth
it, after all” five times. Has any of Prufrock’s life been worthwhile? It seems to be the
“overwhelming question” Prufrock cannot bear to have asked or to have answered in
stanza one. Piers Gray asserts that

No, it certainly would not have been worth it, would not have been worth
those pressing infinitives leading us toward the crucial moment when the
experience of hell, the assertion of one’s identity with Lazarus alive and
desperate to warn the living of what a living suffering death is really like,
is brushed aside. (66)

Lyndall Gordon, in *T. S. Eliot: An Imperfect Life*, draws upon the Bergson-Eliot
connection and forms her own conclusion in the sense that

Prufrock’s overwhelming need is to ask . . . a metaphysical one, suggested
by Bergson, about the point of a man’s accumulated experience.

“To live”, says Bergson, “is to grow old.” (“I grow old . . . I grow
old . . .,” Prufrock murmurs.) Life is a succession of psychological states,
memories, and roles, “a continual rolling up, like that of a thread on a ball,
for our past follows us, it swells incessantly with the present that it picks
up on its way . . .” (68)

But for Prufrock, words fail. Gray indicates that Prufrock has never been
articulate enough to be understood by the women of his past, by “one, settling a pillow or
throwing off a shawl” (110). Continuing this echo, the final stanzas spiral downward to
“the chambers of the sea” where mermaids ignore Prufrock, the one who should have
been a crab—not whole and complete, but merely its claws. As Spurr phrases it, Prufrock “flees in the other direction, downward and inward to a primitive world of silence where forms of knowledge and discourse simply to not pertain” (8).

In stanza eighteen, Prufrock utters a single, pitiful, and defining line: “I do not think that they will sing to me” (127). These “floors of silent seas” are the where the remainder of the poem takes place and where we see the final vision of Prufrock as powerless, in “a silent world of instinctual being” where he will continued to be ignored, misunderstood, and imprisoned in a self-created tragedy where memory keeps him hostage. These mermaids, women who have no legs for action on land—but at least tails for propelling themselves forward in water—have evolved from all the women throughout the past who do not understand Prufrock, and, thus, they will not sing to him. By the penultimate stanza, we see the “waves blown back” in time, and Prufrock devolves to the point of being unable to decide if he should “part my hair behind” or “dare to eat a peach,” and there is no further question of going anywhere (124). As Gray suggests, “time the creator becomes time the delayer: the more time there will be to contemplate action, the further from action, necessarily, one is to be found” (62). Even the most elemental decisions prove insurmountable for Prufrock by the poem’s conclusion. In the final line, “Till human voices wake us, and we drown,” the memory of the etherized sky and the man “sprawling on a pin” have evolved into the most final image of sorrow, inaction, and inarticulateness: death by water and the “crushing failure” to which Bergson asserts (133). And we, as readers, hear the chords of “Prufrock’s” song resonating and lingering in Limbo, a state that leads into the world of “The Hollow Men.”
Chapter 4

MOVING TOWARDS “THE STILL POINT” IN “THE HOLLOW MEN”

In the last line of both “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” and “Rhapsody on a Windy Night,” Eliot offers images of death, the final conclusion awaiting us all, as he gives us “Till human voices wake us, and we drown” and “The last twist of the knife” (33, 78). Prufrock has “seen the moment of my greatness flicker,” and he confesses, “I was afraid” (84, 86). The speaker in “Rhapsody” shows no visible fear, but he offers resignation in regards to the inevitable, the end. Both Eliot figures are men who failed to act and instead resign themselves to the realm of the inarticulate. In “The Hollow Men,” presented, according to scholar Everett A. Gillis, as “more of a musical suite, consisting of . . . recitatives and choruses spoken or chanted by the hollow-man leader . . . and the chorus of hollow men,” Eliot brings us past time, memory, and life, and into the place where “Prufrock” and “Rhapsody” leave off: Limbo. In “The Hollow Men,” we dwell for a moment in the logical ending place of men who lived lives of inaction and inarticulateness, like the speakers in “Prufrock” and “Rhapsody.” In essence, we have the natural progression and evolution of Eliot’s men of inaction. Grover Smith expounds that “in ‘The Hollow Men,’ since its drama mainly depends on a continuing voice, nothing like a plot is visible, and the images are simply disconnected,” which is nothing new for Eliot (102). Both “Prufrock” and “Rhapsody” typify Eliot’s similar approach of fragmented images, connected in and out of time by memory. Furthermore, like the men of inaction in previous poems, Smith goes on to say that
Despite the dramatic postures—the hollow men “Leaning together,” the “tree swinging,” the lips praying to “broken stone,” the groping shapes beside “the tumid river,” and the despondent shuffle round “the prickly pear”—there are no dramatically motivated actions . . . [and, unlike previous men] “The Hollow Men” are absent any illustrative memories to epitomize the sequence by which the speaker has sunk to his misery; there is not even the reasoning process of Prufrock. (103)

Lacking memory and reason, “The Hollow Men” represents the evolution of men of inaction and inarticulateness as illustrated in “Prufrock” and “Rhapsody”—and Eliot creates an added evolution in his representation of Bergsonian intuition and duration. By drawing on our memory of the eye imagery we encounter in “Rhapsody on a Windy Night” and in “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” Eliot connects with our consciousness by again using images of eyes that remain in a state of flux in “The Hollow Men.” Craig Raine notes that throughout the poem, the eyes are “metamorphosed, transfigured, disguised” (18). By referencing our historical and literary memory of the past in his carefully selected epigraphs, Eliot creates more melding of our memories as Eliot allows for our own consciousness to go back and forth in time between his poems, England’s historical past, and the literary canon, creating his own duration.

“The Hollow Men” ends on a repetitive note of desolate despair, reminiscent of Prufrock’s dilemma: “Would it have been worth while?” (91). Posed in variation and repetition in “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” this elemental Eliot question continues evolving in “The Hollow Men,” echoing a familiar theme: the consequences of
a life unlived. Harold Bloom indicates that the poem “addresses failures of human
courage and faith” (60). Indeed, as with Prufrock, “The Hollow Men” perpetuates Eliot’s
obsession with the memory of lost life, lost hope, and lost time. Though Prufrock
ineffectually attempts to convince himself “There will be time” (26), he is empty and out
of time to do anything about life’s missed opportunities because he never acts upon his
half-hearted desire “to go.” The hollow men have gone somewhere—only by default of
death. They have moved past life into an afterlife, out of time forever—and echo
Prufrock with their “Life is very long” (83), a symbolic, monostichic line, placed halfway
between stanzas in section five. As Bergson views it,

The interest of a living being lies in discovering in the present situation
that which resembles a former situation, and then in placing alongside of
that present situation what preceded and followed the previous one, in
order to profit by past experience (MM 323).

When one fails to discern former situations from the past that can direct the present to
profitable ends, then one fails to take action, to live life fully in the present, and to move
towards the future. “The Hollow Men” failed to use the past to shape their present in this
same manner as Bergson expresses it. Life is not, in fact, long enough to ignore the
lessons of the past and to defer action indefinitely. As Raine notes, “they have failed to
live. They are depleted, unvital” (17). Whether the hollow men are without substance
because of post-war effects, spiritual crisis, or indifference to life, matters little. These
hollow men made a personal choice in their life on earth, and now these lost souls are as
unable to move forward to a conclusion in the afterlife as they were in their earthly lives.
They are even unable to complete their own prayers in the penultimate stanza as Eliot uses *aposiopesis* to silence his hollow men. Harkening to Dante’s imagery, the hollow men’s souls are “gathered on this beach of the tumid river” and find themselves in limbo, halfway between heaven and hell (60).

Using *symploce* in the first two lines, Eliot hits the reader with a striking effect that creates an expectation. Indeed, this first trope leads to a progression of other paradoxes and oxymorons: “Paralysed force, gesture without motion” and

- Between the idea
- And the reality
- Between the motion
- And the act” (12, 72-5)

How can men be both hollow and stuffed? How can there be “Shape without form, shade without colour” (11,12)? The answer: when they have failed to be men of action in life. In the afterlife, these men with their “dried voices” are not even capable of uttering more than a “quiet and meaningless” whisper when all put together, their “dry cellar” not even approaching the hot flames of hell. They have not entered “death’s other Kingdom” like other “lost / Violent souls” but reside in the “twilight kingdom” (15-6, 38). How reminiscent are these men to J. Alfred Prufrock? And who are the “direct eyes” that have at least entered hell, not limbo? And, like Prufrock, they retain a consciousness of their failure to act.

In part one, the “direct eyes” symbolize men diametrically opposed to the hollow men. Here, Eliot shows “the lost, violent souls” who were at least decisive in their actions
and intentions while living their life on earth—even if they did not act for the good of mankind. These eyes of men who have entered “death’s other Kingdom,” transition into eyes that have not made their journey to hell for violent crimes but to limbo for having not dared to love, to laugh, to live. Craig Raine points out they are the men “without substance—without guts, without integrity—men who are spiritually gelded” (14). Helen Gardner draws the comparison of “the hollow men are like the wailing figures Dante saw first in the no-man’s-land before he crossed the river into Hell, those who ‘lived without blame and without praise’, whom Hell rejects” (111). Harold Bloom points out, “Eyes are an important and repeated image of spiritual insight” (61). These eyes that the speaker “dare not meet” in “death’s dream kingdom,” that state of being in between worlds, neither in heaven nor in hell, exist in spiritual limbo and lack clear vision. These same eyes become metaphorically likened to sunlight as it shines on a “broken column,” not a whole one. Vision here becomes “refracted and distorted” (61). The speaker professes a strong desire not to be one of the souls who remain in limbo—again, since he does not want to meet these eyes. Helen Gardner deems these eyes the “eyes of judgment. The look we are aware of makes us feel our own insufficiency, our hollowness; it is a look that finds us out” (109).

The speaker finds himself at the end of the world in a place where eyes reveal “broken stone” and the ineffectual, dried voices of those whose whispers are as futile in limbo as they were in life. The whispers transition into stanza four’s voices that “are/ In the wind’s singing” (25-6). Insignificant voices become as insubstantial and transparent as wind in Eliot’s purgatory. Equally important is the fact that these wind voices are
“More distant and more solemn/ Than a fading star” (27-8). In stanza six, the speaker begs, “Let me be no nearer” and offers that he may even “wear / Such deliberate disguises,” presumably to avoid being among these hollow men who are halfway between in the “twilight kingdom” because of they failed to act in life. Gardner also states, “Better be a scarecrow, wearing deliberate disguises, responding to any chance gust, aware at times of a visionary sunlight and sweetness, than face the agony of living our dreams” (112). And to dream is not to act.

In his second epigraph, Eliot offers someone who historically did act, and he draws our conscious minds back historically in time to Guy Fawkes and the famous “gunpowder plot” of 1605 to blow up the Houses of Parliament in England. By conspicuously sending us back in time, Eliot further sets the poem’s tone, establishing meaning. The fact that the “gunpowder plot” was linked with a religious movement also sheds interesting light on Eliot’s growing religious conflicts and concerns. “A penny for the Old Guy” echoes the voices of children who, on November 5th, used to celebrate Guy Fawkes Day in part by creating effigies stuffed with straw or newspaper and asking for pennies on the streets. The celebration also included bonfires and subsequent burnings of the “Guy,” bringing to mind the eternal flames of hell, which is the “other kingdom” that Eliot refers to in “The Hollow Men.” The stuffed effigies of “Guy” as suggested in the epigraph, lead straight into the paradoxical first section of “The Hollow Men,” their “headpiece filled with straw” being a direct reference to the Fawkes effigies (4). Eliot suggests that men who do make it to either heaven or hell are the men have dared to go, to do, to be—like Fawkes, not the hollow men. In his essay on “Baudelaire,” Eliot makes
the paradoxical and startling assertion that “So far as we are human, what we do must be either evil or good . . . and it is better, in a paradoxical way, to do evil than to do nothing” (236). Thus, the mere physical act of daring to participate in life in a decisive way becomes crucial to Eliot. To act is to live. To dare is to live. Just as Guy Fawkes dared to dress in disguise, harboring explosives, so does the narrator, one of the hollow men, make wishful proclamations in memory of a man who dared to act: “Let me also wear / Such deliberate disguises / Rat’s coat, crowskin, crossed staves” (31-3). Even if a man has performed acts of evil rather than good, he is at least in hell, a definite place, not in limbo. Even in death, Guy Fawkes dared to act, for instead of being hanged to the point of almost death and then being drawn and quartered as his punishment decreed, he looked with “direct eyes” and leaped from the scaffold, breaking his own neck in the fall. Did Fawkes’ world end with a bang or a whimper? In Eliot’s world, action—either good or evil—is life, leading to heaven or hell, and inaction is the whimper, the infinite and endless limbo for lost souls he labels as “The Hollow Men.” And the only hope lies in our ability to heed the warning, to learn from the past, and to act in life, just as Bergson suggests. Gardner reasons, “the hope of empty men is that the eyes may ’re-appear’, that our human experience may be made valid” (109). Eliot’s pursuit of creating such representations of the “valid” life finds a turning point in “The Hollow Men.”

In section three, Eliot draws our memory back to *The Waste Land* and its first section, “The Burial of the Dead,” and it revisits “the dead land” imagery by the eyes of this hollow speaker who describes the fate of those who have lived their lives filled with non-meaning, non-action, nonsense, non-being. Bloom further notes, “They languish in
inaction because they were neither good nor evil” (61). This place of limbo causes the narrator to concede to his failure to act in life as he reflects upon his existence in “the twilight kingdom.” Actions center on life deferred and incomplete—even the stone is broken. This in-between place is no place the narrator desires to be, and he dreads it, pleading, “Let me be no nearer / In death’s dream kingdom” (29,30). Their old essence on earth has become nothingness in the twilight kingdom. “Walking alone,” the speaker alludes to the missed chances of life where he might have dared, “Trembling with tenderness,” but now, “Lips that would kiss” cannot (49-50). All that remains are “Prayers to broken stone,” and not whole, but fragmented (51). The eyes see only “the twinkle of a fading star” (44). Yet this “fading star,” whose image appears twice in stanzas four and seven, does have a twinkle the second time we see it and reappears later in a different form to offer some glimmer of hope.

However, before we get a glimmer of hope, section four shows eyes that are “sightless,” that is, lacking their natural sense. These unseeing eyes are similar to hands that “groped together”—groping being an inept attempt at their natural sense: touch. To draw further comparison, there are mouths that “avoid speech.” Though hand and mouth are implied body parts in the stanza, Eliot highlights their lack of natural senses. Why should these hollow men in limbo be bothered in death with senses they did not dare use in life? The fading star image becomes the only glimmer of hope for these sightless hollow men. “The perpetual star” harkens to the guiding star seen above Bethlehem which guided the wise men to the new hope for humanity in the visage of a newborn sent
to act as a savior; thus, Eliot creates duration again as we navigate back in literary time to *The New Testament*. Grover Smith also notes that the hollow men

must invade the “other kingdom,” the “twilight kingdom” of actual death, which, after further purgatorial trial may vouchsafe them, through the eyes of pain and joy, a way upward, even to the “multifoliate rose” . . . to “the perpetual star,” a symbol of the Holy Virgin. (106)

Hence, the “perpetual star” becomes a potential guide to help lead some of these lost, hollow men on their movement through the chambers of death’s kingdom to their final meeting place.

In “The Hollow Men,” Eliot demonstrates movement from “Prufrock’s” “muttering retreats / Of restless nights” through “Rhapsody’s” “ . . . reaches of the street / Held in a lunar synthesis” and arrives at a destination—even if that place is “Between the motion / And the act” in a world of “The Hollow Men” in Limbo. As Gardner points out, “the poem ends ambiguously” (113). The final lines that mimic the chant of childhood may be read, according to Gardner,

as a contemptuous epitaph on a world that comes to an end without the splendour and grandeur of catastrophe, but with the simple whimper of defeat, the gasp of exhaustion; or as a riddling answer to the riddle of life, declaring in childish terms that the world ends with the cry of helpless infancy: the whimper of a little creature drawing its first breath. (113)

However ambiguous, contemptuous, defeatist, or puzzling, the end of “The Hollow Men” offers more than drowning, more than the “last twist of the knife.” The end, while it
offers no solutions, offers motivation to act so as to avoid the fate of the hollow men. It
gives us two symbols and holds them out for our review and possible acceptance: Eliot’s
“perpetual star” and “multifoliate rose,” each offering an intimation of hope. First,
examining the star—and not just any star, but “the perpetual star,” the one and only
star—the image is of light, perpetually guiding the voyager who might be in need across
waters, still or not. The second image, that of the “multifoliate rose,” capable of
regeneration in many ways, is a symbol seen in Eliot’s beginning and, finally, in his end.
Lyndall Gordon states, “Self transformation begins from what precedes it: a person feels
weak, helpless, and locked in fears: on one hand, fear of action; on the other, fear of
inaction” (TSEAIL 210). Eliot moves his hollow men in small steps of hope, and as
Gordon explains, they are “allowed to overhear an act of conversion” (TSEAIL 211).
Even if they remain wordless, they are at least closer to evolving toward a “still” point of
Bergsonian élan vital.

“The Hollow Men,” published the year before Eliot began publicly talking about
his interest in St. John of the Cross and five years before his Ash Wednesday, marks a
turning toward a new phase in his evolution. David Spurr also asserts, “Eliot’s obsession
with the themes of desiccation, evacuation, and inoperancy in ‘The Hollow Men’ comes
at a turning point in his artistic and intellectual development” (54). His conversion to
Anglicanism, as previously mentioned, was another idea to collect, a religious
indoctrination Eliot stored and utilized, more fragments of his continued evolution.
Interestingly enough, even the thematic choice of “penitence,” as explored in Ash
Wednesday, continues to show Eliot following his pursuit of temporal concerns. Gardner
notes, “penitence can be defined as a proper attitude to the past, a recognition of the present and a resolve for the future” (114). Based on Gardner’s definition, even Eliot’s journey toward and through his religious conversion contains elements of Bergson’s intuition and duration because memory of the past informs the present and, consequently, propels the hope for the future. Thus, Bergsonian memory continues to accompany Eliot on the way to the “still point” of *Four Quartets*. 
“THE STILL POINT” OF DURATION IN FOUR QUARTETS

In Four Quartets, T. S. Eliot’s mystical discourse of time and memory continues to echo the fragments of Bergson’s philosophy that existed in his early work—on a more developed and evolved plane as Eliot winds his way towards his poetic end, a “still” place of conciliation and acceptance. Rajnath points out that, Four Quartets is a philosophical poem dealing with the problem of time . . . to the intersection of the Eternal moment and the flux of time” (166). And though, as Rajnath further points, out, “it is difficult to say where precisely Eliot derives the concept of time from,” Philip Le Brun asserts, “Eliot’s concept of permanence is essentially organic” (154). While the term “organic” includes death, the natural conclusion of life, for Eliot it means movement towards evolution. Though present to a “diminishing” degree, Bergson remains with Eliot in his end. Eliot’s theory of the artist’s mind and memory aligns closely with Bergson’s idea that “If there be memory, that is, the survival of past images, these images must constantly mingle with our perception of the present, and may even take its place. For if they have survived it is with a view to utility” (Childs 479). As Childs also notes, “Pure perception is a state of consciousness in which the practical intellect disappears” (483). As previously noted, the duration of Pure Memory depends on how long we can push back the impulse towards the needs and desires of the body, that is, our Practical Memory. The essential problem lies in the fact that the desires and urges of Practical Memory are strong in their influence and impulses. In accordance with this difficulty,
Eliot begins the first of his *Four Quartets*, “Burnt Norton,” with the theme of time’s multiplicity wherein light remains associative of Pure Memory just as darkness beckons us back to Practical Memory.

In “Burnt Norton,” a fragment of Bergsonism emerges as Eliot evolves Bergson’s idea of time into his own compound by admitting the future into the equation when he announces,

> Time present and time past

> Are both perhaps present in time future,

> And time future contained in time past. (1-3)

Time past, present, and future melt into one another effortlessly, allowing Pure Memory to emerge as the doors of time dissolve and open “the door we never opened / Into the rose garden” (14,15). Effortlessly, Eliot reflects Bergson’s idea that “My memory is there, which conveys something of the past into the present” (CE, 4). Eliot’s memory of the rose garden rapidly fades into memory of the rose itself as the speaker contemplates “But to what purpose / Disturbing the dust on a bowl of rose-leaves” (17,18). The act of questioning the purpose of the dusty, dried rose petals, the rose’s literal memory, signifies the speaker’s struggle between Pure Memory and Practical Memory, which remains but a temporary displacement, a temporal disagreement of consciousness. It also establishes one of the primary themes in “Burnt Norton.” What value do we place on time that is other than the present? Nancy Gish asserts that the value lies in our internal contemplation of the external in and out of time when she states, “Moments of great feeling or intense awareness seem always, in the *Quartets*, already to have happened, and
the immediate experience, the primary experience articulated by the poem is pondering them” (93). Bergston echoes this idea when he contends that the theme of time in the *Quartets* “has two different aspects: the perceptual and the conceptual aspect, ie; time as immediate experience and time as the subject of abstraction” (43). In section I, after contemplating the practicality of the rose’s memory, Pure Memory reemerges in the rose garden upon the speaker’s entry into it. In the garden, another instance of Pure Memory haunts the speaker’s consciousness in the following lines:

To look down into the drained pool.

Dry the pool, dry concrete, brown edged,

And the pool was filled with water out of sunlight (36-38)

The moment of Pure Memory dissipates when “a cloud passed, and the pool was empty” (42). As in Eliot’s “Rhapsody on a Windy Night,” light plays a key role in allowing for the symbolic emergence and emphasis of Pure Memory, while the lack of light, the cloud that blocks the sunlight, symbolizes Practical Memory. Only in the joining of time past and time present could such a phenomenon occur, this moment of Pure Memory realized, and only in the mind of the speaker who is able to achieve Pure Memory does this dry pool fill with water and empty itself with the passing of a cloud. Nancy Gish observes, “this inexplicable moment is both timeless and dependent on time, for it rests on memory” (99). Much like the speaker in “Rhapsody on a Windy Night” who is able to break down the walls of memory and the years that divide those memories, the rose garden’s pool represents the essence of the Bergsonian mystical moment that
Practical Memory can so easily supplant. In section II of “Burnt Norton,” we see an explanatory resumption of the light element reemerge.

Here, Eliot has further developed Bergson’s idea of Pure Memory and created a new phrase for it in “the still point.” In this “still point,” we gain the ability to experience Pure Memory as we move toward

The inner freedom from the practical desire,

The release from action and suffering, release from the inner

And the outer compulsion, yet surrounded

By a grace of sense, a white light still and moving (77-81)

Eliot’s phrase “practical desire” overtly reflects the essence of Bergson’s Pure Memory as implicitly defined in this passage. If we can divorce ourselves from the practical needs of the body, its desires and compulsions within and without, we can move towards Bergsonian Pure Memory that encapsulates “white light still and moving” as it flows between present and past. In the same creative process he describes in “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” Eliot adds his own invention to Bergson’s ideas of consciousness. He questions the valuation of past and future as being less important than “Quick, now, here, always” as he moves towards a place of transcendence from the time and the body’s practical concerns (182). A. David Moody also observes this experience of transcendence when he states,

Then thought takes over and continues to the end in a sustained exploration of how time and the sensual body might be transcended . . . ,
positively affirming what is to be aspired to; then there is a return to the
inescapable complications of a consciousness that is in time and in the
sensual body. (144)

Just as the “sensual body” creates demands, so does the past contain memories that tug on
us in a demanding way, but what good are those memories if we allow them to
overshadow our consciousness and become more important than now? Staffan Bergston
refers to the experience in the rose garden as “release from the obsession with what might
have been . . . a manifestation of grace” (157). And as *Four Quartets* progress, Eliot does
move towards such “release” and “grace” from the power of the past that creates inaction
and inarticulateness in the consciousness of his early poetry. The past and the future
“allow but a little consciousness” as opposed to the greater consciousness of the present,
and Eliot offers up that “To be conscious is not to be in time;” that is, one needs to be in
the present in order to be truly conscious. The practicality of Eliot’s musings over the
value of time past and time future act in a limiting fashion similar to Bergson’s Practical
Memory, yet Eliot has taken the idea and made it his own. Before section II of “Burnt
Norton” is over, Eliot suggests a paradox of time, an abandonment of Practical Memory,
and a return to moments of Pure Memory, unique in experience when he says,

But only in time can the moment in the rose-garden,

The moment in the arbour where the rain beat,

The moment in the draughty church at smokefall

Be remembered; involved with past and future. (94-97)
Even as Eliot questions the worth of time past, he cannot dismiss it as wholly worthless, for its movement and memory are always there, waiting to be visited and revisited.

In “East Coker,” Eliot sets up an evolution of time in the first stanza with a rapidity of movement and memory, quickly giving way to a continuous struggle between Pure Memory and Practical Memory. “Houses live and die” and generations “of man and beast” rise and fall in a matter of thirteen lines (8,9). There is an abstract quality to Eliot’s timeline suggestive of a mathematical and scientific way of seeing these events. Then Pure Memory emerges and harkens us back to experience these events, not on a practical level, but on an earthy, emotional level. Eliot draws upon Laforguean light imagery from his early poems to illuminate time and to break down the divisions of past and present. “. . . Now the light falls / Across the open field” and shows us the road that will lead us to the past again “Where you lean against a bank while a van passes” (17).

This memory fades as the natural light fades, and Pure Memory dissolves into Practical Memory of “electric heat” and “sultry light,” both manmade and desire-driven (19, 20). Before the light fades away again, it reappears, in the third stanza, as moonlight “On a summer midnight” when a warning chant arises. However, unlike the moonlight that radiates Pure Memory in “Rhapsody on a Windy Night,” this moon is elusive and delusional in that it does not show us Pure Memory but Practical Memory. “If you do not come too close, if you do not come too close” stands as a mystical incantation that serves to quietly conjure memories of summer nights long past (25). Here, Eliot establishes temporal condition by illustrating the endless life cycle of bodily needs and desires that symbolize Practical Memory—with “Eating and drinking” leading to “Dung and death”
Of this death image, Staffan Bergston notes that “the meaning of time lies beyond the temporal dimension, and hence each end in time means either death or a new beginning” (211). Interestingly enough, the reader must observe distance in order to achieve the Pure Memory necessary to view this field in time past and to experience the rustic, ritualistic earth dance and union of man and woman. Section I in its entirety reflects the distinct struggle between Practical and Pure Memory before Eliot gives us resolution, consciously pointing to a new day:

Dawn points, and another day
Prepares for heat and silence. Out at sea the dawn wind
Wrinkles and slides. I am here
Or there, or elsewhere. (48-51)

Here, Eliot reconciles his own brand of time, with the “wrinkles and slides” representing the way time slides back and forth between now and then. The speaker admits to being here, there and everywhere, or rather, elsewhere—less impossibility and more probability of Bergsonism. Only through the conscious mind’s intuition could the possibility of Pure Memory be possible and enable the speaker to be in multiple places at varying times.

In section V, more conspicuous fragments of Bergsonism occur when, reminiscent of “Rhapsody on a Windy Night,” Eliot brings back the images of light to illuminate Pure Memory. The natural “starlight” seems evocative of the “moonlight” in “Rhapsody” as the man-made “lamplight” substitutes for that poem’s “streetlamp.” Either way, light is symbolic in that it allows for Practical Memory to dissolve and Pure Memory to advance. Eliot makes note that the “dead and the living” form a “pattern more
complicated” in our worlds “as we grow older” (201-03). And then we see not just one moment or memory in time

But a lifetime burning in every moment
And not the lifetime of one man only
But of old stones that cannot be deciphered.
There is a time for the evening under the starlight,
A time for the evening under the lamplight
(The evening with the photograph album). (205-10)
Bergson reverberates in this passage. Helen Gardner equally reflects Bergson’s theory of the past always “clawing its way into our present” when she asserts that “every moment is a new moment, and every end a beginning—that the past is alive in the present” (169). Interestingly, Gardner fails to credit Bergson for this idea, which suggests further how deeply ingrained his philosophy lies waiting within our shared consciousness. In these lines, the speaker of Eliot’s poem has achieved the universality and synchronicity of Bergsonian Pure Memory, connecting even with the dead whose names on tombstones appear so faded as to offer no memory but to bear witness that they were here. The light burns to illuminate the memory of many—even the photo album, a fragile, impermanent memory in itself.

As Eliot transitions from “East Coker” to “The Dry Salvages,” we see the permanence of the ocean’s memory shift to the ever-changing river and another fragment of Bergson’s enduring influence when we encounter another moment of Pure Memory attached to light as
His rhythm was present in the nursery bedroom,
In the rank ailanthus of the April dooryard,
In the smell of grapes on the autumn table,
And the evening circle in the winter gaslight. (12-15)

This Pure Memory hails from Eliot’s childhood in St. Louis, close to the banks of the Mississippi, and Eliot personifies the river as a god, omniscient and timeless in form—“almost forgotten” but “waiting, watching and waiting” for the opportunity to rise and make its presence known (6, 10, 11). The river has memory. The river is both past and present simultaneously and represents an Eliot-evolved form of Pure Memory. Gardner concurs that “The Dry Salvages” is “about the past as it is known in the present, in our consciousness of it through memory” (170). Later, in section II, past and present become synonymous as “the river with its cargo of dead negroes, cows, and chicken coops / The bitter apple and the bite in the apple” flow down a stream of timelessness (124-26). Only in a moment of Pure Memory could such a conglomerate cargo of past and present exist while quickly colliding with Practical Memory as Eliot again shows us the constant struggle between our two types of memory. Of this movement of water linked to our consciousness in time, David Spurr, too, makes an unconscious statement that reflects Bergson’s condition of élan vital when he states that “the forces within us flow out and connect us to the universe” (95). Only in a moment of achieved intuition and duration is such Pure Memory and élan vital possible.

The first stanza of “Little Gidding” continues to exemplify Pure Memory as Eliot has merged seasons into a new type of duality and awareness that symbolizes death and
new life. The eternal condition becomes a seasonal experience, coexisting in the same manner that memories of past and present can exist simultaneously:

. . . This is the spring time

But not in time’s covenant. Now the hedgerow

Is blanched for an hour with transitory blossom of snow . . . (13-16)

The covenant of time is the promise of time and may be further extended to include the trinity of time—that of past, present, and future. Eliot has taken Bergsonian Pure Memory to a new evolution again because he looks not just at his own personal memory but that of the universal, timeless earth and its seasonal memory.

Section II of “Little Gidding” contains further evidence of Eliot’s collective mind as it develops a Bergson-like melding of time and memory. This time Eliot has compounded several memories of people from his past to create a moment of Pure Memory that dissolves into Practical Memory. Time past and time present merge as

I caught the sudden look of some dead master

Whom I had known, forgotten, half-recalled

Both one and many; in the brown baked features

The eyes of a familiar compound ghost

Both intimate and unidentifiable. (95-99)

This composite “ghost” represents memory more than apparition, and, true to Eliot’s description of the creative process, he has again collected the particles of multiple personas to whom his art has been indebted. In this memory man, we may assume, lies a host of literary and philosophical influences to walk with the speaker in the present—
from Dante to Bergson, who, as earlier noted, died in 1941, as Eliot wrote “Little Gidding.” Past and present memories have synthesized into Pure Memory as the speaker and “dead master” converse with an “ease” that can only come from familiarity and the peaceful resolution that Eliot is working towards in “Little Gidding”:

And he: ‘I am not eager to rehearse
My thoughts and theory which you have forgotten.
These things have served their purpose: let them be.’ (114-16)

Though this memory man suggests the speaker leave the past alone, the principles of Bergsonism and Eliot’s own words negate this as a viable possibility because the past, present, and future are inevitably intertwined.

“Little Gidding” reflects more Bergsonism when Eliot connects previous images from *Four Quartets* to create Pure Memory. In doing so, Eliot allows our conscious to flow from the present memory of reading “Little Gidding” to the past memory of reading other poems in *Four Quartets*. In section I, Eliot utilizes anaphora reminiscent of “East Coker” to create a connective memory link. When we read the passages in “Little Gidding” that begin “If you came this way,” Eliot engages our ability to experience Pure Memory when we, as readers, double back in time past to the mystical warning in “East Coker,” “If you do not come too close, if you do not come too close” (25). This technique becomes even more conspicuous as Eliot approaches the end of *Four Quartets* in section V. When fragments from “Burnt Norton,” “East Coker,” and “The Dry Salvages” reappear, their particles form a new compound yet remain identifiably connected to Eliot’s past *Quartets*. As a poetic devise for achieving closure and for
unifying *Four Quartets*, this use of Pure Memory is especially effective because it allows
the reader to be in the moment of all four poems in one moment:

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.
Through the unknown, remembered gate
When the last of earth left to discover
Is that which was the beginning;
At the source of the longest river
The voice of the hidden waterfall
And the children in the apple-tree
Not known, because not looked for
But heard, half-heard in the stillness
Between two waves of the sea.
Quick now, here, now always—(245-57)

In the beginning of this final stanza to Eliot’s “Little Gidding,” we see the transition from
Practical Memory, in the form of the practical intellect’s desire to push toward
exploration, to that of Pure Memory’s “stillness” and the waves of the sea mimicking
how time folds in on itself and past becomes present. And in this moment of “stillness,”
we have, as C. A. Bodelsen affirms, “the mystical experience, with which all the Quartets
deal . . . a release from the time-bondage of human nature, and as taking place in some
sphere outside human time: while the experience lasts, time has momentarily come to a stop” (35). And in that stopping point, we experience a connection to all *Four Quartets* simultaneously as we return to the gate of the rose garden, our beginning and end, the river god, the pool, the hidden children, and the still point. Grover Smith aptly points this out when he states that we have arrived at “the eternal moment of the present suspended between past and future. By the discipline of action, of patience, of renunciation” (296). In the end of *Four Quartets*, all converge in an Eliot-creation: his version of Bergsonian Pure Memory, one that reflects an evolution from his early forays into the world of inaction and inarticulateness—a moment in time of acceptance and conciliation.
CONCLUSION

Finding fragments and echoes of Bergsonism in Eliot’s beginning and end is one thing. Finding the value in finding it is quite another. What do fragments of Bergson’s philosophy mean for the worth or meaning of Eliot’s poetry? These fragments support Eliot’s own assertions about the tradition of talent and of poetry.

In his 1951 lecture, “Poetry and Drama,” Eliot makes the observation that “it is ultimately the function of art, in imposing a credible order upon ordinary reality, and thereby eliciting some perception of an order in reality, to bring us to a condition of serenity, stillness, and reconciliation; and then leave us, as Virgil left Dante, to proceed toward a region where that guide can avail us no farther” (SP 146). Eliot has done exactly what he said an artist does. He has collected the parts of his world, the ordinary and the extraordinary, and given them order, representing his images in a way that guides us to our own conclusions and realizations. In effect, he has taken past and present memories and given them up to us, the future. For those of us who read his poetry, he has become like Virgil, and he has left us to make sense of his word and his world—and we must choose either to dismiss them or to make them part of our world.

In his early work, Eliot attempted to make meaning of consciousness and temporal boundaries, exploring the duality of the self in the modern world—with all its complexities. Nancy Gish relates that “a certain kind of experience unites these diverse poems, a division of self and world in which the self remains disconnected from and troubled by life, uneasily impelled toward it yet able only to observe it” (2). In *Four Quartets*, Eliot made peace and reconciliation with his life in and out of poetry, and,
consciously or unconsciously, he found past, present, and future capable of Pure
Memory. Inasmuch as his poetry survives time and the continual test of time, Eliot has,
in effect, achieved his own type of immortality that mimics what Eliot’s mother
suggested excited some followers of Bergson as “an intimation of immortality” (L 130).

Using Eliot’s own words as blueprint for his poetic mind, we can trace the
intricate patterns of his evolution, which flowed as a natural progression. In defense of
this pattern of evolution, Piers Gray states, “what LaForgue had offered, Bergson
naturally developed from” (38). Equally true in support of Eliot’s evolution, comes an
even earlier influence in the form of his mother. Lyndall Gordon notes of Eliot’s mother,
“Charlotte mapped out the states of being between loss and recovery of grace, a map her
son redrew in his poetry with vivid, ingenious twentieth-century touches” like his
integration of philosophies like Bergson’s (EEY 6). However, Gordon further states that
Charlotte Eliot “gave him a blueprint he could only partially follow” (EEY 44).

We can conclude that in his own way, which includes integrated fragments of
Bergson’s philosophy, Eliot developed a poetic voice of action and articulateness—quite
different and evolved from his early voices: the indecisive Prufrockian voice of inaction
and inarticulateness and the silent Rhapsodian speaker who moves in and out of time and
memory with but a semblance of action. In Eliot’s beginning, we have men confounded
and ultimately constrained by practical memory and time, affecting little meaning. In
Eliot’s end, *Four Quartets*, he has arrived at a destination of decided action with, as
David Spurr notes, “Tennysonian courage” (104), calling upon a version of Bergsonian
memory.
In his end, Eliot actively and boldly proclaims that, “We shall not cease from exploration.” By evoking the Victorian past, Eliot actualizes his own philosophy that we are none of us free from the inherent debt we owe to those who have come before us. In Eliot’s own words as stated in “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” “No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists” (SP, 38). By the time of *Four Quartets*, Eliot is definitely not effacing towards the past in sorrow, thus creating an action of debilitating consequences. Rather, Eliot refers to images of river, waterfall, children in the apple tree, sea, fire, and rose—all emerging as active, all converging into a moment of duration and intuition wherein the life force, the *élan vital*, finds memory both still and moving, in accord and at one with the universe. Eliot redeems time and consciousness, in his end, and harkens back to his Bergsonian beginning, at peace, at last. Just as Helen Gardner states, “He has never forced his poetic voice . . . . His development has been a growth in the understanding of his earlier experience, not a rejection of it” (78).

In “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” Eliot reveals the inner-workings of the writer’s mind, which operates as Bergson suggests when he says that life “flows out of previous forms, while adding to them something new” (CE 393). There is no failure of admission on Eliot’s part, simply the progressive flow of creation Bergson describes. There is not even a failure to deny the value of past and present, which is conceptually Bergsonian in nature. Indeed, we cannot help but be influenced by all that has come
before us. Whether in reference to Bergson, Dante, or any philosophical or poetic voice that inspired or influenced him, Eliot admits a debt owed to those who came before him.

If Eliot’s words from “Tradition and the Individual Talent” hold true, then they serve as support for Bergsonism being an altered and perhaps “diminishing quality” but nonetheless a presence waiting to “unite” and emerge when poetic conditions are conducive. Bergson’s philosophy of time and memory were stored up as part of Eliot’s collection of “numberless feelings, phrases, images” and available to emerge and combine into “a new compound,” a new poetic voice. Thus, as Eliot lays out the workings of the poetic mind for us, on an unconscious level, fragments of ideas, images, memories, and even Bergsonism lie waiting if we look for them.

As Eliot admitted, “No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast, and comparison, among the dead” (SP 38). Finding Bergson’s influence in Eliot’s poetry, from “Rhapsody on a Windy Night” to *Four Quartets*, is not only possible but inevitable because Eliot’s present was always in relationship to his past, just as those of us who are “Quick, now, here, always” have become Eliot’s future. “For us, there is only the trying” to piece together the fragments of Bergson or any number of influences that make Eliot’s poetry influential to our past, present, and future.
WORKS CITED


