

Cambridge University Press  
 0521841232 - T. S. Eliot and the Art of Collaboration  
 Richard Badenhause  
 Excerpt  
[More information](#)

## INTRODUCTION

*Reaching the stillness of music*

This book identifies collaboration as a life-long operating procedure in T. S. Eliot's theory and practice, and it also illustrates the various ways he resisted that same assistance. Eliot's reflections upon this complicated process can be teased out of one of his poetic meditations written in 1935, the same year he visited the gardens of Burnt Norton with Emily Hale. Although "Burnt Norton" now appears as the first of Eliot's *Four Quartets*, the poem originally stood very much on its own. It turned up as the concluding piece in *Collected Poems 1909–1935* and only began to be seen by its author as the opening of a series during the war, when he started composing additional quartets. Consequently, "Burnt Norton" should not necessarily be read as a forward-looking poem that launches themes, images, ideas, and emotions that eventually surface in those subsequent quartets. Instead, it can be understood more accurately as a summary of Eliot's past experiences and the effects of those memories upon the present-day speaker. After offering a fairly dense, philosophical discussion of time, the speaker of "Burnt Norton" declares:

Footfalls echo in the memory  
 Down the passage which we did not take  
 Towards the door we never opened  
 Into the rose-garden. My words echo  
 Thus, in your mind.

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

Other echoes  
 Inhabit the garden. Shall we follow?  
 Quick, said the bird, find them, find them,  
 Round the corner. Through the first gate,  
 Into our first world, shall we follow  
 The deception of the thrush? Into our first world.  
 There they were, dignified, invisible,

Moving without pressure, over the dead leaves,  
 In the autumn heat, through the vibrant air,  
 And the bird called, in response to  
 The unheard music hidden in the shrubbery,  
 And the unseen eyebeam crossed, for the roses  
 Had the look of flowers that are looked at.  
 There they were as our guests, accepted and accepting.<sup>1</sup>

This passage describes a place in which memories of the past are present but maddeningly inaccessible due to the incessant shifting of the speaker's perspective. Eliot imparts the frustration of that condition by seeming to orient readers in a specific place but then spinning them around at a dizzying pace. While the garden is filled with passages, doors, gates, and corners, it is a landscape that can never be mapped. We are given the illusion of a place in time, only to find that we share the speaker's inability to fix that locale in the present. Eliot furthers the confusion through an intricate syntax that drives us forward through complex sentences before we really have time to catch our breath at the pauses created by commas, periods, and line-breaks.

As he does in "Prufrock," then, Eliot invites the reader to participate in the dilemma of his speaker. But unlike that early poem, where the speaker immediately announces himself in the first person singular, the speaker in "Burnt Norton" is more comfortable hiding in anonymous pairs or groups. He sticks his head out from behind a bush only momentarily, when he announces: "I do not know." He materializes alone a second time in the poem to express a similar frustration over his inability to locate place and time. Since this is clearly an individual in search of some stabilizing guidance, I would like to read this passage as an extended metaphor that depicts the complicated process of imaginative creation and positions the assistance Eliot sought and often found in collaboration as a solution to the problems raised by that activity. In fact, the passage demonstrates many of the central concerns Eliot faced when writing his poetry, that "intolerable wrestle" with language. They include questions about how to access memory; how to fix those moments in a phrase; how to give order to the fragments that emerge from that fixing; how language is received; and how collaborators can assist in bringing the process to a successful close.

When Eliot writes that "My words echo / Thus, in your mind," he forces our attention back to the previous sentence through the confusing adverb that implies we have just received an explanation of how it is that the words of the speaker can echo in the mind of another, whether he be an unidentified companion, a version of the speaker, or the reader. But the

*Reaching the stillness of music*

3

preceding sentence does not really head toward that elucidation. In fact, it complicates the situation by failing to identify whose specific memory is being targeted in this passage and refusing to clarify the relationship between the individuals that make up the “we.” This passage can be read as an account of the collective memory Eliot and Hale shared of their visit to the gardens of Burnt Norton and of intimate time spent together during the previous two years. The door not opened was an offer of marriage to Hale, who had been confident enough about Eliot’s intentions that she took a year’s leave of absence from her teaching post at Scripps’s College with no assurance of renewed employment when she returned. Though separated from his first wife at the time, Eliot never did follow through with a commitment to Hale and chose instead to continue in that disastrous marriage until Vivien Eliot’s death in 1947. The rose, a symbol of love, remained frustratingly and perpetually out of reach. Another possibility is that the speaker is addressing former versions of himself. The dominant emotion of the passage is regret of a very personal nature. Thus the reader is not implicated in the second and third lines – “we did not take . . . we never opened” – but only in the fifth line: “in your mind.” And the possessive pronoun of that fifth line still accommodates the versions of the speaker’s previous selves: he is now addressing both the reader and those earlier identities.

But these important transitional lines also operate on another level. The phrase at line fourteen of the poem, “Into the rose-garden,” concludes a set piece written originally for the Second Priest in *Murder in the Cathedral*. As often happened with Eliot’s poetry, this passage was cast aside from an earlier effort and became a foundation for “Burnt Norton.” Thus the speaker’s referencing of “my words” points very specifically to Eliot’s poetry written in a different time and place, and introduces the problem of language as a central theme that will continue to be a focal point for later quartets. This topic is especially apropos at a time when Eliot thought that he was unable to write non-dramatic poetry – what he called “real poetry” – any longer, for it was a period, he confessed, when he thought that “pure unapplied poetry was in the past,” until the discarded fragments that had “stayed in [his] mind” eventually helped initiate the shaping of a new poem.<sup>2</sup> What had seemed like a dead end in *Murder in the Cathedral* suddenly provided a path into “Burnt Norton.”

At this point in the poem, we have Eliot literally pausing to reflect upon earlier work. He constructs a spectral version of a former authorial self who addresses a present writer faced with the problem of beginning a poem: “I give you these words written previously and they are now echoing in

your mind.” The curious break that occurs at the half-line after “mind” signals a response from a different speaker. In this case, the auditor is the present self, who says: “But to what purpose / Disturbing the dust on a bowl of rose-leaves / I do not know.” The lack of punctuation indicates that these are the stray thoughts of a mind deep in reflection. The fragmentary phrases unfold as the writer attempts to make sense of the echoes before him. What is the purpose, asks the writer, of considering such echoic images? Is it worth investigating the experiences of an earlier occasion that have been preserved in memory as a keepsake, that of rose-leaves taken from the garden and left undisturbed for a long time? Why stir up the protective blanket of dust that coated these images? Why risk the pain that will inevitably accompany the task of accessing these memories of a road not taken? The speaker concludes that he does not truly know the answers to these questions.

These are the predicaments that haunted Eliot whenever he started a poem. The enormous uncertainty he experienced during such occasions is well-documented in Eliot’s own accounts of the creative process, which highlight the pain and torment that accompanied imaginative activity. So we have a poet in “Burnt Norton” at the cusp of memory, wondering whether he should dive into the recesses of an imagination that will amplify that memory. He realizes other echoes are potentially available, but is not sure if it is worth following them. At this point of indecision, another presence arrives and encourages the author: “Quick, said the bird, find them, find them, / Round the corner.” The author ponders if he should follow the urging of the thrush, for that path leads “[i]nto our first world,” into the place of memory. We get the answer right away, when he decides to acknowledge “our first world. / There they were.” The author has chosen to pursue that which lies around the corner and he immediately starts to describe that world as he enters into it. This is a key moment in “Burnt Norton,” for it dramatizes the authorial vacillation that so often plagued Eliot as well as the solution on which he depended: the presence of another to help encourage and even guide creative output. The mental action that delivers the speaker into the first world is initiated only after the encounter with the companion. Without the encouragement of the bird, the speaker probably chooses not to act, chooses not to disturb the dust of memory, chooses the path of Prufrockian inaction.

The entry into the world of memory, however, is not immediate. The language of “Burnt Norton” attempts to demonstrate that point by offering a blurred scene that comes into focus in the present only as we retreat further into the landscape of the past: “There they were, dignified, invisible, /

Moving without pressure, over the dead leaves, / In the autumn heat, through the vibrant air" (*CPP* 311). The speaker offers a pronoun, "they," for which we have no reference and then begins to characterize "their" demeanor, movement, and location. This is exactly how memory functions, as we move from present to past as constructed in our existing minds. We are accessing a fiction *as* we are writing it, which throws into disarray the devices we associate with conventional narrative: logic, identification of character, consistency in time and place. As the speaker of "Burnt Norton" composes his fiction, his audience interrupts once again: "And the bird called, in response to / The unheard music hidden in the shrubbery." This revised Keatsian moment celebrates the "unheard music" that results from imaginative creation and signals the speaker that he is on a proper course in his quest to write his memory. In "Ode on a Grecian Urn," the speaker gives voice to the silent music depicted on the urn; here, Eliot is redeploying and refining this imaginative process. The "hidden" music is neither "unheard" nor inaccessible to the bird, since it responds to that noise. Rather, that music – the echoes buried further in the shrubbery of memory – is still unattainable by the speaker at this point. But it exists in the present and is capable of being detected through memory; and the shift in the passage from the initial static "bowl of rose-leaves" to vibrant "roses" indicates clearly that we have entered the realm of recollection. Yet the speaker, like a frustrated Alice wandering through the confusing landscape of her imagination, has yet to open the door to that moment.

The bird also responds to another image as yet inaccessible to the speaker: "the unseen eyebeam crossed." This allusion to Donne's "The Extasie," in which lovers are joined in a series of metaphors demonstrating perfect union, establishes idealized love as a remembered condition the speaker hopes to achieve. Currently, he can only guess at its existence, because the roses in the garden "[h]ad the look of flowers that are looked at." The speaker cannot shift the perspective to the lovers in the foreground of memory, for only the flowers are currently in focus. Then, he comments on this place in time: "There they were as our guests, accepted and accepting." Although the ambiguous "they" returns, surely it refers here to memories accepted by the speaker and memories that accept the presence of the speaker into their past. Then why "our"? Are they the guests of Eliot and Hale? Guests of two versions of Eliot? Or of Eliot and his companion, in this case a bird?

While the answer is that all these possibilities are concurrently present, I would like to emphasize the final one. Eliot tended to view the writing process as one that could succeed only through the presence of a

companion, since he found the poetic material generated by his imagination unwieldy and, at times, overwhelming. He believed that the assistance of a collaborator could help fix experience in some definite form and bring the creative act to a close. When the final movement of “Burnt Norton” begins with the image of words and music moving in time, the speaker is looking outside himself for an agent that will help stabilize memory. He surmises that “Only by the form, the pattern, / Can words or music reach / The stillness,” and he equates this condition to “a Chinese jar still / Mov[ing] perpetually in its stillness” (*CPP* 175). According to “Burnt Norton,” the writing process is a dangerous one in which words break under the pressure of creativity, language fails to remain still, and the voices of hostile auditors shriek, scold, mock, or, worst of all, ignore. The transcendent result occurs as the poem moves to its conclusion: “Sudden in a shaft of sunlight / Even while the dust moves / There rises the hidden laughter.” Following the emergence of sound, its physical source comes into focus: “children in the foliage / Quick now, here, now, always” (176). Here, the speaker has finally peeled away the veil that obscures a clear view into memory and the light of that past pours into his consciousness. He realizes that in disturbing the dust on the bowl of rose-leaves he has made the proper choice, for he has been rewarded with epiphanic images of the first world. The redemptive laughter of the children – the formerly unheard music – materializes from behind the shrubbery and is fully available to the speaker at last. It is the culmination of the quest begun at the start of the poem, when the speaker wonders whether or not it is worth the risk of following these echoes. At this moment of fulfillment, the bird returns. At one with the speaker, to the point that it is not even identified, the bird repeats its earlier encouragement to the speaker–author: “Quick.” Hurry up and capture this moment, it urges. The memory you have experienced in the present time and place must be written down, it tells the speaker. Only then will you, I, and others be able to recover this scene “always” through the printed word. Only then will time present be time future.

The problem with this highly stylized and personal version of artistic collaboration is that it remained very much an unattainable ideal for Eliot. Written after Eliot had been publishing poetry for twenty years, poetry that often reflected the help of others, the extended metaphor in “Burnt Norton” draws up a vision of creation in which a receptive speaker–poet depends on the assistance of sympathetic companions to help access memory, initiate creation, provide stability, and facilitate a poem’s completion. Yet the poem actually distorts, or even recasts, the way in which

Eliot's collaborative arrangements operated in practice. In an assortment of prose essays, Eliot attempts a similar move, refashioning collaboration into a simple, clean, mutually beneficial cooperation between equals that has as its goal the generation of a lasting art. The realities of Eliot's collaborative alliances were much more complicated, messy, and varied, depending on the personalities involved. Despite the fact that Eliot enjoyed using his prose to wax poetic about the many advantages of productive unions among peers, his own collaborations tended to develop along hierarchical lines. While there is an apt musical metaphor that captures the nature of Eliot's collaboration, it is not the one he proposes in "Burnt Norton." Rather, a more appropriate model would be that of a conductor controlling a highly talented orchestra made up of fellow artists with a variety of different skills and a combustible set of neuroses, professional biases, and complicated personal attachments. To make matters more difficult, all of the collaborators are focused on the man in charge, who is himself unusually tentative about fully embracing positions of authority, so much so that many of the prose documents erect models of collaboration that highlight the eliding of authority as one of their primary characteristics. Accordingly, Eliot's attitudes towards collaboration typically wavered between an enthusiastic attraction to fanciful, idealized constructions of the practice – in which the dominant features are a passive artist who struggles to take responsibility for artistic creation and a cooperative collaborator who is able to offer assertive assistance – and a much more ambivalent posture, where Eliot is loath to acknowledge publicly the assistance of others, even though privately there seems an almost pathological dependence on collaborators.

While this study locates collaboration as a central preoccupation of T. S. Eliot's critical and creative programs, it also demonstrates how difficult it was for the poet to digest the assistance of others on his work. Eliot sought to suppress the personal in his own work, a move collaboration helped enact through the introduction of alternative voices. Yet he also possessed a deep attraction to authority, which necessitated the aggressive exercising of the individual will. My reading shows that collaboration informed the writer's approach to a wide range of subjects, including audience, tradition, influence, translation, modernism, and the creative process, among others, and that while collaboration became his primary compositional strategy from the early poetry through his final play, Eliot also struggled to arrive at a coherent, comfortable accounting of how that collaboration ultimately took place. I am defining "collaboration" in the broadest possible manner, so as to explore its many different resonances in Eliot's work. I employ the



word in its most literal sense – along the lines of Jack Stillinger’s key discussion of “situations where someone other than the nominal author is essentially and inextricably a part of the authorship”<sup>3</sup> – in examining Eliot texts that partly owe their existence to collaborators such as Ezra Pound, Vivien Eliot, E. Martin Browne, Frank Morley, John Hayward, Geoffrey Faber, Herbert Read, Sydney Schiff, and Mary Hutchinson, among others. But I have also expanded the scope of what it means to collaborate (partly because the poet himself followed this route) so that it encompasses Eliot’s collaboration with his readers, dramatic audiences, and even past writers, which is a stance that extends beyond even M. Thomas Inge’s recent fairly broad definition: “Anytime another hand enters into an effort, a kind of collaboration occurs.”<sup>4</sup> Eliot himself, for example, repeatedly configured literary influence as collaboration, most famously in “Tradition and the Individual Talent.” There Eliot argues that influence does not operate only in one direction but that a reciprocity exists between dead writer and practicing artist, a relationship that readjusts past and present texts and the entire line of literary tradition. He sought to establish a union with his audience as a theoretical ideal in early essays like “Marie Lloyd” and then endeavored to put that theory into practice in his poetry, especially after he started to write for the stage, though as I have just noted, the enactment of these idealized versions of collaboration was much less tidy than Eliot’s prose accounts suggest. Similarly, I have situated allusion in Eliot’s work within this collaborative framework, and treat the many allusive echoes in the poetry as part of a larger conversational alliance Eliot attempted to set up with past collaborators. As in the example from “Burnt Norton,” submission to an external authority (in this case previous texts and their multiple voices) helped Eliot manage the creative process and give shape to imagined and remembered material. In fact, Eliot’s persistent search for external frameworks – from the use of epigraphs to position the reception of poems, to notes that try to contextualize poetry in various symbolic and mythic frameworks, to the use of dramatic monologues that filter personal experience through the mask of a fictionalized speaker – has at its core a need to collaborate with other agents in the belief that they can provide the path to the still moment. While this relaxed definition of collaboration accommodates a host of extratextual presences as collaborators, charting a pattern of such associations will show Eliot’s consistent interest in and dependence on collaborative solutions to writing problems in all of his critical and creative work.

Eliot’s critical prose suggests he was extremely attuned to collaboration as a creative procedure in the work of others: the word “collaboration”



appears in over twenty different essays, with about half of those references to be found in his discussion of Renaissance dramatists. Even more prevalent in Eliot's criticism is a vocabulary that incessantly evokes, suggests, or depends on collaborative activity, for that lexicon is distinguished by repeated uses of words like "amalgamate," "assimilate," "balance," "collective," "collocation," "combination," "composite," "compound," "converge," "cooperate," "doubleness," "harmonize," "mixture," "reciprocal," "reconciliation," "syncretism," "synthesis," and "union." Eliot's favorite expression marking this process is "fusion," which surfaces remarkably in over thirty separate essays. This suggests Eliot was particularly preoccupied with the notion of exploring the productive unification of distinct elements and he tended to view the creative process in terms that located some type of collaboration as its fundamental, guiding principle. Whether he is discussing the make-up of the poet's mind in terms of a chemical analogy in which two gases mix in a productive combination or examining the rejuvenating union of a translator's mind with that of the original artist, Eliot assumes that distinct entities must come together for creation to occur.

Because Eliot was baptized into the modernist movement by Pound, who was instrumental in initiating various collective literary enterprises, Eliot saw early on the advantages of collaboration both in the production and marketing of literary works. The literary scene of the 1910s, into which Eliot plunged as an unproven writer, privileged the group over the individual. Works were distributed via collective vehicles like the anthology and the little magazine, or assigned to larger movements that outlined their artistic programs in strongly worded manifestos. But Pound and Eliot differed in their approach to such alliances. While Pound favored very public partnerships, Eliot adopted more private arrangements: a small, collaborative circle with himself at the middle. While his prose criticism often lauded the many benefits of overt collaboration, Eliot preferred to orchestrate from behind closed doors, where he could exert much more control and also exit collaborative relationships much more quietly and discreetly, especially when they no longer served his purposes. This practice gave him the security to set the tenor of the critical debate and even to engage its members in readings of his work-in-progress, as long as those auditors had already been sanctioned by Eliot as qualified readers according to his strict criteria. A letter of 15 April 1915 from Eliot to Pound – a response to Pound's request that Eliot join one of his collective schemes – exhibits these dual impulses. Eliot replies cautiously, turning over the implications in his mind: "How much is implied by the word Alliance? Is the alliance anything more than for the purposes of the manifesto? Of course I don't

know the work of any of these men myself, but that doesn't matter. But I should like to know in what way this is to be promulgated and how followed up."<sup>5</sup> That circumspection informed one of Eliot's standard literary rules, which was never to contribute to the first issue of a new journal. It made better sense, he thought, to pause in order to see with what kind of group he would be associated.<sup>6</sup> Eliot did not seek such public literary collaborations until his editing of *The Criterion*, where he was firmly in charge. Importantly, Eliot waited until 1922 (when his critical and artistic authority was somewhat more assured), before he decided to stand at the forefront of a project that sought to establish a collaborative conversation among the most influential writers and thinkers in Europe.

Eliot recognized that alliances afforded by the anthology best served the purposes and desires of younger poets, for the genre gave them a better chance of getting into print, positioned them in such a way so as to allow reviewers to write about them collectively, and made their works ultimately easier to interpret and distribute. This was part of the brilliance of Harold Monroe's marketing of the Georgian poets and the effect was not lost on Eliot, when he observed in "John Marston" (1934) that the "minor poet who hitches his skiff astern of the great galleon has a better chance of survival than the minor poet who chooses to paddle by himself."<sup>7</sup> Eliot himself took advantage of such opportunities, most notably in Pound's *The Catholic Anthology* (1915). In a review of the volume, Conrad Aiken writes that "Prufrock" and "Portrait of a Lady" were "the crystallization of the efforts of the other contributors," and "the logical outcome of such unfinished, though often brilliant work, as that of Messrs. Masters, Bodenheimer, Pound, and Rodker."<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, Eliot was in search of a broader reputation than that afforded by anthologies, and he would soon caution accomplished poets against depending too much on such volumes. Ultimately, one could only judge the greatness of a writer by the "whole" of his work and that necessitated the distinguishing of writers from each other based on their singular achievements. In other words, despite the advantages of bringing together different writers under a single umbrella, public collaboration could forestall evaluations of individual literary worth.

When Pound first met Eliot in 1914, the young Harvard graduate student was ripe for falling under the influence of his fellow American expatriate. Away from his family, friends, and professors, Eliot stood on the periphery of unfamiliar national and vocational environments. This first major collaboration satisfied Eliot's need for a mentor in England and started to pay significant benefits the following year, when Pound began to place some of the poems that would eventually appear in the *Prufrock*