

“Into our First World”: Schopenhauer, Wagner and the Music of the Will in *Four Quartets*

As the essays in this volume demonstrate, Eliot engaged with many art forms, in a body of writing that necessarily reflected on the relation of the arts to one another. *Four Quartets* in particular is predicated on a musical analogy and makes use of musical devices, including the development of motifs. Yet the poem also depends largely on images, such as that of the rose or falling sunlight.ⁱ While all poetry partakes to some degree in both the visual and aural dimensions, Eliot’s late sequence examines this relationship in a particularly deliberate way, continuing a nineteenth-century philosophical conversation among Arthur Schopenhauer, Richard Wagner and Arthur Symons. This dialogue is connected with a Romantic concern with painting and music, reflecting contemporary ideas of the beautiful and the sublime, and the growing association of the sublime with music.ⁱⁱ Despite extensive consideration of the role of music in *Four Quartets*, Eliot’s poem has not been read in the light of this nineteenth-century inquiry into the relation between music and the arts. This essay explores Eliot’s awareness of Schopenhauer, Wagner and Symons and their presence in the *Quartets*. In particular, the Schopenhauerian influence on Eliot’s aesthetics explains the association in his poem between music and a metaphysical reality that lies beyond appearance.

In *The World as Will and Representation* (1818), Schopenhauer argued that the whole of the phenomenal world is the manifestation of the one inner reality of the will, “the thing-in-itself, the inner content, the essence of the world.”ⁱⁱⁱ Between the will and the world of appearance exist the intermediary Platonic Ideas, the universal forms instantiated within phenomena. Schopenhauer’s metaphysics also differentiates between the universal will, or will as thing-in-itself, and the individual will, the will-to-life. According to the philosopher, the significance of the aesthetic realm is that it offers liberation from the cycle of suffering, pain, and desire to which we are bound by our individual wills. Through the aesthetic appreciation of nature and art, we are released from the self-serving will and the spatiotemporal world in which it operates, instead gaining knowledge of the eternal Ideas or of the universal will itself. Schopenhauer’s aesthetics also posit a key distinction: all of the arts, except for music, communicate knowledge of the Ideas that are contained within phenomena and apprehended perceptually. Music alone bypasses the Ideas to express directly the whole of the will and the inner nature of all manifestation. Schopenhauer’s musical aesthetics is one of the best-known dimensions of his philosophy and its relevance to Eliot’s musical thinking deserves serious consideration. Though the relation between *Four Quartets* and Beethoven’s late string quartets is well known, its musical analogy remains only partly understood and may be reconsidered in the light of Schopenhauer’s alternative worlds of music and phenomena.

Documentary evidence that Eliot studied Schopenhauer is contained in Harry Costello’s account of Josiah Royce’s 1913–14 seminar, of which Eliot was a member.^{iv} Evidence that Eliot closely read *The World as Will* is also found in a number of papers and reviews that he wrote up to about 1920.^v Notably, Schopenhauer’s conception of the objective nature of aesthetic contemplation influences Eliot’s “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1919), published three years after the completion of his doctoral thesis in philosophy.^{vi} Here, Eliot suggests his famous chemical analogy for verse-writing in terms that strongly echo Schopenhauer’s description of the poet-chemist who employs images to precipitate a perceptual Idea. Eliot’s essay shows his familiarity with Section 51 of *The World as Will* where Schopenhauer argues that poetry, like the plastic arts, conveys a primarily visual knowledge of the Ideas, despite using the abstract concepts of language. In Section 52, Schopenhauer goes on to discuss the special metaphysical status of music, the one art that exceptionally expresses not the Idea but the universal will itself. As Schopenhauer writes, “these [other arts] speak only of the shadow, but music of the essence.”^{vii}

The influence of Schopenhauer’s musical aesthetics on Eliot’s *Quartets* also passes through two important mediating figures. The first of these is Wagner, Schopenhauer’s best-known disciple. Schopenhauerian philosophy influences Wagner’s operas, particularly *Tristan and Isolde*, which

Eliot quotes in *The Waste Land*. Wagner himself read *The World as Will* in 1854 and described the work as having a “radical” influence on him.^{viii} Indeed, Wagner was responsible for bringing about a Schopenhauerian renaissance from the 1860s onward. Schopenhauer’s ideas find particularly extensive expression in Wagner’s important essay “Beethoven,” published in 1870 to mark the centenary of the composer’s birth. Despite the vast influence of Schopenhauer on Wagner, this is the only public context in which Wagner explicitly draws on the philosopher. In his essay, Wagner argues that the music of Beethoven best exemplifies Schopenhauer’s conception of music as expressing the interior world of the will. Wagner’s essay effectively brings together the music of Beethoven with the philosophy of Schopenhauer, and it is this work that is central to a reading of *Four Quartets*.

In “Beethoven,” Wagner develops Schopenhauer’s distinction between the phenomenal world and that of music. He calls upon Schopenhauer as the first philosopher to define clearly the position of music among the fine arts, ascribing to it an entirely different nature from that of either plastic or poetic art. Drawing directly on Schopenhauer, Wagner notes that music does not need mediation through abstract concepts “which completely distinguishes it from Poetry, in the first place, whose sole material consists of concepts, employed by it to visualise the Idea.”^{ix} So while the Ideas of the world comprise the “object” of the other arts, the “object” of music, as Schopenhauer writes, is the will itself. Wagner’s essay develops Schopenhauer’s binarism at length, describing this as the central and founding paradox of the philosopher’s musical aesthetics. If the Idea is concerned with physical perception, Wagner points to music as originating “upon that side of consciousness which Schopenhauer defines as facing inwards.”^x Wagner writes,

our consciousness has two sides . . . in part it is a consciousness of one’s own self, which is the will; in part a consciousness of other things, and chiefly then a visual knowledge of the outer world, the apprehension of objects . . . the Thing-in-itself—inconceivable by that physical [or “visual”] mode of knowledge—would only be revealed to this inward-facing consciousness . . .^{xi}

Having located the genesis of music in this inward-facing consciousness, Wagner develops his discussion analogically, in relation to Schopenhauer’s dream theory. Wagner suggests that beside the world envisaged by the waking brain exists another “second world.”^{xii} This second world cannot be “an object lying outside us”, but rather “must be brought to our cognisance by an inward function of the brain... [what] Schopenhauer here calls the Dream-organ.”^{xiii} For Wagner, it is not only the genesis of music but also the “sympathetic hearing” of music which enters us into this dreamlike state “wherein there dawns on us that other world”.^{xiv} Wagner’s essay effectively differentiates a world of appearance and of music, of waking and dreaming, a “light-world” and a “sound-world.”^{xv} All of these ideas come together in the figure of Beethoven himself, whom Wagner curiously compares with Tiresias, the deaf musician seen in parallel with the blinded seer.^{xvi} Wagner’s intention is to suggest the music of Beethoven as achieving a kind of interior vision divorced from phenomena, embodying a “second world” of the will. In *Four Quartets*, the presence of Beethoven is importantly connected with the motif of artistic exploration. When Eliot writes that “old men ought to be explorers” (*East Coker* V), he is likely drawing on J. W. N. Sullivan’s description of the composer in his 1927 book, *Beethoven – His Spiritual Development*.^{xvii} Reading the *Quartets* against Wagner’s worlds, Eliot’s poem can be seen to explore precisely the transition from a “light-world” to a “sound-world”, from the world as appearance to the world as will.

The third mediating figure in Eliot’s reception of Schopenhauer’s musical aesthetics is Arthur Symons. Eliot’s debt to Symons is well known, particularly his introduction to the French Symbolists through Symons’s *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (1899). Christopher Ricks has also identified references to Symons’s *Studies in Seven Arts* (1906) in Eliot’s early notebook poems. Yet little attention has been given to Symons’s essay “Beethoven,” collected in this later volume. In

“Beethoven”, Symons draws heavily on Wagner’s 1870 essay, similarly discussing Schopenhauer’s doctrine of music as expressing the will. Symons also reflects on Wagner’s distinction between two worlds and on the dream-like nature of Beethoven’s music. He cites Wagner’s description of Shakespeare entering the world of light even as Beethoven enters the world of sound.^{xviii} Symons writes:

To Shakespeare, to Michelangelo, who are concerned with the phenomena of the world as well as with “the thing itself which lies behind all appearances,” something is gained, some direct aid for art, by a continual awakening out of that trance in which they speak with nature. Beethoven alone, the musician, gains nothing: he is concerned only with one world, the inner world; and it is well for him if he never awakens.^{xix}

Aligning the verbal and visual in a manner in keeping with Schopenhauer’s aesthetics, Symons emphasises too the somnolent quality of Beethoven’s inner music. Quoting liberally from Schopenhauer, Symons writes that music ““reveals the innermost essential being of the world.””^{xx} This ““is not an image of phenomena,” but represents ‘the thing itself which lies behind all appearances’”; here Symons cites Schopenhauer’s reference to the scholastics, quoting ““concepts are *universalia post rem*, actuality *universalia in re*, whereas music gives *universalia ante rem*.””^{xxi} Schopenhauer’s words draw on the medieval understanding of human concepts as posterior to particular things (““universals after the thing”), in comparison with the universal features inherent in things themselves (““universals in the thing”). For the scholastics, the ““universals before the thing”” are found in the universal exemplars in the divine mind; in Schopenhauer’s aesthetics, they are given in music. So music suggests an ante-world, a world that precedes action much as the will itself exists outside of time and space. Symons too emphasizes this idea. The best of Beethoven, Symons suggests, is the sublime, not in action but in being. He describes Beethoven’s music as

the gaiety which cries in the bird, rustles in leaves, shines in spray; it is a voice as immediate as sunlight. Some new epithet must be invented for this music which narrates nothing, yet is epic; sings no articulate message, yet is lyric; moves to no distinguishable action, yet is already awake in the void waters, out of which a world is to awaken.

Music, as Schopenhauer has made clear to us, is not a representation of the world, but an immediate voice of the world.^{xxii}

There could scarcely be a better introduction to the opening stanzas of 'Burnt Norton' I than Symons’s words here, as they draw on both Schopenhauer and Wagner. While “Tradition and the Individual Talent” is preoccupied with the image and Schopenhauer’s world of appearance, in *Four Quartets* Eliot attempts to write poetry that explores the world of sound and thereby the inner reality of the will. At the start of the poem, Eliot’s depiction of an eternal present containing both past and future immediately recalls Schopenhauer.^{xxiii} Describing a world of “possibility” and “speculation”, Eliot suggests the noumenal not only through his treatment of time but, vitally, through a presentation of sound and echo. Leading us to the “other echoes” that inhabit the garden, Eliot describes a timeless realm in the very sounds used by Symons: birdcall, vibrant air, leaves that will be filled with the laughter and voices of children. In pursuit of these echoes 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...” In this first world are only echoes, “dignified, invisible,” moving “over the dead leaves.” Eliot’s shadowy sounds and invisible echoes, I would suggest, are an expression of Schopenhauer’s musical aesthetics; they evoke a “first” or anterior world, the world of will that precedes action. As in Schopenhauer, Wagner, and Symons, this world of sound is suggested by Eliot to be one of two worlds. Twice repeating the phrase “into our first world”, Eliot goes on to contrast these elusive echoes with the image of roses, subtly suggesting a Schopenhauerian distinction between sound and perception. “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.” In this movement between worlds, *Four Quartets* is conceived as an exploration of a new musical aesthetic and a new world that is also, paradoxically, the “first world”.

The imagery and contrast of worlds seen in *'Burnt Norton'* I returns in section V: “Sudden in a shaft of sunlight / Even while the dust moves / There rises the hidden laughter / Of children in the foliage.” Here, the “shaft of sunlight” echoes the “unseen eyebeam” of *'Burnt Norton'* I, even as the “hidden laughter / Of children in the foliage” replays the “unheard music hidden in the shrubbery.” We see now that the echoes contained within leaves and shrubbery at the start of the poem look forward to this laughter of children amid the greenery. Eliot’s linking of these echoes with the ephemeral sounds of children’s voices is important, and makes it easier to understand this rendition of sound as a portrayal of the noumenal will. Although the noumenon lies outside time and space, the closest Eliot can get to it is through music, represented here by voice, echo, birdcall, and laughter. Indeed, Eliot’s movement between sunlight and sound recalls Wagner’s contrast between a light-world and a sound-world, even as the elusivity of these sounds suggests the dream-like quality of music emphasized by Wagner. At the same time, Eliot’s portrayal of sunlight and laughter suggests both the visual and musical as implicitly transcendent. This too is in keeping with Schopenhauer’s aesthetics. For though Schopenhauer and Wagner privilege music over perception, it is also in perception that we transcend flux and movement, apprehending the eternal Platonic Ideas, which “always are, never become and never pass away.”^{xxiv}

The opening of *'Burnt Norton'* V, oft-cited for its reflection on the nature of poetry and music, returns to this relation between the visual and aural. Eliot begins by comparing the temporal movement of words or music to the temporality of what is living: “Words move, music moves / Only in time; but that which is only living / Can only die.” On the one hand, the time-bound nature of music and language as experienced in reality seemingly contradicts a model of music as expressing the timeless will. But Eliot moves quickly to imagine musical form removed from time, likening sound with the image of a Chinese jar: “Words, after speech, reach / Into the silence. Only by the form, the pattern, / Can words or music reach / The stillness, as a Chinese jar still / Moves perpetually in its stillness... ” Both ghostly music and aesthetic object are framed in perpetuity, paradoxically still and still moving. In the case of the static object, one way to conceive this movement is from image to Idea. In the case of music, stillness is variously the length of a note and the pattern of the whole. “Not the stillness of the violin, while the note lasts, / Not that only, but the co-existence... / And all is always now.” It is music that expresses the whole of the will in its eternity, and Eliot’s words here notably recall his Schopenhauerian conflation of time past and future in *'Burnt Norton'* I. Like the philosopher, Eliot suggests that time and death belong to the realm of phenomena: for what is “only in time” is “only living” and can “only die”. Beyond this limited condition of being, however, Eliot obliquely refers to that higher reality of the will which alone is changeless and eternally present.

Eliot’s poem also draws directly on a Schopenhauerian aesthetic of the sublime, further supporting the connection between his musical thematics and a metaphysics of the will.^{xxv} While Schopenhauer does not speak of music in terms of the sublime, both Wagner and Symons clearly apply Schopenhauer’s sublime to music. Wagner emphatically asserts that music can ultimately only be judged by the category of the sublime.^{xxvi} He bases his musical aesthetics on Schopenhauer’s argument that, whether in nature or in art, the sublime brings us into direct contact with the universal will. According to Schopenhauer, we experience the sublime when the very object that invites our contemplation seems to have a hostile relation to the human will. In this case, we must struggle to turn away consciously from our individual wills and in doing so we experience an exaltation (“*erhebung*”) to the universal will itself. Extending Schopenhauer’s discussion, Wagner writes, “the *individual will*, silenced in the plastic artist through pure beholding, awakes in the musician as the *universal Will*”.^{xxvii} I would suggest that Wagner also implicitly draws on

Schopenhauer's conception of exaltation. He claims that, in the case of the plastic arts, we see "the will in the Individual as such...unable to lift itself above its barriers save in the purely disinterested beholding of objects; whilst there, in the musician's case, the will feels *one* forthwith, above all bounds of individuality"^{xxviii}.

In 'Burnt Norton' II, Eliot directly employs Schopenhauer's conception of sublime exaltation in presenting the "dance" at the "still point of the turning world". In this important passage, it quickly becomes apparent that the "dance" is rather a condition of being which cannot be described in terms of time or space. "I can only say, *there* we have been: but I cannot say where. / And I cannot say, how long, for that is to place it in time." Eliot then moves immediately to what can only be read as a transcription of Schopenhauerian doctrine. "The inner freedom from the practical desire, / The release from action and suffering, release from the inner / And the outer compulsion." Eliot effectively describes a "release" from the individual will in the very terms used by Schopenhauer: "freedom" from "desire," "action," "suffering" and "compulsion". Having described such an aesthetic escape from individual willing, Eliot suggests the sublimity of this state of being; it is "still and moving, / *Erhebung* without motion, concentration / Without elimination, both a new world / And the old made explicit..." Returning us to the realms of music and phenomena, Eliot now hints at a reconciliation of worlds through the discourse of the sublime. As we have seen, Schopenhauer speaks of the sublime in the context of visual contemplation, whilst Wagner and Symons apply the sublime to music. Eliot's figure of the dance offers just such a synthesis, simultaneously suggesting both music and visuality. On the one hand, the image recalls Mallarmé's description of dance as pure symbol, "a visual incorporation of the idea" (Hegel).^{xxix} But through both the visual and aural, the sublime works to effect an exaltation outside of motion, space and time, to that which is both still and moving. It is the dance of the universal will, whose apprehension is the liberated condition of being Eliot describes here.

At the close of *Four Quartets*, Eliot returns again to Wagner's worlds of music and phenomena, now in crucial conjunction with the metaphor of exploration. Eliot writes, "We shall not cease from exploration / And the end of all our exploring / Will be to arrive where we started..." As I noted earlier, the influence of Beethoven in the poem is connected with the trope of exploration, specifically Eliot's injunction "old men ought to be explorers". Concluding the *Quartets*, Eliot reinscribes the music of Beethoven and the metaphysics of the will that this music expresses. Importantly, the place or condition that we will "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." Not only does Eliot emphasize the difference between what is known or looked for and what is heard, but he describes again the voices of children in the foliage, the very sounds by which he suggests a music of the will in *Burnt Norton*. That Eliot draws on Schopenhauer's metaphysics is supported too by his evocation of the river and the sea. As we read in *Dry Salvages* I, "The river is within us, the sea is all about us." The dance of the will which Eliot describes at the still point of the turning world returns now at the poem's close. For what is heard in the stillness between two waves is an echo of this universal will and "that which was the beginning" is none other than the first world of sound with which the poem began.

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- i The repetition of the image of sunlight in *Four Quartets* is discussed by Helen Gardner in her essay "The Music of *Four Quartets*" in *Essays on Form: Literature and Music*, ed. Nancy Anne Cluck (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 1981), pp. 94-106. Other useful studies of Eliot and music include *T. S. Eliot's Orchestra*, ed. Xiros Cooper (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 2000), especially John Adames' essay "Eliot's *Ars Musica Poetica*: Sources in French Symbolism" and Brad Bucknell's "Eliot's Impossible Music". Also of note is *Words in Time: New Essays on Eliot's "Four Quartets"*, ed. Edward Lobb (London: Athlone Press, 1993).
- ii General studies on the subject include Edward Lockspeiser's *Music and Painting* (London: Cassell & Company Ltd., 1973) and, more recently, *The Arts Entwined: Music and Painting in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. M. Morton and P. Schmunk (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 2000).

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- iii Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, trans. E. F. J. Payne (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1969), vol. 1, 275.
- iv Bryan Magee, *The Philosophy of Schopenhauer* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), 213. Magee notes that Royce's whole thought was strongly influenced by Kant and by the post-Kantian philosophy of will as developed by Fichte and Schopenhauer (xiii).
- v T. S. Eliot, 'Report on the Kantian Categories' (1913) and 'A Review of *The Philosophy of Nietzsche*, by A. Wolf' (1916) in *The Complete Prose* I:34, 402. Also 'Euripedes and Professor Murray' (1920) and 'The Criticism of Poetry' (1920) in *The Complete Prose* II: 198, 238.
- vi Aakanksha Virkar-Yates, "An Objective Chemistry: what T. S. Eliot borrowed from Schopenhauer," *Philosophy and Literature* 39.2 (2015).
- vii Schopenhauer, *WWR*, 257.
- viii Magee, *Schopenhauer*, 360.
- ix Richard Wagner, 'Beethoven' in *Richard Wagner's Prose Works*, trans. W. A. Ellis (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., Ltd., 1896) vol. 5, 65.
- x Wagner, 'Beethoven', 67.
- xi Ibid.
- xii Wagner, 'Beethoven', 68.
- xiii Ibid.
- xiv Wagner, 'Beethoven', 74.
- xv Wagner, 'Beethoven', 68.
- xvi Wagner, 'Beethoven', 92. See also Keith Alldritt, *Eliot's 'Four Quartets': Poetry as Chamber Music* (Ilford: Woburn Press, 1978), 125.
- xvii In his article, 'Eliot, Beethoven and J. W. N. Sullivan', Herbert Howarth offers internal and external evidence that Eliot was familiar with Sullivan's book. Sullivan himself refers three times to 'Beethoven the explorer' and Howarth reads Eliot's line as an endorsement and extension of Sullivan's words. See H. Howarth, 'Eliot, Beethoven and J. W. N. Sullivan', *Comparative Literature* 9.4 (1957): 328-9.
- xviii Arthur Symons, 'Beethoven' in *Studies in Seven Arts* (London: Archibald Constable and Co., Ltd., 1906), 213.
- xix Symons, 'Beethoven', 195.
- xx Symons, 'Beethoven', 194.
- xxi Ibid.
- xxii Symons, 'Beethoven', 193.
- xxiii Magee, *Schopenhauer*, 213. In his footnotes to Chapter 9, Magee observes that Schopenhauer is called to mind by the opening lines of 'Burnt Norton'.
- xxiv Schopenhauer, *WWR* I, 171.
- xxv Aakanksha Virkar-Yates, 'Erhebung, Schopenhauer and T. S. Eliot's Burnt Norton', *Notes and Queries* 61.1 (2014): 126-27.
- xxvi Wagner, 'Beethoven', 77.
- xxvii Wagner, 'Beethoven', 72.
- xxviii Ibid.
- xxix Hegel's formulation is itself connected with Schopenhauer's sublime; see Virkar-Yates, 'Erhebung and Burnt Norton', 126-7.