

Elisabeth Van Dam
Fellow of the Research Foundation Flanders FWO
GHENT UNIVERSITY
CENTRE FOR CRITICAL PHILOSOPHY
Research Unit Transcendental and Phenomenological Studies

Blandijnberg 2
9000 Ghent
☎ 09 264 39 72

elisabeth.vandam@ugent.be
www.criticalphilosophy.be

Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* and Eliot: two voices, one present?

The philosopher Wittgenstein and the poet Eliot: two flagrant figures, two vibrant voices, speaking new and strange words at the dawn of modernism. Are these great men affiliated? Do they cross each other's pathway's? A closer look at the surface of their lives provides for arguments. Both were born the 26th, Eliot in September, 1888, Wittgenstein in April, one year later. Both came from a foreign place to England, respectively Saint Louis at the Mississippi-river in the American state Missouri, and Habsburgian Vienna, at the edge of a dimming and dust collecting Austro-Hungarian empire. Both studied philosophy with Bertrand Russell and where in close friendship with him, Eliot in Oxford, Wittgenstein in Cambridge. Both broke their friendship with the logician, too light-hearted and erotic for their noble, serious and troubled spirits. Both where sincerely religious and attracted to an ethical mysticism that could support their souls in search for authenticity, truth, value and beauty. Both seemed doomed to escape from their lust and feelings for a beloved one, frightened by their belief in the fact that 'no human relations are adequate to human desires' (Eliot, *Sel. Essays*, 428) and driven by a profound scorn towards the flesh. Both were teachers, professors and got involved into the academic world of universities and clubs, which they found repulsive. Both wrote. And wrote ... Both published the work that changed our world and made them famous in the miracle year of 1922: Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* and Eliot's *The Waste Land* caught light and public eyes next to other masterpieces appearing that year, like Joyce's *Ulysses* and Rilke's *Duineser Elegien*. Both where metaphysical in the deepest sense. Poetry, literature, art, music and philosophy where the breathing fibers out of which their rich modes of being, working and thinking wove themselves into a remarkable oeuvre pointing to the riddle of silence. Both identified with Saint-Augustine and his confessing attitude inspired their visions towards life, honesty, belief, change and ethical enactment. Both knew they were speaking and manifesting themselves out of the dull but glorious roots of tradition, stirring these with the spring rain of their individual talents. Their spiritual worlds are generally considered difficult, hermetic and

exclusive. Nevertheless, both have brightened history, unquestionably belonging to the geniuses that set the tone pitch of our time ... However, no written document states that Wittgenstein and Eliot actually ever met, although, considering the here summed up similarities and simple facts to be found in their personal lives, both seem to look alike. But can we reconcile them in their philosophical and literary ideas as well as that? Can we learn from their thinking and writing practices and their conjunctive functioning as philosopher and poet? And if so, what?

Wittgenstein's as well as Eliot's primary concern was **language**. It was their material to work from and to think about. It was their material to work *in* as well. It was the matter that could structure their subjectivity in life and experience and that could bring the silent relation between world and mind into a tangible form. For both, language occupied a constitutive function in the process of understanding, as it was a condition of possibility for reasoning and communication. In order to investigate my propositions and proposed affiliations in a more concrete way, I would like now to focus on Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* and Eliot's *Four Quartets*.

Four Quartets is a bundle of verses published in 1943, when Eliot was at the age of 46, wandering in the middle of the journey of his life (allusion to Dante). It exists out of four uniformly constructed poems, 200 verses each, metonymically organized around a coordination system that encompasses the four elements air, earth, water and fire (*Burnt Norton, East Coker, The Dry Salvages, Little Gidding*). Undoubtedly it is an autobiographic masterpiece but it transcends the personal level due to its metaphysical and philosophical character. It combines the intensity of confession lyric with the distance of reflection, abstraction and elevation. It forms a sublime but sensitive and moved meditation on human questions: the relation between time and eternity, the sense or senselessness of expressions of life, the importance of art, the connection between individual experience and tradition and so on ... Next to these features the verses are most of all about language, speech, writing and literature, about what is happening during the conception and reading of a poem: they expose the limits and limitations of self-expression and utterance in their most tactile form, *in* the gap of poetic language itself. They *show* what is absent in the words of the poet. They *display* the endless depth around which those words circle, ever without seeing through that depth. They *grasp* the void they never say. They *point at it*. And they speak for all of us, who are subjects that live and are imbedded in language, driven by the 'raid on the inarticulate'. Let us listen to some of those stirring verses and see what they exhibit:

'So here I am, in the middle way, having had twenty years –

Twenty years largely wasted, the years of *l'entre deux guerres*

Trying to learn to use words, and every attempt
Is a wholly new start, and a different kind of failure
Because one has only learnt to get the better words
For the thing one has no longer has to say, or the way in which
One is no longer supposed to say it. And each venture
Is a new beginning, a raid on the inarticulate
With shabby equipment always deteriorating
In the general mess of imprecision of feeling,
Undisciplined squads of emotion. And what there is to conquer
By strength and submission, has already been discovered
Once or twice, or several times, by men whom one cannot hope
To emulate – but there is no competition –
There is only the fight to recover what has been lost
And found and lost again and again: and now, under conditions
That seem unpropitious. But perhaps neither gain nor loss.
For us, there is only the trying. The rest is not our business.’

(Four Quartets, East Coker, V, vs. 172-189)

Exactly that very specific consciousness of imprecision these verses point at and the strive for an erasure of what ‘gets in the way’ when attempting to find clarity in thoughts and feelings, is the string that unifies the cores of Eliot’s and Wittgenstein’s thinking. Both did what they did, as poet and philosopher, from that same frustration provoked by words: words inadequate to say ‘what is’, merely describing facts (that are no words), falling in between ‘undisciplined squads of emotion’ and ‘different kinds of failure’. Clearly, something needs to be conquered, ‘by strength and submission’ ... Is it silence? Eliot seems to make visible in his verses that ‘the rest that is not our business’ must be that what needs *to keep* its silence. Speaking is trying, and what the trying is pointing at, is perhaps ‘that whereof one cannot speak’ (Wittgenstein, TLP, 7).

The just cited passage displays striking parallels with Wittgenstein’s preface and proposition 6.54 of his *Tractatus*. Two affiliated things must be considered here, that

are: **language as repetition**, and **language as failure**. Both aspects point to a specific sort of conquest, facing logical description and lyrical expression. In his preface, Wittgenstein states that his (quote) 'book will perhaps only be understood by those who have themselves already thought the thoughts which are expressed in it'. In other words, Wittgenstein does not claim any novelty upon his work and stresses the repetitious character of *thinking in words* and, in result, of the act of philosophizing as well. Everything that he, Wittgenstein the philosopher, is trying to say, (quote Wittgenstein) 'has already been discovered'. But just as Eliot, he does not bother the threat of emulation and is conscious of the fact that there are always (quote Wittgenstein) 'others to come that may do better'. He seems to make clear that understanding has to do with recognition, and, moreover, perhaps with the power of tradition, memory, empathy or even sympathy. What conditions are required by such power? Without it, the range of communication is very limited. Only those who are in the right tone with the one who is trying to express something can perhaps understand the things being said. But how to be 'in the right tone'? A little further in his preface, Wittgenstein announces that his book aims to 'draw a limit to thinking, or rather -- not to thinking, but to the expression of thoughts'. It seems that this 'expression' is always a failure that needs to be overcome, if one is able to conquer words and can *feel through* those describing symbols of imprecision the enlightenment of what lies beneath them not as a logical describable fact but as a *lyrical* one: the unspoken. Those who can feel, have true understanding and are able to ascend from language to literature up to a constitutive silence. Feeling is thus a condition of possibility to grasp something that transcends any word, although that 'something' reciprocally is also a condition, always and already constituting words at the same time. Proposition 6.54 states this feeling/grasping act very literally, but also seems to declare the failure of the philosophical text of the *Tractatus* as text. I cite its lines in German:

'6.54 Meine Sätze erläutern dadurch, daß sie der, welcher mich versteht, am Ende als unsinnig erkennt, wenn er durch sie–auf ihnen–über sie hinausgestiegen ist. (Er muß sozusagen die Leiter wegwerfen, nachdem er auf ihr hinaufgestiegen ist.)'

Does Eliot want us to throw away his words as well, like a ladder that is of no use anymore? Is the requisite need to be able to feel and conquer words a 'throwing away' or, more precise: a loss? Why then does Eliot file his words as precious diamonds until they spark, so we can collect them in our reading hearts as brightening (and enlightening) treasures? What function provides *the poet* his words with? Again, two aspects need to be considered, that are: **lyrical language as *Bild*** and **the timelessness of poetry**. I will demonstrate now how these functions can be situated in Eliot's as well as Wittgenstein's thinking.

1. Lyrical language as *Bild*

Wittgenstein states in proposition 2.172 of his *Tactatus*:

‘2.172 Seine Form der Abbildung aber kann das Bild nicht abbilden; es weist sie auf.’

Ein Bild (impossible to translate adequately in English, confusing: ‘a picture’, perhaps better: ‘an image or a model’) is for Wittgenstein a consciously and actively constructed draft or drawing (*Darstellung*) in language matter, logically ‘in line’ with the form of the things that are produced in it and, simultaneously, are brought into the light of our understanding by it. Important in such a process are the art and manner in which we draw such ‘models’ or *Bilder*, in other words: how these *Bilder* are constructed. A non-verbalizable activity takes place, connecting words to things and vice versa. The form of the *Bilder* and the drawing movement that is constituted during that action is inexpressible and yet that very form is the only characteristic (function) these *Bilder* share with the thing expressed. This form is being pointed at, not *in* but *with* and *through* language. To be seen, again, this form asks for sympathy, empathy and feeling. This is why, often, while communicating and following the rules of logic without any anticipating and imaging sense, we do not understand each other. Poetry and lyrical language express that very limit. However, their constraint is their possibility. Lyrical words work by grace of default and limitation. They are ‘models’ or *Bilder*: not of things, but of the inexpressible. And that is why they touch us all. They bring up the memory of silence and failure we have collected in our experiencing bodies. They speak of it in speechless terms. They express it. They use memory and projection as connecting strings between analogously combined and metonymically associated images. Only the form or structure of these images unifies them and constitutes the core of a poem or lyrical text as a logically constructed ladder. Nevertheless, it is this unifying power that remains silent. Eliot is well known as the poetic master of verbal echo’s, connotations, associations, combinations, variations, repetitions, intra- and intertextual play, contrasts and differentiating registers to build poems as vibrant houses of dynamical meanings and stairways of significations. He uses the logical power of language and creates abstract ‘models’ or *Bilder* of his subjective experience to bridge the space between particular feelings and their universal symbols, between ‘I’ and the Other. He displays that bridge as the silent condition that precedes every act of expression. But, doesn’t he make his still bridges and *Bilder* sing? Perhaps that’s why the title of his *Four Quartets* refers to a genre in music and not to a literary one. It might be that Wittgenstein would have approved this choice. After all he knew more than any other that music is a strange field of tones that go beyond language and can make us hear things our words cannot. If one knows how to listen, of course. And that might keep on being a riddle. To illustrate Eliot’s use of logic and it’s explosion into the lyric, one could point at the analogies that are created between for instance the dance in the rose garden in the first poem *Burnt Norton* and an endless range of elements that are affiliated with that

basic image or scene: everything that exhibits a formal structure, if it would be the dancing drift of stars, the turning world, the circulation of the lymph or the rhythm of the poem's words that dance as rose leaves, as echoes, children's laughing voices or singing birds, they all are chained up and connected in a logical sense as *Bilder* of movement in time and space. Meanwhile they sound together in a lyrical sense as the silent messengers of the still point around which they circle, endless, timeless, spaceless and wordless. They consonate, in harmony. Eliot expresses this strikingly beautiful, I cite two passages:

'Words move, music moves
Only in time; but that which is only living
Can only die. Words, after speech, reach
Into silence. Only by the form, the pattern,
Can words or music reach
The stillness, as a Chinese jar still
Moves perpetually in its stillness.
Not the stillness of the violin while the note lasts,
Not that only, but the co-existence,
Or say that the end precedes the beginning,
And the end and the beginning were always there
Before the beginning and after the end
And all is always now.'

(Four Quartets, Burnt Norton V, vs. 137-149)

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

I can only say, *there* we have been: but I cannot say where.'

(*Four Quartets, Burnt Norton, II, vs. 62-67*)

2. The timelessness of poetry

Eliot confesses: there are things he cannot say. Nevertheless, we get a sense of them when he speaks, for instance, about 'the still point of the turning world', about a place 'where past and future are gathered', about there where one feels a release from linear thinking and conscious movement through a logically distributed time via memory and projection, about there where there is no time, where there is nothing but being or dance: a vibrant silence. Time is a crucial element in Eliot's metaphysics. It converges with Wittgenstein's notion of it. Proposition 6.4311 of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* is about Eliot's 'still point' and brings the Augustinian 'time present' in our minds:

'6.4311 Der Tod ist kein Ereignis des Lebens. Den Tod erlebt man nicht. Wenn man unter Ewigkeit nicht unendliche Zeitdauer, sondern Unzeitlichkeit versteht, dann lebt der ewig, der in der Gegenwart lebt. Unser leben ist ebenso endlos, wie unser Gesichtsfeld grenzenlos ist.'

Compare these words with Eliot's in the first verses of *Burnt Norton*:

'Time present and time past

Are both perhaps time present in time future,

And time future contained in time past.

If all time is eternally present

All time is unredeemable.

What might have been is an abstraction

Remaining a perpetual possibility

Only a world of speculation.

What might have been and what has been

Point to one end, which is always present.'

(*Four Quartets, Burnt Norton I, vs. 1-10*)

What is present is ‘unredeemable’ and escapes logic. It is the inexpressible structure of logic itself, its pure ‘working’. It is that silent relation between past and future (‘out of any time’), between mind, word and world that makes things real, objective and communicable. It is the condition of possibility that makes all understanding to be happened: a space of translation. Lyric displays that condition of silence in its very own words, as *Bilder* of that connecting activity. It silently says the necessary holes that make those words work as gifts from a present that cannot be grasped in logic. Exact and logically constituted language covers consciously constructible facts, in past or future, before and after (*nachträglich* or retro-active), but not the experience of the present ‘now’. Or as Eliot says it, of the:

‘Quick now, here, now, always –

Ridiculous the waste sad time

Stretching before and after.’

(*Four Quartets, Burnt Norton V, vs. 173-175*)

What can we conclude from this, considering Wittgenstein and Eliot as thinkers that have worked in, on, through, with and about language? Where do they lead us? Hear Wittgenstein:

‘6.522 Es gibt allerdings Unaussprechliches. Dies *zeigt* sich, es ist das Mystische.’

It is the ‘showing’ (*das Zeigen*) that can be found in poetry, literature or lyrical language. It is at work in logic as well, but not as an expression. Silence in lyrical language expresses or ‘shows’ its very own foundations that cannot be founded in words. Wittgenstein calls it ‘mystic’. Eliot would formulate it as the ‘timelessness of belief’. I leave it in the middle of them and see it as the void we need to be able to take steps in life or into the unknown, to be able to ‘go’ from an indeterminate determination that leads you and draws your blind or silent way through the ‘other’. It is there where you will find yourself as subject. It is there where you will neither observe nor describe but feel and remain silent of your world as ‘one’. To end I give my voice to Wittgenstein:

‘6.45 Die Anschauung der Welt sub specie aeterni ist ihre Anschauung als–begrenztes–Ganzes. Das Gefühl der Welt als begrenztes Ganzes ist das mystische.’