But to apprehend
The point of intersection of the timeless
With time, is an occupation for the saint –

(‘The Dry Salvages’)¹

The ‘point of intersection’ is heard only three times in Eliot’s poetry and critical prose – once in The Rock (1934), once in ‘The Dry Salvages’ (1941), and once in ‘The Music of Poetry’ (1942) – and yet it stands as an emblem for the ever-present contexts and conditions of Eliot’s poetic thought. Eliot uses the phrase as a way of imagining the textures of poetic language: each word exists at a ‘point of intersection’, finding its music and meaning within the reticulated field of poetic language.² But Eliot also uses the phrase as a way of thinking about the experiences of meaning that such a reticulated language enables: the work of the poet, he suggests is to labour towards that other ‘point of intersection’ that is the meeting of the ‘timeless’ with ‘time’, the frontier between what we know and that which is, in some sense, beyond us. As such, the first part of this essay recovers Eliot’s notion of the ‘point of intersection’ as one of the primary ways in which he interrogates his own poetics, thinking both about what poetic language is and the experiences of consciousness or meaning that it uniquely affords.

¹ ‘The Dry Salvages’, in The Poems of T. S. Eliot, vol. i: Collected and Uncollected Poems, ed. Christopher Ricks and Jim McCue (London 2015) p. 199. Further quotations of Eliot’s verse are from this volume; page references are given parenthetically in the text. Quotations from the notes in this volume (referred to as Poems) are given in the footnotes.
² ‘The Music of Poetry’, in T. S. Eliot, On Poetry and Poets (London 1957) p. 32.
And yet, as this quotation from ‘The Dry Salvages’ suggests, the ‘point of intersection’ is not simply a way of figuring these pressing questions of poetry and poetics but a way of exploring what it means to live within a world haunted by the possibility of another, unknown and timeless, world beyond us. If the nature of poetic language is such that it enables us to know that which otherwise could not be known (and this, I suggest, is Eliot’s claim) then we need to ask what kind of thing this new knowledge is, what kind of unknown world we are entering into. For Eliot, there are two possibilities. On the one hand, to transcend the limits of knowledge might be to encounter the world of the timeless, the eternal, or the divine. On the other hand, to transcend these limits might be to discover that we have only extended our understanding of the world in which we already live. This uncertainty, this dilemma – and Eliot, for reasons that we will explore further, insists that it is a peculiarly ‘modern dilemma’ – is the broader philosophical preoccupation that animates Eliot’s more particular enquiry into the cognitive affordances of his own poetics. It is at this point that this essay’s specific consideration of Eliot’s poetics begins to broaden in scope, working with Eliot towards an account of what modern poetry might be able to do for us.

This essay is ultimately concerned with what Eliot meant and what he thought was at stake when he wrote that the ‘poet is occupied with frontiers of consciousness beyond which words fail, though meanings still exist’. This is a claim that Eliot makes for his own work as a poet, and the first part of this essay examines the ways in which his verse technique is directed towards apprehensions of meanings that exceed both language and comprehension. But it is also a claim that Eliot makes for modern poetry more generally. The question for Eliot – and for us – is whether modern poetry can achieve this extension of understanding and, if it can, what, exactly, lies beyond the ‘frontiers of consciousness’.

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The ‘point of intersection’ finds its cousin-term – its verbal form, its corresponding practice – in ‘crossing’: ‘In every moment of time you live where two worlds cross, ‘In every moment you live at a point of intersection’. It is my contention here that ‘crossing’ is the key term in Eliot’s attempt to conceptualise his own poetics. In the first part of this discussion, I will look at how ‘crossing’ gives Eliot a way of imagining the principles that underwrite

3 Revelation, ed. John Baillie and Hugh Martin (London 1937) p. 38.
4 ‘The Music of Poetry’, p. 30.
5 T. S. Eliot, The Rock (London 1934) p. 52.
6 For a discussion of the metaphors Eliot uses in conceptualising the processes of poetic creation, see Sarah Kennedy, T. S. Eliot and the Dynamic Imagination (Cambridge 2018).
the practices and aims of his verse; in the second part, I will show how this is realised in an exemplary passage from *The Waste Land*.

‘Verse stands in constant need of what Samuel Butler calls a cross’, Eliot wrote in 1917, ‘The serious writer of verse must be prepared to cross himself with the best verse of other languages and the best prose of all languages’. Eliot – a self-confessed ‘serious writer of verse’ – recounted how his own verse had arisen out of such a hybridising ‘cross’: ‘the form in which I began to write in 1908 or 1909, was directly drawn from the study of Laforgue together with the later Elizabethan drama’ (*CP*, III, p. 518). Such intertextual crossings were the means by which Eliot developed his distinctly allusive and elusive voice. Hugh Kenner observes that the ‘mimicry of the dynamics of personal intercession’ – this crossing of borrowed or assumed voices – ‘transforms at last into self-sustaining technique the anonymity which Eliot always devised, by one means or another, as the indispensable condition of his poetry’. Anonymity, as Helen Thaventhiran notes, is also the achieved condition of the ‘mosaic or macaronic quality’ of Eliot’s critical prose: ‘Behind this screen of other voices, Eliot, with the proper decorum of modernist objectivism and impersonality, may even retreat entirely.’ But Eliot also developed his distinctive voice through practices of intratextual crossing. Fragments of earlier writing return in the later work, drawn into oblique conversation within the characteristically composite textures of his verse. As Eliot himself observed: ‘That’s one way in which my mind does seem to have worked throughout the years poetically – doing things separately and then seeing the possibility of focusing them together, altering them, and making a kind of whole of them’.10

Verse stands in constant need of a cross. The intersection of text and text, voice and voice, gives Eliot his beginning, but it also gives his verse its enduring character, its distinctive texture of sound and meaning. ‘The music of a word’, Eliot wrote in 1942, ‘is ... at a point of intersection: it arises from its relation first to the words immediately preceding and following it, and indefinitely to the rest of its context; and from another relation, that of its immediate meaning in that context to all the other meanings which it has had in other contexts.’ Each word becomes musical as words and contexts

7 The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot, ed. Ronald Schuchard, 8 vols (London, 2014–) vol. i, p. 679. Hereafter all references to the Complete Prose (*CP*) are given parenthetically in the text.
8 Hugh Kenner, The Invisible Poet: T. S. Eliot (London 1960) p. 251.
9 Helen Thaventhiran, Radical Empiricists: Five Modernist Close Readers (Oxford 2015) p. 31.
10 Quoted in B. C. Southam, A Student’s Guide to the Selected Poems of T. S. Eliot (London 1968) p. 134.
11 ‘The Music of Poetry’, pp. 32–3.
intersect, just as the poet found his eloquence in the crossed voices of his literary predecessors. If each word exists at a ‘point of intersection’, then the words of the poem hold together as a reticulated or latticed field. Indeed, Eliot habitually describes poetry as constituted by – perhaps even consisting as – ‘pattern’. ‘Every poem has its own embryological pattern’, he insisted. By extension, every group of poems, every corpus, has a familial resemblance. Eliot’s saw Ezra Pound’s limited success as a translator of the Commedia as an indication of his failure to ‘understand the whole pattern’ of Dante (Letters, v. 183). There was also, he observed, a ‘pattern in Shakespeare’s carpet’. But despite this echo of the Jamesian figure for elusive meanings and undiscovered intentions, Eliot often uses ‘pattern’ to describe something more particular: the organisation of words within a poetic text. Writing to Clive Bell in 1941, Eliot described his ‘odd occupation’ as that of ‘making patterns with words’. A year later, he clarified that these patterns were ‘musical pattern[s] of sound ... and secondary meanings’.

This ‘odd occupation’ of making patterns of ‘sound’ and ‘meaning’ produces those ‘point[s] of intersection’ in which we might become conscious of something that is distinctly ‘musical’. This ‘music’ is, in some sense, both acoustic and meaningful. But although it arises from the intersections of ‘sound’-patterns and ‘meaning’-patterns, it evades and exceeds both these categories. This ‘music’, this meaning-bearing resonance, is conjured through but heard beyond the criss-crossed textures of verse, exceeding that which we might speak of and surpassing that which we might call ‘sound’. Thinking of D. H. Lawrence’s declaration that the ‘essence of poetry ... is a stark directness, without a shadow of a lie’, Eliot confessed that in his own work, he had ‘long aimed’ at a ‘poetry so transparent that we see not the poetry, but that which we are meant to see through the poetry’ (CP, iv pp. 847–8). Eliot initially imagines that which we might apprehend ‘through the poetry’ as the stark meanings that lie behind what Lawrence calls the ‘unlovely actualities’ of modern life. But he also imagines it as something heard beyond the acoustics of its form: ‘To get beyond poetry, as Beethoven, in his later works, strove to get beyond music’ (ibid.). Indeed, in another essay of 1933, Eliot suggests that the acoustic has a certain primacy in our experience of apprehending that which lies ‘beyond poetry’: the ‘auditory imagination’, Eliot wrote, is that ‘feeling for syllable and

12 Paul Valéry, The Art of Poetry, with an Introduction by T. S. Eliot, trans. Denise Folliot (London 1958) p. 1.
13 The Letters of T. S. Eliot, ed. Valerie Eliot and John Haffenden, 7 vols (London 2009-)
14 T. S. Eliot, ‘Dante’, in Selected Essays (London 1932) p. 245.
15 Quoted in Eliot, Poems, p. 887.
16 On Poetry, p. 33.
rhythm, penetrating far below the conscious levels of thought and feeling, invigorating every word; sinking to the most primitive and forgotten, returning to the origin and bringing something back'.

Poetry requires us not only to listen but to engage the ‘auditory imagination’, attending not only to the rhythmic and syllabic textures of verse but to that strange ‘music’ that arises from and is heard beyond these crossed acoustics. To listen in this way is to get ‘beyond poetry’, to discover those realities that lie beyond the linguistic and acoustic range of the patterned text, and which consequently lie beyond the range of our conscious ‘thought and feeling’. The ‘auditory imagination’ reaches into the world ‘beyond’ words and brings ‘something’ back – a ‘something’ that is felt to be real and significant, but which continues to resist the conceptual frameworks of the word-bound imagination.

And so the poet’s ‘odd occupation’ of ‘making patterns with words’ reveals itself to be a version of that ‘occupation’ that was once the peculiar prerogative of the ‘saint’: the labour of working to apprehend those realities that lie beyond the ‘frontiers of consciousness’. Verse stands in constant need of a cross because the poet is occupied with the idea that in the lateral crossing of word on word we might discover a new thing that exceeds the original terms of the cross and extends our understanding into that dimension ‘beyond’ words. To put it another way, the point of intersection as a poetic strategy is to generate that other ‘point of intersection’ that is the frontier between our time-bound imaginations and the timelessness of eternity.

This moment of self-transcending knowledge is what Eliot aims at in his verse. But his worry is that the ‘point of intersection’ between word and word might not convert so easily into that hypothesised, hoped-for ‘point of intersection’ that is the moment of brief contact between the world of words and the world beyond words. This worry becomes the central dilemma of Eliot’s verse: does the poetic work of intersection or crossing lead us into apprehensions of that which is otherwise inapprehensible, or does it only confirm to us the boundedness of our cognitive life? This dilemma is evident in the two senses of to ‘cross’ at play in Eliot’s poetry. To ‘cross’ is to meet, pass, or intersect, the ‘crossed’ space a between-zone in which things move laterally ‘across’ each other. This is the ‘place of solitude where three dreams cross’ (Ash-Wednesday VI; p. 96) and that lunatic moment in which ‘old nocturnal smells ... cross and cross across her brain’ (‘Rhapsody on a Windy Night’; p. 19). But to ‘cross’ is also to pass over borders, to move between worlds and to discover new truths. In The Hollow Men, ‘Those who have crossed | With direct eyes, to death’s other

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17 ‘Matthew Arnold’, in T. S. Eliot, The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism (London 1933) p. 119.
Kingdom | Remember us’ (p. 81), while Harry, we are told, ‘has crossed
the frontier | Beyond which safety and danger have a different meaning’.18

There are two possible outcomes of a ‘cross’. The first is a crossed interval,
a place associated with solitude, lunacy, and dreams – a cipher for the
closed world of private thought. The second is a crossed frontier, the ‘cross’
becoming the means by which we journey beyond the ‘frontiers of con-
sciousness’ and encounter new worlds of ‘different meaning[s]’.

Eliot sometimes imagines this second outcome as a process of ‘triangula-
tion’. Writing to I. A. Richards in 1929, he suggested that the best way to
tackle their shared concern with the ‘belief matter’ was to ‘plot it out so as
to work from different approaches, and so hope to get some sort of triangu-
lation by it’ (Letters, iv. 399). Two minds, approaching a single subject from
different angles, might discover a new kind of understanding that arises
from but moves beyond the convergence of their individual insights.

As Anne Stillman observes of Eliot’s own thinking, his habitual transform-
ation of a ‘binary into a trinity’ results in a new kind of intersection, the
third point of the triangle ‘intensifying the collision and eluding it’.19
Christopher Ricks offers another example of how Eliot uses triangulation
as an epistemological strategy: ‘In 1922 Eliot needed to compare English
and American poetry. This involved him in comparing the English lan-
guage as it was in the two countries; and this in turn meant invoking a third
term, French, in order to get purchase on the other two’.20 This time Eliot
works backwards, using the distant, transposed insight of the ‘third term’ in
order to reinterpret the relation between the original two terms. In Eliot’s
later years, the possibility of verse drama became the focus of his triangu-
lating thought. The distinctive voice of verse drama, he argued, is the prod-
uct of a cross, arising as the author gives ‘some bit of himself’ to his
character and as that character draws out ‘latent potentialities of [the
author’s] own being’: to write verse drama, he claimed, was to write in the
‘third voice’.21

In Eliot’s doctoral dissertation, Knowledge and Experience in the Philosophy of
F. H. Bradley (completed 1916; published 1964), this work of triangulation
is not only a necessary epistemological strategy, but the very ‘life of a soul’:

The point of view (or finite centre) has for its object one consistent
world . . . the life of a soul does not consist in the contemplation of one

18 The Family Reunion, in The Complete Poems and Plays of T. S. Eliot (London 1969)
p. 342.
19 Anne Stillman, ‘T. S. Eliot’, in Joyce, T. S. Eliot, Auden, Beckett, ed. Adrian Poole,
Great Shakespeareans XII (London 2012) pp. 57–104: 61.
20 Christopher Ricks, T. S. Eliot and Prejudice (London 1988) p. 204.
21 ‘The Three Voices of Poetry’, On Poetry, p. 94.
consistent world but in the painful task of unifying (to a greater or less extent) jarring and incompatible ones, and passing, when possible, from two or more discordant viewpoints to a higher which shall somehow include and transmute them.22

The ‘life of a soul’ is the labour to move from the individual ‘point of view’ to a more complete vision of the world. This labour is the work of drawing other ‘viewpoints’ into adjacency, crossing these subject worlds of experience against each other in the hope of attaining ‘one consistent world’. Eliot’s language anticipates the more explicit figures of triangulation that recur in his later work, the ‘two or more’ points passing into a ‘higher’ point – a ‘third term’ – which ‘shall somehow include and transmute them’. This ‘consistent world’ might be a shared realm of subjective experience or an unmediated perception of the material world; at this early stage in Eliot’s thinking, this ‘consistent world’ is one that transcends the sphere of private experience, but which does not necessarily transcend the sphere of material existence. Nevertheless, the ‘life of a soul’, in this early account of epistemology and being, consists in the painful labour towards apprehensions of a knowledge that lies beyond the frontiers of individual consciousness.

In Eliot’s later work it becomes increasingly apparent that this question about what it is possible to know beyond the closed world of private experience is also a question about the kinds of metaphysical commitment that we might be able to sustain. In 1934, Eliot introduced a collocation of three terms – ‘two worlds’, ‘cross’, ‘point of intersection’ – that would recur throughout his work as a way of figuring the self-transcending ambitions of poetry:23 ‘In every moment of time you live where two worlds cross, \( \text{In every moment you live at a point of intersection} \). There is an echo here of Edwyn Hoskyns’s translation of Barth’s *Epistle to the Romans*: ‘two worlds meet and go apart, two planes intersect, the one known and the other unknown ... the point on the line of intersection at which the relation becomes observable and observed is Jesus’.24 The ‘cross’ is silently present, too, within Barth’s text: this moment of visibility is ultimately identified as the ‘Cross of Christ’.25 This memory of Barth’s commentary suggests that the ‘cross’ of verse achieves something that corresponds to, or is continuous

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22 T. S. Eliot, *Knowledge and Experience in the Philosophy of F. H. Bradley* (London 1964) pp. 147–9.
23 See in particular ‘Little Gidding’: ‘In concord at this intersection time ... Between two worlds become much like each other’ (*CP*, p. 204).
24 Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns (London 1933) p. 29.
25 Ibid., p. 150.
with, the ‘Cross’ of Christian revelation. The ‘cross’ is where something truly unknown penetrates our own sphere of consciousness. This ‘unknown’ is a world that lies beyond our own world of words and self, a world of timelessness and transcendence which meets our own and becomes visible through the work of the incarnate Christ – or (and on this Eliot is very unsure) through the labour of the poet. The ‘point of intersection’, in this account, reveals the possibility of belief in a metaphysical reality.

But there is also an echo here of Matthew Arnold’s ‘Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse’ (1855): ‘Wandering between two worlds, one dead, | The other powerless to be born’. In a reversal of Barth’s terms, the world that lies beyond Arnold is not ‘unknown’ because it is timeless and transcendent, but because it is a secular world of ‘action and pleasure’ to which Arnold, still drawn to the metaphysics of Christianity, is unable or unwilling to commit himself. To wander in the space between ‘two worlds’ is not to find oneself reaching for eternity but rather to find oneself unable to relinquish the metaphysical commitments that have become ‘a dead time’s exploded dream’. As Eliot observed in 1941, Arnold’s poem does not reveal the possibility of belief but rather voices ‘a moment of historic doubt, recorded by its most representative mind’ (CP, iv, p. 211).

Eliot’s figurative language for the self-transcending ambitions of his verse arises, in 1934, out of these crossed voices of Barth and Arnold. It exists at, and as, the point of intersection between their competing accounts of what it might mean to reach beyond the limits of the known world. And it sustains but transmutes this hesitation between the scepticism of the poet and the faith of the theologian or saint, finding in the criss-crossed music of verse as peculiarly poetic version of this uncertain, perhaps impossible, labour towards belief in that which lies ‘beyond’ our word-bound, self-bound world.

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Eliot’s poetics of the ‘cross’ works to connect the poet’s occupation with that of the saint, the business of ‘making patterns with words’ with the work of labouring towards apprehensions of that second, perhaps transcendent, world that lies ‘beyond’ our own. In the second part of this discussion I want to trace out some of the ways in which Eliot’s theoretical conception of what verse is and the kinds of apprehension that it affords plays out within the linguistic textures of The Waste Land (1922). In the last part of this essay, I will examine the ways in which Eliot’s conversion in

26 Matthew Arnold, ed. Miriam Allott and Robert H. Super (Oxford 1986) p. 161.
27 Ibid., p. 164.
28 Ibid., p. 162.
1927 brought a new urgency to these questions about what we might know when we read verse, but for now I want to demonstrate the ways in which this desire to go beyond the ‘frontiers of consciousness’ animates Eliot’s poetics throughout his career, even in this early and self-consciously modern(ist) poem.

Writing to Ford Madox Ford in 1923, Eliot claimed that there were only ‘about thirty good lines in The Waste Land . . . The rest is ephemeral’ (Letters, ii. 188). These lines, he later clarified, were the ‘twenty-nine lines of the water-dripping song in the last part’ (Letters, ii. 240). Not only did he think these lines from ‘What the Thunder said’ were the best he had written, but he described the process of their composition as ‘almost automatic writing’; these were also the lines he had in mind when he likened writing poetry to ‘communion with the Divine’. The ‘water-dripping song’ seemed to Eliot to be a superlative instance of that poetry which arises from and brings knowledge of that moment in which the world of human thought is at a ‘point of intersection’ with a world of meaning – whether occult or divine – beyond it.

The song begins in a waste, dry land. Eliot’s deserts are in-between spaces, barren intervals crossed by dreams and thoughts and walking figures. In Ash-Wednesday, the ‘last desert between the last blue rocks’ is an emblem for the condition of life lived between birth and dying, profit and loss, affirmed faith and worldly disaffection (p. 95). In ‘Burnt Norton’, the attributes of the desert – ‘deprivation’, ‘destitution’, ‘desiccation’ – are abstracted and transposed into a description of a deserted city, a place not empty of people but evacuated of meaning (p. 182). There are echoes in Eliot’s desert lands of Arnold’s closing image in ‘Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse’, the ‘desert’ that is the place of untenable but unresigned commitment to the English church and the Christian faith. The desert is an intermediary space, a place of transition in which apprehensions of a transcending or transcendent reality cannot – or can no longer – be sustained. It is the place of solipsism, filled only with the ‘thoughts of a dry brain in a dry season’ (p. 33); it is an emblem for what Seamus Perry calls the ‘self-bound verbal space’ of modernity.

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29 Quoted in Eliot, Poems, p. 686.
30 Pascal’s Penseés, ed. W. F. Trotter (London 1931) p. 1. Valerie Eliot confirmed that these were the lines Eliot had in mind in 1971; see Eliot, Poems, p. 686.
31 Matthew Arnold, ed. Allott and Super, p. 165.
32 Seamus Perry, The Connell Guide to T. S. Eliot’s The Waste Land (London 2014) p. 101.
In this song of the between-place, words are organised according to criss-crossing patterns of twofold repetition:

Here is no water but only rock
Rock and no water and the sandy road
The road winding above among the mountains
Which are mountains of rock without water
If there were water we should stop and drink
Amongst the rock one cannot stop or think
Sweat is dry and feet are in the sand
If there were only water amongst the rock
Dead mountain mouth of carious teeth that cannot spit
Here one can neither stand nor lie nor sit
There is not even solitude in the mountains
But red sullen faces sneer and snarl
From the doors of mudcracked houses

(p. 68)

The word at the end of one line repeats at the beginning of the next: ‘rock | Rock’, ‘road | The road’, ‘the mountains | Which are mountains’, ‘without water | If there were water’. Alongside this sequence of paired words there are other, more local patterns that are similarly twofold in structure. There is the repetition and reversal of chiasmus: ‘no water but only rock | Rock and no water’. There are parallel phrases with minor modulations: ‘stop and drink . . . stop and think’, ‘There is not even silence in the mountains . . . There is not even solitude in the mountains’. And there are rhymes and echoes that re-sound the exact repetitions as more approximate acoustic pairs: ‘rock . . . road’, ‘spit . . . sit’, ‘mountains . . . rain’. These twofold patterns create a verse texture in which there are many points of intersection: the line-break between repeated words, the turn at the midpoint of the chiasmus, the consonance of rhyme. The point of intersection, for Eliot, is to generate that other ‘point of intersection’ that is a new thing, a momentary reach into the world that lies beyond the horizons of our own. But the criss-crossings of this verse seem unproductive. They are barren, generating nothing: there is ‘no water’ in this desert land. And yet ‘no water’ is not quite nothing. As the absence of water becomes compelling, these repetitions conjure ‘water’ as a recurrent sound within the poem: ‘no water . . . no water . . . without water . . . If there were water . . . If there were only water’. The beginnings of a mirage are here, ‘water’ conjured over dry land.

‘Rock’ and ‘water’ are twinned words, occurring in close proximity throughout The Waste Land. In the first stanza of the ‘water-dripping song’,
‘rock’ was the sign of drought, a word that conjured only ‘water’, the absent presence of a thirsty land. But as the song takes up the refrain, ‘If there were water’, for a third time, we find that now there is ‘no rock’. The song begins to entertain the possibility that if there were no ‘rock’, or if it existed only in the dream-realm of ‘If there were’, then, perhaps, there might be ‘water’:

If there were water  
And no rock  
If there were rock  
And also water  
And water  
A spring  
A pool among the rock  
If there were the sound of water only  
Not the cicada  
And the dry grass singing  
But the sound of water over a rock  
Where the hermit-thrush sings in the pine trees  
Drip drop drip drop drop drop drop  
But there is no water

(pp. 68–9)

For a moment, there is ‘rock | And also water’. Water begins to flow, no longer the echoing sound of absent ‘water’ but a fresh current that grows fuller and deeper, first a ‘spring’ and then a ‘pool among the rock’. The repetitions of the water-dripping song seem to have brought the rains, conjuring fresh water out of the recurrences of poetic language. But just as these audible-but-invisible waters seem to have become a real presence within the landscape, the old, conditional refrain returns, reminding us that we are dealing with the realm of the unreal and that this water is only a mirage or, more accurately, an auditory hallucination: ‘If there were the sound of water only’. The refrain reminds us that this reach into the realm of the unreal or the perpetually possible is achieved only through the repetitions of poetic language and, as such, that the ‘water’ we discover there is not the sound of real water but only the fluent ‘music’ arising from the patterned recurrences of verse. Poetry, in this account, leads us into apprehensions of that which once seemed unknowable. But these apprehensions remain essentially poetic, word-conjured illusions that resemble but which are ultimately discontinuous with those realities that exceed or transcend our own. We are left with the dryness of the land and the ‘self-bound verbal space’ of modern poetry, unable to reach beyond
ourselves and our language into a world that lies beyond the frontiers of our own.

But just as the ‘sound of water’ is about to be dismissed as a word-conjured hallucination, a hermit thrush is discovered singing in the pine trees. It sings what Eliot identifies in his ‘Notes on The Waste Land’ as its distinctive ‘water-dripping song’ (p. 76): ‘Drip drop drip drop drop drop drop’. This song does not arise from the verbal repetitions and intersections of Eliot’s verse. But neither is it the sound of real water. The presence of the singing thrush keeps open the possibility that what we hear when we listen in to the recurrent music of verse is something that has a real existence beyond its linguistic and acoustic form – something that is real and distinct and which sings to us of possibilities that lie beyond the horizon of our dry, small world.

And so Eliot’s ‘water-dripping song’ – a somewhat less assured version of the thrush’s song – is another iteration of that dilemma that is at the centre of his poetic thinking: the recognition that there are two possible outcomes of a cross. The cross can produce an empty interval, a place in which we might conjure only the unreal, the mirageous, or the hallucinatory. Or the cross can produce a third term, a new voice that arises from the intersection of two other voices but which sings with its own peculiar accent in a dimension that is the extension and transmutation of our own. The thrush becomes an emblem for this hope that poetry might take us beyond ourselves, enabling (to use the words of ‘The Dry Salvages’) that labour of ‘ardour and selflessness and self-surrender’ (p. 200) that ends in apprehension of the ‘point of intersection of the timeless | With time’.

In ‘Burnt Norton’, the thrush sings once more, its song a sign for, a gesture towards, a reality which we have forfeited or which we have not yet known, calling in ‘response to | The unheard music in the shrubbery’ and calling us to follow those ‘other echoes’ into the ‘rose-garden’ that was – and which might still be – our ‘first world’ (p. 179).

Eliot finds a new figure for the uncertainty of this epistemological strategy of triangulation in the stanza immediately following his ‘water-dripping song’:

Who is the third who walks always beside you?
When I count, there are only you and I together
But when I look ahead up the white road
There is always another one walking beside you
Gliding wrapt in a brown mantle

(p. 69)

In his ‘Notes’, Eliot comments that these lines were prompted by Shackleton’s account of crossing South Georgia and how, at the ‘extremity of their strength’, his party was under ‘the constant delusion that there was
one more member than could actually be counted’ (p. 76). But there is also an echo of Christ’s resurrection appearance (on the third day) to two of his disciples on the road to Emmaus. The third man – like the ‘third term’ and the ‘third voice’ – is a figure for that which exceeds comprehension, disrupting our empirical counts of what the world is like and our unbelieving assumptions about what happens to dead men. And yet Eliot hesitates as to the nature of this strange knowledge. By crossing his own, imperfect memory of Shackleton’s account with the scriptural narrative, he keeps two options in play: 33 the third man might be a ‘delusion’, the dream of a self-bound mind, or he might be (as Shackleton himself thought) a manifestation of ‘Providence’, the meeting of the timeless and the time-bound made visible in the person of the incarnate Christ. 34 The ghost, belonging neither to the material world nor to eternity, becomes a figure for this inability or refusal to choose between a materialist conception of poetics and epistemology and a Christian one. This postponement of the moment in which we have to resolve the dilemma, deciding once and for all what, exactly, it is that we have encountered, becomes the mark of Eliot’s poetry of the 1930s and 1940s.

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Eliot’s conversion to Christianity in 1927 did nothing to alleviate or resolve the dilemma that, in its early form, was given fullest expression in Knowledge and Experience and The Waste Land. Rather, it made the dilemma all the more acute. In the final part of this essay, I want to sketch out some of the reasons why this dilemma became increasingly important after 1927 and then show how the attempt to sustain this dilemma became the defining condition of Eliot’s mature poetics – the condition both of his own verse and of that modern poetry which he was most willing to commend.

In his essays of the late 1920s and 1930s, Eliot framed this dilemma in explicitly philosophical terms. ‘There is no avoiding that dilemma’, Eliot wrote in 1929, ‘you must be either a naturalist or a supernaturalist’. 35 In 1932, writing for The Listener on the subject of the ‘modern dilemma’, Eliot framed it as a choice between communism and Christianity. 36 And in 1937 he extended this thought, claiming that the ‘modern dilemma’ was the choice between the ‘secular philosophy’ of communism and the

33 Shackleton actually records that it had seemed to him ‘that we were four, not three’: Ernest Shackleton, South: The Story of Shackleton’s Last Expedition, 1914-1917 (London 1999) p. 211.
34 Ibid., p. 211.
35 ‘Second Thoughts about Humanism’, Selected Essays, p. 485.
36 T. S. Eliot, ‘The Modern Dilemma: Christianity and Communism’, The Listener (1932) pp. 382–3.
‘revelation’ of Christianity. The epistemological dilemma of *The Waste Land* becomes an all-encompassing ‘modern dilemma’. This dilemma is peculiarly ‘modern’ because it arises from the dissatisfactions of life lived within the closed, immanent frame of secular modernity and from the dissatisfaction, in particular, with the idea that there are no meanings beyond those which can be apprehended by the human mind. As Eliot observed in 1937: ‘the conversion to Christianity’ – the willingness to embrace a possibility other than those laid before us in the modern age – ‘is apt to be due . . . to a latent dissatisfaction with all secular philosophy’. This ‘modern dilemma’ became peculiarly pressing for Eliot after his conversion because it was now no longer an epistemological experiment but a question about the reality and relevance of those meanings that seemed excluded from modern life but to which he had nevertheless decided to commit himself, both as matters of doctrine and as principles for daily living. As Eliot put it in 1933, to come to believe in anything is to join that ‘bitter fraternity which lives on the higher level of doubt; no longer the doubting which is just play with ideas . . . but which is a daily battle’.

Eliot’s poetry in the years following his conversion is thus preoccupied with this uncomfortable zone between metaphysical scepticism and supernatural insight that is the place of embattled ‘belief’. Barry Spurr observes that ‘Eliot’s poetry from his Christian period . . . focuses, repeatedly and profoundly, on the difficulties of faith and the elusiveness of transcendental experience, while urging that it remains necessary, constantly, to strive towards these things’. And yet, as Ricks notes, such a preoccupation with the tense interval between unbelief and faith can turn back on itself, becoming a habit of dwelling in and dwelling on that strange zone created by a suspended choice. Writing of the ‘between-poems’ that come after *The Waste Land* and before *Four Quartets*, he notes: ‘it is not their plight or their position merely, this being between, it is their occupation and their element’. *Ash-Wednesday* (1930) is, in many ways, the superlative ‘between-poem’, an attempt to occupy that space ‘between the usual subjects of poetry and “devotional” verse’ and caught between affirmed faith and worldly disaffection (*Letters*, v. 288).

But it is ‘Marina’, written shortly after *Ash-Wednesday* and prefiguring the concerns of *Four Quartets*, that gives the clearest picture of what it means to

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37 *Revelation*, ed. Baillie and Martin, pp. 38–9.
38 Ibid., p. 12.
39 Quoted in Russell Kirk, *Eliot and His Age: T. S. Eliot’s Moral Imagination in the Twentieth Century* (Wilmington, Del. 2008) p. 181.
40 Barry Spurr, ‘Anglo-Catholic in Religion’: *T. S. Eliot and Christianity* (Cambridge 2010) p. 113.
41 Ricks, *T. S. Eliot and Prejudice*, p. 208.
occupy this uncomfortable zone between metaphysical scepticism and supernatural insight, as well as the reasons why it might be preferable, if not advantageous, to avoid resolving the dilemma. The poem begins with a ‘woodthrush singing through the fog’ (p. 107). In his conclusion to *The Use of Poetry*, Eliot wondered ‘why, for all of us, of all that we have heard, seen, felt, in a lifetime, do certain images recur, charged with emotion rather than others? The song of one bird…’. The peculiar charge of the thrush’s song is its insistent gesture towards a world that lies beyond the frontiers of our own. The hermit-thrush sang in *The Waste Land* of a dream of distant water; the ‘bird’ in *Ash-Wednesday* sang that ‘ancient rhyme’ that speaks of recovering that which has been lost or excluded from our world: ‘Redeem the time, redeem the dream’ (p. 93). The woodthrush’s song arises out of the crossed voices of these two birds, its song an extension and transmutation of their songs into that uncertain ‘third’ dimension that may or may not be the place in which our world comes into contact with the unknown world beyond.

The poem is occupied with questions about what, exactly, we might encounter at the ‘point of intersection’ – the place of convergence and also, perhaps, the place where the known touches the unknown. In the place ‘where all the waters meet’, a figure comes into uncertain focus: ‘What is this face, less clear and clearer | the pulse in the arm, less strong and stronger – | Given or lent?’ (p. 107). Marina is at once an unreal figure, her faint life ‘given’ to her by the dreaming Pericles, and a warm and real woman, her strong pulse lending its vitality to her dying father. Marina – the woman a proxy for the poem itself – is suspended between the imagined and the real, between the dreams of a dying mind and the reality of a ‘world of time beyond’ us (p. 108). This hesitation as to what, exactly, we might come to know at the ‘point of intersection’ is sustained, as a slightly different kind of problem, in the juxtaposition of title and epigraph. The title, ‘Marina’, alludes to Shakespeare’s *Pericles*; the epigraph is a quotation from Seneca’s *Hercules Furens*. The intended effect, Eliot explained, was a ‘crisscross between Hercules waking up to find that he had slain his children, and Pericles waking up to find his child alive’ (*Letters*, v. 68). At the ‘point of intersection’ – in these ghostly, dream-like waters – there is real and troubling uncertainty about the reality of what we have begun to apprehend.

William Empson, in his 1931 review of ‘Marina’, saw this dilemma clearly: the ‘dramatic power’ of the poem’s symbolism, he argued, lay in ‘the balance maintained between otherworldliness and humanism; the essence of the poem is a vision of an order, a spiritual state, which he can conceive and cannot

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42 Eliot, *Use of Poetry*, p. 148.
This is the ‘modern dilemma’ as to whether we might believe in that which transcends our private worlds of knowledge and experience: in the language of Eliot’s critical prose, it is the choice between ‘humanism’ and metaphysical or Christian belief. And yet this is not so much a clear-cut dilemma as a ‘balance’, an incipient choice that, for the time being, remains out of focus. As Kenner observes, this poem faces towards ‘a domain of waking dream’, its gaze turned towards that distant frontier where we might become aware of things that were otherwise unimaginable but without perceiving a distinction between the dream of sleep and the wakeful vision, the imaginative projection and the real ‘unknown’ (p. 108). For Pericles, this distinction constitutes a potentially tragic dilemma: a choice between acknowledging the enclosure of his own world, and thus the absence of his dead daughter, and affirming the reality of another world and accepting the imminence of his own death. But this dilemma remains out of focus, suspended. In these uncertain, foggy regions – littoral waters that are peculiarly lyrical, the place of ‘-song’ and ‘breath’ – it is possible to sustain the thought of a nearly realised reconciliation between father and daughter, between the world of time and the timelessness of the beyond.

For Eliot himself, the modern dilemma presents a potentially catastrophic choice between that which is self-consciously modern and that which is explicitly Christian; to choose is either to disengage from the imaginative frameworks of modernity (and modernism) or to disavow one’s commitment to the metaphysics of Christianity. To be a poet writing in the modern era and a confessed Christian means that this dilemma is real and pressing, but also that it must remain suspended, resolving neither into a secular poetics nor into “devotional” verse. Eliot’s poetics – like the lyrical, littoral waters of ‘Marina’ – enable him to occupy the interval in which we might push beyond the ‘frontiers of consciousness’ but without committing ourselves to either a secular or a Christian interpretation of the experience. On the one hand, this is something of a compromise with secular modernity, the metaphysics of Christianity presented as an extension of consciousness available to the private reader but not insisted on as an integral part of reality. But, on the other hand, it keeps open the possibility that poetry, with its tendency to make known the unknown, might demonstrate the necessity of a more thoroughgoing acceptance of the metaphysics of Christianity which insists on the reality of both the known and the unknown. A third option – and one that Eliot only hints at in *Four Quartets* – is that in this uncertain zone between

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43 William Empson, *Argufying: Essays on Literature and Culture*, ed. John Haffenden (London 1987) p. 356.
44 Hugh Kenner, *Historical Fictions* (San Francisco 1990) p. 216.
worlds we discover an experience that is an approximation of that ‘impossible union | Of spheres of existence’ that is ‘Incarnation’ (p. 200).

But Eliot’s poetics is more than an attempt to find an accommodation between his poetic vocation, defined as it was by his involvement with modernism, and his Christian faith: as his early work attests, his concern with the ‘frontiers of consciousness’ pre-dates his 1927 conversion. His concern was ultimately with what poetry is and the kinds of understanding that it affords uniquely. And this concern has its roots not in his personal adoption of a metaphysical framework but in his dissatisfaction with the imaginative affordances of ‘secular philosophy’. And so Eliot’s poetics is more than a personal commitment to the criss-crossed textures of his verse; it is, rather, a distinctly modern poetics that centres on the idea that poetry, at its best, gives us a way of evading the enclosures of modernity, finding an expansion of consciousness that is both mysterious and, in some sense, profoundly necessary. This is a poetics not confined to the modernist tradition but engaged with questions about the place and condition of poetry in the modern age. And so, when Eliot was asked to write a birthday tribute for Walter de la Mare – a poet who, though contemporaneous, was certainly not a modernist – his commendation was directed towards the ways in which de la Mare’s poetry occupied that strange zone at the ‘frontiers of consciousness’:

Or when the lawn
Is pressed by unseen feet, and ghosts return
Gently at twilight, gently go at dawn,
The sad intangible who grieve and yearn;

When the familiar scene is suddenly strange
Or the well known is what we have yet to learn,
And two worlds meet, and intersect, and change;
(‘To Walter de la Mare’, 1947; p. 217)

In the convergence of their voices, Eliot articulates what the best modern poetry – modernist or otherwise – can do: it takes the reader to that place of intersection where what is known comes into contact with the unknown, and the modern mind finds a new freedom, ranging beyond the limits of secular modernity but without needing to affirm the reality of the occult, the divine, or the transcendental.