POETIC QUESTIONS: INTERROGATIVE IN THE POETRY OF

W. B. YEATS. T. S. ELIOT. AND WALLACE STEVENS

by

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A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Graduate Department of English
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ABSTRACT

Poetic Questions: Interrogative in the Poetry of

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This dissertation examines the functions of questions in selected poems by W. B. Yeats, T. S. Eliot, and Wallace Stevens. Interrogative is an effective and flexible force in shaping literary and critical discourses, particularly in its capacity to rupture texts, opening them to new voices and visions and thereby challenging certain conventional definitions of poetry. This thesis seeks to demonstrate how focusing on interrogative patterns in poetry can yield worthwhile readings of individual poems; highlight central and shifting concerns of individual poets; serve as an important basis of comparison between poets; underscore some of the abiding technical and philosophical concerns of a literary period--specifically, Modernism; and emphasize the need to renovate tenacious critical assumptions surrounding certains sorts of poems. The introduction to the thesis provides a theoretical context for the close readings of the poems which follow.

Interrogative is central to Yeats's poetry both thematically and structurally; the
first chapter of this thesis examines the important ways in which interrogative patterns function in Yeats's work, and how changes in these patterns are tied to the poet's continual reconstruction of identity. Chapter II considers how Eliot's poetic questions focus persistent concerns of form and appetite in an effort to point beyond the immediate moment--beyond social and personal pressures in the early poetry, or beyond the time-ridden world to Incarnate meaning in *Four Quartets*. Stevens uses interrogative to the opposite effect, crafting questions which vividly evoke a present which they in fact help to create. The third chapter studies the ways Stevens's poetic questions locate speaker and reader in a reality which is interrogated with increasing urgency in the last poems. The dissertation concludes with a discussion of some of the general characteristics of Modernist poetic questions, speculates on reasons for their development and function, outlines further implications of the thesis's findings, and indicates directions for further research.
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INTRODUCTION

I.

The primary aim of this dissertation is to demonstrate how essential and useful, the interrogative is in shaping literary and critical discourses. To this end, the present study examines the functions of questions in the poetry of W. B. Yeats, T. S. Eliot, and Wallace Stevens. The poetry of Modernism—especially that of Yeats, Eliot, and Stevens—constitutes rich territory for any sort of critical exploration. While the genre, period, and poets considered here have been specifically selected for reasons outlined below, in the broadest sense their presence in this study requires no justification. The importance of questions in literature and literary criticism, however, does not yet enjoy such self-evident significance. This thesis seeks to augment a growing body of work which attempts to remedy this situation.

Questions have been important shaping forces in the development of several contemporary theories of literary hermeneutics. As the readings in this thesis illustrate, they may also prove important catalysts for the revision of these theories. In his introduction to Allegories of Reading, for example, Paul de Man demonstrates how the rhetorical question requires simultaneously literal and figurative meanings which are often divergent; from this finding he extrapolates the self-contradictory and

\[1\] I am using "Modernism" here, and throughout the thesis, to encompass roughly the period 1890-1950.
relative nature of all literary meaning. Hans Robert Jauss subsequently offers a critique of de Man’s assessment which, like de Man’s own, centres around the interrogative. Jauss builds on Hugo Friedrich’s notion of the "lyric question," an interrogative form which differs importantly from the rhetorical question examined by de Man. According to Friedrich,

> This [the lyric question] and the rhetorical question share only the capacity to intensify that which is said. But here it is another sort of intensification, namely, one that moves toward the indefinite and unlimited, even the mysterious. It has no implicit answer. Rather it is purely and simply without one. It steeped the known or the seen in premonition and in an eternal, usually painless, sometimes even joyful, noncomprehension that has no wish to encroach upon the incomprehensible. (qtd. in Jauss 85)

As Jauss observes, this concept of the lyric question opens up certain interpretive avenues by dissolving "the implicit answer suggested and affectively enhanced by its rhetorical counterpart, and in the state of suspense thus created, opens an unexpected horizon of possible meaning that the reader must then concretize through his inquiring aesthetic observations. This description of the aesthetic question has the hermeneutic advantage of being available for use with all grammatical and rhetorical models of the question, models that, in fact, are constantly employed by the lyric" (85-86).

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2 A detailed examination of rhetorical questions, and de Man’s contribution to our reading of them, follows in the discussion of "Among School Children" in chapter 1. below.

3 This quotation from Hugo Friedrich’s *Epochen der italienischen Lyrik* (449) is translated into English by Michael Hays, editor and translator of Jauss’s *Question and Answer: Forms of Dialogic Understanding*. All quotations from Jauss, whether they are his direct comments or comments quoted by him from other sources, will be given here in Hays’s English translation. From this point forward only page numbers from Jauss will be given.
Such a notion accounts impressively for questions such as that which closes Yeats's "Among School Children." But as this thesis shows, poetry employs a wide variety of other interrogative types. Jauss recognizes this: "Lyric poetry. . . . can also pose questions for which one has long known the answers, but poses them under poetic conditions that nudge the predetermined answer into the 'indefinite and unlimited,' that is, into the process of further modification for which the reader who knows how to ask questions is responsible" (86). Accordingly, Jauss extends Friedrich's view of the lyric question as one which is mysteriously unanswerable, and redefines it to include a range of questions of varying purposes and forms which may or may not have answers. However, even his broader definition assumes strictures which are ultimately undermined by the functioning of certain poetic questions, notably several of the questions appearing in the Modernist poems examined here.

For instance, Jauss asserts that the lyric question "gladly responds to the need to have answers to questions dealing with the ultimate meaning of life. . . . by bringing an imaginary authority into play" (91). Yet he does not grant this authority enough autonomy to be viewed as separate in any way from the speaking voice, the lyric "I." Jauss follows Bakhtin in considering lyric poetry a monologic discourse (a practice shared by several critics of Modernist poetry), despite his own depiction of the dialogic in the verse of Goethe which he chooses for his examples ("Then, at the high point of the hymn, it [the lyric question] becomes dialogic" [91]).

Even if the poem is directed toward a "you," as when question and answer are split into two speaking roles, or when the poem fabricates a dialogue with itself, lyric speech remains predominantly monologic. The voice of the "you" toward whom the lyric question can turn does
not emanate from some external other as it does in prose. It remains within the subjectively experienced world through which the lyric "I" and, by extension, the reader too is disclosed. Although the lyric poem is the preeminent medium of self-expression among monologic fictions, here an "I" seems to be speaking only to itself, as if it had no listeners. Because of this, it can still become dialogic on a second level insofar as it draws nearer to the reader through its questions and answers--through questions that it puts to the reader or uses to make insinuations about him, and through irritating answers that must be probed by the reader, since their meaning remains open and demands the reader's participation. (91)

The criteria upon which Jauss bases primary and secondary levels of discourse are unclear. Other than his citing of Bakhtin, there is no reasoning provided to explain his distinction between primary monologic and "second level" dialogic poetic speech. What differentiates the two? Why would the identical verbal exchange be considered monologic when it occurs in poetry, and dialogic when it occurs in the novel? Gerald Bruns is a contemporary critic who attempts to contextualize and amend this fundamental Bakhtinian distinction, noting that Spring and All, The Waste Land, and The Cantos "are heteroglot poems" (Gelpi 31); but even he finally adopts Bakhtin's view that "[t]he world of poetry, no matter how many contradictions and insoluble conflicts the poet develops within it, is always illumined by one unitary and indisputable discourse. Contradictions, conflicts, and doubts remain in the subject, in thoughts, in living experiences--in short, in the subject matter--but they do not enter the language itself. In poetry, even discourse about doubts must be cast in a discourse that cannot be doubted" (Bakhtin 286).4

4 Bruns is not alone in his appropriation of Bakhtin (nor, for that matter, in his use of Stevens as primary whipping boy in the movement for heteroglot poetry); Perloff, Kenner, and others have adopted similar views. See, for instance, Perloff's
As Jauss himself suggests, questions and answers do establish dialogic
discourse in poems, a discourse which need not be relegated to secondary status.
Questions in poems may introduce a plurality of voices or perspectives in several
ways. They may signal that there is more than one voice present. The numerous
questions of The Waste Land work this way, as the discussion of questions in "A
Game of Chess" in chapter II below illustrates. But questions may also accomplish
this in a shorter, less pluralistic, more "lyric" poem, such as Stevens's "Questions
Are Remarks." By giving us the child Peter's question directly--"'Mother, what is
that'" (Stevens, CP 462)--the speaker makes another voice actually present in the
poem. This question itself makes another (the "Mother") immediately present, in a
way in which the mere mention of her by the speaker in the following stanza does
not. These are not voices simply interpreted by the poem's speaker; instead, they are
voices actually interpolated into the poem. Nor is it punctuation alone which
accomplishes this. The question quoted creates another discrete presence (presences,
if we include the mother), and thus emphasizes the speaker as other. Its mere asking
about an event the speaker has already described draws our attention out, toward a
world in which the speaker's viewpoint is only one among a number of perspectives.

Questions may also work against the notion of monologic discourse by
disrupting perceptions of psychological unity, whether this is the unity of a poem's
author or speaker, or the unity of a single self. In Yeats's "Vacillation," for instance.

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essay, "Revolving in Crystal: The Supreme Fiction and the Impasse of Modernist
Lyric" (Gelpi 41-64), and Kenner's A Homemade World (esp. 74-75). (I am
indebted to Bruns for the Kenner reference.)
the close association of the poet with the speaker (the lyric "I") is intentional and undeniable. Yet its questions and answers call attention to a range of voices entering the poem, voices which on the evidence of the text do not belong necessarily either to Yeats or to the speaking "I" (e.g., "What's the meaning of all song? / Let all things pass away" [V 502]). or which the text suggests may belong to both equally (e.g., the questions of the Heart and the Soul in section VII [V 502]).

Certainly the subject matter of the poem, as the title clearly forewarns, is full of Bakhtin's "contradictions, conflicts, and doubts." But to say that these conflicts, figured prominently in the poem's questions, "do not enter the language itself" is to miss the point of the poem, which, with the essential aid of its questions, seeks specifically to "enter the language": that is, to establish artistic identity within a multifaceted, language-based heritage resistant to teleology, rather than within the unifying single Word of Christian belief.

Let us consider another, more "lyric" example of how poetic questions can disrupt perceptions of a unified speaker. It is pertinent again to use the work of Stevens, who draws the most fire from Bakhtinian critics for his (in their view) abidingly monologic poetry. As the discussion of "As You Leave the Room" in chapter III below makes clear, the central question of the poem casts serious doubt upon any determination of who the "You" and/or the "I" referred to in the poem's opening lines may be. The sudden appearance of the "I" asking the question in lines

5 All quotations from Yeats's poems are taken from the texts in the variorum edition; from this point forward they will be designated by "V" and the appropriate page number.
8-10 "unfix[es] the subject" (90), to use Belsey’s terms, making us uncertain as to whether we are privy to a dialogue between two individuals occurring in the "real" time of the poem; a dialogue being carried on between two distinct points of view, one of which is remembered or imagined, one of which is occurring in "real" poetic time; or a dialogue carried on, in the same poetic moment, between two parts of one self.

*You speak. You say:* Today’s character is not
A skeleton out of its cabinet. Nor am I.

That poem about the pineapple, the one
About the mind as never satisfied.

The one about the credible hero, the one
About summer, are not what skeletons think about.

I wonder, have I lived a skeleton’s life,
As a disbeliever in reality,

A countryman of all the bones in the world? (OP 117)

The question here does not clearly establish the "you" of the opening lines as the presence of an external other in the way that the question of Peter in "Questions Are Remarks" did. But it does explode the notion of a unified speaker, both by the introduction of the "I" as opposed (perhaps) to the "you," and by evoking the notion of an "I" which may not even exist (the I who may have lived the skeleton’s life). It is not a "discourse about doubts. . . cast in a discourse that cannot be doubted," for, as the question demonstrates, it is not only that we cannot locate the speaker; whoever the speaker is, is literally calling into doubt a wider discourse than that contained in the poem. If he has lived a skeleton’s life, what is the nature of the discourse of that
life, that is, of the poems written by the speaker which are specifically listed prior to the question? Are they, too, constructs without a foundation in the real? The question here problematizes more than identity. While it may not create a dialogue of voice within the poem, it does inscribe a dialogue between this poem and other poems, between this reality and other realities (or, as the final lines would have it, the real and the unreal). It is a question which points beyond the discourse in which it is immediately contained, and thus beyond the "I" responsible for that discourse.

Finally, questions work against the notion of poetry as a monologic discourse in their pointing to listeners and readers (Jauss's view of the latter notwithstanding). The first question of Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"--"Oh, do not ask, 'What is it?' / Let us go and make our visit" (Eliot, CP 13)--illustrates this capacity of questions most clearly; many of the questions in The Waste Land have a similar effect. In the pointed language of this exchange from the second section of "Little Gidding," questions implicate the "I" as well as the "familiar compound ghost" as listener(s):

So I assumed a double part, and cried
And heard another's voice cry: 'What! are you here?'
Although we were not. I was still the same,
Knowing myself yet being someone other --
And he a face still forming; yet the words sufficed
To compel the recognition they preceded. (Eliot, CP 217)

Arguably, the genres of these poems enable— even encourage— questions to function in this way. Yet the questions in lyric verse also may point to auditors outside of the immediate poetic context. The questions in one of the most lyrical sections of Four Quartets, the fourth section of "Burnt Norton" discussed in chapter II below, draw
attention to the reader by their repeated use of the plural pronoun, which insinuates the reader into the general fate envisioned by the speaker:

Will the sunflower turn to us, will the clematis Stray down, bend to us; tendril and spray Clutch and cling? Chill Fingers of yew be curled Down on us? (Eliot, CP 193-4)

The intentional shaping of these questions, which highlights the sinking down into death evoked by these lines, emphasizes the eyes of the reader more than the voice of the speaker. The repetitive phrasing, alliteration, and urgent, inquiring tone of the questions also make the reader aware of the role he or she is asked to play, whether that role is one of choosing an answer to the queries, of simply agreeing that the fate they portend is indeed inescapable, or of interpreting the response of the kingfisher’s wing to these questions in the following lines.

A keener demand, which calls yet more attention to the reader, is made in the questions of canto IX of Stevens’s "The Auroras of Autumn": "Shall we be found hanging in the trees next spring? / Of what disaster is this the imminence: / Bare limbs, bare trees and a wind as sharp as salt?" (Stevens, CP 419). The first question again appears to implicate the reader with its inclusive "we"; its potentially violent image, coming (as it does in context) completely unexpectedly, also startles the reader into wondering whether s/he forms a part of this "we," or whether it refers only to the couple portrayed in the previous stanza. In either case, the plane of monologic discourse is broken by the question.

This rupture is underscored by the second question, which reads like a riddle.
Again, the menacing imagery involves the reader more urgently than usual in attempting to solve it, as it appears that someone's life--perhaps the reader's--is headed for disaster. The following, final stanza of the canto, with its apocalyptic imagery, prolongs the reader's engagement with the issues raised in the questions. These questions are multi-directional, pointedly bringing the reader into the text in order to urge him or her to look out. These are not questions asked by Jauss's "'I' [which] seems to be speaking only to itself, as if it had no listeners" (91). The dialogic discourse these questions imply does not seem "second level" in any way, but essential to any full reading of the passage.

The close readings of Modernist poetic questions presented in this thesis are not meant to subvert completely such theories of poetic questioning as that put forward by Jauss, nor even more encompassing theories of literary hermeneutics such as that of Bakhtin. These readings can and should be used, however, to make us more critically aware of the assumptions and implications of these theories. For instance, the present readings of poetic questions indicate that Jauss's notion of the lyric question requires some renovation. Also, it is clear that the "lyric" question (regardless of how much more broadly he has defined it) and the poetic question are not, as Jauss would have it, interchangeable.\(^6\)

Furthermore, the readings of poetic questions in this thesis point out that it is not only our concept of the lyric question, but our entire notion of lyric, which

\(^6\) Indeed, Jauss more than once uses "aesthetic question" as a synonym for "lyric question," a yet more dangerous conflation.
requires rethinking. Examination of the roles of questions in Modernist poems, particularly of the capacity of interrogative to open a poem to new voices and visions, challenges any definition of a "lyric" poem as one marked exclusively by a unified speaker or perspective, i.e., by monologic discourse. Fine criticism has resulted from the recognition of the highly heteroglot poetry of Eliot, Pound, and others; but these poets also wrote lyrically in passages of poems which fall ultimately into other genres. A more useful definition of lyric would be a valuable aid in reading their work more fully. More importantly, however, the challenges which questions present to conventional ideas of lyric should make us more aware of the diversity and complexity of poems by writers like Yeats and (especially) Stevens, whose poetry initially appears more indebted to this genre.

While the study of poetic questions can play a crucial role in the construction and critique of literary theory, it benefits more than purely theoretical endeavours. Indeed, the central focus of this dissertation is practical: it reads several major Modernist poems through their uses of the interrogative, to demonstrate how analyzing poetry in this way not only can yield worthwhile individual interpretations of poems, but also highlight central and shifting concerns of individual poets. In so doing, it resembles, and is indebted to, certain existing research on poetic questions. This is a nascent field; but within it several important studies have appeared. Most of these have been shorter works, generally consisting of overviews of the functions of specific kinds of questions (e.g., Kertzer on the rhetorical question), or investigations of the role of interrogative in specific authors (e.g., Cooke on questions in Stevens,
or Earle on questions in Yeats). Susan Wolfson's book, *The Questioning Presence: Wordsworth, Keats, and the Interrogative Mode in Romantic Poetry*, is an important exception to this tendency. It usefully elucidates the significance of poetic interrogative, relates it to contemporary critical debate in the study of Romantic poetry, and then provides a sustained and careful look at the role of questioning in the works of Wordsworth and Keats.

In her Preface, Wolfson observes that "Questioning is an active power of dislocation" (19). Her book charts "[t]he impact of such dislocations... registered throughout the discourses of Romanticism" (19) principally by tracing the differences in the ways Wordsworth and Keats understand and inscribe the lyric "I" in their poems. Wolfson speculates that the two very different views of the role of personality in poetry held by Wordsworth and Keats are reflected in their respective uses of the interrogative mode, and her readings of their work support this notion. Yet as she points out, the interrogative practices of these poets also reflect the complexity and ambiguity of their poetics:

Wordsworth remained committed to the notion that "the Poet" ought to speak answers to live by; Keats was always inclined to think that "A Question is the best beacon towards a little Speculation." Yet the power of Wordsworth's questioning voices resists his designs of affirmation, particularly in the poetry of "self" which Keats only cautiously tested. And Keats, despite the complex art and artifices of questioning that remain his favored idiom of speculation, finds that when the questions of poetry converge with the questions of self, the voice of open-ended inquiry becomes increasingly difficult to maintain. (370)

The present thesis shares Wolfson's opinion that "the interrogative mode is especially potent for exploring the rhetorical status of discourse" (20), and discovers
as Wolfson does the power of interrogative to encode and reflect multiple, sometimes conflicting points of view. The capacity of questions to rupture, dislocate, and disconnect which Wolfson notes is also repeatedly revealed in this dissertation as a critical function of questions in Modernist poetry (poetry which, after all, is often overtly fragmented and disjunctive). Yet the differences between Romantic and Modernist poetry, as well as the differences between the interrogative practices of individual poets, naturally produce differences of focus and emphasis between the present study and those of Wolfson and others. The primary difference is one of expansion: the impressive range and diversity of Modernist poetry, its proclivity for experimentation, and its complex and vital relations to a great number of literary and historical sources, require enlargement rather than significant revision of the presuppositions and findings of prior studies.

One example of this need for expansion may be found in the way that the present readings of Modernist poetic questions necessitate extending Wolfson’s conception of questioning as a power of dislocation, to include the equally important ability of questions to locate and to focus. As chapter I documents, Yeats frequently employs questions in individual poems (e.g. "The Tower," "Among School Children," "Vacillation") and in his work as a whole to situate his speaker/himself, actually to construct identity. In Eliot, too, questions significantly locate as well as disconnect. Chapter II illustrates how acts of questioning in "Marina" particularly enact a poetics of presence; yet questions in poems as diverse as "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" and Four Quartets also call attention to the worlds their speakers
so earnestly seek to get beyond. A third and different use of interrogative as an agent of location is evident in Stevens's work, which frequently uses questions to help readers, at least as much as speakers, to situate themselves. Chapter III examines the familiar formal means and techniques out of which Stevens constructs his questions. questions which, in "The Auroras of Autumn" for example, usefully assist readers in making sense of the poem's continual shifts, and alert them to important moments of insight.

In addition to drawing on existing work on poetic questions and questioning, this dissertation borrows liberally from the much greater amount of research on interrogative in other fields. Consumer research, education, journalism, law, law enforcement, philosophy, politics, psychology, and science, to name only a few examples, have all gained practical benefit from investigation into how questions shape their respective goals and discourses. Such investigations may be useful to studies of literary questions in two ways: their data and conclusions may, at times, profitably be brought to bear on literary questions; and their practical focus may productively be emulated. The present study attempts to take advantage of both possibilities. It incorporates the findings of research on questions in other fields, when applicable, to the poetic questions under consideration; and it adopts (in addition to its theoretical observations) the practical aims of interrogative investigations in other areas.

One of the most practical methods of literary criticism, espoused by New Critics and deconstructionists alike, is the close reading. This is the method centrally
employed here. Its reliance on close reading is not intended to ally this thesis exclusively with either of these critical schools. Equally important, it is not intended to ignore the contributions of critical theories, such as those associated with Marx, Foucault, Kristeva, and Lacan, which insist that our interpretations consider what is beyond as well as within a literary text. The eclectic nature of existing studies of literary questions, and the paradoxical nature of questions themselves, however, make it important first to establish what it is we are looking beyond. In short, in literary criticism these extra-textual considerations must relate directly to a text; and the text--more specifically, the role of questions in constructing it--is the primary focus here.

It is also for practical reasons that this thesis does not primarily deal with the entire "interrogative mode"--a concept which "encompasses moods and syntaxes that operate interogatively--forms of rhetoric that could be described as pre-interrogative or quasi-interrogative: loaded conditionals. . . strained hypotheses. . . suspect assurances. . . and all those 'whether-or' and 'either-or' constructions that favor conjecture over positive knowledge" (Wolfson 28). Though it occasionally points to such broader considerations, its principal focus is narrower: it concentrates on actual instances of interrogative, on questions which appear as questions in the poems. Indeed, the scope of this thesis even prevents it from exploring all the implications of these questions. The ways questions encode and influence political and gender positions, for example, are two compelling aspects of the interrogative toward which this thesis has been able only to gesture.

Lastly, it may be useful to clarify the reasoning behind the historical and
literary parameters of this thesis. While practical factors necessitate that the large

topic of literary questions be pruned into something more manageable, the period,
genre, and authors featured in this study have not been arbitrarily chosen.

Modernism, in addition to being a very rich literary period generally, was also a
period in which literary questioning changed. The changes in interrogative--in what is
questioned, how things are questioned, who questions, who responds, and what these
responses are--constitute, in fact, a large part of what differentiates Modernism from
other periods. Though these changes in the interrogative also may be charted in other
genres of Modernism, the variety, intensity, and experimentation that are the
hallmarks of poetry in this period make it an especially fruitful genre to study.

Poetry in the first half of this century drew on an impressive number of historical and
cultural models. Modernist poetic questions were shaped by a wider range of
influences than those of any other period, and their great variety of form and function
reflects this.

Part of the reasoning behind the selection of W. B. Yeats, T. S. Eliot, and
Wallace Stevens as the three poetic questioners considered here is best explained by
Eliot himself. Upon writing about two of the world's pre-eminent literary geniuses,
Eliot entreated,

In extenuation, it may be observed that to write in this way of men like
Dante or Shakespeare is really less presumptuous than to write of
smaller men. The very vastness of the subject leaves a possibility that
one may have something to say worth saying. . . . (SE 237)

The amount, quality, and influence of the poetry of Yeats, Eliot, and Stevens make
this observation equally applicable here.
There are other comments to add to this general apology for the presumption of writing about three poets who not only produced so much fine poetry and criticism, but about whom so much fine criticism (and poetry) has been produced. These three writers not only use questions in important and influential ways; the ways they use questions also change significantly in the course of their careers, making these poets especially valuable for a study of poetic questioning. Finally, Yeats, Eliot, and Stevens differ importantly from one another in their interrogative practices. These differences enrich a study of poetic questioning, and enrich comparative readings of their poems as well. In addition, these differences help to forestall any categorical definition of the Modernist poetic question. To study the questions of these three poets together is to be reminded continually of the elasticity and usefulness of the question, a central Modernist means of writing the possible into the concrete.
CHAPTER I

QUESTS AND QUESTIONS:
YEATS, INTERROGATIVE, AND IDENTITY

I.

One of the most interesting aspects of the vast amount of criticism available on the work of William Butler Yeats is how much of that criticism has mirrored the thrust and structure of the poetry. A devoted and sensitive Yeatsian critic, Richard Ellmann, is a fine example of this tendency. In an important article on Yeats's "affirmative capability," Ellmann notes Yeats's discomfort with the skepticism of Eliot and Lewis, the poet's feeling that it results in "a tendency to exchange search for submission." As an alternative to such skepticism, Yeats embraces the idea of affirmation, an idea which, "even when incomplete... remains valid within some limit" (qtd. in Ellmann, "Art" 380). In a remark crucial to Ellmann's case, Yeats declares,

The one reason for putting our actual situation into our art is that the struggle for complete affirmation may be, often must be, that art's chief poignancy. (qtd. in Ellmann, "Art" 380)

From this and other evidence, Ellmann extrapolates that the desire for "complete affirmation"--another term for Yeats's "unity of being"--is at the heart of Yeats's poetic.

Yet despite, indeed because of, Ellmann's carefully crafted argument, what is most apparent in Yeats's work is the literal object of Yeats's assertion: the
"struggle," the search for, rather than the state of, affirmation. Yeats can tirelessly eye and dramatically render the striving after a state, such as affirmation, which may itself prove elusive or unclear. Ellmann's contention that affirmation is the poet's goal is undercut by his own eloquence about the compelling process by which this affirmation may be gained:

The principle involved is that the more sharply we represent the contradictions of life, the more urgently we invoke a pattern of the reality which must transcend or include them. The poet cannot penetrate to this reality directly, but he can give a sense of the jaggedness and anfractuosity which it must encompass. Through focussing the contradictory attitudes to which the world of appearance gives rise, attitudes which enthrall the mind without securing its total allegiance, the poet presents reality as if by antithesis. . . . Affirmative capability does not free him from the responsibility of intellectual search or understanding of experience. . . . rather it forces him to live, as well as to write, in such a way that his consciousness will be inclusive. Any narrowness, any adherence to a given affirmation beyond the moment that it satisfies the whole being, any averting of the eye. destroys the vision. (384-85)

In contrast to its intention, the primary focus of this passage is not on an inclusive consciousness or a state of affirmation, but on "jaggedness and anfractuosity," "contradictory attitudes," "intellectual search." The multifarious "world of appearances" can give rise at best to tenuous and temporary visions, rather than the "transcendent pattern" Ellmann believes the poet may, somehow, evoke by presenting its opposite. The vigour of Ellmann's rhetoric unwittingly underlines the primary force of Yeats's work: it is the passionate struggle of great emotional and intellectual forces which we chiefly experience in Yeats's poetry, a poetry that works through, not to, the moment of vision.

Nonetheless, in attempting to emphasize "complete affirmation" while
effectively undercutting it, Ellmann is only following the poet’s lead. Yeats himself, in a frequently quoted late essay, cannot adequately articulate the process of synthesis or isolate the state of unity he and his critics have "discovered" in or imposed on his work.

One day when I was twenty-three or twenty-four, this sentence seemed to form in my mind without my willing it, much as sentences form when we are half-asleep. ‘Hammer your thoughts into unity.’ For days I could think of nothing else, and for years I tested all I did by the sentence. I had three interests, interest in a form of literature, in a form of philosophy, and a belief in nationality. None of these seemed to have anything to do with the other, but gradually my love of literature and my belief in nationality came together. Then for years I said to myself that these two had nothing to do with my form of philosophy, but that I had only to be sincere and to keep from constraining one by the other, and they would become one interest. Now all these three are, I think, one, or rather all are the discrete expressions of a single conviction. I think that each has behind it my whole character, and has gained thereby a certain newness—indeed every man’s character is peculiar to himself—and that I have become a cultivated man. (qtd. in Ellmann, Yeats 237-8)

The more closely one considers this disarming, eloquent, and seemingly quite authoritative statement, the plainer its deep-rooted ambiguity becomes. The poet is neither asleep nor awake; personally yet will-lessly an imperative is revealed which will act as a touchstone not only for his future, but, it seems (given what we know of his inveterate revisions), for his past work as well. This revelation allows the poet eventually to unite three disparate strands of interest.

The way in which the first two interests, "love of literature" and "belief in nationality," are united, is initially unspecified, but subsequently these two are related, if vaguely, to his third philosophical interest by his efforts "to be sincere and to keep from constraining one by the other." How could any interests as complicated
as Yeats's philosophical ones help but be constrained by others as complex and conflicting as his political and artistic views? We are not told how this happens, only that it has happened: "Now all these three are. I think, one"—note the hesitant "I think" leading into the next important qualification—"or rather all are the discrete expressions of a single conviction." Exactly how unified are these "discrete expressions"? To what degree can they participate in a "single conviction," and moreover, what is that conviction?

Furthermore, if, as Yeats continues, "each" interest has behind it his "whole character," which in turn imbues it with "a certain newness," are we to understand that the unity he asserts is a unity of the new, whole-character-improved interests, or the former, blended-yet-nonthelss-discrete interests? If we believe "character" to be dynamic rather than static—a view which Yeats's assertion of his own change from a less- or non-cultivated to a "cultivated man" would imply—does this mean that as his character changes, these interests, and potentially their unity and/or individual integrity, will change as well? Is there a single idea we can confidently or consistently latch onto in the whole mellifluous quotation?

This is an extremely revealing, and characteristic, passage which, in its subtle, insistent, and economic unbalancing of its central assertion about unity, apparently stands as a model for many of his critics, especially (but not solely) his early critics. While ostensibly focussing on unity, the passage really highlights multiplicity and contradiction. Many seminal Yeats scholars have similarly tended to structure their studies along dualistic, often contrasting lines. This critical methodology
encompasses a wide range of subjects. and crosses chronological and theoretical boundaries. A pioneering study of Ellmann's, as its title indicates, figures Yeats in terms of man and masks; Parkinson, Allt, Witt, and others divide the poet's work into his early and late styles; de Man makes much of Yeats's intricate use of image and emblem; Smith of his strong, conventional closure and weak "anti-closure"; Adams and Earle focus on the play between Yeats's semantic and syntactic structures; the list could easily expand. Surely this dualistic structure is so tenacious, even among critics purportedly interested in exploring Yeats's achievement of unity, because, as both the Ellmann and Yeats passages demonstrate, what is most compelling about Yeats's work is the tension between terms, the dynamism of a paradoxical vision which simultaneously renders existing parts, his "discrete expressions," and their potential whole, the "unity" they may, or may not, create. What we can affirm, if anything, about a Yeats poem is not unity of being but multiplicity of perception.

This is not a new idea: there are copious examples in Yeats's poems, plays, prose, stories, essays, and letters which illustrate his interest in these tensions, and other commentators have expounded on the antecedents, presence, and effects of antithetical forces in Yeats's work. What remains intriguing is why, if the paradoxical relations of opposites are so central to Yeats's work that they occur in every genre in which he wrote; why, if these relations are so crucial that even criticism on the poet structures itself along these lines; why, these ideas being so important, there has been so little concern with how they come about in the poetry itself.
Perhaps, once again, Yeats's critics have followed his lead: Yeats admitted in a letter to Edith Shackleton Heald "how bothered I am when I get to prosody--because it is the most certain of my instincts, it is the subject of which I am most ignorant" (Letters 896). Nevertheless, it seems a lovely academic irony that we can now look back on decades of Yeats criticism and note the continuing complaints about this basic lack of prosodic information even as (with a few notable exceptions) it has gone unfilled. Consider this survey from a recent article:

Richard Ellmann has noted the broad directions of Yeats' stylistic development, as well as treating some aspects in detail, and Parkinson has a penetrating essay on Yeats' "passionate syntax" in W. B. Yeats: The Later Poetry. However, James Hall and Martin Steinmann wrote in their introduction to The Permanence of Yeats, that "the one surprising gap in the criticism is a thorough analysis of Yeats's verse as verse," that is, his "ways of putting words together." Patrick J. Keane writes that "the work of the past two decades has not really filled that 'one surprising gap' ('a thorough analysis of Yeats's verse as verse') noted by the editors of... The Permanence of Yeats (1950). A hundred books and a thousand articles... we are still wondering 'how Yeats did it.'" This plea, that more attention be paid to Yeats' "stitching and unstitching," had previously been voiced by that seminal critic Allen Tate who urged that the critical energy behind the "occultation" of Yeats' poetry--the correlation of the philosophy of A Vision and the poems--be rechanneled to "the more direct and more difficult problem of the poetry itself."

(Al-Arishi and Tarvin 31; ellipses theirs)

This absence of information, however, has begun to be addressed more widely and frequently in the past few years.¹ Not only have there been several articles

¹ Undoubtedly this has been spurred on by the several schools of poststructuralism and postmodernism, which tend to focus more on "discrete [and indiscrete] expressions," their genesis and function, rather than on "unity" and a totality of effect, as did the New Critics in particular. Still, many of these studies build on or begin where the close readings of the New Critics left off; it is only recently that contemporary critics are recognizing, less grudgingly than some critics of the '60s and
centering on individual aspects of Yeats's style, but longer works attempting to analyze certain prosodic elements and fit them into (or wrench them out of) various theoretical grids have also begun to appear. Enabled by some of this research, and by an expanded range of critical viewpoints, we may be better able to get at some of the means by which Yeats is able to establish and shape the important tensions in his poems. I believe it will appear that one of Yeats's most common stylistic devices (referred to in more than one article as his stylistic "signature") is also one of the most flexible and effective tools he uses to encode struggle, multiplicity, and paradox. As even a rudimentary inquiry into the prominent features of his style is bound to disclose, emotionally, intellectually, formally, even statistically, it is impossible to ignore Yeats’s use of the question.

Though statistical weight is not usually the most fruitful starting point for poetic analysis, the sheer number of questions in Yeats’s poetry is arresting. Earle (21) has counted over 300 questions in the 374 poems of the Lyrical section of The Poems, a very impressive number; I tally 146 of these 374 poems as containing questions, or nearly 40%. The smallest percentage of poems containing questions to total number of poems in an individual volume of Yeats’s poetry is still a substantial

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'70s, the contributions of their critical forebears.

2 For articles of this nature, in addition to the Al-Arishi and Tarvin work quoted above, see Finneran, Roberts, Wright; for books, Adams, Doughtery, Beum, and Veeder provide some representative examples.
25%. while most volumes contain at least half or more poems featuring questions. Questions are also one of the most consistent, as well as frequent, devices in the poet’s continually evolving style. There is not one of his volumes which does not contain several poems with questions, and there is no discernible pattern of increase or decrease in their use in poems throughout Yeats’s career.

Other patterns regarding Yeats’s poetic questions are discernible, however. Perhaps the pattern critics most frequently note is the inordinate number of closing questions Yeats uses in his poems. Al-Arishi and Tarvin state that the variorum edition of Yeats’s poetry contains 26 poems ending with a question (32). Thirty-eight of the Collected Poems close this way according to Zimmerman (36). Another pattern which emerges from the study of Yeats’s manuscripts and early printings is the number of times statements are transformed into questions. Though the most prominent investigators of Yeats’s revisions (e.g., Parkinson, Bradford, Witt,

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3 These figures likely would prove particularly high compared to those of other poets. Though there are no data for such a comparison readily available, consider the data on just one aspect of questioning, use of a closing question in poetry:

Shakespeare uses the terminal question in only one sonnet (115). John Donne uses it in only three poems from his Songs and Sonnets. T. S. Eliot uses it in only three poems, the most important one being "Portrait of a Lady." The two English poets who had the most noticeable influence on Yeats, William Blake and Percy Bysshe Shelley, used the device sparingly. Blake used the terminal question three times ("Thel’s Motto," "The Tiger," and "To Tirzeh"). Shelley used it five times, his most well-known use being the rhetorical question closing "Ode to the West Wind." (Al-Arishi and Tarvin 32)

By even the most conservative estimates, Yeats closes 26 of his poems with questions. My guess is that such marked discrepancies between Yeats and other poets would be manifest in other uses of poetic questions as well.
Alspach, and Allt) do not mention this pattern, many of the most memorable questions in Yeats actually began as statements.⁴

Again, the number of such changes to the interrogative is impressive; but merely one example of a substantive change hints at the true importance of such revisions. Parkinson notes with some trepidation Yeats's first attempt at the close of "Among School Children":

O dance when everything’s so finely done
How can we know
It seems the dancer and the dance are one.

(qtd. in Parkinson. Later 107)

Obviously, the change to the interrogative in the final version of the poem makes it a very different, and richer, experience. Though not always with such dramatic results, Yeats changed his lines much more frequently to the interrogative, rather than to the indicative, imperative, or other forms, throughout his career.

Scholars are beginning to look at these and other of Yeats’s uses of the question. Zimmerman and Herrnstein Smith have centred on Yeats’s use of the question to effect closure; Earle is interested in the syntactical significance of Yeats’s questions; Al-Arishí and Tarvin examine the sequence of Yeats’s questions; de Man probes their rhetorical and semiological ramifications. Nearly all of these studies and others like them construct taxonomies of questions, then proceed to explore certain of their functions and to evaluate their success in Yeats’s poems. Most writers feel that

⁴ In the variorum edition of Yeats’s poems (from which all quotations of Yeats’s poetry in this chapter are taken). see for instance "Leda and the Swan," "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen," "Among School Children," "The Circus Animals’ Desertion," "September 1913," to cite some of the more significant of these changes.
the questions are effective, especially the closing questions; but they are currently seen as effective in terms of a different set of literary aims and values from that embraced by New Criticism. This newer inductive approach in considering questions, coupled with recent changes in literary theory, has resulted in critics "discovering" and valuing not the unity of Yeats's work, but its powerful and evocative absence.

Many critics point out how the double nature of questions, rhetorical questions in particular, suits Yeats's "penchant for contradiction" by allowing him to eschew resolution (Zimmerman 36); as Yeats himself put it, to "sing amid our uncertainty."

For questions, like irony, another dominant Modernist trope, effectively enable multiple readings--even, as de Man points out, "mutually exclusive" readings (Allegories 9)--of a single grammatical unit. Questions almost always seek and impart information at the same time: about the topic, the speaker, the listener, the situation, the parameters or possibilities of answer. Even a "rhetorical" question--a problematic term for a very complex phenomenon--which seems to require no response, still does seek a kind of acquiescence, an affirmation that the presumably self-evident response is indeed just that, even as it assumes that such is the case.

What the research to date on Yeats's questions suggests, directly and indirectly, is that Yeats uses the flexibility and economy of questions to demonstrate the complex nature of issues which concern him, issues such as identity, relations, and time. Questions, for instance, cannot help but highlight issues of identity, for questions--even rhetorical questions--are signs constructed to elicit some kind of
response, some form of dialogue. This dialogic nature of questions allows Yeats to create and manipulate identity by emphasizing the relation between dramatized personae, between speaker and reader, or between different aspects of the speaker himself. Poems such as "A Dialogue of Self and Soul," "Ego Dominus Tuus," "Michael Robarts and the Dancer," or "Crazy Jane and the Bishop" make this point explicitly; but questions also may heighten awareness of the speaker(s) in Yeats's more conventional lyrics. One critic links Yeats's view that "a poem is an elaboration of the rhythms of common speech" with his use of the interrogative to theorize that Yeats's questions serve to "personalize tone":

This concern with verse that approximates speech illuminates his fondness for questions: most poetic utterances, even in Yeats, are in the indicative mode, so that when a question does occur, by virtue of its relative oddity it calls attention to itself as a question and, thus, inevitably to the questioning voice that utters it. Questions personalize tone. Often they provide a conversational effect and a sharpened sense of immediacy. Virtually always in Yeats, they make us feel the presence of a man thinking and feeling... even though no explicitly personal references, and no "I," appear. (Zimmerman 37)

It is important to note in addition, however, that not only is the uttering voice present to us in the question; so is the possibility of a voice or voices responding.

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5 It is important to note that questions may indeed signal the existence or desire for dialogue on one level even while rhetorically stifling it on another. Certain kinds of rhetorical questions are especially effective at undercutting dialogue even as they grammatically or semiotically suggest it; Eliot makes use of this technique in section II of The Waste Land (see below), though perhaps the preeminent example here would be the powerful string of questions constituting Yahweh's response to Job. In fact, anyone who has ever been in trouble with a parent is also doubtless familiar with questions earnestly asked which it is none the less better not to answer; in this vein, see Benjamin on the declension of the question "why," quoted in the discussion in chapter III of Stevens's poem "Questions are Remarks."
whether it is a persona's "voice" (either the speaking persona or another inscribed in the text), the inscribed reader's "voice," or the actual reader's "voice"—or indeed, any combination of these. We are made aware of both aspects, asker and asked, in the action of asking.

This may indeed, as Zimmerman suggests, "personalize" tone, but it also inevitably politicizes it. Questions, whether they are establishing, underscoring, shifting, or celebrating them, make us conscious of relations, relations in which the dynamics of power play a part. The syntactic and rhetorical flexibility of questions suggests a flexibility in the dialogic relations they represent. Yeats may manipulate questions so as to personalize—or alienate, objectify, or generalize—the tone of his poems. In so doing, he may, and often does, create assured, assertive, powerful personae. Yet Yeats cannot control the potential, and political, volatility of his

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6 These relations are emphasized by the structure of Yeats's questions. It is interesting to compare some of Roberts's findings regarding "Yeats's Rhetorical Imperative" with the poet's use of the interrogative. While there are some functions the two rhetorical strategies share, a primary syntactic difference between them as they occur in Yeats's work is that in the imperative form, the subject is implied ("Quiet the dog, tether the pony" [V 617]; "Put off that mask" [V 263]; "Consume my heart away" [V 408]), while the interrogative form nearly always names both subject and object as well as verb ("... Can someone there / Recall the Cretan barb that pierced a star?" [V 541]; "Man is in love and loves what vanishes, / What more is there to say?" [V 429-30]; "Did she put on his knowledge with his power / Before the indifferent beak could let her drop?" [V 441]). The structure of the questions does not allow us to lose sight of either term of a relationship. Not coincidentally, I believe further investigation would demonstrate that Yeats's use of imperative and interrogative in his poems tends to mirror his use of them in his revisions: that is, that the poems begin with imperatives, and/or use them earlier in their development, whereas interrogatives occur later in a Yeats work, at the end, as is most commonly remarked, or as two other critics suggestively note, in a penultimate position in the poem (Al-Arishi and Tarvin 32-33).
questions. For, regardless of the way in which a question is structured, Yeats cannot remove the possibility that, as a question is asked, the ground opens, however widely or narrowly, for the balance of power between questioner and respondent to shift. His questions both create, and illustrate the contingency of, identities and relationships. This potential for change, carried in Yeats’s numerous poetic questions yet outside the poet’s control, charges Yeats’s poems with an energy and drama as forceful (if different in kind) as the conscious sort of energy and drama with which his authoritative speakers imbue the poems.

Yeats’s questions also underscore the complicated nature of time, in relation both to life and to art. In Questioning Strategies and Techniques, a book on the pedagogical uses of questions, Francis Hunkins observes simply but importantly that "[q]uestions require time" (66). This is an important principle to remember in the "schoolroom[s]" of Yeats’s poems; but we may well ask what sort of time Yeats’s questions require. In his review of Yeats’s questions and syntax, Earle notices that "unlike assertions, they [poetic questions] are not specifically marked for time":

The exchange of information demanded by interrogative syntax always occurs in the present moment. Whether the question is "Did you go?", "Are you going?", or "Will you go?" the answer is always a factual, atemporal "Yes" or "No." Thus, the preponderance of questions in a poem such as "Leda and the Swan" (more than seven of its fourteen lines) adds to the poem’s broad historical sweep and, in concert with the parallelism and verb formation . . . contributes to the poem’s timelessness. (42)

While Yeats can produce this sense of timelessness in his questions, he is also capable

7 The various political ramifications of "Leda and the Swan," discussed below, exemplify this.
of achieving an effect opposite to the one Earle is proposing: that is, Yeats can construct and place questions to emphasize the importance of a single instant of time, to isolate or focus a particular historical moment, as well as he can thrust us centrifugally out upon the timeless. Any attempt to answer his poetic questions demonstrates that temporal balances, as well as those of power and personality, may shift in ways that are multidirectional. Though we may answer a question with an "atemporal" yes or no, any answer we make returns us to the poem, in time, thus completing it historically as a work of art which can exist at any moment. The hermeneutic multivalence of questions is again suited to Yeats’s needs. His express desire to control the "enemy" time, to "strike a match / And strike another till time catch" (V 476), is balanced by the realization that there never is, as one of his closing questions suggests, another Troy to burn (V 256). His questions point out that time is precisely that which cannot be controlled or kept.

There is a great deal to be gained from considering the question as a discrete syntactical unit: the question as noun. However, as such study immediately indicates, to do so is to face yet another doubleness inherent in the term question itself: to come up against question as verb. If the questions in Yeats’s poems are objects, they are objects which demand action, interaction, reaction. Questions are both creatures and catalysts within the process that is the poem, and both aspects of the question, particularly in Yeats’s work, require attention. Studying questions as syntactical entities--questions-as-nouns--demonstrates how multiplicity can be economically encoded in a single, common grammatical unit. Studying questions as
special and strategic stimuli--questions-as-verbs--reveals how we are encouraged to integrate complex linguistic units into meaning; how the dramatic force of certain poems is generated; and how this force in turn generates the poem.

Most dramatically for Yeats, questions represent quests. To respond to his poetic questions is to participate, unusually and powerfully, in the poetic quest: both the quest within the poem, and the quest for the poem. Through Yeats's questions we are implicated in, indeed often instigate, the process of the poem itself. Perhaps the most famous question in Yeats is that which closes "Among School Children." Yet we could not have reached this question, could not sense it as so spectacularly apposite a summary of our experience, without undergoing the process the first line of the poem involves us in. We too must walk through the long schoolroom questioning before we are able to come up with questions which not only embody but body forth our experience.

Questions represent quests for Yeats in a larger sense, too. If we follow the pattern of Yeats's questions and questionings not only within poems but between poems, a telling design becomes apparent. While the relative number of questions do not fluctuate greatly, the presence and position of Yeats's questions do change throughout his career, reflecting changes in his personal life and poetic interests. In remaking and relocating questions, he remakes his poems, his perspective, and himself.

In his earlier works, Yeats frequently begins with questions which get answered in the course of poems (e.g., "The Rose of the World," "Maid Quiet,"
"The Cloak, the Boat and the Shoes"). As he moves into the period of great change in his philosophy and style, marked particularly in such volumes as Responsibilities, The Tower, and The Winding Stair, Yeats writes poems which culminate in questions and questioning ("Leda and the Swan," "Among School Children," "At Algeciras"). Finally, in his later works, the poet frequently moves beyond placing questions in poems altogether and back to the materials of their inspiration, the images themselves ("The Circus Animals' Desertion," "Lapis Lazuli," "Long-legged Fly"). These last poems are almost themselves questions, which readers are left to formulate and puzzle through as best they might.

To investigate the ways in which Yeats uses questions and questioning in his poetry, and the implications of changes in his interrogative patterns, it is instructive to look at the middle and arguably the most potent period of Yeats's questioning: that is, to consider some poems from The Tower and The Winding Stair. These volumes, in addition to representing some of Yeats's most consistently fine work, are central in Yeats's career not merely chronologically but poetically and philosophically. The patterns in Yeats's questioning poems during this period mirror some of his most complex and important beliefs. These are the poems in which Yeats begins by characterizing conflict, responds to the pull of the past, and ends with a push toward vision, a push manifest frequently and fundamentally by the interrogative. Looking at patterns of questioning in these works shows us how Yeats can creatively include conflicting terms and the tensions they produce. Gaining an idea of how questions and questioning in these central poems work also highlights the significant departures
from these patterns present in other, especially some of the later, poems.

II.

A good place to begin examining Yeats's patterns of questioning is "At Algeciras -- a Meditation upon Death" ("Algeciras"), a short poem from The Winding Stair which, interestingly enough, contains no questions at all. The poem does, however, conspicuously place Yeats himself, usually the questioner, in the position of being questioned, and this anomaly, along with the structure of the poem itself, makes it particularly revealing of Yeats's attitudes toward questioning. In fact, "Algeciras" embodies Yeats's primary pattern of questioning in his middle period: what leads to a question, what chief concern underpins his questions, and the nature of the responses such questioning may produce.

In October 1928, Yeats was extremely ill, possibly dying. His doctors sent him to Spain for the sun, and it was there, in November, that he wrote "Algeciras" (Jeffares, Commentary 351). The poem begins with a description, in the present tense, of birds crossing the Strait of Gibraltar at evening. This observation leads the speaker to recall boyhood evenings spent bringing shells from the Irish seaside to a friend--"actual shells," he stresses, not shells representing knowledge "such as are in Newton's metaphor" (V 494). In the final stanza, the focus of the poem returns to

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8 This is a reference to Sir Isaac Newton's comment, "I do not know how I may appear to the world, but to myself I seem to have been only a boy, playing on the seashore, and diverting myself in now and then finding another pebble or prettier shell than ordinary, while the great ocean of truth lay all undiscovered before me" (qtd. in Finneran, CP 500).
the present moment, where sunset and evening chill spur the speaker's imagination on to consider another, more personal ending.

Greater glory in the sun,
An evening chill upon the air,
Bid imagination run
Much on the Great Questioner:
What He can question, what if questioned I
Can with a fitting confidence reply. (V 494)

The poem closes with the act of questioning, as so many of Yeats's poems from this point forward will; but it is important to note how he arrives at this juncture. "Algeciras" follows a pattern shared by other of Yeats's poems of this period. It begins with a specific, concrete evocation of an actual physical setting. By the end of the first stanza, we know where we are, what time of day it is, what type of birds are being observed, where they have fed, what they have fed on, where they will roost, and for how long. Something in the scene (in "Algeciras," it is presumably the seaside setting and the time of day) evokes a memory, often in Yeats a memory from childhood (as here) or youth. The memory is often entangled with, and gives way to, metaphor. The metaphor in "Algeciras," as metaphors often will in this pattern, connects two sorts of time and two ways of knowing. Following the

9 It also pointedly connects two great thinkers, Newton, and, we may presume, Yeats. Yeats often links himself to great thinkers in this way; to take only some of the examples discussed below, "Among School Children" connects Yeats and other "scarecrows" such as Plato, Aristotle, and Pythagoras, while "Vacillation" connects him to Chinese author and statesman Châu-kung, among other ancient "conquerors," and finally pairs him specifically with the religious philosopher Baron Friedrich von Hügel.
metaphor there is a return to the present, with an increased awareness of mortality. symbolized here by the setting sun and the chill as things darken. Then comes the interrogative moment. In face of the possibility of some kind of death, the imagination questions.

Here, specifically, the imagination runs on "the Great Questioner." Rarely does Yeats use capitals in this way; perhaps this is why many critics have wanted to read ultimate meaning into them, and have interpreted the Great Questioner to be God. However, the title of the poem, the sense of time passing, the images of sunset and coldness and crossing the water, and the circumstances of its creation, strongly suggest that the Great Questioner is Death. Whatever it is, certain attributes of the Great Questioner are identifiable: he is masculine ("what He can question"), appears to be in a position of power (as the capitals and the speaker's attitude toward him indicate), and is likely to initiate a dialogue in which he will ask the questions.

These circumstances of questioning in "Algeciras" represent crucial aspects of Yeats’s questioning, his closing questions particularly. Yeats's poetic questions tend to pull together complicated strands of material reality, memory, and metaphor which precede them in a poem, and they seem to be motivated in an essential way by the contemplation of death. The questioning itself, however, tends to elicit a more open, paradoxical understanding of life; to emphasize the relations between the images or identities being considered, particularly the power relations between them; and to evince the possibility of dialogue. In the face of death, Yeats’s questions open spaces in which to reconsider, and often to reconstruct, a life, or the nature of life, usually
in a wider and richer context than has been present previously in a poem.

In this light, Yeats's response in "Algeciras" to his (potentially) being questioned is especially instructive. If the Great Questioner does inquire into his life (the poet, quite humanly, hedges against this possibility with qualifiers such as "can" and "if"). Yeats wonders what he could "with a fitting confidence reply." The diction is canny. To reply to a query with a "fitting confidence" is not necessarily to reply correctly. This may imply that there is no correct answer to the question, or that the correct answer is not known. It may suggest that the circumstances of questioning are intimidating or evaluative, or the question impossible to answer; thus to reply with a fitting confidence is the only suitable, or possible, response. Ultimately, the speaker does not know the limits of the Questioner, whether he will actually be questioned, what the questions might imply, or what the answer(s) might be. He simply knows the power and possibility of inquiry and exchange. The poem ends at the point of action, or more accurately, imaginative interaction.

Who Yeats is, or was--more precisely, who he thought he was--would be revealed by whatever answers he might make to the Great Questioner. But tellingly, Yeats does not furnish himself, or us, with a response. He cannot, or will not, say who he is, for to do so would be to limit himself, to freeze himself in time. This may represent a certain arrogance in the poet--the language lacks terms adequately to define him--but the response betokens much more than this. It represents a significant rethinking of the way selves are conceived: not as static entities, but multiform, evolving ones, partially if not wholly created by individuals themselves. This is a
fundamentally Modern perception, and it is one which Yeats’s questions, with the opportunities they present for reconsidering and remaking identity, actively and artfully underscore.

The idea that who we are is continually changing holds implications for what we know. In "Leda and the Swan," Yeats uses questions to illustrate the multifaceted natures of identity and time, two chief components of any epistemology. Through a series of questions which is more precise and leading than most commentators have noted, the poet encourages us, in a remarkably short space, to reevaluate not only Leda’s perception of her experience, but our experience of the poem.

"Leda and the Swan" ("Leda") concentrates and extends the general pattern of questioning represented in "Algeciras." "Leda" begins with the final stage of the pattern, a stage comprised of a return to the material reality of the present moment, an awareness of death, and questioning. In this poem, however, physical reality and linear time are figured from the outset as very complex.

A sudden blow: the great wings beating still
Above the staggering girl, her thighs caressed
By the dark webs, her nape caught in his bill,
He holds her helpless breast upon his breast. (V 441)

"A sudden blow" falls on the reader and Leda simultaneously; yet while we seem to be thrust quickly and violently into a specific moment, our sense of time is modified by the participles and ambiguous phrasing of the opening stanza. The great wings are "beating still," an oxymoronic phrase which implies the action is continuing; the girl is "staggering," seeming to imply the present tense, but the participles "caressed" and "caught" suggest the past tense, until the swan finally "holds" her, clearly
emphasizing the present again. Is this a scene being enacted now, or is it a description of a past event? Or, could it be one which is somehow continually occurring?

It is equally difficult to determine who or what is actually present. Attempts to determine the speaker accentuate the sense of dislocation. Though the quatrain makes us feel as if we are witnesses to the event, the speaker is neither of the two possible first persons. Instead, the voice is rather like that of the chorus in Greek tragedy: someone there yet not there; on the stage where the action is taking place, yet divorced from it, able to describe and potentially to comment on it.10

Similarly, though the scene is dramatically rendered, exactly what is being described and where our attention is being placed is difficult precisely to say. Is the focus of these four lines Leda, the swan, or an act? The balances between them are delicate and calculated, as Yeats's revisions to this section show. Parkinson traces the octave of "Leda" from its manuscript through its first printed versions and finally to the poem we now know, suggesting that Yeats "came to stress the bird-like rather than the godly qualities of the swan. . . . the supernatural and natural qualities of the icon" (Later 137-8). This is certainly so, but accounts for only part of the impact of Yeats's revisions. The poem we now have also shifts the focus of the scene from one of a godlike swan clearly overpowering a mortal woman, into one in which the

10 In his essay "Emotion of Multitude," Yeats writes: "The Greek drama has got the emotion of multitude from its chorus, which called up famous sorrows, even all the gods and all heroes, to witness, as it were, some well-ordered fable, some action separated but for this from all but itself" (Essays 215). The poet appears to use the choral voice to exactly this effect here.
perception of the event is more evenly divided.

Comparison of early and late versions of the poem discloses this balancing.

Consider the opening quatrain in manuscript:

Now can the swooping godhead have his will
Yet hovers, though her helpless thighs are pressed
By the webbed toes; and that all powerful bill
Has suddenly bowed her face upon his breast.

(qtd. in Parkinson, Later 137)

Yeats's revisions contain not only more of god-as-beast, but more of woman. In the final version, both woman and swan have three pronouns each in the quatrain; we read of her thighs, nape and breast, and the swan's webs, bill, and breast, an equal number of references; and the phrasing becomes more paratactic. Most interestingly, we have a move from "the swooping godhead hav[ing] his will," "her helpless thighs" being "pressed," and "the all powerful bill" which "bowed her face upon his breast" in the manuscript; to the present version, with its highly ambiguous fourth line, "He holds her helpless breast upon his breast." The lack of punctuation in this line, following on the evenly distributed referents preceding it, make us pause over the word "helpless": precisely to what or whom does it refer? The natural assumption seems to be Leda; but it could also in some sense apply to the swan. If Yeats chose to excise the explicit "Now can the swooping godhead have his will," it seems consistent that line four was rephrased ambiguously to leave open the possibility that the swan is as helpless in his actions as Leda, who is the apparently powerless recipient of them. This wording allows us legitimately to wonder whose will, if any, is at work.
These ambiguous renderings of time and personae do, however, leave us with the impression of a death—in this case, the "death" which is not uncommonly a poetic euphemism for sexual climax. In accordance with the pattern, the awareness of this impending "death" breeds questions.

How can those terrified vague fingers push
The feathered glory from her loosening thighs?
And how can body, laid in that white rush,
But feel the strange heart beating where it lies?  (V 441)

The second quatrains is composed explicitly of questions; yet curiously, some readers have missed or dismissed them as questions altogether. Marion Witt, in an otherwise very useful survey of Yeats's revisions of his later poems, quotes the first printed version of "Leda" (The Dial, June 1924), including the second quatrains:

How can those terrified vague fingers push
The feathered glory from her loosening thighs!
All the stretched body's laid on the white rush
And feels the strange heart beating where it lies. . .

(qtd in Witt 52)

He then quotes the subsequent edition of the poem from The Tower (1928), and notes, "[t]he two best lines in the original, the fifth and sixth, were wisely unaltered" (52). Aside from a remark about the "new power" afforded them by "balanced parallelism," there is no comment on the punctuation and other changes in lines 7-8, which, as in lines 5-6, convert a statement into a question.

The changes to the interrogative are not noted as changes at all, though they are significant ones. Leaving aside his dubious opening assertion for a moment, Zimmerman suggests one reason these changes are important:

These are not real questions, of course, but even rhetorical ones
normally call attention to their speaker. And yet, the lines keep our gaze steadfastly riveted on the action, on what's "out there." The feathered glory, the white rush, the loosening thighs—all the erotic images (intensified by the sexy opposition of "push" and "loosening" and the rhythmic and syntactic inexorability)—sustain the action's engrossing immediacy. (38)

By changing these lines to questions, Yeats is further able to encode a double focus, on both the speaker and the scene, and on the action of the poem and the reaction of the reader, which questions (even rhetorical questions) on one level elicit.

Another advantage of the interrogatives is the way in which they extend the play between time and timelessness. The parallel "how can" construction of the questions, the mix of verb tenses, and the use of the conjunction "And" in the second question, contribute to our perception of a scene taking-and-already-taken place, underscoring a sense of dramatic action and mythic time. The sort of information the questions request, too, may illustrate the tensions between present and past. Some comments of E. Culpepper Clark on the art of the oral history interview are resonant on many levels with respect to the function of questions and time in "Leda"—Yeats appears to have structured his questions in just this way:

One simple way of moving an interviewee back in time is to begin with fact or feel questions and save opinion questions until later in the interview. The danger in beginning with opinion questions is that the narrator's critical reflections on a given subject are always governed by how the experience has come to signify itself in the present; therefore such questions serve only to encourage a presentist bias. Moreover, once an opinion is expressed, it will govern the selection of facts. I include feel questions along with fact queries because they move the interviewee to reflect upon concrete, as opposed to abstract experience. (qtd. in Tolor 188)

By making us question the facts in the first quatrain, then asking explicitly what Leda
can "feel" in the second, Yeats makes a past moment present to us. His questions move us concretely through time in the poem, towards the important "opinion" question with which it closes.

There are other arguments to be made for the effectiveness of these interrogatives as well. One such point contests the comment made by Zimmerman, and perhaps implied by Witt, that these are not "real" but only "rhetorical" questions. Absolutely, these questions serve rhetorical functions (though the functions of rhetorical questions are more complex than is usually considered). They also serve expressly dramatic, almost melodramatic, purposes, bringing readers into the scene, creating a sense of excitement yet helplessness and confusion in readers which mirrors that in the spectacle being presented. Yet more seems to be at work: despite their similar phrasing, construction, meter, form, and rhyme, despite the connecting conjunction, these questions are quite different. They are not asking the same thing, and moreover, what they are asking, and the order in which they ask, hold serious implications for the poem's final question.

The first question, "How can those terrified vague fingers push/The feathered glory from her loosening thighs?", seems to inquire how Leda, helpless before the onslaught of the swan, could possibly be able to repulse his attack (an attack that ambivalent phrases such as "vague fingers," "feathered glory," and "loosening thighs" suggest Leda may not experience purely as unwelcome). Still, the question fundamentally implies that if she had the power, resistance would be her goal. The second question shifts the focus. It asks how could "body," presumably Leda's, "laid
in that white rush / But feel the strange heart beating where it lies?" Again, sifting through the puns on words like "laid," "lies," perhaps even "rush." this question seems to ask: how can Leda not feel the swan's heart beating against hers. The language is loaded: the somewhat archaic use of the conjunction "but" to mean something like "except" implies a negative answer to the question without sacrificing the parallelism of the quatrain by including a negative term in the question itself.

How can Leda not feel it? She cannot help but feel it; but to feel the swan's heart beating implies a different experience from her feeling its wings beating above her seven lines before.

"Heart" has many connotations, and given the ambiguous tone of the scene and the language, one possible reading of the question seems to be whether Leda can help but sense the nature of her attacker. Is the heart that of god or beast, and what can Leda tell from feeling it against her own breast? This is a question of a different order from the previous one. The first implies a lack of power on Leda's part. The second suggests the stirrings of new knowledge. Though perhaps not literally difficult to answer, the complex implications of these questions reverberate in the poem's final, more difficult question. To what degree can, and does, Leda have power in the situation? What is the nature of Leda's experience? What does she know, or take away of, the divine swan?

Though it anticipates a little, the impact of Yeats's changes to the interrogative in lines 5-8 may be highlighted by reviewing Harold Bloom's discussion of the poem. In considering "Leda," Bloom cites what he calls an "unfortunate... pattern repeated
throughout Yeats's revisions: the sacrifice of clarity and fullness for the sake of dramatic shock" (Yeats 365). Specifically, he prefers Yeats's earlier version of the poem's final question. "Being so caught up / Did nothing pass before her in the air?" (qtd. in Bloom 365) to the version we now have, arguing the subsequent change "adds little in itself and takes away the crucial question: did she have a vision as she was being victimized?" (365). While it is highly disputable that Bloom's is indeed "the crucial question," certainly the second question in the second quatrain is getting at precisely this: What is Leda's perception of the experience? The final question of the poem is asking something different again, purposefully. Yeats's revisions, not simply to the powerful question ending the poem, but to the questions throughout the poem, are much more intricately connected to its tone and its movement of ideas than commentators may have been willing to see.

Finally, the questions of the second quatrain serve to make the declarative, concise, summary statements which immediately follow them striking in contrast.

A shudder in the loins engenders there  
The broken wall, the burning roof and tower  
And Agamemnon dead.  

Being so caught up,  
So mastered by the brute blood of the air,  
Did she put on his knowledge with his power  
Before the indifferent beak could let her drop?  

(V 441)

In a single sentence, readers are moved into the past (the fall of Troy and of the House of Atreus), which is the future for the characters in the scene, and we see the consequences of the act even as it is being completed in the present tense ("engenders there"). Questions about Leda's experience are left in abeyance as historical fact
takes precedence.

Then, in the middle of line 11, there is the celebrated abrupt break. The voice falls at the end of the sentence on the word "dead"; the reader is stopped short. only after a beat to be "caught up" again just as Leda was caught, another "sudden blow" that, after the pause (perhaps another kind of "beating still") stresses the intersection of time and the timeless, with the participle "being" yoked to the past tense verbs which follow. The swan, which until this point we have known primarily metonymically (the dark webs, the bill, the breast, the heart), we now get metaphorically: "the brute blood of the air." The poem closes with a question which, like the others before it, is couched in terms of Leda's perceptions of events. "Leda" duplicates the pattern of "Algeciras": in the context of an evocative setting, there is a move into history and the past, and into metaphor, leading to a reformulation of terms, and a questioning of the meaning of one's experience.

There have been many responses to the final question of "Leda," some of the most interesting of which are attempts to answer it. Careful readers of the poem have constructed compelling arguments for antithetical answers to this question. However, answers have not been the only, perhaps not even the chief, response to the question closing "Leda." At least as much critical ink has been spilled over the merits of closing the poem with a question, or at least this question. Bloom's view

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11 One interesting comparison of opposing views is outlined in William Veeder's book, The Rhetoric of Repetition, where Veeder compares his argument that the answer to the final question must be "yes," to Leo Spitzer's reading, which is predicated on a negative response to the question (Veeder 7-10n.).
has already been noted, that Yeats's revised final question is not the most fortunate choice. Other critics have expressed dissatisfaction with an interrogative ending for the poem generally. In his book tellingly titled Answering to the Language, C. K. Stead remarks about the poem's conclusion that it "takes the form of a question--not the strongest way to finish a poem, but the form is sustained perfectly, and any slight downturn in energy can be justified (if it needs justification) as a kind of postcoital lowering" (33). He returns to this:

The sonnet concludes with a question: 'Did she put on his knowledge with his power . . . ?' If you look at three variously representative critics of Yeats--Yvor Winters, Richard Ellmann, and Helen Vendler--you will find they don't agree at all on what to make of this question, and that perhaps signals a weakness. Ideally, I think such an emphatic poem as this is should not end on something that produces uncertainty. Nevertheless, I have to say that when I look long and hard at the poem, the meaning at that point doesn't seem to me unclear. (35)

Spitzer is similarly uneasy, wondering as he completes his own reading of the poem, "But if this is the correct interpretation, why did Yeats choose the interrogative form, which must needs weaken his protest" (Veeder 8n.). Yvor Winters asserts that

The greatest difficulties reside in the remainder of the sestet. "Did she put on his knowledge with his power?" The question implies that she did put on his power, but in what sense? She was quite simply overpowered or raped. . . . That is, if we are to take the high rhetoric of the poem seriously, we must really believe that sexual union is a form of the mystical experience, that history proceeds in cycles of two thousand years each, and that the rape of Leda inaugurated a new cycle; or at least we must believe that many other people have believed these things and that such ideas have seriously affected human thinking and feeling. But no one except Yeats has ever believed these things, and we are not sure that Yeats really believed them. . . .

(qtd. in Bloom 365)

Other readers remark on the aptness of the interrogative ending. In this camp
we may include Veeder, Unterecker, Ellmann, Zimmerman, and Smith. Zimmerman
sums up the effectiveness of the closing question formally and thematically:

The end question thus leaves a profound thematic irresolution. Yet at the same
time it rhetorically secures an impressive sense of closure. Smith suggests that "drop" functions as a "terminal feature" (a non-
structural device that provides a closural effect) by alluding to finality (p. 250). Structurally, the last sentence closes the sonnet as sestets do traditionally, by commenting on and in some way evaluating the octet. This evaluation itself, though irresolute, nevertheless subtly establishes a closing feel by something unaltering in its tone: there is some resolution in discovering the right terms of inquiry, in defining the problem and knowing what question to ask. . . . Finally, as it highlights the personal voice, the question cinches closure by bringing the poem home, by centering it in the speaker's mind. This homecoming, after the staggering start, gives a satisfying closural sense even as it underscores the poem's thematic uncertainty.

(Zimmerman 39)12

Zimmerman speaks of the personal voice in the poem, and Stead too weighs in with the intriguing observation that "What's odd about 'Leda and [the] Swan' is that Yeats drops the first person singular but uses the form that seems most to call for it--the sonnet being traditionally a personal expression of love or piety" (32). Stead goes on to make an interesting case that "history as rapist is what makes the underlying psychology of this apparently impersonal sonnet engage and interlock with that of the personal, first-person poems of The Tower" (35).

With respect to these arguments, some of which are interesting and persuasive, not every reader feels the same need as Winters, Zimmerman, and Stead to personalize the poem. Indeed, the circumstances of its commissioning and

12 Zimmerman's reference to "Smith" here is specifically to Barbara Herrnstein Smith in her book on Poetic Closure, listed in the bibliography.
composition indicate that its message was emphatic and available enough to scare at least one editor (Winters's view of having to swallow Yeats's entire system notwithstanding). In a note to the poem Yeats writes,

I wrote Leda and the Swan because the editor of a political review [George Russell] asked me for a poem. I thought, "After the individualist demagogic movement, founded by Hobbes and popularized by the Encyclopaedists and the French Revolution, we have a soil so exhausted that it cannot grow that crop again for centuries." Then I thought, "Nothing is now possible but some movement from above preceded by some violent annunciation." My fancy began to play with Leda and the Swan for metaphor, and I began this poem; but as I wrote, bird and lady took such possession of the scene that all politics went out of it, and my friend tells me that his "conservative readers would misunderstand the poem." (qtd in Ellmann, Modern Poems 85n.)

We must agree with Stock in her assessment that the problem was not that readers might have trouble understanding the poem, but that it could not easily be misunderstood (209). Despite Yeats's fancy, the poem is hardly devoid of politics. Yet it is no more, or less, important to politicize the poem than it is to personalize it.

While it is useful to connect the poem to the poet's own preoccupations and characteristic themes, even to specific political issues and parties active during the time in which it was written, it is not necessary so to limit it. This is one of the critical lessons the "irresolute" closing question of "Leda," which has produced so many diverse and intelligent readings, teaches.

There is much to admire in the closing question in addition to those aspects registered by the critics noted above. The repetition of words and sounds ("so caught up. . . so mastered"); "brute," "blood," "before," "beak"; "his knowledge. . . his power"); the shift in tone from the cursory sentence preceding it to the ruminative
question, with its stretched, rising rhythms and pitch variations; the alteration of images (the swan's bill has become a sharper beak; either swan or god could be described as "brute blood of the air"); the shift in viewpoint; the ambiguous sense of time; and the change from the "how can" to the "did she" construction of the question, as well as the ambivalent "could let" and the temporary "put on," all work to pull together images and ideas from earlier in the poem and slightly turn them, push them forward, past the power of the godhead to the wonder of a woman. What did the mortal in touch with the god-beast really experience? Much the same as have we readers; and, in a second important critical lesson, we realize that the question must, in some sense, be applied to us. Have we put on knowledge through the course of the poem, enough to know the answer to the question it asks? Have we experienced anything more than the poem’s power before we too are dropped at the end? If we have "put on" knowledge or power, is it as temporary and directly tied to our immediate experience as Leda’s? Do we sense the events in the poem and/or the event of the poem as a beginning or an end? In having to form opinions about what has happened to ourselves or to Leda, we, like Leda, continue to participate uncertainly in two worlds, time-ridden and timeless, in which a questioning of experience persists regardless of the way in which we respond.

Yeats’s own comment on the poem perhaps underscores its nature best. The observation comes not in his "Dove or Swan" chapter of A Vision, which is closely related to the poem, nor in his notes on the poem’s conception, nor in his scattered comments about the appeal of the Leda myth. Instead, in a pregnant remark to
L. A. G. Strong, Yeats said he regarded the poem as "a classic enunciation" (qtd. in Henn 188). Meanings in this statement are as multiple and shifting as those in the poem, and in a different way as enjoyable. The pun on "classic" is good, but the pun on enunciation/annunciation is wonderfully fitting. The ideas contained in the dual meanings, the saying of things (with additional puns on word/Word) and the beginning of things, get at the core of the poem. We are at the beginning of the expression of experience, at the beginning of a new kind of experience itself. In his personal comment, Yeats encodes his double meanings through word play. In his poem, he encodes a more complex but related nexus of ideas and implications through his questions. The technical effects, trains of thought, and critical perspectives demonstrated so forcefully and economically by the questions in "Leda" prove important aids in navigating what is perhaps Yeats's most famous interrogative journey: the questioning walk he takes "Among School Children."

III.

If the numerous different responses to the question at the close of "Leda and the Swan" make us suspect its status as a "simple" rhetorical question, there has been less interrogation of the nature of the questions, especially the closing questions, of "Among School Children" (ASC). Indeed, the final question in this poem has rarely been discussed as a "question" at all; instead, it is esteemed by many readers as Yeats's ultimate "statement," "comment," "figure," or "affirmation" of his doctrine of Unity of Being. Paul de Man's discussion of this closing question is a notable
exception to this tendency, as is that of John Hollander; their main comments will be reviewed more fully below. Before considering the final question as a singular syntactic or rhetorical unit, however, it is worth pursuing two points which are frequently overlooked, and which bear significantly on readings of the final questions and of the poem as a whole: the circumstances of the poem’s composition, as usefully elucidated by Bradford and Parkinson, and the larger patterns of questioning and response within the poem.

In Yeats at Work (8-11), Bradford cites manuscript evidence (consisting both of preliminary working notes and early drafts of the poem) as well as external evidence (such as Yeats’s "topic" for the poem, related notebook entries, and a stanza from the opening song of At the Hawk’s Well which treats similar material) to suggest that Yeats began the composition of ASC with what is now stanza V of the poem. This is interesting for several reasons. Yeats often composed brief prose "subjects" for poems, which bear a wide range of relations to the poems which eventually resulted. Sometimes the subsequent poems draw heavily on the ideas, images, and language of the prose subjects; sometimes they depart radically from them. Perhaps Yeats’s first mention of his ideas for ASC occurs in an unpublished manuscript quoted in Parkinson:

Topic for poem--school children and the thought that life will waste them, perhaps that no possible life can fulfill their own dreams or even their teacher’s hope. Bring in the old thought that life prepares for what never happens.  (Later 93)

Later, in a letter to Olivia Shakespear, Yeats quotes a version of what is now stanza VI of the poem, calling it "my last curse upon old age. It means that even the
greatest men are owls, scarecrows, by the time their fame has come . . . . It is a poem of seven or eight similar verses" (Letters 719). In some musings in the same manuscript book in which the poem appears, however, Yeats ruminates again on this sense of loss and time which preoccupies him, but tellingly, he is neither in the realm of old thoughts or of last curses: he is in the realm of questions.

I think of my grandfather and grandmother, to whom I was so much, and as I look in the glass, as I look at old age coming, I wonder if they would [have] thought it worth the bother. What have I that they value? I think of my father and mother, and of my first coming to their house. What have I that they value, what would have seemed sufficient at the moment? (qtd. in Bradford 9)

If Bradford is right, it seems to be with these questions that Yeats decides to start writing the poem. Bradford's manuscript transcriptions show that, though many of the lines of stanza V went through several changes, the overall shape of the question composing the stanza underwent almost no revision. Lines 1, 5, 7, and 8 of the stanza, the lines containing the main syntactic signals that it would be a question ("What mother [1] . . . Would think [5] . . . A compensation for [7] . . . Or the uncertainty of his setting forth? [8]"), were arrived at early in the process of composition, and remained relatively stable. Thus Yeats may have started composing ASC with the question which later comes in the centre of his poem; and the poem in some sense radiates multidirectionally from this central question, in addition to using it as part of its overall sequential development.

The pattern here is one in which many aspects of the poem--image, metaphor, time, vision, allusion, point of view--participate, not the least aspect being the pattern of questioning. It is the pattern of the winding stair more than the tower, a design
that comes back to what appear to be the same or similar points from different
directions, at different levels; a pattern that at once recalls and extends what had
seemed to be known. The poem is more usually read, however, in a sequential
fashion, almost like an ode: it moves from a concrete beginning, through memory of
happier times in youth, to contrast with a comparatively deficient present; then leads
to existential questioning and a series of belittled famous answerers; then to a
meditation on the nature and power of images and presences; and concludes with a
great affirmation of an essential truth beyond that which may be known solely through
physical reality or the image. The development of the poem may, almost must, be
read this way initially: it is too complex to consider without working out some
fundamental scheme of movement for the images and ideas it contains. The risk of
mapping such schemes in a poem like this is that it is too easy to assume a causal
connection between points, to make stops, starts, and turns seem naturalized in a
larger intended pattern, like the chestnut tree. Too many aspects of the poem militate
against such easy conclusions, particularly the notably uneasy conclusion of the poem
itself. Again, it is useful to consider one of the most informed opinions about the
circumstances of ASC's formation, that outlined by Parkinson in his chapter on
Yeats's composition in The Later Poetry.

Not only is Parkinson's elucidation of manuscript materials enlightening--prior
to work on the Cornell University Yeats manuscript project, it proved invaluable to
those without other access to these papers--but his views regarding the composition of
ASC are also very persuasive. One of Parkinson's central conjectures about the poem
is that

. . . Yeats really did at one point intend the poem to be a blend of curse and lament upon old age and that the famous concluding stanza was not part of the poem's intended shape until very late in the process of writing. (Later 94)

"This accounts," observes Parkinson, "for certain very curious qualities in the last two stanzas" (Later 94). He cites Yeats's letter to Olivia Shakespear\(^\text{13}\) regarding his uncertainty about the length of the poem, which may have been going to end with seven rather than eight verses; but Parkinson's argument actually begins in his discussion of stanza VI, of which, he notes,

. . . though the manuscript offers no absolute proof, I believe that the urbane, knowing tone of this deprecating treatment of intellectual effort, originally prepared for a sorrowful and disillusioned conclusion. (Later 104)

An earlier version of the last lines of stanza VIII provides strong support for such a reading:

And yet they too break hearts--the Presences
That love, or piety or affection knows
And dead or living statuary symbolize
Mock every great man and his enterprize.

(qtd. in Parkinson, Later 105)

As Parkinson suggests, "if Yeats had held to his original intention of writing a poem on naturalistic disappointment, this would have been a sorrowful and fitting ending" (Later 105); indeed, it seems an ending much clearer than the one we now have, relating the dead or living statuary to the nuns' images of marble and bronze, and the mother's image of her son, and echoing as well as commenting further on the

\(^{13}\) Letters 719; for Parkinson's discussion, see Later 94 ff.
preceding stanza concerned with great men and their various enterprises which are unequivocally mocked (this greatness and mocking may also, of course, relate to the poet and his enterprise). Certainly such an ending to the poem is more commensurate in tone and theme with other poems of The Tower.

But ASC, coming in the middle of the volume, is itself a sort of turning point between the bitterness and loss, the unfit country of the opening poems, and the possibilities of the self-sufficing thought, the place "where the blessed dance" in the closing poem of the volume, "All Soul's Night." It is evidently not enough for Yeats to "traffic in mockery" here, as he does in "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen." The Presences move beyond mocking man, beyond standing in one version as essences that "all kinds of image symbolize" (qtd. in Parkinson, Later 105), and transform into self-born symbols of "all heavenly glory," preparing for the more radical shifts in tone, image, and syntax to come.

Yet even these shifts in stanza VII did not completely smooth the way for the famous questions at the poem's close. In his first attempt, Yeats follows the apostrophe to the chestnut tree with an assertion: "O dance when everything's so finely done / How can we know / It seems the dancer and the dance are one" (qtd. in Parkinson, Later 107). A second effort at the final lines comes closer ("O dancer, seeing that all so smoothly runs / How shall we know the dancer from the dance" [qtd. in Parkinson, Later 107]), before the last four lines are drastically changed:

O hawthorne tree, in all that gaudy gear
Are you it all or did you make it all;
O dancing couple, glance that mirrors glance
How can we know the dancer from the dance.
Yeats then discards the hawthorn tree lines, which in fact ask quite a different question than that which is asked of the chestnut tree; rids himself of the couple, returning to the single dancer; and after several other attempts at phrasing the final couplet (e.g., "O dance are footfall, shoulder, glittering"; "O blazing foot, O glittering glance"; "O body swayed to music, O glittering glance" [qtd. in Parkinson. Later 107]), composes the version we now have.

As Parkinson astutely shows, there is "beneath the very slightly troubled surface brilliance of the verse an effortful illusioning" (Later 109). The final vision of the poem was not easily or automatically written; much change was involved, and a great deal of rethinking. And while the manuscript evidence provides proof of this, there is also a strong argument to be made from internal evidence--specifically, from its pattern of questioning--that this poem, particularly its rhapsodic end, represents a significant turning point in The Tower and in Yeats's work as a whole. Tracing the patterns of questioning in ASC leads to conclusions similar to those presented by the manuscript evidence regarding the complex, dramatic turn enacted by the questions at the end of the poem.

There are five occasions of questioning in ASC, each serving a different purpose. The first comes in the first lines: "I walk through the long schoolroom questioning; / A kind old nun in a white hood replies" (V 443). These rather straightforward lines immediately establish a specific setting, speaker, and situation—a version of Yeats himself as Irish Senator, walking through a classroom on a tour.
making inquiries of the nun who teaches in or perhaps runs the school. The replies, which may be the sort of information we next get in the stanza regarding the activities of the children, do not captivate the speaker as much as the children’s passing interest in him, their perception of him. Not only do these lines establish imagery which will be further developed in the poem (children, nuns, "momentary wonder," the "sixty-year-old smiling public man," and certainly questioning), but they also launch a sort of questioning and answering pattern which, while informative on one level, does not finally satisfy the root of the speaker’s curiosity. The very concrete setting is for Yeats an apt metaphorical one too: throughout his career, he seems to be walking through the long schoolroom questioning things, inquiring after the way people learn, the way humans develop, how youth is shaping and is shaped, the conjunctions and discrepancies of age and youth. Yet this sort of dialogue is not enough. The questioning here is rooted plainly in the immediate material world, and both this questioning and the nun’s direct answers about the workings of this world leave something to be desired, much as did the sensual music of the vivid natural world portrayed in the opening poem of the volume, "Sailing to Byzantium." From this partially-satisfactory, public catechism, from direct question and answer, we fittingly move on to what is desired: to the personal, to visions of youth, unity, love, and the beloved, in the next two stanzas. As in "Algeciras," we move from the realm of the concrete and observed, through memory and metaphor, to vision; here, a vision of Maude Gonne.

The next instance of questioning is no more satisfactory, and perhaps less so,
than the first attempt. At least the first attempt, in its inadequacy, provoked moving and fruitful rumination, and was related to life as it is lived. The second instance of questioning is more rhetorical and romantic, leading eventually down an unpromising personal cul de sac of self-pity. The speaker recognizes this, and, wisely, abruptly abandons it.

Her present image floats into the mind--
Did Quattrocento finger fashion it
Hollow of cheek as though it drank the wind
And took a mess of shadows for its meat?
And I though never of Ledaean kind
Had pretty plumage once--enough of that,
Better to smile on all that smile, and show
There is a comfortable kind of old scarecrow.  (V 444)

The questioning here is much more like an earlier sort of questioning used by Yeats: it is a rhetorical question in the generally received sense of the term. It is reminiscent of the questions found, for instance, in "The Countess Cathleen in Paradise," "Maid Quiet," "He Thinks of His Past Greatness When a Part of the Constellations of Heaven," perhaps most pointedly in another famous poem about Maude Gonne, "No Second Troy." While such questions are rhetorically effective, even personal and dramatic, finally they do not advance the cause very far. ASC is a poem of exploration, and just as in Socratic dialogues or medieval epics, wrong dreams and guides, wrong modes of questioning, must be cast out, and appropriate leads found and pursued.14

14 There is an interesting relation here to a use of questions, specifically rhetorical questions, cited by John Robson in his article, "What Was the Question?: that is, questions used "as part of the strategies making up refutatio. We can, for instance, through interrogatives imply while preparing to refute our opponents' plausible but
Yeats then moves to the third, and arguably the central, occasion of questioning in the poem: stanza V. In addition to the possibility outlined by Bradford that this stanza, composed entirely of a question, was indeed where Yeats began writing the poem, two other points support the particular significance of this question as a crucial not only to the poem but to the general shift in questioning Yeats makes from his earlier to his later style. First, in terms of the movement of the poem itself, this question occurs almost in the centre of the poem--and the "almost" is important. As Al-Arishi and Tarvin notice, "a peculiarity of Yeats' use of the medial question . . . is his tendency to push it toward the end of the poem, often into a penultimate position" (33).15 Yeats does this in earlier poems, such as "The Man Who Dreamed of Faeryland" and "A Prayer for My Daughter," to great effect: postponing a question until near the end of a poem, then providing, if not always an answer per se, at least a response or a gloss of the question.

This same structure is employed here, and is most clearly an illustration of this pattern if we share Parkinson's views about the initial intended ending for the poem. Immediately following this question, we get a range of possible responses to it in mistaken views" (248-9). It is possible the speaker does this for himself here, effectively implying a line of thought with colourful imagery, allusion, and the interrogative form, which he soon wisely relinquishes.

15 This tendency toward placing questions in a penultimate position is put effectively to use in Modernism generally; it allows for a more modest or ironic response to significant questions which seems well-suited to the timbre of many Modernist poems. Consider, for instance, the way in which Frost undercuts the powerful question to which his sonnet "Design" builds by the understatement of the last line.
stanza VI, all of which are belittled, and the stanza ends with a return to the
scarecrow image. The point, and the penultimate question/response pattern, would be
driven home in the bleak initial version of stanza VII, where yet another set of
possible answers--images and presences--simply end up doing what the poet does in
stanza VI: mocking great men and their enterprises. Question and answer would have
come full circle, more complete a circle in fact than most of Yeats's penultimate
questions and "responses" usually do.

Perhaps it was partly the bleakness and clear finality of this possible close
which disturbed Yeats; the point is, the poem does not end with stanza VII. The
question of stanza V could not, evidently, be so satisfactorily answered for the poet,
in part because it was a different kind of question from the sort he had asked before;
indeed, a different sort of question from similar important questions he was asking in
the same volume. The question is now less penultimate than central in the poem.
This central position is often a place of importance for questions in meditative poems
(Wordsworth's odes, as critics have noted, often operate this way); Yeats uses it
himself in "The Tower." But consider the difference between these two medial
questions. "The Tower" begins with an angry, invigorating question about old age.
which leads basically to another version of the same query, the somewhat anti-
climactic central question, "Did all old men and women, rich and poor, / Who trod
upon these rocks or passed this door, / Whether in public or in secret rage / As I do
now against old age?" (V 413). After spending several stanzas having summoned a
host of potential answerers, the speaker states that he "has found an answer in those
eyes / That are impatient to be gone," dismissing everyone but Hanrahan (his own creation), of whom he asks a characteristically Yeatsian corollary: "Does the imagination dwell the most / Upon a woman won or lost?" (V 413). The final section of the "The Tower" serves as a sort of response to these questions, describing the speaker's acts of making his will and making his soul. "Compelling it to study / In a learned school" until even the worst he can imagine becomes nothing more than "a bird's sleepy cry / Among the deepening shades" (V 416). The poem seems to move from a personal, impassioned question about how the speaker is to cope with old age; to a central question that is also couched in highly personal terms (did others respond as he responds? what does his creation have to say about it? what about his "woman lost"?); to end with an ambivalent, strangely energized resignation to accept age, in part by learning with the help of scholars to modify his reactions, in part by recognizing and dauntlessly asserting man's self-creation.

Despite its similarity in theme to the questions in "The Tower," the central question of ASC works quite differently. The speaker has once again reflected on age, youth, and his beloved; yet he has come out of the highly subjective world of the tower, in which he, his home, life, thought, creations, and soul are the primary touchstones of experience, and into (reluctantly perhaps, and not without forays into idyllic memories and idealistic visions) the real and present world. Yeats starts in the very present, very material schoolroom, and it is to the world of the schoolroom, in time, that he returns—not the more abstract "learned school" of "The Tower." While he does remember lost love and lost youth, and entertain another affectionate creation
of his own (the vision of the child Gonne), ultimately he is recalled to images of his current, older self, and the present spectre of his beloved. He rejects the romanticized version of both former lover and former self, eschewing what might have developed into a paean to his youth followed by a zealous rail at old age. He has moved, by the middle of the poem, to the position that "There is a comfortable kind of old scarecrow" (V 444), the very position he is attempting to achieve at the close of "The Tower." The question we then get is the question which follows on the findings of "The Tower": what mother would think her son, if she could see him at sixty, worth the trouble?

This is not simply another version of an old-age lament. The question is more generalized than the questions of "The Tower"; for the first time in the poem, we have a stanza without the pronoun "I." While there are of course links to be made between the unspecified mother's son and the speaker, elements such as the presence of several other children in the poem, the complex allusions to the soul before birth, even diction such as "shape" and "uncertainty," the use of the conditional tense and the subjunctive mood, as well as the use of the more open syntax of the interrogative, make this question one which may be interpreted as generally addressed, more directly applicable to those outside the speaker's individual experience. The question is poised exactly between the centripetal, first-person initial section of the poem, the "I walk/I dream/I look/I had" part, and the centrifugal, third-person second section, the "they too/we know" part. It is a change which greatly influences the poem, and represents a real shift in Yeats's interrogative structures. Many questions in his later
works, while undeniably embedded in specific poetic contexts themselves closely tied to Yeats's own life and thought, are more generally addressed and pertain to a broader range of human experience; and they achieve a greater resonance because of this.

While many, if not most, rhetorical questions are also generally addressed, this central question hardly seems to fall into that category, despite the tone of the preceding stanzas and the derision implied in the answers which are subsequently explored. If the question were rhetorical, it is entirely logical, nearly inevitable, that poem end where and how Parkinson believes it did in earlier versions, with its strong, sad, and pointed answer. It is the fact that the question is broader and is sincere, and that possible responses to it are important and compelling (while assenting to his particular use of them in the poem, do we really dismiss Plato, Aristotle and Pythagoras as quickly as Yeats does?), which perhaps made Yeats start with it, and move from it toward the final questions of the poem. In fact, his own attitude toward the question may have changed: perhaps he did initially see it as rhetorical, yet, finding the "obvious" answer he outlines unsatisfactory, he came to see it as more

16 This is not to suggest that such an ending would be weak, or such a poem powerless. Parkinson suggests that the poem "even in its projected first version, would have satisfied any but the greatest poets" (Later 113), and certainly other bitter testaments in The Tower, such as "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen," demonstrate Yeats's force when he does underline particular points rather than tease them into questions. In fact, his capacity to craft strong poetry out of "answers" is also notable. Some critics (e.g., Al-Arishi and Tarvin) have considered certain poems themselves 'answers' to questions asked outside the poem; alternatively, Yeats may use a poem to respond to a question posed in the title (e.g., "Are You Content?"), or use structural devices such as refrains to contain questions upon which the main verses of the poem comment (e.g., "What Then?").
profound. Such a shift would help account for the poem's subsequent change in direction.

Yeats's response to this central question, which he finds inadequate in the end, seems to replicate earlier questioning and response patterns. Following the question, we get brief, amusing if mocking descriptions of historical thinkers and their responses to the world, the issue of which is the observation that these men too became old scarecrows. As in "The Tower," where the poet declares, "I mock Plotinus' thought / And cry in Plato's teeth" (V 415), philosophical responses are repudiated as a means either to cope with aging or to assess the worth of the actual man. This is a more complex version of the situation we get at the opening of ASC: the answers provided by the real world about its workings are insufficient. In his next step, however, Yeats diverges from his response of schooling his soul toward acceptance in "The Tower," and gravitates more toward the pattern he established earlier in this poem. Rather than assert and accept, he chooses instead to pursue what had interested him when first faced with the spectre of the scarecrow: images, actual and envisioned, and their relations.

Recognizing that what nuns and mothers, as well as lovers, worship is not the physical reality, the actual image of son, god, beloved, so much as ideal imaginings of them, the speaker begins to consider what precisely such images represent. He calls these ideal imaginings "Presences," known through "passion, piety or affection" and symbolizing "all heavenly glory." The syntax then becomes more ambiguous than has been recognized.
And yet they too break hearts - O Presences
That passion, piety or affection knows,
And that all heavenly glory symbolise -
O self-born mockers of man's enterprise; (V 445)

"Self-born mockers" is generally read as referring to the Presences, who as ideals are self-born, and who cannot help but mock the enterprises of flawed man. However, it is plausible to read "self-born mockers" as a reference to "they" (that is, 'images') of line 53. In some sense the images too have been "self-born," born of the selves that need them, the nuns, mothers and lovers; perhaps, as Yeats says in "The Tower," the images too . . . were not / Till man made up the whole, / Made lock, stock and barrel / Out of his bitter soul" (V 415). Do images have a meaning until man or poet gives them one? Certainly, in their ability to "break hearts," the images are also able to mock man's enterprise, as the image of the male scarecrow mocks the vision of the child the mother holds, and the female scarecrow mocks the swan-child vision of the lover.

Either reading may make sense of the end of the sentence, which is also syntactically challenging.

Labour is blossoming or dancing where
The body is not bruised to pleasure soul,
Nor beauty born out of its own despair,
Nor bleary-eyed wisdom out of midnight oil. (V 445-6)

Whether the "mockers" are Presences or images, the point here seems to be the move from them to "labour," from things/essences to act, from noun to verb. This shift is key, for it sets up the coming together of things, essences, and acts in the final lines of the stanza. Still, it is difficult to tell exactly what labour is; are we to read
"blossoming" and "dancing" as gerunds, or as present participles? And the
ambiguities only begin here. After a thorough consideration of the grammatical
possibilities of these four lines, Joseph Adams concludes that

The upshot of all these interactions is a remarkable network of
differential series within the 'single' relative clause [beginning
"where"]. There are several restrictive interpretations differentiating
themselves from each other as well as from several non-restrictive
interpretations... which in turn are continually differentiating
themselves from each other and from the restrictives. (55; ellipsis his)

Of greater interest perhaps is not just what these lines could mean, but why
they are written the way they are. It seems as if we are to read allusions to mother,
lover, and nun in the modifying phrases of lines 58-60, and interpret that "labour"
may apply to the undertakings of all three (labour as in childbirth; labouring "to be
beautiful," as Yeats puts it in "Adam's Curse"; and clerical labour). But why are the
modifying clauses negatively defined? Is it a way to ensure that we see both what
really is and what ideally should be (e.g., the link between beauty and despair, as
well as ideal beauty itself)? Why are these lines so difficult?

It is too easy simply to acknowledge that they are talking about complex
things; Yeats is almost always writing of complex things, and one of the hallmarks of
his style is the economy, vividness, and precision with which he can do this. Perhaps
it is in part an attempt to enact what is being stated: whether the lines pleasure our
souls, give us beauty, or grant us wisdom, we undoubtedly have to labour to get
through them. The act of interpretation is both a blossoming out and a dancing
around, an act which requires us to deal with what is--the semiotic units we have on
the page--and with what could be--what this tangle of syntax and signifiers might
mean. As readers, we are implicated in a complicated process, whose parts or steps are difficult to differentiate—they seem to change depending on perspective—yet which we keep striving to know. This state, in which object, essence, and epistemological struggle are inextricably intertwined, prepares us for the poem’s final questions.

O chestnut tree, great rooted blossomer,
Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole?
O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,
How can we know the dancer from the dance? (V 446)

Given the complexity of the preceding lines, it is easy to sympathize with the urge of some readers to see these closing questions as rhetorical structures which state or summarize in a more dramatic way by appearing as questions. The "answers" for such readers are clear: the chestnut tree is none of those things; we cannot tell the dancer from the dance; therefore, these lines serve as an acknowledgement that we are unable finally to separate essence and object. The questions are simply a common syntactic device used for the rhetorical purpose of dramatically emphasizing the concept of Unity of Being. Certainly this reading provides a welcome relief from the confusion of the preceding sentence, and provides a strong sense of closure for the poem, and it continues to have many adherents. Yet there are readers who have found the close more complicated than this, readers who, not accidentally, have concerned themselves primarily with questions.

The first of the final questions has received less attention than the last, perhaps because it is more obviously "rhetorical." How obvious a rhetorical question is, however, even before we get into the complexities of de Man’s reading of them, is certainly cause for speculation. The range of definitions provided, and not provided,
by handbooks and dictionaries under the heading "rhetorical question" is telling. This is a much more difficult phenomenon adequately to explain than is generally considered. The OED, for example, declines to try a definition of its own, referring the reader to two quotations on the subject, both of which are from nineteenth century books on Latin prose and composition. The first (T. K. Arnold. Latin Prose Composition, 1843) calls them questions "of appeal"; the second (Bradley's Aids to Latin Prose, 1884) states that "Questions that do not require an answer, but are only put in the form of a question in order to produce a greater effect. . . are called rhetorical questions" (OED). Professor Robson's search of other dictionaries, including Penguin, Random House, and Funk and Wagnalls, produces a spectrum of definitions (242). In literary handbooks, the definitions are more consistent: Fowler (525) and Holman (381) have definitions much like this of Abrams: "A rhetorical question is a question asked, not to evoke an actual reply, but to achieve an emphasis stronger than a direct statement, by inviting the auditor to supply an answer which the speaker presumes to be the obvious one" (161). What such definitions have in common is the assumption that the answer asked for by the question is obvious, perhaps so obvious as not to necessitate reply. If we entertain the notion that the chestnut tree apostrophe is a rhetorical question along these lines, it is remarkable how much work the poet has undergone to undercut subtly the obviousness of our reply.

The simplest form of rhetorical question to respond to would be one merely asking for agreement or disagreement. The chestnut tree question is not structured
this way; instead, it specifies three alternative answers, none of which is the "obvious" right one. While it is sometimes risky to import research done in other fields wholesale into literary studies, it is significant that two of the largest, most prestigious pieces of research done about different types of questioning (Dillon; Schuman and Presser) have found that responses to questions which present alternatives differ radically from those which offer none. Respondents are far more likely to select an answer from alternatives when they are presented than to suggest their own. Furthermore, responses change radically based on the type, number, and order of alternatives. To take only the cases pertaining to the chestnut tree question, research has shown that shifts in response up to 15 per cent occur when a question "adds a middle term or category for response" (Dillon 125). Moreover, "[t]he last-mentioned alternative attracts, on average, 10 per cent additional responses than when mentioned in first or second place. . . [q]uite irrespective of content" (Dillon 125). Structurally, Yeats has loaded his question so that it would require some thought to go against our general inclination to choose between alternatives presented.

The structural properties of the question which make choosing the "obvious" answer more difficult are complemented by several specifically literary techniques. This question is also an apostrophe; grammatically, it is not directed to us as readers either specifically or generally; nor is it addressed to the speaker himself, with whom the reader may feel some sense of relationship. Though it may be minuscule, surely there is some hesitancy on the part of a reader to respond to such a question, perhaps in the belief that, as there are more lines of poetry to follow, the question will be
answered (if not by tree, by poet), or more information provided, before the poem concludes. The apostrophe also contains the "correct" answer to the question before the question is really asked: the tree is called "great rooted blossomer," a wonderfully evocative and economical term which suggests the tree is all of its parts--root, trunk, leaf, flower. The choice of blossomer as the noun is especially inspired: not only does it imply both thing (blossom) and act (blossoming) as did "blossoming" in the stanza's first line, it also links the noun itself (blossomer) back to the act of labour. These emphases on the tree as tied up inextricably with action, as somehow a powerful sum of its parts, undercuts our choice of the tree as simply one or another of its parts; yet these parts alone are the options from which we are asked to select its identity.

Rhyme is influential here as well. Of the /a/ rhymes of the stanza, "where" and "despair" are perfect rhymes, and "blossomer" the half-rhyme, separating it slightly from them, allowing it to stand as its own entity. This may give weight to the concept of tree-as-whole-being, thus making it harder again to choose between the

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17 Beum has an interesting discussion of half-rhyme in Yeats in his chapter on "Yeats the Rhymer." While every stanza of ASC contains half-rhyme, some of Beum's comments are especially relevant to the conflicting and ambiguous aspects of the poem's final stanza, especially the tension between part and whole:

Imperfect rhyme is a matter of sounds almost, but not quite, mating. The phonological effect is one of incomplete resolution, or dissonance. . . . And this effect is what makes slant rhyme so appropriate for verse that expresses conditions like tension, anxiety, and anguish. . . . It irritates us, so to speak, and so tends to draw attention to itself as artifice. It tends to throw enormous emphasis. . . . upon the meshing of words. The whole tendency is to violate the desire of art to conceal itself. (97-8)
parts presented in the next line, or it may make us lean toward the selection of "blossom" as a choice when it is repeated in the next line. After the half-rhyme with "oil." "bole" rhymes exactly with the other /b/ rhyme, "soul," creating a connection between essence and part which, along with its terminal position in the list, may give a psychological edge to our selection of "bole" as an answer. Metrically, identical weight is given to each part in line 62; "leaf," "blossom," and "bole" each have a strong stress, seemingly making them equally strong contenders. Their paratactical presentation also makes them syntactically equal objects.

Yet finally, despite the subtle structural, syntactic, and poetic influences which may pull us momentarily, almost subconsciously, in various directions, the answer we are called on to provide to this question is not among the options presented at all. The "correct" answer seems to be that the chestnut tree, the subject, is all and none of the objects. This rhetorical question cannot intend to "evoke" from us "a natural reply." because there is not one. It "achieves an emphasis stronger than direct statement" precisely by precluding any direct statement at all. It is not in the gaps and silences of the text that we have revelation; it is rather in our struggle against absence, our attempts, however inadequate, to answer the question, that we get (P)resence.

The "rhetorical" status of the final question of the poem has been interrogated more closely than the chestnut tree question. One such examiner is Paul de Man, in his discussion of semiology and rhetoric which opens Allegories of Reading. De Man chooses specifically to discuss the closing question of ASC. He presents two readings
of it, one figurative (there is "potential unity between form and experience." no
"discrepancy between the sign and the referent" [11]), and one literal ("since the two
essentially different elements, sign and meaning, are so intricately intertwined in the
imagined ‘presence’ that the poem addresses, how can we possibly make distinctions
that would shelter us from the error of identifying what cannot be identified?" [11]).
These two readings, he asserts, result in interpretations of the poem which are not
simply different; they are confrontational:

... two entirely coherent but entirely incompatible readings can be
made to hinge on one line, whose grammatical structure is devoid of
ambiguity, but whose rhetorical mode turns the mood as well as the
mode of the entire poem upside down. Neither can we say ... that
the poem simply has two meanings that exist side by side. The two
readings have to engage each other in direct confrontation, for the one
reading is precisely the error denounced by the other and has to be
undone by it. Nor can we in any way make a valid decision as to
which of the readings can be given priority over the other; none can
exist in the other’s absence. (12)

In his chapter "Questions of Poetry" in Melodious Guile, John Hollander breaks this
question down further, seeing a distinction between readings based not on whether the
question is read literally or figuratively, but on how a reader interprets the phrase
"know from":

For the confusion of act and agent is reflected in an ambiguous sense of
the phrase ‘know from.’ It not only can mean ‘distinguish between,’ as
the usual and obvious construing of the question suggests; it can also
mean ‘infer from,’ ‘know by means or evidence of.’ And whereas the
first meaning of the phrase depends upon an epistemological priority of
actual, present dancer over derived entity of action, or dance (dancing
is present, but less thing- or personlike than the dancer), here this is
momentarily reversed. The dance gets priority, and the same
hopelessness framed by the rhetorical question about not being able to
distinguish between the two ends up by celebrating the contingency of
what had been thought to be the more prominent and substantial
member of the pair. If the question might be said (although I should prefer not to talk this way) to deconstruct itself, it does so in a most resonant way. (37)

Perhaps the first thing to note about these complex readings is that they exist because the closing question is a question. Had Yeats been content with one of his earlier attempts at a close, which was a statement ("It seems the dancer and the dance are one"), the most critics would be able to debate in this vein would be the ambiguous overtones of "seems." It is the act of being asked, as well as the context and manner in which we are asked, which provokes the sort of analysis that furnishes complex readings such as those above. Each reading has its strength, and it is true, as de Man asserts, that we cannot base the superiority of any particular reading upon grammatical, even syntactical or poetically technical clues, such as those in the chestnut tree question. It is possible to agree with both de Man and Hollander that different readings of the same question conflict with each other. What seems unnecessary, however, is de Man's insinuation that we have to choose, and that to choose one interpretation is to forego entertaining the other. Divergent, even directly confrontational readings can and frequently do exist side by side--indeed, often intentionally so. Irony works this way; it can only function if at least two different meanings, often opposite meanings, are understood simultaneously. So, quite pointedly in the case of Yeats, does paradox. The explicitly open nature of questions allows for a potentially greater number of readings to be fostered and sustained by a single grammatical unit, partly because the range and interpretation of possible responses, as well as the interpretations of the question itself, will always produce a
relatively wider range of total interpretations than a statement can.

One of the rhetorical strengths of questions is their ability to present, not necessarily to insist upon, choice; choosing remains the prerogative of the respondent. What questions do, more than ask us to choose or even to answer, is to think—about who or what is being asked, why it is being asked, how or what could be answered. Even rhetorical questions compel us to think, as these critics’ interpretations demonstrate. Julie Solomon’s remarks about rhetorical questions in a narrative context apply equally well to the poetic context:

The thing you can perfectly well ask a reader to do while still remaining an audience is to think, to perform cognitive actions. Indeed, one could suggest that the essential condition of the act of narrating is that it counts as an attempt to have the narratee think through [a] series of ideas. So rhetorical questions can be seen to act out, and underline something that is happening all the time as part of the reading process itself. They seem to be requests that the narratee take an active part in the development of narrative or argument, that s/he accompany the narrator on a step in the logic of the discourse, a request for solidarity and agreement in an active, perceptual kind of way. (98)

We may not take a step of "logic" precisely at the end of ASC, and the questions Yeats poses may not (evidently do not) produce solidarity and agreement. As one landmark study on questions and questioning succinctly put it, "higher education can increase ambivalence and uncertainty as well as decrease ignorance and confusion" (Schuman and Presser 272). We do, however, become active and perceptual, through the thinking brought on specifically and directly by the agency of questions.

Another important point about the final question, which Hollander (37)—but surprisingly few other critics—notes, is that it is a very different question from the one
preceding it.\textsuperscript{18} The chestnut tree question asks a natural, organic image what part of itself is its true identity, which element contains its essence. The final question employs very different imagery to ask something very different. In place of the incorporate organic image, the "great rooted blossomer," we have the images of dancer and dance, body and music and glance--images of man, art, and perception. What this question asks is not, what are these things, where do we situate identity, but how can we know created from creator (if we prefer Hollander's reading, creator from created). It asks literally not for the location of unity between form and essence, it asks about the possibility of differentiation. This, perhaps, is the ultimate labour: distinguishing the subject from the process, the artisan from the artifact, the life from the art.

It is to this labour that Yeats's work more consistently turns. While Yeats never abandons natural images, from \textit{The Winding Stair} on there is an increasing emphasis on images of created objects and creators, finally even on the life of the created objects themselves. This is especially true of the later volumes; the relation between creator and created, the life and the art, are explored particularly in the imagery of such poems as "Lapis Lazuli," "An Acre of Grass," "Those Images," "Municipal Gallery Revisited," and culminate perhaps in such personal assessments of

\textsuperscript{18} As the two medial questions in "Leda and the Swan" also illustrate, Yeats rarely if ever places questions back-to-back which ask the same thing (this is even true when the question itself is repeated, as in a refrain: intervening stanzas change the context and thus the question). It is surprising that this important aspect of his verse, which helps to make it economical, fresh, and dramatic, elicits no critical attention.
Yeats's own life and art as "Under Ben Bulben" and "The Circus Animals' Desertion." In ASC, however, the onus of this final labour does not fall on the poet/speaker alone. It is the labour of "we"--suddenly in the final stanza we get an inclusive pronoun, implicating both speaker and readers, and potentially the whole of humankind, in the process of struggle and discovery.

It seems highly significant too, especially given the extremely close association between the poem's speaker and Yeats the poet, that the closing question asks not, how can we tell the dancer from the dance, but how we can know one from the other. The verb choice is revealing: if we construe the question as purely rhetorical, and assume that the answer is that we cannot know dancer from dance, then though we have an answer and in a sense we "know," what we know is that we cannot "tell"; if we interpret the question as literally asking whether we can make the distinction, we are asked only whether we can "know"--even the speaker/poet, if he "knows," by using a question himself chooses not to, or is unable, to "tell." Action and perception may indeed be stimulated by these questions, but what these questions, as questions, equally suggest is that whatever we may perceive about the nature and problems of unity and differentiation cannot easily or necessarily be articulated.19

19 The request to "speak" or "tell" is almost always a fertile starting point for analyzing what is going on in a poem by Yeats, Eliot, or Stevens; for placing a poem within their respective oeuvres; and for comparing their poems to each other. In addition to the present example, consider the ways "telling" functions in WL and FQ, or the manner in which demands for speech relate to the evolution of Stevens's poetry from Harmonium to the late poems (see the relevant discussions in chapters II and III below).
Given that the closing questions are full of internal and external tensions; given that their careful multiplicity can work against at least one of the notions (unity) that they also evoke, what accounts for the closural satisfaction they have given many readers? In addition to the satisfaction of their symmetry, imagery, rhythm, and euphony—all of which contribute powerfully to their effects, and should not be overlooked—they seem to satisfy for at least two other reasons. One is the expansion of their intended audience to include the reader. By slowly becoming more general, and bringing in the pronoun "we" in the final stanza (both strategies which implicate readers more directly in the poem), its ending becomes more personal for readers through its insistence on labour—readers' labour. The imagery of the final question, and the open, eliciting nature of the question itself, make us aware of the poem as a created object—or, more correctly, a creative process—and of our role in this creation. By ending with a question, the poem in some sense is never complete until we complete it, if we can, whether by a quick rhetorical response, or a more complex consideration of its implications. The poem's open ending calls attention to itself as constructed, and our response, whatever response we make, implicates us as participants in its construction. This openness, too, grants the possibility of change and difference in readers. A complex, questioning ending may satisfy more people on a subject or in a time when fewer and fewer readers can be satisfied by a single, knowing reply.

A second reason for the pleasure this ending affords is that it seems commensurate with our experience of the poem. The poem begins by questioning,
questions throughout, and ends with questioning. As responses to this questioning, we have memory, vision, philosophy, amused cynicism, and a formidable sense of the passing of time. We have an exploration of images and ideals. We have common but incomplete human experiences; we have the labour of process. What the poem emphasizes, from start to finish, is the impossibility of summarizing such an experience, an experience marked by trying on new answers, trying out new questions. Questions, particularly such complicated, beautifully crafted, and meaningful questions, seem an apt place to leave such effort. The close of ASC is so strong, paradoxically, because it is so open. Acclimating ourselves to this openness, and to the labour of contending with questions and images, is essential if we are successfully to read Yeats's complex later poems--in fact, many other Modernist poems--where questions and responses become subsumed by the images themselves.

IV.

In the centre of The Winding Stair is a poem Yeats initially entitled "Wisdom." Much of this poem does embody the kinds of wisdom Yeats had attained by 1932. One section demonstrates Yeats's ability to render graphic, symbolically-charged images. Others recite autobiographical experiences of antithetical yet shaping emotions. Others use maxim, parable, and dialogue to express Yeats's philosophical and artistic concerns. And the entire work reflects the technical and stylistic wisdom
Yeats had acquired. In their "variety . . . and virtuosity,"\textsuperscript{20} the eight sections of the poem showcase Yeats's formidable range of tone, diction, allusion, and especially form: their metrical patterns run from the shorter lines reminiscent of Yeats's early work in the opening section, through ottava rima, strongly stressed five- and six-line stanzas, and decasyllabic dialogue, to the longer, irregular couplets of the final section.

This work also illustrates the range of Yeats's questioning. The several questions scattered throughout the poem occur in a variety of positions and contexts. There are opening questions, medial questions, penultimate questions, and closing questions. The questions appear in historical, philosophical, and artistic contexts; in dialogue and in lyric. They are spoken in the first person, the third person, and by personae. There are short and long questions. They are direct, ironic, figurative, allusive. There are examples of all four categories of question Earle distinguishes in Yeats's poetry: dramatic questions, open questions, questions to be answered within the context of the poem, and traditional rhetorical questions (33). Moreover, these different types of questions address a variety of subjects, including joy, remorse, art, belief, and the life of the artist.

Despite the wisdom it reflects, however, Yeats changed the name of this poem to "Vacillation." It is the more apt title. The culmination of Yeats's wisdom truly

\textsuperscript{20} Quoting some lines from the end of the 1889 version of Oisin, Bradford writes, "It seems hardly possible that one poet could have come all the way from this to "Vacillation," where Yeats uses such a variety of metrical patterns with such complete command that the poem is a kind of set piece, so to speak, of metrical virtuosity" (131).
was vacillation\textsuperscript{21}, as the form of this work underscores. "Vacillation" is not a long poem, it is a poetic sequence. It does not depend on linear development for its force and meaning; indeed, its images, adages, experiences, and questions speak to each other across the work. The poem is still often read as "wisdom"—a "[p]erfection of the life, or of the work" (495). The real accomplishment of this sequence, however, is not that it contains a life, but that it shows how a life is made: not by diachronic progression, but syncretic process. The diverse placement, types, subject matter, and functions of questions in "Vacillation" accentuate this process. In their diversity and effectiveness, they punctuate where Yeats has been and what he is doing in the sequence. Yet they do more, too; the questions in "Vacillation" also signal where Yeats is going, and who he is trying to be.

Questions in "Vacillation" attempt to grasp large ideas which are important to Yeats, as his questions often do; but they do so here in general or rhetorical terms. Indeed, different though they are, the distinguishing characteristic questions in the sequence share is that they are—with an important exception—in some way discursive. It is uncommon, most especially in this period of Yeats's work, to find so many questions in a poem which yield this impression; and, in fact, this impression is part of their point. The questions in the poem are discursive rather than descriptive and symbolic to contrast more sharply with the other prevalent constituent of

\textsuperscript{21} Yeats included in a letter to Olivia Shakespear a comment which could well serve as a gloss to the poem: "The swordsman throughout repudiates the saint, but not without vacillation" (Letters 798).
"Vacillation." Its images. The play of these two key components drives the sequence, with questions explicating or exploring the rich implications of the images. Yeats separates the two in the sequence to clarify the epistemological tensions at stake. But he will provocatively join image and interrogative at the close of the poem as a sign of his choice to serve the complicated, multidirectional process of creative life.

The questions of "Vacillation," particularly read in relation to the images of the sequence, comprise a quest for artistic identity. This quest opens, as many do, with a riddle, the first question of the poem: if man is caught between extremities throughout his life, these antinomies ending physically in death and emotionally in remorse, "What is joy?" (V 500). This is a question toward which the author of ASC might naturally proceed; it is the question that The Tower starts to beg, in its brilliant bitterness and vigor. Why does one make art in the face of the horrific moments? How does one account for the rapturous ones? Several critics submit that the remainder of "Vacillation" attempts to answer its opening question. It seems more accurate to say that the sequence really refines the question to the point that it becomes its own answer. Joy is a part of vacillation, and vacillation is the condition Yeats comes to accept as the one in which he lives, and from which he must

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22 Dillon, who has extensively researched the interrogative, offers advice on useful ways to revise questions. Part of this advice includes rehearsing questions aloud before putting them to an intended audience. Dillon notes: "Marvellous things emerge from our mouth as we struggle to answer our own craftfully wrought questions, producing answer after strange answer that moves us to rework the question" (170). This observation, with its emphases on craft, continual process, and the spoken, is relevant to the reworking of questions and answers contained in the many verses, visions, and voices of "Vacillation."
forge his art.

While this may be the eventual answer that the poem comes to, it is important to note that the direct response to the opening question is an image.

II

A tree there is that from its topmost bough
Is half all glittering flame and half all green
Abounding foliage moistened with the dew;
And half is half and yet is all the scene;
And half and half consume what they renew,
And he that Attis' image hangs between
That staring fury and the blind lush leaf
May know not what he knows, but knows not grief. (V 500)

Yeats has amalgamated the trees of The Mabinogi, The Orations of Julian, The Golden Bough, and other sources into his own pregnant image, which he combines with the myth of Attis\(^2\) to provide a commentary on the opening section (and a hint of what is to come). Not only is the image of section II more memorable and dramatic than the opening section, it is much more specific. The relation of the

\(^2\) Attis, beloved of Cybele, goddess of fertility, was an ancient vegetation god whose death and resurrection were celebrated in special spring rites. In one account of his death, according to Frazer, he "unmanned himself under a pine-tree, and bled to death" (404); other legends hold that after his death he turned into a pinetree. Priests of Attis castrated themselves, and wore images of fertility on their breasts. In Roman ceremonies each spring, a special tree, wound like a corpse and decorated with wreaths of violets (said to have sprung from Attis' blood) was set up in Cybele's sanctuary. An image of Attis hung on the tree, and was later buried. Several days of rites followed, including the Day of Blood, in which the high priest and others cut themselves and bespattered the altar with blood, and novitiates castrated themselves, accompanied by wild music and frenzied dance. This sacrifice from the male ministers was believed to enable the female deity to effect the rebirth of spring. At nightfall, the tomb was opened and the god was said to have risen from the dead; the next day, figured as the vernal equinox in the Roman calendar, was one of great celebration (Frazer 404-9).
"antinomies" of life are emphasized: they are unique yet inextricably joined, both are required to make "all the scene." both symbiotically "consume what they renew."

Similarly, the general "Man" from section I becomes "he that Attis' image hangs" between the halves of the divided tree. Many commentators hold that this "he" is an artist figure; thus, the image is that of the artist, placing an image (i.e., in the Attis context, an icon of death and resurrection) between the extremities of this world. As rites associated with the myth insinuate, this placing of images is an act of sacrifice as well as of celebration, an acceptance of the divided forces of life.24 Pointedly, we are told that this act of creation and acceptance does not convey 'wisdom,' but it does reflect a capacity to realize joy: "he...[m]ay know not what he knows, but knows not grief" (V 500). The second section moves the broad investigation of joy in section I into the slightly more specific context of art.

It is vital to note, too, the image within the image in this section. The artist is "he that Attis' image hangs" on the divided tree. It is interesting that this use of the "image" has inspired little comment from other readers. Perhaps this is because its

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24 The sacrificial aspect of the Attis myth is troubling. One of the chief parts of Attis's legend and rites is his castration. Is this part of the artist's sacrifice, his sexuality? Can we believe Yeats would really know no grief for such a loss? What other readings can account for this strange, primal correlation? Given Yeats's abiding concern with sexuality, it is interesting that this connection has caused so little comment, particularly as "Vacillation," and all of the poems leading up to it in The Winding Stair (with the possible exception of "For Anne Gregory"), are among the least sex-concerned of Yeats's works. The poems in the remainder of the volume, however, become increasingly absorbed with sex and the body. It is almost as if, having gotten through concerns of the body to philosophical concerns (ASC, The Tower), Yeats uses "Vacillation" to turn again from the metaphysical to the physical in The Winding Stair.
associations with Yeats's thought are too obvious--it may be taken as one more example of Yeats's use of the mask, symbolizing inspiration and creativity. Yet the image of mask or effigy does not appear frequently in Yeats. This image represents a direction in which Yeats will ultimately turn, though he must try on many masks before he gets to the image of masks again in his later poems. The Winding Stair is, largely, Yeats's taking on of these masks, these voices. There is a tendency in "Vacillation," and in the volume, towards greater and more diverse use of poetic masks. Both poem and volume are full of dialogues, different voices, dramatized personae, counterpoint and argument, and a variety of formal styles. In fact, Yeats indicated more than once that "Vacillation" itself was begun as an attempt to exorcise the particularly strong voice of Crazy Jane (Jeffares, Man and Poet 272).

Yet ultimately the images supersede the voices, important as they are. Masks and voices are important for putting the questions which exercise and rivet Yeats; images are the main responses the poet offers, almost a form of exorcism. Section II of "Vacillation," with its male priest/artist hanging an image on the divided tree, does more than suggest the direction in which the sequence is tending. This image of an image also prefigures the emphasis on artifice--the imagistic "refuse," to use Yeats's term--of the final poems.

In place of questions or images, section III, in a rather Polonius-like tone, offers advice. It is the most prescriptive section in the poem, its point of view the most authoritarian. While its numerous imperatives, its preponderance of lines beginning with verbs ("Get," "Satisfy," "Begin," "Test"), its epigrammatic quality
("No man has ever lived that had enough / Of children’s gratitude of woman’s love"), and its commanding tone make this section sound the most forceful, it is the least effective in terms of the larger quest the sequence enacts. Section III does present differences, but in terms of choice, not vacillation—indeed, in terms of "The Choice" rather than "Vacillation." The first stanza expands the categories of "The Choice":

Get all the gold and silver that you can,
Satisfy ambition, or animate
The trivial days and ram them with the sun,
And yet upon these maxims meditate:
All women dote upon an idle man
Although their children need a rich estate;
No man has ever lived that had enough
Of children’s gratitude or woman’s love.  (V 500)

One must live and get enough to live on, "satisfy ambition," but one must realize too that this is not all that women and children—presumably equally compelling "ambitions"—will desire or admire. It is the choice again between "the life" and "the work." Though this section does rehearse key themes of "Vacillation" (works "of intellect or faith," men who come "[p]roud, open-eyed and laughing to the tomb"), its emphasis is on evaluation ("Test. . . everything. . . / And call those works extravagance of breath / That are not suited. . . .") [V 501]), not creation. It is the life of creation that the sequence is primarily concerned with; and as the following two sections go on to demonstrate, the shaping experiences of life are not always those which are chosen.

Sections IV and V are companion sections, representing respectively the experiences which originally served as their titles: "Happiness" and "Conscience." Neither contains questions—their intent is to present, not to analyze experience—but
both employ imagery important to the sequence, and both use time in interesting ways. Section IV begins, "My fiftieth year had come and gone." and goes on to describe an epiphanic moment in Yeats's life when he experienced great happiness. Everything about the episode is rendered quite particularly. The scene in the London shop is set precisely and vividly: the speaker gazes out on the street. "An open book and empty cup / On the marble table-top" (V 501). Suddenly, he feels his body "blaze," an image recalling both the flaming brand of section I and the flaming half of the tree in section II, and looking forward to the "simplicity of fire" in section VII. The interlude lasts "twenty minutes more or less," and fills him with so great a happiness "That I was blessed and could bless" (V 501). Though the incident is remembered--it is relayed in the past tense--the times and places connected to joy are specific, and made to seem very present.

In contrast, section V outlines the heart's "remorse" referred to in the opening section. Its images are also connected to others in the sequence: the "cloudy leafage of the sky" recalls the tree of section II again, while the "moonlight" perhaps anticipates the "gaudy moon" of section VI. Yet, though written in the present tense, this poem has no specific physical or chronological setting. It speaks of summer and winter, night and day, sky and field. Similarly, the speaker, about whom we have no information, remembers an indefinite but appalling range of "things": "Things said or done long years ago, / Or things I did not do or say / But thought that I might say or do" (V 501). Remorse, apparently, is not nearly so succinct nor specific an experience as joy.
These two poems are not composed of a created image, nor do they use questions to further intellectual debate; they certainly do not offer advice. These poems relate experiences. Falling in the centre of the sequence as they do, they suggest that experience is central, and that the central experience of life is vacillation. But the sequence does not end here, with experience. What it goes on to explore is another issue subtly raised in each of these poems: perspective. Perhaps the most telling contrast between sections IV and V relates to perspective. The joyful speaker notes his surroundings in detail; his epiphanic moment occurs "[w]hile on the shop and street I gazed" (V 501). The remorseful speaker, however, confesses that "[a]lthough the summer sunlight gild / Cloudy leafage of the sky, / Or wintry moonlight sink the field / In storm-scattered intricacy, / I cannot look thereon" (V 501). Though different in each poem, perspective is crucial to, even helps to create, experience. The remainder of the sequence attempts to work out, in light of this central experience of vacillation, what perspective the artist should take.  

The second major question of the sequence asks, in the context of vacillation, about the nature of art. It occurs in section VI, a poem which explores the connected (and by now characteristic) themes of great men and change. The first stanza develops a line of contrasting images, which also recall the passage of time. The

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25 It should be noted, too, that the move from sections IV and V into section VI follows Yeats's common pattern of a move from memory into metaphor: the emphasis on perspective and its role in creation here may partially explain why the poet frequently structures his poems in this way. The remainder of the sequence, in fact, continues the pattern outlined in "Algeciras," moving here from the predominantly metaphorical section VI into renewed questioning in sections VI and VII.
great lord of Chou overlooks a "rivery field" where he casts off mountain snow even as he smells new-mown hay; his cry is, "'Let all things pass away'" (V 502). The conqueror calling to "battle-weary men" on the former site of "Babylon or Nineveh" in the second stanza echoes this cry of mutability. The third stanza of the poem concludes:

From man's blood-sodden heart are sprung
Those branches of the night and day
Where the gaudy moon is hung.
What's the meaning of all song?
'Let all things pass away.'

(V 502)

The figure of the moon, an especially important image in this volume, is often associated in Yeats with the imagination; here it is hung on "branches" which recall the tree of section II. This stanza suggests that man himself--specifically his heart, which will play an important role in the following section--is the source of the vacillating reality upon which his imagination works.26 This being the case, we are then asked what such works signify: "What's the meaning of all song? / 'Let all things pass away'" (V 502). Art informs us (and the allusions to specific times and lives in the previous stanzas, the mention of "night and day," and the reference to the mutable moon bolster the notion) that our lives and works are temporal and temporary. This final stanza proposes that "man," and we must read particularly the artist,27 creates works of the imagination out of his vacillating heart, and that the

26 This idea will become central in "The Circus Animals' Desertion."

27 Yet more particularly, Yeats; as the autobiographical sections of the poem (and his general disposition and practice) insinuate, "Yeats" is writ large in any reference to the artist. As in ASC, Yeats links himself, albeit indirectly, to the other great men
meaning and nature of these "songs" reflect the realities of time and change in which he is caught. Yeats will examine the implications of singing such transience in the final sections of the sequence. But this second major question suggests that one response to the inquiry into joy is an inquiry into the meaning of art; art itself is linked to change, and the pattern of vacillation continues.

Section VII of the sequence debates, in the form of a dialogue, the consequences of the knowledge that all things pass away. The dialogue is one of Yeats favourite constructs (it is especially prevalent in The Winding Stair), and its dramatic presentation of important ideas befits the subject of this section. In addition, the fact that half of the lines in the section are questions contributes to the efficacy of this dialogue. The interrogative form gives the dialogue the tone of debate, quickens its pace, and is rhetorically more gripping than a stanza composed exclusively of direct statement would be. Moreover, its dual voices give a balance to the vacillation it enacts, and by closing with a question, which remains open while simultaneously enforcing a point, this dialogue foreshadows the assured but benevolent tone of the concluding section.

The participants in this dialogue are "The Soul" (which holds much the same position it had in the earlier poem, "A Dialogue of Self and Soul" [V 477-9]) and "The Heart," perhaps the vacillating heart described in section VI. The first question of the Heart, which speaks only in questions, is a vital one for the sequence. This question specifies and extends the quest of the sequence from an inquiry about the
nature of the world ("What is joy?") and art ("What's the meaning of all song?") into one probing the nature of the artist in the world.

The Soul seems to counsel that, given the transient nature of this world, one should focus not on it but on permanent "reality." The Heart responds with a key question which reads the close of section VI differently: if all we know of reality is vacillating experience, if all we create points to a continuous passing away--if all we know are "things that seem"--how can the Heart sing anything else?

*The Soul.* Seek out reality, leave things that seem.

*The Heart.* What, be a singer born and lack a theme? (V 502)

The Soul offers Isaiah as an example, implying that (Christian) belief in a permanent, transcendent "reality" produces fine song; but the Heart notes the price of such prophetic song is being "Struck dumb in the simplicity of fire," dumbness being anathema to a singer. The fire image, though an attractive and purifying one for Yeats (we may think of "In Memory of Eva Gore Booth and Con Markiewicz", and particularly "Byzantium"), here implies choosing only one side of the equation. The artist, as section II dramatically shows, is involved in a paradoxical but wider reality: as compelling as the flaming half of the tree might be, it takes both sides to make "all the scene," to "consume what they renew." Though the Soul counters that this fire offers salvation--an assertion which is not denied by the Heart--the Heart rejoins with a final question which presents the image of the father of singers as its response.

*The Soul.* Look on that fire, salvation walks within.

*The Heart.* What theme had Homer but original sin? (V 502)

Salvation may be laudable, but it is too exclusive a theme for poetry. For the Heart,
a singer must plant himself in "original sin," and sing the passionate, impermanent body in the divided world.

Section VIII, with its firm resolve and gentle dismissal, personalizes the position of the Heart. It has taken the vacillations of the entire sequence to arrive at this position, and fittingly this final section recalls many important parts of the sequence. It is a dialogue of sorts; it uses specific, historical, holy, and contrasting images and allusions; it reiterates arguments concerning what best serves a life headed for the tomb; and it poses important questions about art, belief, and change.

Like the sequence itself, section VIII begins with a question. Rather than a broad, earnestly seeking question, however, this question gently asks about a parting the speaker already anticipates. The speaker asks "Von Hügel"--the Catholic theologian Baron Friedrich von Hügel--whether they must indeed part, though they both accept miracles and honour sanctity. The casting of von Hügel in the role of friendly foe is a thoughtful one. As section VII indicates, the position Yeats sets against his own in the sequence is the Christian one, specifically its belief in an absolute and permanent truth beyond this world which should govern our actions and attitudes within it. It is a belief seductive in many ways to Yeats, and von Hügel's version of it would have been especially appealing. Von Hügel, among other things, was the author of The Mystical Element of Religion, which argued in part that the Christian vision and the artistic vision coincided (Henn 223). Yeats himself begins by emphasizing what the two thinkers share, and the phrasing "Must we part," coupled with the interrogative structure of the first two lines, suggests a congeniality between
the two, a wistfulness at the prospect of separation. Von Hügel stands for Yeats not only as a representative of Christianity, but of its most attractive qualities. In contrast to Ellmann’s assessment, von Hügel is not simply "Yeats’ straw man" (Identity 274) here. To assume so not only makes the speaker’s final choice seem less hard-won; it also misreads a familiar pattern in Yeats’s poetry. Much of the passion and strength of Yeats’s work is evoked by the formidable persons or prospects he confronts.

There is no reason to see von Hügel and his beliefs as exceptions.

While Yeats goes on to discuss the miracle of St. Theresa, a miracle he and von Hügel both accept, the poet immediately branches out to consider ideas wider than those which orthodox Christianity will admit, that “perchance” the same hands handled St. Theresa "that once/Had scooped out Pharaoh’s mummy" (V 503). The speaker surmises:

I -- though heart might find relief
Did I become a Christian man and choose for my belief
What seems most welcome in the tomb -- play a predestined part.

(V 503)

The diction here is charged. The speaker asserts that his "heart" might find relief in Christian belief, but it would seem from the preceding section that "soul" would be a better choice; the heart, in sections VI and VII particularly but also in sections I, IV, and V, has demonstrated its vacillating nature and un-heavenward leanings. Perhaps the use of "heart" here signifies its continued vacillation, despite its prior positions.

More provocative still is Yeats’s use of the verb "choose" in connection with Christian belief, followed by the loaded adjective "predestined" in connection with his own. To "choose" Christianity suggests that far from being "the way, the truth and
the light" (John 14.6), it is one option among several; one that, with its belief in the afterlife, would "be most welcome in the tomb," a sort of contingency plan against the finality of death. Yet the speaker ironically describes his own choice—to live the life of vacillation, to sing from an "unchristened heart" the passing songs of "original sin"—as "predestined," a word associated with inevitability and Christianity. This reversal of terms allows us to read the two positions presented here as both similar and different simultaneously. Yeats's ingenious choice of diction in this passage, striking in itself, also presages the ironic use of biblical allusion in the final question of the poem.

The speaker adopts Homer and his "unchristened heart" as his example instead of von Hügel's Christianity, an outcome foreshadowed by the responses of the Heart in section VII. The speaker does not defend this choice, nor does he try to persuade von Hügel to accept it. Rather, in the manner of the Heart again, he poses a question, in the terms of von Hügel's own Christian tradition:

The lion and the honeycomb, what has Scripture said?  
So get you gone. Von Hügel, though with blessings on your head.  
(V 503)

It is an allusion to an Old Testament riddle put by Samson, who killed a lion and later found bees had nested in the carcass: "Out of the eater came forth meat, and out of

28 All biblical references in this thesis are taken from the 1611 King James Version of the bible.

29 The phrase "unchristened heart" is connected in the poem with Homer, but it applies as well to Yeats, who aligns himself with the ancient poet; indeed, in early drafts of the poem the phrase first described the speaker, and only later was moved to modify Homer (Bradford 132-3).
the strong came forth sweetness” (Judges 14.14). Again, Yeats uses the terms of Christian discourse, this time from its most sacred text, in support of his own pagan position. But here the connections and disconnections extend beyond those between Yeats’s and von Hügel’s views to encompass the hitherto parallel if complementary work of questions and images in the sequence.

Yeats frames his allusion as a question. Image and interrogative, which have occurred essentially separately in the sequence, unite in a layered, paradoxical riddle. The interrogative function of this question reflects the several functions of questions throughout the sequence. It is discursive and rhetorical: it both asks for information and makes a point; it furthers the argument. The images in the question similarly sum up the use of images generally in the sequence: they are dramatic, concrete, mythical/historical, and symbolic. Their allusion to the riddle of the lion and the honeycomb recalls the paradoxical image of the tree from section II: both visions refer to life and death, consumption and renewal, celebration and sacrifice, and to a strong, creative figure negotiating these things. In short, the images evoke the paradoxical life that the artist must live and sing.

Together, this combination of images and interrogative suggests the proper aim of creative life in the vacillating world: not resolution, but resolve. Consequently, the poem ends not with absolution, but benediction. In a final appropriation of Christian terms, section VIII closes with the speaker dismissing his amiable adversary

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30 This presents an interesting contrast to Eliot’s characteristic pattern, illustrated most clearly in the poems of Ash-Wednesday: Eliot more typically ends in a posture of submission or humility, seeking rather than bestowing blessing.
von Hügel, "though with blessings" (V 503). This is more than simply a rejection of the strictures of Christianity, however. It also represents a mediation of the exclusive positions outlined in "Sailing to Byzantium," the emblematic opening poem of The Tower: the poet must sing the sensual music as well as the monuments of unageing intellect. He must acknowledge that, as man and poet, he will always have to vacillate between the two. To sing, one must be in nature, with all the complex, disordered process that that entails. Perhaps this realization accounts for why there is such a return to the body in the remainder of this volume, and eventually to creative process in the themes and images of the later work.

With the dismissal of von Hügel, we are left again with the poetic "I." The shifts between "you," "we," and "I" in the final section are quite deliberate; the first draft of section VIII, interestingly, was in the first person singular throughout (Bradford 132-3). Bradford observes that the final version of this poem "shows Yeats's highly skilled management of the 'I-persona' here and throughout his later poetry" (133), a skill Yeats's questions accentuate. One scholar of poetic questions has observed that questioning is "an active power of dislocation" (Wolfson 19).

31 This sequence enables a richer reading of the memorable but problematic "golden bird" of "Sailing to Byzantium": "once out of nature," why would one immediately make oneself over in a natural image (the "fowl" of stanza I), and moreover, animate this image in a natural way, by singing? Finally, in this fixed state, the bird still sings of process, of what is "past, or passing, or to come" (V 408). As "Vacillation" points out, you cannot escape this world, nor sing in the same way if you could. The heart must remain unchristened by any type of permanent existence, be it the Christian heaven or the Byzantine "artifice of eternity." In many ways, the tensions of "Sailing to Byzantium" are considered more fully in "Vacillation" than in its 'companion' piece from The Winding Stair, "Byzantium."
While this is most often true, the opposite power may also be in play, as it is in the questioning of "Vacillation." In asking his final question of von Hügel and then bidding him farewell, the speaker is locating himself, physically, metaphysically, and artistically, in the world of vacillation. Beginning with an inquiry into the nature of the world (if the world is as it appears, "What is joy?"), moving to an investigation of art ("What's the meaning of all song?") and which perspective the artist should adopt in the vacillating world ("What, be a singer born and lack a theme?"), and finally shifting into an interrogative acknowledging the artist’s paradoxical position ("The lion and the honeycomb, what has Scripture said?"), questions throughout the sequence help Yeats to formulate an identity for the creative self in the world.

It is an interesting journey from the "we" closing ASC back to the "I" being formulated in "Vacillation." While the open, inclusive questioning at the end of ASC provided a transcendent way out of the morass of self-absorption, in "Vacillation" Yeats moves back towards an individual response to the world. The "I" of this sequence is not that of The Tower: it does not desire to know, how does the world relate (rather, why will it not conform) to my self, but how does my self live in this world. ASC used events and images from the objective, historical world to explore timeless, subjective experience. "Vacillation" is more of an interior quest, an attempt to extrapolate from individual, subjective experience a way in which to deal with the mutable, objective world. In the later poems, these two impulses, and the questions which figure them, will fuse more and more into images alone—"outward visible sign[s]," not of Christianity’s "inward and spiritual grace" (BCP 581), but of
ongoing, unsettled creative struggle—until finally, in "Lapis Lazuli," it is the art itself, its images, which look out at the human world.

V.

As its questions and images illustrate, in "Vacillation" the poet is able to separate his "eye" from his "I." This important distinction is at the root of much of the poetry which follows, for Yeats will increasingly turn his eye on the creative self, interrogating it and its creations, and they will increasingly, enigmatically, sometimes threateningly, respond with images. The questions "Lapis Lazuli" raises about creators, the tragically gay who build and rebuild the things that last "but a day," are answered by an image of animated sculpture, whose inhabitants' "ancient, glittering eyes" stare back at us in an inversion of the static world of the Grecian urn. Last Poems begins with the robust, didactic "Under Ben Bulben," a poem centrally concerned with the poetic "I." "Ben Bulben" figures the speaker/Yeats as exactly the sort to go "proud, open-eyed, and laughing to the tomb" (V 501), thereby rendering a not unfavourable judgement in his own terms on his life and work: structuring his death in his life, the speaker writes his own epitaph, closing the poem with an image of the power of the artist even in the face of his own death. Yet this resolution cannot be sustained throughout the volume. In "Man and the Echo," the Man ponders,

All that I have said and done,
Now that I am old and ill,
Turns into a question till
I lie awake night after night
And never get the answers right.  

(V 632)

His only response is an echo of his own words, until the last disturbing image of the poem leaves even the echo silent.

Perhaps the most potent example of Yeats's investigation of the artistic self and its creations occurs in "The Circus Animals' Desertion." Here we have direct question again, and a direct response issued in images:

Those masterful images because complete  
Grew in pure mind but out of what began?  
A mound of refuse or the sweepings of a street,  
Old kettles, old bottles, and a broken can,  
Old iron, old bones, old rags, that raving slut  
Who keeps the till. Now that my ladder's gone  
I must lie down where all the ladders start  
In the foul rag and bone shop of the heart.  

(V 630)

Images are what the poet makes, and images reflect what he is. He must fashion his masterful, complete images from the fragmented world of which he is a part. The bitter tone of the passage, its humility (and perhaps self-pity), are ultimately unconvincing given the power of the images themselves. The question once again creates a space and serves as a means by which the poet begins to make, or remake, himself and his art.

In discussing "The Shadowy Waters," compared specifically to The Wind Among the Reeds as an example of Yeats's maturing style, Paul de Man significantly notes,

The same poem puts in the form of a question what in the preceding volume would have been unreservedly answered in the affirmative: "Is Eden out of time and out of space?"  

(Rhetoric 205)

From the earlier to the last poems, significant thematic and rhetorical changes in
Yeats’s works can be mapped by looking at innovations in the nature and function of his questions. Perhaps most importantly, questions help to trace Yeats’s continually shifting sense of the creative self. In her study *The Questioning Presence*, Wordsworth, Keats and the Interrogative Mode in Romantic Poetry, Susan Wolfson argues that a fundamental difference in the interrogative modes of the two Romantic poets is based on their divergent views and uses of poetic persona.

If Wordsworth insists on the centrality of self as the source of his poetic power and the resource of his most intense questionings, Keats resists that idiom by translating his questionings into terms [and, she argues, formal patterns (33)] that afford disinterested speculation: the worlds of myth, literature, art, and legend, not the language of empirical experience. (40)

Much of the strength of Yeats’s poetry, and his poetic questioning, stem from his seemingly unique ability to combine these two positions. Clearly, Yeats’s own self is central to his poetry, from beginning to end. People, places, ideas, events, and artworks, which are inseparable from the life of Yeats the man, appear everywhere in his poems. The first person singular is certainly one of his favourite points of view, if not his very favourite. Most of his poetic questions are concerned, directly or indirectly, with himself, or things as they impinge on the self. Yeats is everywhere related to his poetic masks.

Yet despite these empirical references, personal allusions, the self-referentiality of the poetry, and its individual voice and character, the poems are written in regular stanzaic and metrical forms, which bring their own political and thematic baggage. We may be aware of ties in the poems to Yeats the man, but his use of myth, symbol, history, and form introduce issues and concerns beyond those associated with
the private man. The irony, and the vacillating views and subject matter of the poems, make us unable to conflate the man and the masks completely. The complex nature of his questions, even simply their abiding presence in his poetry, play a crucial role in making us aware of these tensions: of textual and other ruptures, of both the connection and disconnection of person and persona, creator and created. Yeats is, if it is possible, an egotistical chameleon, who uses questions continually to remake not only his poetry but himself.32

Because this process was always one of vacillation for Yeats, his poetry focuses more on questions than on answers. Perhaps it is this focus which makes him most Modern; it is striking that he shares this proclivity with his very different Modernist counterpart T. S. Eliot, another poet deeply concerned with questions, who also frequently eschews answers for images. However, questions are interestingly a root difference between the two poets as well: though also focused on questions and their relation to persona, Eliot uses them to escape personality rather than, as Yeats does, continually to formulate it. In shifting attention from Yeats to Eliot, we fundamentally shift from a search for and through the overwhelming question, to dramatic avoidance of it.

32 N.B. Yeats's early untitled quatrain:

_The friends that have it I do wrong_
_When ever I remake a song_
_Should know what issue is at stake;_
_It is myself that I remake._ (V 778)
CHAPTER II

DEVICES AND DESIRES:
THE FORMAL APPETITES OF ELIOT'S INTERROGATIVE

I.

After his death, upon his instructions, T. S. Eliot's ashes were taken to the church of St. Michael's in his ancestral village of East Coker. Of all the words he had read and written in his life, the ones he chose for inscription on a plaque dedicated to his memory there are these, taken from "East Coker": "In my beginning is my end" (CP 196), and "In my end is my beginning" (CP 204).¹

Though obviously chosen, as are most words by Eliot, to refer to a wide range of experience, these lines also provide an instructive guide to his work. Many of Eliot's endings are well-known, and have instigated a good deal of critical comment and discussion. So "significant," "influential," and "memorable" does Barbara Herrnstein Smith find Eliot's endings, for example, that she uses him as her primary example of how modern poetic closure often works: "The whimper, the question, the dying fall: with these, Eliot established a tone and style of poetic closure that have become as familiar and representative as the personality of Prufrock" (248-9).

Such remarks ring true to our experience of Eliot, particularly the early Eliot: so much seems to be finished or finishing, closed off, exhausted, over. Yet perhaps

¹ All citations to "CP" in this chapter refer to the Collected Poems 1909-1962 of T. S. Eliot.
we get a more complete idea of the trajectory of Eliot's poetry if we go at it from the opposite angle, from the perspective of his beginnings. It is the beginnings, even more than the endings, which hold the key to the poet's changing views, though as the lines from "East Coker" suggest the two are always closely linked. Beginnings seem nearly synonymous with endings in the early work: Prufrock asks more than once how to begin, yet cannot; conversations, relationships, thoughts, actions, all attempts at starts in "Portrait of a Lady" are aborted; the opening of The Waste Land, with its allusions to beginnings literary, religious, and organic, among others, is immediately figured as an end--April is the cruellest month, its "little life" overshadowed by inevitable death.

Poems from Eliot's central period challenge this fruitless equation. Ash-Wednesday insists at its start and its close on turning, hoping; rather than assuming their identity, it celebrates "the time of tension between dying and birth." The Ariel poems continue this trend, perhaps most poignantly in "Marina," where an old man finds himself not in a dry month but on his home shore, and what once seemed an end becomes, foggily, a beginning. Four Quartets in some sense completes the revision, setting a midwinter spring in the face of The Waste Land's snowy April, replacing the corpse garden with the rose-garden, and asserting directly that endings are beginnings, that

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.
Through the unknown, remembered gate
When the last earth left to discover
Is that which was the beginning. . . .

As much of the copious criticism on Eliot attests, though, the danger of imposing too clean a scheme on any Eliot poem, never mind the oeuvre, is even greater than the compulsion to do so. The relations of beginnings and endings in the poetry are not simple, nor without important shifts, subversions, and qualifications in each of the poems. However, the interplay of beginnings and endings, the move between expectation and fulfillment, openings and closure, is crucial in Eliot's work. Just as interesting and crucial to his poetry is one of his primary techniques of rhetorically encoding these transitions: his use of the question.

Questions cause textual ruptures of sorts; they open spaces in discourse. While Yeats provides some examples, and Eliot will furnish more, of ways in which questions may rhetorically close off the responses they seem to invite, grammatically, semantically, and semiotically, questions function primarily as beginnings. J. M. Kertzer has noted this flexible aspect of the question, usefully linking views posited by linguistic, hermeneutic, and narrative structure theories to underscore its special rhetorical status. He valuably connects the multivalent nature of the question to Edward Said's observations in *Beginnings: Intention and Method*:

Speech-act theory shows... how the conditions of asking a question both encourage and control interpretation through consensus, authority, and limitation. They permit a question first to open and then to close a field of discourse. This double process of expansion and contraction is characteristic of all narrative "beginnings," according to Edward Said. A beginning posits an authoritative, narrative intention. It is "transitive" in that it "foresees a continuity that flows from it" and advances toward a suitable end that it implies. It is a "formal appetite," commanding an answer to fill its need. (244)
The notion of a question as a "formal appetite"—a notion which implies both desire and control, beginning and ending—is enormously helpful in studying Eliot. Eliot’s poetry is full of both form and appetite; indeed, it derives a great deal of its force from the tension between the two, whether they are figured as social or sexual, spiritual or psychological. A look at how and where Eliot’s questions punctuate these restrictions and desires should shed interesting light on the larger concerns of the poetry, and help to plot the shifts between beginnings and endings in his work. Such an investigation may most profitably begin where Eliot did, in his first book of poetry: with "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," a poem and persona obsessed with appetites, forms, questions, and how to begin.

II.

"The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" ("Prufrock") is a highly interrogative poem; it both provokes and contains a number of questions. The questions contained in the poem divide themselves interestingly into two major groups, closely related to the function of questions as formal appetites. The first group, consisting of the "spoken" questions in the poem, is primarily concerned with issues of form. The second group, comprised of the unspoken question(s) in the poem, focuses chiefly on appetite. But as different as the nature and aim of these questions are, both groups participate in a similar, foreboding pattern. They emphasize that all in the world—space, time, even death—is conditional. They illustrate, and help to create, a world in which nothing can complete. Attempts to begin in "Prufrock" are principally figured
by and in its questions. What careful attention to these questions reveals, however, is that these attempts at beginnings actually mask an abiding fear about endings:

"Prufrock" does not despair over the impossibility of starting so much as dread an inability to end.

This pattern of incompletion is demonstrated by the first category of questions in "Prufrock," the "formal" group, whose chief characteristic, ironically enough, is that they resist final form. The questions accomplish this lack of closure at the technical level--verbally, rhythmically, and syntactically--with the powerfully simple aid of repetition. The most striking aspect of the questions in "Prufrock" is that they are very repetitive.

'Do I dare?' and, 'Do I dare?'

Do I dare
Disturb the universe? (CP 14)

So how should I presume? (CP 14)

Then how should I begin
To spit out all the butt ends of my days and ways?
And how should I presume? (CP 14)

And should I then presume?
And how should I begin? (CP 15)

And would it have been worth it, after all,
After the cups, the marmalade, the tea,
Among the porcelain, among some talk of you and me,
Would it have been worth while. . . (CP 15)

And would it have been worth it, after all,
Would it have been worth while,
After the sunsets and the dooryards and the sprinkled streets,
After the novels, after the teacups, after the skirts that
trail along the floor--
And this, and so much more?--
Would it have been worth while... 

The device of repetition is used here in an unusual and canny way. Rather than reinforce a pattern of thought or behaviour, as repetition often does, these questions use repetition to dissolve. The effect of repeating the same words and phrases over and over in the questions is analogous to that of repeating any one word over too many times: words are dispossessed of meaning, focus is lost, action paralyzed. It is not only words such as "begin" and "after," and the concepts they represent, which we suspect after such repetition; ominously, the word "I" is also reiterated many times, hinting at the dissolution of personality which the poem both courts and fears.

This pattern of dissipation is evident not only in the vocabulary of questions in the poem, but in their rhythm and syntax as well. In his book The Technique of T. S. Eliot, Thomas Rees carefully outlines the rhythmic patterns he discerns in "Prufrock"; his close study of the metrics of the poem relies on a preponderance of lines containing questions for its examples. What Rees discovers is that, rhythmically, "a definite pattern of dominance and subordination emerges: there are nearly twice as many pentameter lines as there are hexameters, and almost twice as many hexameters as tetrameters" (43). He sees the same "pattern of metrical dominance and subordination" in Eliot's practice of "alternating regular and irregular lines, duple and multiple feet" (43). This irregularity continually thrust into a seductive, wave-like rhythm creates an impression of undercut expectation; it is a cadence which refuses to locate the very desire for destination it encodes.
The syntax of the questions also embodies this pattern of continuity without completion. A recurring syntactical feature of the questions in the poem is their beginning with a conjunction, particularly the conjunction "and." This use of the conjunction provides an economical way to link ideas grammatically which may not, upon closer inspection, be otherwise connected. Disparate thoughts, observations, or other strands of experience may be introduced and associated by a simple "and" without the need for further logical or causal explanation. This diffuses the intent of the questions, as does their extensive use of repetitive, descriptive phrases. The oft-repeated phrases in the questions of "Prufock" ("how should I . . . ", "would it have been. . . .", "after the. . . ") constitute lists of sorts. While these lists may flesh out meter and detail, and register Prufrock's shifting mental and emotional states, their primary effect is to digress from the true topics of the questions themselves. The generally paratactic style of the questions echoes their rhythmic pattern of "dominance and subordination." The syntax of the questions allows main ideas and queries only brief ascendency; under the pressure of quantity and repetition, their point inevitably succumbs to the myriad, commonplace details of circumstance.

The verb forms of the questions, too, show how the definite and decisive are evoked only to be suspended. The main verbs of the questions are strong, active,

\[ \text{2 This technique is frequently employed by Modern novelists as well, such as Hemingway and Faulkner, not only because it is economical but because it replicates more closely the rhythm and construction of "thought" language. Undoubtedly this is part of its function in "Prufock," too; however, considering it in this light raises issues of what is and is not "spoken" in the poem--issues of genre--which are dealt with in more detail below.} \]
even aggressive: disturb, presume, begin, say, spit, force, part, eat. They are everywhere surrounded, however, by qualifiers: should have, would have been, shall, do. These auxiliary verbs greatly modify the impact of the main verbs, creating a tension around the possibilities of action that borders on paralysis. Furthermore, it is in many ways a paralysis of action in the present moment, for another characteristic that these questions share, a characteristic underscored by their verb forms, is the evocation of a time not immediately present.

It is not only the construction of the questions which exhibit qualification and incompleteness. The time and space in which questions are articulated are also highly provisional. The movement of time in the poem is complex, but the structure of the verbs in the questions seems to indicate that they are always asking about behaviours to be asserted at a conditional or future moment (e.g., "And should I then presume?") or about behaviours that might have been or should have been undertaken at a moment in the past (e.g., "And would it have been worth it after all. . .?"). Perhaps the only instance of questioning we can locate with assurance in the present tense is the first one, which is ironically situated within the speaker's imperative not to ask: "Oh, do not ask, 'What is it?'" (CP 13). After the opening verse paragraph, locating the present in the poem becomes very problematic indeed, and the structure of the poem's questions contributes to this confusion. Prufrock tells us over and over again that there will be time, for nearly everyone and everything, but the time to actually put his central question never arrives.

Just as these questions have trouble existing in any but a conditional time, they
also exist in a rather conditional space. Ludmila Gruszewska-Wojtas distinguishes between "the street" and "the drawing-room" in exploring "the construction of the represented world" (65) in *Prufrock and Other Observations*, and the distinction is useful here. The street is the locale in which Prufrock comes closest to formulating the overwhelming question.

> Streets that follow like a tedious argument
> Of insidious intent
> To lead you to an overwhelming question. . . (CP 13)

though he never does formulate it—in fact, he enjoin us not to ask what it is. Again, when Prufrock is attempting to begin, he asks,

> Shall I say, I have gone at dusk through narrow streets
> And watched the smoke that rises from the pipes
> Of lonely men in shirt-sleeves, leaning out of windows? . . . (CP 15)

yet this promising effort is also aborted.

Instead, we have the questions of the drawing-room, the space of formality but no substantial form. Unlike the gritty, concrete, direct depiction of life outside the parlour, inside the drawing-room the world is almost all metonymic. People are known by their parts: Prufrock by his balding head, thin arms and legs, and various pieces of clothing ("My morning coat, my collar mounting firmly to the chin, / My necktie rich and modest, but asserted by a simple pin" [CP 14]); the lady by her "Arms that are braceletled and white and bare / (But in the lamplight, downed with light brown hair!)" (CP 15), her perfume, dress, and shawl; others, by their "voices dying with a dying fall" and their eyes "that fix you in a formulated phrase" (CP 15). Time is similarly "measured out by coffee spoons" (CP 14).
Even the room itself is known only through associated items and activities: ", . . 
the cups, the marmalade, the tea, / among some porcelain, among some talk of you
and me" (CP 16); "... the novels... the teacups... the skirts that / trail along
the floor" (CP 16); "the pillow" (CP 17) settled by the head. Nothing in the drawing-
room is ever presented in its full form; we get only pieces, possibilities, conditions
that never add up to whole things. The questions which occur in this space, which
hesitate, digress, and peter out, are no exception. The space and the time in which
the questions occur mirror the fractional, incomplete nature of the questions
themselves.³

These questions draw attention to fragmented form in a larger sense, too.
Questions are inevitably associated with dialogue, whether that dialogue is between
two participants or two parts of one self. The questions in "Prufrock" never seem to
complete the form of a dialogue, largely because it is difficult to determine who the
"second" participant might be. To whom are the questions in the poem addressed?
Any speculation regarding the actual or intended auditors in "Prufrock" must be
closely linked to one's generic interpretation of the poem. Most critics refer to
"Prufrock" as a dramatic monologue. As Abrams defines it, a dramatic monologue

³ Some readers have expressed the view that the events in the poem never take
place in "real" time or space, but only in Prufrock's head; that is, that we never go
and make the visit, never go through the streets or into the parlour at all. While the
complex form of the poem, as well as the complicated renderings of time and space
and persona within it, could be construed to support such a reading, I do not think it
vitiates the arguments put forward here. The time and space distinctions are still
made in the poem, whether they occur in the poetic "world" or only in the "world" of
Prufrock's mind (which, in any case, is at least as conditional in space and time as
any other construction in the work, if not more so).
has three distinctive features:

(1) A single person, who is patently not the poet, utters the entire poem in a specific situation at a critical moment. . . . (2) This person addresses and interacts with one or more other people: but we know of the auditors' presence and what they say and do only from clues in the discourse of the single speaker. (3) The principle controlling the poet's selection and organization of what the lyric speaker says is the speaker's unintentional revelation of his or her temperament and character. (46)

Abrams goes on to cite "Prufrock" as "the best-known modern instance" of the dramatic monologue. While there are similarities between "Prufrock" and the dramatic monologue, surely more qualification is needed before it can be so easily identified. Regarding the criterion of dramatic situation, for example, we must note that a major point of the poem is that the "critical moment" for Prufrock never arrives. Similarly, regarding the criterion of character revelation, it is remarkable that one of the principle attributes of the poem is Prufrock's own understanding of his situation, manifest by his ironic commentary throughout, and the absolute intentionality of his revelations about his character.

More to the point here, however, is the poem's ambiguity regarding Abrams' second criterion: is there another person present, and if so, who? Some readers have tried to tie the "you" of the first line to the epigraph, suggesting that the "you" may be a Virgil or Dante figure, some kind of "familiar compound ghost" (Frye). Other readers (Williamson, Basler) believe that the "you" of "Let us go then, you and I" is only another "personality" of Prufrock's, another aspect of his consciousness.⁴ A

⁴ Prufrock need not have another "personality" to address the questions to himself, however. It is conceivable, and perhaps our most compelling though not
third view (Brooks, Warren, Weitz) takes the "you" to be the reader. Perhaps the questions are addressed to a "you" accompanying Prufrock about whom we know nothing.⁵

The problem of identification stems from our lack of information of any kind about the "silent auditor," and without this information it is doubly difficult to determine to whom the questions posed by the persona are addressed. We are definitely led to believe by the responses Prufrock imagines (e.g., "If one, settling a pillow by her head, / Should say: 'That is not what I meant at all'" [CP 16]) that the questions which never actually appear in the poem are at least intended to be put to a lady, but she is never questioned directly. At any rate, our inability to identify the audience for the "spoken" questions, and our noting that the intended recipient of the most critical question is never ultimately asked anything, underscores again the ambiguity of questioning in the poem: the dialogue a question should begin never really starts, and thus never completes.

Even the subject of the "spoken" questions in the poem emphasizes form,

thoroughly satisfying choice, to assume that all the questions actually put in the poem are put in at least the first instance by Prufrock to Prufrock himself, in the same way any single personality talks to him- or herself. Not only do we have instances where the punctuation tells us this must be so ("To wonder, 'Do I dare?' and, 'Do I dare?'"), but the nature of other questions, and their answers, also argue that Prufrock at least on some level is interrogating himself and his actions.

⁵ See Lloyd Dickson's "Prufrock in a Labyrinth: A Text Without Exits" (140), and John Halverson's "Prufrock, Freud and Others" (571-74), which review these and other speculations as to the identities of the "you" and the "I" in the opening lines of the poem.
specifically social form. Prufrock repeatedly inquires about what to do, and how and when he should do it. He asks continually for information about how to behave, ironically in circumstances and with people about which he allegedly knows everything already: he has "known them all." More precisely, he is asking for information about how to behave differently, how to address a new situation of his own creation, how and when to ask the overwhelming question. He is trying to find a new form which will not be what the English would term "bad form." And, as so much about his questions foreshadow, he cannot, or does not, find the time nor the shape for this new form of conduct.

Thus Prufrock moves from questions anticipating the potential shape of this new social form—the forward-looking, how-to questions; towards a confession of his fear; and then into a series of retrospective questions about what it would have been like had he been able to articulate the question, to find this new form. His last questions return acerbically to the conventional forms of the drawing-room. No longer does Prufrock wonder about disturbing the universe: he asks about parting his hair and eating a peach, metonymic, superficial questions which place him sadly and squarely back in the social strictures of the parlour. Prufrock's inability to articulate his most compelling questions, to begin a dialogue, or to usher in the possibility of the new, is the rhetorical equivalent of his impotent will. He has chosen the trivial but familiar forms of the drawing room (and even these behaviours, the interrogative ensures, remain potential rather than complete), and the triviality of his last questions reflects this.
The responses to the questions in the poem continue the questions' own pattern of discontinuity. Just as Prufrock does not really want to ask, so he does not really want to respond. If the questions of the poem hedge, its answers dodge. They stave off completing the familiar form of question-and-answer by pre-empting, either rhetorically or imaginatively, a real response.

In response to his earliest questions, those inquiring about how to initiate new forms of behaviour, Prufrock attempts rhetorical escape. He elongates and repeats the question through the means outlined above; he distracts with detail; he continually provides information, but only about what he knows, not about what he can or should do. At the end of this series of questions, he does make one positive attempt at a start, and this attempt is separated by rhythm, line length, imagery, tone, and punctuation from the previous section:

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Shall I say, I have gone at dusk through narrow streets
And watched the smoke that rises from the pipes
Of lonely men in shirt-sleeves, leaning out of windows? . . .

I should have been a pair of ragged claws
Scuttling across the floors of silent seas.
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(CP 15)

The reality of his finding a possible way to start apparently has a terrific and terrifying impact on Prufrock, however. As the final couplet here shows, he escapes again, this time into an imagined sea realm he will return to when the pressures of reality crowd him again at the end of the poem.

Following the stark contrasts of this passage, we begin to get questions not
about potential behaviour, but instead about the value of such behaviour, had Prufrock been able to effect it: we get the retrospective, conditional questions, those beginning "would it have been worth it after all." Needing more than rhetorical formulas to avoid these evaluative queries, Prufrock evades them by means of negative imaginative projections. Rather than imagine putting the overwhelming question to the lady, he imagines instead her response to it: "That is not what I meant at all. / That is not it, at all" (CP 17).

All we can determine from her repetitive "answer" is that it is negative--but regarding what? We cannot really tell from this imagined response exactly what the question may have been. The lady's answer, as Prufrock projects it, may be assertive and dismissive, vague and indirect, teasing, or pitying and polite, depending on what the question was that prompted it. Prufrock may not be able to exercise power by speaking for himself, but he does imaginatively attempt to assert it by pre-empting the responses of others, negative though they may be.

Prufrock pre-empts not only possible responses to his action (or inaction), but to his entire personality, again through the agency of negatively constructed assertions. Throughout the poem he paints a picture, through a series of allusions from history, scripture, and literature, of what he is not. Though he has "wept and fasted, wept and prayed, / Though I have seen my head (grown slightly bald) / brought in upon a platter" (CP 16)--a reference to John the Baptist's demise at the hands of Salome--he is not a prophet, Prufrock tells us. He is evidently not a speaker out of Marvell either, he suggests in the next verse paragraph, lacking the ability "To
have squeezed the universe into a ball / To roll it towards some overwhelming question" (CP 16). Neither is he "Lazarus, come from the dead" (CP 16). Finally, we learn in a highly layered reference, Prufrock is not "Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be" (CP 17).

To the contrary, as Steven Helmling among others has observed, there are many ways in which Prufrock is indeed like Hamlet. Reading Prufrock in light of Eliot's famous essay on the play, Helmling notes:

. . . Eliot's comic-pathetic antihero, too, can be reprehended (on the premise of the "Hamlet" essay) for seeking "relief" from (rather than resolutions to) his "problems," in "levity," "repetition of phrase," and "puns": "I grow old . . . I grow old . . . / I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled." If the beholding eye is not sympathetic, what else can this be except "the buffoonery of an emotion that can find no outlet in action"? . . . In the "Hamlet" essay Eliot is concerned to repudiate a style of response to the self-consciousness problem that he himself, in his best-known poem (as "Prufrock" was in 1919) had seemed most brilliantly to exemplify. ("Humour" 154)\(^6\)

Where Prufrock differs most pointedly from the prince is not in temperament necessarily, and not even in a hesitancy to act\(^7\), but in his inability to do one specific thing that Hamlet does do: articulate the overwhelming question. There is more at work than simple ironic effect in Prufrock's assertion he is unlike another character he actually in many respects closely resembles. The interrogative--what it concerns,

\(^6\) In the interests of clarity, I have changed Helmling's format for quoting "Prufrock" from the double-spacing and indentation used in his article to the single-spacing here.

\(^7\) In fact, I would argue that Prufrock and Hamlet are often indicted unfairly on the charge of not acting: both characters do a great number of things in the works in which they appear. It is only one chief action on which they stick, though a different one for each.
to whom and where it is spoken, the simple fact that it gets spoken--comes to represent character; and Prufrock's inability to articulate his question reflects on the character of both Prufrock and his age.

Prufrock may be no Hamlet, but it is equally significant that he is not, as he goes on to tell us, the Fool. This is a moving admission, again for reasons related to the interrogative. Prufrock says he is "almost ridiculous-- / Almost, at times, the Fool" (CP 17). To be actually rather than "almost" a Fool, particularly in the Shakespearean context which is strongly evoked in this passage, is to have an important role. In many formal courts, including those found in Shakespeare--and surely the drawing-room in "Prufrock" represents a similar environment in terms of class and conduct--the Fool, the "ridiculous" one, was the only one given leave to question authority. Looking no further than King Lear, it is possible to see how ridiculous, Foolish questions ensure needed perspective, and reflect a risky love. Were Prufrock to be a Fool in this way, he may have been able to ignore the social forms which preoccupy him and risk putting the overwhelming question to the powers that be. It is at the heart of Prufrock's personal tragedy that he cannot fully give himself over to the "ridiculous," but it is also sad that, unlike the Shakespearean court, Prufrock's world apparently has no form for the Fool, or for his questioning. These melancholy reminders that things could have been, "almost," different, add depth and poignancy to our perception of Prufrock's reflections.

Prufrock's questions and responses show him consistently unable to create a new form in an old world. This leaves him with two options: he can either return to
old forms, or make a new world. Interestingly, at the close of the poem, he does both, neither with any lasting satisfaction. At the poem's close, Prufrock returns to the old forms once again by resorting to questions, now painfully ironic, about how to behave in the drawing-room world: "Shall I part my hair behind? Do I dare eat a peach?" As opposed to the earlier, open-ended questions asking about how to act, how to start, what to say, however, these are yes-or-no questions, questions whose answers fit a particular, familiar, closed form. To these and similar questions Prufrock actually has a response. He knows how he shall behave: "I shall wear white flannel trousers, and walk upon the beach" (CP 17).

Yet the emptiness of the responses demanded by the world of the parlour is measured in Prufrock's turning, or returning, to another world, a world of his own creation. Instead of mentally projecting a negative real world, he imagines a positive fantasy world, the world of the sea.

I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each.

I do not think that they will sing to me.

I have seen them riding seaward on the waves
Combing the white hair of the waves blown back
When the wind blows the water white and black.

We have lingered in the chambers of the sea
By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown
Till human voices wake us, and we drown. (CP 17)

It is a world Prufrock has sunk into before, notably right after his real attempt at finding a way to start: "I should have been a pair of ragged claws / Scuttling across the floors of silent seas" (CP 15). The sea-world appears to be a place of wish-
fulfillment for Prufrock, his ultimate escape; but the escape it offers, while beautiful and soothing, turns out to be highly ambivalent. The imagined sea initially appears to be everything Prufrock's world is not. It is a world of lyrical imagery and assertion, not a world of tiresome inquiry; yet it provokes more questions than answers. It is characterized not by the clink of porcelain but the silence of the scuttling crab, not by whispers about Prufrock's thinness, but by the mermaids' song; yet as Prufrock notices, the mermaids are singing "each to each. / I do not think that they will sing to me." After an entire poem insisting on separate or exclusive pronouns (chiefly "I," but also "you," "one," "her," "they"), the sea world seems to be a world of community, where "we" have lingered; yet this coming together is short-lived, as human voices almost immediately wake "us," and "we" drown.

Finally, the sea seems to be a world of varied form: the plural "floors" and "chambers" of the sea; the "ragged" claws; the singing, swimming mermaids; the wind changing the shape and colour of the waves; the sea-girls wreathing seaweed both "red and brown." Tellingly however, the lines about the sea constitute the most structured verse in the poem. The couplet about the crab, with the exception of one foot, is perfect iambic pentameter. Aside from the couplets, the final lines are the only ones in a regular stanzaic pattern in the poem; their rhyme, meter, and syllable-count are more regular than that of the other verse paragraphs. Prufrock's imaginary escape from the forms that enclose him is rendered in the most formal verse. His responses to the questions which plague him, particularly his evocative but ambivalent imaginary response at the poem's close, underscore the revelation of the questions
themselves: that form and desire, while intimately linked, undercut one another in the poem. The inability of form to complete itself, or to relate unironically to content, is a reflection of appetites unsatisfied.

These appetites or desires are the focus of the second group of questions in "Prufrock." the "unformed" or unspoken questions of the poem which are represented centrally by that enigma, "the overwhelming question." What are these appetites, what is this desire that remains unarticulated but overdetermined in Prufrock's world? What is the overwhelming question? Curiously, Prufrock's evasions on this score appear contagious. Very few critics actually formulate the overwhelming question when they discuss it; more frequently, they describe generally what they think it must concern. Those critics who do hazard a guess (and again, a surprising number do not) have produced a varied list to account for the content of the overwhelming question, speculating that it may concern matters social, sexual, suicidal, religious, or metaphysical, among other possibilities.⁸

Clearly, the overwhelming question centrally involves Prufrock's deepest desires; and the strongest depiction we get of those desires is contained in the pregnant close of the poem. The final passage of "Prufrock" suggests two desires as most prominent. The first of these, a form of death-wish, is the subject of Michael Baumann's article "Let Us Ask, 'What Is it?'" Baumann believes that the overwhelming question is "'Should one commit suicide?' which is to say: 'Should

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⁸ Two succinct and representative (though not exhaustive) summaries of various critics' views of the overwhelming question can be found in Dickson (142), and throughout the article by Baumann (see especially 48-52).
While it is difficult finally to agree with Baumann that this is Prufrock's ultimate question, it is easy to see how the numerous evocations of death in the poem would suggest this possibility. Much of the poem's imagery connotes death. The setting of the poem is October, and nightfall. Subsequent to the startling opening image of the evening "spread out against the sky / Like a patient etherised upon a table," Prufrock mentions the fog that encircles the house like a cat "asleep"; he speaks of the men at "dusk"; later he observes how "... the afternoon, the evening, sleeps so peacefully! / Smoothed by long fingers, / Asleep ... tired ... or it malingers, / Stretched on the floor" (CP 15).

Prufrock sounds enervated. He tells us he has foreknown and foreseen it all. Time for him seems endless; yet the end of his time is never far from his mind. When he reports that he has "seen the eternal Footman hold my coat, and / snicker," he is "afraid." Even in his fantasy world he is drowned. The historical and literary allusions Prufrock makes also relate to death. He speaks of seeing his "head (grown slightly bald) / brought in upon a platter" like the decapitated John the Baptist's (CP 16); he says "I am Lazarus, come from the dead, / Come back to tell you all. ..." (CP 16); he compares himself to Hamlet, a figure obsessed with whether to be or not to be (CP 17).

Upon closer inspection, however, these references are much more to death-like states, potential deaths, than to death itself. Indeed, their point ultimately seems to be that the trouble with death, like other escapes, is its lack of finality, reality, permanence. Autumn and twilight are states suggesting endings, but they are also
parts of cycles that will bring spring and morning round again. One can awaken from both sleep and anaesthesia. Prufrock may have imagined his head on a platter, but by his own admission he is not a prophet—John's fate may not be his. The point of Lazarus's story (regardless of which Lazarus is being referred to here) is that he is alive after death; even in Prufrock's version he is "come from the dead" to the living. And Hamlet is more remembered for his inability to decide to take his life than for his life finally being taken. Even Prufrock's own drowning is a dying from fantasy back into the life of the real world, the world of "human voices." Though it is plainly an abiding concern, death, and whether or not he should expedite his own, is not Prufrock's overwhelming question. Rather, it concerns a way he might break a cycle of life from which there is no escape, even in death.\(^9\)

The overwhelming question more probably relates to the second strain of desire suggested by the close of the poem, with its imagery of mermaids, song, wreathing, waves, watery chambers, blowing hair, the plural "we." It is a question concerned not with the metaphysical but the physical, not with the "time to murder," but the time to (pro-"create" (CP 14). In short, many critics suppose that Prufrock's question regards his making love to the lady in the poem; and much in the poem supports the notion that Prufrock's overwhelming, unspoken question has to do with sexual passion. The original title of the poem was, in fact, "Prufrock Among the

\(^9\) Of course, the inability to die and the concept of the living dead will be key throughout The Waste Land. Prufrock in fact, in his inability to die, his standing in some sense outside of time, his preoccupation with passion and gender, and his "knowing it all," foreshadows Tiresias in many important respects.
Women" (Ackroyd 44).

The poem's imagery provides clues that passion, consciously and subconsciously, preoccupies Prufrock. Imagery of the streets, where mention of the overwhelming question first occurs--"the muttering retreats / Of restless nights in one-night cheap hotels" (CP 13) and the "lonely men in shirt-sleeves, hanging out of windows" (CP 15)--hints at a life without a mutual, socially sanctioned passion, one which Prufrock feels as "insidious," though he seems to understand it. In the parlour, his sensitivity to the female, especially the effect that things feminine have on his senses, suggests that passionate concerns are not far from his mind. He describes "Arms that are bracelet ed and white and bare / (But in the lamplight, downed with light brown hair!)," arms that "lie along a table, or wrap about a shawl" (CP 15)--a shawl that he later imagines is thrown off; he wonders if it is the "perfume from a dress / That makes me so digress" (CP 15); he notes the "skirts that / trail along the floor" (CP 16); he envisages more than once the woman "settling a pillow by her head" (CP 17).

In addition to the imagery, the patterns of domination and subordination already noted in the rhythms of the poem, specifically in the rhythm of its questions, could be construed to follow a pattern of sexual flow--though pointedly without climax. The diction throughout the poem, too, frequently has passionate or sexual connotations. This is particularly true of the verbs, which--when divorced from their neutralizing modifiers or contexts--have sometimes quite explicit sexual associations: "lift and drop," "taking," "rubs," "licked," "let fall," "slipped," "mounting," "known
them all." "smoothed by long fingers," "have the strength to force the moment to its crisis." "bitten," "squeezed," "roll," "swell," "riding."

Finally, the spoken questions and responses to them in the poem indicate that the overwhelming question would have been put to a lady, a lady who, in Prufrock's imagination, responds negatively. It seems very likely that a question put to a lady would relate to the pursuit of a relationship with her. To logic, and the internal evidence in "Prufrock" that this is so, may be added the example which appears in the poem following "Prufrock" in the volume, "Portrait of a Lady." This poem features very similar physical, social, and ideological settings to "Prufrock"; a similar dramatic situation; a similar cast of characters; similar strategies of escape; even similar metrical and other formal properties. It is the lady in the subsequent poem who is burdened by the overwhelming question, however; and, in sharp contrast to her predecessor Prufrock, she speaks it:

'I have been wondering frequently of late
(But our beginnings never know our ends!)
Why we have not developed into friends.'

(CP 21)

The reaction of the young man to whom she speaks recalls that of the lady in "Prufrock" : "I feel like one who smiles, and turning shall remark / Suddenly, his expression in a glass. / My self-possession gutters; we are really in the dark" (CP 21); it is not what he meant at all, either. While the differences in gender and power (and speaking) positions developed in the two poems are vital, their striking

10 More likely than that Prufrock would be asking a lady whether or not he should commit suicide (one would also hope her answer to such a query—even as imagined by Prufrock—would be quite different, or at least less indifferent).
similarities argue for the poems being different views of nearly the same situation, companion pieces of sorts. It is very plausible that Prufrock's unspoken question resembles that of his counterpart in "Portrait," i.e., that it concerns the nature and advancement of a love relationship.

The desire motivating Prufrock's unspoken question remains unsatisfied, however. Most explicitly, he imagines a negative response by the lady to his expression of desire. But there are other indications in the poem that this primary desire is and may remain unsatisfied. One particularly revealing and persistent motif in the poem significantly links Prufrock's preoccupation with sexual desire and his inability to speak it. Both speech and desire in "Prufrock" are sublimated into a range of oral images:\footnote{11} in place of his own craving question is the mermaids' siren song, for instance: and while sometimes a cigar is just a cigar, it is interesting that the "lonely men in shirt-sleeves" have pipes in their mouths.

The most indicative oral imagery in the poem, however, has to do with food: if Prufrock cannot get the overwhelming question out of his mouth, the poem presents any number of other things to go into it. Images of food and eating permeate "Prufrock," and are nearly always connected with Prufrock's desire, and failure, to speak his passion and change his life. From the outset, "cheap hotels" are coupled with "restaurants with oyster-shells"--the oyster-shells connoting that the restaurant is

\footnote{11} It would be interesting to trace oral images, and particularly images of consumption, throughout the corpus; certainly there are several such images associated with both sexual and spiritual matters (e.g., the consumption of Christ the Tiger--"Us he devours"--in the early Eliot, as compared to Christ becoming "The dripping blood our only drink, / The bloody flesh our only food" of "East Coker").
probably seedy, but also perhaps faintly hinting at the famed aphrodisiacal qualities of oysters (they may also function as a debased version of the sea imagery to come). In place of unspoken thoughts and suppressed passion, the drawing-room world offers food: tea is mentioned several times, and there are "toast," "cakes," "ices," "cups," "marmalade"—perhaps even peaches dare be eaten. This atmosphere measures life in "coffee spoons"; the "talk of you and me" is among the "porcelain." Prufrock wonders if he should have "spit out" his story, or have "bitten off the matter with a smile" (CP 16).

Like other forms of transference in the poem, these culinary substitutions are ultimately unsatisfactory, too. In an intriguing twist, they are replaced by more graphic depictions of Prufrock's desire: the desire that he himself be accepted by the lady, taken in by her as food is ingested. This is illustrated most subtly and intriguingly in the poem's use of plates. Rather than to serve food, plates in Prufrock's world are used to convey identity. This is most graphically depicted in Prufrock's vision of seeing "my head (grown slightly bald) / brought in upon a platter" (CP 16). But the implications of an earlier passage are richer still.

There will be time to murder and create,
And time for all the works and days of hands
That lift and drop a question on your plate;
Time for you and time for me,
And time for yet a hundred indecisions,
And for a hundred visions and revisions,
Before the taking of a toast and tea.  

This passage presents Prufrock's problem, and the problem of his world, in microcosm, and unsurprisingly a question is at its centre. The difficulty is that while
there may be time for them, it is impossible either to murder or to create in this world. Prufrock may have a desire to die, or to create a relationship, or simply to procreate, but he cannot seem to achieve any of these things. He cannot successfully, or for long, either end or begin. His is a world unlike Hesiod's cyclical, agricultural, productive world of "works and days": in Prufrock's world, disembodied hands only lift to "drop a question" onto one's plate.

Moreover, the "question" in this case is Prufrock himself. Upon arrival, guests of Prufrock's period announced themselves by placing their formal calling cards on plates which were then carried to the hosts. Prufrock becomes his own unspoken, overwhelming question. His card, symbol of himself, another form of unarticulated desire, is figured as a "question" which is served up to the lady as a request for acceptance into her company. As the pun on the uses of plates suggests, Prufrock, the "question" here, becomes himself a "formal appetite," in this case a form (the card) intended to draw attention to an appetite (acceptance by the lady) as yet unfulfilled. The remainder of the passage describes the process the larger poem will enact: multiple indecisions, visions, and revisions will be played out, before the forms of tea-time provide again the familiar routines which sublimate and extenuate, but do not finally obliterate, desire.

Both sorts of questions in "Prufrock" rhetorically and thematically illustrate the same principle: form and appetite cannot find a way to coexist. This impasse prevents communication, since the conjunction of form and appetite, the means and the desire to express something, are central to language. In his most direct moment,
Prufrock frustratingly cries, "It is impossible to say just what I mean!" (CP 16).

Exactly. He can either perpetuate the forms, which his final questions show him doing, or lose himself in appetites, which his overwhelming question and his fantasy represent, but he cannot merge the two; he cannot speak his need. As Joseph Bentley points out, on one level "Prufrock"

... presents a vivid rendering of the fear that all language evokes in those who, like Prufrock, sense that it is no longer a valid medium of self-assertion and self-disclosure. The poem suggests, illustrates, and evades such language modes as love song, confession, argument, explanation, and description. In the process the poem calls into serious question the truth of all assumptions about the formal coherence of speech, speaker, and subject of speech. (145)

The dissociation represented here is not one of sensibility--Prufrock does feel his thought, and sensuously, too. His plight is that he cannot make others feel it. Both thought and feeling are dissociated from language for Prufrock--they cannot find an appropriate, public, linguistic form. And when language cannot encode meaning, even provisionally, crucial human relationships break down, change, or cannot begin: not only relations to world or other, but relations to self. This failure of language relates directly to the break up of the self and the break down of the world. As Eliot goes on graphically to show, this failure and fragmentation is part and parcel of The Waste Land.

III.

If the questions of "Prufrock" are troubling, the answers of The Waste Land (WL) are even more so. Prufrock's questions are intimately related to himself, a
single consciousness, and their import is comprehensible in the context of that consciousness. We can grasp with some assurance the outlines of Prufrock and his world. This is patently not the case with WL. Eliot’s famous note on Tiresias notwithstanding, there is no unified consciousness in WL. If “Prufrock” is a monologue of sorts, WL is a poem of many voices. Moreover, its myriad points of view and often surreal imagery are rendered in shifting historical, spiritual, and spatial contexts. Instead of portraying, like “Prufrock,” an all-too-knowable self in a recognizable world, WL challenges our ideas of knowing and recognizing, and questions the very concepts of self and world; indeed, characters and settings, like time in the poem, are at best only provisionally discrete.

Instead of focusing on questions, WL is a poem emphasizing answers and responses. Prufrock’s questions, spoken and unspoken, compel us (and him) to supply various sorts of responses. Though WL contains questions, questions which are dramatically and thematically significant, more importantly it provokes questions by providing a range of responses to the world that is terribly complex. The difficulties of beginning in “Prufrock,” of living, and the strong desire for endings expressed in the poem, shift to problems of ending in WL, of dying, and ultimately an absorption with relentless beginnings.

With all due respect to the work of the New Critics, notably in this case

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12 The poem’s original title, “He Do the Police in Different Voices,” underscores this point.
Cleanth Brooks\textsuperscript{13}, it seems impossible to call WL a unified poem. While there are (as these same New Critics have usefully pointed out) persistent themes running throughout the poem, finally WL is too large, too diverse, and too deeply ambiguous for us to nominate any one theme as encompassing. Yet that desire to find the key to WL, to discover the underlying relation of its many compelling parts, is not simply born of a particular critical bent. In many ways the poem itself teases us into this position, by providing enough richly allusive fragments for us to construct a number of contingent unities. These local, conditional unities provoke us to interrogate WL's sprawl for the secret universal connection we sense must be there, but finally is not. Instead, as Michael Levenson persuasively argues in \textit{A Genealogy of Modernism}, the poem works by a sort of miasmic coming together and pulling apart of various ideas and viewpoints. "The poem is not," Levenson asserts, "... built upon the \textit{juxtaposition} of fragments: it is built out of their \textit{interpenetration}" (190):

\hfill \ldots to recognize fragments as fragments, to name them as fragments, is already to have transcended them--not to an harmonious or final unity but to a somewhat higher, somewhat more inclusive, somewhat more conscious point of view. Considered this way, the poem does not achieve a resolved coherence, but neither does it remain in a chaos of fragmentation. Rather it displays a series of more or less stable patterns, regions of coherence, temporary principles of order--the poem not as a stable unity but engaged in what Eliot calls the 'painful task of unifying.' (192)

Questions in WL reflect this ambiguity and this "painful" effort. They nearly always meet with a response, but almost never an answer. They look for an end that

does not come, and suggest beginnings that are uncertain. Their desire for connection and completion is never directly fulfilled, but neither is it ignored. They are the rhetorical equivalent of a prevalent motif in the poem: like the sibyl of the epigraph, questions in WL represent desiring forms consistently unsatisfied yet persistently surviving.

Section II of the poem, "A Game of Chess," is an especially dramatic example of how questions can underscore these themes. The questions in the first part of this section are typical of the poem in the way they both emphasize certain motifs and tones, and simultaneously make us aware of ambiguities. An allusive, carefully wrought description of an opulent room opens the section, followed by a "dialogue" of sorts initiated by the neurasthenic lady inhabiting the chamber. Prufrock's wish for a magic lantern that would throw "the nerves in patterns on a screen" seems realized here, and the pattern this lady's nerves frequently take is an interrogative one. In fact, correspondences between this section and "Prufrock" are several: the formal room; the sexual tension, suggested by the references to Philomel, the controversial line about the ivory men, Webster's chess game, and the lady's threat to "walk the street / With my hair down"; the nervous yet overtired tone; the use of allusion, most especially the references to death; and the many uses of the question. As in

14 While it appeared in draft versions, the line is missing from most printed copies of the poem. Eliot restored it in a holograph copy in 1960, but it did not appear in Faber's 1961 limited edition by Mardersteig which Eliot later said might be taken as "the standard text" (Moody 303).

15 A particularly chilling reference included in the manuscript but eventually altered by Eliot, read, in response to "'What is that noise now? What is the wind
"Prufrock," the questions here contain active verbs--know, see, remember, think, speak, do--though there is little actual action.16 The questions are also quite repetitive in structure and diction, as in "Prufrock," and to some degree, like Prufrock, the lady also answers her own questions.

The differences between the two poems, however, are most instructive. Unlike Prufrock's questions, the lady's queries grow briefer rather than more involved, dissolving, like Philomel's cry, into short sounds which, as they are repeated, are increasingly sapped of meaning and original motive; they too become "'Jug Jug' to dirty ears" (CP 66). The rhythms of her speech--which start longer, disintegrate, then restart and repeat again in bursts--also recall the rhythms of birdsong.

'My nerves are bad to-night. Yes, bad. Stay with me. Speak to me. Why do you never speak? Speak. What are you thinking of? What thinking? What? I never know what you are thinking. Think.' (CP 67)

In her demands and responses to her own questions, the lady cuts off the conversation she apparently wants to start, and must begin again and again. Imperative gives way to interrogative, imperative, interrogative, declarative, imperative again. Yet though these persistent questions continually fail to initiate the dialogue they desire, they do provoke responses, and quite complex responses at that.

16 One is tempted to write that action is at a stalemate, this term being the unspoken, multi-layered, bitter pun which reverberates through the entire section.
For instance, the first response to the questions quoted above—"I think we are in rats' alley / Where the dead men lost their bones"—sounds as if it might be an allusion. Eliot's note on the line, however, only refers us to another section of the poem, part III, line 195: "[And bones cast in a little low dry garret,/] Rattled by the rat's foot only, year to year" (CP 70). How are we to read this? Is the poem alluding to itself, and if so, why would the note refer us ahead in the poem, instead of having a note later which would refer us back? What is the connection between these two passages? Do we need to know what it is before this response makes sense? Is it helpful to know that the line read originally "I think we met first in rats' alley, / Where the dead men lost their bones" (V. Eliot 12)? Is this an actual response to the question at all, or is the "I think" syntax merely coincidental? Conventional structures of dialogue, time, space, meaning, and interpretation are immediately undermined by these lines: do we read backwards or forwards? Text or subtext? Through the allusions or in spite of them? Respecting ideas of textual origin, or only insofar as they inform the present? Should academic apparatus such as notes, manuscripts, editorial comment, authorial intention, carry much weight?  

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17 This includes, as perhaps the preeminent case, Eliot's own notes to and comments on the poem ("Notes"). William Burke, building on work done by Ruth Nevo, observes that "Notes" does not reduce our dissatisfactions, but extends them. . . [it] frequently ignores allusions where clarification would be helpful, and provides unnecessary or irrelevant exposition on others. . . . "Notes," finally, is both a parody of scholarship and, more importantly for the reader, an ironic exposure of the false consolations of culture embodied there. . . . [revealing] that our most significant cultural texts are but fragments of an incompletely articulated desire for meaning that has yet
generically? Literally? Figuratively?

These hermeneutic dilemmas are exacerbated in the next lines:

‘What is that noise?’
The wind under the door.
‘What is that noise now? What is the wind doing?’
Nothing again nothing. (CP 67)

The initial response here works ingeniously both as a literal reply to the question ("'What is that noise?'/ The wind under the door"), and perhaps as another reference to death, through its allusion to Webster and its continuation of the sinister imagery of the preceding response. By picking up the word "wind," the questions which follow make us wonder if somehow these juxtaposed fragments do constitute a conversation of sorts, but the textual evidence does not let us decide whether this is, or is not, the case.

The response this time, "Nothing again nothing," with its lack of internal punctuation, also reverberates in a number of directions. It could be a direct response to the lady's question, or a vaguely threatening comment with wider meaning. We may read into the "nothings" of this simple phrase, particularly following on references of wind/breath, death, and Renaissance drama, the awful nothings and deaths of King Lear; or, in the vein of the first response, we may look elsewhere in

to be satisfied. (87-89)

Further, according to Valerie Eliot, Eliot himself later admitted that the source of the reference to "The wind under the door," which he lists in his notes to WL as coming from Webster, "... was of no significance as his adaptation of the phrase gave it a different meaning" (V. Eliot 126). This Modernist touchstone thus illustrates a key "postmodern" tenet: we can be no more sure of the world, and language, outside of the poem than inside of it.
the poem for connections, for instance a link with lines 301-2, "I can connect / Nothing with nothing" (CP 74), and try reading backwards once again. Each response that is made demands from us different modes of interpretation, so that our own responses to this text (and ultimately other texts) grow multifarious and less sure with each exchange. Seemingly straightforward if paranoid questions are met with layered, rather menacing answers. Yet when the questions finally crescendo to a sort of existential anxiety--"'What shall we ever do?'"--the answers become immediately, ironically prosaic--"The hot water at ten. / And if it rains, a closed car at four" (CP 68). The responses both relate to and refuse to accommodate the questions; they create more questions rather than satiate existing ones.

One of the main questions they raise is, who is responding? The lady’s comments are surrounded by quotation marks, indicating that they are ‘spoken’, but the responses to her remarks are not. Where they are mentioned at all, critics generally assume these silent and ironic comments are those of a single speaker, and that they occur in the head of a male companion the lady is addressing. Though such a reading is very plausible, in contrast to criticisms of "Prufrock" other possible speakers are not suggested. Nowhere do critics speculate that these comments may occur in the lady’s own head, or that they may represent different voices, or even that they may be simply tangentially related lines like so many others in the poem. The ambiguity of the text makes locating this silent speaker more complicated than it first appears. Though it seems as if we are reading a dialogue between a man and a woman, we cannot be certain from the text alone who is responding, nor even of the
shape of the exchange. The questions abet our desire to read these lines as a
dialogue--to construct a familiar form, a local unity--when in fact there is no direct,
equivocal textual evidence that it is one.

The questions work dramatically to draw us into a situation; they invite us to
desire and expect responses, and the responses disorient us. It is our reading
experience that is being dramatized here: the poem, like the lady's chamber, is
beautiful, art-filled and artful, but it is finally a bottomless, threatening, violent, place
where, like Philomel's cry, language dissolves. Our questions are met by responses,
but we cannot be sure who is responding nor what the responses mean. We
experience profound dislocation, yet, like the lady, we keep trying to engage, trying
to make sense of our experience by trying on our own answers, and ultimately putting
more and more questions.

Questions are dramatic not only in this dialogue form, when they disconcert us
as to who is answering, but also when they leave us unsure as to who is doing the
asking. With regard to their emphasis on the speaking subject, questions in WL
function much as they do in Yeats's poetry, to precisely the opposite effect. In
Yeats's poems, questions often draw our attention to the speaker, to the persona doing
the asking, and reinforce our already generally strong sense of who this voice is, what
it represents. They make us focus on the subjective, on the subject. Questions in
WL also draw attention to the speaker, only to reinforce our sense of a subject who
continually disappears.

At the close of "The Burial of the Dead," we wonder who is the "I" inquiring
This "I" responds to its own questions with sinister, ironic allusion, then closes by addressing us directly with Baudelaire's cry, "'You! hypocrite lecteur!--mon semblable,--mon frère!'" (CP 65). If we are its double, its brother, who (or what) is it? This denizen of modern London who was also with Stetson "in the ships at Mylae"--is it the same "I" who has gone to Madame Sosostris? Who looked into the heart of light in the hyacinth garden? Who reads much of the night? We cannot tell how many "I"s there are, nor much about them--they are spread out in time and space, they speak others' words, they overlap. In "The Fire Sermon," who is the "I" who makes "no comment," asking rhetorically "What should I resent?" (CP 74). Who is it elaborating on the Thunder's dictum in the final section of the poem, asking "Datta: what have we given?" (CP 78). Is it the same persona who several lines later asks, "Shall I at least set my lands in order?" (CP 79). The personal pronouns in these questions (and, significantly, nearly all the questions in the poem feature them) are deft touches: they palpably remind us of a speaker, and often a listener, we cannot readily identify. They are subjective utterances from an only dubiously discernible subject. Interrogative in WL reinforces our sense of the polyphony of the poem, bringing us concretely up against the amorphous.

David Spurr writes convincingly on this problem of identity in WL:

"The Waste Land" is a postmodern poem in this respect, continually opening into a space where its speaking subject is both destroyed and
restructured anew at every turn. To borrow a phrase from Julia Kristeva, the poem enacts the drama of the sujet en procès—the subject both "in process" and "on trial." The poem is elegiac in tone, yet it repeatedly dismantles the convention of the speaking subject on which the elegy traditionally depends, by calling into question the conventional unity and identity of that subject. (161)

While it seems unnecessarily narrow to cite this as strictly a "postmodern" tendency, we should note that questions are one of the chief rhetorical devices by which WL continually opens this space for the deconstruction, and reconstruction, of the conventional poetic persona. They also dramatically call attention to this very process.

Moreover, questions in WL challenge our sense of conventional poetic structure. "A Game of Chess" illustrates how questions can work locally to encourage us to create the provisional unities of the poem. Two questions in the first and last sections of the poem demonstrate how questions underscore its created and provisional structure at a larger level. The first question in WL, in "The Burial of the Dead," appears to be one of the few which receives a direct answer.

What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow
Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,
You cannot say, or guess, for you know only
A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,
And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,
And the dry stone no sound of water. (CP 63)

The question is self-referential, asking both what can take root in the waste world being evoked, and also what we can take hold of in the "stony rubbish" of the poem. The response to the question is beautifully layered. It may stand on its own in the poem, its prophetic tone matching the earnest tone of the question, its precise imagery
sensuous, desolate, and commanding at once.

The biblical references in the lines, however, which Eliot notes, deeply enrich the passage. Eliot refers us at line 20 to Ezekiel 2.1 ("And he said unto me, Son of man, stand upon thy feet, and I will speak unto thee"), yet the entire book of Ezekiel resonates throughout the passage, particularly the prophet's experience in the valley of the dry bones (Ezek. 37.3: "And he said unto me, Son of man, can these bones live? And I answered, O Lord GOD, thou knowest").¹⁸ In his note to line 23, Eliot refers us to Ecclesiastes 12.5, which describes evil times ". . . when they shall be afraid of that which is high, and fears shall be in the way, and the almond tree shall flourish, and the grasshopper shall be a burden, and desire shall fail: because man goeth to his long home, and the mourners go about the streets." Eliot has absorbed the tone of this verse, and reworked some of its images (the grasshopper becomes the cricket, for example) in these lines, but what is more striking is the way he uses other of these images and ideas in the remainder of "The Burial of the Dead," which prominently features fear, the failure of desire, and mourners in the streets.

Yet despite the sense that both of these biblical references are relevant, they do not seem directly so. In its original context, the Ezekiel verse indicates that the Lord will speak to the prophet, filling him with knowledge and guidance. The Ecclesiastes passage is part of an admonishment to "remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth, while the evil days," described in verse 5, "come not" (12.1). Yet in the

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¹⁸ For this connection I am indebted to the notes on the poem found in Modern Poems, A Norton Introduction (282), edited by Richard Ellmann and Robert O'Clair. Also note that this same verse will later play an important role in Ash-Wednesday.
poem, the evil days are now, and there is no inspired prophet to assist us. The divine
voice speaks only to tell us that we, with our limited knowledge, cannot know
whether anything might root in this desert world. These biblical allusions are an
example of a tendency William Burke has noticed: ". . . the textual surface of the
poem is continuously at odds with the sub-text" (89):

In a recent book on Wallace Stevens, Joseph Carroll remarks that 'the
subtext of allusions in Stevens' work enriches and illuminates the
primary text'(7); in Eliot, the situation is changed: the allusions
enrich, but they unravel the primary text. The pervasive allusiveness in
itself retards understanding, pulling us between the lines into other
works--The Tempest, the Bible, and so on. The subtext entices us into
labyrinthine corridors, feeds the emotions of homelessness and
dislocation, and confounds rational comprehension. Where we expect
the subtext as supplement and clarification, we find instead that it
serves as impediment and displacement. (89-90)

This perhaps overlooks the subtler, succinct, evocative work of the poem's
allusions, but the observation is an interesting one19, and is related to the manner in
which responses to questions in the poem work. Replies, which should complete,
connect, or accelerate exchange, instead disperse, disconnect, or stymie dialogue.
The response to the question put forward here, about what we can clutch or connect
or create in this environment, is blunt and bleak: we cannot say, or guess, for what
we know is limited to a heap of broken images in a sterile land. This is true of the
poem itself, of course: "saying" becomes increasingly difficult, as language dissolves
often into simple sound or complex rhythms, and the tumble of images and allusions

19 To be fair, the example Burke cites from "The Fire Sermon" for his argument
(90) is much stronger and clearer than the one I am putting forward here.
makes a confounding context in which to guess at meaning. At the outset of the poem, we are told, in effect, that our efforts to make sense of things are doomed. Inquiries about beginnings, at the beginning, meet dead ends.

Yet at the end of the poem, in the context of these same words and images, we get a question about preparation for the end which functions, finally, as a beginning.

I sat upon the shore
Fishing, with the arid plain behind me
Shall I at least set my lands in order?
London Bridge is falling down falling down falling down
Poi s'ascose nel foco che gli affina
Quando fiam uti chelidon -- O swallow swallow
Le Prince d'Aquitaine a la tour abolie
These fragments I have shored against my ruins
Why then Ile fit you. Hieronymo's mad againe.
Shantih shantih shantih (CP 79)

This final question of the poem seems to suggest an imminent death. Though Eliot does not gloss the question in his "Notes," many commentators draw attention to Isaiah 38.1 in connection with this question: "In those days was Hezekiah sick unto death. And Isaiah the prophet the son of Amoz came unto him and said unto him, Thus saith the LORD, Set thine house in order: for thou shalt die, and not live."

This is a powerful echo, but even without its specificity the imagery of a person on a shore-edge, bounded by water and plain; diction such as "at least"; and the concept of organizing one's lands ("kingdom," Eliot wrote in one draft, more explicitly connecting the passage to the Fisher King [V. Eliot 78-9]), all hint at a person on the

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20 Interestingly, this is similar to what happens to the process of "saying" in Stevens; see Chapter III below.
brink of death, or at least a significant change or departure.

Many of the allusions which follow also relate in some way to death, disenfranchisement, or decay--to endings--and this idea is reinforced again in the famous image of fragments "shored against my ruins." The final lines, which repeat the words of the thunder, followed by the three "shantihs," the "formal ending to an Upanishad" ("Notes" [CP 86]), summarize and emphasize closure. There are many signals that we are coming to, or are at, an end.

These signs of closure, strong as they are, though, are qualified by competing images, allusions, and constructions. The first lines of this final passage refer, as Eliot's note on them indicates, to Jessie L. Weston's version of the legend of the Fisher King, who along with his land is restored when a knight undergoes ordeals and successfully obtains the answers to special, ritual questions. Images of a shore and fishing, denoting water, and mention of the arid plane "behind" him, suggest that the quest has been successful, and restoration of the dry waste land is underway. The question about setting one's lands in order is followed by a series of textual fragments which are precisely what the preemptory response to the first question in the poem told us were all we could know: a "heap of broken images, where the sun beats," has become a jumble of fragments "shored against my ruins" beyond the arid plain. What stonewalled us initially has turned in to another sort of stone wall that shores and protects at the end.

These allusions are followed by words of enlightenment and of blessing. We are still left with the work of making meaning of the fragments--why these? how do
they connect? what and how do they intend?--but our state of inquiry seems benevolently pronounced upon. The response to the final question of the poem is images, not prophetic answer. The first question-and-response of the poem is dramatized at its close, and the only answer provided leads to more questions. As the questions at beginning and end enact, the poem's structure is never finally completed. We are left only with what we can make out of what we know. The rich number of responses in the poem leave us only with questions--not the encompassing and expansive final questions of Yeats, but confusing quests for understanding, sense, connection.

The questions and responses in the poem illustrate one of its most powerful themes, that of cycles: cycles of life--the lilacs bred out of the dead land; the corpse garden; Lil and her offspring; the typist, the young man carbuncular, and Tiresias; Philomel; Phlebas; the Fisher King--that are nonetheless not life-affirming. Questions have alien responses, which not only disorient in themselves, but perpetuate the confounding cycles by creating more questions. It is this emphasis on sterile, unsavoury cycles which makes WL such a disturbing poem. It is not prophetic, it is apocalyptic; but what it does that other apocalyptic literature often does not do, is show us the frightening truth that apocalypse is not the final end--in fact, that it has no end. In his fascinating series of lectures published as The Sense of an Ending, Frank Kermode reflects:

The great majority of interpretations of Apocalypse assume that the End is pretty near. Consequently the historical allegory is always having to be revised; time discredits it. And this is important. Apocalypse can be disconfirmed without being discredited. This is part of its
extraordinary resilience. (8)

This insight is essential to WL. It is a poem obsessed with endings that will not end, beginnings that go nowhere but cannot stop going. It is full of moments of history (particularly bleak moments), moments of ending, death, and crisis that are reshaped in the poem to create yet more moments of the same sort. This is precisely what responses and questions in the poem rhetorically encode: an increasingly desperate quest for meaning and closure that can only perpetuate its own need. It is never the promised end, only the image of that horror, remade and replayed on endless loop.

In some contexts, such cycles could be interpreted as positive: as bad as things are, they are never finally over, and the continual possibility of beginning may foster hope. Indeed, there have been "positive" readings of WL that follow similar paradigms. Beginning again is a human characteristic. Later in his lectures, Kermode cites the work of American sociologist L. Festinger, who had some of his research assistants successfully infiltrate a cult which believed that the End was near. When these assistants were present at what the sect believed to be the final countdown, they "... were able to observe that for most of the members of the sect disconfirmation was quickly followed by the invention of new end-fictions and new calculations" (16-17). Kermode surmises,

Men in the middest make considerable imaginative investments in coherent patterns which, by the provision of an end, make possible a satisfying consonance with the origins and with the middle. That is why the image of the end can never be permanently falsified. But they also, when awake and sane, feel the need to show a marked respect for things as they are; so that there is a recurring need for adjustments in
the interest of reality as well as of control. (17)

Questions in WL represent, to various degrees and in various ways, just that "awake and sane" need to make adjustments, to acknowledge reality, and to control. They are thwarted in their attempts. The modern, and indeed Eliot seems to be saying also the historical, will not adjust. Reality does not hold still so that we may control it. The "shantihs" at the close of WL may represent to some the consonance so energetically sought by the poem--that is, by readers of the poem--but like all responses in WL they are too shaky and provisional, and beg too many questions, to function as final. One of the key things WL teaches, perhaps the thing that most accounts for its power as chief Modernist literary icon, is that we must be moved, if uneasily, to appreciate not a desire satisfied, but the energy of continual desire. In Horizons of Assent: Modernism, Postmodernism, and the Ironic Imagination, Alan Wilde notes as a characteristic hallmark of Modernist literature its display of "... desire straining against the constraining form it has itself devised as the only possible response to its own impossible hope for fulfilment" (37). As WL illustrates, a crucial form of this desire and this constraint, and perhaps our truest response to this whirled-without-end, is the question.

IV.

The Waste Land understandably, if somewhat reductively, has been read as "gothic fantasy"21; but if it is gothic, it is so in a particularly Eliotic sense: the

\footnote{21 For one instance, see Douglas Fowler's article in Brooker 127.}
source of its horror is not so much the undead as the unliving. Examination of the unliving, which begins in "Prufrock" and continues dramatically in WL, comes to a head in "The Hollow Men," whose lack of will incapacitates them to live in either of death's kingdoms (never mind life's). They do not begin or end, they barely are; lacking volition, they are condemned to the valley of the Shadow, the void of "Between."

As Christopher Ricks points out, *Ash-Wednesday* (AW) also "practises the dispositions of 'between'":

"Between" in *Ash-Wednesday* may be a state, or a hinge, or a fearful responsibility, "Wavering between the profit and the loss." "This is the time of tension between dying and birth." And there is the moment which returns to the earlier between-poem, when *Ash-Wednesday* crosses to "The Hollow Men," to its dream-crossing to the twilight kingdom, along the line "The dreamcrossed twilight between birth and dying." (212)

Yet there is a world of difference between the "between" worlds of "The Hollow Men" and AW: the Hollow Men, like the inhabitants of WL before them, find themselves in their vacuum; AW actively seeks one. In Ricks's terms, the poem "aspires to the spiritual void which may with grace issue in spiritual life" (228). It is the will which is the difference in AW, a will recalcitrant, assertive, expansive, "small and dry," renouncing, and accepting, by turns. Turning is key, for it is in the acts of turning, willed acts, that AW breaks the helpless, endless cycles of WL. In its acts of turning, AW leaves behind the powerlessness characteristic of Eliot's earlier poems and wills itself into the painful process of spiritual life.

From the opening to the close, things turn in AW, including the opening and
the close themselves. Words turn, the will turns, and so do questions and responses. Questions turn into responses, and responses seem to turn to questions which are never asked. The poem begins with what sounds like a response to a question:

Because I do not hope to turn again
Because I do not hope
Because I do not hope to turn

"Because" frequently introduces an answer, usually an answer to a question asking "why." One of our initial reactions to these lines may be to imagine the question to which they respond. As we read on, we realize there is no question. Here, "because" functions differently; it explains an action which the syntax delays: "I no longer strive to strive towards such things" (CP 95). The "because" phrases serve as a justification, not an answer.

Yet as soon as we begin to think about them in this way, we are immediately presented with two "why" questions, which, ordinarily, would feature "because" as part of their answers--if they were "serious" questions. Instead, these are rhetorical questions:

(Why should the aged eagle stretch its wings?)
Why should I mourn
The vanished power of the usual reign?

Rhetorical questions usually do not require answers, certainly not answers beginning "because," though that is the echo we hear. Answers to rhetorical questions are meant to be painfully obvious, and are often implied, as here, in the questions themselves: why should the aged eagle stretch its wings? it should not; why should I mourn? I should not. Rhetorical questions function in large part as statements; they
attempt to invert the primary function of questions. Thus in the opening verse paragraph alone, we turn from what appear to be answers to what appear to be questions, questions which themselves turn into their own answers.

Turns on the question/answer matrix involving "because" do not stop at the break. Following the "why" questions which end the first verse paragraph, we again get a series of "because" clauses in the second.

Because I do not hope to know again
The infirm glory of the positive hour
Because I do not think
Because I know I shall not know
The one veritable transitory power
Because I cannot drink
There. where trees flower, and springs flow, for there is nothing again

(CP 95)

These clauses make us rethink the "rhetorical" status of the questions preceding them: were they really rhetorical? Do the lines that follow actually constitute a serious response to them? The structure and proximity and repetition of (potential) question and (potential) response, of "why" and "because," make their echoes not unlike a sort of catechism: "Why should I mourn / The vanished power of the usual reign? // Because I do not hope to know again / The infirm glory of the positive hour" (CP 95). Read in this way, the import of the lines is precisely the opposite to that intended by their speaker in the passage taken as a whole. In which direction are we actually turning?

Continuing on, we find that the series of subordinate "because" clauses are attempting to justify a position which may be reductively paraphrased as, because I do not hope to know God and the paradise that is his glory again, because I realize space
and time are what they are, I renounce the idea of heaven and rejoice anyway, "having to construct something / Upon which to rejoice" (CP 95). The line (and indeed the verse paragraph) immediately following this assertion, however, suggests that the foundation of this construction is the mercy of God.

And pray to God to have mercy upon us
And I pray that I may forget
These matters that with myself I too much discuss
Too much explain
Because I do not hope to turn again
Let these words answer
For what is done, not to be done again
May the judgement not be too heavy upon us

(CP 96)

This entire verse paragraph is itself an abrupt shift from the matter and manner of what has gone before, so that when we get to "Because I do not hope to turn again," it is very difficult to know which direction this turn implies. "These words" which are to "answer / For what is done, not to be done again," are little help, particularly as what has been done, namely "these words" and these turns, will indeed be done again, and again, and again.

As section I closes we are again turned toward one of the rhetorical questions at its beginning by lines which seem to serve as an answer.

Because these wings are no longer wings to fly
But merely vans to beat the air
The air which is now thoroughly small and dry
Smaller and dryer than the will
Teach us to care and not to care
Teach us to sit still.

Pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death
Pray for us now and at the hour of our death.

(CP 96)

The image of the wings recalls the question regarding the aged eagle at the outset of
the poem, providing it with yet another answer: Why should the aged eagle stretch its wings? It need not, because the wings are "no longer wings to fly." The will has succeeded in making its element "smaller and dryer" than itself. The first step in turning back toward the God it had renounced has been taken; the world, the "air" of time and place as they are, has been reduced. Now the will itself must be subdued, taught "to care and not to care." The final response to all the turns of the passage is a step in this direction. The closing lines, taken from the Ave Maria, turn from the "I" to the "we." The importance of the individual is subsumed; its fate will be that of all: like the others, it too requires prayerful mediation; it too will be levelled by death.

These twists of question and answer occur again in sections IV and V. Section I opened with what seemed like an answer but was not; section IV opens with what appears to be a question, but is not. Both opening passages maintain suspense about what they are through repetition and a delaying syntax.

Who walked between the violet and the violet
Who walked between
The various ranks of varied green
Going in white and blue, in Mary's colour,
Talking of trivial things
In ignorance and in knowledge of eternal dolour
Who moved among the others as they walked,
Who then made strong the fountains and made fresh the springs

Made cool the dry rock and made firm the sand
In blue of larkspur, blue of Mary's colour,
Sovegna vos (CP 100)

"Who," when it begins a sentence, most often functions as an interrogative pronoun.
That seems appropriate as our first interpretive reaction here, but that impression fades as the passage continues, then renews with the psalm-like rhythms of "Who then made strong the fountains," and then is rendered dubious again by "Sovegna vos." As the passage continues, we do not wonder who, we recognize the lady of paradoxes from section II, the intermediary to the Virgin whom the speaker wishes to "be mindful" of his pain. The "who" construction here seems a way of avoiding naming her, even of calling her "Lady" as before. By both describing and obfuscating the subject, and delaying the verb, this construction not only emphasizes that the sentence is in the middle of a process: it also reminds us that the penitent himself is in the middle of a process, turning in directions and to sources of comfort which are not consistently clear and present.

This strange relation of apparent question to apparent answer continues in the next lines. Our persistent sense of the interrogative nature of "who" underlies our response to the following lines, which once again seem to serve as an answer to a question which was never asked:

Here are the years that walk between, bearing
Away the fiddles and the flutes, restoring
One who moves in the time between sleep and waking. . . (CP 100)

The rhythms of this line, and the repetition of "walk" and "between," seem to make it

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22 Some critics persist in interpreting the opening of section IV as interrogative. Leonard Unger refers to the opening passage as a "series of questions. . . [implying] wonder as to the identity of the Lady. . . . The protagonist is questioning because he does not specifically remember (or visualize) the one by whom he would be led to a higher love" (364-5). While I disagree, it is easy to see how one could be led to this assumption by the strange syntax of the passage.
answer to the poem's opening: who walked between? the years. This sense is exacerbated by the years' being responsible for "restoring / One who moves in the time between sleep and waking, wearing // White light folded, sheathed about her, folded" (CP 100)--they seemingly precede the lady. Question and answer participate in the larger fluctuation of pattern: just as the lady "bent her head and signed but / spoke no word," so the poem gestures toward questions that remain unspoken.

This pseudo-interrogative pattern repeats in the opening of the next section. Section V begins with the ambiguous preposition "if," which initially appears interrogative.

If the lost word is lost, if the spent word is spent
If the unheard, unspoken
Word is unspoken, unheard; (CP 102)

but instead is functioning in the sense of "though." as the continuing lines suggest:

Still is the unspoken word, the Word unheard,
The Word without a word, the Word within
The world and for the world (CP 102)

Yet while the "if" construction suggests but finally is not an interrogative, the refrain which follows actually makes a response (emphasized by the relatively rare period) from what was originally a question:

O my people, what have I done unto thee. (CP 102)

The origin of this phrase is a reproach issued by the Old Testament God in Micah 6.3: "O my people, what have I done unto thee, or wherein have I wearied thee?

Testify against me." Revising the phrase from question to response significantly affects our perception of the speaker, thus highlighting another important displacement
that occurs in questions and answers throughout the poem: the displacement of subjects and objects.\textsuperscript{23}

Such displacement is perhaps most explicit in Section II, where the God who asks whether the bones shall live is answered, indirectly, by the marrow of bones, which addresses itself primarily to "this Lady," who is in turn an intermediary for an "I" which is "dissembled," not only physically but also in its deeds, which are proffered to oblivion, and its feelings, its "love" which is proffered "[t]o the posterity of the desert and the fruit of the gourd" (CP 97). The questioned, as well as the question, are dispersed, much as are the Lady and the question both suggested by the "who" passage which opens section IV.

Similarly, in the refrain of section V, not only has the question from Micah turned into a response, but its original speaker (again, God Himself) has been displaced. First, of course, is the displacement any quotation or allusion undergoes when it appears in a context other than its original one. But the speaker is at more than this fairly common remove. Even if we hear immediately that this response is a reworking of the Micah verse, its revision from question to response makes it difficult automatically to assign it to the voice of the Old Testament God, as we could perhaps when confronted with a similar allusion from Ezekiel in Section II ("And God said / Shall these bones live? shall these / Bones live? [CP 97]).

Some readers have assigned the voice of the refrain in section V to Christ

\textsuperscript{23} This same displacement is also importantly at work in Stevens's poem, "Questions are Remarks," discussed in the following chapter.
rather than to God: "In the New Testament world of Ash-Wednesday, these phrases emanate from Christ, who asks what he has done to merit the opposition of his former believers who now 'avoid the face' and 'deny the voice'" (Eiles 114-5). Other critics (Jones 53; Schneider 123) have linked the voice to the reproaches which appear in the Roman Catholic liturgy for Ash-Wednesday. Still others seem to assume it is the voice of the poem's speaker. The voice speaking here arguably may emanate from any of the above, or be designed to recall all of the above; the point is that locating the speaker (and determining his position of authority) precisely is not a simple or perhaps possible task.

If questions open up spaces in texts, if they disrupt the constructed fabric and allow for unforeseen possibilities, it seems curious that they are avoided, submerged, and their subjects and objects displaced, in a poem like AW which desires to create a space in which to "sit still." Spiritual seeking, particularly in its poetic form, often has used questions to forward its purpose; certain poems by George Herbert come to mind (e.g., "The Search," "The Forerunners"), among many examples. Why would this seemingly useful rhetorical strategy be eschewed here?

The answer lies in part with the sort of spiritual poem AW is not, and in part with the sort of questions it is evading. AW is not a meditative poem. It is a poem about a power struggle, about the process of willed subordination. While meditative

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24 That Eliot was familiar with these reproaches we know from his mention of "the Lamentations of Jeremiah, and the Reproaches in the Mass of the Presanctified" in his essay on George Herbert in British Writers and Their Work, where he specifically quotes the response, "O my people, what have I done unto thee or wherein have I wearied thee? Testify against me" (T. S. Eliot, "Herbert" 70).
poems importantly are processes, too, they are traditionally marked by characteristics including an emphasis on understanding and analysis; the importance of landscape and dramatic, graphic images; and a specific, historic "I." speaking primarily to itself in common speech, ascending to communion with the supernatural. As Louis Martz succinctly explains in The Poetry of Meditation, "meditative poems... are composed in 'current language heightened,' molded, to express the unique being of an individual who is seeking to learn, through intense mental discipline, how to live his life in the presence of divinity" (324).

AW is intent on different goals, and correspondingly employs different techniques. Its mode of operation is not analytic but (for lack of a more accurate term) inductive, not intellectual but (again, for lack of a more precise word) moral. It desires to obliterate landscape and all things physical, especially the visual. Its trajectory is one of descent, of humility before a separate and superior God and His (female) intermediaries. It attempts, through quotation of liturgy and literature and other "exalted" discourses, to subsume the "I" in the community of sinful humanity. To further this project, AW must suppress the sort of questions which meditative poetry frequently and usefully employs: questions which open, empower, and earnestly inquire.

J. M. Kertzer, using specifically the example of rhetorical questions, demonstrates how interrogatives "illustrate problems of interpretation by exhibiting

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25 Martz discusses these and other aspects of the meditative poem throughout The Poetry of Meditation; his concluding chapter summarizes them most conveniently, and mention of the specific characteristics outlined here may be found in that chapter.
the three issues of consensus, authority, and enigma" (242). "When consensus and authority fail," he writes. "questions grow enigmatic" (242):

In poetry, these circular, ambiguous, and indeterminate questions are enigmatic. The appetite and intention they call into play cannot be closed off. The asking baffles the answering, as questions raise further questions. (253)

The questions suspended in AW--questions, we suspect, about the nature and relation of God, self, will, and world--are by and large enigmatic questions. The spaces which they would open in discourse would not provide a finite place from which to focus on spiritual matters, but instead whirl centrifugally out, disintegrating meditative quiet with a babble of possible responses. The desire of AW is precisely to avoid the state into which Eliot’s earlier questions plunge us--to take Kertzer’s example, "the enigma that torments Eliot’s Gerontion":

"After such knowledge, what forgiveness?" It illustrates how uncontrollable a question becomes when it permits no satisfaction at all. Unlike Dryden and Watts, Eliot allows his question to become ambiguous and indeterminate. Unlike Wordsworth and Keats, he finds no comfort in indeterminacy. For Gerontion, mystery is an uninterpretable horror because it is not rooted in the consensus of a common faith or even of commonsense [sic]. It does not look forward to a reply sanctioned by doctrine. It does not trust in a higher authority. Instead, the poem obscures revelation ("Christ the Tiger") and enters a labyrinth of discourse, whose cunning passages and contrived corridors lead to deceit, despair, paradox, and, at the end, cosmic disintegration. The restraining and limiting features of

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26 Compare Blake’s questions in Songs of Innocence and Songs of Experience: in "The Lamb," the innocent child can answer its own questions; in "The Tyger," the questions are left hanging, unanswered, in an air of fear and awe (I am indebted to Hollander, especially pp. 32-3, for prompting this comparison). The speaker of AW, trying to escape the world of experience and regain innocence again, is caught "between": although he finds responses, his own or his church’s, for any questions which occur, they are never the easy and assured replies of Blake’s "The Lamb."
interpretation are suspended in the face of a relentless, enigmatic questioning. (255-6)

AW will not support questions like these. It does trust in the consensus of a common faith, in replies sanctioned by doctrine, in a higher authority. Therefore, questions and those involved in questioning must be controlled. They must be obliterated, negated, or subdued. Consensus and authority must be brought to bear, and they are, through the responses permitted by the poem: consensual responses, negative responses, faithful responses; responses that continually eschew the "I" and the eye.

AW wants to obliterate place. to obliterate the material, including the speaker himself. It wants to forget, literally, "these matters" (CP 96). The action of AW is that of a will working to clear a controlled, silent space where it can "sit still" and ultimately be absorbed in the greater will of God. Thus AW is not a poem of "things," or even of experiences immediately felt and thought. In examining section I, A. D. Moody recognizes how its language reflects the poem's desire to rid itself of the physical:

How removed from the complex immediacy of actual experience are the images of Ash-Wednesday. . . . Now the images merely refer to such experiences, without making them present reality. The "blessed face" is neither actual nor distinctly human; and the trees and springs are more symbolic than sensual. The diction is mostly removed from direct sensation towards the ideas or ideals of things. . . . Anything that might revive sensual feeling has been refined out of the language, leaving only what will serve a mind and spirit intent on renunciation. The rhythm is similarly determined, placing the stress surely upon the negative, and leading the mind through reasoning to acceptance. The verse is a setting of controls upon love. . . . So the poem is hardly at all an expression of the love-experience. Instead it is perfectly organised to control, distance and transform the feelings which persist
beyond the experience. (TSE, Poet 141-2)

In place of questions, responses; in place of the personal and the visual, the communal and the auditory. To clear its spiritual space, to cleanse, focus, compel, and control, AW relies on the primarily rhythmic rhetoric of charm.

The rhetoric of charm is dissociative and incantatory. It sets up a pattern of sound so complex and repetitive that the ordinary processes of response are short-circuited. Refrain, rhyme, alliteration, assonance, pun, antithesis: every repetitive device known to rhetoric is called into play. Such repetitive formulas break down and confuse the conscious will, hypnotize and compel to certain courses of action.

(Frye, C&R 126)

In his discussion of charm, Northrop Frye notes that "the central idea of the magic of charm is to reduce freedom of action, either by compelling a certain course of action or by stopping action altogether" (C&R 124); such magic aids the desire to "sit still," "to care and not to care," to stop the still whirling unstilled world of Section V. In "charm metamorphosis. . . something once capable of speech and consciousness is obliged to fall silent" (C&R 140), which helps to explain how the cacophonous turns of section V may make it easier ultimately for AW's speaker to hear "the Word unheard, / The Word without a word" (CP 102). "The central principle of charm," writes Frye, is "the power of words over things" (C&R 140). This is the power that AW is trying to access and exercise.

And this is the power it almost loses.27 For the sensual does indeed return in section VI of the poem, nearly overwhelming "[t]he place of solitude where three

27 As the eminently physical seductions of the third stair in section III foreshadow.
"dreams cross" (CP 104). The determined "Because I do not hope to turn again" of section I has become, at the outset of section VI, the humbled "Although I do not hope to turn again." Yet the penitent wings which were "no longer wings to fly / But merely vans to beat the air" in section I are suddenly, in the midst of section VI, "Unbroken wings," "seaward flying" toward a world of sight, sound, and smell rendered so richly and beautifully, and in such detail, it is hard to believe it truly "lost":

And the lost heart stiffens and rejoices
In the lost lilac and the lost sea voices
And the weak spirit quickens to rebel
For the bent golden-rod and the lost sea smell
Quickens to recover
The cry of quail and the whirling plover
And the blind eye creates
The empty forms between the ivory gates
And smell renews the salt savour of the sandy earth.  

The sensual, sensuous world pulls the penitent, just as the concrete imagery pulls the reader, away from the power of the Word and the word. For a moment, incarnation seems ready to supersed Incarnation in "the time of tension between dying and birth" (CP 104).

But such a poem cannot end in such a way. The sensuous imagery, the temptation of the concrete, are succeeded by the rhythms and repetitions of charm ("Blessed sister, holy mother, spirit of the fountain, spirit of the garden/. . . . /Sister, mother / And spirit of the river, spirit of the sea"), by abstract spaces and symbols ("The place of solitude where three dreams cross / Between blue rocks"), and by the communal, sanctioned responses of literature ("Our peace in His will") and
liturgy ("Suffer me not to be separated"). Finally, at its close, even the only sort of asking AW can allow--invocation--is turned into response: "And let my cry come unto Thee" (CP 105).

V.

Though part of the Ariel series, and frequently linked to AW, the beautiful poem "Marina" stands apart in Eliot's oeuvre. Indeed, despite critics' attempts to see profound similarities between AW and "Marina"\(^2\), the two poems are fundamentally important inversions of one another. AW repeatedly and effortfully turns in its battle with "The deceitful face of hope and of despair" (CP 99). In AW, the penitent child seeks to be subsumed in the Father, its peace "in His will" (CP 105). With the aid of the devices of charm, the poem desires to "forget"; it avoids the material, fearing the siren song of the all-too-real sea, preferring instead to "construct something" abstract "Upon which to rejoice" (CP 95). AW eschews the incarnate for the Incarnation. Earthly loves are best interred in "the Garden / Where all love ends" (CP 98); earth itself is a desert, and provides "No place of grace": "Where shall the word be found, where will the word / Resound? Not here" (CP 102), we are emphatically told.\(^2\)

\(^2\) See for instance Moody: "It ["Marina"] is most nearly related to \textit{Ash-Wednesday} . . . They have in common a recovery in vision of what had been lost; the denunciation of the world; and the doubtful questioning of the dream of sensual renewal" (157). (I take issue with all of these comparisons, finding each of them patently inapplicable to one poem or the other.)

\(^2\) One critic has even found the poem's acts of renunciation so complete as to include poetry itself--"\textit{Ash-Wednesday} is so emphatic a farewell to poetry that no one should be surprised that the \textit{Four Quartets} are hardly 'poetry'" (Helmling, "Success"
"Marina" stands in direct and lyrical contrast to these positions. It does not turn again, it begins again, in both its substance and structure. It relies only momentarily on the rhetoric of charm, calling more frequently on the resources of riddle. Its focus is not "those who walk in darkness" (CP 102) but "The awakened" (CP 116), not the lady of silences who "spoke no word" (CP 101) but the daughter with "lips parted" (CP 116). It does not battle but welcomes hope. The sea is an agent of reconciliation rather than a temptation to be renounced. The air of "Marina" is not "small and dry" (CP 96) but damp, expansive, scented with pine and sounding with birdsong. The poem's concrete imagery and affectionate wonder celebrate earth and earthly love. It rejoices in a creation, not upon a construction. In "Marina" what has been forgotten is also remembered; its lost is found. Here, the father resigns his mortal life for the life of a child "[l]iving to live in a world of time beyond me" (CP 117). Here, the incarnate is valued, including perhaps that "unknowing, half conscious" (CP 116) thing, the poem. Here, the answer is "here," where "grace is dissolved in place" (CP 115).

Many of these differences, and the nature of these differences, are illustrated in the different ways these poems deal with questions. AW, as we have seen, tries to avoid open questions, by displacing or subsuming them, providing ready-made, usually liturgical responses for them, or structuring them so that they do not require answers. In the interests of focus and discipline questions are turned, frequently by being turned into something else. Enigmatic questions are suppressed. In "Marina," 69)—though few would be likely to agree with such an extreme position.
questions are not turned, controlled, or answered, but allowed to remain paradoxical and ambiguous. Moreover, an enigmatic question inhabits the very centre of the poem.

The opening of "Marina" resembles the curious openings of some of the AW sections. Once again we are presented with a passage that appears to be interrogative, but which ultimately defies categorization:

What seas what shores what grey rocks and what islands
What water lapping the bow
And scent of pine and the woodthrush singing through the fog
What images return
O my daughter.                          (CP 115)

Following on the heels of the epigraph--"Quis hic locus, quae / regio, quae mundi plagae?" (What place is this, what region, what quarter of the world?)--our inclination is to continue reading "what" in these first few lines as an interrogative pronoun. Yet the line "What images return" does not seem to be interrogative; in fact, it suggests that the preceding list was a catalogue of those returning images rather than a series of questions about them. Alternatively, we may read the lines as exclamation ('what seas!'), though the lack of punctuation until the calm period at the end works against this notion. Finally, we may read the lines as a mix, the "what" clauses functioning as interrogative, exclamatory, declarative, or several of these at once. The tone, rhythm, punctuation, and lineation of the passage prevent our having to settle on a unilateral reading.

Many critics have noted the multivalence of these lines. Scofield writes that "[t]he opening lines are rapt and expansive--the feeling is as much one of wonder as
of questioning": Moody suggests that "[t]he first paragraph, an introduction, is a wondering questioning of images that are distinct yet mysterious" (154). Knottenbelt notes of the rhythm of the lines that "it is deliberately ambiguous and hence enacts the tentativeness, that very process of feeling along rather than of having grasped the sense of wholeness" (316), and Ricks observes, "[t]he sequence is affecting in its being at once so clear and so hazed" (230). Perhaps the most salient point to be made about this ambiguity is that we do not have to choose, or that we can choose a simultaneous variety. According to Louise Glück, this is uncharacteristic of Eliot:

... choice is Eliot's obsession. And every choice is vulnerable to some absolute, external judgment [sic]. This explains, in part, the fastidious hesitations: when the compulsion of speech is to find and say the truth, which is single because inclusive, all utterance must be tormented by doubt. The capacity of such a mind for suffering has to be enormous. (1143)

While these comments ring true for AW, and perhaps for other of Eliot's work, the opposite seems to be occurring in "Marina." "Marina" is not a poem about choosing, but about being chosen. It is a poem about revelation, the contours of which take some time to grasp. After the initial attempt to interpret what this new world (really an old world become new) is, the speaker of the poem tries another tack: he outlines what it is not.

Those who sharpen the tooth of the dog, meaning Death
Those who glitter with the glory of the hummingbird, meaning Death
Those who sit in the sty of contentment, meaning Death
Those who suffer the ecstasy of the animals, meaning Death
Are become unsubstantial, reduced by a wind,
A breath of pine, and the woodsong fog
By this grace dissolved in place (CP 115)

The charm-like rhythms here (their only notable appearance in the poem) serve as a casting out of deadly sins and of death. The abstract (also its only notable appearance in the poem) is itself made "unsubstantial" by the concrete, the sensual, a grace significantly dissolved "in place." Describing his initial reaction to AW, Seamus Heaney evocatively relates that "[t]he sense that the poem stood like a geometry in an absence was what caused my original bewilderment. I sensed myself like a gross intrusion, all corporeality and blunder in the realm of grace and translucence, and this unnerved me" (22-3). In "Marina," it is "Death" that is the intrusion, and corporeality that is grace. This may in part account for the persistence of the word "intrusion" in critics' descriptions of parts of the poem which have to do with death, i.e., the lines quoted above ("The poem contains one passage, however, that no amount of effort on my part enables me to feel as anything but an intrusion" [Schneider 139]), and the epigraph from Hercules Furens ("... one cannot help feeling that the Senecan epigraph is an intrusion" [Scofield 166]).

In its casting out of sin and death, this passage also casts out the pervasive answer to perhaps the most pervasive question in poetry, the ubi sunt question.

The widely known formula identified as the ubi sunt device... presents interesting rhetorical problems of questioning. It is not expected to elicit a chorus of responses... rather, perhaps, its effect is to remind the reader not only of all our deaths, but of all our usual suppression of our consciousness of it. The question expects, even demands, a knowing silence... More and more, though, in later literature the ubi sunt question, whose answer can only be "Dead," receives poetic answers or evasions of answers, which try to ignore
death or face it figuratively and obliquely. (Hollander 38-9)

The thrust of "Marina" is exactly to reverse this response. Death is not evaded nor avoided, but faced directly, and so faced, it disintegrates. The "knowing silence" is replaced by a casting out of death and an emphasis on life, here, now, on this "place." Instead of "dead," the answer to ubi sunt--"where are they now?"--is, miraculously, "here." It is worth quoting the poet Gjertrud Schnackenberg's response to this moment at length:

. . . I said that the poem "Marina" is a visionary answer to the question, What world is this? This question, is of course, a version of the question, Where am I? and it is, at the basest dramatic stratum, merely the first, disoriented question on the lips of most people who are revived (as a number of Shakespeare's creatures are revived) from various forms of lost consciousness--from fainting, grave illness, coma, shock, near-death--but this question, in Shakespeare's hands, is an immensity, and its equally simple answer, which is Here, is, in Shakespeare's hands, an immensity as well. The vision of life to which Pericles awakens is a companion-vision--as well as a counter-vision--to Prospero's: as Prospero beholds the actors melting into thin air, the baseless fabric of reality dissolving, the insubstantial pageant of time fading, Pericles sees, in awe, in glimpses through the fog of coma and death, not life melting away but death melting away, and the miraculous reappearance of a world he knows full well: his world. . . as we hear Pericles asking, "What seas what shores. . ." it is impossible not to remember Lear's question to Cordelia as he awakens from madness: "Where am I?" and Cordelia's answer, "In your own kingdom, sir." (qtd. in Clampitt et al., "Prefaces" 213-4)

But to grasp that the common answer is wrong is not necessarily to grasp what the right answer is. The hesitations that follow in "Marina" are not born of fear, as is usual in Eliot, but of wonder.30 We are moving from the realm of charm to that

30 Sometimes, in his post-conversion work, Eliot unites the two; as he will write in "The Cultivation of Christmas Trees," the poem following "Marina" in the volume, the "accumulated memories"
The riddle of "Marina" becomes the riddle of life, as we can know it through "the actual world explored by sense experience":

What is this face, less clear and clearer
The pulse in the arm, less strong and stronger --
Given or lent? more distant than stars and nearer than the eye

Whispers and small laughter between leaves and hurrying feet
Under sleep, where all the waters meet. (CP 115)

But the proofs of sense, while the ground of our experience, cannot alone account for revelation. Vision and reason only get one so far with mysteries which are "more distant than the stars and nearer than the / eye." The speaker is still approaching recognition; he may possess, but does not yet understand or believe the

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May be concentrated into a great joy
Which shall be also a great fear, as on the occasion
When fear came upon every soul:
Because the beginning shall remind us of the end
And the first coming of the second coming. (CP 118)

But for once, in "Marina," the joy, unclear as it is, comes first, and is most pervasive.
miracle. Attempting to ground himself and this experience further, he turns again to the material, to what he knows: his craft.

Bowsprit cracked with ice and paint cracked with heat
I made this, I have forgotten
And remember.
The rigging weak and the canvas rotten
Between one June and another September.
Made this unknowing, half conscious, unknown, my own.
The garboard strake leaks, the seams need caulking.
This form, this face, this life
Living to live in a world of time beyond me; let me
Resign my life for this life, my speech for that unspoken,
The awakened, lips parted, the hope, the new ships.  

As Scofield perceives, "[t]he passage alternates between the suggestive intimation of meanings on the edge of consciousness and the solid sense of practicalities" (164). The lines are evenly divided between, and ultimately begin to mix, the two things which the speaker has made: one the craft he knows in detail, which, while rickety, has withstood hard weather and brought him to revelation; the other the daughter, the physical embodiment of a spiritual beginning. Both represent critical aspects of Eliot's poetry, and of Eliot as poet, as "maker" and as "seer."

Surely this passage stands in some sense as Eliot's description, and hesitating acceptance, of the intricacies, the perils, and wonders of making incarnate "this unknowing, half conscious, unknown" thing--of making a poem: "this form...living to live in a world of time beyond me" (CP 116). In a letter to E. MacKnight Kauffer, "the designer who was to illustrate the Ariel edition of 'Marina,'" Eliot wrote that "the theme" of the poem "is paternity; with a crisscross between the text and the quotation" (qtd. in Schulman 205; 211). This passage suggests that the
paternal relation of poet to poem is included in this theme, along with all the tension, the "moment of exhaustion, of appeasement, of absolution, and of something very near annihilation" (T. S. Eliot, *Poetry* 98), involved in waking to find one has made something horrible or something wonderful.

This further connection between maker and made adds another level of significance to the moving question at the heart of "Marina." Is the revelation of the made/maid "given or lent" (CP 115)? The question would trouble Eliot throughout his career; he returns to the problems of revelations and incarnations poetic and spiritual in *Four Quartets*. In "Marina," however, he resists the temptation to answer the question. It is allowed to hang as enigmatically and luminously in the air as the fog, for, like the hazy interrogatives which open the poem, its answer is 'both at once.' The revelation is given wholly, but only for a time. As the dilapidated shape of the ship, and the menacing undertone of the poem's last lines imply, things do fall apart, whether or not the centre holds:

What seas what shores what granite islands towards my timbers
And woodthrush calling through the fog

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31 Helmling, in his suggestive article "The Success and Failure of T. S. Eliot," notes these remarks by Eliot as late as 1947:

I have always been haunted by one or the other of two doubts. The first is, that nothing I have written is really of permanent value. . . . But the second doubt is still more distressing. I sometimes feel that some, at least, of what I have written, is very good, but that I shall never again write anything good. Some imp always whispers to me, as I am struggling to get down to any new piece of work, that this is going to be lamentably bad, and that I won't know it.

(qtd. in Helmling 73)
My daughter. (CP 116)

The islands are now a sharper "granite" than at the opening, threatening the already vulnerable timbers; the woodthrush now is "calling through the fog," perhaps like a siren, luring the ship toward the rocks. Eliot being Eliot, it was perhaps too much to ask that the physical world be the repository of joy and revelation for too long.

Among the great figures of the time, Eliot was, in the work, the least materialistic, the least consoled by the physical world. Because what he wanted was either to see through the material to the eternal (in which case the material was an obstacle to vision) [AW] or to experience a closing of the gap between the two worlds. Only through the closing of that gap between the actual and the ideal could the physical world attain to meaning, authority. But a mind sensitive to this discrepancy is unlikely to experience a convincing union of these realms. (Glück 1143)

"Marina" represents, for perhaps the only manifest moment in Eliot, the closing of the gap; but though it is ambiguous and short-lived, the union of the realms does seem convincing. The end of the poem is still "My daughter." The relation to revelation can be claimed--"my own," "my daughter"--though its essence cannot be held or named: the daughter is not described in the poem, and, importantly, her name is never spoken. Frye notes that "it is common to give the 'solution' of riddle poems in their titles" (Frye, C&R 141); if so, "Marina" remains both solution and riddle. And so it must be, Frye implies, for an "answer hardly does justice to the poem":

... like all interpretations that profess to say "this is what the poem means," the answer is wrong because it is an answer. The real answer to the question implied in a riddle is not a "thing" outside it, but that which is both word and thing, and is both inside and outside the poem. (C&R 147)
In "The Three Voices of Poetry," Eliot would write that "When you have the words for it, the 'thing' for which the words had to be found has disappeared, replaced by a poem" (T. S. Eliot, Poetry 97-9). In "Marina," having the words for it means not having the words for it; the poem, the form, does not replace the "thing" but becomes the appetite for it: finding an answer means facing the question, in all its infinity and multiplicity. again. Four Quartets may be Eliot's most elaborate and extended pursuit of paradox, but paradox is never again as fully embodied as it is in the wonderful riddle of "Marina."

VI.

Visual artist David Finn "stood in front of 108 canvases over a period of ten years" (Finn 33), attempting to turn Four Quartets into paintings. In a comment describing his experience of the poems, Finn elucidates what makes Four Quartets (FQ) so different from most of Eliot's other (particularly his early) work:

Everything is here. The past is no longer just a fading memory, the present is no longer just a fleeting instant, the future is no longer just an unanswerable question: all are an inextricable part of what is now. (33)

"Here" and "now" are key to FQ. Eliot's early poetry used a variety of strategies to avoid the immediate moment, to escape present time and present space. FQ insists on the present. The opening section of the opening poem asserts clearly the paradox that comprises the central theme of FQ: "Time past and time future / What might have been and what has been / Point to one end, which is always present" (CP 190).

This is not the same conception of the present which threatened in Eliot's early
poetry, however. The present in FQ, while still frequently fraught with violence, failure, and despair, is redeemed by the possibility that grace, too, is available at every moment. The present of FQ, in sharp contrast to the present of WL, for example, is connected to the possibility of hope, meaning, completion. Consequently, there is much in and about FQ which emphasizes connection and completion, including its pervasive pattern of questions answered.


Yet close investigation of the interrogative in FQ also reveals the capacity of questions to disrupt impressions of unity and closure. The paradoxical functioning of questions in this paradoxical poem highlights another of its themes, one just as significant as its insistence on connection. Questions in FQ, in their operation and very nature, point to the importance of what is beyond. This pointing does not vitiate the poem's insistence on the here and now. Eliot's use of the beyond in FQ, like his use of "here," differs from his use of it earlier in his career. In poems such as "Prufrock" or WL, Eliot is concerned to move the here into the beyond; the present is transported into the realm of fantasy or phantasmagoria or myth. In FQ, Eliot's concern with the Incarnation makes him intent on moving the beyond into the here.
Questions. with their capacity to emphasize both the here and the beyond, become an important means by which Eliot encodes this new perspective. A richer reading of the poem is available to those who consider how the poem, aided by its questions, presents and makes meaningful both the complete and incomplete together.

The fundamental experience of FQ for many readers remains that of connection and wholeness. Traversi writes of "the drawing together of a number of initially separate themes until . . . they are seen to fit together in the form of a design or 'pattern' of meaning greater than the sum of the separate parts" (88). Kenner, to cite another example, speaks of the poem's "diagrammatic" quality, the "manner in which, from first to last, Four Quartets deals with opposites first falsely, then truly, reconciled" (Invisible Poet 267).

Several factors contribute to this impression of FQ as ultimate response. Catalysts external to the poem encourage such readings. The historical moment(s) of its publication doubtless made its first readers, caught in the midst of an increasingly dark and complex war, look to it in part for hope or answers. In addition, as the last major poem Eliot published, its position in the oeuvre also plays on our proclivity to read FQ as a unifying "answer," in this case to many of the problems posed by, and in, the earlier work. The self-conscious and self-controlled nature of Eliot's career exacerbates this inclination to read FQ as a sort of solution to the rest. Kenner observes of his career that

. . . Eliot closes off the possibility of. . . a future trans-temporal dialogue, having written the counter poems himself, and so left not an affirmation, partial and assertive, for some future voice to complete, but an equilibrium, Calder-like in its precarious mobility, for present
and future to cherish or ignore. There is nothing for another poet to do but do otherwise. . . . There is not even a selection to make; he has virtually made it himself, in cannily declining to publish we cannot tell how many verses. (T. S. Eliot 14)

Though he may overstate the case, there is a good deal of truth to these assertions: Eliot basically closed the book on his own career, and in so doing helps to make FQ its last word. It is perhaps because Eliot's poems are so intimately related, and the career so ostensibly governed, that there is a much greater tendency in Eliot criticism to compare his poems with each other rather than with poems by other writers, and a strong urge to re-read them all (regardless of how they are subsequently valued) through the allegedly concluding lens of FQ.

Perhaps the most significant external factor bearing on a unified and unifying reading of FQ is the general impulse to look to poetry in part for some sort of insight or answer. Underlying a "formal quest" for meaning, which is commonly undertaken when we read, is a desire that Said describes as "an imaginative and emotional need for unity, a need to apprehend an otherwise dispersed number of circumstances and to put them in some sort of telling order, sequential, moral, or logical" (41). Such a

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32 While the situation is not so consistent or hermetic as she indicates. Helen Gardner also notices this quality of Eliot's work. Introducing her comments on FQ, she writes,

The best kind of interpretation is that supplied by an author's other works, and this is particularly true of Mr. Eliot. . . . His poetry is extraordinarily self-consistent, and there is almost nothing he has published that does not form part of his poetic personality. One of the results of this integrity is that his later work interprets his earlier, as much as his earlier work does his later; so that criticism of The Waste Land to-day is modified by Ash Wednesday, and Ash Wednesday is easier to understand after reading the Quartets. ("FQ" 57)
desire may be especially operative when reading an important, late poem by a major writer. Yet to read FQ with a critical awareness of this expectation, as many postmodern readers surely do, is to become still more aware of the careful way in which the poem is crafted to encourage discovery of "answers."

The most compelling reasons for interpreting FQ as a poem of conclusion(s) are contained in the poem itself. The tone of the poem is one of authority; its personae cannot help signalling knowledge and ability even while professing humility, and despite their periodic bombast we attend to their pronouncements. Structurally, FQ is marked by connections: connections verbal, metaphoric, imagistic, syntactic, symbolic, semantic. These connections create patterns within and between the quartets which encompass rather than disperse, inviting us to invest them with meaning. The themes of FQ emphasize reconciliation: of the timeless and time, of beginning and end, of past, present, and future; of personal and public, of success and failure, of ambition and actuality. The rhetoric of the poem, distinguished by imperatives, answers, instructions, and admonitions, deals with what is known and what is to be done rather than with what is not. It is predominantly a rhetoric which requires and requites. Nearly every technical and thematic aspect of the poem is aimed at "a further union, a deeper communion" (CP 204). The internal evidence suggests that FQ is attempting to counter the entropy of early Eliot with harmony and insight.

Questions too, like so many other technical aspects of the poem, initially seem to function toward this end. They appear to build perceptions of accord and
conclusion. The most conspicuous characteristic of the questions in FQ is that nearly all of them receive direct responses, frequently though not always in the form of unequivocal answers. This is true regardless of whether they appear in the most highly structured verse, or in the free-verse, ruminative passages; whether they are in the first or third person; whether they are allusion, occur in dialogue, or function as part of instruction, vision, meditation, or argument. Each quartet furnishes examples:

"Burnt Norton"--

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. (CP 189-90)

"East Coker"--

You say I am repeating
Something I have said before. I shall say it again.
Shall I say it again? In order to arrive there... (CP 201)

"Dry Salvages"--

Where is there an end of it, the soundless wailing,
The silent withering of autumn flowers
Dropping their petals and remaining motionless;
Where is there an end to the drifting wreckage,
The prayer of the bone on the beach, the unprayable
Prayer at the calamitous annunciation?

There is no end, but addition...

... ...

There is no end of it, the voiceless wailing,
No end to the withering of withered flowers,
To the movement of pain that is painless and motionless,
To the drift of the sea and the drifting wreckage,
The bone's prayer to Death its God. Only the hardly, barely prayable
Prayer of the one Annunciation. (CP 207-8)

"Little Gidding"--

So I assumed a double part, and cried
And heard another's voice cry: 'What! are you here?'
Although we were not. (CP 217)

Why should we celebrate
These dead men more than the living?
It is not to ring the bell backward. . . (CP 220)

Who then devised the torment? Love. (CP 221)

Yet any sustained look at the functions of questions in FQ reveals a subtle undermining of order, authority, and closure. Questions in the poem are not sated finally by the poem's ubiquitous answers. They reflect and help to create the poem's corollary emphasis on the fragmentary, incomplete nature of human answers and accomplishments.

The manner in which questions influence the authoritative tone of the poem is a good example of their flexible functioning. FQ represents a departure for Eliot with regard to the tenor of its personae. While the early critical voice was highly authoritative, Eliot's predominant poetic voice was most decidedly not. Despite his having known everything and everyone "all already." Prufrock's is hardly an authoritative voice, and neither for all its posturing is the young man's in "Portrait of a Lady." Gerontion qualifies himself and his observations from beginning to end. The sheer number of voices in the WL means that what authority is present, if often intimidating, is necessarily shared; the allusions hint that this authority is not only shared, but borrowed. AW programmatically undermines the authority of the
individual, and shifts it to the congregation, replacing the willful "I" with the
suppliant "we." The Ariel poems take almost as a collective plot the bowing of
conventional, worldly authority before revelation. Even his humorous self-description
in "Five Finger Exercises" emphasizes Eliot's lack of authority: he characterizes his
conversation as "restricted to What Precisely / And If and Perhaps and But" (CP
151).

The personae in FQ, however, assume an authority that those in earlier poems
do not. This is most obvious in the didactic, at times sententious, passages, such as
the following instructions from "Little Gidding":

You are not here to verify,
Instruct yourself, or inform curiosity
Or carry report. You are here to kneel
Where prayer has been valid. (CP 215)

Such passages are mostly located in the free-verse sections of parts II, III, and V of
each quartet, although the same hortative quality also periodically informs the formal
verse. In DS II, for instance, the voice speaking the prayer to the virgin—who is no
longer the "Blessed sister, holy mother" of AW, but simply "Lady, whose shrine
stands on the promontory" (CP 211)—sounds much more authoritative, familiar, and
demanding ("Repeat a prayer also on behalf of / Women. . .") than anything in AW.
The verses in EC IV and LG IV similarly inscribe potent, knowing personae.

Questions assist a great deal in developing these authoritative voices. By and
large, the questions in FQ are rhetorical questions, in the sense that their answers are

33 From this point forward, poems of the quartets will be abbreviated by initials
and Roman numerals; e.g., the first poem of "Burnt Norton" would appear as BN I.
known beforehand: in the more precise terms of formal rhetoric, the questions in FQ function more as percontatio or rogatio than interrogatio. Even if the appropriate responses to the questions are not initially obvious to us as readers, the tone, diction, and structure of the responses indicate that they appear obvious to the answerer. The light these questions throw on the response and respondent is what sets FQ apart the most from Eliot's previous work: the questions emphasize that there is an answerer, and moreover an answerer who seems to have answers. As Kertzer notes,

> A rhetorical question creates, locates, or searches for authority because posing the question arouses a desire for, and expectation of, an authoritative answer. (250)

Certainly one key function of questions and their answers in FQ is to arouse this expectation, and meet it. They indicate the presence of a voice of authority. This argument for authoritative voice may seem to be undercut by those

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34 I am thinking primarily in terms of the distinctions outlined by Lee Sonnino in *A Handbook of Sixteenth Century Rhetoric* (261).

35 The way in which this authority functions in their rhetorical questions is a revealing difference between Yeats and Eliot. The voices of Yeats' personae--(melodramatic, self-conscious, grandly pronouncing--sound highly authoritative. Yet Yeats nearly always leaves his rhetorical questions unanswered, which, along with other factors such as their placement towards or at the end of poems, often means the questions slide from rhetorical to "real," expanding the range of possible responses beyond a single authoritative answer. Eliot's personae do not sound so consistently authoritative or self-assured; even in FQ they are often at pains to demonstrate their failings or apparent lack of command in various (usually literary) situations. Yet they do exert authority, as the rhetorical questions in FQ show: the nature and tone of the responses confirm our sense of the questions as rhetorical, which, as Kertzer suggests, in turn reconfirms the authority of--or behind--the answer and answering voice.
sections which deal with the difficulties of aging, and of using language. Yet part of the impact of the humbling that occurs in these sections comes from the sense that it is the successful professional, the older and wiser man, who is embracing humility. EC II is an example of how questions can shore up the perception of authority in these circumstances.

It was not (to start again) what one had expected. What was to be the value of the long looked forward to, Long hoped for calm, the autumnal serenity And the wisdom of age? Had they deceived us, Or deceived themselves, the quiet-voiced elders, Bequeathing us merely a receipt for deceit? The serenity only a deliberate hebetude, The wisdom only the knowledge of dead secrets Useless in the darkness into which they peered Or from which they turned their eyes. There is it seems to us, At best, only a limited value In the knowledge derived from experience. (CP 199)

The first question here repeats prosaically what is essentially asked in the preceding verse section: "What is the late November doing / With the disturbance of the spring," a disturbance bound to bring "The world to that destructive fire / Which burns before the ice-cap reigns" (CP 198)? What has happened to "the long looked forward to, / Long hoped for calm" of age anticipated by the speaker? The second question of the passage suggests a possibility: the speaker’s expectations were not necessarily inherently wrong: he has been misled. The speaker’s perceptions are unimpugned; perhaps the "quiet-voiced elders" who led the speaker to expect "autumnal serenity" and "wisdom" deceived him. Perhaps they have deceived themselves; by dividing these two phrases between lines, we are given a sense of two
choices. What the question really seems to be asking is not whether the elders deceived, but whom they deceived. The final part of the question seems to underscore the rightness of at least one choice. Delaying the final phrase of the question, and giving it a line to itself, implies that regardless of whether or not they deceived themselves, we have been bequeathed by the elders "merely a receipt for deceit." The phrase functions more as description of what has happened than as query about what may have happened, using diction ("merely") and rhyme (receipt/deceit) to emphasize the true "answer."

The syntax of the following lines enacts what has been going on all along in the questions: it seems to ask, but really tells. Because there is no main verb, the lines initially read as if they are a continuation of rhetorical questioning; the period at the end of the sentence comes as a bit of a surprise. Rereading it as a sentence, however, underscores the answer to the questions we have already come to expect from the questions themselves. The serenity is only a hebetude, wisdom is only the useless knowledge of dead secrets. With their worthless wisdom and perhaps cravenness (suggested by their averting their eyes), the elders seem to have deceived themselves as well. The speaker was clearly right on both counts, and he has constructed his questions and responses to emphasize this. It is the speaker who detects the deception of the quiet-voiced elders, the "limited value / In the knowledge derived from experience." It is he who recognizes that "[w]e are only undeceived / Of that which, deceiving, could no longer harm" (CP 199). In putting questions which seem to lament the loss and deceit he has suffered, the speaker actually
augments his authority. The way in which questions become answers at the beginning of this passage makes it less a surprise when, at its close, the speaker achieves a strong and forceful conclusion by turning his answers into imperatives. He casts out what is unnecessary, demands what is useful, and, ironically, boldly announces our need for humility:

Do not let me hear
Of the wisdom of old men, but rather of their folly,
Their fear of fear and frenzy, their fear of possession,
Of belonging to another, or to others, or to God.
The only wisdom we can hope to acquire
Is the wisdom of humility: humility is endless. (CP 199)

While questions help to consolidate the speaker's authority, particularly in their immediate context, they also cast suspicion upon the answers and instructions he derives from them. With the use of questions and answers, the speaker sets himself up as possessing a wisdom he then undermines; as practicing subtly a craft which "does not matter" (CP 198); as giving us an experience which is, "at best," of "limited value." Just as question is turned to answer, questioner becomes respondent; the speaker's authority supersedes that of the quiet-voiced elders. If we conflate the speaker and the writer, which the subject of the passage (and indeed the title and subject of the quartet) encourages us to do, it is in fact fairly easy to cast Eliot himself as a "quiet-voiced elder." His questioning of them and their authority becomes our questioning of him. Does he deceive us? What is the nature of the wisdom he proffers? After all, as one critic remarks, "'The poetry does not matter': it is T. S. Eliot who tells you this" (Helmling, "Success" 55). Questions in FQ cannot help pointing to something beyond the answers that are given, beyond the
authority they help to establish.

In this respect, questions represent another crucial motif of FQ, the gesturing to authority or authorities--such as other great poets, religious figures, historical personages, patriarchs of the Eliot clan, philosophers, ghosts, God--who are outside the world being immediately rendered in the poem. In addition to questions, any number of tropes in the poem--such as those metaphors of transportation, the supernatural, art, music, disease, vegetation, exploration, deterioration, to name a few--insinuate or strive for states which are somehow "beyond." Eliot himself spoke in these terms when describing his desire in FQ "to get beyond poetry, as Beethoven, in his later works, strove to get beyond music" (emphases his). What he wished to create, he said, was a poetry "with nothing poetic about it, poetry standing naked in its bare bones, or... poetry so transparent that in reading it we are intent on what the poetry points at, and not on the poetry" (T. S. Eliot, SE 276; emphasis his). FQ, with its striving tropes, its knowing tone, its controlled viewpoints, its authoritative personae, and not least its rhetorical questions and answers, determinedly and consistently points. Like the roses in "Burnt Norton" which have "the look of flowers that are looked at" (CP 190), the questions in FQ make us aware of the double sense of authority operating throughout the poem: the pointer and the pointed-

36 "These remarks were included in an unpublished lecture on 'English Letter Writers'--primarily on Keats and Lawrence--which was delivered in New Haven, Conn., during the winter of 1933" (Matthiessen 96).

37 Cf. Derrida in Of Grammatology: "The feelings of the mind, expressing things naturally, constitute a sort of universal language which can then efface itself. It is the stage of transparence" (11).
Just as questions contribute to but ultimately move beyond the authoritative tone of the poem, so do they help to shape but also to subvert its authoritative form. The rhetorical unit of question and answer in FQ is representative of the general form of the poem. Questions, especially the rhetorical ones which comprise the majority of questions in the poem, appear to be asked primarily so that they can be answered. They are cause for connection and completion, for the repetition of the rightness of the answer provided. This is particularly true of the questions and answers in EC—for example, "I shall say it again. / Shall I say it again? In order to arrive. . . ." (CP 201), which literally repeats to complete the familiar paradoxical catechism. DS also furnishes examples, such as "Where is there an end of it. . . ? / . . . / There is no end of it. . . ." (CP 207-8), where the placement and symmetry of question and answer emphasize the final assertion of the passage.

Many readers have interpreted the form of the poem to be just as encompassing and complete as this paradigm of question and answer—so much so, in fact, that one critic uses the term "answer" in describing the form of FQ:

Each Quartet is self-enclosed by a return of theme or imagery at the end, and the series of the four together create loosely the three-part effect of reflections springing from family and self (II and III) enclosed within a frame of broader reference. The last Quartet encloses all by including as well as answering the first and is, besides, the final recapitulation of a life’s journey. (Schneider 172)

It is true that there is much in the form of the poem which emphasizes closure and control. Indeed, just as the many answers in the poem apparently overcome the formal appetites of their questions, so the form of the poem, with its continually
connecting rhythms, patterns, images, and ideas, seems to subdue the often subversive desires which periodically surface. Unlike most of Eliot's early work, which displays appetite unfulfilled, or AW, which attempts to suppress it altogether, FQ evokes desire only to illustrate that it is, or has been, somehow controlled: fulfilled, perhaps.

The inner freedom from the practical desire,
The release from action and suffering, release from the inner
And the outer compulsion, yet surrounded
By a grace of sense, a white light still and moving. . . (CP 191)
effectively disciplined,

I said to my soul, be still, and wait without hope
For hope would be hope for the wrong thing; wait without love
For love would be love of the wrong thing; there is yet faith
But the faith and the love and the hope are all in the waiting.
Wait without thought, for you are not ready for thought:
So the darkness shall be the light, and the stillness the dancing. (CP 200)

or overcome,

This is the use of memory:
For liberation--not less of love but expanding
Of love beyond desire, and so liberation
From the future as well as the past. (CP 219)

This control is exerted in many aspects of the form of FQ. The verse sections in the poem generally feature regular, usually enveloping rhyme schemes which emphasize management and closure; even in his masterful "translation" of Dante's terza rima, Eliot satisfies the desire its interlocking stanzaic pattern evokes by substituting alternating masculine and feminine line endings in place of the rhyme present in the original structure.
Similarly, the poem's numerous pronouncements also serve to check or channel appetites, actual or potential, with their symmetry and imperative structures ("This is the one way, and the other / Is the same, not in movement / But in abstention from movement" [CP 193]) and instructions ("In order to arrive there . . . You must go by a way wherein there is no ecstasy" [CP 201]: "You are not here to verify. / Instruct yourself, or inform curiosity / Or carry report. You are here to kneel / Where prayer has been valid" [CP 215]). The form of the poem, and forms in the poem, seem as in-folded as its final image.

Yet despite these often commanding formal characteristics, to see the form of the poem as so neatly summary and complete, as finally "answering" the complex issues it raises, does a disservice to the variety, intricacy, and scope of FQ. Part of what augments our appreciation of the principal formal satisfactions of FQ--its wholeness and intricate connection--are those moments when these very qualities are threatened. As Peter Ackroyd writes, it is the "ambivalence between the formal order of the poem and troubled intimations of its own fragility . . . [which] gives the poem its power" (271). One of the surest rhetorical intimations of this uncertainty is the question. Questions--even the most seemingly assertive rhetorical questions--are at least double-edged propositions. As Julie Solomon notes of the status of rhetorical questions,

While certainly not perceived as asking for information, such questions are often formally indistinguishable from real questions. In their display context, we *take* such questions as promises to explain and give the answer. But they *are* asking us for something. Coloured by the basic function of interrogative utterances, questions can't help asking for something. (97)

Questions formally point beyond their answers even while simultaneously pointing to them. Analogously, the form of FQ is at its strongest when it points to the difference and
complexity existing within the closure it predominantly depicts. What FQ says is that beginnings are ends, and ends beginnings; what it points to, is reconciliation. But what FQ also does, at its most successful moments, is show the existential distance between beginnings and ends, the complexity of the natural, historical present which stands in need of this reconciliation. What FQ points out, is the life of difference which desires meaning.

The lovely lyric comprising BN IV is a fine example of both difference and reconciliation existing in the present moment. This short poem suggests some of the non-Romantic, non-Symbolist resources Eliot draws upon in crafting FQ, resources he then shapes, with the critical use of questions, to his own ends.

IV

Time and the bell have buried the day,
The black cloud carries the sun away.
Will the sunflower turn to us, will the clematis
Stray down, bend to us; tendril and spray
Clutch and cling?
Chill
Fingers of yew be curled
Down on us? After the kingfisher’s wing
Has answered light to light, and is silent, the light is still
At the still point of the turning world. (CP 194)

The influences of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century poetry are everywhere apparent here, particularly the influence of George Herbert. The musical rhythms of the passage recall the songs of the period; indeed, Eliot admitted that an anonymous sixteenth-century lyric formed the basis for the opening lines of BN IV (Reinsberg 344). The simple diction resembles that of the Elizabethan plainstyle, a diction

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38 I am indebted to the research of Julia Reibetanz in A Reading of Eliot’s *Four Quartets*, specifically (44; 211) for this connection, and generally (43 ff.) for valuable
employed later by poets such as Herbert and (to lesser degrees) Vaughan and Marvell. The various line lengths here call to mind the mixed short-and-long-lined stanzas commonly found in the verses of early seventeenth-century devotional poets; again, Herbert serves as an example, in poems such as "Dullness," "Peace," and "The Collar." Herbert may also be behind the shaping of this lyric: while not as obvious as the shaping of a poem like "Easter Wings," the opening lines of BN IV do shorten, echoing the descent of life into death which their imagery portrays. This abbreviation culminates in the line consisting of the single word "Chill," after which the lines expand again to close the poem with long lines evoking the possibility of renewed life.

The imagery of the passage also appears indebted to Herbert, among others; but Eliot's use of this imagery, particularly in relation to his questions, reveals a more Modern (and perhaps characteristic) sensibility. In their simplicity, immediacy, translucence, and their pastoral quality, the images of BN IV recall those of Herbert. Eliot has even learned from Herbert (and perhaps from Marvell as well, in a poem like "The Garden") how to use these natural, almost naive images with a subtly and wit which does not compromise their simplicity. The images, like the falling rhythms and truncated lines in the questions, impel us to "Descend lower" (CP 193), signalling death and burial. The first image of the questions is that of the tall sunflower, which turns its head toward the earth when it is fully ripe. Following the sunflower there is the wonderful connecting image of the desperate, clutching and clinging clematis vine, insights into the rhythm and metrics of this lyric.
which strays "down." It is followed in turn by the image of roots. "Chill / Fingers of yew," tree of graveyards, which curl "Down on us." As the descending images both effect and reveal, we are not above the earth but under it, buried, like the day.

It is very tempting to agree with Traversi's assessment of what is occurring in this lyric:

This is not poetry which makes its effect by complex imagery or by the use of calculated ambiguities dear to certain types of critical explication. It is the work of a poet, rather, who is aware of these things, but who here--and generally in the most successful passages of these poems--has chosen not to use them, may be said to have moved in a sense beyond them. This is... poetry which, far from being 'simple' in any limiting sense, represents the final distillation of an experience which is no longer dependent upon complexity. (119)

This captures the essence of BN IV; but essence is only part of what this lyric concerns. Experience here is not distilled into pure spirit. Admittedly, the powerful initial effect of the passage is born of its concreteness and simplicity; but while this simplicity is striking and sustained, complexity is present, too. It is not the same sort of complexity produced by the jarring imagery, the fragmented form, the irregular metric, the divided voices, and the other dramatic devices characteristic of early Eliot.

It is not the complexity, as Rajan rightly insists, of "calculated ambiguity." Nor is it the involved, ingenious, self-consciously constructed complexity of metaphysical conceit. The images are not complex in themselves, nor in relation to other images, nor in relation to a priori concepts or situations. Their complexity resides in relation to the cycles of time and nature in which they are involved and to which they point.

Unlike Herbert, who generally intends singular associations with his images (e.g., flower = life), Eliot intends us to read duality (sunflower = life and death). His
images illustrate a complexity inextricable from "here," where, undoubtedly, the simple and the complicated exist at once.\(^{39}\)

The complexity of the passage is at work, not below the surface, but alongside the simplicity of the poem, as several of its technical aspects indicate. Within the lyric, "continuity of sound and rhythm operates to create a smooth flow and to fuse lines of disparate length into one long progression;" but this continuity is achieved by the knitting together of "great metrical irregularity" (Reibetanz 44-5). The simple imagery of the poem clearly enacts descent, but interestingly, while the death it suggests is the natural end of existence, the images by which we are "buried" move in the opposite direction, in terms of plant life--from ripeness (the blossom of the sunflower), back through a middle phase (the "tendril and spray" of the clematis), to the root (of the yew). Even the nature of the vegetation selected reveals paradox. The sunflower, turned here toward the earth, is most renowned (as its name underscores) for facing the other direction, for continually following the sun.\(^ {40}\) The yew tree is the tree of cemeteries, evocative of death, but it is also an evergreen, evocative of everlasting life.\(^ {41}\) These images are not ambiguous, bottomless, or centrifugal, the way images often are in early Eliot. They do have doubleness, but it is clear. Their effect is centripetal. They do not involve us in an unending quest for

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\(^ {39}\) This is not to suggest one use of imagery as superior to the other; it merely illustrates that for the Modern mind, even one permeated by Christian faith, it is almost impossible for the world and the present to be depicted in simple or singular terms.

\(^ {40}\) The pun on sun/Son must also be at work here.

\(^ {41}\) Eliot plays on the doubleness of the yew earlier, in the final section of AW.
significance, but simply bring two different ideas into focus simultaneously.

All of these aspects are brought together under the rhetorical aegis of the interrogative. The questions of BN IV embody the doubleness of their constituent parts; they appear at first as simple as the rhythms and images of which they are composed. These are not the questions feared and suppressed in AW: they are not enigmatic. Their repeated sounds, familiar imagery, and rising intonation make their intent clear. As rhetorical questions frequently do, these questions contain their own answer; "the questions are... answered in their own images" (Moody 192). Yet the questions also point beyond this to a different answer, "an end beyond their reach" (Moody 193), embodied in the image of the kingfisher’s wing which answers "light to light." The answers to the questions are simple and complex, mirroring the place of death in the "here" Eliot is at pains to evoke: the images of the questions point to death, the end of human life; the images of the answer (light, "the still point of the turning world") point beyond death, to eternal life.

It is this questioning which differentiates Eliot and Herbert, and helps to distinguish the former as Modern. Herbert’s perspective on death is informed primarily by the future; its promise of union with God, obtained at the price of Christ’s death, colours his conception of it, making it unequivocally "fair and full of grace / Much in request, much sought for as a good" ("Death").42 It is not a matter for inquiry for him, as is, more commonly, human reaction to God and His will; it is

42 Taken from the text of Herbert’s poem found in George Herbert and the Seventeenth-Century Religious Poets (66-7).
a matter for explanation and expectation. When Herbert does question, his questions are frequently dramatic, rhetorical, and direct, and they generally receive didactic, direct speech in reply (e.g., "Love III").

In BN IV, Eliot is interested in realizing rather than in interpreting experience. His focus is on what is here, and how what is present is informed by what is beyond. Death is, as it has always been for Eliot, a crucial and absorbing part of what is here, as important as a part of the "place of disaffection" (CP 192) as it is in its role as portal to another, better place. Though both are Christian in conception, the manifestation and significance of death in Eliot's present is more complex than its evocation in Herbert's future. The significance of both the end and the beginning to which (particularly in the present) death points leads Eliot to use a rhetorical form well-suited to such paradox, the interrogative.

Moreover, in a characteristically Modern way, he crafts his questions and response in terms of images, for direct speech has lost much of its power in Eliot's world. "Words strain, / Crack and sometimes break, under the burden, / Under the tension, slip, slide, perish, / Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place, / Will not stay still" (CP 194). This view is pervasive among Modernists (and Postmodernists), and may be located throughout writings of the period. But the inadequacy of words is also due here to Eliot's major subject in FQ, the Incarnation and its implications. As Stephen Spender points out, "[t]he theme of the end preceding the beginning, and of the pattern preceding both end and beginning presses toward a metaphysical pattern that lies beyond the patterns of which the poet is capable in language" (169). The
many sections addressing language in FQ are at pains to convey this very idea, that words are insufficient to the task of describing experience, most especially the experience of Incarnation. They come closer when they attempt to imitate it, when they try to render rather than to explain experience. Image and interrogative are two of the primary moulds into which the Modernist mind, including Eliot's Modern Christian mind, casts words to create experience.

The benefits of learning to read the paradox of questions like those in BN IV may be extrapolated into the reading and understanding of other, non-interrogative passages in FQ. A vital section in the fourth quartet has often been misread because it has been understood in the generally linear light of its declarative structure, rather than in the light of doubleness that interrogative equips us to read. In spite of its opening statement, the passage is read and interpreted from beginning to end, instead of being read and understood as questions instruct us to read and understand, with beginning and end interdependently linked. It is the opening section of LG V:

What we call the beginning is often the end
And to make an end is to make a beginning.
The end is where we start from. And every phrase
And sentence that is right (where every word is at home,
Taking its place to support the others,
The word neither diffident nor ostentatious,
An easy commerce of the old and the new,
The common word exact without vulgarity,
The formal word precise but not pedantic,
The complete consort dancing together)
Every phrase and every sentence is an end and a beginning,
Every poem an epitaph. (CP 221)

The emphasis in this passage is on disparate things--end and beginning, old and new, formal and common--coming together. Such is the balance of its rhetoric,
and the seduction of its rhythms, that we may feel the passage also happily unites form and content. Yet as one careful critic has pointed out, the lines do not seamlessly enact the harmony they imply:

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\ldots \text{it seems odd that Eliot's own statement of this principle should appear in the poem as an interruption, a parenthesis so long it forces the sentence containing it to begin again. If good writing is that in which every word is "at home, / Taking its place to support the others," what kind of writing is this, which clearly lacks a proper place in the sentence that includes it? This inconsistency suggests the survival of contradiction even in the passage that announces its resolution. (North 120)}
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In contrast to those who have read this passage as a "triumphant conclusion," Michael North submits that this inconsistency may amount, "however dimly," to "an admission of failure, because the opposites survive no matter how carefully Eliot balances them out" (120). In their extremity, both readings miss the point. This passage is neither a conclusion of triumph nor of failure; nor is it a middle way.

What this passage from LG illustrates is how meaning may manifest itself in the centre of something which already exists as complete. The present has its own form, and must be accepted as a whole experience, just as the major sentence of the passage is complete and "right" on its own, without the information in the parentheses. But the material in the parentheses changes our perception of the sentence, giving it depth, perspicuity, and greater meaning, just as the Incarnation (Eliot argues) gives meaning to human life. Such "interruptions" reshape our concept of the end, be it the end of the sentence or the end of life.

To grasp the significance of this passage from LG, we must read it as we do interrogative. We must appreciate its formal completion and present intellectual
satisfactions while simultaneously recognizing its desire to import meaning and
wholeness from beyond itself (a "beyond" here which ironically is located elsewhere
within). This is a mode of reading that other aspects of FQ--notably its form(s) and
imagery--also encourage us to employ. But its great flexibility, its instructive local
usages in the poem, and its specifically rhetorical nature, make the question one of
the most effective aids at our disposal in reading the complexity of what is "here" in
FQ.

Eliot's questions, both at the beginning and at the end of his work, signal
complexity. The nature of this complexity changes, but the poet's commitment to
acknowledging and dramatizing it, to realizing it, does not. To follow the changes in
Eliot's interrogative complexity is to gain more than richer readings of his poems: for
the complexity that Eliot's questions highlight and encode requires an analogous
complexity in our own questions: about Eliot's career, about poetic interrogative,
about Modernist poetry, and about forms of critical approach. While attending to
Eliot's poetic questions primarily enhances our ability to read absence in his poems,
finally, in FQ, it assists us to read presence as well. This latter capacity proves an
especially useful tool in studying his very different contemporary, Wallace Stevens, a
poet who uses interrogative not only to point to the "here" in his poems, but indeed,
to help him create it.
CHAPTER III

QUESTIONING PRESENTS:
STEVEN S'S INTERROGATIVE THRESHOLDS

I.

A look at any one of Yeats's volumes, and certainly at his work as a whole, makes it easy to see that he is central to a study of Modernist poetic questioning. Similarly, even a cursory acquaintance with Eliot's work enables one to recall key questions in his poetry\(^1\), and his presence in a study of questions and questioning seems easily justified. But Stevens? Aside from his general stature, and the intriguing contrasts between his work and that of Yeats and Eliot, his inclusion in a study of poetic questioning does not seem as obvious a choice. We don't usually think of Stevens as an interrogative poet; no counterparts in his work to "How can we know the dancer from the dance?" or "After such knowledge, what forgiveness?" spring immediately to mind.

In fact, Stevens can convincingly be figured as a poet of answer.\(^2\) His prose

\(^1\) It is uncanny that, if they retain nothing else, nearly all survivors of undergraduate survey courses seem to remember "Do I dare to eat a peach?".

\(^2\) It is interesting, for example, how many articles in a very fine recent book on teaching Stevens suggest that we look to Stevens himself for answers to questions about how best to teach his poetry: "'Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird' is a poem that works by teaching us what questions to ask of it" (Serio and Leggett 26), Lauren Rusk's article opens; similarly, Eleanor Cook begins "Suppose we reverse things. Instead of asking how we can teach the work of Wallace Stevens, suppose we ask how he can teach us" (Serio and Leggett 41).
suggests this: many of the essays in The Necessary Angel address poetry and poetics in a manner which suggests they are encompassing, systematic responses to questions about the genesis and function of poetry. Partly because of their broad range and philosophical bent, these essays have been read as insights and explanations, as answers, in a way that "specific" or "occasional" essays such as Eliot’s "The Metaphysical Poets" or Yeats’s "A General Introduction for My Work," usually mined for individual critical nuggets, have not. In a completely different style, Stevens’s Adagia draws on the succinctness and authority of aphorism to become almost a specimen of wisdom literature; and, as many do with other proverbial texts (such as the Bible), eager readers, ignoring Adagia’s inconsistencies, have frequently isolated parts of it to "prove" their readings of the poems.

This sense of definitiveness, of answer and answering, may also be noted in the poetry, one of the primary aims of which is, in Stevens’s words, "plainly to propound" (CP 389).3 The personae in Stevens’s poems are strong figures who make frequent use of imperative, announcement, and pronouncement. Many, such as the bantam of "Bantams in Pine-Woods," the speaker to the ephebe in Notes toward a Supreme Fiction, or the respondent to the girl’s questions in "Sunday Morning," very clearly answer and advise. The mere names or titles of other characters--Canon Aspirin, Professor Eucalyptus--signal their traditional positions as possessors of answers. This authority of voice is echoed in the tone of some poems (e.g., "Tea at

3 All citations to "CP" in this chapter refer to The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens.
the Palaz of Hoon") and in the diction of several poems as well ("It comes to this" [OP 28]; "What he has he has" [CP 426]; "That's it" [CP 443]).

Certain internal structures of the poetry also contribute to this sense of an answer being reached. The syllogistic structure of such poems as "A High-Toned Old Christian Woman" and "Connoisseur of Chaos," for example, creates an impression of a definitive argument being put forward. Also, Beverly Coyle has written compellingly on the "centripetal force" of aphorism in Stevens's poetry, demonstrating how it functions as "a statement... whose formal and thematic elements together create in the reader a sense that what is expressed is both final and stable" (3).

Yet, a case can be made for Stevens as an interrogative poet, based on more than the ubiquitous perceptions of his ambiguity or the puzzling qualities of his verse. Helen Vendler has noted the "mood of questioning in Stevens" ("Qualified Assertions" 167), and George Bornstein has observed the complex gestures of interrogative in Stevens's syntax (Transformations 207, 227). Both Eleanor Cook and Nathalie Cooke have recognized the structural and hermeneutic importance of questioning in Stevens's poems, that is, the need to ask the right questions of the poems before they will yield their most fruitful answers:

Among the many riddling poems Wallace Stevens has given us are some that are riddles structurally. That is, they cannot be read with much beyond pleasurable puzzlement until we have found the questions for which the poem provides answers. (Cook, "Riddles" 227)

But Stevens is also a questioning poet in a more literal way. As Vendler remarks, "[t]here are enough questions at crucial points throughout Stevens's work to
make us see the question as one of the natural forms into which his mind casts its observations" ("Qualified Assertions" 167). The questions in Stevens are essential rhetorical counterparts to the aphoristic tendencies so ably elucidated by Coyle. In contrast to Coyle's notion of the "lack of connectives" and the "absence of modifiers, qualifying phrases, and subordinate clauses" in aphorisms which help to create their authoritative "boundary effects" in his poetry (7-8), Stevens's questions connect, qualify, suggest, and expand. They work centrifugally to foster a sense of choice, "not a choice // Between, but of" (CP 403).

Stevens's questions do not represent wide variety nor lend themselves to easy taxonomy; they are not summary, nor is their primary point to poise exquisite paradoxes, as do those of Yeats. Stevens's questions do not display sharp, frequent shifts from poem to poem; they do not emphasize avoidance, or an essential "beyond," as do those of Eliot. Instead, Stevens's questions offer a series of alternatives, spinning off possibilities that in their quantity, fullness, and detail very nearly move out of the interrogative and into lusty declaration. Rather than paradox or absence, Stevens's questions call forth presence. They function rhetorically as places from which to survey a number of directions, images, identities, or ideas, which in turn take on a sheen of reality so compelling as almost to mask the interrogative form itself. If the chestnut tree may serve as the symbol of Yeats's questioning, and the sibyl as that of Eliot's, the appropriate symbol for Stevens's interrogative practices is the threshold. At these thresholds we stand on a form constructed of what we know, and behold a vivid range of possibilities. Stevens, like
his Santayana, is also "an inquisitor of structures," and questions are the favoured rhetorical thresholds at which he stops.

As if the design of all his words takes form  
And frame from thinking and is realized.  

| (CP 511) |

II.

While the style and structure of Stevens's questions do not change radically throughout his career, the range of subjects they encompass, the possibilities they present, and the responses they incur do shift significantly. The most interesting shifts occur in Stevens's later poems, and examples from The Auroras of Autumn and after will be the primary focus here. However, it is useful to note some of the tendencies of Stevens's poetic questioning prior to this period, so as to appreciate his later adherence to and departures from general patterns.

The poems in the earlier volumes establish certain patterns of questioning which persist in Stevens's poetry. Stevens's questions, in general, are relatively lengthy. They are filled with copious, striking description, and detailed qualifications or alternatives. Consider the close of "The Man on the Dump":

One sits and beats an old tin can, lard pail.  
One beats and beats for that which one believes.  
That's what one wants to get near. Could it after all  
Be merely oneself, as superior as the ear  
To a crow's voice? Did the nightingale torture the ear,  
Pack the heart and scratch the mind? And does the ear

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4 Although Stevens's questions tend to shorten in the later work, especially in The Rock, even there one finds lengthy examples, such as the questions in "Prologues to What is Possible" and "Long and Sluggish Lines."
Solace itself in peevish birds? Is it peace, Is it a philosopher's honeymoon, one finds On the dump? Is it to sit among mattresses of the dead, Bottles, pots, shoes and grass and murmur aptest eve: Is it to hear the blatter of grackles and say Invisible priest: is it to eject, to pull The day to pieces and cry stanza my stone? Where was it one first heard of the truth? The the. (CP 203)

This passage demonstrates several ways in which Stevens uses questions to create presence so palpable that it is easy to forget its root in the conditional of interrogative. He does this at the level of image, piling up concrete images such as "bottles, pots, shoes and grass." He does it sensuously, weaving sights, tactile actions and textures, and especially sounds, into a vivid and realistic pattern. He does it at the level of syntax, moving from "could" and "did" to the present "does" and "is." He does it at the level of argument, taking as fact in a subsequent question that which is only provisionally set forth in a previous one: "Did the nightingale torture the ear / . . . And does the ear / Solace itself in peevish birds?" Indeed, even his choice of article contributes: the questions in the passage above contain thirteen "the"'s. As Dillon points out, the use of the definite article is a well-known technique for creating "reality" through questioning:

[T]he wording of the question can influence people. . . to give, truly, answers about non-existent things. . . . The classic case, and the simplest, is for the questioner to denote by 'the' instead of 'an' an object that was not present in the observed scene. Where there was no X, more people will say 'yes' to 'Did you see the X?' than will say 'no' to 'Did you see an X'? . . . In general, respondents find it easier—even more desirable—to go along with the question as posed rather than to dispute it and complicate the exchange. . . . Once having been so agreeably incorrect in their answer, respondents base their answers to subsequent questions upon the truth of the false presupposition that
they had affirmed in their previous answer. In that way their ‘eyewitness’ testimony can build fiction upon fiction, without either the questioner or the answerer recognizing it as fiction. (138)

Stevens undoubtedly does recognize the fictions which are created in this way: it is, in fact, one of his primary points, as the final remark of the poem--"The the"--underscores. Yet Stevens's obvious recognition of its fictive power does not prevent this technique from working effectively for him. His use of "the," and the other techniques he skillfully employs in these questions, do render a vibrant sense of reality which nearly eclipses the interrogative context. What happens here to both reader and speaker is an experience Bornstein later notices in Notes towards a Supreme Fiction (NSF): "[he] has become so caught up in the reality of his syntax [and, I would add, other stylistic features] that he generates vision out of its provisional components" (Transformations 227).


Furthermore, these questions habitually come in threes, as in "Of Heaven
Considered as a Tomb":

What word have you, interpreters, of men
Who in the tomb of heaven walk by night,
The darkened ghosts of our old comedy?
Do they believe they range the gusty cold,
With lanterns borne aloft to light the way,
Freemen of death, about and still about
To find whatever it is they seek? Or does
That burial, pillared up each day as porte
And spiritous passage into nothingness.
Foretell each night the one abysmal night.
When the host shall no more wander, nor the light
Of the steadfast lanterns creep across the dark?   (CP 56)

Sometimes the trio of questions is separated by a line or comment, as in "Evening Without Angels" or "In a Bad Time." but more often the questions occur together. It is notable that this pattern of three is repeated in other important aspects of Stevens's writing—he is partial to the tercet stanza, for example, and his criteria for the supreme fiction are threefold. Tripleness appears to be a structure critical to his thinking. It is not the Hegelian trio of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis; not the tripartite pattern of syllogism; nor is it any sort of religious triad. His tripleness reaches not toward balance or unity or resolution, but exploration. It may be closer, at least in his questions, to the action he describes in "Credences of Summer":

Three times the concentrated self takes hold, three
times
The thrice concentrated self, having possessed

The object, grips it in savage scrutiny,
Once to make captive, once to subjugate
Or yield to subjugation, once to proclaim
The meaning of the capture, this hard prize,
Fully made, fully apparent, fully found.   (CP 376)

Tripleness in Stevens's questions may help him "take hold," "grip" things and
scrutinize them. In their length, diction, syntax, and other strategies, his questions do attempt to make their contents appear "fully made, fully apparent, fully found."

These hard prizes cannot, however, escape their roots in the interrogative any more than Stevens's credences can remain in summer. Perhaps inevitably, this pattern of triple questioning reaches a sort of crescendo in canto VII of "The Auroras of Autumn," where it finds "what must unmake it and, at last, what can" (CP 418): it occurs there for the last time. After this poem, questions tend more frequently to appear singly, perhaps because the later poems are less concerned with "proclaim[ing] / The meaning of the capture," and more concerned with interrogating, and experiencing, the object itself.

Two earlier poems which employ triple questioning point the way toward this change in Stevens's later work. "Tea at the Palaz of Hoon," from Harmonium, is a blatant example of Stevens's tripartite questioning in its "proclaim[ing]" mode.

Not less because in purple I descended
The western day through what you called
The loneliest air, not less was I myself.

What was the ointment sprinkled on my beard?
What were the hymns that buzzed beside my ears?
What was the sea whose tide swept through me there?

Out of my mind the golden ointment rained,
And my ears made the blowing hymns they heard.
I was myself the compass of that sea:

I was the world in which I walked, and what I saw
Or heard or felt came not but from myself,
And there I found myself more truly and more strange.

(CP 65)

The questions, like all else in the poem and the world of the poem, point only to the
unendingly "concentred self" (CP 376), the inescapable "I." The questions here differentiate objects only to make the world evoked easier to grasp, more real. They have one simple, equation-like syntax; they share one tense; they are filled with vivid, sensuous imagery. Yet this more richly realized world immediately unites again in the self: each question closes with some form of the "I" ("my beard," "my ears," "me"). Objects serve--in fact, become identical with--subject. The questions here do confer, if temporarily, reality on objects; ultimately, however, as they must in such a poem, the questions aggrandize the subject which contains them.

In "The Pure Good of Theory," from *Transport to Summer*, things are different. By 1945, the tripartite questioner is not the source and compass of the sea: he merely lies "in bed on the west wall of the sea" (CP 331). His questions do not strengthen but sicken him: he is "[i]ll of a question like a malady, / Ill of a constant question in his thought, / Unhappy about the sense of happiness" (CP 331):

Was it that--a sense and beyond intelligence?
Could the future rest on a sense and be beyond
Intelligence? On what does the present rest? (CP 331)

Again, there are three questions, and they function in ways characteristic of Stevens's questions, i.e., they are aids in "grip[ping]" a concept, and each question assumes as given the presuppositions of those preceding it. But the focus of the questions is changing. The solipsism and assurance of Hoon is gone; these are the questions of "a soul in the world" (CP 331). They are questions about an elusive, possibly centrifugal or plural, subject, "beyond intelligence." Their varied syntax, and evocation of more than one time ("future," "present"), reflect more complicated
relations between subject(s) and object(s), speaker and "sense." These questions do not go as far as Stevens’s last questions will: they do not yet focus fully on the material object itself. But they do instigate a questioning of the world outside of the mind which the later poems will pursue and intensify.

In his later poems, Stevens concentrates his multiple interrogatives more and more into single questions. A pattern of single questioning is manifest in his earlier poetry, too, but it is different from that found in the later work. Single questions occur less frequently in the earlier Stevens than the multiple question pattern does, but they do make periodic appearances, especially in longer poems. Commonly in this pattern, a poem or stanza will present a single question--usually beginning with "or"--which is a direct reversal of what has just been stated. "Le Monocle of Mon Oncle" employs this technique in its opening stanza: "And so I mocked her in magnificent measure. / Or was it that I mocked myself alone?" (CP 13). The most significant use of this technique occurs in "Credences of Summer," where the whole poem pivots upon the reversal of the question at its centre: "One day enriches a year. . . . / . . . / Or do the other days enrich the one?" (CP 374). The single question which reverses things, however, like the accumulation of questions in threes, is not employed again in this way after Transport to Summer.⁵

While these patterns of questioning appear in all of the first five volumes, there are interesting differences between these earlier books, too. Parts of a World,

⁵ "The World as Meditation" does use an interrogative technique which resembles this, but to very different ends, as is discussed below.
for example, contains many more questions about human experience than do the
others: "What is it that my feeling seeks?" asks the speaker of "Country Words" (CP
207). While this question expresses the major interrogative impetus of Parts of a
World, its emphasis on the singular is atypical. There are more personal pronouns in
the questions from this volume than are present in the others, and the majority of
these are collective pronouns.

Do they touch the thing they see,
Feel the wind of it, smell the dust of it? (CP 225)

. . . Who, then, are they, seated here?
Is the table a mirror in which they sit and look?
Are they men eating reflections of themselves? (CP 228)

But would it be amen, in choirs, if once
In total war we died and after death
Returned, unable to die again, fated
To endure thereafter every mortal wound,
Beyond a second death, as evil's end?

. . . .

How can
We chant if we live in evil and afterward
Lie harshly buried there? (CP 258-59)

The final poem of Parts of a World asks, "Can we live on dry descriptions. / Feel everything starving except the belly / And nourish ourselves on crumbs of
whimsy?" (CP 278). While the answer called for in context is clearly negative, it is
interesting that much of the following volume, Transport to Summer, is devoted to
"description" (though it is far from "dry") and "whimsy" (which is worked out with
care and at length). The questions of Transport to Summer reflect this: they are less
seeking and more showing. Often they are catalysts for description, as the opening of
"Two Tales of Liadoff" shows:

Do you remember how the rocket went on
And on, at night, exploding finally
In an ovation of resplendent forms--

Ovation on ovation of large blue men
In pantaloons of fire and of women hatched,
Like molten citizens of the vacuum?

Do you remember the children there like wicks,
That constantly sparkled in their small gold? (CP 346)

In addition, questions in Transport to Summer are frequently used to develop argument ("whimsy"), rather than to serve as means of finding out how to live, what to do, as do the questions of Parts of a World. Shorter poems, such as "Paisant Chronicle" (CP 334), may illustrate this tendency, but it is particularly evident in the long poems of the volume. The eighth canto of "It Must Give Pleasure" from NSF provides a clear example:

What am I to believe? If the angel in his cloud,
Serenely gazing at the violent abyss,
Plucks on his strings to pluck abysmal glory,

Leaps downward through evening's revelations, and
On his spredden wings, needs nothing but deep space,
Forgets the gold centre, the golden destiny,

Grows warm in the motionless motion of his flight,
Am I that imagine this angel less satisfied?
Are the wings his, the lapis-haunted air?

Is it he or is it I that experience this?
Is it I then that keep saying there is an hour
Filled with expressible bliss, in which I have

No need, am happy, forget need's golden hand,
Am satisfied without solacing majesty,
And if there is an hour there is a day,

There is a month, a year, there is a time
In which majesty is a mirror of the self:
I have not but I am and as I am, I am.

These external regions, what do we fill them with
Except reflections, the escapades of death,
Cinderella fulfilling herself beneath the roof? (CP 404-5)

So intently do these questions pursue their line of reasoning that the question mark itself is lost by the end of the penultimate stanza, the close of what should be the fourth question. Whether they concentrate on a central question, as does "Credences of Summer," or use a variety of questions and questioning techniques, as does NSF, questions in *Transport to Summer* tend mainly to paint the scene, and to put forward and focus ideas.

The questions in *Harmonium* differ more from the rest of Stevens's poetic questioning than do those of any other volume. The short poem ending *Harmonium* points to two of the most important issues at stake in these interrogative distinctions:

**To the Roaring Wind**

What syllable are you seeking,
Vocalissimus,
In the distances of sleep?
Speak it. (CP 113)

Questions in this volume generally identify rather than search for identity; and they demand speech in response.

Many of the questions in *Harmonium* name the entity—often only figuratively but still specifically—to whom they are addressed:

Timeless mother,
How is it that your aspic nipples
For once vent honey? (CP 4)

To what good, in the alleys of the lilacs,
O caliper, do you scratch your buttocks
And tell the divine ingenue, your companion,
That this bloom is the bloom of soap
And this fragrance the fragrance of vegetal? (CP 48)

What of the night
That lights and dims the stars?
Do you know, Hans Christian,
Now that you see the night? (CP 110)

They suggest some sort of dialogue; indeed, many of the poems are dialogues, or posit a situation of dialogue. The questions often hint at a speaker who knows more than the entity being questioned. The questions may be obviously constructed to demonstrate the knowledge of the speaker, as in stanza VI of "Sunday Morning"; they may be ironic and (in one sense of this slippery term) rhetorical, as in the second example given above; or they may be knowing, like those of Socrates in the Platonic dialogues or Yahweh in the Book of Job, as are those in "Sonatina to Hans Christian Anderson" (the third example quoted above). A common sign of these speakers' knowledge or power or intimacy, however, is their naming of those they interrogate. This pattern persists beyond Harmonium—a question is put specifically to Ramon Fernandez in "The Idea of Order at Key West" (CP 128), to cite another notorious example—but, generally speaking, important shifts in terms of identity and questioning occur in the later Stevens.

Initially in Stevens's work, a usually unidentified but authoritative questioner interrogates a specifically identified respondent; this is the situation frequently found
in Harmonium (e.g., "To the Roaring Wind"). Subsequently in Stevens's work there is a shift to the more subjective question--the question, in various forms, of "A Dish of Peaches in Russia": "Who speaks?" (CP 224). It is a questioning of the asking "I" (or, as Parts of the World would have it, "we"), an inquiry into the experience of the speaker. Moreover, while not always identified specifically, this speaker is increasingly contextualized, located concretely in the world. Again, "A Dish of Peaches in Russia" provides illustration:

With my whole body I taste these peaches, I touch them and smell them. Who speaks?

I absorb them as the Angevine Absorbs Anjou. I see them as a lover sees,

As a young lover sees the first buds of spring And as the black Spaniard plays his guitar.

Who speaks? But it must be that I, That animal, that Russian, that exile, for whom

The bells of the chapel pullulate sounds at Heart. (CP 224)

Later in Stevens's work, this questioning moves further outward. While human experience is still important, focus begins to shift toward the way external phenomena affect it, and shape identity. "The Auroras of Autumn" is an important point in this shift outward: the nadir of individual identity feared at the end of canto VI coincides with the zenith of questioning about the external form of the auroras at the beginning of canto VII. Similarly, the questions in "In a Bad Time" now highlight not "he" so much as "what he has":

What has he? What he has he has. But what?
It is not a question of captious repartee.
What has he that becomes his heart's strong core? (CP 426)

Finally, Stevens's questioning moves beyond identity to identification. Its focus shifts from "whom" to "what," as the contrast of questions in "Questions are Remarks" (discussed below) outlines. Questions begin to investigate the nature of the external object; they reflect the desire to identify, to distinguish one thing from others. They attempt to get back to an original "plain sense of things" (CP 502), as the concrete images in the question at the heart of "Long and Sluggish Lines" suggests:

    Could it be that yellow patch, the side
    Of a house, that makes one think the house is laughing;

    Or these--escent--issant pre-personae: first fly,
    A comic infanta among the tragic drappings.

    Babyishness of forsythia, a snatch of belief.
    The spook and makings of the nude magnolia?  (CP 522)

At the end, Stevens is no longer asking "the question of the image's truth" (OP 141). His questions at this point seek to disclose "Not Ideas About the Thing," as he entitles the last of his Collected Poems, "But the Thing Itself" (CP 534).

    With this move away from identity to identification as the focus of questioning, there comes a second, related move away from the demand for speech to simple, moving, often sad attempts merely to interpret sounds. In the earlier work, there are an inordinate number of verbs, adjectives, and imperatives related to speech, words such as "say," "tell," "speak," "murmur," "mock," "sing." In Harmonium,
questions and questioners demand, and usually receive, response. The "[t]imeless mother" of "In the Carolinas" replies immediately and directly to the question put to her: "The pine-tree sweetens my body / The white iris beautifies me" (CP 5). In "Last Looks at the Lilacs" (quoted above), the questioner continues in the third stanza. "Poor buffo! Look at the lavender / . . . / And say..." (CP 49). In "Of Heaven Considered as a Tomb," the interpreters are enjoined to "Make hue among the dark comedians, / Halloo them... / For answer..." (CP 56). Hoon, fittingly, answers his own questions (CP 65); the woman in "Sunday Morning" hears, in the final stanza, "A voice that cries" (CP 70) a definitive answer to her queries; there is a response, in an italicized French, to all the questions in "Sea Surface Full of Clouds" (CP 98). The final command following the question to the roaring wind is bluntest of all: "Speak it" (CP 113).

By the end of Stevens's career, this wind pointedly will not speak it. To "speak it" becomes, as "The Course of a Particular" puts it, "an exertion that declines"; the wind now is merely the vehicle for "the cry of leaves that do not transcend themselves," a cry not only impossible to ascribe meaning to, but which finally "concerns no one at all" (OP 123-4). By the time of "Not Ideas About the Thing But the Thing Itself," the effort becomes simply to hear truly the "scrawny cry," which seems at first merely "a sound in his mind" (CP 534). More hopefully, wind and bird and cry combine in "Of Mere Being," where a breeze "moves slowly

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6 Cf. Gerald Bruns' article, "Stevens without Epistemology," in which he argues that "people in Stevens' poetry never answer back" (Gelpi 26).
in the branches" in which the gold-feathered bird sings. Yet, far from being Yeats's golden bird which sings the essentially human story of "what is past, or passing, or to come." this bird's song is "a foreign song." "without human meaning. / Without human feeling" (OP 141). Far from it being demanded of them, in the last poetry there seems a clear assumption that neither bird, wind, nor any other thing will . . . speak words that in the ear,
In the delicatest ear of the mind, repeat,
Exactly, that which it wants to hear. . . . (CP 240).

A third significant, and related, difference between the questions in Harmonium and those in the later poetry is that the former tend to discriminate between objects, ideas, opinions, or experiences, while the latter try more directly to apprehend them. What is A to B, asks Harmonium; what is this you think compared to what I see, how does what you say or do relate to this I feel?

And, "Why are you red
In this milky blue?"
I said.
"Why sun-colored,
As if awake
In the midst of sleep?" (CP 58)

Later, the interrogative terms have shifted from two or more to one; the effort is to get at "[t]he plain sense of things." Questions are less about relation than comprehension: "This day writhes with what?" (CP 429); "But was it Ulysses?" (CP 521). As we might expect with Stevens, however, comprehension is no more clearly or easily achieved for this narrowing of focus.

Stevens observed that "[a] change of style is a change of subject" (OP 197). Tracing the changes of his interrogative style from Harmonium to the poetry of his
last decade, however, reveals not so much a change of subject for Stevens as a change—more accurately, changes—of perspective. One of Stevens’s most marked shifts in perspective occurs in his great poem of change, "The Auroras of Autumn." Perspective is everything here, yet perspective frequently changes; and his questions, appearing at key points throughout the poem, are "always enlarging the change" (CP 412).

III.

"The Auroras of Autumn" is a threshold poem. Like thresholds, much of its formal foundation rests on what exists, what has come before. Yet a threshold simultaneously serves as a farewell to what has been; it faces the future, it is a brink from which to glimpse what is to come. Though critics have concentrated primarily on its valedictions rather than its visions, "The Auroras of Autumn" (AA) manifests both. The questions in the poem reveal Stevens in the act of "contriving balance" (CP 420) between these things. Formally, the questions emphasize connection to what has been; they imitate—actually culminate in many instances—Stevens’s previously established interrogative structures and patterns. Yet in tone, substance, and point of view, the questions in AA break with what has come before. They destroy earlier ideas, present alternative ones, or serve as presentiments of things to come. This paradoxical functioning of questions in AA makes them a useful rhetorical means of charting some of the changes with which the poem is obsessed.

The initial work of questions in AA is to establish familiar formal spaces in
the text. In creating these formal thresholds, questions in AA employ many of the patterns characteristic of Stevens’s poetic questioning to date. The question at the opening of the poem recalls several of Stevens’s interrogative techniques: the single question reversal, marked by "or"; tripleness; length; the presentation of alternatives:

I.

This is where the serpent lives, the bodiless.
His head is air. Beneath his tip at night
Eyes open and fix on us in every sky.

Or is this another wriggling out of the egg,
Another image at the end of the cave,
Another bodiless for the body’s slough? (CP 411)

The questions of canto V similarly draw on conventions familiar from prior examples of Stevens’s questioning.

We stand in the tumult of a festival.

What festival? This loud, disordered mooch?
These hospitaliers? These brute-like guests?
These musicians dubbing at a tragedy,

A-dub, a-dub, which is made up of this:
That there are no lines to speak? There is no play.
Or, the persons act one merely by being here. (CP 415-6)

Here, in addition to his piling up of questions, we may note Stevens’s vivid use of imagery, particularly auditory imagery; his use of questions as a pretext for authoritative comment; and his emphasis on identity, his description and identification of those present. Again, in the questions of canto IX, through a clever use of syntax, punctuation, repetition, and concrete, sensuous imagery, Stevens prophesies a potential reality so startling that its conditional status in interrogative is nearly
overwhelmed:

Shall we be found hanging in the trees next spring?
Of what disaster is this the imminence:
Bare limbs, bare trees and a wind as sharp as salt? (CP 419)

The effect of the familiar forms of these questions, and indeed the many other characteristic formal properties with which AA is filled⁷, is to provide a place from which, like the man on the beach, we may turn and observe an ever-enlarging change. That this "place" of perspective is a rhetorical strategy rather than a persona deserves attention. Traditionally, the fixed point against which other views are measured in poetry has been the speaker. This concept of the "lyric I"--a single, dramatized speaker whose situation, experiences, and attitudes act as points of reference in a reader's response to a poem--has become almost inextricable from definitions of lyric poetry; indeed, from poetry itself. To cite one influential instance discussed in the Introduction to this thesis, the lyric "I" is the foundation of Bakhtin's designation of poetry as "unitary, monologically sealed-off utterance" (296); it defines poetry over and against his notion of heteroglossic texts like the novel. Reading through this conventional lens, several contemporary critics have declared that Stevens's use of the

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⁷ Bloom has noted that "'The Auroras of Autumn'" is packed with allusion to Stevens' own poetry" (Stevens 254), but what is more interesting is that this great poem of change employs so many characteristic formal aspects of Stevens' work: the tercet stanza; the numbered canto structure; much of the diction ("For these the musicians make insidious tones, / Clawing the sing-song of their instruments" [CP 415]); the syntax ("In flights of eye and ear, the highest eye / And the lowest ear, the deep ear that discerns, / At evening, things that attend it until it hears // The supernatural preludes of its own, / At the moment when the angelic eye defines / Its actors approaching, in company, in their masks" [CP 414]); the punctuation (dashes, ellipses); the predominantly end-stopped lines and stanzas; the predominantly pentameter line.
lyric "I" produces a poetry which is particularly "monologic." Perloff, for instance, applies Bakhtin's distinction between the monologic lyric and dialogic novel more specifically to poetry, citing Stevens's work as a prime example "of what we might call 'straight lyric'" as opposed to "the 'impure' collage poetry of the Pound tradition" (qtd. in Gelpi 61). Bruns similarly contends that Stevens's poetry is essentially monologic: "even the deconstructive Stevens of the late poems," he asserts, "holds fast against dialogue" (qtd. in Gelpi 32).

Stevens's use of the lyric "I," however, particularly in his longer poems, is not nearly so simple nor so pervasive as these critics assume. Consideration of Stevens's rhetorical strategies--specifically, I am arguing, his interrogative strategies--makes this clear. AA is the preeminent example: its grand scope; its intellectual, symbolic, scenic, and semantic shifts; and its overarching theme of change, all necessitate some point(s) of reference to ensure even minimal accessibility and intelligibility. It would appear to be a poem most requiring the lyric "I." Yet as David Walker points out in his reading of canto II of the poem (a reading he contrasts specifically to Perloff's), "viewed in terms of its rhetorical strategy, the poem takes on a different cast: there is no 'I' in the section, no dramatized character at the beginning of the section at all. simply a sequence of starkly objectified perceptions" (182):

The rhetoric seems even deliberately to evade contact with a specific persona ("Reminding, trying to remind of a white. . . " [CP 412]), and the result. . . is to establish a complex interaction between the narrative and the reader's imagination, which encounters the drift of abstract and concrete sensations, memory and speculation, without the benefit of a mediating consciousness. . . . To reduce this epistemological uncertainty to a thematic interpretation, to argue that because the poem's images can be read as symbolic, "the landscape of 'The
Auroras of Autumn' is thus the externalization of the poet's psyche". . . is to miss much of the uncertainty and instability that Perloff values so highly in other poets. (Walker 183)

In AA, Stevens eschews the lyric "I," preferring to construct the necessary "shelter[s] of the mind" (CP 413) from the recognizable forms of his past poetry, including his poetic questions. The questions of AA may in fact be the chief rhetorical means Stevens employs to involve readers in this complicated text, and to assist them in making sense of the poem's important and dramatic shifts. Proof of this may be that Stevens figures the climax of the poem and its changes (in canto VII) in interrogative terms. Stevens's consistent use of questions in AA--questions which pointedly recall his most characteristic interrogative practices--make it all the more striking when these forms, too, prove tenuous and provisional. Like the beach, the house, the festival, the room, and all other significant structures in the poem, questions too are "dissolved" (CP 413).

When the trade edition of Ideas of Order was published, Stevens revised its order of works to begin the book with a farewell. "Farewell to Florida," like AA, was a threshold poem. It, too, vividly evoked that which it was leaving; it too "made a refrain / Of this: that the snake has shed its skin upon / The floor" (CP 117). "Farewell to Florida" bid adieu to the lush world of Harmonium. Similarly,

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8 Walker is quoting here from Perloff's The Poetics of Indeterminacy (22); his argument contends specifically with her reading of canto II as set forward on pages 18-23 of that text.
"The Auroras of Autumn" says goodbye to ideas of order.9  "Farewell to an idea . . .", begin three of the first four cantos, and the valediction to various, often cherished, concepts carries on throughout the poem. Though they are formally connected to the past, and serve in part as relatively stable vantage points, the questions in AA also participate crucially in its farewells and "extinguishings."

The opening question is a good example. As noted above, this question is built on many of the formal structures found in Stevens's earlier interrogatives. However, it also occurs—as does every other instance of questioning in AA—at a formal threshold in the poem.10 Questions are thresholds of form in two senses. They are constructed of familiar forms, and at the same time mark the limits of those forms. In this case, the question overtly interrogates the limits of forms.

First, the question pointedly questions the form of beginnings, both beginnings figured by "another wriggling out of the egg," and the beginning of AA itself. The structure of the question underscores this, through its use of the pronoun "this."

"This" begins each attempt at a beginning or progression of argument designated in the canto: "This is where the serpent lives" (ln. 1); "This is where the serpent lives. This is his nest" (ln. 7); "This is form gulping after formlessness" (ln. 10); "This is the height emerging" (ln. 13); "This is his poison" (ln. 19). By immediately

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9 Charles Berger notes similar connections, in slightly more detail, in his discussion of AA in *Forms of Farewell* (45 ff.).

10 All questioning in AA occurs at the beginning or end of a canto; when questions occur at the end of a canto, they also generally contain the end of an elaborate apostrophe or image.
interrogating the poem’s initial assertion in its own terms—"Or is this . . .?" (ln. 4)—the question draws attention to the ambiguous referent of the "this" in the first line. It also sets a precedent for our questioning of all the subsequent assertions which start with "this." assertions that the repetition and specificity of the pronoun may encourage us to take as authoritative, when in fact it is difficult to say with precision what "this" is in any one instance. (The ambiguity remains even when we are "told" what "this" is: "This is his poison: that we should disbelieve / Even that." [CP 411]).

In this same way, the opening interrogative is meant to make us question not only our first idea of this poem, but the whole concept of a "First Idea" so recently central to Stevens’s poetic. The challenge to this concept continues throughout the canto and the poem, most evocatively in the strong second canto. In addition, the first image of the question complements its structural tactics by suggesting the "wriggling out" of old intellectual and physical forms that comprises one of the primary movements of the poem.

The second image of the question, an "image at the end of the cave," surely alludes to the Platonic Forms. Thus within two lines, this interrogative is able to call the idea of forms as well as the form of ideas into question. The second image extends the questioning of forms to include historic and philosophic as well as physical and intellectual ones: not only the real, but the ideal too is open to question.

Finally, the question offers the image of "[a]nother bodiless for the body's slough." This is a particularly rich and hardworking image. It furthers the serpent
image with which the poem begins, hinting at the transformations it will undergo, from bodiless sky serpent to earthy "flecked animal" in this canto alone. It recalls previous serpents in Stevens, such as that of "Farewell to Florida," but also resonantly those from "Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery" (XII), "The Bagatelles the Madrigals," and "The Greenest Continent" (IV). Most importantly, this image extends the range of concepts questioned to include the idea of formlessness itself. The paradoxical relation of "bodiless" and "body," and the purpose behind the inevitable "slough"-ing from one to the other, is at the heart of AA.

What is the effect of this questioning of form, formlessness and ideas about them both? The question does in one sense undo the beginning of the poem; it does say farewell to the stability of forms and ideas out of which it is built. Yet, as canto IV recognizes, "the cancellings, / The negations are never final" (CP 414). What follows this encompassing and transforming initial question is another start. The poem begins again, quite literally: "This is where the serpent lives," it ventures a second time, though both home and nature of serpent and nest have shifted, and will shift again. Like this serpent and its nest, the issues and patterns of change suggested in the economical opening question of AA will also recur; the remaking here must in turn cede to the crucial power of unmaking in the passage most commentators see as the crux of the poem, the complex questions and answers of canto VII.

Canto VI closes with one of the clearest and most affecting images of the

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11 I am indebted to Bloom (Stevens 255) for this connection.
threshold in Stevens:

He opens the door of his house

On flames. The scholar of one candle sees
An Arctic effulgence flaring on the frame
Of everything he is. And he feels afraid. (CP 416-7)

This momentous emotional threshold is also a formal one, the end of the canto.

Crossing this threshold, with its overtones of awe and annihilation, means facing the central questions of the poem:

VII

Is there an imagination that sits enthroned
As grim as it is benevolent, the just
And the unjust, which in the midst of summer stops

To imagine winter? When the leaves are dead,
Does it take its place in the north and enfold itself,
Goat-leaper, crystallized and luminous, sitting

In highest night? And do these heavens adorn
And proclaim it, the white creator of black, jetted
By extinguishings, even of planets as may be,

Even of earth, even of sight, in snow,
Except as needed by way of majesty,
In the sky, as crown and diamond cabala? (CP 417)

It is hard to imagine that, on such a critical threshold, one would pose rhetorical questions; yet this is how these questions have been treated and described by several critics.12 The structure of the questions themselves, however, may

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12 Bloom: "The first half of canto VII consists of three rhetorical questions, all of which imply an unhappily positive answer" (Stevens 272); Berger: "The series of assertions that mark the sixth canto give way to the rhetorical questions of canto VII. . ." (61). Eleanor Cook ("Bible") is one of the very few commentators who have carefully examined the questions of canto VII; her thoughtful exegesis of them
contribute to this reading. These questions are crafted from some of the most recognizable, and effective, staples of Stevens's poetic questioning. There are three questions. They are relatively lengthy. They present a quantity of ideas and images, and do so vividly. Their complex syntax, and the basing of subsequent questions on the conditional propositions of prior ones, contribute a strong sense of reality to subjects and actions which are actually still suspended in interrogative. As Leggett notes, "[t]his interrogation plants the conception so firmly in the poem that, later in the canto, Stevens shifts from question to statement, dropping the tentative tone for a more assertive voice" (185). Indeed, as he has done elsewhere, Stevens seems subsequently to accept the propositions put forward in his questions as given truths, upon which he bases the explanations and elaborations of the final four tercets of the canto.13

Thus, rather than having answers that are pre-ordained and self-evident, as do conventional rhetorical questions, these questions build up internal evidence for the answers that they desire. They are so effective in this effort that they appear, in retrospect, to be rhetorical questions, when what they evoke, in fact, are rhetorical answers.14 The presumed affirmatives they elicit are products of the questions, not demonstrates that these questions are at least as complex and difficult as the answers they provoke.

13 Bornstein offers several other fine examples of this tendency (e.g., Transformations 207); his discussion of the eighth poem of "It Must Give Pleasure" from NSF (Transformations 226-7) is particularly apt.

14 Cf. Yeats, especially at the close of ASC, where a rhetorical question becomes a real one; here in AA, what seem to be earnest or real questions become by some lights "rhetorical."
answers existing a priori. Structurally, these questions show Stevens in the act of connecting things so convincingly that he makes the conditional deceptively present.

What these questions use their structural connections to present, however, is profound disconnection, even obliteration. Formally, the questions themselves become "the white creator[s] of black," entities that use presence to body forth absence. The images of the questions demonstrate this. They are primarily images of alienation, remoteness, "extinguishings": dead leaves; snow and snow-blindness; and pre-eminently an imagination "enthroned," a "crystalled" entity that "enfold[s] itself" and sits in "highest night." It is suggested that this imagination is more elevated than we: physically (in its "majesty, / In the sky"); in terms of its moral dispassion (being "As grim as it is benevolent, the just / And the unjust"); and in terms of its imaginative capacity ("in the midst of summer" it "stops" -- as do both the line and the stanza -- "To imagine winter"). This imagination is figured repeatedly as a god, and tellingly even its primary symbol is not metaphorical but metonymic: it is not represented by any sort of resemblance but by isolated parts of its singular self, "crown and diamond cabala." The images insist upon the difference of this entity from us, and ultimately its greater stature and power.

Other aspects of the questions contribute to a sense of disjunction. The sounds of these lines, full of words ending on hard, closed consonants like /t/ and /d/, emphasize the separateness of words and, by extension, of the things they stand for. The many phrases, especially prepositional phrases, all set off by commas rather than connected by conjunctions, repeat the pattern of isolated units. Several exact and near
opposites (e.g. just/unjust, white/black) are evoked in these lines, including three in the opening question alone. Even the biblical allusion frequently noted in the third question is more interesting in its differences from the original than its similarities to it. "the singing heavens, declaring the glory of God" in the source, Psalm 19. "explicitly questioned" here by the heavens adorning Stevens's poem (Cook, "Bible" 247).

These structural ambiguities help the questions here to accentuate the processes of change which are at the core of the canto. Is there an imagination which stops in the midst of summer, the apogee of creation, to imagine its opposite, winter and death? In so asking, the first question not only suggests the concepts of creation and destruction, but in its detail creates the powerful and paradoxical imagination which presides over these changing states.

In autumn, of the poem or of life, does it enfold itself in the north—either a geographic north, if we consider this imagination exterior and transcendent, and associate it with the lights, or a personal/metaphoric north, if we are reading the imagination as human? This "goat-leaper" seems composed of both creators who were destroyed earlier in the poem, the mother and the father: "crystalled" refers perhaps to the "fat girl, terrestrial," the mother earth who revolved in crystal at the end of NSF, and "luminous" recalls the mother of canto III; the father sat high in the heavens in canto IV, similar to the position of the imagination here. The second question sets all sorts of dualities against one another: it outlines an enfolded imagination which yet appears extended and shining; it both leaps and sits; it is of
both mother and father, yet remote. In a time of changing forms, this imagination migrates and changes its own form, a form described highly paradoxically.

The third question extends the paradoxes, often into outright oxymoron. It asks whether these heavens (dark night, or lighted by the auroras?) adorn or proclaim this force, a "white creator" of an imagination (itself a provisional creation) which is "jetted by extinquishings," of planets, earth, even of sight except as needed to ensure its "majesty." Just as the first question emphasized creation, the third emphasizes extinction, a destructive force which nevertheless has its own exceptions. Exceptions are important, for it is by exception that this imagination itself can change. "from destiny to slight caprice": despite its august power, we learn, "it dare not leap by chance in its own dark" (CP 417).

While this enigmatic, leaping imagination dominates and invigorates the canto, the leaping of the questions here is the truly great imaginative feat of the poem. The questions of canto VII are some of Stevens's most privileged questions, his threshold questions, and they operate much as does Heidegger's most privileged question:

... we find out that this privileged question... has its ground in a leap through which man thrusts away all the previous security, whether real or imagined, of his life. The question is asked only in this leap; without it there is no asking... Our questioning is not yet the leap; for this it must undergo a transformation; it still stands perplexed in the face of the essent. Here it may suffice to say that the leap in this questioning opens up its own source--with this leap the question arrives at its own ground. We call such a leap, which opens up its own source, the original source or origin <Ur-sprung>, the finding of one's own ground. (Heidegger 5-6)\(^\text{15}\)

\(^{15}\) The connection between Heidegger and Stevens here is more than fortuitous; while several books and articles on Stevens mention Heidegger, Thomas J. Hines in
Standing on the flaming threshold which obliterates all the "previous security, whether real or imagined, of his life," Stevens takes a leap and asks questions, questions which themselves constitute, and promulgate, great leaps. To classify them as rhetorical questions is not to leap, but to jump, to conclusions. It is not enough simply to furnish rhetorical answers.

Nor is it enough to rest in Stevens's carefully constructed paradoxes, personified powerfully in the image of the auroras. This has been the uneasy position of most critical attempts to interpret the close of this canto, though the paradoxes emphasized differ from critic to critic. Berger, for instance, reads the auroras as "a force in search of a counterforce, tyranny in search of resistance"; "celestial script in search of an earthly echo"; "an epitaph in search of a survivor to behold it" (63). Bloom sees the auroras as "only a kind of commemorative tablet. . . subject. . . to an unmaking by man as the only maker of meaning" (Stevens 276). Vendler declines specifically to characterize the paradox she senses, averring that "[i]t is hard to imagine what might undo the aurora borealis, as the aurora 'undid' summer," and finding the response furnished by the poem "an imposed order, not a discovered one"

his book The Later Poetry of Wallace Stevens has probably gone to the greatest length in tracing important links between the two. Heidegger's theories of Being may be interestingly compared to similar views evoked in Stevens's later work (see Hines, and J. Hillis Miller); and the elevated position Heidegger accords poetry in his later writings, its indispensability and its capacity both to disclose and create truth, echoes Stevens's conceptions of these things outlined in The Necessary Angel. Most salient here, however, is Heidegger's life-long emphasis on the centrality of questioning, both as a means of defining Dasein and of understanding the world. AA may be Stevens's most overt exploration of change, being, and time in an existential context. Like Heidegger, he finds the interrogative vital in understanding and expressing the relations between these things.
These readings, while provocative, do not strike at the heart of Stevens’s response. They leave him where the questions did. In the midst of them he is still standing, sight all but extinguished, "perplexed in the face of the essent."

Leggett, who does an admirable job of summarizing various responses to the canto\textsuperscript{16}, links its close to Focillon’s theory of the Life of Forms, concluding that "Stevens’s cosmic principle is likewise neither happenstance nor necessity, but an originator of transient forms manifest through metamorphosis" (187). Though no interpretation may adequately address this complex, opaque passage, in his emphasis on change Leggett perhaps comes closest to the gist of the response offered here, a response that is action as well as meaning. Stevens recognizes that the imagination "dare not leap by chance in its own dark." So it changes, as it must, "from destiny to slight caprice," and in so doing discovers that its "own source" is change--both destructive and creative change--itself.

And thus its jetted tragedy, its stele

And shape and mournful making move to find
What must unmake it and, at last, what can,
Say, a flippant communication under the moon. (CP 417-8)

Stevens here has not simply crafted questions which help create their own answers; much more significantly, in the "flippant communication" of this canto he has made questions that can unmake themselves. As Heidegger implies, to make the vital leap toward understanding, Stevens’s questioning "must undergo a transformation," and it does. The questions of canto VII are in part a culmination of Stevens’s poetic

\textsuperscript{16} See 184-189 in Wallace Stevens and Poetic Theory.
questioning techniques to date: there are three of them, they employ multiple terms. they are vivid, they are long, they feature convoluted syntax. Yet the passage is simultaneously a farewell: many of these techniques are used here for the last time. The form of his questioning has reached an important limit. Significantly, questioning itself is not destroyed; it persists, with important occurrences, to the end of Stevens's career. But its previous form is here unmade, to be remade in the later work. The signature pattern of triple questioning is abandoned, replaced generally by single questions. Long questions, with complicated syntax, allusion, and vivid description, are replaced in the later poetry by brief, direct queries. In the poetry subsequent to AA, Stevens is not as interested in the evocation of a reality which resists the interrogative almost successfully. With a deeper understanding of the forces of change constantly at work, he foregrounds instead the reality that presents itself, and questions that.

Through the questions in canto VII, Stevens demonstrates that he, and we, are not simply on the threshold of change, but that the threshold is change. This realization changes what Stevens says and how he says it, as his very use of the word "say" in the passage insinuates. In earlier volumes, Harmonium most particularly, when "say" or a similar term followed questions it was used strongly in the imperative, as a command "to utter or pronounce" (OED). "Say" in the final line of canto VII, however, is used "to introduce a clause with the sense 'supposing,' 'on the assumption that'; . . . [it is] prefixed to a designation. . . to mark it as an approximate guess or as representing a hypothetical case" (OED). The most
successful "saying" in later Stevens supposes a context of continual change, in which reality is figured frequently as a matter of "approximate guess."

Canto VII does not represent Stevens's final leap; in fact, in some ways his uncomfortable responses to the realizations he comes to point out how much more leaping he has to do. For instance, in canto VIII he insists on innocence, "an innocence of the earth" (CP 418). Key words are urged three times, as if to charm them into reality:

It is like a thing of ether that exists
Almost as predicate. But it exists,
It exists, it is visible, it is, it is.                    (CP 418)

However, despite his obvious desire, this innocence remains more asserted than proved. The sinister questions of canto IX come back to haunt this idea of innocence, and finally the poem leaves us with the question embedded in the puzzling syntax of its close.

In these unhappy he meditates a whole,
The full of fortune and the full of fate,
As if he lived all lives, that he might know,

In harridan, not hushful paradise,
To a haggling of wind and weather, by these lights

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17 It is unsurprising that his conviction about innocence is not sustained consistently in AA. Stevens is ambivalent about innocence, particularly innocence in autumn; stanza XLIV of "Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery" (a poem with several notable connections to AA) states, "There is no such thing as innocence in autumn, / Yet, it may be, innocence is never lost" (CP 157). Later, "One of the Inhabitants of the West" revisits this theme:

So much guilt lies buried
Beneath the innocence
Of autumn days.  (CP 504)
Like a blaze of summer straw, in winter's nick. (CP 421)

There is rhetorical force in these closing lines, and a strong sense of summary of closure. But other important, conflicting impressions are at work as well, and to overlook them is to miss the direction in which Stevens's autumnal compass ultimately points him. The final lines of AA are laced with what Frank Doggett and Dorothy Emerson characterize as Stevens's "semantic yearning" (53), in which "the reader must surmise import for the symbols and tropes that speak a language that is evasive within a language that progresses in a course that is recognizably readable. He must speculate a direction for the indirection of elliptical disclosures" (65). The unspoken upon which this close urges us to speculate is what the "vital, the never-failing genius" (CP 420) actually knows. We are left searching, grammatically and philosophically, for the object.

The final two-stanza sentence is structured so as to make the verb "know" seem transitive: "that he might know" what? We know where "he" might know: "In hall harriand, not hushful paradise." We know how "he" might know: "To a haggling of wind and weather." We know when "he" might know: "by these lights" suggests autumn, the time of the auroras. What we are unsure of is what this spectre might know. What is the object? What might one know in the midst of this persistent shifting? These fundamental questions are half-buried here in the evocation of continual change that is, perhaps, the most fitting end to Stevens's great poem of autumn. But they will leap into prominence in his subsequent poems, poems which centrally interrogate, given this context of constant transformation, what one can
actually know of any object, of the critical "thing itself."

IV.

Wallace Stevens, what's he done?
He can play the flitter-flad:
He can see the second sun
Spinning through the lordly cloud.

In this opening stanza of his "A Rouse for Stevens," Roethke playfully but rightly reminds of us several important aspects of Stevens: his precocious use of language; his fascination with the sun, the poet's primary symbol of reality; his unique and changing perspective; and his ability, by what he's done, to make us reexamine our definitions of things. While these are abiding concerns for Stevens, he brings a different focus to bear on them in his later poetry, particularly in the poems in which questioning is central. "The Auroras of Autumn" is perhaps Steven's last look at and through "the lordly cloud." The remainder of his poetry takes as its essential project seeing "the plain sense of things" (CP 502). Roethke's term "the second sun" is a fitting one for Stevens's later version of reality, which AA has shown to be coloured by the changing circumstances of time, nature, and imagination. Perhaps a better term is Stevens's own, from "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven": his simple, direct questions in the later poetry get him closer, if not to reality itself, at least to "a new resemblance of the sun" (CP 465).

Stevens's interest in the sun--our relation to it, and its relation to language and imagination--spans his career. The opening canto of NSF, to cite a famous example, exhorts the ephebe to begin "by perceiving. . . [t]he inconceivable idea of the sun":
You must become an ignorant man again
And see the sun again with an ignorant eye
And see it clearly in the idea of it.  (CP 380)

The speaker counsels that we must abandon our images and myths of the sun, the
rhetorical varnish with which we have covered the thing itself. "Let purple Phoebus
lie in umber harvest," he asserts, for

The sun
Must bear no name, gold flourisher, but be
In the difficulty of what it is to be.  (CP 381)

These lines come toward the close of Transport to Summer. By the close of The
Auroras of Autumn, Stevens, while still employing images of the sun and language to
deal with the relationship between imagination and reality, changes his emphasis:

The eye's plain version is a thing apart,
The vulgate of experience. Of this,
A few words, an and yet, and yet, and yet--

As part of the never-ending meditation,
Part of the question that is a giant himself:
Of what is this house composed if not of the sun,

These houses, these difficult objects, dilapidate
Appearances of what appearances,
Words, lines not meaning, not communications,

Dark things without a double, after all,
Unless a second giant kills the first--
A recent imagining of reality,

Much like a new resemblance of the sun. . .  (CP 465)

Stevens's questioning of and "never-ending meditation" on these images and
issues persists; "The World as Meditation" and "Not Ideas About the Thing But the
Thing Itself" are just two examples of later works which deal explicitly with questions
of the sun. Coming between the two important views of the sun contained in NSF and "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," however, is another sun experience, one which points the way toward Stevens's latest considerations and questionings. It is captured in the deceptively simple, poignantly human poem, "Questions Are Remarks."

What makes this poem interesting, in addition to its being an important point in Stevens's oscillations on the relations of reality and language, is its explicit linking of these issues to questions and questioning. Their range of functions as speech acts (of which the title bluntly reminds us) makes questions ideal vehicles for representing the ambiguous relations between knowledge and ignorance, subject and object, and experience and rhetoric, suggested by the poem. But the significance of questions here does not rest solely on their rhetorical flexibility. "Questions Are Remarks" (QAR) is a poem concerned with the ways in which questions represent the threshold of our knowledge, the ways in which we use them to define the world. These issues surround the "what" question central to the first part of the poem: indeed, this is the question which will increasingly claim Stevens's attention in the poetry to come. But what the poem also intriguingly reveals is the ways in which questions in turn define us. Questions not only represent our objective knowledge of the world, they also represent--Lacan would say, fundamentally construct--our subjectivity. This idea surrounds the "who" question governing the latter part of the poem; and this recognition of the double force of questioning lurks behind Stevens's poetic questions to the end.
The title "Questions Are Remarks" immediately involves us with questions and definitions, indeed in questioning definitions. Questions and remarks are generally thought of as discrete syntactical entities. The simple statement of the title makes us review how we define questions exactly, and how we define remarks. It makes us question questions: we wonder what questions essentially are, when and how they get to be remarks, and why. It also makes us remark remarks. Given Stevens proclivity for wordplay, particularly puns, and his knowledge and use of French (which the poem employs in notable ways), surely we are to read in "remark" the connotations of "remarquer": "to observe, to notice; to distinguish" (Dubois et al 230). If questions are remarks in the sense most commonly and initially supposed in English definitions, that is, remarks as statements or comments, they are also very much observations, things seen and noted, as the French more strongly suggests. Much of the poem is about how what we see is related to what we ask, as well as how what we ask is what we say. Observing and questioning together become our remarks, and as such remark on us.

The strange first line of the poem demonstrates the challenges to commonly accepted meanings implied in the title:

In the weed of summer comes this green sprout why. (CP 462)

While several terms in the line have numerous connotations (is weed, for example, plant, or dress here? or both?), it is the little word "why" at the end that produces the most puzzlement. Does it make the line into a question? That is, does the line ask why, in the weed of summer, does the green sprout (and what is it?) come? Or is the
line, as its punctuation (or lack thereof) suggests, a remark? Is "why" a noun, the phrase "green sprout" merely adjectival? If questions are remarks, then remarks are also, or at least certainly generate, questions.

The question "why" embedded in the opening line is an interesting one, for while it is ostensibly dropped as a question, it none the less makes one of the poem's most important points. Alfred Benjamin, in his book The Helping Interview, discusses his aversion to the way the word "why" is used in questioning, which is mainly due to the intimidating but fascinating changes worked on the word as we age.

It is worth quoting at some length:

In their early years children use the word frequently--often to our distraction. For them it is a key to unlock the secrets of the world about them; it enables them to explore and discover. They ask for information without implying moral judgement, approval or disapproval. But they learn. They learn that the adults surrounding them use the word differently -- to put them on the spot, to show them they are behaving in an unacceptable manner. Slowly but surely the children stop using the word for the purpose of inquiry and begin to employ it against others the way it has been used against them. The child's ears ring with the questions: "Why did you muddy my clean floor?" "Why are you barefoot?" "Why don't you use your knife and fork properly?". . . . He learns to imitate his elders. Soon enough he will say to his friend, "Why did you take my bike?" to show that he disapproves of the act and not because he is interested in obtaining a bit of useful information. . . .

At the same time children discover a way to defend themselves against the threatening word. . . . In countries where English is spoken they will answer "because" when asked "why.". . . Such replies are more than a defensive maneuver, however. They indicate that the children are learning to play the game according to adult rules. They have discovered that there is no meaningful reply to the question and that none is, in fact, anticipated.

Later on they learn an additional lesson. . . . When they attempt a reply, either they are not listened to or, even worse, they are punished twice over. So they learn not to reply at all. . . . (78-9)
The "why" in the first line makes the speaker and/or the readers, presumably adults, examine what was considered defined. It reinstitutes "why" as a seeking question. While the meat of the poem is more concerned with the implications of the questions "what" and "who," part of what Stevens may be doing in this first line is reminding us that we must learn to discover freshly, to look behind the rhetoric and "the antique acceptances" and see—and question, and remark—as a child again. The course of the poem illustrates this pattern, by showing us a child seeing the sun in its "first idea." The child’s question about this vision, in turn, enables an old man to see a "second" sun, and to recognize the significance of his own questions.18

Indeed, what a child sees, and says, in contrast to adult perceptions and preoccupations, is the crux of this poem. The opening scene of the poem depicts, complete with alliteration, personification, vivid images, strong verbs, and other rhetorical flourish, a sunrise, which serves only as a backdrop for "adult enfantillages." This wonderful use of the French term serves several purposes in

18 In the sixth of his Farfetched Fables, written when he was 93, George Bernard Shaw also notes (with characteristic irony) the power of "why" when asked in its sincere form by children. In the vignette, his "Teacher" character admonishes the students of the future,

Never ask why. Ask what, when, where, how, who, which; but never why. Only first form children, who think their parents know everything, ask why. In the sixth form you are supposed to know that why is unanswerable. . . . Why is beyond knowledge. All the whys lead to the great interrogation mark that shines for ever across the sky like a rainbow. . . ." (176)

In many ways, The Auroras of Autumn is Stevens’s repeated exploration, in different guises, of this "great interrogation mark. . . [in] the sky."
addition to its literal aptness: not only does it seem rhetorically fancy, in a poem in which fancy rhetoric becomes an issue, but it directly juxtaposes "adult" and child ("enfant")—also key—in a manner impossible in English.

As this juxtaposition hints, there is an exception to the "antique acceptances" of the others watching: the sunrise is seen freshly, "as it is." by the grandson.

Peter the voyant, who says "Mother, what is that" --
The object that rises with so much rhetoric.
But not for him. His question is complete.

It is the question of what he is capable.
It is the extreme, the expert aetat. 2.
He will never ride the red horse she describes.  (CP 462)

The boy, with his simple, direct, unrhetorical question, is closest to the object itself. His vision (Stevens would desire us to see the pun) is unadulterated. Unlike the man in AA, he does not look into the sky and formulate questions of judgement about the astonishing thing he sees there. He asks, in language devoid of fear or favour, simply for identification.

Stevens writes, quite deliberately, that "[i]t is the question of what he is capable." The line may be read to mean that the child asks what he is capable of asking; or that his question also contains a question about his own capabilities. But perhaps its main point is that made by the syntax of the question itself. It is the question "what" that the child is capable of asking. This is the question that sets him apart. And this is the question that exercises Stevens in his last poems. What, exactly, is being seen, heard, felt, sensed, thought? What is being experienced? What is the thing itself? The difficulty of determining what is present, and what it

Interestingly, most commentators who note this line paraphrase it somehow, transposing the "what" into the more familiar "which."

. . . in the poem, Stevens responds by saying that a person's question contains his "utmost statement." It is the verbal expression of the thought of which "he is capable" (1.10). In other words, a question is like a remark because it is the expression of our ability to reason. And, of course, we are finding that the questions we ask of Stevens' poems operate in a similar way. (Cooke 48)

This interpretation, by a generally very adept reader of Stevens's questions, points out the danger in overlooking the poet's intentional phrasing. The question "what" does not emphasize our ability to reason; that is more the purview of the question "why," a question Stevens has already raised and left in abeyance.¹⁹ The question "what" is more primary; it emphasizes simply our ability to wonder, to question. It demonstrates our recognition that there is a world outside of us, and our desire to learn about and identify this other world. While it is true that Stevens's poems and the questions we ask of them do challenge, and highlight, our ability to reason, they also engage our best and widest sense of sheer comprehension. They ask us "what":

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¹⁹ In fairness, just prior to this quotation Cooke discusses the question "why" embedded in the first line; but her misreading of the central question "what" still demonstrates how we miss a basic, and significant, project of Stevens's: to make us wonder at what is in front of us. "The trouble is that poetry is so largely a matter of transformation," Stevens writes in his letters, and this is also frequently the trouble with reading poems. "To describe a cup of tea"—or a question—"without changing it and without concerning oneself with some extreme aspect of it is not at all the easy thing that it seems to be" (Letters 643).
what is a blackbird, a sea-surface, a floral decoration? What, after all, is the sun?

However much the effort is celebrated here, however, the ambivalence of any attempt to grasp the object purely is always present to Stevens. Any answer to the question "what," because it is an answer, will always be rhetorical, and in that sense coloured. We may be struck by the discrepancy between the child's ingenuous question and his mother's rhetorically removed reply (presumably she tells him the story of Apollo, driving his horses and the sun chariot across the sky), and Stevens intends for us to be; but what response could she make that would not to some extent compromise the sun? Despite the assertion of the speaker in canto I of NSF, Phoebus plainly isn't dead. He lives in any language we use to speak of the sun, "gold flourisher." The subjective is inextricably involved in perception of the objective.

Hints of this understanding appear in Stevens's diction. In describing his grandson, Stevens borrows a pregnant term from the French, calling the boy "Peter the voyant." Voyant in French has several meanings. As an adjective, the word means "showy, gaudy, garish, loud, vivid, conspicuous" (Dubois et al 278). In addition to being perhaps an apt description of Peter, the adjective resonates with the description of the boy's question later in the poem: "[i]t is his own array, / His own pageant and procession and display." The term also connects him to the sun itself, its "fire" and prominence. The boy, the object he sees, and his question about it all share the same properties. Subject, object and language are connected, perhaps in

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20 Stevens was evidently fond of this epithet for the boy; see Peter Brazeau's "The Irish Connection: Wallace Stevens and Thomas McGreevy" (539) (I am indebted to Lensing [A Poet's Growth 156] for this information).
part reflecting each other.

"Voyant" is also a masculine noun in French, with several meanings. Its primary definition is "seer, clairvoyant, prophet," but it is also a technical term for "sighting-slit." and can mean "signal" as well (Dubois et al 278). All of these seem to apply, more or less, to Peter and his function in the poem. He is the literal as well as the prophetic seer, the one who sees beyond the clouded adult vision to perceive the sunrise "as it is"; but the irony that it takes a clairvoyant here simply to see the real world, the object "as it is," should not be lost on us.21 The other meanings for voyant illustrate that the subject Peter is also in the poem an object: he is the "sighting-slit" through which the adults in the poem see the sunrise; he is the "signal" to the speaker to re-view, to reconsider his own rhetoric, vision, and questions.22

Peter’s question is complete, the poet tells us, because "it contains / His

21 Cf. "Credences of Summer":

It is

A land too ripe for enigmas, too serene.
There the distant fails the clairvoyant eye

And the secondary senses of the ear
Swarm, not with secondary sounds, but choirs,

Pure rhetoric of a language without words. (CP 374)

22 Stevens's Latin term as well as his French ones draws attention to the inescapable connection between subject and object. The term "aetat." is an abbreviation of the Latin phrase aetatis suae, meaning "of his, her, their age. The term is used to designate the year of a person’s life at which an event occurs, a picture is made, or a work composed" (Holman 7). Peter, "the expert aetat. 2," does not merely witness an event, he also in part makes it, composes it. The warning of "Add This to Rhetoric" still applies: "In the way you speak," even if you are a child, "You arrange, the thing is posed, / What in nature merely grows" (CP 198).
utmost statement" (CP 462). His question is, in fact, a statement, a remark, which
the lack of a question mark and the choice of "says" rather than "asks" underscores.
Furthermore, the doubleness expressed here is not merely grammatical, i.e., not
merely one which allows us to read Peter's expression as both inquiry and
declaration. Reading the boy's question as a remark highlights a second doubleness,
which hinges on the verb "is." We may read the remark as replacing "what" with
"that," defining the first general term as the second specific one, and privileging the
object. But the verb may also be read as an equal sign, transitive in both directions:
"what" = "that." In this reading, object is equated with inquiry, as well as inquiry
coming to rest in, or pointing to, an object. Like Peter himself in the poem, his
expression may be read on several levels: it cannot be read as a question without the
recognition that it may also function as a remark; yet to read it as a remark is to
notice how it relates subject and object, and places them both in the context of
speculation.

In his question, Peter expresses both the limit of what he knows, and the
desire to know more. In this sense it is his all. Thus his simple question is translated
into "his own array, / His own pageant and procession and display, // As far as
nothingness permits. . ." (CP 462-3). Suddenly, a child's innocent question about a
familiar entity expresses the human spectacle at its epistemological and ontological
thresholds. And here, as the ellipsis indicate, Stevens pauses. Here he paused in the
writing of the poem, as the manuscript reveals, trying at least three or four different
drafts of the closing tercet before striking on the superior final version (Lensing 137-
8). The child's question, and its implications, suspend things for a moment, literally on the edge of "nothingness"; and in this reflective moment, Stevens's favourite imperative is changed, from the one that marked his earliest verse to the one which will mark his last. The prominent "say" is replaced by "hear":

Hear him.
He does not say, "Mother, my mother, who are you,"
The way the drowsy, infant, old men do. (CP 463)

From this point on in Stevens's work, there is much we will have to try to hear: the silence of a great pond (CP 503), a dove's "small howling" (OP 124) and another's "Song of Fixed Accord" (CP 519-20), the uproar of trees (CP 522), the "scrawny cry" of a bird (CP 534), the cry of leaves (OP 123), a "Dinner Bell in the Woods" (OP 135), the song of a "gold-feathered bird" (OP 141). These are new, subtler sounds in Stevens, and QAR, as the poem which enjoins us directly to hear them, perhaps apprentices us wisely by leaving us listening not to the actual question of a child, but to the unspoken question of old men.

The question of the old men is also, as the punctuation underscores, their remark. Their question is not "what," but "who": it is a question of subjects, not objects. As the personal pronouns "my" and "you," and the repeated intimate name "Mother," indicate, the old men ask about relation. Whatever the mother is--and surely the term is meant to work on several levels here, psychological, physical, and geophysical--the old men seek to know her in relation to themselves, or perhaps themselves in relation to her. Theirs is a question of identity rather than identification.
To wonder about the mother—the mother who held them as infants, or the earthly one which will soon hold them—is a natural kind of questioning for old men; it is a question that interested Stevens as an old man. It is, however, a question that does not get him very far. Either the mother "is dissolved, she is destroyed" (CP 413) and must be bid farewell and goodnight, as she is in the third canto of AA; or more fearsomely, in "Madame La Fleurie," she becomes "a bearded queen, wicked in her dead light," who "feed[s] on him, himself and what he saw" (CP 507). Questions about the mother, as Stevens demonstrates in the final line, ultimately constrict (consider the mouth's movement in reading aloud the three /o/ sounds in the line, from the open /ow/ of "drowsy", through the more closed long /o/ of "old", to the most puckered /u/ sound in "do") and retard (note the consecutive strong stresses, the single syllable words, and the commas which slow the pace until the period seems almost redundant).

Stevens turns in his last poetry to the child's question again, the question "what," and gains much vigor, incisiveness, and freshness by it. But as he suggests in QAR, "who" remains a natural subsequent consideration to "what"; childhood must lead to second childhood, the infancy of old men; the object must lead to the subject, the sun to the "second sun." Questions in Stevens's later poems reflect this duality, the subjective, narrative quality which necessarily adheres to objects entering language, making our questions our remarks. Indeed, another late sun poem, "The World as Meditation," shows how Stevens expertly employs questions to keep "[t]he two beating together" (CP 521).
Several of his critics identify an important strain in Stevens's poetry which they term "meditative." Indeed, Louis Martz, who has written extensively on the matter, asserts that the poet not only memorably employs but has pre-eminently defined the style: "[t]here has never been a better definition of what might be called the genre of meditative poetry." he writes, than Stevens's lines from "Of Modern Poetry" ("World" 143): "The poem of the mind in the act of finding / What will suffice" (CP 239). In a compelling essay, Martz traces the evolution and possible motivations of this poetic style in Stevens, ultimately finding in "The World as Meditation" (WM) a crucial example of "the full development of Stevens's meditative style" ("World" 147).

As Stevens practices it, however, it is meditation with a difference. Stevens's meditations do not concern themselves with heavenly things; neither do they, as some readers believe, focus on earthly things exclusively. What Stevens's meditations tend to realize is that things are rarely exclusive, that many subjects, objects, and ideas are implicated in any one thing, and that all are involved in an ongoing process. The world, as the poem's title insists, is not (more accurately, not only) an object of meditation, but the act of meditation itself. The poem Martz sees as a culmination of sorts actually works against a strict notion of culmination, offering instead possibilities and techniques of continuation and inclusion.

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23 In addition to Martz, Pearce (e.g., "Toward Decreation" 298 ff.), Bevis (e.g., 144 ff.), and others deal with this aspect of Stevens's work in some detail.
WM evokes this impression of encompassing process in small and specific ways. Individual words, for instance, are rarely "individual"; this is particularly true of pronouns. The opening stanzas provide examples of how such terms give a sense of continuation and connection.

Is it Ulysses that approaches from the east,
The interminable adventurer? The trees are mended.
That winter is washed away. Someone is moving

On the horizon and lifting himself up above it.
A form of fire approaches the cretonnes of Penelope,
Whose mere savage presence awakens the world in which
she dwells. (CP 520)

"That" in the third lines suggests that the winter just washed away is one in a series of winters. The "[s]omeone" moving on the horizon (and the later reference to this someone, "himself") could be Ulysses, or could be the sun; the description applies potentially to both. The "[w]hose" in line six, while most likely referring to the form of fire, may initially be construed as referring to Penelope, the closest possible antecedent (the similarity of "savage presence" here and the "barbarous strength" that is clearly Penelope's later in the poem also bolsters this connection). Each pronoun evokes a sense of multiplicity, of including several possible terms. The images and symbols in the poem similarly underscore this sense of shifting and expansion: just as the "form of fire" here could be Ulysses or the sun, or both, so Penelope has been read to represent everything from the creative principle to reality, imagination, mind, earth, humanity, artist, lyric poetry, and Stevens himself.24 As Doggett notes, there

24 In addition to building a web of connection through their multiple referents, much of the imagery in the poem also refers explicitly to cycles, circles, and
is an "ambiguous field of reference" (Thought 172n.) at work in the poem which creates both breadth and movement.

In larger and more general ways, too, the poem fosters a feeling of relation and inclusion. In its generic playfulness, the poem suggests myth, lyric (Lentricchia, Ariel), meditative poetry (Martz, "World"; Lensing; and others), and romantic poetry (Bornstein, Transformations), connecting it to a broad spectrum of utterance; its epigraph further extends the spectrum to the field of music. The poem also strongly echoes several works from Stevens's own canon. In recent criticism, it has been compared to "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" (Bloom, Stevens; Rusk; Weston; Whiting), "Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour" (Cameron), "Sunday Morning" (Weston), "Idea of Order at Key West" (Perloff, "Irony"), "Of Modern Poetry" (Bloom, Stevens; Rusk), "Looking across the Fields and Watching the Birds Fly" (Whiting), and "The Sail of Ulysses" (Hobbs, Lentricchia, Ariel; Rusk), to cite but a few examples. Reading WM requires a constant connecting of the text to an ever-expanding range of reference and experience, ultimately making the reader into "[t]he interminable adventurer."

There is one critical aspect of the poem which works against its dominant gestures of expansion and continuation, however: its questions. In contrast to elements such as diction, image, generic allusion, and thematic echo, questions in

connection, e.g., spring, waking, sheltering, necklace, belt, sun.

25 Michael Hobbs takes a further step, connecting the reader as "interminable adventurer" directly to the figure of Ulysses in the poem; see especially pp. 162-3.
WM appear to disrupt, to distinguish, and to (re)focus. This pattern of questioning begins literally at the outset, as—quite uncharacteristically for Stevens—the poem opens with a question. It is an unexpected question, not merely in its placement, but in its style and content. Following the epigraph, with its emphasis on meditation, composition, and dream, it is surprising to get such an open, direct, quintessentially dramatic question, apparently about the immediate action of a character. Yet while it is initially startling, the question promptly focuses our attention through the immediacy of the present tense, the simplicity of the syntax (also remarkable in Stevens), and the specificity of a familiar name, a potential action, even a literal direction in which to look.

While using a question to instigate or focus is not typical of Stevens’s style, it is a common technique in meditative poetry. Indeed, Stevens so effectively employs this technique and others of meditative poetry that WM rapidly achieves, or at least depicts, that total integration traditionally sought by meditation, that is, "a self that is, ideally, one with itself, with other human beings, with created nature, and with the supernatural" (Martz, Poetry 322). All things in WM are, as the verbs tell us, "composed," welcomed, companioned. Penelope’s created selves, hers and the other, are "[t]wo in a deep-founded sheltering, friend and dear friend." The world itself composes a similar domestic harmony, washing away winter and mending the trees "as an essential exercise / In an inhuman meditation, larger than"—but not

\[26\] See Martz, particularly where he draws on the work of F. E. Hutchinson with regard to opening questions in meditative poetry (Poetry 31 ff.).
unlike, nor, we may presume, unrelated to—"her [Penelope's] own" (CP 521).

Consider where the opening question has led in merely fifteen lines:

She wanted nothing he could not bring her by coming alone.
She wanted no fetchings. His arms would be her necklace
And her belt, the final fortune of their desire.  (CP 521)

It is a moment of imaginative consummation. The images of the passage connote a total embrace ("His arms would be her necklace / And her belt"); the pronouns have moved from singular ("she," "his") to plural ("their"); and the diction and rhythm, as well as the closure of sentence and stanza, suggest a fulfillment ("the final fortune of their desire") which belies the conditional tense of the lines.

Indeed, this sense of consummation is reinforced by comparison with moments in other poems which, though similar, do not achieve this sort of positive communion. The parallels between WM and AA, for instance, highlight the more encompassing and affirmative sense of incorporation rendered in WM. Penelope imagines "[t]wo in a deep-founded sheltering, friend and dear friend" (CP 521). The compound "deep-founded" here graphically represents a coming together, as well as connoting a profound and solid base of affection; the participle "sheltering" insinuates an ongoing act, rather than a permanent structure. It is a more hopeful situation than the analogous one evoked in canto III of AA, where those "at ease in a shelter of the mind" (CP 413) are so only temporarily: there, the single "shelter," the "house [which] is of the mind and they and time" (CP 413), is almost immediately surrounded by annihilating flame and wind. Similarly, other encompassing imagery, such as that of necklaces and belts, is more menacing in AA--where the "necklace is a
carving not a kiss" (CP 413), and "[t]he stars are putting on their glittering belts / . .
. . / Like a great shadow's last embellishment" (CP 419). In WM, Penelope's
accoutrements have a different, pointedly more human source: "His arms," the arms
of her lover, "would be her necklace / And her belt, the final fortune of their desire"
(CP 521).

Yet it is at this moment of apparent attainment in WM that Stevens, with the
help of interrogative, begins to twist conventional meditative techniques to his own
ends. Into the heart of the "deep-founded sheltering" so carefully created suddenly
burst more questions, with a contrasting bluntness and empiricism.

But was it Ulysses? Or was it only the warmth of the sun
On her pillow? (CP 521)

There is a clear tonal shift here, but there are other disjunctions too. The past
tense of the questions not only unsettles the conditional tense preceding it, but
contrasts significantly with the present tense of the opening question, which is echoed
here. The tense shift both brings us back to the present moment, and indicates that
moments are passing and have passed: not is it, but "was it Ulysses?" Something
has happened, and the structure of the questions draws attention to the underlying
ambiguity of that something. The opening question of the poem separates into two
distinct questions. The focus narrows to a single term at a time, and the parallel
syntax of the questions emphasizes the presumed exclusivity of the options put
forward. Ulysses, or the sun? Of what elements was this ardently imagined union
truly composed?

In a very different way, the questioning in WM provokes the same query
elicited by another Modernist meditative poem, *Ash-Wednesday*: why? In Eliot's case, the query was why questions, significant in the meditative tradition, were routinely subverted in *AW*; this suppression had to do with eschewing everything, especially everything personal and material, that might detract from spiritual focus. Stevens's poem portrays the opposite situation: it presents, in "common speech," the workings of a specific, individual consciousness in a changing physical world, which issues in that "unity of interior life" sought by meditation (Martz, *Poetry* 324). Thus the query of *WM* becomes not, why are there no questions, but why are questions here. Why question in the face of accomplishment? Why disrupt the "final fortune of... desire," and the pinnacle of meditative achievement, with another question?

The answer lies in the craft of Penelope herself, a craft that is too often overlooked in interpretations of the poem. It is because of their power to disrupt, not in spite of it, that questions are crucial to the poem. Without the questions here, the poem would end in composition, instead of in the composing which is the real nature and work of meditation. They are the flippant communications which seem to unmake what is being made, as powerful and necessary to the poem as Penelope's

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27 Note the difference between the highly allusive, elevated, complicated, liturgical language of *AW*, and the simple diction of *WM*, a language much closer to that Martz outlines as characteristic of meditative poetry: "Meditative poems, being wrought out as part of a search for the common basis of humanity, must have common speech as a basis..." (*Poetry* 323).

28 One need only consider how important weaving is throughout Stevens to appreciate the importance of Penelope as weaver here; for an overview, see Anthony Whiting's instructive tracing of this trope (170-72).
own unravelling was to her survival. Stevens knew early on that "imagination pressing back against the pressure of reality" was essential to "self-preservation" (NA 36); yet it was also key that the imagination "adhere to reality, which, for my part, I regard as fundamental" (NA 31). As attractive as Penelope's imagined unity is, it exists solely in her head, and the late Stevens cannot live in this seductive but solipsistic world. The interrogative intrudes into WM at this consummate imaginative moment to exert a corresponding pressure of reality, without which there could be no movement. The questions in WM illustrate a principle Penelope well understood: contrary practices are a vital part of the process, indeed are often the source of the essential "barbarous strength."

Significantly, Stevens unmakes Penelope's composition by unmaking his own pattern of questioning. There are three questions in this poem, but they do not occur together. They do not build an involved, convincing if still conditional reality as Stevens's questions normally do. Instead, they dismantle the involving and equally conditional world of Penelope's imagination. There is also an "or" question, which Stevens has used to reverse a line of thought in previous poems. Here, however, rather than presenting an opposing line of thought which is then explored, the "or" question introduces an integration of the alternatives. In place of the "thinking stone" (CP 13), this "or" question proffers the beating thought.

But was it Ulysses? Or was it only the warmth of the sun
On her pillow? The thought kept beating in her like her heart.
The two kept beating together. It was only day.

It was Ulysses and it was not. Yet they had met,
Friend and dear friend and a planet’s encouragement.
The barbarous strength within her would never fail.  (CP 521)

These questions unmake a particular meditation, a purely imaginary construct which seeks to totalize and enclose. It is important to note, however, that they do not unmake the process of meditation itself. The response here to questions about the nature of experience is that it is composed of both real and imagined, "beating together." 29 Once again, as they did in his earliest work, Stevens’s questions here demand that one "say" which it is, what it is: Ulysses or the sun? But this pattern of questioning is undone. There is not a single, sufficient answer. The inclusive response to these exclusive questions renounces the idea of "answer" altogether, as it must; for "[t]he answer is another way of trying to get control over things, the conceptual way, and renouncing it means, again, being set free to create" (Frye, C&R 147). Thus the poem fittingly closes with creative activity—activity that combines the elements of formal meditation (memory, understanding, and will [Martz, Poetry 34-9]) and Stevens’s own creative symbols ("a woman / Combing" [CP 239]) in a process that is pointedly ongoing.

She would talk a little to herself as she combed her hair, Repeating his name with its patient syllables, Never forgetting him that kept coming constantly so near.  (CP 521)

The questions in WM challenge one kind of stasis, a composed, solipsistic, imaginary one. Their search for an answer invites an empirical, conceptual stasis,

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29 Sharon Cameron, in an interesting discussion of this poem, comes to a similar conclusion about this passage: "What becomes clear here," she recognizes, "is that one need not relinquish one reality in order to acknowledge another; that it is, in fact, the co-existence of the two realities that keeps Penelope alive" (591).
which is itself subsequently challenged by the paradoxical responses the questions receive. The questions move the poem to activity, especially meditative activity, as the verbs (especially the numerous participles) in the final stanza underscore. The world as meditation is the world as process. As catalysts to this process, the questions in WM, as they unmake and are unmade, produce another kind of saying: a talking to oneself, a repeating of the patient syllables which help keep the world in focus. They make possible the "never forgetting" of the world "coming constantly so near." The importance of this sort of saying, and the questions which produce it, persist into the last of Stevens's poems. Indeed, what one says to oneself about the world one has meditated is at the heart of one of Stevens's last and most personal questionings, his late poem "As You Leave the Room."

VI.

At the point of death, it is not uncommon for people to try to answer for their lives. This is especially true of poets, who frequently write apologias not only for their lives but for their work. Wallace Stevens answered for his life and work by questioning them. A "veteran of death," as Berryman called him30, in some sense Stevens questioned in this way from the beginning. Such questioning intensifies in the late poems, however, many of which, as Berger asserts, "inhabit a landscape so pervaded with end signs as to make the objectification, or even the mention, of death redundant" (144). "As You Leave the Room" is considered Stevens’s most explicit

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30 The phrase is from "So Long? Stevens" (Dream Song 219) by John Berryman.
death poem. Yet its severe and powerful questioning produces a layered, ambivalent response, making it a most complex, and characteristic, farewell indeed.

"As You Leave the Room" (AYLR), presumed to be written in 1954, is a reworking of an earlier poem, "First Warmth," which Stevens inscribed in his editor's copy of Transport to Summer in 1947.31

FIRST WARMTH

I wonder, have I lived a skeleton's life,
As a questioner about reality,

A countryman of all the bones in the world?
Now, here, the warmth I had forgotten becomes

Part of the major reality, part of
An appreciation of a reality;

And thus an elevation, as if I lived
With something I could touch, touch every way. (OP 117)

The differences in the two poems are striking and revealing, particularly the differences in their questioning. One important contrast is the placement of questions in the poems. "First Warmth" opens with a question: "I wonder, have I lived a skeleton's life. / As a questioner about reality. // A countryman of all the bones in the world?" (OP 117). This question is critically revised in AYLR, and moved to the centre of the poem. In addition to its placement later in the poem and other revisions, however, the question is also changed by the new lines preceding it.

Rather than beginning with a question, AYLR opens with what appears to be a

31 See the Preface and Contents of The Palm at the End of the Mind, and the notes to "First Warmth" and "As You Leave the Room" in Opus Posthumous (323).
response; but for all its definiteness, it is a response that recalls and provokes more questions than it answers. It is interesting that a poet whose questions so often read as convictions has written, in the first six lines here, words of conviction which are a sort of reprise of the major issues raised by his poetic questions.

You speak. You say: Today's character is not
A skeleton out of its cabinet. Nor am I.

That poem about the pineapple, the one
About the mind as never satisfied,

The one about the credible hero, the one
About summer, are not what skeletons think about. (OP 117)

The italicized first words of AYLR emphasize speaking and saying, as do the questions of Harmonium particularly. The substance of the lines—you are not a "skeleton out of its cabinet"; the poems you have written "are not what skeletons think about"—address how one has lived, what one has done, as do the questions of Parts of a World. These lines also lay out an argument (you cannot be a skeleton; I am not one; here is a list of poems you have written; these are not things skeletons think about) as questions in Transport to Summer frequently do.

And most prominently, the opening lines confront, and problematize, questions of identity and identification, as do the questions in The Auroras of Autumn and beyond. Identity in this poem is trickier than is usually noticed; the textual evidence, or more accurately the lack thereof, supports several interpretations as to how many speakers there are, and who may be speaking which lines. Who is the "You" who speaks? Is "today's character" a generic term (Sukenick 203), or does it refer to the "I," or to the "You"? Is the "I" this same "you," or another character? Does this
"you" speak the first six lines, or only the first one and a half? Is the "I" in the second line the "I" of the latter half of the poem? What is the poet, presumably the speaking "I" from line seven forward, actually saying by himself, or for himself?\(^2\)

Indeed, doubts about identity are what the lines attempt to dispel, but again, despite the sureness of tone, only limited information is to be had. Whoever is speaking is trying to convince a skeptic that he is not a skeleton. The terms of the argument, however, are almost all negative: you are not, nor am I, these are not. While it may be clear what the character in question is not, there is never any mention of what he is. We may infer from the list of poems that he is a poet, but the specific attribute which sets him apart from skeletons is not the writing of these poems, it is the "think[ing] about" them. These nuances are important aids in making sense of the question which follows, a question which is startling none the less as it seems to be in direct contrast to everything immediately preceding it.

I wonder, have I lived a skeleton's life,
As a disbeliever in reality,
A countryman of all the bones in the world? (OP 117)

Surely it is strange to encounter this question here, after the author has taken pains to dramatize a voice which unwaveringly tells him in the first six lines that he is

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\(^2\) This "unfixing the subject" is central to Catherine Belsey's definition of "the interrogative text": "The interrogative text, on the other hand, disrupts the unity of the reader by discouraging identification with a unified subject of the enunciation. The position of the 'author' inscribed in the text, if it can be located at all, is seen as questioning or as literally contradictory" (91; emphasis hers). The political as well as literary implications of this practice, which Belsey discusses at greater length, should be noted, in contrast to views of Stevens and his work put forward by Perloff and others.
not a skeleton. But the question is not as directly contradictory as it initially appears. It does not ask whether he is a skeleton; perhaps the speaker accepts the "material" evidence of his poems as proof that he is not one. What the question does ask, more poignantly, is whether, by his very "think[ing]," by his participation in the apparently unreal, he has lived a skeleton's life, a "disbeliever in"—not now a "questioner about"—"reality." While Yeats may gain strength, insight, and, it must be admitted, pleasure, from "enumerat[ing] old themes" (Yeats, V 630), Stevens wonders with painful honesty what a life with his circus animals has cost.

The terms of this question, while indeed more "ruthless" (Brogan 114) and "harsh" (Bloom, Stevens 369) than before, also signal a way of thinking and saying that foreshadows the hopeful, ambivalent response. Has he been, the poet asks, "a countryman of all the bones in the world?" Some of the most fearsome things about a skeleton's life must be that it is not human, that it is alone and buried. Yet Stevens's skeleton is a "countryman," and has a sense of community, if only with other bones. Further, these bones are "in the world," not of the world or in the earth, as skeletons are. In addition, the question has been moved to the centre of the poem, suggesting literally that it is part of a larger project; the enjambement of the question similarly works against a simple notion of closure.33 These ambiguities do not relieve the

33 Daniel Schwarz notes that AYLR "has the elongated shape of a skeleton," which in his view undermines "an affirmative reading" of the poem (223). While Stevens has shaped his poetry before to underscore certain points (see, for example, Cook on the sixth stanza of "Six Significant Landscapes" ["From Etymology" 39-40]), I am not convinced this is the case here. Accepting this reading for the moment, however, the question would come at the "heart" of the skeleton shape, becoming another paradox to add to the present list.
sting, or the integrity, of the question; but they do pave the way for the lines to come by suggesting that perhaps the speaker has not lived the life of a true skeleton after all.

The question, as many of Stevens's questions do, brings the speaker to the present moment, where

Now, here, the snow I had forgotten becomes

Part of a major reality, part of
An appreciation of a reality

And thus an elevation, as if I left
With something I could touch, touch every way. (OP 117-8)

Just as the wording of the question changed significantly from "First Warmth," so does the wording of the response. It is now not the warmth, but the snow that the speaker remembers, snow that resonates with meaning. It may of course be literal snow, forgotten only during the conversation and rumination of the first nine lines, which the speaker may see by turning to a window (though possibly not the most fertile interpretation, this poem in part warns us not to ignore physical reality). The snow may be the cold of death, which the poet now sees as a part of a greater reality. The snow may refer, as several critics observe, to Stevens's 1921 poem "The Snow Man." Partly this allusion is important because it reaches back to Stevens's earliest work, in contrast to the "warmer" poems of the 1940s offered at the beginning of the poem as "proof" he is not a skeleton. The lines may then indicate that rather than a disbeliever in reality, Stevens has been a believer in different sorts of reality all along, as the critical shift from "the major reality" ("First Warmth") to "a major
The memory of snow here may balance Stevens's sense of his own work, and allow him to see its multifaceted relations to multifaceted realities. Surely the evidence, particularly of his later life and work, support Ellmann's view that "Stevens felt increasingly that his recognition of cold, with its attendant and implicit images of death, nakedness, nothing, and saying no, was part of his original contribution to poetry" (*Celebration* 165). Linking his poems of snow and of summer in AYLR allows him to see his poetry as "an appreciation"--and Pearce is right not to let us forget the etymology of the word ("Last Lessons" 133)="of a reality."

This realization is an "elevation" for Stevens, a word pointedly contrasting the idea of burial hovering over the poem; yet it becomes immediately apparent that it is an elevation for someone who is leaving. The change from "lived" to "left" here is one of the most poignant in the poem. This change, and the other strong signals of closure we get in this stanza (the repetition, the strong stresses and drop in pitch at the end of the line, the period), remind us of how much the poet is actually leaving. Leaving the room may mean leaving a lecture hall, the world, or perhaps most painfully, his poetry; we should not forget that another word for "room" is "stanza."

Yet if he is leaving, he has not yet left; in the final twist of a highly ambivalent poem, Stevens gives us one last "room" to walk through. The poem closes:

And yet nothing has been changed except what is
Unreal, as if nothing had been changed at all. (OP 118)

The line break encapsulates the whole effect: we stop for a moment, thinking that nothing has been changed "except what is," i.e., reality, only to find that we
must continue, to discover that what has been changed is "what is / Unreal." The final phrase, which marries Stevens's characteristic use of "as if" with the quiet irony of his late poems34, hardly finishes, closes, or completes the poem. Rather it makes us review not only the stanza, but the entire poem, to assess what sort of reality has or has not changed; even, perhaps, to question what reality reader and poem currently share. Stevens has left us with the feeling that has elevated him: the sense that a life in poetry, of "thinking in poetry"35, does have a reality, a sort that shifts. If he is leaving the room, he has left the door open. Stevens is, most aptly, standing on the threshold at the last.

Whether we feel elevated or not after puzzling through the poem is another question. The end of AYLR is, in one way, cold comfort; but this is, of course, precisely the kind Stevens would provide. It is not the sort of closing provided by Yeats, who, paradoxically, is able resoundingly to end a poem by asking a ringing question. The strength of Stevens's questioning forces him to choose an opposite effect. His questions, like the question at the heart of AYLR, bring us back to the present moment; they seem to carry more weight, and become more real, than many of his "qualified assertions" (Vendler, "Qualified Assertions" 162). It is no accident

34 N.B. Vendler's discussion of Stevens's use of "as if" in "The Qualified Assertions of Wallace Stevens" (esp. 170-75), and Schwarz's supporting discussion of his remark that "[i]f the dominating trope of the early poems was hyperbole, in these last poems it is litotes" (224 ff.).

35 "[T]he evil of thinking as poetry is not the same thing as the good of thinking in poetry" (qtd. by Cook [Serio and Leggett 41]).
that Stevens does not close AYLR with a question. The characteristic "and yet," "except," and "as if" modifying the final lines make his last "statement" more ambiguous than any of his questions could.

"First Warmth" and "As You Leave the Room" were first published in Opus Posthumous. In reviewing this book, Irving Howe wrote,

Stevens poses as his ultimate question not, what shall we do about the crisis of belief, but rather, how shall we live with and perhaps beyond it? And one reason for thinking of Stevens as a comic poet is that he makes this choice of questions. (qtd. in Axelrod and Deese 57)

Stevens's questions help us to look and to live beyond, not beyond the world, as Eliot's often do, but beyond crisis to possibility. They bring us back to the present, to the crux; they offer us a range of options, options so vividly presented they nearly become realities themselves. Even the questions of the late Stevens, which become more urgent, direct, and specific in their attempts to grasp an exterior reality, lead in the end to the recognition that, as Donald Justice writes in his homage to Stevens, "The the has become an a." As his most personal farewell poem attests, Stevens is only a disbeliever in a reality that is singular. His questions, even the difficult questions of the end, are crucial aids in helping him to discover, and to evoke, the rich range of realities from which we shape our worlds.
CONCLUSION

I.

What Modernist poetic questions eminently reveal about themselves and the works they shape is their multivalence. It is vital to keep the protean nature of poetic questions in mind when summarizing their functions and drawing conclusions about them. In aid of maintaining this important perspective, these final remarks are structured along the dualistic lines Modernist poetic questions prominently display: the capacity to highlight what is at hand, and the ability to point beyond that immediate context. The initial observations which follow are based on what is here; that is, on what this study reveals about poetic questions. The latter part of this conclusion offers ideas about where there is to go, suggesting fruitful directions for further research.

II.

While the significance of questions in shaping discourse has been amply demonstrated by research in other fields, there still exists a relatively small amount of research on literary interrogative. Despite the provocative findings of this research on literary questioning, however, it remains necessary to underscore how inherently interesting poetic questions are, and how advantageous it is to focus upon them in reading poems. Thus the first noteworthy result of the present study is the
confirmation of its central assumption: that the interrogative is a revealing and utilitarian lens through which to read poetry. Looking at a poem through its questions can help to pierce the familiarity or the layers of critical varnish which may surround canonical works, as this thesis’s reading of "Among School Children" attempts to illustrate. Conversely, a less well-known work may be opened up by analysis of its interrogative patterns, as the reading of Eliot’s "Marina" or Stevens’s "Questions Are Remarks" tries to show. Individual poems are not alone in profiting from such readings, however. A concentration on poetic questions can also provide new insights into the trajectory of an entire career, as it does in the work of all three poets considered here.

Moreover, mapping the interrogative practices of poems is an interpretive strategy that can productively accommodate a wide range of theoretical biases. This strategy may in fact be doubly beneficial to the critical enterprise. The clear rootedness of poetic questions in the text ensures that regardless of which perspective appropriates them, poetic questions will ground the theory in the poem. Their ability to rupture that same text, however, pushes readings based on poetic questions into considering factors outside the imminent rhetorical domain.

The multiplicity and diversity which make the question such a fertile investigative starting point, however, are the same qualities which make it difficult to marshal the results of these readings into specific, comprehensive observations. Perhaps the distinguishing characteristic of the Modernist poetic question is its inability adequately to be defined except in context. Poetic questions differ radically
from author to author; from one poem to another within a single author's work; even from stanza to stanza within a single poem. Consequently, poetic questions can challenge even those theories which take most sensitive account of their volatility. The following general remarks gleaned from the present readings of Modernist poetic questions are hazarded with an eye on the many exceptions to them equally evident in this thesis.

With this perspective, it is possible to note some general characteristics of Modernist poetic questioning suggested by the present readings. The first concerns placement. Modernist poems tend to locate or revise their most significant questions later in poems, frequently in a penultimate position. (Of the three poets examined here, Yeats serves as the most consistent example of this tendency, though there is supporting evidence in Eliot's and Stevens's work, too.) The reasons for this may be several. Barbara Herrnstein Smith has observed that the occasion for a Modernist poem is "likely to be the existence of an ultimately unresolvable process" (247). Placing a question, with its inherent resistance to closure, in the space generally reserved for resolution emphasizes the prevalent Modernist view of the inadequacy of traditional or univocal responses to complicated, contemporary problems. "Leda and the Swan" is an especially clear instance of this tendency: it pointedly closes with a reverberating question, rather than with the resolution its sonnet form particularly leads us to expect.

Indeed, the general complexity of questions may partially account for this placement, too. In 1903, G. E. Moore wrote in Principia Ethica, "It appears to me
that in Ethics, as in all other philosophical studies, the difficulties and disagreements, of which history is full, are mainly due to a very simple cause: namely to the attempt to answer questions, without first discovering precisely what question it is which you desire to answer" (qtd. in Galambos and Black 157). In the eyes of Modernist writers, this observation must have appeared patently applicable to the literature of their time as well. In contrast to poets in certain previous periods, Modernists could not assume any general agreement on the sorts of questions poetry could or should ask or answer. The complex and sometimes new questions of Modernist poetry require in their asking as much preparation and context as do the "answers" of eighteenth-century or Victorian poems. It takes more of the poem to prepare for the question, and thus questions tend to come later.

Such placement also complements a pervasive trope of Modern poetry, irony. Revising an earlier question later in the poem effectively and economically allows for ironic commentary on it. Similarly, placing a question in a penultimate position creates a space for the brief, concentrated ironic responses frequently adopted by Modernist poets to close their poems. Some poems by Stevens considered here ("The Man on the Dump," "Questions are Remarks," "The World as Meditation") furnish instances of this use of questions. However, it is not uncommon in the work of other Modernist poets; Frost and Ransom also provide examples.

A second characteristic of Modernist poetic questions is that they are frequently framed in terms of an important image or images. Late in the Modernist period, in fact—certainly, late in the careers of each of the poets examined here—
images become not only the material of questions, but their subject. In the late poems of Yeats and Stevens particularly, there is a move away from a questioning of what images represent, to a questioning of images themselves and our perceptions of them. Yeats, for instance, tends to interrogate images of art ("Lapis Lazuli") and images of images ("Vacillation," "The Circus Animals' Desertion") in his later work; Stevens's last poems show him questioning the image of the sun not as a representative concept ("Notes toward a Supreme Fiction") but as sun ("Questions Are Remarks," "The World as Meditation," "Not Ideas About the Thing But the Thing Itself"). Even Eliot, in whom this latter tendency is not as prevalent, nevertheless does create strong paradoxical images (e.g., the rose garden, the midwinter spring) which he then interrogates in *Four Quartets*: the "riddles" of this poem (e.g., EC IV, LG IV) are also initially figured in images.

Embedding images in questions allows Modernist poets to put the iron fist in the velvet glove. Questions create a context of suspension which becomes a rhetorical substitute for the evocativeness and potential transcendence of the Symbol; yet studding these questions with images produces the harder, cleaner, more precise edges required and exploited by the Imagist and Vorticist experiments. The questioning of these same images in later Modernism may be the inevitable outcome of the general investigation into signification going on in this period¹; at any rate, this interrogation

¹ Michael Levenson carefully traces the development of the various movements of early Modernism in his *A Genealogy of Modernism*. The relationships he notes between these movements, and the directions in which they go (see especially 103-36), serve in part as a model for my conjecture here.
of images foreshadows the self-conscious and self-reflexive nature of much Postmodernist art.

A third aspect of Modernist poetic questions highlighted by this study concerns the voices which speak them. In contrast to the questions of Romantic poetry, for instance, which are usually uttered by a single speaker—the famous "lyric 'I'"—questions in Modernist poetry are asked by a number of different voices. The increase in the number and sorts of voices evident in Modernist poetry may be traced in part to the influence of other genres. Though it is more common to note similarities between the multilayered, multivocal styles of a poem like The Waste Land and the fiction of writers such as Joyce and Faulkner, another important influence on Modernist poetry was likely that of Modern drama. Little has been done to trace this connection, but it is a provocative one. Drama, like poetry, was the site of tremendous experimentation in this period, and all three of the poets under discussion here wrote in the dramatic form. The new voices and issues heard in Modern drama, and the new interrogative patterns at work both in the writing and the production of epic, expressionist, and surrealist theatre of the time, doubtless had an impact on the evocation of voice in Modernist poetry.

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2 In Eliot's case the theatrical writing largely postdated the poetry featuring the most varied personae (though he did frequent the theatre even during his college years, the period in which "Prufrock" and other poems were composed [Ackroyd 30]). Later, Four Quartets shows the direct influence of Eliot's work on Murder in the Cathedral, as several critics attest (e.g., Kenner, Invisible 247; Moody 182; Reibetanz 147; Schneider 169).

3 One thinks particularly of Beckett, Pirandello, and Brecht, among many influences. Waiting for Godot is full of questions that never get answered, and that
Historical as well as generic influences also played a part. The wide range of historical models on which Modernist poets liberally drew—the dramatic monologues of Browning and other Victorian poets, as well as the voices of the troubadour poets or the characters of Renaissance drama, to name a few—also notably emphasized voice and "character." In addition to their other formal and technical influences, the privileging and innovative creation of voice in such works significantly affected Modernist poets's crafting of personae.

Of course, not all Modernist questions are asked by myriad voices in poems. Modernist poetry does feature questions posed by singular, first-person speakers; but the Modernist poetic "I" is not equivalent to poetic first persons of other periods. The "I" of a Modernist poem is likely to be the site of multiple, often conflicting impressions and perceptions, as opposed to the "I" of many Victorian poems, for instance, which is constructed to depict a unified personality. Psychological discoveries and theories early in the twentieth century undoubtedly contributed to the depiction of heterogeneous personae in Modernist poems. The writings of Freud, Jung, and others challenged the idea of a cohesive, singular self, and these new change in their import each time they are asked. In Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, Actor and Character (and actor) are deliberately separated, each question they ask being uttered literally and figuratively in different voices. Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt* was designed to provoke the audience into an interrogative state. His performers were to distance themselves from the unified voice of a single character. "Brecht advocated a number of rehearsal devices to encourage this: the actor would speak in the third person, or in the past tense, or even speak the stage directions. . . . Direct address to the audience would be complete, unlike the traditionally hasty aside" (Styan 142-3). Many of Brecht's plays (e.g., *Mother Courage*, *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*) are filled with questions, which in direct address would be asked simultaneously to the audience and to actors onstage.
concepts of personality are reflected in the first-person voices heard in Modernist poetry.

It is important to note that the Modernist conception and production of a complex, multifaceted poetic "I" is apparent even when it seems an author is writing *in propria persona*. While Wolfson has demonstrated, most forcefully in the case of Wordsworth, that interrogative can point out ambivalence and ambiguity beneath the surface of even the most stalwartly singular and specific poetic "I," it frequently does so subtly, covertly, and in opposition to what we know of the poet's intention; "Wordsworth's poetry of self shows a tendency to back away from moments of interrogative irresolution" (36). Similar questions in Modernist poetry, however, by any number of different formal and technical means, signal that the complex, fragmented "personalities" they point to are consciously constructed as such: "Who speaks?" the speaker of "A Dish of Peaches in Russia" (Stevens, CP 224) bluntly, self-reflexively inquires. It should be remembered that Yeats, the Modernist poet who perhaps most often encourages us to conflate author and speaker in his poems, is also the poet responsible for the theory of masks, which holds that we present any number of faces to ourselves and others in private and in public.4

The characteristics of Modernist poetic questions outlined here are neither prescriptive nor exhaustive. To the contrary, the complex nature and manifold, often paradoxical functions of questions in Modernist poetry reflect the multiform,

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4 See Ellmann's discussion of this theory in *Yeats: The Man and the Masks* (esp. 171-76 and 186-87), and Yeats's poem "The Mask" (V 263).
multifaceted nature of the poetry itself. Thus perhaps it is unsurprising that examining the sources, characteristics, and functions of Modernist poetic questions here results in the further discovery of how much about questions and about Modernist poetry remains to be explored.

III.

The findings of this dissertation suggest several fruitful directions for further research. Some of these promising areas are comparative. For instance, there are other Modernist poetic questions and questioners that it would be illuminating to consider. Elizabeth Bishop in particular haunts this thesis. Her inclusion here, had there been world enough and time, would have done more than merely save this thesis from complete political incorrectness, currently conceived. The interrogative pervades Bishop's work in interesting ways. Examining her use of the question in relation to travel and "quest," as well as her consistent employment of the interrogative as a means of introspection, would have provided intriguing comparisons to the work of Yeats, Eliot, and Stevens. Fortunately, some critics of Modernist poetry have begun to study Bishop's poetic questions and their implication in her work: Bonnie Costello's article on "The Impersonal and the Interrogative in the Poetry of Elizabeth Bishop" is an excellent introduction to the subject, and James Longenbach's essay on "Elizabeth Bishop and the Story of Postmodernism," while not expressly about questions in the poet's work, none the less does point to the pregnant
"vicissitudes" in her poems which questions help to encode.\(^5\)

In a similar vein, it would be valuable to place Modernist poetic questioning in a broader historical context. Susan Wolfson’s book on interrogative in Romantic poetry is exceedingly helpful in elucidating questioning practices in one set of Modernism’s literary forebears. However, other important precursors to Modernist poetic interrogative merit similar investigation. As the work here on Eliot in particular indicates, a study of questioning techniques in Renaissance poetry would be useful and enlightening.

The task of tracing the descendants of Modernist literary questioning would be an interesting one as well. The work of Seamus Heaney especially comes to mind: questions evolve in revealing ways in his work, ways which owe something--but not everything--to Yeats. Kevin McGuirk has investigated Heaney’s use of the question in *Field Work*, with provocative results. While he considers Heaney’s questioning in terms of the poet’s individual development, placing it in a wider history of literary questioning would also prove a profitable exercise. John Ashbery, Adrienne Rich, and Derek Walcott are only three of many other examples of contemporary poets whose work might also lend itself readily to interrogative-based readings.

In addition, it would be informative to consider the relation of interrogative to other tropes. As this study repeatedly insinuates, the relation of interrogative to irony would be especially interesting to investigate (the large body of work on irony now

\(^5\) Costello’s article appears in *Elizabeth Bishop and Her Art* (109-132); Longenbach’s article is from *The Southern Review* (469-484). Full citations may be found in the bibliography.
extant makes this an even more attractive proposition). To note another example,
McGuirk, in his study of Heaney, draws stimulating parallels between the
interrogative and the apostrophe, which could be applied very usefully to the poetry
of other authors. Also, the importance of interrogative in creating voice and point of
view has been noted above, and work in this area might be easily expanded. Not
least, the relations of questions and images touched on here, which are integral to
Modern poetry, could be productively extended and pursued.

Not all the interesting work to be done on poetic questions is comparative,
however. Much in the functioning of poetic questions remains to be explored. The
political aspects of poetic questions require greater analysis, analysis which may be
assisted by research in other areas. For instance, poetic questions, and answers, are
often and significantly related to gender: Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred
Prufrock" and "Portrait of a Lady" provide two important examples, though others of
equal significance may be found in the poetry of Yeats (e.g., "Michael Robarts and
the Dancer") and of Stevens (e.g., "Sunday Morning"). What precisely these
relationships are, and how they may inform or be informed by feminist criticism, for
instance, are issues which deserve attention.

Such questions relate fundamentally to another key issue, the power positions
of speaker and respondent. Dillon points out that in terms of attitudes toward
interrogative, "the only generalization that appears to hold is that people find it

6 The issue of gendered questions in Modernist poetry especially might benefit
from further study of Bishop's use of questions.
threatening or somehow diminishing to be asked questions, even when the questioner does not set out to be threatening" (144). He cites "the social fact that most questioners enjoy higher status, power, and authority in the situation than do respondents" (162). These observations may illuminate the ways poets use questions in creating personae; perhaps they would shed light, for example, on the differences between Stevens's early, often arrogant and solipsistic voices, and the very different inquirers of his late poems. Dillon's remarks may also tell us something about the poets themselves. Certain types of poetic questions may point to the cultural status a poet assumes s/he enjoys; other types of interrogative may serve as means of obtaining and sustaining power in an environment where the poetic voice is marginalized or insecure.

The work of Belsey and Meyer on the relationships of interrogative to ideology suggest further areas of investigation for poetic questions. In some cases, poetic questions may reinforce an existing ideology. Conversely, poetic questions in other contexts may challenge a particular ideology. Catherine Belsey is especially interested to elucidate the latter case in Critical Practice. Her concept of "the interrogative text" is based on examples drawn primarily from the novel, and to some extent from drama; but it may be usefully applied (pace Bakhtin et al) to poetry as well. Belsey envisions the interrogative text as one which "refuses a single point of view, however complex and comprehensive, but brings points of view into unresolved collision or contradiction" (92). This allows the text to maintain "what Althusser calls 'an internal distance' from the ideology in which it is held, which permits the
reader to construct from within the text a critique of this ideology" (92). It would be fascinating to try to trace some of the crucial and complex ideological upheavals in the Modernist period through its literary questions. Certainly the poetic questions of Yeats, Eliot, and Stevens would be significant in such a study.

Michael Meyer conceives of the relationship of ideology, literature, and interrogative as more comprehensive still. His view is that

(a) texts raise questions through textuality, (b) these questions call for answers that embody certain ideas, and that (c) political ideologies and social values are composed of ideas which, unlike other ideas, need to appear to be out-of-the-question. As a result, texts have an ideological bearing, either by raising questions that ideologies are reluctant to acknowledge as questionable or by raising questions whose answers reinforce ideologies by exemplifying them. The truth of the matter is that questions are at stake in all thought systems, and that textuality consists precisely in asking for something. Literature enables mankind to match the demands of ideologies with the possibilities of textuality. (Meaning 113)

"Meaning," for Meyer, "is a question-answer relationship" (Meaning 148). While he is using the designations "question" and "answer" in more general terms, it is clear that a study of specific questions and their functions in specific texts would have great bearing on literary theories such as Meyer's which are based on interrogative structures.

Even implications of cybernetic questioning and answering may prove important for investigators of poetic questions (and literary theory, and neurology) to keep in mind. In their work on BORIS (Better Organized Remembering and Inferencing System), a computer model of text understanding, researchers found that "BORIS could answer questions better if the memory representation of the text was
used to help understand questions than if the question was first comprehended and then matched to the memory representation in search of the answer" (159).

It is important to notice that the question-answer process involves more than merely surgically probing the representation for the answer but leaving no trace of the question information. Rather, the question adds information to the memory representation. Research on misleading questions indicates that answering questions can indeed alter memory. . . .

Understanding a question could involve the activation of knowledge that had not previously been connected to the memory representation being queried. . . . Thus, much of the "search" for an answer to a question is accomplished by the correct understanding of the question. Our perspective, therefore, differs from those that consider question answering as first specifying search descriptors and then conducting a brute-force search through a large data-base. Rather, we maintain that question understanding is the key to question answering.

(Galambos and Black 159)

This data raises a number of interesting questions and issues, including how asking and answering questions may affect not only what we know, but what and how we can remember, and how our very brains function. Do the experiments and findings concerning BORIS relate to our experience of interrogative in a poetic context? Is the connection noted above between memory and interrogative being exploited in The Waste Land or "Marina," for instance? Is an intuitive sense that "the time and effort [involved in answering questions] is devoted to re-understanding the question in a number of different ways until an answer is found" (Galambos and Black 159) behind Stevens's habitual practice of grouping numbers of questions in poems? Is the idea that "question understanding is the key to question answering" central to Yeats's placement and revisions of his questions? Applying these findings in even a qualified way to human efforts at interpreting texts, it would appear that
questions may help constitute, as well as inquire into, what we remember and what we know. Analyzing poetic questions may assist us in understanding the role of interrogative in these complex processes. Questioning may prove to be at the root of consciousness itself.

IV.

"The poet," wrote Robert Graves, "is the unsatisfied child who dares to ask the difficult question which arises from the schoolmaster’s answer to his simple question, and then the still more difficult question which arises from that” (98). This interrogative bent is not always manifest by questions per se in poems, but Graves is right to emphasize the act of questioning as central to poetic behaviour. Few other rhetorical resources can present so forcefully, intimate so subtly, and reach so far, as the question. Rarely has this resource been so variously and ably employed as it is in Modernist poetry. To our great benefit, the schoolmaster’s answers never satisfied the three poets considered here: Yeats, Eliot, and Stevens walked through the long schoolroom questioning all of their lives. This study of some of the questions they asked, and how they asked them, is meant not only as a practical aid in understanding poetic questions. It is an acknowledgement of their indelible contribution to the interrogative spirit which continues to inform poetry today.
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