

Turning to the Mystics



T.S. Eliot

Bonus: Malcolm Guite on T.S. Eliot's Four Quartets (Part 1)

with James Finley and Kirsten Oates

Jim Finley: Greetings. I'm Jim Finley.

Kirsten Oates: And I'm Kirsten Oates.

Jim Finley: Welcome to Turning to the Mystics.

Kirsten Oates: Welcome everyone to season 10 of Turning to the Mystics where we've been turning to TS Eliot's poetry in Four Quartets. In this episode, Jim and I are being joined by a very special guest and expert on Four Quartets, Malcolm Guite. This conversation was so rich that we divided it into two episodes. Today, in part one of our dialogue, we'll focus on the first two poems from Four Quartets. But before we get started, let me tell you a little more about Malcolm Guite. Malcolm Guite is an English poet, singer-songwriter, Anglican priest and academic. His research interests include the intersection of religion and the arts. He is a life fellow at Girton College Cambridge. On several occasions he has taught as visiting faculty at colleges and universities in England and North America. Guite is the author of five books of poetry as well as several books on Christian faith and theology. Now, onto the episode. Welcome, Malcolm. Welcome, Jim.

Malcolm Guite: Thank you. It's a pleasure to be here.

Jim Finley: Yeah, very good.

Kirsten Oates: So Malcolm, where are you joining us from?

Malcolm Guite: So I'm actually in a little studio in the wonderful, medieval city of Norwich in the county of Norfolk. Norwich, of course, has its own little resonance with the Four Quartets because the great mystic Julian of Norwich flourished here in the 14th century. And the actual shrine is at a church right here near the city center. It was bombed in the war, but it was rebuilt just in exactly the same place. So you can walk down into Julian's shrine. And in fact, you can hear as it were Eliot channeling her and all shall be well and all manner of things shall be well. And they have a lovely thing. They have a little bowl there of hazelnuts gathered from the trees. And because that wonderful moment where she sees the hazelnut, you can pick up a hazelnut and go and pray and contemplate and then you can take it home with you in your waistcoat pocket and have it to remember. So I think Julian, in a curious way, still has a ministry in Norwich. That space is very special and many people visit it, and there's a deep silence there.

Jim Finley: And Malcolm, I was in Norwich a couple times. I was in her hermitage. It was very sacred space for me. And inscribed in the wall was her quote, "Thou art enough for me."

Malcolm Guite: Yes, that's right. No, that is there on the wall. I was there only two or three weeks ago actually, and it is a remarkable place. But when I was an undergraduate at Cambridge, I came on a retreat here with the then keeper of the shrine, a guy called Robert Llewellyn who wrote some very beautiful books on Julian. I've known a that place since I guess 1979 or '80. Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: Wow. Well, beautiful. Thank you for bringing the resonance of Julian from your space, Malcolm. That's so lovely. And Malcolm, you have a long history with Four Quartets, I understand. I'm wondering if you could share more about your personal connection?

Malcolm Guite: I've loved the poems for a very long time. I first encountered Eliot really as a schoolboy. We had a very good English teacher who read Prufrock and then read The Waste Land. But what was great was that he didn't come at it with all kinds of scholarly learning and show it to us bristling with footnotes. He said Waste Land was originally called he'd do the police in different voices. And so we were all just given parts and it was a kind of drama for us. So that got me into Eliot and then I carried on, and then I found Four Quartets by myself. And it was a very different kind and style, but I found myself deeply drawn to it, so much so that eventually I visited... Well, I visited all three of the places that you could physically visit in England. And I had a friend in Massachusetts who could take me out to a place from which I could see the [inaudible 00:04:13].

So I've kind of touched base with all the places. And of course the thing about... Or one of the many things about the Four Quartets is that the poems remember themselves. The poems not only gather together memory of many other writers like Julian and passages from Bhagavad Gita or all the different things that he gathers in, but each poem refers back to the poem before it and then the third [inaudible 00:04:35]. So it's a great, rich, resonant collections of recollections, which is very appropriate for a poem that is about the relationship of time and eternity. But what I find then is that there's a deeper thing. If you read this poem often enough that passages of it are in your mind and in your memory, then every time you return to the poem in another place or stage of your life, rereading the poem gathers up where you were when you last read the poem. So the thing becomes more and more resonant. And every time you finish the poem, that whole line, "to make an end is to make a beginning. The end is where we start from," there's a sense in which you know that next time you read the poem, however soon or late that is, it's going to be fresh and new, and yet it's also going to be richer for all those previous readings.

I suppose I probably first read it when I was in the sixth form, so that would've been in 1975 or six. So it's nearly 50 years that I've left with this poem.

Kirsten Oates: Wow, thank you for sharing. And Malcolm, when you visited the places, did it bring more life to the poem for you?

Malcolm Guite: Yes, I think so. I mean in very different ways. I was just recently, actually this last summer, I was at Burnt Norton, and that is extraordinary because you can see the pool that is completely empty and drained and the dry concrete edges. But then you move along from it and you do literally follow a voice in a garden. You go into a rose garden, and the people who keep the place still keep the rose gardens and are very open to people who come on pilgrimage there. So that has been very rich for me. And again, it becomes rich, of course, the more you know about Eliot's own life at that point and his having visited the garden with Emily Hale. When you go to East Coker, you are going to visit Eliot's grave. That's what you are going to do. So the whole sense of the earth and the earthiness and the ends and beginnings, because that's where his forebears came from, that has its own feeling.

But the place I've most frequently visited is Little Gidding, and I now quite often take groups of pilgrims to Little Gidding or meet people there. And I've read the poem there many times. And I had the great joy as part of the... I sort began what's now a flourishing thing, is flourishing very well without me, I have to say. But I began at the TS Eliot Festival there, and one of the people who kindly came... Well, Valerie Eliot came. So I walked

around Little Gidding with her. But then Seamus Heaney came, that was a red-letter day. And hearing him reading and reciting the poem in that place... And of course, I think it's my favorite quartet. I know it extremely well. And partly because the whole poem is framed to address the person who is thinking of visiting Little Gidding, and it's Eliot starting with all these remonstrations. What you thought you came for is only a husk, a shell. And what you come to Little Gidding for is somehow a little bit different every time you come, and the poem prepares you for that.

But of course, one of the many reasons why Little Gidding was special to Eliot, the Little Gidding community, was that it's where the precious manuscript of George Herbert's poetry that became the temple was sent by Herbert as he was dying to his friend Nicholas Ferrar. And it was from Little Gidding that Nicholas Ferrar rode to Cambridge and had that collection of poetry published in 1633 in the year of Herbert's death. So in the little chapel at Little Gidding, which is really the heart and center of it all, they have lines of Eliot's cross-stitched up, but they also have some lines of George Herbert's. So I go there to celebrate really three poets, I mean Herbert and Eliot, but also Heaney. Heaney reads Herbert very well. One of my happiest memories of Little Gidding is standing on the green sward outside the chapel by the Dauphusard talking to Heaney, not about Eliot but about Herbert. And Heaney had just come out of hospital and he was recovering, and he was quoting Herbert's, *The Flower* where he says, "Who would've thought my withered age could have recovered greenness? Once more I smell the dew and rain and relish versing." And Heaney said, "relish versing" with such relish. So, many, many layers of experience are accumulated over that place for me.

Kirsten Oates: Wow, how wonderful. Yeah. Jim, how about you? Remind us of your history with this poem?

Jim Finley: Well, I entered the monastery right out of high school, lived there for six years, this cloister, trappist, monastery. It had a very deep effect on me, chanting the Psalms and the silence and so on. And Thomas Merton was novice master, so he guided me through John of the Cross and the mystics and Eckhart, and it was really changed my life. And he introduced me to *Four Quartets*. He gave me a copy. I think I was 19 at the time. I can remember being so moved by it, like the depth of it. And I've been carrying it around with me. I've been reading it over and over ever since... It's endless. It's so poignant and evocative. It's a treasure, actually. It's so brilliant. That's my history with it.

Kirsten Oates: So many years of experience with this poem on this podcast today. How wonderful for us who are listening. I'd love to hear from you both about what is special about the poetic voice. What does it offer us that might be missing in normal day-to-day language, and how do you think it is that the poet finds this voice and that we're able to tap into that voice?

Malcolm Guite: Someone once said that poetry speaks to the head through the heart. It goes through the heart first, and the heart inhabits the language and the language inhabits the heart, so that by the time it gets to the head, it can't be turned into some sentimental cliché. It can't be traded back and forth in soundbites. It's speaking from

a greater depth. Now, that doesn't really answer the question of how it does that, but it does that. I mean, Coleridge talking about reading... Actually, other mystics reading Jakob Bohme and William Law said that in the driest and most cynical times of his youth, somehow reading these mystics helped to keep alive the heart in the head. So I think there's something about reunifying who we are that poetic language does.

In terms of what is distinctive about it, I mean, I don't think you can do better than look at the famous account of the poet that Shakespeare gives in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. You may remember, "The poet's eye, in fine frenzy rolling, Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven." And this is the key moment. As imagination bodies forth the form of things unknown the poet's pen turns them to shapes and gives to airy nothing, a local habitation and a name. And of course, Eliot takes that totally serious because every one of those four quarters has a local habitation and a name. But the key thing I think is you see the glance can be heaven to earth or earth to heaven, but it's comprehensive. It includes everything. But that little passage in Shakespeare in the longer version of the speech is prefaced by a saying... Well, two sayings that use these two words apprehend and comprehend. So earlier, Theseus says that, "Imagination apprehends more than cool reason ever comprehends." And later on he says, "If it would but apprehend some joy, it comprehends some bringer of that joy."

So if you think about how we know stuff, the prehend bit of apprehend is about [inaudible 00:12:22]. So we can apprehend something... We don't have the whole of it. It's a glimpse, it's a glance, it's an invitation. We reach out and touch a little bit of it. If we comprehend something, we can get our mind all the way around it and we know it, but it is necessarily therefore smaller than our mind, the list of things we can comprehend. So there's a spectrum of knowing. And I think what Shakespeare is suggesting there... Perhaps heaven stands for the apprehended there and earth for the comprehended... Is that poetry is wooing apprehension into comprehension. It's glancing at heaven, glancing at earth. And then how does it do that? There's this [inaudible 00:12:55], it's a very incarnational word. He says, "Imagination bodies forth the form of things unknown." That's a way of saying that poetry is a way of knowing. Things we couldn't know otherwise, we know by poetry.

And what the poet does is he takes that fleeting apprehension, that glance of heaven and finds, makes forms a living body for it, and that brings it for us into the world of comprehension. Eliot was doing that from the very beginning when he says in one of the early poems, "I must borrow every changing shape to find expression. Dance like a dancing bear, chatter like an ape." Or he says, "I should have been a pair of ragged claws scuttling across the floors of silent seas." Every one of those vivid images is an image of something inarticulate but real about our feelings. But what he does in *Four Quartets* is extraordinary because he takes all kinds of images, some of them quite natural, like midwinter spring when it's been freezing, but then there's a little thaw and there's a little bit of water forming on the ice. And you're looking at that and you see it. You see the sun glancing on it. It's a really vivid, particular image. And then he says, "Between melting and freezing, the soul's sap quivers." And you suddenly realize that image he's given you of something that's been frozen for a long time but has just seen the light is actually a bodying forth of you, a bit of you. And Eliot does that

supremely throughout the Four Quartets. He gives body and form to otherwise inarticulate things within us.

Kirsten Oates: Beautiful. Tim?

Jim Finley: Once I told Thomas Merton, I was with him one-on-one in spiritual direction, and I said, “When you’re speaking, often the most insightful things seem to come to you and you didn’t plan to say them.” And he said, “All spiritual is 90% intuition, 10% ordering it.” And so there’s like a spontaneous... You don’t plan ahead to say it, but it’s given as an image and the image is highly evocative of a recognition that can’t be explained. And it puts us in touch with this dimension of our lives, and this dimension of our lives is the divinity of the immediacy of everything concretized in these flashes or this language. Another thing, I think, these moments that we’re going to speak of where we get these fleeting moments this way, we can’t make these fleeting moments happen, but we can sit in meditation where we become receptively open in a stance that offers the least resistance to be overtaken by what we can’t make happen. This is why this poem is like *Lectio Divina*. It’s like a prayer and it holds us there. It’s a state. So there’s a kind of a sacramental holiness to it. So that’s what it’s meant to me.

Malcolm Guite: I think Eliot said somewhere that poetry is a kind of peripheral vision, but that normally when you get something in your peripheral vision, as soon as you turn to see it, it’s disappeared again. But he said, if you sit very, very still, if the poet sits still, he can woo the periphery into the center and you can finally see this fleeting thing. He also said true poetry communicates before it’s understood. And I would say this poem communicated a huge amount to me, and still does, before I could ever say anything about it. It was the very is-ness of the poem, just the image itself doing its thing without any further explanation.

Jim Finley: Thomas Merton once said, “There’s certain things in life we simply have to accept or we go crazy inside. And they’re the very things we can’t explain to anybody, including ourselves.” But when he spoke, you could tell he was speaking out of that place and it awakens that place in us that Merton called the spiritual communication. And this is a deep reading of scripture too. So this poem resonates. It just keeps us there. It’s really precious.

Kirsten Oates: I love the way you’re both pointing to the way the poem is actually about our lives, that the poem draws us into recognizing our own interior landscape. I remember in another episode we talked about looking at our lives through this lens, like our life is a poem that we can’t fully comprehend. So we live in a state of apprehension, comprehension, and imagination in our own day-to-day lives as well.

Let’s turn to the poem then. So what we’re going to do here is go through each of the four poems one at a time. Jim’s going to share some key passages, and then Malcolm, please respond or expand on what Jim says or add in passages that you are particularly drawn to.

Jim Finley: Malcolm, I want to make clear that in *Turning to the Mystics* podcast, we’ve been turning to the guidance that these mystics offer us about awakening these mystical dimensions of our lives. So the passages I’m going to select are deliberately chosen because they so deeply resonate with that mystical voice. So I’ll start with Burt Norton. “Time present and time passed. The opening words of the poem, Burt Norton. “Time present in time passed are

both perhaps present in time future, and time future is contained in time past. If all time is eternally present, all time is unredeemable.” And my sense is this, that when he visits Burnt Norton, he’s inviting us to come with him in a moment of time to a place, and it’s the burned ruins of this mansion, this manor house where in the past a tragic event happened to the lives there. And the point is, this moment we’re in this place at this time, in the past. That tragic event will always be the place that in the past that it happened.

And no matter how many hundred years in the future people Burnt Norton, it’ll still be the place in the past. So it’s locked in. So if all time is present, it’s unredeemable. So the question is how to redeem the time. And then he says, “Footfalls echo in the memory down the passage we did not take toward the door we never opened into the rose garden.” And what is the passage we didn’t take and what’s the door we didn’t open? It’s imagination. It’s trans factual reality. And when he opens the door to the imagination, the dead are there, and not just the dead of the two people who died there, but all the dead moving across the dry leaves and following into the dry pool. And the dry pool filled with sunlight. When you lean over and look into it filled with sunlight, over your shoulder, you can see the dead looking in with you over it, and the cloud passes and it’s gone. It’s ephemeral.

And so what I see in it also is something else, and he’s kind of alluding to it because he develops it little by little and Little Gidding blossoms. This is faith. In scripture where it says, “In God we live and move and have our being,” so we’re living our life in the vast interiority of God. And so all the angels are here, all the dead are here, and all the dead aren’t dead because nobody dies. And so he’s opening up our imagination to this faith consciousness concretized in this moment.

Malcolm Guite: Well, just to pick on that very last point, he comes back to this idea about what we would, I suppose think of as the communion of saints and the presence. And he says in Little Gidding, “The communication of the dead is tongued with fire beyond the language of the living.” But you are right. He introduces that theme here. I resonate with a great deal of what you’ve said there. I think he announces a great theme not only of this poem, but of the entire sequence of four when he just begins with this apparently very dry, abstract discourse about time. I mean, it could be the beginning of a philosophy lecture. Time present and time past are both perhaps present in time future. You can see he’s done a doctorate in philosophy.

Now, if the poem had carried on like that for the rest of the poem, we wouldn’t be reading it now. But what he does is he sets this theme out with great clarity, but almost with no imagery. And then he suddenly changes tone. One minute you are in a high Oxford room where there’s a Don[inaudible 00:21:41]. The next room... And speaking of Oxford Dons, you’re almost with Alice at the beginning of Alice in Wonderland, and you’re being offered an invitation down a passage into a rose garden. And when he says, “footfalls echo in the memory towards the passage we did not take, towards the door we never opened into the rose garden,” and then he says, “To what purpose disturbing the dust on a bowl of rose leaves, I do not know.” That’s a key turning point when he says, “I don’t know.” There’s drama there. He doesn’t know. We don’t know. We’re only going to know anything by following him into the garden of this poem.

So he says, “other echoes inhabit the garden. Shall we follow? ‘Quick,’ said the bird. ‘Find them, find them round the corner.’” I want to emphasize the childlike exploratory thing

because that's also I think part of the mystical experience. And then you are right, he hears the voices of the dead. He hears the children hidden in the garden. And a wonderful line, "I've stood by those roses," and he says, "the roses have a look of flowers that are looked at." They're not being just looked at by you. They're sort of being beheld by the saints and the cosmos.

And then I think just towards the end of that first passage comes something that was probably the first image in this poem that really affected me as a young man and has continued to affect me, speaking of one's spiritual life for a moment. I go through quite dry periods, desiccant periods, I can't make sense of things. And sometimes it's in the desert and at the dryness that suddenly out of nowhere comes the refreshment. So this thing about, "Dry the pool to look down into the drained pool, dry the pool, dry concrete, brown-edged," and then with no sequitur, no logic, just sheer gift, "dry the pool," all these things, and he suddenly says, "and the pool was filled with water out of sunlight and the lotus rose quietly, quietly. The surface glittered out of the heart of light." In three lines, you've gone from this desiccate, dry concrete. He's taken you through the lotus into the heart of light. And of course they're filled with water out of sunlight. I mean, Dante comes in much more later, but there's a wonderful moment as they're going closer to the heart of the God in the *Paradiso* where Dante says, "e vidi lume in forma di rivera." "I saw light in the form of a river." And the brilliance of taking us with no warning, if you like, from dry emptiness to the heart of light, that's a moment of poetic genius.

Jim Finley: Turning to the Mystics will continue in a moment.

Kirsten Oates: Thank you both for that reflection. Jim, do you want to go into the next section?

Jim Finley: Yes. Next passage I'd like to focus on in this vein is also in *Burnt Norton*. The passage is, he's talking about time, trapped in linear time. And then he says, the passage is, "Allow but a little consciousness. To be conscious is not to be in time, but only in time can the moment in the rose garden, the moment in the arbor where the rain beat, the moment in the drafty church's smoke fall be remembered, involved with past and future. Only through time is time conquered."

I find it so extraordinary about this, is he's taking these utterly simple moments, like you're out walking and it starts to rain and you run under the shelter of an overarching arbor of grapes and you can hear the big raindrops of water falling on the leaves. You're in a drafty church alone at smoke fall in the evening. There are certain moments that are kind of a state of heightened presence that transcend sequential time, like a timeless time. And they're so utterly simple. And when he says, "Allow but little," he's inviting us to allow it. He's inviting us to remember these utterly simple moments. They're so subtle, we tend to walk right past them. But if we could become students of these moments, it's almost like the eternity of life that never ends flowing through everything that's endlessly ending, and he's inviting us to be in touch with that as a meditative or contemplative state. So if you could reflect on that, what's that evoke for you?

Malcolm Guite: There's so much. That's also one of my favorite passages, partly because I think that list of moments, moments of sudden apprehension or consciousness that seem to crop up, but which you want to somehow make sense of, he gives us those three moments, the rose

garden, the arbor where the rain beat and the drafty church at smoke fall. And obviously, he's sharing all those moments with us because we've been in the rose garden with him earlier. Later on at the end of the whole sequence we're in the drafty church at smoke fall. But what I felt that was inviting me to do as a reader was to lift my eyes from the page and think of such moments myself, the moments I've had in different places. I mean, it's an extraordinary thing to say, "to be conscious is not to be in time." That's really remarkable. I think he's saying that when we are spending too much time trying to revisit the past or anticipate the future, we're actually dissipating our consciousness, that what you need to do is be in that moment. And even when you are remembering the moment moment, it has to be the moment, it can't be your memory of the moment, as it were.

So you are in time whether you like it or not. But there are moments in time when time is conquered. I mean fairly enough, although they disagreed with each other about many things, but they did eventually become friends, CS Lewis [inaudible 00:27:38] Eliot [inaudible 00:27:39] fences with each other in a literary way. But there's a great moment in one of Lewis's Screwtape Letters is a discussion of time and the unreality of our living in the past. And the letters says, "The only place you can actually have love and receive love and share love is the present moment. The past is frozen and no longer flows." I'm quoting Lewis now. "The future hasn't yet happened, but the present is all lit up with golden rays." And then Lewis again, "The present is the point at which time touches eternity."

Now, I think Lewis was reading Burnt Norton behind his back. I think he might not want to acknowledge it, but there you go. So I love that thing. Only through time, time is conquered. I mean later on he writes about music. Music obviously is temporal. It has a beat. It depends on tempo. And yet, it's in music that most people can sometimes have an utterly timeless moment, a point where the present touches eternity, a sense of the eternal. And he writes about that. He says, "Music heard so deeply that you are the music while the music lasts." And I think in that beautiful litany of three moments, he's inviting us not only to remember our own moments, but also to be ready for the other moments that he's going to give us in the course of this sequence.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. Beautiful.

Jim Finley: I want to add to that also. What's interesting, in these moments, whether it's the sunset or in the arms of the beloved or reading a child a good night's story or whatever, what's interesting, if there's any duration to the moment, when it ends and you go about your day, you have to look at your watch because you weren't in time. It was a timelessness in a moment of time. And the next insight I think he's leading us to, especially in Little Gidding, is that in these moments, it's not that something more is given to us, but a curtain open and we fleetingly glimpse what every moment is, that there's a sacramental timelessness. This will get up in Little Gidding with Christ, "And the word became flesh like life itself." I think that's another theme.

Malcolm Guite: I think he thinks the flesh itself... He says, "The flesh protects mankind from heaven and damnation, which flesh cannot endure." That these eternal things are eternally everywhere and present. When we're aware of them, then we're becoming conscious. That's why he says, "To be conscious is not to be in time." I think that one line, "To be conscious is not to be in time," is one of the great mystic sayings.

Jim Finley: It is. It really is.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. Well, I experienced one of those moments, Malcolm, when you were sharing about how in the dry times of your spirituality, those lines from the poem about the sunlight breaking into the pool. That was a moment for me of really resonating with that experience that you had. What comes up for me for this section too is there's a certain way that time needs to be conquered. There's a certain way that the way we look at time gets in the way of this eternal consciousness. And so that's something I've been learning through this poem, is how does time distract us from this? So I love this, "Only through time is time conquered." So it's not ridding ourselves of time, but it's something else, something that we're going to learn.

Malcolm Guite: One of the things he finds to do that conquering of time is the idea of pattern. Stillness is one of the ideas, but the other idea is pattern. And he says later on in *Little Gidding*, "A people without history is not redeemed from time, for history is a pattern of timeless moments." And in this poem in the fifth section, he says, "Words after speech reach into the silence. Only by the form, the pattern, can words or music reach the stillness." And that's why I think this is poetry. It's not prose, because poetry is patterned language. It has form, there's a pattern. I mean there's a very beautiful account of this poetry in a quite early book on Eliot by Helen Gardner called *The Art of TS Eliot*, in which she draws out the obvious thing, that the poem is called *Four Quartets*, and a quartet is both a form of music and a musical ensemble.

And she develops the way... In fact, each single quartet consists of five movements, and she parallels the five movements with what was going on in the music that Eliot was listening to, particularly the late Beethoven quartets, the way you get a theme and a counter theme, and then you get the theme you had earlier but played on a different instrument. And then you get the tensions and the differences and then you get a final movement that resolves them. And she points out that what seemed to be like a series of spontaneous meditations are in fact beautifully and carefully and artistically patterned. The timeless moments in this poem are a pattern of timeless moments, and it's essentially a musical pattern I think.

Kirsten Oates: Thanks so much, Malcolm for bringing that to our attention. That's really a rich new layer for people to explore. I hadn't heard about that connection between the foundational patterns in *Four Quartets* and Beethoven's music. I love that. Well, now it's time to move on to *East Coker*. Jim, can you get us started?

Jim Finley: Again, there's a theme that keeps repeating itself. It starts in a certain place at a certain time. And *East Coker* in the second stanza, "In my beginning is my end. Now the light falls across the open field leaving the dark lane shuttered with branches dark in the afternoon, where you lean against a bank while a van passes and the deep lane insists on the direction into the village and the electric heat hypnotized. In a warm haze the sultry light is absorbed, not refracted by gray stone." And then he says that you're kind of there now all alone. The van passes, you're all alone. You're in this field. I think you see more of this in Europe, I think, than here. Down through the ages, you're looking across the field. And if you don't look too close, like peripheral vision, again, if you don't stare at it, if you don't look too close... "If you do not come too close, if you do not come too close on a summer of midnight, you can hear the music of the weak pipe and the little drum and see them dancing around the bonfire, the

association of man and woman.”

And you see these people living their lives, dancing. And although their bodies have died and they're in the earth, the point is the dead aren't dead. And the image that I get from this, it isn't just that we're eternal as the beloved, but there's also an eternal quality to the daily patterns of our life is sacred, that if God knows we're getting up and lying down at night, watering the houseplants, God eternally knows it, and everything real is forever and there's a certain quiet, liturgical, rhythmic holiness to the rhythms of our life that never ends. That's a sense I have from that. What's that speak to you, Malcolm?

Malcolm Guite: I very much agree with that. And the passage you're quoting, he's come to East Coker because this is where his forebears came from. But also he's quoting an Elizabethan writer also called Eliot, spelled with a Y, who talks about having seen these dances, “In daunsing signifying matrimony, a dignified and commodious sacrament, holding each other by the hand in the arm, which betokeneth concord.” Those are quotations effectively from an ancestor. He's recognizing that although we're going to have great mystical moments and moments of timelessness, he's a Christian and he believes in the incarnation. He says, “The impossible union is incarnation, the union of time and [inaudible 00:35:35].” And therefore he's interested in who we are, in our bodies and our histories and our forebears. And I get the sense that lying behind all of this, particularly as he talks about the loam and the earth, is the Genesis idea that Adam means person of earth, that we're taken from the ground, we return to the ground.

And that's a dignified and beautiful thing. God loves the ground from which he took us. All of those things say, “Rustically solemn or in rustic laughter. Lifting heavy feet in clumsy shoes. Earth feet, loam feet, lifted in country mirth. Mirth of those long since under earth, nourishing the corn.” That's brilliant. Even the bread we break is given to us in the enriched soil of our forebears. And then he gets back to the time thing. He says, “Keeping time,” which was the dance. Keeping the rhythm in their dancing as in their living in the living seasons. “The time of the seasons and constellations, the time of milking, the time of harvest, the time of the coupling of man and woman and that of beasts.” The little echo of Ecclesiastes there. And I wonder sometimes whether when he'd finished *Burnt Norton*, whether Eliot hadn't thought he'd been a bit too hard on time and he wanted to show even in the rhythms of time, there is something beautiful. If you redeem the time, you have to love it too.

Jim Finley: Second one I'd like to quote before we move on to the next poem. In the same poem he says, and this is found in part three of *East Coker*, “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 for the wrong thing. There is yet faith.” Then he jumps down to a direct quote from St. John of the Cross in the *Dark Night*, book II of the *Dark Night of the Soul*. “In order to arrive at what you do not know, you must go by a way of ignorance or the way you do not know. In order to possess what you do not possess, you must go by a way a dispossession. In order to arrive at which you are not you must go by way in which you are not. And what you do not know is the only thing you know, and what you own is what you do not own. And where you are is where you're not.”

And here we get in St. John of the Cross, if we look at this in *Little Gidding*, especially with

a compound [inaudible 00:38:28] and these masters, this passage of the dark night where we're weaned by God of our dependency on what the senses can sense, the mind can grasp in time. And so to hope without hope, you're not yet ready for hope because the finite self's going to be hoping for finite things. But it isn't until the finite things all unravel that eternity shines out through the unraveling. What do you see in that? I think it's so fertile.

Malcolm Guite: I agree with you entirely there. And I think that the reason why the John of the Cross comes where it does is actually that the whole of section three is a meditation on darkness and negation. So it begins with an echo of another great poet, John Milton. Eliot writes, "Oh, dark, dark, dark. They all go into the dark, the vacant into stellar spaces. The vacant into the vacant." Now those opening lines, "Oh, dark, dark, dark," are the first speech of Samson after he's been blinded in Milton's, *Samson Agonistes* where Samson comes on and he says, "Oh, dark, dark, dark. Unutterably dark without all hope of day." And it's his absolute low point. But then he recovers and he asks for an inner light from God. So I think he's saying, "Okay, what are we going to do with the dark? Are we just going to flee it or are we going to dare to go into it?"

And I think he starts with the simple sense that we die. The captains, the merchant bankers, the eminent men of letters, of which of course Eliot is one, the generous patron, they all go into the dark. We are all headed for, in that sense, the darkness. But then what? Can we receive the darkness as a gift? Can we be glad and blessed that it took away from us all the distractions and the hopes for the wrong things? "So I said to my soul, be still and let the dark come upon you, which shall be the darkness of God." I love that line. I think particularly the honesty of what shall be. It would've been glib and presumptuous to have said, "Let the dark come upon you, which is the darkness of God." It isn't the darkness of God, it's my particularly fetid darkness, which needs to be purged of all kinds of things. And the going into the dark is only the beginning of the purgation, but I have hoped that it shall be the darkness of God, and that somehow in that darkness I will then learn to wait, to hope, to receive again.

And I think there's a kind of strand of Christianity where you get some nice comforting saying, "I have good plans for you," and it's stuck on the bottom of a poster with a picture of a lovely sunrise. And it's faith remarketed as sentimentality. It's like those Thomas Kincaid paintings. Now there are some great, wonderful, luminous, uplifting things that you could put on such a poster. But the reason why I trust them in this poem is because of passages like this, that I know he's real about darkness, about deprivation, about letting go, about purging ourselves of the love of the false and the fleeting.

Jim Finley: [inaudible 00:41:48] segue into this second passage which will take us into Little Gidding. "The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness grasps it not. But although the darkness can't grasp it, the darkness can be illumined by it." And it's also interesting, when John of the Cross was in prison, he's being whipped and he went through this horrendous thing, and he says, "Oh, night lovelier than the dawn." You see the same thing with Rumi, when he lost Shams, his teacher and he started spinning around the pillar and all this poetry starts coming out. It's just this lovely light out of darkness.

Kirsten Oates: Thank you for listening to part one of this conversation on *Four Quartets*. Join us for the second half of our special interview with Malcolm Guite dropping next week in which

Malcolm and Jim go through the two final poems in TS Eliot's Four Quartets. We'll see you then. Thank you for listening to this episode of Turning to the Mystics, a podcast created by the Center for Action and Contemplation. We're planning to do episodes that answer your questions, so if you have a question, please email us at podcasts@cac.org or send us a voicemail. All of this information can be found in the show notes. We'll see you again soon.