"THE END IS WHERE WE START FROM": T.S. ELIOT AND AN INTERPRETATION OF ROBERT DORAN'S WORK

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I. Introduction

Robert M. Doran's theological career has extended in many directions. His work is wide-ranging and, for that reason, difficult to synthesize without distorting. In contrast with typical systematic explanations and appropriations, I offer T.S. Eliot's poetic works—particularly *Four Quartets*—as an interpretive key for aspects of Doran's thought. My synthesis will produce the following conclusion: Robert Doran's work, as viewed through T.S. Eliot's contributions, is profoundly Christocentric and cruciform. This is true both in the case of Doran's explicit acknowledgement of as much, and also when that inner unity is only implicit. This in turn implies a much more radical thesis, and that is that prayer forms the very heart of Doran's theological insight. Whether or not such a thesis *seems* radical, the vitality of prayer is *always* a radical center to hold.

II. Robert Doran's use of T.S. Eliot

T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets* appears in Doran's early *Subject and Psyche* as well as the later revision, and again in *Theology and the Dialectics of History* with much the same purpose: describing the fully authentic subject. Drawing on "Little Gidding," the final poem in *Four Quartets*, Doran cites two sections repeatedly. The first is as follows:

> …the end of all our exploring
> Will be to arrive where we started

And know the place for the first time.[1]

Doran uses Eliot's inversion—"arriving where we started,"—to describe "second immediacy." Second immediacy is, to quote Doran, "where cognitive and existential praxis proceed from the kind of self-possession that approaches rendering them equal to themselves."[2] It is a form of presence to one's self in which cognition and praxis have achieved full integration: such an immediacy to one's self both imitates our first immediacy (our first self-presence) and at the same time utterly transforms it, since now we know as authentic human beings. Thus, we arrive where we started, and know the place for the first time.

Doran's reference to Eliot touches on a major theme in the *Four Quartets*, which is the relationship of time to redemption. For example, "Burnt Norton," the first of the quartets, opens with the following puzzle:

> Time present and time past
> Are both perhaps present in time future,
> And time future contained in time past.[3]

The poet here suggests a complex notion of time, one in which the past, the present, and the future—all of which we are used to treating as discrete units of time—are present to one another. This does not mean that there is no such thing as "past" or "present" or "future"; or that time is only an illusion. Eliot resists such a conclusion, insisting in the very next lines: "If all time is eternally present/ all time is unredeemable."[4] Time must still function *as time*, with its progressive flow of anticipation, of decision, and of recollection if it is to be redeemed. Time is a

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[1] T.S. Eliot, "Little Guiding," *Four Quartets*, V.
[2] Robert M. Doran, *Subject and Psyche* (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 1994), 274-5.
[3] T.S. Eliot, "Burnt Norton," *Four Quartets*, I.
[4] Ibid.

complex reality in the midst of redemption and already redeemed, these images of time turn around the central paradox of Eliot's work: redemption consists in a return to what was lost *and* in an absolute transformation.

Such a simultaneous return and transformation is analogously relates to Doran's concept of second immediacy, making his reference apt but also expansive. It implies more than it might seem at first. Citing Eliot's work immediately implies a reference to the Incarnation, a reference without which Eliot's poetry ceases to be cohesive. This is because the *telos* (or end) of time is the Incarnation, which is already present to time in and through time itself: the Incarnation is part of history and beyond history. The Incarnation is

> *Erhebung* without motion, concentration/
> Without elimination, both a new world
> And the old made explicit, understood
> In the completion of its partial ecstasy,
> The resolution of its partial horror.
> Yet the enchainment of past and future
> Woven in the weakness of the changing body.[5]

The Incarnation functions as a significant focal point for Eliot, enfolding his insights into a single, surpassing whole.

But to introduce God's work in the Incarnation in the case of Doran is not a distortion, just as it is not a distortion in the case of Eliot. Doran uses second immediacy to argue for his theory of psychic conversion, in which the subject, in order to be authentic, must experience not only Lonergan's classical set of conversions (moral, intellectual, religious), but must also be converted at the most basic psychic level. Doran argues for the consistent presence of God throughout this

[5] Eliot, "Burnt Norton," II.

transformation, without whom the whole move toward authenticity is only partially rendered. He writes, "one will confirm the suspicion, I believe, that the gift of God's love has been responsible for initiating and sustaining the whole process, that one's own responsibility has been a cooperation with a fated call to a dreaded holiness."[6]

This "dreaded holiness" gives cause to introduce Doran's second most common use of Eliot, which is to reference "Little Gidding's" remark about the "condition of complete simplicity/(Costing not less than everything)."[7] Holiness consists exactly in this costly condition, and in Doran's work the poem is employed when discussing, as in volume one of *Theological Foundations*, "a condition of universal willingness, where…one's ego is no longer the center of reference, but is rather subordinated to some universal destiny governed by the providence of God."[8] In order to be authentic, the individual must experience a purification and intensification of desire that, paradoxically, requires desiring, not everything, but God above all things. Bonaventure, using Pauline themes, would call this being crucified to God and crucified to the world. Doran cites *Four Quartets*, which describes "the purification of the motive/In the ground of our beseeching."[9] These two distinctive ways of speaking are coherent with one another.

The true flowering of Doran's insight into holiness occurs in the second volume of *Theological Foundations*, when he discusses Christian praxis. He says:

> That praxis [of the Christian], a matter of 'doing as Jesus did,' lies in a participation not only in Jesus' ministerial proclamation and

[6] Doran, *Subject and Psyche*, 275.
[7] Eliot, "Little Gidding," V.
[8] Robert M. Doran, *Theological Foundations I: Intentionality and History* (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 2006), 435.
[9] Eliot, "Little Gidding," V.

> enactment of the kingdom, but also in the paschal self-offering…. As the principal catalytic agency of Jesus himself lay in his redemptive suffering, so the principal catalytic agency of the community called and empowered to do as Jesus did will lie in its participation in the law of Jesus' cross.[10]

Like Eliot and his focus on the Incarnation, Doran cannot stand a bloodless (that is, timeless and disembodied) relationship between the gift of God's love and the working out of that love in the world. Redemption is participation in the *cross* not simply as an idea, but as the far-reaching unity of every sphere of existence and indeed of consciousness.

In Eliot, this participation in the cross is described as a "stillness-in-movement," which means imitating the cross as the "still-point of the turning world."[11] In Doran, Lonergan's "law of the cross" receives attention to answer the same question about our relationship to the cross. For both thinkers, the Christian becomes cruciform, losing every embrace of self in order to become more capable of love, and losing even an iron grip on time in order to be inhabited by eternity. In Eliot, the Christian comes to imitate the stillness of the cross:

> 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. [12]

The Christian inhabits time through a kind of timelessness, approaching the world from the point of view of eternity. Either case—Doran or Eliot—is a direct attempt to involve the Paschal Mystery in the events of history; not only as an ideal to be

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[10] Robert M. Doran, *Theological Foundations II: Theology and Culture* (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 2006),529.
[11] Eliot, "Burnt Norton," II.
[12] Eliot, "East Coker," *Four Quartets*, III.

imitated, but as an effective, revelatory event that continues to work in and transform the world.

The two major passages that Doran most cites from *Four Quartets*, referencing the end of all our exploring and the condition of complete simplicity, are in fact both from the same stanza—the very last stanza in *Four Quartets*. For Eliot's poetry to function fully as poetry, it is helpful to read the self-contained whole:

> 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 of earth left to discover
> Is that which was the beginning;
> At the source of the longest river
> The voice of the hidden waterfall
> And the children in the apple-tree
> Not known, because not looked for
> But heard, half heard, in the stillness
> Between the two waves of the sea.
> Quick now, here, now, always--
> A condition of complete simplicity
> (Costing not less than everything)
> And all shall be well and
> All manner of things shall be well
> When the tongues of flame are in-folded
> Into the crowned knot of fire
> And the fire and the rose are one.[13]

The first point to notice is the return to images of the garden mentioned at the very start of *Four Quartets* in "Burnt Norton." The garden is described both in "Burnt Norton" and in "Little Gidding" as "through the gate," filled with voices calling, filled with roses, and joined by children. Though this is the same garden, described in similar terms as in "Burnt Norton," the theme is transformed with the

[13] Eliot, "Little Gidding," V.

addition new images: now there is fire, observed as it were in the very center of the garden, and it has become one with the roses of "Burnt Norton's" rose-garden. Fire fills the garden as its very form, and the beauty of the rose (with its thorns) itself recalls a long literary history of poetry, love, and the cross. In Eliot, the fire-rose is his most incisive poetic image for Christ—who crowns us with these thorny roses as our greatest glory. The fulfillment of the world, for Eliot, is a surpassing fulfillment: meeting our every desire while at the same time obliterating our every expectation by extending beyond our imagination.

III. Doran through Eliot's Eyes

Looking at Doran through Eliot's eyes, I argue now for an analogous surpassing fulfillment in the case of the law of the cross. This law is consistent, pervasive, and indispensible throughout Doran's work. The law of the cross is a law precisely because it is universally applied. What is evil is always in the midst of being transformed into good, even in the complicated rise and fall of historical ages. But this is not a theoretical transformation. Doran himself argues, when discussing the academy, that "Lonergan's emphasis on conversion as foundational reality is perhaps the most controversial element in his entire set of proposals for theology in particular, but also for the whole of the intellectual life."[14] It is controversial because of what it demands of theology and the intellectual life—and it is also controversial because conversion is a foundational reality for *every* facet of human existence (psychic, moral, intellectual, religious). Nothing in the human heart is left

[14] Robert M. Doran, *Theology and the Dialectics of History* (Toronto, Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 1990), 150.

untouched. The law of the cross *inhabits* the Christian, just as the character of baptism remains indelibly with the Christian.

In Eliot, the stillness of the Incarnation inhabits the Christian through prayer. The Incarnation, with the cross at its heart, gathers together the prayer of the whole world in and through Christ. The Christian is to *pray*; and this is not idle indifference, but the driving force that moves the world that turns around the Incarnation. The world is, for Eliot, involved in a "perpetual angelus," participating in the "prayer of the one Annunciation."[15]

I would like to suggest a similar insight into Doran's work. Prayer is at the heart of his theology, even when prayer is not discussed. It fuels the coherence of his insight into the subject, and into history. For it is prayer that allows us to see, best and most irrevocably, the insoluble link between the human person and history; the relationship between God and the world; the ultimate resolution of life's joys and terrors – not against time, but within it. Doran's insightful use of T.S. Eliot, turned back on itself, demands such an interpretation.[16]

In the first place, the law of the cross is linked with prayer, though neither is reducible to the other. It is the form of prayer, by which I mean the law of the cross is the intrinsic principle of prayer. I mean intrinsic principle both in the sense that the cross makes prayer effective, and in the sense that prayer is also to function as a manner of transforming the world to good. This is no radical link. It is almost

[15] T.S. Eliot, "Dry Salvages," *Four Quartets*, IV.
[16] Doran, along with Lonergan, acknowledges the priority of the religious – especially with respect to religious conversation. While not identical with total authenticity, religious conversion demands the other conversions to authenticity: "Neither moral nor religious conversion is identical with self-appropriation at the fourth level of intentional consciousness. But a moral and religious consciousness that can sublate intellectual conversion must be a morally and religiously self-appropriating consciousness*" Theological Foundations I*, 33-34.

ordinary in Christian theology. But the link between prayer and the cross does, in fact, radicalize our understanding of Doran's thought.

The law of the cross is radicalized by prayer. This law abides in the Christian not only as the principle of his or her increasing holiness, but also as the effective increase of the world's holiness through the Christian. Prayer is not *action* in the same sense a good work is. It is prior to action, abides in action, and completes action. Prayer is directed to God first and last, as much as it is still for others, and it is from God that it draws its effectiveness. So, too, of course with the law of the cross. It operates in a similar horizon as prayer, "working" in the world with an analogous action to that of prayer: neither reducible to good works nor obviating them, but sublating them.[17]

Doran's thought is further radicalized if we recall the current state of systematic theology, which avoids prayer and mystical theology as merely "pastoral" concerns. If prayer is the heart of Doran's thought, then to read him is to make prayer and mysticism unavoidable. Prayer is not "beneath" the surface of his works, like a gem to be either found or ignored; it is fundamental, and his work on subjectivity and history—just to name two topics—cannot be fully understood without it. Though most modern theologians admit that prayer is foundational to

[17] Note, for example, the conversation with Balthasar in *Theology and the Dialectics of History*:
…the distorted dialectics of community, the subject, and culture have culminated in what Hans Urs von Balthasar describes as follows: "Man feels himself to be so humiliated through the disfigurement and the denial of form, …to have been so disfigured along with the forms, that he daily experiences the temptation to despair of the dignity of existence and to break off all association with a world that disowns and destroys its own nature as image." GL I 25-26

In this book, Doran recognizes the need for redemption but as it were from the group up, including a thorough redemption of history. Balthasar's category of the aesthetic – which, for Balthasar, is intrinsically related to the glory of God – appears as a helpful further understanding for both history and psychology. Doran makes a note on Balthasar in Chapter 13 (note 1), cautioning against a too one-sided approach to grace, and yet thoroughly accepted the priority of grace as Balthasar works it out.

theology, it has often proven difficult to write theology in such a way that it is really made *foundational* instead of simply a *presumption*. Doran has accomplished this.

As a final note, I would like to indicate that Doran's insight into prayer, rendering it a fundamental facet of his theology, is an aesthetic move. That is to say, he argues for grace and prayer (and presumes both) with such ease because he understands the necessity of beauty in theology. Only a theological aesthetics can comprehend the link between prayer and theology, since beauty unites the mysterious and the explicit. This is why, when he approaches the most mystical of topics in his books, Doran reaches for poetry to describe his meaning. It is an aesthetic moment. Doran himself has expressed keen interest in Hans Urs von Balthasar's theological aesthetics, but I am not arguing here for a Balthasarian influence upon Doran. Regardless of that influence, I think Doran is being perfectly consistent with himself, and this is not for Balthasar's sake, but a product of his own experience. He permits mystery, and thus poetic allusion, a decisive place in his theology. Thus he writes in *Subject and Psyche*, "As Vico declared all to begin with poetry, so perhaps there is a way of affirming that all ends with poetry: we end where we began, but we see the place as if for the first time."[18] Surely this statement is *more* true in the case of prayer than in poetry, since prayer is both the beginning and end of Christian life and thought. Prayer is the manner in which the Christian is eminently concerned with time through the auspices of eternity; through, that is, the Incarnation and the cross. Thus time is redeemed, and thus it is indeed true what

[18]Doran, *Subject and Psyche*, 277.

T.S. Eliot says, "From wrong to wrong the exasperated spirit/ Proceeds, unless restored by that refining fire/ Where you must move in measure, like a dancer."[19]

IV. Conclusion

In this paper, I have examined Robert Doran's use of the *Four Quartets* in his theology, described these same elements of *Four Quartets* beyond Doran's use, and expanded my interpretation of his theology based on T.S. Eliot's insights. What has emerged is a similar Christocentric and cruciform emphasis, and an analogous reliance upon prayer at the heart of both works. Robert Doran sees a world thoroughly inhabited by Christ, and the authentic subject is ever more inhabited by the cross. The radical transformation of the cross, the total conversion of the subject at every level, is the source and goal of true authenticity.

[19] Eliot, "Little Gidding," II.