Hope's Hunger

On Ascetism and Apophaticism of Hope in T.S. Eliot's Post-conversion Poetry

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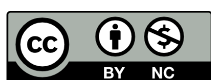
Abstract

In this paper I analyse hope in connection to human desires as a natural passion that can be ordered virtuously and as a theological virtue. In both, hope is primarily threatened by two vices: presumption and despair. The central argument of this paper is that ascetic and apophatic practices can help us navigate the difficult terrain of hope in connection to desire; i.e., that one way to learn virtuous hope is to engage in ascetic practices whereby the desires that motivate hope – and our moral vision which makes visible to us those goods to which hope attaches itself – are purified. Ascetic is here understood not as a complete denial of desire – an absence of all desiring – but as a momentary renunciatory suspension of desire that leads to its purification and reorientation towards the good. This asceticism is connected with apophaticism: a welcoming of noetic darkness through which one enters a state of profound and willed ignorance in relation to God and desired future goods. My claim is that T.S. Eliot's post-conversion poetry – especially 'Ash-Wednesday' – yields many interesting and influential examples of how ascetic practices can form our future-orientated way of being, directing our hunger towards perceived future goods in a virtuous manner. In 'Ash-Wednesday' we discover an account of the individual convert's journey towards spiritual renewal and the difficult death hope must experience during that journey. In the *Four Quartets* asceticism and apophaticism of hope are also present while the focus shifts from the inward world of the individual convert to the individual in the context of the historical communities she is a member of. One of the most interesting features of Eliot's account of asceticism and hope



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is that for him the ascetic struggle is not a straight-forward journey from renunciation to stillness but a constant back-and-forth between moments of devotion and distraction. Indeed, the ascetic struggle for the purification of the desires that motivate hope takes place through the confusion of the fallen world that also pushes upon us the need to re-evaluate our hopes after disappointments and crises. After an analysis of Eliot's post-conversion poetry, I will present some preliminary remarks about how this kind of ascetic-apophatic approach towards hope can help remedy some of its accompanying vices on various levels.

I find myself
Devouring verses of stranger passion
And exile. The exact words
Are fed into my blank hunger for you.

Geoffrey Hill, *The Songbook of Sebastian Arrurruz*

Introduction

We generally think of hope in terms of desire and expectation. Hope, as the OED defines it, is an "expectation of something desired; desire combined with expectation". As such, hoping is risky business: while it is a natural activity for human beings – we cannot help but exist as future-orientated agents – through hope we also become invested in future goods that are uncertain and difficult to attain, hence making ourselves vulnerable to presumption, disappointment and eventually despair. In addition, as a movement towards an attractive future good, hope is linked with desires: we hope for that which we desire, and we desire that which we perceive as good. It is also this connection with desires that makes hope dangerous: disordered and selfish desires can create a cacophony of hopes and disappointments in a person that hold her back from attaining the inner stillness needed for virtuous living.

One way to characterise the nature of hope as a natural human activity is to speak of it, as Thomas Aquinas does, as a passion. For Aquinas hope as a natural passion is a desire for a future good that is difficult and yet possible to attain (*bonum arduum futurum*).[1] As a passion hope functions on

[1] For Aquinas passions are sensual appetites that generate "inclinations of desire towards those desirable objects immediately perceived through the senses and imagination, or aversions from what is perceived as noxious or unpleasant (I-II 22.3)." Jean Porter, *The Perfection of Desire: Habit, Reason, and Virtue in Aquinas's* Summa Theologiae (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 2018), 17. As such passions themselves are not virtues but natural inclinations that must be ordered by virtues: human beings are passionate agents who are moved by their passions to pursue what they perceive as good and avoid what they perceive as bad. Virtues – such as prudence, fortitude, justice and courage – integrate these passions around the good.

various levels, intersecting with virtue in diverse ways.[2] It is possible, for example, to be distracted by the natural passion of hope – desiring some immediate, perceived good – so that one becomes obsessed with that desired good to a point where one is unable to orientate oneself properly towards some other, objectively greater future good. We can imagine, for example, an academic who hopes for a specific kind of academic success – such as a position of influence in an elite university. There are several moral pitfalls such a hope can fall into. For example, the academic can hope for the desired position of influence for unvirtuous reasons: a disordinate desire for power or fame can be the basis of her motivations. Hope that has its basis in disordinate desires rather than virtuously ordered ones, can easily become obsessive: our academic can eventually become so preoccupied with the singular goal of attaining a position of influence that she is unable to hope for other, even greater goods – such as that of being a good colleague to those with whom she shares the academic enterprise she is engaged with. Her hope, mixed with pride, can then also slip into *presumption*: she can despise her colleagues who might be competing for the same position, thinking that the position is already hers. If it happens that she is not, in fact, offered the position, the disappointment can cause her presumption to swing to the other extreme and turn into *despair*: having thought of her future good primarily in terms of this specific thing, she is unable to imagine a desirable future without it.

While not all of us are academics, most of us can probably think of similar examples of situations where the human tendency to hope for uncertain future goods results in some, smaller or greater, moral loss. I would like to argue, therefore, following Aquinas, that hope is an art: in the same way as a person needs to learn how to order her desires to love all good things in the right order, she will have to learn how to hope well on various levels. Indeed, hope, desire, and love are all interconnected: hope as a passion is a movement of desire towards an arduous future good, so desired because it is loved. A person's passions, desires, and loves, however, are not necessarily virtuously ordered. Rather, they can easily become excessive, disordinate, and obsessive, pushing our hopes towards presumption and finally disappointment and despair.

[2] For Aquinas, hope threatens to slip towards the vices of presumption and despair since as a natural passion "hope, like the other passions, is subject to a mean and extremes". (STh. II-II, q. 17, a. 1.) For Aquinas the virtue of theological hope is distinct from the passion of hope as such and is not subject to means and extremes (it is not possible to hope too much in God or trust too much in divine assistance), expect in secondary sense "it may have a mean and extremes, as regards those things a man trusts to obtain" – i.e. the specific things one hopes from God – "in so far as he either presumes above his capability [presumption], or despairs of things of which he is capable" (STh. II-II, q. 17, a. 1). Strictly speaking, only theological hope can be a virtue: natural hope is a passion and hence subject to virtue but not a virtue in itself. However, some – such as Nicholas Austin, SJ – have argued that there is indeed a virtue of moral hope in Aquinas as well: magnanimity. See Austin, 'Moral Hope: Aquinas and Cajetan on Magnanimity', *Nova et Vetera,* vol. 18, no. 3 (2020), pp. 817-852.

The argument of this paper is that ascetic and apophatic practices can help a person to navigate this difficult terrain of hope in connection to desire and virtue: one way to learn virtuous hope is to engage in ascetic practices whereby the desires that motivate hope – and one's moral vision which makes visible those goods hope attaches itself to – are purified as hope takes on a more apophatic form.[3] Ascetic practice as a momentary renunciatory suspension of desire clears our vision, removes distractions, and so helps us to become "devoted, concentrated in purpose".[4] If hope is a passion then hope, too, must be purified and transformed to become virtuous: hope and its accompanying passions – sorrow, joy, fear – must be "put in order and calmed".[5] In addition to this level of virtuous ordering of passions, ascetism also relates to theological hope: hoping for a God who is beyond any creaturely image, concept or experience – the wholly ineffable, unimaginable God – requires a kind of *via negativa* of hope. Ascetism therefore paves the way towards an apophaticism of theological hope.[6] An interesting and influential example of this kind of purification of hope can be found in T.S. Eliot's post-conversion poetry, especially in 'Ash-Wednesday'. Thus, the main argument of this paper regarding ascetic practices of hope is made via an analysis of Eliot's poetry. In Eliot we find one possible account of the kind of ascetic struggle that those who hope as morally imperfect agents can engage in. In order to locate Eliot's account of hope's ascetism in a broader theological context, I will discuss it's relation to two major theologians' account of hope: Thomas Aquinas and St. John of the Cross. Of these especially the latter was also a significant influence on Eliot and will therefore make an excellent conversation partner for the purposes of this paper.[7] Thomas Aquinas's influence on Eliot is more mediated, especially through Dante who was a major source of inspiration for Eliot. In addition, he was also

[3] For a discussion of asceticism see Sarah Coakley, *The New Asceticism: Sexuality, Gender and the Quest for God* (London: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2015), especially the introduction. In this paper I will be mostly following Coakley in how I understand asceticism not as a repression of desire but as a reordering and re-channelling of desire towards its proper end through a momentary renunciatory suspension of it.

[4] 'Ash-Wednesday', II.21.

[5] St. John, "Ascent of Mount Carmel" in *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, edited and translated by Kieran Kavanaugh, O.C.D., and Otilio Rogriguez, O.C.D. (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 2017), 3.2.2.; 3.16.4-5.

[6] This emphasis on reordering of desire through ascetic and apophatic practices is mine: for Eliot the matter is somewhat more complex and at times he seems to suggest that the goal is not mere *suspension* of desire – a kind of pause between desire and movement – but its disappearance. The closer he gets to theological and hence apophatic hope, the more Eliot seems to be thinking thinking not simply in terms of desire's denial but its absence: the ideal state for learning theological hope is that of complete stillness where desiring has ceased. On the other hand, his notion of stillness-in-movement seems to suggest an asceticism that is more like renunciatory suspension of desire: desires are still experienced as real but they are momentarily set aside and the movement they motivate comes to a halt, intentional stillness is chosen instead.

[7] For the influence of St. John of the Cross on Eliot, see Paul Murray, 'The Influence of St. John of the Cross' in *T.S. Eliot and Mysticism* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 1991), pp. 88-100.

influenced by Neo-Thomistic philosophy, especially that of Jacques Maritain.[8] In this paper, however, I've chosen to go to Aquinas directly since he also offers, as was seen earlier, a rich way of understanding hope as a human passion – that is, an activity that is inherently human but needs to be ordered by the virtues in order to be integrated into a life of human flourishing. His account of hope, therefore, offers an interesting framework against which Eliot's asceticism of hope can be compared.

The Hard Death of Hope: On T.S. Eliot's Ash-Wednesday

The conversion of T.S. Eliot into Anglo-Catholicism in 1927 came as a surprise to those who had come admire him as the author *Waste Land* (1922) and as a major voice of Anglophone literary modernism: for some his conversion seemed like a betrayal of his earlier modernist convictions, a turning away from the spiritual waste lands of his early poetry towards religious and metaphysical consolations.[9] While the question of continuity in Eliot's poetry is a complex one, a shift in tone and ethos in contrast to his earlier poetry is clear in Ash-Wednesday (1930) which is the first of Eliot's poems written after his conversion to Anglo-Catholicism. The theme of the poem itself also suggests that a shift has taken place in Eliot's life and thinking: the poem explores, after all, the realities of conversion and spiritual transformation and the difficult renunciation of old desires that accompany such a transformation. Ash-Wednesday is a poem "fundamentally concerned with alternations in state, with the painful processes of becoming, and with the subtle permutations of the changed and the changing self".[10]

The poem consists of six parts which were originally separate fragments that Eliot edited into one poem – this process of writing and editing shows in the fragmentary nature of the poem itself, as we shall see later.[11] The title 'Ash-Wednesday' refers to the beginning of Lent: a season of repentance and conversion preceding the celebration of Passover and eventually Easter. On Ash-Wednesday the priest will tip his fingers into ash, draw a sign of the cross on the foreheads of the faithful and repeat the words: "You are dust and to dust you shall return." These words – and the moment at which they are spoken in the narrative of the first few chapters of Genesis (3.19) – help situate the reader of the poem: we enter the world of the poem at the moment of our exile

[8] For a discussion of Dante's influence on Eliot, see for example Massimo Bacigalupo 'Dante' in ed. Jason Harding *T.S. Eliot in Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011). For Eliot and Neo-Thomistic philosophy, see James Matthew Wilson, '"I bought and praised but did not read Aquinas": T.S. Eliot, Jacques Maritain, and the Ontology of the Sign,' in *Yeats Eliot Review* vol. 27, issue 1/2, pp. 12-22.
[9] Lyndall Gordon, *The Imperfect Life of T.S. Eliot* (London: Hachette Digital, 2012), chapter 6.
[10] Sarah Kennedy, '"Let these words answer": Ash-Wednesday and the Ariel Poems,' in ed. Jason Harding, *The New Cambridge Companion to T.S. Eliot* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 91.
[11] Kennedy, 89.

from the Garden. Already with the title, then, the central juxtapositions of the poem are established: exile and return, the Desert and the Garden, death and rebirth.

In addition to the liturgical context, the intertextual context of the poem is also important for its interpretation. The two main sources of influence and inspiration are Dante – especially Vita Nuova, Purgatorio and Paradiso – and St. John of the Cross.[12] The poem is in many ways modelled after Dante's Vita Nuova: here, too, the ambiguous character of 'the Lady' represents both earthly and divine loves, inviting the lover into deeper communion with God through herself. St. John of the Cross's mystical theology, on the other hand, inspires the ascetic theme of renunciation, the upwards movement on 'the ladder of divine love' – "mounting of the saint's stair"[13] – towards ever deepening darkness.

The structure of 'Ash-Wednesday' has divided its critics. One could argue that the poem follows the structure of the Mass, each part corresponding to a part of the Mass: Preparation, Offertory, Consecration, Communion, the Gospel, and Thanksgiving.[14] This would be fitting especially in light of the liturgical context in which Eliot situated his poem. However, such a unified structure is not evident to all readers: many have argued that the poem does not have any unifying form but consists of, for example, six loosely related developments on a theme,[15] while others have seen in it the structure of Dante's *Purgatorio*,[16] the three stairs imagined in the Buddhist Way of Purification written by Buddhaghosa,[17] or a pattern of regression and progression depicting the experience of a catechumen who is preparing for baptism.[18]

While the various attempts to fit 'Ash-Wednesday' into a form such as the ones mentioned above might be illuminating, in my view the poem's structure seems to elude any obvious pattern; it seems to consist, mainly, of loosely connected moments of conversion interrupted by dream-like visions – the 'three dreams that cross' (VI.21) – which are represented by parts II-IV. The distinction between dream and reality, however, is never too clear: the convert's world depicted by the poem is, rather, that of "the dream-crossed twilight between birth and dying" (VI.7), a wavering between renunciation and return. The fragmentary, ethereal structure serves a purpose: as a convert's "journey to no end" (II.40) the poem manifests in its progressions and regressions the complexity, difficulty and ambivalence of spiritual death and rebirth, the wavering between the

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[12] Kennedy, 93.
[13] 'A Song of Simeon', line 28.
[14] Audrey T. Rodgers, "T.S. Eliot's "Purgatorio": The Structure of "Ash-Wednesday" ", *Comparative Literature Studies* vol. 7, no. 2 (1970), pp. 97-112, 99.
[15] For some examples, see Sr. Margaret Patrice Slattery, C.C.V.I., "Structural Unity in Eliot's 'Ash Wednesday' ", *Renascence* vol. 20, no. 3 (1968), pp. 97-112.
[16] Rodgers, "T.S. Eliot's "Purgatorio" ", 97.
[17] Eloise Knapp Hay, *T.S. Eliot's Negative Way* (Cambridge, MA/London: Harvard University Press, 1982), 93.
[18] Slattery, *Structural Unity.*

world and God, old life and new. The structure of the poem itself, then, displays the kind of hesitancy and back-and-forth movement inherent in an experience of spiritual growth. I will later argue that this "wavering structure" is also important in terms of what it reveals of Eliot's understanding of hope's ascetism, but first it will be useful to go through the poem in the order in which it is presented to us.

The poem begins with a declaration (I.1-3): "Because I do not hope to turn again / Because I do not hope / Because I do not hope to turn." These lines refer to Guido Cavalcanti's poem translated by Dante Gabriel Rossetti as 'Ballata Written in Exile at Sarzana'. The poem expresses Cavalcanti's devotion to his lady when death closes in: "Because I think, not ever to return / Ballad, to Tuscany." 'Perch'Io non spero' could also be translated more literally as 'Because I do not hope'.[19] The very first lines, then, already invoke the theme of exile and loss: we meet the speaker at the moment when he gives up his hope to "drink / There where the trees flower, and springs flow" (I.13-14). There is no going back to the Garden, to the sources of life: the aged eagle can no longer spread its wings to fly.

The Garden, here, seems to assume a kind of double meaning: it points towards the Garden of Eden and hence towards one's original exile and the need for conversion. On the other hand, it is also the Earthly Paradise that signifies the joys and pleasures of life, including romantic love. This double meaning between the original Garden of Eden and the Earthly Paradise, the Lady as a symbol of divine love and earthly love, remains throughout the poem, instilling it with intentional ambiguity: mundane desires are tangled up with higher ones, and in order to pursue the higher ones with a purity of devotion one must go through a process of transformation whereby earthly attachments are renounced. In order, then, to return to the original Garden from his exile – to go through the necessary death – the speaker must renounce the pleasures of the Earthly Paradise and – most importantly for the purposes of this article – his *hope* for being able to enjoy that Paradise. The first hopes to be ascetically renounced, then, are those for worldly glory and prestige, 'the infirm glories of the positive hour' (I.10; I.4-5): "Desiring this man's gift and that man's scope / I no longer strive to strive towards such things."[20]

While some interpreters see in 'Ash-Wednesday' a depiction of a more active conversion, reading the first few lines as a kind of declaration of intent on the part of the speaker, in my view this ascetic renunciation of mundane hopes – the passion of hope, if you wish – and the poem as a whole have a significantly passive tone. The poem does not depict so much a spiritual achievement

[19] George Williamson, *A Reader's Guide to T.S. Eliot* (Bristol: Thames and Hudson, 1967), 169.
[20] This is a reference to Shakespeare's Sonnet 29: "When, in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes / I all alone beweep my outcast state, - - / Wishing me like to one more rich in hope --/Desiring this man's art and that man's scope - - / Yet in these thoughts myself almost despising / Haply I think on thee, and then my state / Like to the lark at break of day arising / From sullen earth sings hymns at heaven's gate."

as the inability to reach toward any such achievement: the focus is not on the speaker's agency but on the uselessness of his agency and the incapacity of his will (I.34-39). Hence, 'the turning' is not something the speaker *does* but an acknowledgment of what he *cannot* do or achieve both in terms of his more mundane hopes and spiritually. Conversion in Eliot's account is thus, more than anything, *a form of yielding, a type of death.* The disappointment and unattainability of what was hoped for – romantic love, power, prestige, honour – forces the speaker to reckon with the transitoriness, if not worthlessness, of his usual hopes and his inability to reach towards higher hopes. In this sense, ascetism is not so much chosen as it is forced upon the speaker. And so, he must come to terms with the fact that he is spiritually dead, gone. He must enter St. John of the Cross's 'passive night'. Yet, a glimmer of a higher hope remains. The reference (I.4) to Shakespeare's Sonnet 29 suggests that a better hope is still available: the love of 'the Lady' – now representing divine love – to whom the speaker directs his prayers at the end.

Seen through the lenses of Aquinas's account of hope as a passion – as a natural inclination towards perceived arduous future goods that feeds on what is known through the senses – the speaker in Eliot's poem has reached a point where he has become aware of how disorderly his passions are, including his hopes. This revelation is made possible through disappointment that illuminates his hopes – and the vanity that accompanies them. The speaker, however, accepts this painful revelation as spiritually salutary: while the disappointment of his hopes is not (yet) willed by the speaker, through acceptance a way of ascetic purification opens up and even banal disappointments become elevated into a kind of ascetic *via negativa*.

The second part of the poem – the first of the 'three dreams' (VI.21) – continues this theme: addressing the Lady, the speaker recounts how "three white leopards sat under a juniper-tree / In the cool of the day, having fed to satiety / On my legs my heart my liver and that which had been contained / In the hollow round of my skull" (II.1-4). The three white leopards represent the world, the flesh, and the devil which have now consumed the speaker entirely. As a result, he has become fully aware of his state of spiritual death and so the renunciation of hope as a passion has led him to the next level of hope: the moral hope for spiritual rebirth.[21] "And God said / Shall these bones live?" (II.4-5) Evoking the image of the dead bones coming back to life from Ezekiel 48, Eliot is suggesting that rebirth is indeed possible but at the same time this hope remains intentionally ambivalent: the death that such a rebirth requires is very hard, indeed nearly impossible, to achieve.

[21] There have been many theories as to what the three white leopards represent and some have even seen them as salutary agents of spiritual rebirth, but Eliot himself seemed to have thought that the three traditional enemies of a Christian pilgrim get closest to the meaning of the image (See the annotations in Christopher Ricks and Jim McCue, eds., *The Poems of T.S. Eliot, Volume I: Collected and Uncollected Poems* [London, Faber&Faber, 2018], 741.)

The purification of hope's passion – the renunciation of earthly hopes – is connected with memory: to be purified one must wade through the waters of River Lethe and be baptized in forgetfulness. "And I pray that I may forget / These matters that with myself I too much discuss / Too much explain." (I.27-29) Thus, when in part II the speaker finds himself completely devoured by his unruly passions and desires, he again hopes for forgetfulness (II.19-21). That is, for the ability to empty his memory of past sins but also – since memory is connected with a continuation of identity through time – for the ability to forget *the person* he was. By forgetting his old self and the hopes he had for that self, he becomes empty and ready to receive the unimaginable new life that God might create – a life so different from the old that it is almost inconceivable. Thus, it can only be hoped for with an apophatic hope. As Eliot put it later in Little Gidding (7-10): "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."

Here, in the connection Eliot draws between memory and hope, the influence of St. John of the Cross is apparent; he also locates hope in the memory. For St. John memory is to be understood broadly as "what a person has become over time through accumulated acts of knowing and loving". As such memory also conditions any exercise of the will and thus – as "the underlying and unifying self-presence of the soul that is distended across time" – it is the capacity for anticipating the future.[22] In Eliot as well, the convert of 'Ash-Wednesday' must empty his memory and thereby experience a discontinuation of identity in order to re-emerge as a new self. Since memory sustains one's identity through time, forming a basis for one's hopes regarding the future, a suspension of one's ability to anticipate the future, a death of hope, is also required. The new self requires new hopes.

The key to understanding why such a renunciation of the passion of hope is needed lies in the connection, in Eliot, between hope and desire on the one hand and stillness on another; union with the divine requires a calming of all desires in what St. John called "holy simplicity". Hope's passion must go, because hope like all wanting is a kind of movement that keeps the pilgrim of the poem from sitting still (I.38-39). It is a distraction that keeps him from achieving the kind of singularity of desire necessary for a union with God.[23] Hence, we can already see how the training of the passion of hope through ascetic denial reaches towards hope as a theological virtue: the inordinate passions must be "cleared away" so that one can pass through them to God. One has to learn to hope 'for God alone in silence' (Ps. 62.5). The journey towards God, then, as St. John

[22] Dominic Doyle, 'Changing Hopes: The Theological Virtue of Hope in Thomas Aquinas, John of the Cross, and Karl Rahner', *Irish Theological Quarterly* vol. 77, no. 1 (2011), 26-27.
[23] Cf. 'Burnt Norton' (V.25-27): "Desire itself is movement / Not in itself desirable; / Love itself is unmoving - -."

puts it, "does not consist in consolations, delights, and spiritual feelings, but in the living death of the cross".[24]

Paradoxically, then, while the passion of hope must be stilled, hope as a theological virtue keeps Eliot's convert moving. It is the pilgrim virtue that carries him towards God. Yet, at the same time this theological hope, too, must be *still*. This paradoxical movement-in-stillness – "journey to no end" (II.40) – is made manifest in the ascent-like structure of Ash-Wednesday. Eliot seems to be suggesting that we do not yet know, in our usual state, what is it like to actually hope for God, the ineffable and unimaginable One. We might have some approximations, some intuitions and images, but our hoping is yet to be trained through the cold desolation of denial. When spiritual consolations are denied us – when the darkness of God comes upon us ('East Coker', III.13) – we learn, beyond knowing, to truly hope for *God* rather than an idea or an image of him, or a certain kind of experience, or a feeling such as some sense of peace or satisfaction. We learn to persist through disappointment and even despair, entering what St. John called, "the dark night of the spirit".

Here again, we can hear echoes of St. John in Eliot. For St. John all theological virtues must – if they are to be truly *theological* virtues that unite one with God, the unimaginable One – take on a form of emptiness. This is so because in their natural state human mental faculties – intellect, will, and memory – have as their material creaturely stuff, i.e., what can be seen, felt, thought, imagined. However, for St. John all this creaturely stuff is so different from God that it is, in fact, an impediment to experiencing a union with him. Hence, in one's natural state it is impossible to achieve union with God, caught up as we are in the world of senses. Thus, "[a]ll these sensory means and exercises of the faculties must consequently be left behind and in silence so that God himself may effect divine union in the soul. As a result one has to follow this method of disencumbering, emptying, and depriving the faculties of their natural authority and operation to make room for the inflow and illumination of the supernatural." In order to achieve union with the ineffable God, our mental faculties must be emptied of all things creaturely through the theological virtues: the darkness of faith empties the intellect, hope vacates memory, and love purifies the will from all objects other than God.[25] Here St. John's understanding of theological hope, differs somewhat from that of Aquinas. While Aquinas too thought God to be beyond our natural capacities of understanding, he does think that – through the infused, 'supernatural' virtue of faith – the human mind can be elevated to grasp God as its ultimate end. In order to hope for a union with God, then, we first need faith that will reveal God to us as our ultimate end and happiness: a kind of knowing precedes hope. Hope can therefore be said to have a steady, graspable object. "Absolutely speaking, faith precedes hope. For the object of hope is a

[24] St. John, *Ascent*, 2.7.11.
[25] St. John, 3.2.2.

future good, arduous but possible to obtain. In order, therefore, that we may hope, it is necessary for the object of hope to be proposed to us as possible."[26] Aquinas's understanding of how faith as a kind of supernatural knowing makes the virtue of theological hope possible is not necessarily incompatible with St. John's – and Eliot's – emphasis on the apophaticism of theological virtues, but the emphasis is markedly different.[27] The journey of Eliot's pilgrim in 'Ash-Wednesday' reflects this tension between a more positive, Thomistic account of faith and hope and the more negative, Carmelite account of the theological virtues: in order to get started on his journey the convert must have faith – some grasp, however inadequate, of God's reality – and some hope of reaching a union with him. However, as the journey continues, deeper into the darkness, these virtues take on an increasingly apophatic form. Or, as St. John puts it, "in the measure memory becomes dispossessed of things, in that measure it will have hope, and the more hope it has the greater will be its union with God; for in relation to God, the more a soul hopes the more it attains. And it hopes more when, precisely, it is more dispossessed of things."[28]

Hence, having thus struggled with 'the devil of the stairs who wears the deceitful face of hope and despair' ('Ash-Wednesday', III.5-6), in the next dream-sequence the speaker moves upwards in ever deepening renunciation until all hope, even the theological kind, is silenced and "there were no more faces and the stair was dark" (III.9). The stairs are a first explicit reference to St. John's *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* in Ash-Wednesday, suggesting that the first two parts of the poem were loosely connected with what John called "the night of the senses": the mortification of appetites, a casting out of "all alien affections and attachments" and 'a purification of their residue'.[29] Although Aquinas did not articulate his understanding of theological hope in equally apophatic terms, for him as well hope as a passion is located in the sensual appetite and hence was orientated through the senses and imagination: hope has as its content what the imagination, informed by the senses that perceive various possible goods in the world, creates. Hope, thus, depends on the human ability to imagine, based on our experience of the world, possible future goods. Hence, for Eliot – inspired by St. John's intense apophaticism – a purification of the imagination, of senses, is necessary for the purification of hopes, and so the speaker in 'Ash-Wednesday' moves forwards

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[26] STh. II-II, q. 17, a. 7.

[27] With love – the third theological virtue – the order of virtues is more complex. In one sense love – which is the means by which we attain union and friendship with God – flows from hope since hope is that which makes us move towards the desired union with God and one cannot attain union with something without first moving towards it. In another way, love also precedes hope since one desires and hopes for that which one already loves in some sense. It is by faith, then, that we understand God as our supreme happiness, and it is hope that believes that it is possible for us to achieve union with God while love is that which makes the union possible, the means by which it is achieved. See, STh. q. 17, a. 8. See also Doyle, *Changing Hopes*, 21.

[28] St. John, *Ascent,* 3.7.2.

[29] St. John, 1.5.7.

through the first night into the emptiness of even theological hope that "lies beyond all - - understanding, taste, feeling, and imagining".[30]

In the darkness of the staircase, the pilgrim of the poem keeps rising, higher, once again momentarily catching sight of the ambiguous blessed face he first renounced in part I. Now "the broadbacked figure drest in blue and green" – the latter, noticeably, being the liturgical colour of hope – becomes "a distraction" that must fade away: "Fading, fading: strength beyond hope and despair / Climbing the third stair." (III.15-21) Darkening of the mental faculties upon which hope feeds – primarily memory and imagination, but also the intellect and the will to the degree that faith, love and hope are all connected – leads into a state of almost ungraspable movement-in-stillness where the speaker's usual future-orientated way of being is momentarily suspended while he continues moving forward, carried by a desire that is beyond hope. This desire beyond hope is a paradoxical, empty desire because it is directed towards a God who is unsayable and unimaginable. In other words, it is *apophatic* hope that is directed towards the non-object who is God, clouded in the darkness of unknowing. This empty hope cannot, however, carry the speaker to the end it points to: reaching the ineffable God beyond all desiring and hoping is impossible for the speaker of the poem. The emphasis on conversion as a passive experience of yielding to an inevitable death aligns with this. Consequently, the upward movement in the staircase ends in a prayer that returns to the passive tone of the earlier poem (III.24-25): "Lord, I am not worthy / but speak the word only." The traveller must yield completely to the passive night of the spirit, waiting to be carried into the impossible healing and rebirth, the ineffable union with God for whom no hope can be articulated.

This dark night affords no words. Thus, the staircase is not followed by a straight-forward depiction of a beatific vision or union with the divine: the pilgrim's journey does not reach a simple ending like that. Rather, the ascent-like structure of poem breaks down and part IV begins with yet another unplaceable, dream-like vision. This time it is a vision of the Garden, echoing with the reminiscences of the Earthly Paradise Dante reaches after climbing Mount Purgatory in the Divine Comedy. The springs from which the speaker could not drink in part I are made fresh again (IV.8), and the birds sing the call to reach back towards the Garden from which we are exiled, "redeem the time / redeem the dream / the token of the word unheard, unspoken" (IV.26-27). The blessed face that was renounced now becomes a symbol of devotion.

The moment of reprieve in the Garden, however, does not last. Quite abruptly part IV ends with "and after this our *exile*" (IV.29).[31] The Earthly Paradise – the moment of union and illumination, purity of devotion, singularity of desire – is a fickle moment, soon lost. And so, unlike in Dante,

[30] St. John, 2.4.2.

[31] Cf. *Salve Regina*: "Let my cry come unto thee, and after this our exile, show us the blessed fruit of thy womb, Jesus."

Eliot's pilgrim does not rise to the heavens. We enter, rather, the wild whirling of the unstilled world where we're "torn on the horn between season and season / time and time / between hour and hour, word and word, power and power" (V.22-24). We're no longer "thus devoted, concentrated in purpose" (II.21) but back in the world of distractions, unruly desires, and imperfect devotion. We're once again children at the closed gates of paradise, exiled, pleading for the prayers of the Lady (V.24-26). Hence, despite his wishes, the speaker finds himself once again thrown back to the beginning, turning again, repeating the prayers of the first part (VI.1-3): "Although I do not hope to turn again."

This is where Eliot's ascetic vision is at its richest: there is no simple movement from renunciation to purification, but rather constant "wavering between the profit and the loss / in this brief transit where dreams cross / the dreamcrossed twilight between birth and dying" (VI.4-6). The ascetic movement, the renunciation of desire and hope, is complex and imperfect, ever going back-and-forth between loss and gain. There are glimpses of a beatific vision, moments of complete surrender and devotion, but they're always followed by a return to the opaqueness of the fallen world: the apophatic moment cannot be sustained perpetually. Rather, one must always descend back to the sensory world of memory and imagination. Conversion, then, is constant. One must constantly seek "a further union, a deeper communion". Our hopes, too, must be constantly purified and it is precisely in the opaque, fallen world where such a purification takes place. In the end we find 'the desert is in the garden and the garden in the desert' (V.34): the moments of devotion and progress always overlapping with moments of distraction and regression.

Time, Movement and the London Tube: Briefly on The Four Quartets

'Ash-Wednesday's' complex vision of ascetic purification gets carried into the *Four Quartets* (1936-1943) a decade later.[32] In this paper I will not discuss the whole of *Four Quartets* but will simply point to some themes and primarily one image – that of the London Tube – that further illuminate some of the motifs that were present in 'Ash-Wednesday'. In the *Four Quartets* time and history themselves become purifying agents and places where finite and infinite cross, where human beings can approach the difficult, nearly impossible end of all their desiring – God, the eternal in time. As a result, the focus shifts from the inward experience of the individual convert to the relationship between the individual and the communities she is a member of – both cultural and political communities, but also historical: the individual is defined by her relationship to the generations that preceded her and the legacy they left. Time, then, is not simply an individual, inward experience of a single lifetime, an arch that reaches from birth to death. Rather, the individual's experience of

[32] While the first poem of the series, Burnt Norton, was written in 1935 and published in 1936 – that is, before the Second World War – the other three poems were written during the war (East Coker in 1940, The Dry Salvages in 1941, Little Gidding in 1942) and reflect Eliot's experience of the war.

time is also marked by the burden of all the time that has gone before her, the collective past – and tradition – of the communities she identifies with. The purifying fire is no longer "the intense moment / Isolated, with no before and after / But a lifetime of burning in every moment / And not the lifetime of one man only / But of old stones that cannot be deciphered." ('East Coker', V.21-25)

However, time itself does not automatically purify: in order for the friction of time to become spiritually useful, intentional movement inward – a descent "into the world of perpetual solitude" – is required. This, once again, requires an ascetic struggle, "destitution of all property / Desiccation of the world of sense / Evacuation of the world of fancy / Inoperancy of the world of spirit" ('Burn Norton', III.29-33). Hence, in part III of 'Burnt Norton', the London Tube represents the kind of banal deprivation that does not serve the ascetic struggle towards the Garden and hence is no "darkness to purify the soul / Emptying the sensual with deprivation / Cleansing affection from the temporal" but only "Tumid apathy with no concentration" (III.7-14). The image of the grimy London Tube is contrasted with the realities of spiritual struggle for "internal darkness, deprivation" (III.28). At the same time the London Tube is also an image for the spiritual stillness in the midst of the moving world that is required of the ascetic: the world, like the Tube, moves with all history "on its metalled ways / Of time past and time future" while the passenger sits still (III.36-37). The double-meaning of the image of the London Tube – both as a place of spiritual apathy but also as a place of spiritual renewal – points to the way in which the possibilities of spiritual renewal and apathy, devotion and distraction, coalesce in the fallen world.

The image of the Tube returns in 'East Coker' part III where the train stops too long between the stations – the frantic movement of the world-in-time comes to a halt – and conversation fades into silence, "leaving only the growing terror of nothing to think about" (21). Again, these prosaic moments in the midst of the busyness of the city life can become places of spiritual purification: the train, standing still in the darkness between the stations, becomes a figure of divine darkness that descends upon the spiritually aware person. In this darkness Eliot returns to the Johannine theme of the apophaticism of theological virtues that was so prevalent in 'Ash-Wednesday' ('East Coker', III.23-28):

> 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.

In order to learn to hope well for the unimaginable God – to know how to truly hope God from God – we must sit in stillness, in the darkness as when "in the theatre / The lights are extinguished,

for the scene to be changed" ('East Coker', III.12-13). Paraphrasing John from *The Ascent of Mount Carmel,* the speaker of the poem then says (III.35-39): "In order to arrive there / To arrive where you are, to get from where you are not / You must go by a way wherein there is no ecstasy. / In order to arrive at what you do not know / You must go by a way which is the way of ignorance."

It is perhaps easy to read these passages in *The Four Quartets* simply as a reiteration of the individual pilgrim's inward journey towards apophatic hope in 'Ash-Wednesday'. However, when Eliot's *Four Quartets* are read in their historical context – the social, political and moral crisis of the Second World War – a broader picture emerges: hopes, private and public, are also purified in the communal, historical context. Crises, both personal and *communal*, break down the usual pattern of continuity we expect between past, present and future. The future that was imagined in the past becomes disconnected from the present, while the present with its crisis forces a new sense of future, perhaps marked with confusion, a feeling of looming threat or even despair. In the breakdown of the usual pattern of expectation and continuity hope must be re-evaluated and rearticulated. When such rearticulation is required, that is, during a time of confusion – when divine providence is hidden, when future is uncertain and the usual stories we tell about ourselves and the world around us are interrupted – *The Four Quartets* offer an invitation to dwell in the ambiguity of history, to embrace the way of ignorance as a way to a future that is yet unimaginable. The confusion of history itself can become a purifying fire. Thus, for Eliot, the perplexing pattern of history, the opaqueness of the fallen world, call for purification of hope through ignorance and even disappointment not just in terms of individual hopes but collective hopes as well.

For Eliot, then, a certain apophaticism of our shared hopes is pushed upon us by the twists and turns of history, the stacking of time upon time in an ever-more-complicated pattern – and that is what makes time and history, for those who are aware, a purifying fire. Hence, for Eliot, even the terrors of the Blitz he encountered while working as an air-raid warden in London can become a figure of the divine, purifying fire. "The only hope, or else despair / Lies in the choice of pyre or pyre – / To be redeemed from fire by fire." ('Little Gidding', IV.5-7). The uncertainty, if not the complete disappearance, of the expected future during a time of crisis can either be a fire that consumes in despair or a purifying fire from which hope emerges resurrected and renewed. This is no theodicy, not an explanation or justification of the terrors of history. Rather, it is a bold invitation to consider this world – with all its perplexity and terror – as a place of spiritual renewal. "We must be still and still moving / Into another intensity / For a further union, a deeper communion / Through the dark cold and empty desolation." ('East Coker', V.33-36)

Ascetism of Hope as a Remedy of Vices

In this article I have argued, with the help of T.S. Eliot, that asceticism and apophaticism can help us to virtuously order the desires that motivate hope. In addition, they help us to navigate the perilous terrain between the vices of presumption and despair that virtuous hope must travel through. Here it should be emphasised that in my meaning asceticism is not to be understood as an end of desire but rather as a momentary renunciatory suspension of desire that aims at its reordering and purification. The emphasis, then, is on the *suspension* rather than absence of desire: ascetic practice is not about reaching a state of non-desiring but about attaining, through momentary renunciation, sufficient distance between desires and the will so that the effective link between wanting and acting can be broken and then *rebuilt*. Another way to put it would be to say that ascetic practice aims at surrendering and subjecting all our desires to the good in order that these desires might harnessed for human flourishing. In this way, too, asceticism cannot aim at absence of desire since one cannot surrender desires that are non-existent. This also makes clear the connection between asceticism and virtue: virtue orders all passions and desires, indeed the whole person, towards the good in the right order, as Aquinas argued. Ascetism can hence aid us in developing virtue.

Momentary renunciatory suspension of desire leads towards apophaticism: a spiritual practice of embracing noetic darkness, a state of willed ignorance through which one can adopt a non-controlling position in relation to God and the future goods that are hoped for. This paradoxical state of desiring and not desiring Eliot called 'movement in stillness'. In this moment of stillness hopes can re-formed: it is an apophatic pause that allows for hopes to be articulated in light of the good rather than the cacophony of images and illusions, born of unruly passions and desires, that call from within and without. In this last section, then, I will make some preliminary remarks about how this kind of ascetic practice can help remedy some of the vices that hope is in danger of falling into as a passion and as a theological virtue.

First, the passion of hope. Hope as a passion, as Aquinas argued, is a natural state for human beings: we have the capacity to imagine arduous future goods and we have an inherent hunger towards these perceived future goods that propels forward. In other words, humans are capable of hope. For Eliot, this movement is connected with the 'time-ridden' nature of human existence and can become a hindrance for experiencing the stillness that spiritual life requires. Human beings move constantly in time, orientating themselves in the midst of time's relentless passage towards various imagined futures. "But to apprehend / The point of intersection of the timeless / With time, is an occupation for the saint – / No occupation either, but something given." ('The Dry Salvages', V.17-20) Ascetism, then, as a momentary renunciation of this human hunger for future goods, can lead to a stillness in the midst of time, a quiet in which the noise of the wanting, expectation, and disappointment is made less loud. Caring and not caring, still and still moving, a

new kind of moral vision can open up: goods other than those in one's immediate field of vision, goods one was blinded to earlier – moral and theological – emerge. And so, the training of the passion of hope through ascetic struggle can clear the way for the formation of virtuous hope.

Second, apophaticism of hope calls into question the assumption that hope must always have a steady object. The practice of ascetic suspension and apophatic surrender of expectations, can open the door for the truly *new* life of God to appear – the life that surprises, the life one did not know how to hope for. In the same way as the disciples' hope for God's new future had to go through the cold desolation of the cross in order to be formed into the Easter hope that the resurrection of Christ gave birth to, some hopes might have to be surrendered to God in a moment of apophatic pause so that they can emerge renewed, so that the life of God – unseen, unexpected – can emerge. As St. John and Eliot both make manifest, in waiting for the unimaginable God there might be moments when expectations and wishes must be laid aside, and the pilgrim must enter a state of suspension, not knowing what will be next. Adopting a non-controlling apophatic position thus becomes vitally important. It is this ascetic struggle towards the new and hence yet unknown life that Eliot depicts in 'Ash-Wednesday'. In the end, the dead bones shall indeed live, caught up in the rhythm of God's own life and future.

The practice of ascetic detachment can also help us to navigate the difficult aspect of uncertainty that tempts hope with presumption and despair. Both of these vices attempt to release the tension inherent in hope – that it is always a kind of movement towards something that we do not yet possess, that it is a virtue of privation – by removing uncertainty. The paradoxical notion of movement-in-stillness reaches towards the difficult balance that virtuous hope must learn: having joyful expectation of something that is not absolutely certain. Learning to dwell in that tension between loss and gain is an ascetic practice: waiting and not waiting, yielding to the unpredictability of future and finally to the empty darkness of God, moving forward in hope that is 'beyond hope and despair'.

This also has some relevance to our collective hopes. The public discourse around the question of hope – especially hope at the face of such global, existential threats as the climate change – is often focused on whether we should be able to articulate some kind of achievable, shared hope so as to form a basis of collective action towards a better future. The problem with this is, of course, that such a hope is not always – when facts are considered – well-founded. Thus, there is a legitimate fear that collective hope can become presumption: a dangerous delusion, an illusionary shelter from the reality of the catastrophe that is already happening, a false comfort that lulls us into the deadly sleep of inaction. On the other hand, looking at our collective hopes merely as illusions of the dangerous sort tends towards despair, also undercutting our sense of agency and action. Thus, the problem: how to hope together and well – or virtuously – in the midst of life's confusion and, indeed, terror?

It might be easy to think that apophatic hope that embraces uncertainty and unknowing is not well-suited for articulating a collective vision of the future – a hope that will motivate action in the present. However, Eliot's ascetic spirituality is connected with a deep awareness of historically situated responsibility and his understanding of apophatic hope can therefore also inform our collective hopes; sometimes we perhaps have to sit in darkness together, waiting for the scene to be changed. For Eliot in *Four Quartets* such a collective praxis of apophatic hope does not mean abandoning the responsibility to orientate ourselves towards the future. However, he is suggesting that this responsibility to hope can perhaps sometimes only be realised by welcoming the refining fire of crisis and disappointment, embracing the yet unknown future. The image of darkness in the theatre as the scene is changed – darkness that is a collective experience, shared by all of those in the audience – challenges us to ask whether apophatic hope is a praxis we should appropriate not just individually but collectively as well. The crisis of the Second World War caused an apophatic pause in Eliot's hopes for the future as the usual expectation of continuity between past, present and future was broken down: there was a sudden disconnect between what the imagined future of the past was and the actual future that the present gave allowance to. The expected future of the past no longer suited the present circumstances, and the hope that had belonged to the past had to be reformulated. Currently we are facing a whole of host collective threats that challenge our expectations and hopes about the future: global pandemics, climate crisis, war, food shortages. In many ways especially those in the west who have become used to thinking of their futures as secure, as matching a set of expectations they have – such as continued high standard of living – are perhaps experiencing shared disorientation. Understanding hope as something that can have an apophatic element to it might help us to negotiate this tricky transition from the hope of the past into the hope of a new kind of present. Similarly, an ascetic understanding of hope might aid us in accepting the fact that, given the climate crisis, it is likely that those of us that are wealthier on a global scale might not be able to enjoy their current living standard indefinitely into the future: some hopes for the future will be frustrated, but perhaps there is a possibility that such frustration can be accepted, even welcomed as salutary because it forces a confrontation with some of those disorderly, even selfish desires that might motivate our hopes.

Finally, ascetism of hope functions as an apophatic purification of theological hope, directing it more and more towards the ineffable and unimaginable God. Learning such apophaticism can also put a check on the way in which humans use language about God's future – his providential will, his plans, his promises – to justify a particular type of action or choice. It questions the way in which religious hopes are sometimes used to wield power over others to a destructive degree. Apophaticism of hope could perhaps be one way in which a pause could be inserted into the thinking of those who are very certain that they are 'on the right side of history', if not 'on the side of God'. This does not mean that religious hope for the future can only ever be either completely apophatic or a power grab attempted through rhetoric. It does, however, introduce

the possibility that perhaps we haven't got it all figured out, that we might be more ignorant than we think. As such, apophaticism of hope calls for discernment.

Hopes, then, are purified in the fires of crisis, disappointment and denial that are inherent in human life marked by time – by memory and by the unknowable future we expect and hope for in light of that memory – but Eliot is inviting us to welcome the purifying fires. The failure of the passion of hope to attain what it wants and even the darkening of theological hope can be opportunities to refining both hope and desire. At the same time, Eliot's asceticism and apophaticism should not be read too simplistically: it is precisely Eliot's understanding of the intense difficulty, indeed near impossibility, of reaching the state of stillness-in-movement that makes his ascetic vision of the Christian life so interesting. Yet, while it remains an open question for Eliot and his readers whether it is ever possible to completely reach such a state, the invitation to seek stillness remains real precisely in the midst of life's ambiguities, time's friction and history's confusing pattern; it is a work to be done in the opaque twilight of the fallen world. Perhaps the point is not in the end – or at least not for now – the destination but the journey of ascetic struggle itself, "a lifetime's death in love" ('The Dry Salvages', V.21). It will hence remain an imperfect endeavour, this "fight to recover what has been lost / And found and lost again and again - - under conditions / That seem unpropitious" ('East Coker', V.15-17). Thus, for us, "there is only the trying" ('East Coker', V.18).

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