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From Recognition to Restoration:  
Community and Connectivity in John Donne and T.S. Eliot

Trust thyself: every heart vibrates to that iron string. - Ralph Waldo Emerson

The Western social consciousness has been deeply formed by the “wisdom” of the Enlightenment. For moderns who bear the weight of this relatively new ontological structure, it is important to question the resulting development of radical individualism. In America, “from an early age we hear extolled the virtues of self-reliance, independence and autonomy” (Kenneson 137). Emerson’s “Self-Reliance,” as quoted above, has been a powerful advocate for the autonomy of the individual, claiming that “trust thyself” is the fully enlightened expression of human nature. This particular wisdom of the past brings into question the reliability of information outside of its context. After considering Emerson’s writings holistically, it is clear that his advocating of self-reliance was never intended to be isolated from the concept of the “over-soul.” Emerson never intended that the appeal to “trust thyself” should be detached from the reality of metaphysical connectivity and a common social consciousness. This misconception is not uncommon, and reveals a tendency of Post-Modern thought to detach wisdom of past generations from its original context. When past wisdom is isolated from its context, it is quickly deemed irrelevant, easily dismissed, even quickly forgotten. However, when recognized in necessary connection to original time and place,

the breadth of wisdom offered by philosophers, authors, and poets of the past can speak wisdom to those who question what it means to be human in our own time.

As the 21<sup>st</sup> century continues to perpetuate chaotic wars and global instability, the bitterness and cynicism of Post-Modern thought has come to define our daily life. If reality is governed by this negativity, it is not difficult to conclude that life is meaningless. However, poets and artists from past centuries can bring hope and meaning to those who have forgotten what it is to be fully human. John Donne and T.S. Eliot each offer unique wisdom for redeeming the social disconnection that perpetuates meaninglessness. Not surprisingly, it is common for contemporary minds to reject wisdom of the past because of the consideration that the authors are unfamiliar with the current time and place. Because of this unfamiliarity, Post-Moderns conclude that those voices were relevant only in their own context. “Times change,” they say, and time is accepted as grounds for dismissal. However, this common ideology assumes that with time and place, human nature and identity must inevitably change accordingly. On the contrary, human nature does not change in response to invention or innovation. We are still as clearly at odds with defining ourselves as we were centuries ago. To our disadvantage, a distinct sense of vanity has come to encumber our attempts to arrive at any sense of collective identity. The discovery of physical principles and industrial mechanics has come to replace our sense of urgency to work toward recognition of our common humanity. The vanity of the present claims that “we know all;” if this is true, it follows that the work of self-discovery is futile because there is nothing left to ascertain. However, to accept passively a cultural identity that is founded on principles of individualism and self-fulfillment is to fail to recognize the depth of both human identity

and human relationships. John Donne and T.S. Eliot each care deeply about issues of connectivity, and their writing reflects their profound insight. Though it is dangerous to approach their writing apart from its original context, it is perhaps more dangerous to apply their wisdom without a deeper understanding of *our* context. To hear these voices we must be prepared to listen; an adequate analysis of our current social consciousness must precede our ability to learn from those writing in different contexts.

Self-reliance and individualism – both presently functioning as social virtues – operate on a system of paradoxical standards that make it nearly impossible for any human to exist without a symbiotic relationship to society. Consider especially the market of consumerism, generally known to perpetuate rampant individualism and self-fulfillment. The paradox arises in the radical dependence that the market forces upon those whom it calls to be independent. Consider especially the grocery store, the shopping mall, or any other setting for large-scale commercial exchange. Rather than allowing for independence, the illusion of self-reliance actually becomes enslavement to the corporate market:

We are encouraged to operate in the marketplace as self-interested parties attempting to secure our own existence in the midst of others doing the same. As a result, we tend to view other people in the marketplace not as unique and splendid people in their own right who warrant our attention, but as actors in *our* drama. (Kenneson 43)

As we maneuver the reality of marketplace living, we tend to isolate ourselves to ensure that distance will allow us power over others; consequently, self-inflicted distance has no semblance of unity or connectivity. This attempt at social disconnection is inherently

contrary to the human necessity of community. Our connection to the host of unseen people responsible for our daily provision is another complex paradox in marketplace reality. We will never meet the farmer that grows our grain, the workers than run the machines that grind and bag our flour, or the truck driver who delivers the product to the grocery store; we barely even recognize the humanity of the sales clerk with whom we exchange invisible, electronic currency. Despite our attempts to be self-actualized and autonomous, the layers of connectivity trickle out in infinite possibility. When we ignore this connectivity and perpetuate the illusion of disconnection, part of our humanity is inevitably lost. When we dwell in illusory isolation and forget our true identity in relation to others, we are not fully human. To consider ourselves as more or less than human is to become inhuman. To be inhuman is to be dehumanized, and to be dehumanized is to subvert unity and fullness.

When we reject who we are, even unknowingly, we are enslaved to illusion and self-deception. The mentality of individual autonomy isolates us and prevents us from recognizing the reality and importance of connectivity in our lives. To wrongly define who we are is to enslave ourselves to a life that is insubstantial, emptied of meaning. Consider the blatant mis-definition with which we have characterized our era. We claim to be “Post-Modern,” and though this term was coined to designate a specific *era*, there would be no indication of an era without the reality of those who populate it. Surely it follows that those within the era are defined by the title they have given it. As for the name, a common dictionary defines “post” as meaning “after,” and “modern” as meaning “of or pertaining to the present.” To say that we are “Post-Modern” is to say that we are beyond the present; we are beyond who we are now. Even the terminology suggests that

we inhabit an era dramatically inept at recognizing our common humanity. To suggest we are beyond who we are is to define ourselves as something other than human. To be any more or less than human is to be dehumanized, enslaved to illusion. When unable to characterize ourselves, it is necessary to consider the wisdom of the past as a viable resource for exploring and reclaiming our common humanity. In reality, human nature has not changed, but the illusion of the present has caused humankind to be blind to its own natural identity.

In order to reconsider what it means to be human, being especially attentive to extensive connectivity, it is necessary to consider our relationship with history. The relentless continuity of human history connects the present with all precedent humanity, especially with writers that explore human relationships and unity. When we scoff at the mistakes that riddle human history and isolate ourselves to the vanity of the present, our isolation enslaves us to repetition of the same mistakes. We desire to be free from the guilt and destructiveness of the past, yet this disconnect further separates us from a common human identity. Though we are necessarily unique in our context, as are those who have come before us, we are not whole unless able to recognize our selves in the contexts of the past. We are not a different humanity now than any humanity of preceding centuries, even those we now consider dark and inhumane. At times we attempt to rewrite the past in order to “free” ourselves from the common horrors of human error. Sadly, to wrench ourselves from the contexts of the past is to wrench ourselves from what it means to be human. This historical isolation puts us in a condition of slavery, attempting to define the human condition with illusions of self-actualization and self-formation. To understand historical context becomes essential to understanding writers and thinkers of

the past because the contexts of history are essential to our identity as part of an ongoing human race, located in one unending moment that spans centuries, even millennia. To subdivide ourselves into centuries and decades contributes little or nothing to recognition of human identity. To idolize reckless industrialization and technological wizardry as signs of progress in human nature is to ignore the essential reality that every moment of the past has come to form the time and place we currently inhabit. Indeed, the past is vital to what it means to be human in the present.

Necessarily, those who inhabit the past and share in our common humanity have been actively asking the same questions that daunt thinking humans today. What does it mean to be human? What does it mean to be connected? What do our relationships mean, if anything at all? Philosophers, writers and poets have for ages been considering these issues and have often arrived at very interesting conclusions. The writings of John Donne and T.S. Eliot have much to contribute to the ongoing struggle to understand what it means to be human. To explore the connectivity necessary to human identity, Donne's "Meditation XVII" and Eliot's *Four Quartets* provide helpful resources for those of us who desire to explore commonality and wholeness. To isolate these writings from their necessary historical and authorial context undermines their significance. Context of time and place is essential for past wisdom to have coherent meaning; hence, the richness of context is essential to the expanse of meaning they offer to the present.

John Donne is best known for his metaphysical poetry, but his identity as a writer can in no way be severed from his identity as an Anglican clergyman. He lived as both priest and poet during the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, a time of drastic upheaval and change in the Western social consciousness. Unlike most churchmen of his time, Donne was not

confined to the narrow reality of English society. “[His] theological education, and his experience of foreign travel, left him unusually well-informed about non-Christian religions” (Shell 66). His variety of experience empowered him with a unique ability to write about the human condition with a broad, holistic mindset.

There is no doubt that Donne was writing at a time of religious turmoil. Protestants were fleeing to distant colonies to avoid persecution in Europe. Catholics and Protestants were locally suppressed by the Church of England. At the peak of religious division, the Thirty Years War broke out in 1618 as a result of political and denominational intolerance. Christians, called to embody peace in a violent world, were assaulting one another for divisive ends. Rather than focus on the pain of disunity that shook the faith of many of his contemporaries, Donne preferred to focus on the solidarity of humanity. Though secure in his allegiance to the Anglican Church, when asked to define his faith, “Donne generally preferred to do so with the single word ‘Christian...’ as one who ‘dares not call his Religion by some newer name than *Christian*” (Shell 67). This intentional transcendence of denominationalism suggests that Donne had indeed grappled with the divisions that clamored to define those who shared his faith. Perhaps in response to the disunity he sensed, Donne wrote “Meditation XVII.”

The entirety of Donne’s devotional material was written while recovering from a case of “spotted fever.” He spent over three months in 1623 on a sickbed with ample time to reflect on life and write about his thoughts (Frost xiii). It is not difficult to conclude that Donne spent this time contemplating the nature of humanity. In time, Donne’s meditation led him to consider human connectivity, the reality that we cannot exist without one another. Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu writes about similar issues of

human identity, stating that “my humanity is caught up, inextricably bound up, in yours... A person is a person through other persons... I am human because I belong. I participate. I share” (Tutu 31). In reality, the disconnection of humanity has more to do with perpetuation of illusion than with reality. Donne reacts similarly in the most famous line of “Meditation XVII:” “No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main” (Donne 272). Theologian Mary Pohl points out that recognition of connectivity is essential; we must realize that “the simple fact of our common humanity... [provides] a basis for recognition and respect. Humanness itself requires that persons recognize others as like themselves. Each person is made for others and depends on others” (65). As should be expected, individualism deteriorates our ability to recognize the need for shared life.

The oneness of mankind is a powerful theme throughout the meditation. Again, to ignore or dismiss the reality of true identity, in this case as a unified mankind, is to be dehumanized and enslaved to illusion. Freedom is possible only through recognition of our inherent connection to all others and all times. Achsah Guibbory explains that for Donne, “the art of salvation, is but the art of memory;” it follows that “memory for Donne becomes the surest faculty by which men can approach God” (261). Similarly, our approach to human commonality is caught up in our willingness to remember who we have always been and continue to be with one another: connected, interdependent, and vital to sustaining any form of community.

Donne expresses the necessity of our place in each other’s lives with an extensive metaphor: “If a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less” (Donne 272). Although being “washed away” may relate to the ongoing discussion of death throughout

the meditation, to be “washed away” may also represent a symbolic death. This immediately brings up issues of social isolation and withdrawal from others. When radical individualism pulls us away from one another, we are the less for it. Our common identity is injured when others are enslaved to the illusion of disconnectivity. The apparent pain we inflict on one another remains inevitable in Donne’s thoughts on physical death: “Any man’s death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind, and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee” (Donne 272). We are so inextricably a part of one another, whenever one man dies, a part of our self inevitably dies as well. However, in a Post-Modern reality where individualism, or “island-living,” reigns, there is such a distance between us and others that the bell toll of death can scarcely reach our ears. So numb are we to one another that our ability to feel remorse or loss is progressively waning; nursing homes and hospitals welcome the dead, and social life goes on with little disturbance.

To dwell on the isolated island of oneself instigates the construction of a metaphorical sanctuary of self-worship. With no one else to love or appreciate, the self obtains a status likened unto that of a god. It is here that numbness to others creates the most suffering, often unrecognizable because of the reckless self-love of the individual. The elusive possibility of self-fulfillment makes this reality a serious delusion of mainstream Western society. In such delusion, connectivity may seem unreasonable, even mythic to a Post-Modern consciousness.

Part of properly naming what it means to be human is to recognize the essential role of connectivity in the ways that we live. It is necessary to consider the inevitability of suffering, and to recognize that sharing common burdens is essential to life together.

Donne comments that “affliction is a treasure, and scarcely any man has enough of it. No man hath affliction enough that is not matured and ripened by it, and made fit for God by that affliction” (272). In this description, affliction, or suffering, continually prepares us to dwell in God, who is love. If indeed we dwell in love, we will learn to love one another. It follows that suffering is essential to love, which in turn is essential to wholeness. Thus it is that suffering is essential to wholeness, and suffering together is essential for common wholeness and identity. When we view connection in the context of communal sharing, life together becomes not only imaginable, but possible. If the sanctity of our own life is dependent on the lives of others, then “life in community is no less than a necessity for us – it is an inescapable ‘must’ that determines everything we do and think... We must live in community because all life created by God exists in a communal order and works toward community” (Arnold 1).

Necessarily these conclusions may possibly bring discomfort to those who are dissipated with illusory isolation. The naming of our connection must precede its fruition, which can only occur when we are present and committed to others. The significance of connection was an important theme in Donne’s life; in late writings, his deceased wife “is identified as the ‘streames’ that have led him to the ‘head,’ to God Himself” (Franssen 153). Donne understood his connection to his wife as essential to his journey to God, which ensures for him that her death was not in vain. In his meditation, he explains: “all mankind is of one author, and is one volume; when one man dies, one chapter is not torn out of the book, but translated into a better language; and every chapter must be so translated” (271). Whether in life or in death, our connectivity allows us to continually fulfill for each other what it means to be human.

Eliot's reflection on connectivity parallels that of Donne, but makes other essential connections that enhance Donne's already rich portraiture of human identity. Though addressing many eternal themes, Eliot's writing must necessarily be located in its space-time context to be meaningful and coherent. Years before writing the *Four Quartets*, Eliot was considered an atheist. However, his conversion to Anglicanism in 1926 was not as drastic as could be supposed. Literary scholar Lyndall Gordon writes: "Eliot did not turn from atheism to belief but from spiritual self-reliance to the support of a Church. Eliot in his youth had trusted the inner light, but came to perceive the danger of untempered individualism" (77). In Eliot's own life, communal reality had to precede his writing of the *Four Quartets*. However, his shift from individuality to community also had a quality of disconnection: his "conversion to Anglicanism... cost him friends and aggravated his obsession with guilt and suffering" (Jay 200). Necessarily, his struggle to live and write led him to "the exploration of his own spiritual inadequacies, most disturbingly present in the difficulty of accepting the immediate world" (Montgomery 11). The ongoing struggle with faith and human identity defined his authorship of the *Four Quartets* in the years preceding and during World War II. The collection was written and published in Britain during a time of great turmoil, overshadowed by the relentless violence of the Nazi Regime (Jay 25).

The horrors of reckless ambition and humanity's destructive potential saturate Eliot's composition of the *Four Quartets*. The sense of chaos in the poems reflects the context of Eliot's writing; however, disorder does not have the final word. Hope is rarely if ever forgotten as glimpses of connectivity and unity are found even midst the turmoil. Eliot begins by considering time: "Time present and time past / Are both perhaps present

in time future, / And time future contained in time past” (13). We are inextricably bound to the trinity of past, present, and future, always and ever three in one; our meaning as humans cannot be determined in isolation from any of the three. Likewise, Christ embodies the fullness of mankind in his Trinitarian unity; he represents who we have been, who we are now, and who we will become. Christ’s wounded body reveals all previous iniquity, reflects the fragmentation of current disconnection, and embodies the hope of future reconciliation. When we attempt to define ourselves in the restriction of the present, we are limited to the reality of fragmentation; we are not free to exist as common and continual humankind, able to be reconciled by time and humility. The chaos of the past and the renewal available in the future are both necessary for living well now. All people share a common bond in the present; this timeless unity enables us to question human identity and connectivity with assurance, confident that fullness exists.

When considering reality in the context of what it means to be human, Eliot encounters limitations to establishing commonalities between human beings:

...There is, it seems to us,  
 At best, only a limited value  
 In the knowledge derived from experience.  
 The knowledge imposes a pattern, and falsifies,  
 For the pattern is new in every moment. (26)

Eliot recognizes the fallacy of relying on personal experience to define our identity. Experience is insubstantial, transient, and finite; no pattern can be ascertained that can grant true understanding. The unreliability of experience subjects every moment to an

endless spectrum of possibilities, preventing experiential patterns from maintaining coherent structures of meaning. After further reflection, Eliot writes:

...Do not let me hear  
 Of the wisdom of old men, but rather of their folly,  
 Their fear of fear and frenzy, their fear of possession,  
 Of belonging to another, or to others, or to God. (Eliot 26)

In these lines Eliot explains that understanding the complexity of human nature is more valuable than trying to gather meaning from personal experience. When we are able to explore the ways those in the past have responded to common fears and connectivity, we are more capable of discerning who we are as communal beings. As we grapple with identity, we must be reminded that “the only wisdom we can hope to acquire / is the wisdom of humility: humility is endless” (27). Literary scholar Fayek Ishak claims that humility “constitutes a preliminary and indispensable factor in the mystical development of the soul... In Christianity the ethical value of humility originates in the Incarnation” (113). Christ – who descended from divine perfection to take on human flesh and weakness – is essential to Eliot’s definition of humility, which is “endless.” Christ as the physical and eternal paradigm embodies wisdom, providing a viable expression of abstract ideals in the context of human reality. His dual status as fully divine and fully human reflects the hope offered by “the only wisdom we can hope to acquire” (27).

The oneness of common humanity over past centuries remains vital to understanding human identity. Struggling with this connection, Eliot writes:

There is only the fight to recover what has been lost  
 And found and lost again and again: and now, under conditions

That seem unpropitious. But perhaps neither gain nor loss.

For us, there is only the trying. The rest is not our business. (31)

To recognize the cycle of forgetting is essential to reclaiming common identity. We are not the first, nor will we be the last, to abandon the work of discerning human connectivity. In fact, it is not our role to make something new or exciting, “there is only the trying,” and to realign ourselves with an unchanging reality is all we can hope to do. As we continue to learn about human nature, “the world becomes stranger, the pattern more complicated” (Eliot 31). Eliot is mindful of the complex relationship between past and present:

...Not the intense moment

Isolated, with no before or after,

But a lifetime burning in every moment

And not the lifetime of one man only

But of old stones that cannot be deciphered. (31)

It is not enough that our place in time be considered “intense” or unique in itself. In fact, no time or place has meaning if isolated from the stories that both precede and follow its action. The newness we conceive of present action has more to do with the tools or props used in the drama than in any new characterization. Though we continue to gauge our progress by material implementation, our actions are not comprised of “the lifetime of one man only.” The “old stones” – inscribed with undecipherable, dead language – are the very parts of our selves that have died by forgetting. If again we learn to translate the “old stones” of commonality in each other, our attempts to recover and redeem human connectivity will see fruition.

Eliot recognizes the mystery of the present both in its significance and irrelevancy to who we are as human:

Love is most nearly itself  
When here and now cease to matter.  
Old men ought to be explorers  
Here and there does not matter  
We must be still and still moving  
Into a another intensity  
For a further union, a deeper communion. (32)

In this passage the language of love is congruent with the language of connectivity; Eliot speaks initially of “love,” yet ends with the possibility of a “deeper communion.” We are most capable of learning about our common humanity “when here and now cease to matter.” This pertains to our necessary connection to wisdom of the past, but also considers how we dwell in place, or circumstance (here), and time (now). Continual exploration, by both stillness and movement, is essential to the “intensity” with which we live life. As Eliot weds the concepts of “intensity” and “union,” he again brings up the fullness available to us in common life and interdependency.

Eliot considers our relationship to time and place by further exploring the relationship between experience and meaning:

We had the experience but missed the meaning,  
And approach to the meaning restores the experience  
In a different form, beyond any meaning  
...I have said before

That the past experience revived in the meaning  
Is not the experience of one life only  
But of many generations. (39).

Life acquires meaning through our relationships to past generations and one another. When we assume that experience has inherent meaning, or venerate experience for the sake of experience, we render experience meaningless. However, when experience is recognized as a construct for meaning, it is possible to redeem the things that we do. We are connected not for the sake of connection, but for the sake of the meaning derived from the life we share together. Like Donne, Eliot recognizes the experience of shared suffering as essential to establishing human meaning:

We appreciate this better  
In the agony of others, nearly experienced,  
Involving ourselves, than in our own.  
For our own past is covered by the currents of action,  
But the torment of others remains an experience  
Unqualified, unworn by subsequent attrition. (40)

Passive isolation prevents us from suffering with and near others; we are unable to share the closeness that gives life meaning. By sharing, and actively experiencing collective suffering, we are able to appreciate life more fully.

When we expect to know the meaning for which we search, our journey will often surprise us with meanings and conclusions unforeseen:

...And what you thought you came for  
Is only a shell, a husk of meaning

From which the purpose breaks only when it is fulfilled  
If at all. Either you had no purpose  
Or the purpose is beyond the end you figured  
And is altered in fulfillment. (Eliot 50)

Our ongoing search for meaning must not become preoccupied with predetermined conclusions, for these ends are often shadows of the fulfillment to be found elsewhere. If we search in humility, open to the fulfillment offered by community and relationships, we may discover a richness we had not supposed to exist. As we journey to recover connectivity and common definition as human beings, we will often be surprised by, but never completely unfamiliar with our discoveries:

We shall not cease from exploration  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we start  
And know the place for the first time. (Eliot 59)

The inherent humanity in all of us cannot be dissipated by our illusions and reckless disconnection from one another. However, these illusions ruin our conception of identity, causing us to be enslaved to what is not the true self. John Donne recognizes the capacity for humankind to succumb to illusion: “Perchance he for whom this bell tolls may be so ill, as that he knows not it tolls for him” (Donne 271). When disconnection is characterized as an illness, it becomes something the community can heal. By exploring what it means to be fully human, to be connected and involved in common struggle, we will not necessarily discover new realities or new connections; rather, we will recognize who we have always been and know our selves “for the first time.”

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