T.S. Eliot’s later contribution to the literary tradition is often difficult to appraise due to his daunting reputation as a Modernist poet as well as his initiatory role in the founding of New Criticism. As the representative poet-critic of his age, Eliot emphasized impersonality and aesthetic formalism at the expense of subjectivity and life-experience. His exemplary place in the Modernist canon has prevented his readers from considering his poetry as a record of personal change and critical revision. In *Four Quartets*, however, Eliot explores his poetic development as an autobiographical concern that challenges the way that his poetry and prose have been read and institutionalized. While the autobiographical references in his later poetry are easy to identify, what remains to be more fully acknowledged is the literary significance of Eliot’s turn away from the impersonal poetics of High Modernism.

Our interest in this shift in literary paradigms will assume three stages: first, we will examine how a specifically religious thematic provides Eliot with the basis for a discursive approach to the problem of the self in time; second, we hope to offer a unique overview of *Four Quartets* itself, a complex poem that dramatizes the rift between spiritual and material being; finally, we shall discuss how the textual features of Eliot’s work help us understand the meaning of spiritual crisis as well as conversion in the later poetry.

**Augustine and the poetics of time**

Eliot’s theological interests, as they emerge in *Four Quartets* from beginning to end, often frustrate the attentive reader from considering literature apart from the matter of personal belief. But the poetry itself, rather than the poet’s own life as an independent source of value, can be read as a sign of increasing commitment or as a narrative that
places those same commitments in temporal perspective. Criticism, properly considered, can suggest how the poetry can be interpreted, not necessarily as an obscure beginning that was later articulated theologically, but as a clear response to a contemporary situation. The mediation between language and the world that occurs in *Four Quartets* is a matter of discourse, which might be read as the verbal effort to provide communal significance to the self’s journey through time. The self that emerges as the theme of a discursive elaboration enables the poet to return to the past as both personal and historical. R.A. York suggests that Eliot may be “the greatest master of discursiveness in modern poetry”, but also that “he practices discursiveness to show its limits; to hint at what is private, immediate, incommensurate with speech”.¹ In Eliot’s case, discourse opens up fissures in the being of language, showing us that the poem is neither a timeless artifact nor simply the result of impersonal reflection.

Hence, if considered in terms of the difference between a complete theology and a phenomenology of experience, *Four Quartets* calls attention to rifts in time that animate the speaker’s account of his own journey from doubt to religious certainty. Furthermore, this journey, which involves the reader in an experience of disillusionment that prevents the poem from becoming merely a retrospective survey, cannot be assessed unless the movement from past to present can be appreciated as a temporal process. This would mean, for instance, that the poem as a whole cannot be understood in view of the modern theological (and perhaps Utopian) view of history as complete in advance of its unfolding, but that instead the poem is more wisely situated somewhere between prospective experience and the seal of meaning that the poet has chosen to place on his religious life. It would seem, therefore, that a compelling interpretation of the poem depends on the possibility of distinguishing whatever informed it from what might be theologically articulated or reflectively examined, since the poet’s own life may possess a singular value that is easily misunderstood.

It is useful at this point to reflect on the role of the autobiographical tradition itself in constituting the limits of Eliot’s own project, which is neither reducible to metaphysics nor to a private