

To Whom Much Has Been Given

A Biblical Perspective on the Responsibilities of Human Beings as
Environmental Stewards

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Abstract

- God is both immanent and transcendent ; he creates and upholds the universe but is distinct from it. Human beings are an organic fusion of corporeal body and spiritual soul: they are part of physical nature, but not only of physical nature. God, in whose image human beings are made, has delegated to us a unique role as managers of the earth and its other creatures. To deny the special status of human beings in relation to the rest of the earthly creation is also to deny our divinely decreed obligations towards it. At the same time, it is important to remember the fallen state of our race when considering the proper extent of unchecked human authority over nature.

- The idea of *rights*, upon which so much of contemporary legal and ethical discourse hinges, is inferior in several ways to an ethic founded on *responsibilities*. Furthermore, of these two possible bases for ethical analysis, only the latter finds direct support in the Bible. An appeal to responsibilities rather than rights is especially helpful in establishing a solid philosophical foundation for environmentalism.

- The land-use and economic laws of the Old Testament contain provisions for implementing wise environmental practices, and strong sanctions for failing to carry them out.

- Two opposite ways of failing to be a good steward are much in evidence at present. On the one hand, the steward may lose sight of the distinction between himself and the Master he is called to serve. He may begin to believe that the resources under his control actually belong not to his Master but to himself, and that he may therefore use — or exploit — them as he pleases. Such a person is prone to undervalue God's creation, and to plunder it through selfishness. On the other hand, the steward may begin to regard herself simply as a part of the 'estate' she has been called upon to manage, denying any significant difference between herself and the Master's other creatures, and thereby failing to acknowledge her dominion over them and responsibility for them. Owing to an excessively egalitarian (or even worshipful) attitude towards the natural world, a person of this sort is in danger of reverting to a kind of pantheistic nature religion.

‘Of one to whom much has been given, much will be required.’

Jesus’ words in Luke 12.48 b provide a succinct key to the views presented in this paper, and to what I regard as the mandate for human stewardship of the environment. Human beings enjoy a special place in God’s earthly creation, and with that privileged position come proportional great responsibilities. The concept of *noblesse oblige* is not an outworn relic of the past.

The Unique Status of Human Beings

God is infinite spiritⁱ — ‘without body, parts, or passions’, as Chapter II of the Westminster Confession puts it. He creates the universe *ex nihilo* but is not himself bound up in it.ⁱⁱ

Human beings are God’s psychosomatic creatures, a two-fold hybrid of material body and spiritual soul. It was Chief Seattle who is reputed to have said, ‘The earth does not belong to us; we belong to the earth.’ Christians can wholeheartedly concur with the first of his assertions, but not the second, for the Bible insists that we — like all creation — belong not to the earth but to Godⁱⁱⁱ, and furthermore that we are constituted not only from the dust of the ground but also from God’s breath (or spirit).^{iv} Of all the creatures whose origins are treated in the first two chapters of Genesis, human beings are the only ones said to be made ‘in God’s own image’.^v

According to the biblical creation narrative, human beings enjoy a singular status that confers upon them both great honour and concomitant grave responsibilities. No sooner are our first parents identified as being made in God’s likeness than they are immediately charged with having ‘dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.’^{vi} They are also directed to ‘till and keep’^{vii} the garden of Eden where they have been placed to live. Human dominion is illustrated in the first man’s assigning names to the animals in Genesis 2, and later in Noah’s task of preserving species during the great flood.

A genuinely biblical approach to any philosophical question must of necessity be *theocentric*, but nowadays the fundamental debate in environmental philosophy is typically posed as a choice between *anthropocentrism* on the one hand and *ecocentrism* or *biocentrism* on the other. Some versions of anthropocentrism have rightly been criticized for exploiting nature and for valuing it

only to the extent that it is of ‘use’ to humanity. This utilitarian outlook is not the biblical view, however, for God pronounces nature *good* before mankind is even made^{viii}, and the whole of creation — not just humanity — is capable of glorifying God.^{ix}

None the less, if a choice must be made between these alternatives, there are at least two compelling reasons for being anthropocentric rather than ecocentric :

1. The Sanctity of Human Life

In Genesis 9.5 – 6 we read, ‘For your lifeblood I will surely require a reckoning; ... Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for God made man in his own image.’ Although the life of animals is also honoured in the prohibition against eating blood (Gen 9.4), there is no commandment *per se* against killing animals. In Matthew 10.31 Jesus states flatly that human beings ‘are of more value than many sparrows’, contradicting the assertion by some deep ecologists that all species are inherently equal in importance. The philosopher Paul Taylor, for example, argues that ‘The killing of a wildflower, then, when taken in and of itself, is just as much a wrong, other-things-being-equal, as the killing of a human.’^x Such a point of view hardly seems to merit a detailed refutation, as it is so completely at odds with virtually everyone’s common-sense view of life (not to mention our legal system). Joe Bloggs, if asked why he swatted the fly instead of letting it share his dinner, will answer with an incredulous laugh — not a closely reasoned philosophical defence. Some of the more extreme pronouncements of the radical biocentrists remind me of a parody of the antepenultimate stanza of Coleridge’s *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* that was made by Professor J. S. Phillimore of Glasgow University^{xi}:

He prayeth best who loveth best
All things however small.
The streptococcus is the test :
I hate him worst of all.

2. The Moral Standing of Human Beings

On earth it is *de facto* the case that human beings are the only reasoning moral agents, unless there are other such species that have so far maintained a remarkably low profile. Chaucer wrote a great poem about a ‘Parliament of Fowls’ who gathered to discuss the nature of love, but that,

alas, was fantasy. When I lived in Kenya there used to be occasional trouble with elephants despoiling not only farmers' crops but also the ecology of the game reserves set aside for them and the other wild animals. When this happened no delegation was sent to reason with the elephants (even though they are reputed to be among the most intelligent of beasts), for it was understood that only human beings can and will respond to rational arguments, and only they might act to alleviate the situation.

The Fallen State of Humanity

While anthropocentrism is to be preferred over ecocentrism, we must never forget to take into account the failed state of the human race in the spiritual and moral spheres. In Genesis 3 we learn that the initial harmonious relationship between God and human beings was broken as a result of wilful sin on the part of our original ancestors. As a consequence of this we are now all born as fallen creatures, spiritually cut off from God and naturally rebellious against him. Jesus Christ makes possible the reconciliation between God and us, but in this life we still suffer the vagaries of a fallen world. Because the first man was the lord of nature, when he fell so did certain aspects of the natural world. The ground suffered a curse because of his sin^{xii}, and following the evident rapport between man and the animals in Genesis 2.18–20 we find in Genesis 9.2–4 that:

The fear of you and the dread of you shall be upon every beast of the earth, and upon every bird of the air, upon everything that creeps on the ground and all the fish of the sea; into your hand they are delivered. Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you; and as I gave you the green plants, I now give you everything.

Because the image of God in humanity has been defaced, we dare not simply follow our own inclinations when acting as stewards of creation. Doing what comes naturally is no longer good enough, and none of us can be trusted with absolute power even over animals and land, let alone over our fellow human beings. Environmental *laws* are now an unfortunate necessity, and it is surprising that Christian conservatives (who ought to understand the corruption of the human heart better than others) are often the most reluctant to accept this.

What's Wrong with Rights

Thesis: The discourse of *rights*, within which most issues in politics and moral theory (including environmentalism) are debated these days, is both historically ill founded and philosophically flawed. Ethical and political questions are better analysed, instead, in terms of the older discourse of *responsibilities* (or, perhaps alternatively, *virtues*). Let me be clear that I am not advocating a better 'balance' between rights and responsibilities, but simply that we drop 'rights talk' altogether in favour of 'responsibilities talk'.

(a) *Historical/Social Weaknesses*

(i) Sophisticated, comprehensive ethical theories based on duties (or virtues) pre-date the concept of rights in the modern sense (i.e., 'subjective' natural or human rights as an entitlement or a power, versus the old idea of 'objective' right) by thousands of years, and they seem to have arisen independently in many different locations and cultures. For example: the Mosaic law of the Jews, the *Dharma* of Hinduism, the Eightfold Path of Buddhism, the *Analects* of Confucius, Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, the 'natural law' of the Stoics and the Scholastics, the moral teachings of Christianity, the Muslim *sharia*, most traditional African ethical codes, etc.

Since it proved possible for many varied human civilizations to rub along quite well without it for so many centuries, does the relatively new notion of 'rights' really possess the critical ethical significance that so many people currently attribute to it? ^{xiii}

(ii) In contrast to the ancient and widespread duty-based moral systems, rights-based ethics, in addition to being rather recent, are also narrowly localized in origin (viz, Western Europe). The fact that powerful Western countries have effectively *imposed* the doctrine of rights on the rest of the world (with increasing rapidity and force since the UN's 'Universal Declaration of Human Rights' in December 1948) might be viewed as a kind of 'ethical imperialism'.

(iii) Some research in psychology (see, e.g., Harvard professor Carol Gilligan's widely discussed 1982 book *In a Different Voice*) suggests that the natural tendency of many *women* is to analyse moral questions in terms of *relationships* and *responsibilities for the care of others* instead of in terms of rights, but that under the strong contemporary influence of the 'rights approach' (as Gilligan calls it) they are often impelled to change their way of thinking (see, e.g.,

page 132 of her book). This raises the question whether those who insist on formulating ethical questions in terms of rights are contributing to *sexism* as well as to imperialism.

(iv) Concentrating on our mutual responsibilities builds community and strengthens social harmony and cohesion, whereas each person's focusing on his or her private, individual rights tends to result in unhealthy competitiveness and social fragmentation — as already foreseen by Rousseau in the eighteenth century. (It is interesting to compare the socially corrosive effects of the competitiveness intrinsic to the rights perspective with the somewhat analogous but arguably 'healthy' competitiveness inherent in a free-enterprise economic system.)

In contrast to the temptation towards self-indulgence implicit in the rights outlook, an ethic of responsibilities aids greatly in the difficult (but crucial) task of self-mastery, promotes the development of the virtues (e.g., the 'cardinal virtues' of prudence, justice, temperance, and fortitude), and fosters a sense of *gratitude* for the good things of life that come to us. (Cicero claims that 'Gratitude is not only the greatest virtue, but even the mother of all the rest', and the theologian Karl Barth asserts that 'radically and basically, all sin is simply ingratitude.'^{xiv})

(b) *Philosophical Weaknesses*

(i) Rights and responsibilities are often regarded as being nothing more than two sides of the same coin, but I believe that in fact their relationship is not as utterly symmetric as many people suppose. It seems to me that every right can indeed be rephrased in terms of obligations, but that the converse is not true. (Jacques Maritain makes the same point — particularly with regard to duties of charity and duties to animals — in Chapter 7 of his 1950 book *An Introduction to the Basic Problems of Moral Philosophy*.)

(ii) Environmentalism and the moral imperative to avoid unnecessary animal pain can flow naturally from an ethic of responsibilities, but a rights advocate who wished to be able to hold such views would seem to be compelled first to demonstrate that animals (and perhaps even plants and inanimate objects) possess rights, questionable as this might be.

(iii) '*Entia non sunt multiplicanda praeter necessitatem.*' ('Occam's Razor': cf **a** (i) above.)

(iv) Historically, rights theory developed out of the theory of natural law^{xv}, but it was not a logically *necessary* development. That is, natural law can exist without natural rights, but I do

not see how the converse can be true. It is strange, then, that many people today believe wholeheartedly in rights but are quite sceptical about the existence of natural law — from which the idea of rights first arose, and which alone gives it such philosophical support as it possesses.

Similarly, near the beginning of the US Declaration of Independence the source of rights was said to be our ‘Creator’. Thomas Jefferson’s Enlightenment-era colleagues were happy to invoke the rights doctrine, but many of them were Deists and wanted to efface any vestiges of a personal God from their philosophy. This seems to me rather like insisting on living on the first floor of a building while at the same time being determined to knock out the ground floor upon which the upper storey rests. As long as a ‘right’ meant what the medieval Scholastics understood by the term — namely, a guarantee of the freedom of action necessary to fulfil one’s duty to God (or, alternatively, to the ‘natural law’) — then I think the notion was probably benign. However, once such a duty-based understanding was lost, whether through religious apostasy or bad philosophy, it was virtually inevitable that the concept of rights should become perverted and abused, as we have no shortage of evidence for today. In the process we have become like G. K. Chesterton’s madman^{xvi}: losing everything except our reason, and thereby forsaking our sanity.

God’s Concern for the Environment

At the point of bringing the children of Israel into Canaan, God prescribes environmental practices to be followed, especially with regard to the use of land. For example:

‘You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain.’ (Deuteronomy 25.4)

‘If you chance to come upon a bird’s nest, in any tree or on the ground, with young ones or eggs and the mother sitting upon the young or upon the eggs, you shall not take the mother with the young; you shall let the mother go, but the young you may take to yourself; that it may go well with you, and that you may live long.’ (Deuteronomy 22.6–7)

‘For six years you shall sow your land and gather in its yield; but the seventh year you shall let it rest and lie fallow, that the poor of your people may eat; and what they leave the wild beasts may eat. You shall do likewise with your vineyard, and with your olive orchard. Six days you shall do your work, but on the seventh day you shall rest; that your ox and your ass may have rest, and the son of your bondmaid, and the alien, may be refreshed.’ (Exodus 23.10–12)

‘The land will yield its fruit, and you will eat your fill, and dwell in it securely. And if you say, “What shall we eat in the seventh year, if we may not sow or gather in our crops?”, I will command my blessing upon you in the sixth year, so that it will bring forth fruit for three years. When you sow in the eighth year, you will be eating old produce; until the ninth year, when the produce comes in, you shall eat the old. The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; you are strangers and sojourners with me. And in all the country you possess you shall grant a redemption of the land’ (i.e., every half-century, in the year of Jubilee, when land that had been sold reverted back to the family it had originally been assigned to). (Lev 25.19–24)

God also decrees some rather harsh sanctions if his commandments are not carried out :

‘Do not say in your heart, after the LORD your God has thrust them out before you, “It is because of my righteousness that the LORD has brought me in to possess this land”; whereas it is because of the wickedness of these nations that the LORD is driving them out before you.’ (Deuteronomy 9.4. See also the last part of Revelation 11.18, translated in the New Jerusalem Bible as, ‘The time has come to destroy those who are destroying the earth.’)

‘Do not defile yourselves by any of these things ... lest the land vomit you out, when you defile it, as it vomited out the nation that was before you.’ (Leviticus 18.24–28)

‘If in spite of this you will not hearken to me ... I will scatter you among the nations, and I will unsheathe the sword after you; and your land shall be a desolation, and your cities shall be a waste. Then the land shall enjoy its sabbaths as long as it lies desolate, while you are in your enemies’ land; then the land shall rest and enjoy its sabbaths. As long as it lies desolate it shall have rest, the rest which it had not when you dwelt upon it.’ (Leviticus 26.27–35)

In 586 B.C. God made good on these threats, as the people of Judah were carried off into captivity:

‘[The king of the Chaldeans] took into exile in Babylon those who had escaped from the sword, and they became servants to him ... until the establishment of the kingdom of Persia, to fulfil the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah, until the land had enjoyed its sabbaths. All the days that it lay desolate it kept sabbath, to fulfil seventy years.’ (2 Chronicles 36.20–21)

Two Opposite Ways of Failing at Environmental Stewardship

(a) Forgetting That the Earth Belongs to God, Not to Us

It is unfortunate that our civil laws allow land to be sold in such a way that people can come to believe they actually *own* it. But, as the passage above from Leviticus 25 reminds us, the land is really God's, and we are but brief sojourners on it. Those who forget this fact can easily lose sight of their role as stewards and begin to think of themselves as masters instead. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that such lapsed stewards vigorously assert their 'right' to use and 'develop' their land in any way they see fit, even if that involves strip-mining, clear-cut logging, or putting in yet another shopping centre or block of terraced houses. Those who reason this way typically think of themselves as being politically conservative, but 'conservation' really has little to do with their concerns. They may acknowledge God with their lips, but they seem to have no conception of how the Old Testament economic laws — private property protected, but special treatment of land; forbidding money to be lent at interest; a limit to the sizes of cities — would have inhibited the rise and the rampant growth of the gigantic multinational capitalist system that drives their development schemes and that often threatens the liveability of our planet.

(b) Forgetting That We Belong to God, Not to the Earth

If 'conservatives' are prone to greed and delusions of inflated authority, 'liberals' are wont to disregard their dominion altogether and to forget their difference from the rest of nature. To deny one's special status with respect to nature, however, is also to shirk one's responsibility to manage it wisely. In extreme cases such people lose track not only of the distinction between the Master's estate and themselves as stewards, but even the distinction between the estate and the Master. They may say that they find their 'spirituality' in nature, but they tend to forget that nature is a fragile, temporary thing — created from nothing — like the tiny hazel nut in Julian of Norwich's vision.^{xvii} Their error is similar to the one St Paul describes in Romans 1.23–25:

They exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man or birds or reptiles. ... They exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator.

Beautiful though it may be, nature is derivative, contingent, and mortal, and it is no place to put our ultimate trust:

But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and the works that are upon it will be burnt up. ... But according to his promise we wait for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells. (2 Peter 3.10 –13; see also Heb 1.10 –12, Rev 21.1, Mark 13.31, and 1 Cor 15.53)

The current ‘New Age’ version of nature worship among a certain segment of humanity seems to me to be a kind of regress into pantheism after thousands of laborious years spent rising above it. It would be almost comical if the potential consequences were not so dire.

Still, even pantheism is preferable to a modern atheistic ‘scientism’ that can find only cold, impersonal mechanism in the universe. To their credit, pantheists and neo-pagans still possess a sense of enchantment, and they have not lost the refreshing capacity to believe in something outside of themselves. If they can populate every grove of trees with wood nymphs and are able to see a naiad in each brook, then they at least have some incipient foundation for a more mature faith. After all, the Bible itself uses images of nature to describe the divine. For example:

‘His voice was like the sound of many waters ... and his face was like the sun shining in full strength.’ (Revelation 1.15 –16)

‘The righteous flourish like the palm tree, and grow like a cedar in Lebanon.’ (Psalm 92.12)

‘And those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the firmament; and those who turn many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever.’ (Daniel 12.3)

‘The wind blows where it wills; you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it is going.’ (Jesus speaking of the activity of the Holy Spirit in John 3.8)

‘You will do well to pay attention to this ... until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.’ (2 Peter 1.19; compare Revelation 2.28 and 22.16)

Given such biblical imagery, we need not feel ashamed of longing, as T. S. Eliot says^{xviii}, for:

The wild thyme unseen, or the winter lightning
Or the waterfall, or music heard so deeply
That it is not heard at all, but you are the music
While the music lasts.

What modern-day pantheists need to understand is that the way to get ‘deeper’ into the glories of nature is not through nature herself but through her Creator — through the Lord of Glory himself. God has indeed invited us into that deeper beauty, but the gate through which we must pass is not the one we might expect. It is not Blake’s grain of sand, not Wordsworth’s daffodils, and not Ansel Adams’s Yosemite. The gate is Jesus Christ, through whom and for whom all things were created, and in whom all things hold together (John 10.9, Col 1.16–17). In finding him — or, rather, being found in him — we shall at last commune directly: not only with nature, but also with nature’s Inventor and Maker.

Endnotes

ⁱ See, e.g., John 4.24 (compare Luke 24.39); Psalm 145.3, 147.5; Jeremiah 32.17; Mark 10.27.

ⁱⁱ See, e.g., Gen 1.1; Ps 33.6, 33.9, 148.5; Isa 42.5, 44.24; John 1.3; Rom 4.17; Heb 11.3; Rev 4.11; 1 Ki 8.27; Mt 24.35; Acts 17.24–25. (See also 2 Maccabees 7.28 in the Apocrypha.)

ⁱⁱⁱ See, e.g., Leviticus 25.23, Psalm 24.1, Isaiah 43.7, Ephesians 1.12, Colossians 1.16.

^{iv} Genesis 2.7.

^v Genesis 1.26–27. This is not to claim that human beings are the highest of God’s creatures, nor even the *only* ones made in his likeness. For example, the Bible also tells of *angels*, mighty beings of pure spirit, without the material component that we possess. Also, there seems to be nothing to preclude the possibility of God having created rational, non-human, corporeal creatures in his image on other planets of our universe, or in other universes. None of this belies the unique position of dominion and responsibility that human beings have on earth.

^{vi} Genesis 1.28; see also Psalm 8.3–9.

^{vii} Genesis 2.15.

^{viii} Genesis 1.10–25.

^{ix} See, e.g., Ps 19.1, 150.6; Num 14.21; Job 12.7–10, 38.7; Isaiah 35.1–2, 44.23; Luke 2.13–14, 19.37–40.

^x Paul Taylor, ‘In Defense of Biocentrism’, *Environmental Ethics*, Vol. 5, No. 3 (1983), p. 242.

^{xi} Quoted in *The Church and I*, by Frank Sheed (New York: Doubleday, 1974), p. 81.

^{xii} Gen 3.17. See also, e.g., Rom 5.12 ff, Ps 14.1–3, Ps 51.5, Rom 3.9–18, 1 Cor 15.22, Eph 2.

^{xiii} The idea of ‘rights’ in the modern sense (particularly from the time of the Enlightenment onwards) has been challenged by more than a few philosophers. For instance, Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832), the founder of Utilitarianism, famously declared that

‘Natural rights is simple nonsense: natural and imprescriptible rights, rhetorical nonsense — nonsense upon stilts.’ (*Anarchical Fallacies*, Article II)

More recently, Alasdair MacIntyre, in his influential 1981 book *After Virtue*, contends that

‘[T]here is no expression in any ancient or medieval language correctly translated by our expression ‘a right’ until near the close of the Middle Ages: the concept lacks any means of expression in Hebrew, Greek, Latin, or Arabic, classical or medieval, before about 1400, let alone in Old English, or in Japanese even as late as the mid-nineteenth century. From this it does not of course follow that there are no natural or human rights; it only follows that no one could have known that there were. And this at least raises certain questions. But we do not need to be distracted into answering them, for the truth is plain: there are no such rights, and belief in them is one with belief in witches and in unicorns.’ — Chapter 6 (p. 67)

Bearing in mind the time period during which the Bible was written, MacIntyre’s claim that our contemporary understanding of rights simply *could not* have been expressed naturally in any ancient language ought to be of considerable relevance to Christians, especially as one of the overarching themes of Scripture is *grace* on the part of God rather than any human deservedness, a theme that does not mesh well with the idea of rights as innate entitlements. It must be admitted that nearly all recent English translations of the Bible *do* sometimes use ‘a right’ where the Greek text has ἐξουσία — a word that appears at least 100 times in the New Testament, but which more properly has the meaning of ‘authority’ or ‘power’, as it is typically translated in, for example, Matthew 21.23–27 and 28.18, or John 19.10–11. Though the distinction may at first sight seem subtle, I believe that present-day translators who employ ‘a right’ for ἐξουσία (as in the first half of 1 Corinthians 9, for instance) are guilty of linguistic prochronism: smuggling into such biblical passages — even if inadvertently — a connotation that the original authors could not have intended. (By way of comparison, notice how the Authorized Version avoids any such tendency in its renderings of 1 Corinthians 9, Romans 9.21, and John 1.12 — since to refer to ‘rights’ as we think of them nowadays would hardly have occurred to any of King James’s translators, even more than 1500 years after New Testament times.)

^{xiv} *The Doctrine of Reconciliation* (*Church Dogmatics*, Vol. IV, I), Ch. XIII, § 57, 2, p. 41.

^{xv} See, for example, *Natural Law and Natural Rights* (1980) by John Finnis, especially section VIII.3 (ARE DUTIES ‘PRIOR TO’ RIGHTS?), pp 205–10.

^{xvi} See Chapter II (‘The Maniac’) of Chesterton’s 1908 book *Orthodoxy*.

^{xvii} *Revelations of Divine Love* (or *Showings*), first revelation (short text Ch. IV; long text Ch. 5).

^{xviii} T. S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*, ‘The Dry Salvages’, 209–212.