'I gotta use words when I talk to you': A literary examination of John

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'I gotta use words when I talk to you' says Sweeney in T.S. Eliot's *Sweeney Agonistes*. Sweeney is telling the awful parable of the man he knew who 'did a girl in' and wasn't sure which of them was alive and which dead. In the world of Sweeney's experience 'That's what life is. Just is ... Life is death'.[1]

> When you're alone like he was alone/You're either or neither/I tell you again it don't apply/Death or life or life or death/Death is life and life is death/I gotta use words when I talk to you/But if you understand or if you dont/That's nothing to me and nothing to you ...

Words here are strained to accomplish their explanation (how can 'life' be 'death' when the words signify opposites) and as they stretch they give up multiple significances to unfold un-thought-of meanings. If Sweeney's friend Doris says (whether of Sweeney's 'canibal isle' where life is 'birth, and copulation, and death', or of the proposed 'crocodile isle' idyll of 'Morning/Evening/Noontime/Night'), 'That's not life, that's no life/Why I'd just as soon be dead', she may not only be expressing a simple equality of preference, but saying that on an isle with no telephones, gramophones, cars or trains, only fruit and flowers and sameness, death will come just as surely and as soon as in the busy world of sights and sounds and doings. When Sweeney picks this up and says 'That's what life is. Just is', he may allude to the quality of life—hurried, mechanised, or slow-dropping hypnotised—as death *or* to the incontrovertible fact that the end, the fulfilment, of all life is death.

The world Sweeney describes is the world in which language is the only means of communication, of formulating understanding, but is inadequate. Language is the expressive medium intimately linked with this world where life seems to be defined in relation to (or *by*) death and may be inseparable from it. Sweeney doesn't care 'if you understand or if you don't' because understanding is not necessary for life to be lived through to its end in death.

This is a world both like and unlike the world of John's gospel. Certainly mortality is a fact—the primary fact of the world Jesus enters, and of the nature he assumes when the Word is 'made flesh'. But mortality is also the fact he comes to deny; the world of death is that into which he steps and says 'I am ... the life'. Life, therefore, assumes a new

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dimension, a new definition. It is not simply the day-to-day morning-evening-noontime-night existence we lead, which leads us to death. This life is beyond death, unending, just as the Word was *before* death, before creation, in the beginning. Language has yielded up—or acquired—a new meaning, a whole new dimension, perhaps always existing as a memory or desire in our word 'life' but diminished as an understandable reality by our familiarity with mortality. No wonder Jesus in John's gospel—the Word in all its purity of being and fullness of meaning—finds it difficult to make himself 'known', his transcendent meanings understood. John's Jesus seems to find the language he is compelled to use a frustrating medium, itself emblematic of worldly limitation.

> Why do I speak to you in the first place? (8:25)
> Why do you not understand my speech? Because you are not able to listen to my word. (8:43)
> If I speak the truth why do you not believe me? (8.:46)

Sometimes it almost feels as if he's going to exclaim 'I gotta use words when I talk to you!'

'Making known' God to his creatures is the essence of Christ's ministry; it is also the evangelist's task. John's Jesus must draw to him those who can hear and by believing understand—but first he has to reclaim language itself so that functioning in the world, taking its meanings from worldly experience and having meaning by worldly traditions, it may also remind the world of its origins beyond the written traditions of law and prophets, of literalness and community codes—'in the beginning', when the Word 'was' what the Word-made-flesh *is* and when language has to aspire to be again—'full of grace and truth'.

Jesus's life and his death and resurrection, the evangelist reminds us often, fulfill and validate the words of Scripture, the words of God's promise, the words of law and prophecy by which his community has been guided and from which they have taken their idea of self. The evangelist's own task is to find the words adequate to memorialising that life and death in such a fashion as to enable Jesus's story to continue to make God known. The anxiety about the adequacy of words in a world of misunderstanding and spiritual deafness which the evangelist displaces onto the Son of God in the gospel is his own.

The occasion for this writing is the presence of the transcendent in the worldly, the Spirit in flesh. The gospel has to show the Word in the world and in words. The drama of the gospel is created by the need for understanding, the pressure to 'make (God) known', both within the gospel story and in its readership. The evangelist's problem—and Christ's peculiar activity in John's gospel—is to represent in language the place where 'the impossible union of spheres of existence is actual'. The quotation from Eliot's *Four Quartets* is apposite. In *Dry Salvages* the poet who has sought and seeks 'the point of intersection of the timeless with time' says,

The hint half guessed, the gift half understood, is Incarnation
Here the impossible union
Of spheres of existence is actual ...

And just this point of union, of intersection is where the Evangelist in his Prelude starts.[2]

In the Prelude to John's Gospel language itself mediates between the divine and the human, the timeless and time—in a word: the Word itself. God's authority is all-embracing: the story itself is authored by God, witnessed—not authored—first by the forerunner John, last by the evangelist John. The source of all being is the source of Life—life here seems to be more than mere being; it seems to be the residual source and continuing meaning of being, the *Light* which links the 'being' of men to the source of being and which gives that being potential immortality. The Light becomes its own embodiment as the source itself steps into the world through the Incarnation. 'The true light which lightens every man, was coming into the world ... The Word became flesh.'

Already the meeting points that will characterise the whole gospel are established. The multiple senses of 'word' (logos) are richly central—in the world *logos* is a statement such as you or I might make; as a personal designation it also means God's word, God's son, the original and absolute word. There are other kinds of words in the gospel. It is a text rich in words and speech, the words of talk (and of talk about words) and of writing (notably Scripture); everyday words and significant words; words of earthy, visceral response (Jesus 'snorts' in 11.33 and 38, the Jews 'mumble' and 'grumble' in 6:41 as the disciples do in 6.61); words of common denotation and words richly symbolic of that which is ineffable. We shall look at all these words.

The Word that was identical to God from the beginning is also 'life' and 'light'. The aural similarity of these words in English helps us to form a connection between them—a meaningful one, of mutual definition. This life is not just being, but meaning. But I think this illuminating equivalence obscures another motion implicit in the Greek and significant throughout the gospel.

En autōzōē, kai hēzōē en to phōs tōn anthrōpōn (1:4).

Zōē seems an earthly term—it refers to life in the physical sense (it is the opposite of death). It is what goes on on earth. *Phōs* comes preeminently from above—the first light is the sun (*phōs* is not there at night) and other heavenly bodies: it is therefore the readiest metaphor for a supernatural source and was designated the element and sphere of the divine. Only by likeness do lamps, torches etc. become (earthly) lights. So in the Life that is light we have a meeting point of the two spheres of existence, that below and that above. When Jesus says 'I am the light of the world' he announces himself *as* the source of life and of meaning, as the point of intersection of the timeless with time.

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The polarity between above and below here implied will be of the greatest significance in the gospel (see, for example 1:32, 3:13, 6:48—9, 12:14). It becomes significant *not* to establish irreconcilable or antagonistic dualities, but precisely for the opposite reason. Because that which 'lives' below has a richer potential for life from above, realised *through* Christ and *in* the world first of all. 'To those who received him he gave power to become children of God, to those who believe in this name. They were born, not from blood, nor from the will of the flesh, nor from the will of man, but from God.' This image of a birth from God adumbrates the discussion which will take place between Jesus and Nicodemus in chapter three of the gospel. When Nicodemus wrestles with the shocking idea that 'unless a man is born *an ōthen* (again/from above) he cannot see the kingdom of God', we who have been made familiar by the Prologue with the idea of a spiritual birth, must remember that without the other kind of birth 'from blood, the will of flesh'—what Sweeney calls the way life 'just is': birth, copulation and death—there could not be a new birth from above, a new life that is deathless because it *is* the life of God. So the language of denial of the earthly ('not from the will of man') asserts the necessity of the earthly to realise the new and greater grace which is itself the product of the union of spheres in Christ.

Christ, as a 'light', makes the unseen Father 'known' to the world. God's power is made known through the 'signs' Christ works, not, as he always insists, on his own authority alone, 'not from myself' (e.g. 5:30, 8:28, 12:48) but on the authority of the Father who sent him. Among the people and places of the world the Son of God works his 'signs'; from these come the dramatic scenes sin his ministry. From the varied occupations of this world—fishing, keeping sheep, buying and selling, vine-dressing—derive vivid similes and metaphors to 'make known' Jesus's message.

It has often been noted that there is an emphasis on dialogue in John's gospel. The mission of Christ is not , as in Luke, a pounding up and down the roads or, as in Matthew and Mark, an extensive and detailed working of wonders and preaching, a breaking of laws and rousing of rabble. What Jesus does pre-eminently in John's gospel is *talk*.

The pattern of John's gospel alternates coherent dramatic scenes, often representing 'signs' worked by Jesus, with passages of discussion, preaching or argument, usually resulting in 'division'. The scenes are human stories and some of the most memorable in the gospels. But what goes on in these scenes is most importantly the dialogue. The miracles almost seem just by the way.

The substance of this explanatory or argumentative discourse discourse is often words themselves: sometimes the Scriptures the listeners unimaginatively cling to, often metaphors Jesus has used ('bread of life', 'living water'). The people Jesus encounters tend to look to written words—the law, Scripture—as authoritative and to measure Jesus's credibility against these. A too-literal or ill-informed reading of these

words can mislead. The crowds who dispute whether Jesus is the Messiah (7:40—44) are misled by their ignorance of his nativity, and cannot think that seeming Galilean can be the foretold Messiah from Bethlehem. Jesus says in Chapter five, 'you hunt through the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life, and these are they which bear witness about me. Yet you are not willing to come to me ... (5:39—40).

People tend to believe as a result of seeing 'signs' (miracles) worked by Jesus, but not to believe his *words* as signs. And Jesus insists that the Word (God's word) makes the signs: 'the words that I say to you are not spoken on my own; it is the Father, abiding in my who performs the works' (14:10)—Jesus's words are God's works. Apprehending the full meaning of Jesus's words (and thus faith in him and knowledge of God) depends on belief. This is a model for understanding which corresponds to models of how ordinary language works. Familiar to us through late nineteenth-century linguistics is a model of linguistic meaning (known also in the ancient world): that language only has meaning at all through belief, through the agreement that a sign will refer to a given signified, that words have *of themselves* no inherent significance.

The belief so willingly invested in the everyday workings of language is not unlike that which distinguishes the attitude of those who see in the signs/words of Christ's ministry the divinity signified by them. It is like that attitude which the evangelist must generate through *his* words, witnessing to Jesus's signs and his Messianic identity: 'now Jesus did many other signs ... which are not written; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ' (20:30—31). We (the gospel audience) are to believe through the witness of these words because we, too, live in a world of words—like the people in John's gospel we talk (and *sometimes* listen), we translate our experiences into words, we ask questions, we argue, we are sometimes at a loss for words, but often we find our way to complex understandings through the polysemy, the versatility of words themselves.

The episode of the Samaritan woman (4:4—42) tells of an exchange of words, and foregrounds the importance of talk itself. When Jesus has asked the woman for a drink, promised her living water and revealed himself to her, his disciples return. Their first reaction is astonishment that is talking with her—a Samaritan and a woman at that,: ... *ethaumazon hoti meta gunaikos elalei*. Throughout this episode a suggestive distinction in the Greek between talking (even vulgarly 'nattering') *lal ō* and speaking (significant words) *leg ō* operates. The ordinariness of 'talking' underlines the universality of the fields in which Jesus figuratively works and reaps worshippers (not just among the chosen, the educated, those of status or orthodoxy, but among foreigners, women, those prepared to believe and follow). The distinction between talking and speaking defines and locates the problem we are examining.

Talking is commonplace, but only *when* talking can one speak meaningfully (and at a distance—as we see from the disciples'

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approach—the two are indistinguishable). 'They were astonished that he was talking with a woman.' All their prejudices say that nothing of importance can be going on, except that he may be in need of something or she may be being a nuisance to him. 'Yet no one said "what are you seeking"? or "why are you talking with her"? And, curiously, they thus deny themselves access to the message he has staggeringly delivered, or the belief which she has readily taken up.

The drama of the scene itself is entirely enacted through words. Her surprise that he begs water of a prohibited person is met by Jesus's allusion to his own identity as one able to give 'living water'. In drawing parallels between them he has signalled difference. Her response, characteristic of Jesus's dramatic interlocutors is to seize on the literal—where is his (living water) bucket, Jesus, too, alludes to the literal—*this* well's water—to depart from it. 'Everyone who drinks this water will thirst again, but whoever drinks the water which I shall give him will never thirst; but the water which I shall give him will become in him a spring of water, welling up for eternal life.' The metaphor is rich and complex. Water satiates thirst; it is necessary to life. Jesus gives absolute satiety and eternal life. (The image never quite loses its literalness because awareness present throughout the significant imagery of John's gospel is the eucharistic one, embracing the necessity of Christ's sacrifice, the imperative of his consumption by his followers in an absolute union of belief). The claim is a large one, and for the woman Jesus is prepared to back it up. Once Jesus has told her 'all she has done' (in the matter of husbands anyway) she is ready not only to ask for living water but also to acknowledge that he is a prophet, even possibly the Messiah, who, she knows, 'will tell us everything'.

Jesus says 'I am he, the one speaking to you.' He uses the word *legō*—not the *lalō* which the disciples perceive. This *is* significant speech, not just idle talk. And when many Samaritans listen to the woman's witness and believe, it is her speech, '*ton logon*', which convinces them. When Jesus stays with them 'many more believed because of his word', *ton logon autou*. And, in a nice comic touch—because John is more alert to human nature than some think—having believed for themselves, they dismiss the woman's words as mere talk, *tēn sēn lalian*. 'It is no longer because of your talk that we believe, for we ourselves have heard, and we know this is truly the saviour of the world.'

The distinction between talking and speaking (significantly)—like the difference, also exploited, between a word (*rēma*) and a significant word of speech (*logos*)—is a product of normal (careful) Greek semantic usage, which for the most part John observes. But when he does put the words together, in juxtaposition, I think the implication is considerable. It suggests that ordinary language can be significant (without changing its form) just as the Son of Man can be divine without abandoning a shred of mortality, and just as those in the world can become children of God—not by leaving the world or by changing their nature—but through belief. It

also returns us to the recognition that for the Son of Man, the Incarnate Word, words are the only available medium for the expression of ideas, of facts, of truths. The possibility for misunderstanding is accordingly great, but the gospel's consequent exploitation of the potential in words to carry truth, knowledge beyond the understanding of the phenomenal world, is exciting.

Let us take two more examples. Jesus's word is itself a sign-worker. 'Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe', Jesus says to the crowds, but the king's officer who asks Jesus to cure his dying son returns home at Jesus's command: 'The man believed the *word* which Jesus spoke to him and he went' (4.50). He believes before he sees that Jesus's assurance means his son will live. Jesus makes his word a way of life, of faith, with consequences. He tells his Jewish followers, 'If you continue in my word ... the truth will make you free' (8:31—32).

Jesus himself makes the distinction between mere talk and significant speech in chapter eight. He says that the difference in this case is in the ears of the beholders. He addresses the Jews who have followed him but who still fail to take the point of what he says. 'Why do you not understand my speech (*tēn lalian tēn emēn*) because you cannot hear my word (*ton logon ton emon*) (8:43). These men have, as Eliot says, 'knowledge of words, and ignorance of the Word'.[3]

Jesus's word must locate itself in ordinary speech just as the divinity of the Son of Man must locate itself in ordinary mortality in the world. But as the world is the medium in and through which Christ works to bring people to salvation, so language is the medium through which the Word can and must make its transcendent meaning known. 'Why do you not understand my speech; because you cannot hear my word' beautifully holds the paradox of the limitations *and* possibilities of words. It holds the tension John's gospel discovers between the Word which is human and divine and the world which is the place, the medium of Incarnation.

A receptive response, belief, is what turns talk into significant words—or rather *hears* the significant word in what otherwise seems like mere talk. The king's officer who asks Jesus to cure his dying son does not need to see signs to believe: 'the man believed the *word* which Jesus spoke to him and he went (4:50). He believes before he sees that Jesus's assurance means his son will live. All through John's gospel, where irony is heavy and misunderstandings within the text the most frequent pointer to the truths of the text and the faithful understandings of its readers, *how* words are understood brings out the greater potential in language for conveying knowledge of both the limited, the worldly, *and* the transcendent.

John's gospel has been seen as a dualistic text. Evident structural oppositions in the imagery of light and darkness and the fundamental opposition between God and Satan ('the ruler of this world') have provoked the conclusion that all oppositions in the text signal incompatibility. So spirit and flesh, that which is of the world and that which is not of the world, are enlisted, and the text has even been seen as

Gnostic in its leanings. This is a tendency which, from the opening words onward the text itself denies. Rather than implying a dismissal of this world, John's gospel alludes to and displays a transformation of it. The model for this transformation lies in the workings of language itself. The 'transfiguration of the commonplace' (Muriel Spark's phrase) is the medium of speech—(not unlike the transformation of water to wine) that occurs when talk acquires meaning, or when the literal referent of a word is joined by metaphorical or metonymic significances to expand the word's meanings, when a single word holds the world *and* the spirit, points to a similar capacity for transformation of the medium of human life. The achievement of the use of language in John's gospel is that in it the medium of *our* experience is made to generate understanding of the transcendent.

Figurative language in the gospel is of several types. There are words of two meanings; there are similes and metaphors—words taken from familiar experience, the life of the world—and these often expand into parables. These little stories or comparisons are used to explain or illustrate Christ's or God's nature or his 'works'. Parables and metaphors are not usually understood at the time, but are invariably 'remembered' later. In 2:22, after driving the money-changers and sellers out of the Temple, Jesus says, 'Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up'. The evangelist glosses the metaphor: 'he was speaking about the temple of his body. When he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this to them'. These figurative sayings are always understood by the readers who have the privileged knowledge belief confers—and who have been told the outcome at the beginning anyway.

An interesting example takes off from a word with two senses. The crux of the story of Nicodemus (3:1—12) is the word *an$\bar{o}$then* in 3:3 which may be translated either 'from above' or 'anew'. It has both meanings—and translators are exercised as to which to use. But the problem is more complicated than that. Nicodemus would be equally baffled by the idea of a new birth or a birth 'from above', stuck as he is in his benighted literal fidelity to a language where birth signifies the physical emergence from the maternal womb, and to a world where this event is a once in a lifetime experience. (He might say, like Sweeney, that 'I've been born, and once is enough'.)

But the image is complicated because we are dealing *both* with a word with two meanings (anew/from above) and with words which can be taken in two senses, the literal (worldly) and the figurative (spiritual). In fact the double meaning alerts *us* to the two possible senses. The 'anew'/'from above' duality gives us our understanding because one meaning constitutes the explanation of the other. We understand that 'anew' means (not worldly physical birth, but) spiritually 'from above'. Nicodemus takes it all simply literally. 'How can a man be born when he is old?' He seems quite left behind as Jesus follows up his remark with an

explanation in language which alludes to the symbolic and the spiritual. 'In very truth I tell you, unless a man is born from water and spirit, he cannot enter the Kingdom of God.' We have seen both John baptising with water and the Holy Spirit descending as a dove upon Jesus who 'baptises with the Holy Spirit' in chapter one. We'll soon hear about 'living water'.

Jesus's discourse then announces what seems a duality: 'That which is born from flesh is flesh and that which is born from the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished because I said to you "You must be born anew" '. And he goes on, 'The wind blows where it wills, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from, nor where it goes. This is what it's like with everyone who is born from the spirit'. Here again translation has to choose between two meanings—a worldly one and a spiritual one which the Greek holds together—inseparably—in one word: *pneuma*. The sentence about the wind *could* be read, 'The spirit breathes where it will and you hear the voice of it'. This word *pneuma* which can mean wind *or* spirit permits the statement to be understood as a worldly example, which then becomes a metaphor, and/or a literal description of the workings of the spirit. The passage ends with one of those disappointed or exasperated reproaches by which the Son of Man registers the difficulties of teaching the children of this world. 'In truth I tell you, we talk about what we know, and bear witness about what we have seen; yet you do not accept our witness. If I have spoken to you about earthly things, and you do not believe, how will you believe if I speak to you about heavenly things?' (3:11—12)

The remark again *seems* to assert a dualism, but again it's not so simple. The earthly things about which they have spoken—the wind, a birth—*are also* spiritual things—the spirit, a birth from above. The spirit breathes (the wind blows) *on earth*. The believer is born again *on earth*. What seems symbolic in the passage (water and spirit) is revealed as literal. The spirit is and works *in* the world. Speaking about earthly things, then, *is* speaking about heavenly things. Metaphor makes the substance of the discourse a unity.

What creates dualism is (in this case especially) not language, *not* the word—*an ōthen, pneuma*—but the way it is heard (or read, or lexically picked apart). Duality here is not created by the medium, the words which move easily between world and spirit. The words *hold both* meanings. The division that occurs is a failure of understanding. 'We talk about what we know'—and if what the hearer 'knows' or 'believes' (the words are associated in John) is only half the story (only flesh, and baffled by knowledge or the spirit), division ensues. The words themselves make it possible that what we know may prove more than we thought, if we hear carefully the richness of the words of our talk.

Division, then, does not arise out of dualistic words. Division in John's gospel rather arises *because* of Jesus's words (e.g. 9:16 'And there was a division among them'). The division is not *in* the words, in what he

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says, but because the words are taken in only part of their sense. The division is either between Jesus and his interlocutors, or more usually within the group he is speaking to.

In the Prologue 'the light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome/comprehend it'. This is later elaborated, 'He was in the world, and the world was made by him, yet the world did not know him ...'. And then, 'but those who received him he empowered to become children of God'. In chapter eight he says 'I am the light of the world. He who follows me will never walk in the dark' (8:12), and then, as antagonism persists, he says, 'You are from below; I am from above. You are of this world; I am not of this world ... if you do not believe that "I am", you will die in your sins' (8:23—24). Again this looks like a division between Christ and 'the world'. Yet we note that the distinction is between those who 'judge according to the flesh' and those *in* the world who embrace the light *of* the world. Increasingly in the second half od John's gospel, as Jesus looks—and turns—towards his 'lifting up', the world becomes a crucial element in his talk. The whole question of 'the world' seems to be one where the meaning of words is crucial, and where rather than creating or even signalling division, words hold a seeming-impossible union of the human and the transcendent in a near paradoxical poise.

How we read the many references to the world, which grow in number and weightiness in the later gospel, and the relationship of Christ and of his believers to it hangs importantly on the tiniest of words, the preposition *ek*. The word means 'from'—usually in the sense of 'out of' but is sometimes also translated 'of'. In the passage I just quoted, 'You are of this world; I am not of this world', *ek tou kosmou* is used. The sense is of origins. The same sense of origins, or belonging, was found earlier in the phrases (3:31) *ek tēs gēs* 'from (of) the earth'; (3:32) *ek tou kosmou* 'from (of) heaven'. That there are different possibilities becomes significant when we meet a complex like 15:18—19: 'If you were of the world, the world would love its own. Because you are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hates you.' The translation[4] suggests that the chosen stand *apart from* (out of) the world and creates a dualistic image. This translation greatly plays down the sense of origin, rules out that of belonging.

The same translation of Jesus's last discourse has Jesus say to his Father at 17:6, 'I revealed thy name to the men whom thou hast given me out of the world'. But shortly thereafter (17:14) the same prepositional phrase is rendered '... the world hated them because they are not *of* the world as I am not of the world'.[5] *Out of context* it looks as if the world is being abandoned or left behind as Jesus and his chosen escape in some kind of eternity pod from a place they never really belonged in. This is not the case. Quite apart from the fact that simply reversing the 'ofs' and 'out ofs' would promote a radically different interpretation, when the context is re-supplied a more complex relation ship emerges.

The people in question 'were yours (the Father's) and you gave them to me and they have kept your word ...'. The context now is Jesus's departure; he faces his sacrificial 'lifting up' through which he will be glorified. The intense prayer (17:1—26), of the threshold of death and triumph, the threshold of this world and eternity, bridges the worlds in Jesus's person, in his words. He says, 'I am no longer in the world', but they are in the world, and I am coming to thee. Holy Father, keep them in thy name which thou hast given me ... Now I am coming to thee, and I am saying these things in the world that they may have my joy made complete in them.' It is at *this* point that he prays crucially 'not ... that thou take them out of the world (*ek tou kosmou*), but that thou keep them from the evil one (*ek tou ponērou*)'. And after this, his prayer returns his chosen *to* the world: 'Consecrate them in the truth. Your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, so I send them into the world...'. The *reason* for this mission is that the word—their word (and their works)—now will continue to keep God's truth alive in the world. 'I am praying ... also for those who believe in me through their word, that all may be one...'.

What we see is Jesus—the Word, the Light, *in* the world, the Son of God who became flesh—making himself the meeting point of human and divine, of the world and the spirit in a way that does not dismiss the world, does not alienate it further from *its* origin ('in the beginning was the Word ... all things were made by Him'), but makes the intersection of the timeless with time a continuing possibility. The end of the characteristic up and down ('from above' and 'from below') movement is a meeting point—and T.S. Eliot's words perhaps describe it best:

> At the still point of the turning world. Neither flesh nor fleshless;
> Neither from nor towards: at the still point, there the dance is ...
> (*Four Quartets:* Burnt Norton)

Translation itself divides the plenitude and potential of the gospel's phrases by having to choose equivalents for *ek* with very different senses: the 'out of the world' which implies not *in* the world, and the 'from' or 'of' which conveys place of origin or belonging. I think the significance of the construction is that the ambiguity which brings together *both* senses—of origins or belonging *and* of apartness—rather than needing to be resolved into opposition can fruitfully hold both possibilities. The chosen *are* from the world: their physical birth happens there, their spiritual birth *too* happens there, and their mission, like Jesus's own, is in the world. What makes this possible is God's word: (3:34) 'He whom God sent speaks God's words ... the Father loves the Son and has given everything into his hand. He who believes in the Son has eternal life.' The meeting place of flesh and spirit is in Christ. The meeting place of flesh and spirit is in words, which belong to earth and to God. And a meeting place of flesh and spirit is also *in* that flesh which has received the spirit through belief, through the understanding of words.

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And so John's Jesus can find that meeting place, name that unity in the world, and look forward to its continuing in the world, *through the power of words*:

> I am praying ... also for those who believe in me through their word, that all may be one, as thou, Father, art in me and I in thee, that they also may be in us, in order that the world may believe that thou hast sent me. I have given them the glory which thou hast given me, that they may be one as we are one; I in them and thou in me, that they may be made perfect (*teteleiōmenoi*) into one, in order that the world may know ... that thou hast loved them as thou hast loved me (17:20—23).

We may note here too the unity words can enforce: the word here translated 'made perfect' is related to the ultimate word that Jesus speaks from the cross: *tetelestai*—'it is completed'. Completion, perfection, an *end in* the world signals the ends for which Christ came (his sacrifice, humanity's redemption). These are ends originated 'in the beginning' and looking forward to a last end when 'the kingdom of this world has become' Christ's kingdom (Rev. 11:15).

John records Jesus's continued appearances in the world after his resurrection. The world has not been abandoned ... once again God's Word and Christ's words are with the disciples and again, or still, the purpose is to perpetuate those words in the world's hearing. 'Feed my lambs.' The evangelist's work is one of the results. His words, too, bear witness—principally *by* recording the words of Christ, and registering in the very difficulties of language the tension of a world which aspires out of its characteristic darkness to a knowledge of the light, a world which works through the knowledge of words to knowledge of the Word, aspiring to the promised 'perfection'. That is outside our world; but out of the historic presence of the Word in the world it becomes possible. The fullness of that experience the evangelist finds, almost humorously, an inexhaustible source of words. John ends:

> This is the disciple who is bearing witness about these things and has written them down ... there are also many other things which Jesus did; if they were written down one by one, I think that not even the world itself would hold the books being written. (21:24—25)

1 T.S. Eliot, *The Complete Poems and Plays,* New York, 1962, pp. 74—85.

2 The Prelude as a whole is part of John's gospel as it stands. That some verses are often claimed not to have belonged to a hypothetical original does not affect the point made here. The same observation applies to the last chapter of the gospel, to which reference will later be made.

3 Chorus I from 'The Rock', *Complete Poems and Plays,* p. 96.

4 *John: A Greek-English Diglot for the use of Translators,* The British and Foreign Bible Society, 1961.

5 Raymond Brown renders that 'do not belong to', *The Anchor Bible: The Gospel According to John* (xiii—xxi), New York, 1970, p. 757.