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Ecclesiastes

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ECCLESIASTES: WHERE CAN I FIND MEANING?

Everywhere we turn, there are circles. One of the first words uttered to Man in the Garden was “you are dust, and to dust you shall return,” thus introducing the circularity within which every human life is bound. Our ancient forefathers observed the courses of the sun, moon and stars, finding in the heavens a celestial circle drawn by all the heavenly bodies, both by day and by night. Some of the oldest and wisest of the ancient observers even noticed the circularity in time itself: history always repeats itself, and that which has been is that which will be.

This observation of circularity, and fascination with circles, has continued throughout history. Leonardo da Vinci’s most famous drawings depict a man with arms spread out and legs slightly apart, bound within the circumference of a circle. Copernicus rocked his world by observing that the circuitous routes of the stars do not represent orbits of the planets around the earth, but rather that the earth itself is a planet in orbit around the sun. In Columbus’s day, the radical concept was that the world itself was round, a great globe, with no edge, over which water poured into some dark abyss, and that by sailing west we would eventually reach east.

In our world today, our enchantment with circles continues. One of the most popular songs of Disney’s *The Lion King* was entitled “The Circle of Life.” There is also a resurgent interest in popular culture in the spiritual systems of the American Indians. For many tribes, the circle was the dominant spiritual symbol: it was the shape of the base of the tepee, it was the shape of many amulets and “dream catchers,” and their sacred drums were always circular. Many people in our era wear the yin-yang circle around their necks, again binding life within the symmetry of a circle. From the beginning of human history until now, across many widely varying cultures, we are spellbound by circles and the circularity of life on this earth.

Solomon, the wisest man who lived before Jesus Christ, considered this circularity in human experience more deeply than anyone else in history. He asked a fundamental question: Where can I find meaning? His quest for meaning is what the book of Ecclesiastes is all about.

Overview of Ecclesiastes

The book of Ecclesiastes is unfortunately titled in English. “Ecclesiastes” has no meaning for us. The title in the Hebrew Scriptures comes from the word *Qobeleth* found in the first verse, a word which is translated in most English versions as “Preacher.” But the root verb underlying *Qobeleth* in Hebrew, *qahal*, means “to come together, to bring together.” Thus, the one who goes by this description is actually the one “gathering together or bringing together” all these observations and thoughts and summarizing them for us. A better title for the book in English might be “The Gatherer,” or in this age of CNN, “The Investigative Reporter.”

But who was this Gatherer? The text gives us enough evidence to determine exactly who this man was in history. In Eccl 1:1, we learn that he was “the son of David, king in Jerusalem.” In Eccl 1:12, we learn that the Gatherer “has been king over Israel in Jerusalem.” The only man who accurately fits both of these descriptions is Solomon, the only son of David who ruled over united Israel from the capital city of Jerusalem. Thus, our investigative reporter here is Solomon.

In sum, what Solomon recorded in Ecclesiastes is *humanity’s quest for meaning*. It is the most philosophical of all the books in the Hebrew Scriptures. In it, all of human life “under the sun” is either observed, personally experienced, analyzed, or reviewed according to human wisdom. From

beginning to end, Solomon’s thesis in the book is “Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.” This idea appears again and again whenever he concludes a thought by saying, “this too is vanity and striving after wind.” The book is remarkably difficult to outline, because it does not flow along a linear line of thought, but is entirely circular. It begins with the thesis statement, “Vanity of vanities, all is vanity,” in 1:2, and that same conclusion is made almost verbatim in 12:8 at the end of the search. The search itself is circular, and is thus a vain search. The quest for meaning recorded in this book begins with meaninglessness and ends with meaninglessness. The key to this book is to discern how this gnawing meaninglessness can be transcended.

Since this book is so philosophical, we need to begin by defining our terms. When I am talking about “meaning” here, I am talking about that which is *personally meaningful*. What is *personally meaningful* is that which is eternal and thus beyond the circularity of the marked time of my own dust-to-dust life, and that which is relational and thus beyond the confines of my dying self. Ultimate meaning is something which marries these two: an eternal relationship. It is this meaning which Solomon attempts to find throughout his quest.

Ecclesiastes 1:1-11: The Summary Overview of the Quest

The first two verses declare the author and his thesis: “The words of the Gatherer, the son of David, king in Jerusalem. ‘Vanity of vanities,’ says the Gatherer, ‘Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.’” When Solomon tells us “all is vanity,” he is saying, “all is meaningless.” The phrase “vanity of vanities” is a doubly-weighted word pair, making it superlative: nothing could be more transitory and empty, more meaningless, than what he is about to describe. He moves on to say “all is vanity;” thus all that can be observed under the sun is ultimately meaningless. Certainly such a bold claim will need to be substantiated.

In considering this “vanity,” I think back to when I was a young boy visiting my grandparents’ cotton farm down in Texas. To teach us kids a solid work ethic, we were told to go out and hoe the cotton field. I remember walking out to the field in the cool of the early morning, hoes slung over our shoulders. When we got to the field, each of us took one row several hundred yards long, and we started down it, hacking away at the weeds. Before long, the sun baked our backs. When we reached the end of the row, we moved down to another row and worked back. The rows seemed to stretch on endlessly. After a week of this, I remember walking by my very first row, and what do you think I saw in that row? A healthy new crop of weeds! I experienced this “vanity”: no matter how hard you work, the rows just keep coming, the weeds just keep growing. The monotony of it sank into my soul.

Maybe you feel this way in your job, where the projects keep rolling at you like an invisible assembly line which never fails to keep you busy and doesn’t allow a time of rest. Maybe you are young and feel like life is a succession of hoops set up for you to jump through: you finish high school, then you go to college, then you work a while, then you look to get married, then to have kids, then to buy a home, and so on and so forth. Maybe you are older, have jumped through all the hoops, and you are asking, “What was that all about?” Solomon must have felt the same way and asked the same questions, until he decided, “vanity of vanities, all is vanity.”

To illustrate all this, Solomon wrote a poem in verses 3-11. Before we read the poem as a whole, I want to isolate verse 3 for us. The question in

this verse is one to which Solomon will return again and again throughout the text. His fundamental question is: “What advantage does man have in all his work which he does under the sun?” In other words, is there any advantage in working, is there any point to everything a man does in all his days under the sun? This question is both profound and deeply rooted.

This question is rooted in Genesis 3:17-19. In fact, the entire book of Ecclesiastes is simply a larger commentary on the truths found in Gen 3:17-19, and the only way to understand Ecclesiastes is to read it in light of its context back in the narrative of the Fall in Gen 3. Here is what Gen 3:17-19 tells us: “Then to Adam He said, ‘Because you have listened to the voice of your wife, and have eaten from the tree about which I commanded you, saying, “You shall not eat from it”; Cursed is the ground because of you; in sorrow you shall eat of it all the days of your life. Both thorns and thistles it shall grow for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field; by the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, because from it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”

In the Genesis 3 passage, God proclaimed his consequence for the man’s sin in the garden, which introduced a sense of futility and meaninglessness into man’s work and his entire life. His work would be tainted by sorrow, and all his achievements would dwindle away in the mind-numbing circularity of the statement “for you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” It is just this futility in work, this meaninglessness in human life that underlies Solomon’s question in verse 3: “What advantage does man have in all his work which he does under the sun?” This question introduces the poem of Eccl 1:3-11, which can be outlined as follows:

What advantage does man have in all his WORK Which he does UNDER THE SUN?	Why work under the sun? What’s the point...the gain?
A generation goes and a generation comes, But the earth remains forever.	Generational cycle. Man is transient Earth remains
Also, the sun rises and the sun sets; And hastening to its place it rises there again.	Solar cycle Nothing changes
Blowing toward the south, then turning toward the north, the wind continues swirling along; And on its circular courses the wind returns.	Weather cycle Nothing changes
All the rivers flow into the sea, yet the sea is not full. To the place where the rivers flow, there they flow again.	Water cycle Nothing changes
All things are wearisome; man is not able to tell it. The eye is not satisfied with seeing, Nor is the ear filled with hearing.	Endless weary cycles: mind-numbing Eye not satisfied: emptiness Ear not filled: emptiness
That which has been is that which will be, and that which has been done is that which will be done. So, there is NOTHING NEW UNDER THE SUN.	Time cycle Nothing new, nothing changes
Is there anything of which one might say, “See this, it is new?” Already it has existed for ages which were before us.	Nothing new
There is no remembrance of earlier things; and also of the later things which will occur, There will be for them no remembrance among those who will come later still.	Endless time cycles no remembrance

A very similar modern poem is the first stanza of T. S. Eliot’s Chorus from ‘The Rock.’ From beginning to end these choruses reflect the progression in his own life from meaninglessness to hope through faith in Jesus Christ. Notice how similarly this poem echoes Solomon’s poem, with both clearly reflecting on the circularity of human experience. Here is the opening stanza, echoing Solomon and recalling for us the spiritual emptiness Eliot felt before he knew God:

The Eagle soars in the summit of Heaven,
The Hunter with his dogs pursues his circuit.
O perpetual revolution of configured stars,
O perpetual recurrence of determined seasons,
O world of spring and autumn, birth and dying!
The endless cycle of idea and action,
Endless invention, endless experiment,
Brings knowledge of motion, but not of stillness;
Knowledge of speech, but not of silence;
Knowledge of words, and ignorance of the Word.
All our knowledge brings us nearer to our ignorance,
All our ignorance brings us nearer to death,
But nearness to death no nearer to G O D.
Where is the Life we have lost in living?
Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?
Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?
The cycles of Heaven in twenty centuries
Bring us farther from G O D and nearer to the Dust.¹

Let’s reflect further on this circularity by contrasting it with the modern view of history. We can trace the modern perspective on the historical development of human life by the evolutionary model. This is the basic thesis of Darwinistic evolution, that human life started from a single-cell creature, and through a vast series of micro-mutations evolved into the complex form of *Homo sapiens*. This theory suggests that human life has thus developed in an entirely linear fashion, proceeding from lower to higher over vast periods of time. Thus, our basic model for human life is a line. As this theory goes, we are “getting better and better all the time,” at least as a biological organism. The problem with this paradigm is that this linearity leads us farther and farther away from God, who is our true origination point. And the destination point is obscured to our view. Ultimately the destination point is nihilism now and hell later.

Certainly if we look at humanity’s technological development, this paradigm seems to hold. We are vastly more technologically developed now than we have been in the past, what with the advent of the computer, the airplane, space travel, nuclear energy, etc. But, how does the linearity of evolutionary development explain the mind-numbing circularity of human life and the patterned cycles we see in the universe? Are we getting any better morally or ethically? Why does history seem to repeat itself? Why is it that “the more things change, the more they stay the same”? What is the paradigm for human life in Ecclesiastes?

The paradigm in Ecclesiastes is the mind-numbing circle. It is God’s curious answer to the man in the garden, an answer that encircles the natural world and human life within an iron ring. The universe is bound within changeless circularity, and human life is defined by this dust-to-dust treadmill.

We need to embrace this new paradigm for ourselves. To enter into an appreciation for this, just consider the following exercise. Mark off about 15 feet in an empty room or outside. Walk forward along an imaginary straight line. Walking along that line feels good: progress is being made, you are going places, you are moving forward always without looking backward. The destination point to which you are walking is obscure, but it sure feels good to walk along that line. Now, mark off a circle whose circumference is about 15 feet. Walk along that imaginary circle for a while. At first it seems to have a certain poetry to it; you continually end where you begin. But it takes only a few minutes to enter into the mind-numbing boredom of the circle. It

becomes more tedious with each full revolution. You are always walking but getting nowhere. So, you crane your neck to start looking around beyond the circle for whatever else is out there. Circularity begs the quest for meaning, defining meaning as something beyond the familiar circle.

This mind-numbing circle paradigm is both very realistic, accounting for the circularity in the universe and in human experience, and very hopeful, because Solomon discovers that this treadmill was redemptively designed by God to compel us to look beyond the circle for meaning in relationship with him.

Ecclesiastes 1:12–12:8: The Quest for Meaning Under the Sun

Solomon's quest began in verses 12-18 of chapter one. Here he described for us his intended search in verse 13: "I have set my mind to seek and explore by wisdom concerning all that has been done under heaven." But his search is summarized at the very beginning in verse 14: "I have seen all the works which have been done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and striving after wind." This phrase "all is vanity and striving after wind" is the continued end-phrase we see time and again throughout his search in 1:12–12:8.

When I think of the phrase "striving after wind," I am reminded of an experience I had last November while hunting pheasants on the Colorado plains. On our first day, a strong, steady wind of 50-60 m.p.h. was blowing, from about noon onwards. It was so constant and so powerful, we had a hard time opening the doors on our SUV. At about 1:30, we stopped to hunt at a new place. I went to open the tailgate to get a Styrofoam cup out of a light plastic bag with three cups in it, so I could drink some coffee. The minute I opened the tailgate, the wind whisked that lightweight plastic bag and three cups out of the back of the SUV. I leaned down to pick it up, but before I could grab the bag, the wind carried it out of reach. Quickly, I ran after it, but even more quickly, that strong wind carried that plastic bag and its cups way out of reach. The last time I saw that bag, it was bound for Topeka, Kansas. That is striving after wind: you can never win that one. How many of our neighbors and co-workers here in Silicon Valley spend their whole lives striving after wind?

Getting back to Solomon, in chapter 2 he begins exploring various philosophies and experiences, starting with the philosophy of hedonism. He tells us in Eccl 2:1 that "I said to myself, 'Come now, I will test you with pleasure. So enjoy yourself.' And behold, it too was vanity." He tells us in 2:3 that "I explored with my mind how to stimulate my body with wine... and how to take hold of folly, until I could see what good there is for the sons of men to do under heaven the few days of their lives." Everything he did at this point in his quest was "for myself," a phrase which appears six times in Eccl 2:4-8. But in verse 11, he "considered all my activities which my hands had done and the labor which I had exerted, and behold, all was vanity and striving after wind." So much for hedonism; it too yields a crop of meaninglessness.

So, in Eccl 2:12-18, he pursued the path of wisdom, as compared to the path of madness and folly. But he went only a few steps along this path before he discovered an arresting truth: whether you are a fool all your days or a wise man from your youth, you end up dead. He mourned in verse 16, "And how the wise man and fool alike die!" This plunged him into depression: "So I hated life...because everything is vanity and striving after wind." So far in chapter 2, he has walked down two paths, the path of hedonism and the path of wisdom, but both were circuitous routes taking him right back to his original thesis, that all is vanity.

But in Eccl 2:24-25, there is the first glimmer of hope. There is a strong sub-text throughout the book of Ecclesiastes having to do with finding enjoyment in the little everyday things of life, which are gifts from God. This theme is introduced here in Eccl 2:24-25, and can be seen again in Eccl 3, 5, and 9. Solomon tells us here in 2:24 that "There is nothing better for a man than to eat and drink and tell himself that his labor is good. This also I have seen, that it is from the hand of God." But then a startling interjection is made in the text in verse 25. Another voice says, "For who can eat and who can have enjoyment without Me?" Here God interjects

his wisdom in all of Solomon's searchings. God's point is this: there is no such thing as human enjoyment, true enjoyment, apart from knowing him. He is the Author of human enjoyment as surely as he is the Author of human life.

I can see this principle in my own life over the past year. This last year was a whirlwind in business for me: ten international trips in twelve months, my first foray into management in Asia, and it was a year following a record-breaking year, so our sales targets were sky high. On one particularly difficult trip to London, I was getting buried under the burden of management from such a far distance. We were below target year-to-date and the pressure was mounting, and my new sales manager was not getting it. I was not enjoying anything about my work. It was a burden. So, I stopped everything and went back to the Bible, which is always my lifeline. I began the next morning by reading again my favorite psalm, Psalm 37, and for thirty minutes had such intimacy with Jesus Christ I will never forget it. We met in that corporate apartment together, and he put my heart to rest and freed me to savor him and enjoy him...and by enjoying him, I was free to enjoy my work again. He makes my work meaningful and wonderful; there truly is no enjoyment apart from him.

In Ecclesiastes chapter 3, Solomon gives us one of the most profound reflections on "time" to be found in any literature. Here is his poem in Eccl 3:1-8:

Theme: For everything a season, and a time for every matter under heaven

A time to bear	and a time to die;
A time to plant	and a time to uproot what is planted;
A time to kill	and a time to heal;
A time to tear down	and a time to build up;
A time to weep	and a time to laugh;
A time to wail	and a time to dance;
A time to throw away stones	and a time to gather stones;
A time to embrace	and a time to refrain from embracing;
A time to seek	and a time to let perish;
A time to keep	and a time to throw away;
A time to tear	and a time to sew together;
A time to be silent	and a time to speak;
A time to love	and a time to hate;
A time of war	and a time of peace.

The above format for presenting this poem is identical to the format used in the Hebrew Scriptures, although in Hebrew the first statement is on the right and its counterpoint is on the left. The poem is like a great pendulum on some cosmic clock, swinging back and forth between opposite extremes, defining "time." He traverses the whole gamut of human experience here, from birth to death in the opening merism to war and peace in the closing merism.

But in v. 9, Solomon returns to his theme question underlying his search: "What profit is there to the worker from that in which he toils?" However, Solomon begins to uncover the answer, which he is desperately seeking in verse 11: "He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in their heart, yet so that man will not find out the work which God has done from the beginning even to the end." Here he begins to look beyond the circularity of the clock. After his great poem on time in verses 1-8, he points to the fact that in the human heart there is a deep yearning for eternity beyond time. The timeless has been placed in the heart of the one trapped in the circle of time. There is some meaning for each person, but that meaning lies outside of time. And the One who put that yearning in the heart is none other than the eternal God, who exists outside of time. Could it be that meaning, that which is personally meaningful for me in all this meaninglessness, can only be found in that eternal God?

But verse 14 is the most important verse in the book thus far. It is the first glimpse of his final conclusion: "I know that everything God does will remain forever; there is nothing to add to it and there is nothing to take

from it, for God has so worked that men should FEAR HIM.” Here he recognizes the eternity of God and his works, as opposed to the temporality of Man and his work and achievements. It is this consideration that leads him to conclude that this chief difference between God and Man, the eternal vs. the mortal, has been set up by God to lead humanity to respect and honor God. The two concluding words, FEAR HIM, will be revisited in Eccl 5, 7, 8 and finally in 12:13. These two words are the sum of Solomon’s wisdom.

Solomon’s quest for meaning in chapters 4-12 is one long, tortuous repeat of the cycle we have seen him follow thus far through the book. Again and again, he will circle back to his original points. But because we have looked at all this in Eccl 1-3, I don’t want to numb you with the continued repetition of Solomon’s search and his findings. This book, if nothing else, wears us down with its repetitions, which is exactly the point: the mind-numbing repetition of life makes us yearn for something more. Solomon as poet not only tells us about meaninglessness along the circle of life in the content of his writing, but in its repetitive form as well.

In Eccl 11:9, Solomon opens the door onto eternity again as he did briefly in Eccl 3. He says, “Rejoice, young man, during your childhood, and let your heart be pleasant during the days of young manhood. And follow the impulses of your heart and the desires of your eyes. Yet know that God will bring you to judgment for all these things.” Solomon has concluded toward the end of his search that what we see in our time under the sun is not all there is. There is more to come, beginning with a judgment on what we have done in this world, in this time.

At the end of his quest in Eccl 12:1-8, Solomon instructs the young man to “Remember also your Creator in the days of your youth, before the evil days come.” Then he catalogs what those days might look like, leading up to the evil day when “the dust will return to the earth as it was, and the spirit will return to God who gave it.” Then Solomon concludes the entire search right back where it began, as he reaffirms in Eccl 12:8: “‘Vanity of vanities,’ says the Gatherer, ‘all is vanity!’” We have come full circle: but wait, there is a conclusion attached to this investigative report.

Ecclesiastes 12:9-14: The Conclusion of the Quest: Meaning Only in Fearing God

Solomon’s conclusion is highest drama. It is almost as if you can hear a drum roll in the distance, and a hush come over the eagerly-listening crowd, when Solomon says in verse 13, 14: “The conclusion, when all has been heard: FEAR GOD and KEEP HIS COMMANDMENTS, because this applies to every person. For God will bring every act to judgment, everything which is hidden, whether it is good or evil.”

Solomon sought the meaning of human life, and he found the mind-numbing circularity of human life. So, he had to look beyond the circle, and beyond the circle he saw the face of God. And in fearing God he discovered not human wisdom, but the beginning of true Wisdom. Solomon knocked on the door of every human philosophy and experience. He discovered at every door that he had been knocking for God. His quest for meaning could lead to only one Person. He found that respecting and loving God was the only thing that was personally meaningful: he was in an intimate relationship with God as an eternal being, and the “God-shaped void in his heart” was filled. Meaning can be found only in eternal relationship with God! So, Solomon said, “FEAR GOD,” which simply means to humbly respect him in relationship with him. This is the answer.

The sum of Solomon’s wisdom is seen in his ability to boil down all his experience and a lifetime of thought into these two words: FEAR GOD! And Solomon’s conclusion here is very weighty: he was a man who possessed a genius in wisdom, inexhaustible wealth to finance his inquiries into the meaning of life, and a man with the absolute power of a king so that he could undertake such a search. No man in history could have made a better investigative reporter on the meaning of life than Solomon did. All

his words have weight, but his conclusion has the greatest weight of all he said or wrote. It all boils down to FEAR GOD!

But this relationship is further defined by the fact that we must walk in obedience to his commandments. We who know Jesus Christ are aware we can obey only in deepest intimacy with the indwelling Spirit of God. And this obedience is critical, because we are not simply bound in this time, with no consequences looming on the horizon of our lives. We are eternal beings, and on the horizon of this life there looms a judgment. This life takes on importance in the here and now because it is the “preface” to the great Book which we will write in oneness with God in eternity, a book which will get better with every turn of the page.

The beauty of what God has accomplished through Solomon in this book is to free us from the sentence of meaninglessness on the mind-numbing circle, and GIVE US HOPE. This life is *not all there is*... what we see under the sun is *not all there is*... dust-to-dust is *not all there is*... *there is more* as we enter relationship with God through Jesus Christ. Through him we have eternal life because he is the first-born of all those who will burst through the iron circle of dust-to-dust through the power of resurrection. This book thus becomes a wonderful word on hope, not on the desperation of “all is vanity” and the doom of dust-to-dust. Our hope is based on the resurrection life of Jesus Christ, the first human being to break beyond the bound of the circle and return to tell about it and promise similar freedom and resurrection life to all who believe in him. Thank God, that as we fear him and enter in relationship with him, we too experience eternal life both now in this age and for all eternity after our resurrection with Jesus Christ. Thus, this little book becomes in the end a handbook on hope.

So, where can I find meaning? Meaning is found in an eternal relationship with Jesus Christ, the only one whose resurrection has broken the bond of dust-to-dust. With him, we still walk the circle, but *we do not walk it alone*. Most of us go through life feeling so terribly alone. With him, he promises that he is with us always. *And he takes our flat, two-dimensional circle and adds a third dimension to it: the circle becomes a spiral staircase reaching to our heavenly home. Every step we take along that spiral staircase now brings us one step closer to the home we have always longed for and never found.* Every step takes us closer to a life of eternal joy and beauty in perfect oneness with God and open community with the believing. Knowing Jesus Christ makes it all worthwhile. With him, we are no longer alone. With him, our lives have meaning. And as Solomon proved beyond a doubt, meaning can be found nowhere else.

This truth has come into even sharper focus in my life over the last few weeks. If one year ago today, someone had asked me to outline my own personal dream scenario in business, the best possible business opportunity I could imagine, I would have said that I want to be the founder of a company with a world-class product that would save lives around the world and make the founders enough money so that in 2-3 years’ time I would be set free to preach and teach full-time with all the financial needs met for the rest of my life. By the grace of God, that very opportunity has come my way, and on Friday the founding documents were all signed and sealed with the lawyers. Trust me, this is the business opportunity of a lifetime. From a business perspective, I could not be more thrilled. But you know, even in these days of walking into my own dream scenario in business, there is a deeper truth has given me a deeper joy, and here it is: even if we are wildly successful, it will be as nothing compared to the joy I have in knowing Jesus Christ and having his Spirit living inside me so that his life is being lived out through my life. Christ in you the hope of glory... that is the greatest truth and best news I have ever heard and will ever hear. Truly, meaning can be found in Jesus Christ alone. Amen and amen.

1. T. S. Eliot, *Collected Poems 1909-1962* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1963), 147.