

## READING *FOUR QUARTETS* IN POSTMODERN TIMES

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### Abstract

The present paper discusses the significance of T S Eliot's *Four Quartets* in postmodern times. It presents the postmodern age as a cultural condition in which time has lost the meaning and significance it had through the ages of faith and religious conviction. It argues that reading *Four Quartets* in this age means enabling oneself to revisit the basic questions of existence and meaning of time, to gain a deeper understanding of the spiritual dimension of life and to apprehend the relation between time and timelessness as a bulwark against the feeling of ultimate void that characterizes the postmodern mood.

**Keywords:** *Four Quartets*, postmodernism, mystical poetry, time, timelessness.

Postmodernism is an age of complete disillusionment, a time when belief in all 'grand narratives' is suspect and in which nothing can be articulated without a self-conscious irony inbuilt in the utterance itself. Umberto Eco explains the condition by invoking an example of a man who wants to express his love for his beloved but knows full well that the expression 'I love you' is fraught with an inherent semantic difficulty, for who is this 'I' who thus expresses his emotion, who is 'you' and what does the word 'love' precisely mean? Beset with an almost incapacitating self-awareness on the one hand but at the same time compelled to articulate his feeling, he resorts to the following: 'As someone has said, 'I love you dearly'. Eco's illustration captures the mood of postmodern self-doubt, tentativeness, provisionality and irony. No expression, even one of personal emotion, can escape the irony imposed upon all human situations due to their embeddedness in unbounded contextual relations. Derrida's summation of the point, 'there is nothing outside the text' is actually a recognition of the dissemination of meaning along the chain of signifiers with no transcendental signified.

Postmodernism, especially in its Derridean version, evinces a thoroughgoing scepticism towards the idea of presence and regards with suspicion any idea that phenomenon can reveal itself to human consciousness without the mediation of textuality. Derrida's critiques of Husserlian phenomenology, his concepts of trace and *differance*, all point to his critique of presence, an idea already explored by Heidegger before him. W S Johnson succinctly illustrates what postmodernism implies for foundational systems of thought:

The term "postmodern" should be employed cautiously as a way of indicating a diverse range of sustained and serious challenges posed against the "foundations" of knowing in the modern world. Whereas modernity sought to attain rational certainty according to a single "center" of knowledge, postmodernity doubts whether there can be any access to a monolithically conceived "center" and seeks instead to advance plural and contextual ways of knowing (1997:14).

And Terry Eagleton describes postmodernity as:

a style of thought which is suspicious of classical notions of truth, reason, identity and objectivity, of the idea of universal progress or emancipation, of single frameworks, grand narratives or ultimate grounds of explanation. Against these Enlightenment norms, it sees the world as contingent, ungrounded, diverse, unstable, indeterminate, a set of disunified cultures or interpretations which breed a degree of scepticism about the objectivity of truth, history and norms, the givenness of natures and the coherence of identities' (1996:vii).

What are the stakes of discussing mystical poetry in this age of disillusionment and scepticism? The paradigm shift in humanities and social sciences towards 'constructivism' suggests that all forms of knowledge are shaped, constrained and, ultimately, determined, by the linguistic, social and cultural factors and hence their claim to objectivity is deeply problematical. Although the constructivist turn in the domain of human sciences remains dominant in postmodern condition too, there is a renewed interest in the realms of thought usually described as religious or mystical. One major reason for this seems to be the complete failure of the prediction of some philosophers and social scientists that science will bring about a total destruction of religion and total secularisation will take place by the middle of the twentieth century. Nietzsche's "God is dead" has, after all, proved to be a proclamation that did not anticipate God's resurrection.

Lyotard's description of the postmodern attitude as one of incredulity points to the failure of the modernist project of emancipation through secular rationality. This itself suggests a possibility of return to disciplines which were suppressed by modernity. Postmodernity, we must remember, is characterised by the return of the repressed. As Kevin Vanhoozer remarks, "the postmodern condition has enabled the recovery of two neglected forms of religious discourse--the prophetic and the mystical" (2003:17).

Mystical poetry has long been recognised as a concerted attempt to capture and then express in language the most intense human craving for the ultimate reality. Deeply

committed to what some modern theologians have called ‘man’s ultimate concern’, mystical poets try to articulate various shades of a broad spectrum of emotions ranging from a deep dissatisfaction with the world and its vanities to the hankering after the divine and complete equipoise after the attainment of the ultimate serenity. Often times, however, language fails to go all along. Hence, Jalaluddin Rumi’s prayer to God to show him the station where speech will flow without words.

Eliot’s *Four Quartets* is undoubtedly one of the most powerful mystical poems of the modern period in its articulation of the soul’s quest for the divine. Commenting on the four poems which together comprise *Four Quartets* K P Kramer makes the following useful observation:

Eliot highlights four spiritual paths (both to himself and to “you”) that embody contemplative action in combination with the gift of divine grace. *Burnt Norton* offers the “way of darkness,” a purgative path that empties one of self-will and opens one to God. *East Coker* fosters the “way of stillness,” a method of withdrawing from the whirl of the senses to an inner tranquility. *The Dry Salvages* proposes the “way of yogic action,” a mode of acting in the world without selfishly grasping. *Little Gidding* explores the “way of purification,” a focus on humility and a generous-hearted trust before God (2007: xvii ).

Two things stand out as most conspicuous in *Four Quartets*: its meditative voice and its musical form. It is generally acknowledged that in good poetry form and content are inseparable, but in mystical poetry the degree in which the two are coalesced is exceptional. The reason for this is the exceptional nature of the mystical experience itself where the experience and its verbal articulation come remarkably close to each other. In a letter to William Force Stead, Eliot suggests a link between mystical experience and poetry:

A theory I have nourished for a long time, that between the usual subjects of poetry and ‘devotional’ verse there is a very important field still very unexplored by modern poets—the experience of man in search of God, and trying to explain to himself his intenser human feelings in terms of the divine goal (Letter to William Force Stead, August 9, 1930, qtd in Kramer, 2007: 14).

In fact one of the central concerns of Eliot through his poetic career was to comprehend the relation between words and reference and this question of referentiality of words is especially important to *Four Quartets*. In a 1933 lecture, Eliot said that he wanted to write poetry “so transparent that in reading it we are intent on what the poetry *points at*, and not on the poetry.” Keenly aware of what this implied, Eliot added that to do this would be “to get *beyond poetry* as Beethoven, in his later works, strove to get *beyond music*.” (qtd. in Matthiessen, 1959:90).

To see how Eliot visualises the goal of a genuinely mystical poem it is necessary to understand that for him the malaise of modernity lies in its deliberate neglect of the transcendental dimension which not only makes life meaningful but also redeems time which

is otherwise irredeemable. A point central to Eliot's purpose is the intersection of time and timelessness; but for the select moments of timelessness, which by definition is the moment of grace, human soul which exists in time can find no deliverance. To be sure, this idea is characteristically Christian and Eliot clearly refers to the moment of Christ's sacrifice as the greatest moment in human history because the intersection between timelessness and time found its best manifestation in that moment. As Kramer explains:

The poet in *Four Quartets* meditates through two constituent human conditions—a deep *dissatisfaction* with the temporal limitations of life and its antithesis, and the soul's resolute *longing* to apprehend the eternally unlimited redemptive presence of the divine. In the process of examining these constituent human conditions, the poet's intenser human feelings are awakened by stillness and nurtured by a spirit of silence for the purpose of prying open inner doors to the soul (2007:14).

The four interconnected poems are very artistically linked to each other and shaped into a cohesive whole wherein Eliot concerns himself with themes like time and eternity, language and divinity, man's relationship with the divine, death, existence, tradition and history. Each poem stands as a representative wherein Eliot presents the idea of time in its physical and spiritual sense. In its spiritual sense time entails eternity and in its physical sense it entails transiency. In the *Four Quartets* the self-conscious poet stands outside his temporal experiences in order to find in them a metaphor for the atemporal he has not experienced. Eliot emphasizes the need of understanding the nature of time and the order of the universe so that mankind is able to recognize God and seek redemption. He looks upon infinite time and its acknowledgement as the consummation of the maladies entrenched in man's fragmentary cognizance debilitated by organic time. Eliot suggests that even spiritually mortal mankind needs the "enchainment" of sequential time in order to enjoy the possibilities of redemption from the constriction of time.

The titles of the four poems are names of places linked to the poet's subjective experiences and to his family's past. These geographical titles, however, symbolize significant stages in Eliot's journey of spiritual self-discovery. *Burnt Norton* represents individual moorings over the complex and concrete present of actualities, a temporal existence which is open to unexpected apprehensions of timeless reality. F O Matthiessen sums up the main concern of *Burnt Norton* as follows:

The chief contrast around which Eliot constructs this poem is that between the view of time as a mere continuum, and the difficult paradoxical Christian view of how man lives both 'in and out of time', how he is immersed in the flux and yet can penetrate to the eternal by apprehending timeless existence within time and above it (Bergonzi, 1969 :94 ).

In *East Coker*, Eliot meditates on existence by introducing its temporal realms of cultural heritages, of family and the depths of history. He continues his reflection on time into history with the beginning maxim, 'In my beginning is my end' and towards the closure of the poem,

the implications of family and history are coalesced in the line, 'Home is where one starts from'. According to F O Matthiessen, Eliot here:

is also thinking in religious terms-in my beginning, in my birth, is implied my end, death; yet, in the Christian reversal of terms, that death can mean rebirth , and the culminating phrase of 'East Coker' is ' In my end is my beginning'. (Bergonzi, 1969:95)

In *Dry Salvages*, he grapples with the existential meditation further, changing the focus from historical community to the individual consciousness of the immediacy of death while in *Little Gidding*, Eliot presents reconciliation between time and timelessness. Morris Weitz writes:

*Little Gidding* is the grand recapitulation of the whole of the quartets, so far as time is concerned, although the emphasis is now on the active or positive way of salvation. Detachment from things, persons and places is the right goal of man. It is the condition which arises through reflection on the nature of history, for 'history is a pattern of timeless moments'; and no people can deny its ultimate significance and meaning which is God and His benevolent relation to the world (Bergonzi,1969:152).

Bertrand Russell, in his essay on mysticism, opined that for mystics time is unreal as they postulate that reality lies outside it. This, however, is not true as many mystics recognise the reality of time. For them time is not an illusion although to regard time as the only reality is. Eliot's theory of time is closer to those mystics who hold time to be real but relative to the permanent element, the still point. Morris Weitz notes:

Eliot's theory of time is neo-Platonic, not Heraclitean. It is essentially an Immanence doctrine according to which the Eternal or Timeless is regarded as the creative source of the flux or temporal. This is not to say that Eliot denies the reality of the flux, in some Parmenidean fashion. He is no dualist, pitting the reality of the eternal against the illusion of the flux. Instead, the flux, with all of its many ordinary experiences, is taken as real but its reality is derived from and sustained by the more ultimate reality of the eternal. The flux is not an illusion, but it is an illusion to regard it as the only reality (Bergonzi, 1969: 142).

The absolute, therefore is immanent in the relative. Temporality becomes a necessary prelude through which we can enter the higher realms of timelessness. Thus, for Eliot the gateways to salvation lie within the temporal experiences. We only need to recognize its significance and strive for it rather than being victims of "death in life" situation. In *Murder in the Cathedral*, Eliot, through the character of Thomas, notes, 'It is not in time that my death shall be known/It is out of time that my decision is taken (Part II). However, Eliot's immanence theory of time finds its best expression in the *Four Quartets*. The first section of *Burnt Norton*, opens with the following lines:

Time present and time past  
Are both perhaps present in time future,

And time future contained in time past. (Section-I, 1-3)

These opening lines of the *Four Quartets* reveal Eliot's grasp of time, its philosophically exasperating nature and its spiritual importance. Eliot here presents a complex notion of time, one in which the future, present and past are treated as discrete units. It does not imply that there are no such notions as past, present and future or that time is a mere illusion. In the very next line, Eliot says: 'If all time is eternally present/ all time is unredeemable.' Time still functions as time, with its continuous movement of decision, of recollection and of anticipation if it is to be redeemed. Redemption exists in a return to what was lost. The image of rose garden presented in the *Burnt Norton* symbolizes those moments that represent the meeting of the eternal and the temporal. The image of rose garden is a complicated one in *Four Quartets*. It is ultimately a reference to Christ. Even the circularity of the language used by the poet points towards the infinite circularity of spiritual absolute, a level of life where the two extremes of time and timeless are indistinguishable. It presents Eliot's belief that the present and the past are perhaps already part of the future and future is determined by the past. Eliot foregrounds the idea that all temporal experiences are in the present and no redemption is possible if only the flux is recognized. Through the metaphor of the wheel, Eliot depicts the intersection of eternity and temporality. There is the temporal but without timeless there is no existence for the temporal. Both are dependent on each other. Mere world of temporality is a world of indolence and desiccation. The timeless provides meaning to the temporal whereas the temporal world provides the spiritual the plane of existence. The image of the dance is also repeatedly employed by the poet to highlight the redeeming presence of the timeless in time and the transitory world, thus providing meaning to a purely physical realm. Temporality provides a platform in which everything occurs. Music, history, memory, place and language exist within that space, "Words move, music moves/ only in time" (*BN-V*, 1-2). Still then, time is fallen like humanity and Eliot craves for timelessness while lending both relative as well as absolute characteristics to time. He presents past as forever disappearing, the present forever being renewed into a single moment and the future forever being born. Apparently juxtaposing timelessness and time, he is basically drawing a close relationship between them.

In the last section of the *Dry Salvages*, Eliot again grapples with the problem of time and timelessness. He contemplates on man's degradation and his inability "to apprehend/the point of intersection of timeless/with time" (*DS-V*,17-19). He believes that through human aspiration and divine grace, these points can be realized. And although grace is unconditional, men should embrace "a lifetime's death in love" which relies on self-surrender and selflessness (*DS-V*, 21). The self has to surrender itself to the divine for all time, then only can it experience "the unattended/moment, the moment in and out of time" (*DS-V*, 24-25). Through self-surrender and negation, a unified consciousness devoid of any internal contradictions comes into being. The realisation that we can find meaning in our lives only by

understanding how time provides us a possibility to escape its rigid constriction allows us to see time not as an antithetical force to the human spirit but perfectly redeemable.

*Little Giddings* starts with an image of winter and summer being united. Thus it is a poem of resolution. The preceding *Quartets* deal with issues related to eternity and time whereas *Little Giddings* deals with the reconciliation of both:

What we call the beginning is often the end  
And to make an end is to make a beginning  
The end is where we start from. (Section-I, 1-3)

Eliot reminds us how we are captured and determined by time, by the apprehensions of the future and the burdens of the past. But then he also offers the solution. He asserts that redemption from the tyranny of time is possible only when we experience living and timeless moments.

Thus during moments of eternal transcendence and graced ecstasy, an individual understands the divine stillness that permeates the structural movements of all things. Eliot calls it “the dance”, the divine emptiness enveloping all. Through these moments we apprehend both the unity and distinctness of time and the timeless:

At the still point of the turning world  
Neither flesh nor fleshless;  
Neither from nor towards; at the still point,  
There the dance is, but neither arrest nor movement...  
...Except for the point, the still point,  
There would be no dance, and there is only the dance.  
I can only say, there we have been; but I cannot say where.  
And I cannot say, how long, for that is to place it in time. (Section-II, 16-23)

Eliot says that only rare persons, whom he calls saints, are capable of apprehending these timeless moments. At the end of the *Four Quartets*, a timeless moment is reached where there is no conflict between time and eternity. The images of the fire and rose symbolize this reconciliation, “The communication of the dead is tongued with fire/ Beyond the language of the living” (LG-I, 64).

Thus in the last lines of *Little Giddings*, eternity redeems time whether it be through “timeless moments”, or through Incarnation which is the absolute redemption. Thus, Eliot views time as continually linked together in inner accomplishment by the Incarnation, by the “still point of the turning world”, which conciliates the strength of time through time, making obvious the inner fulfilment that Incarnate God functions in the world. The still point thus leads towards salvation. The still point stands both out of time and in time and presents a blissful state of spirituality and freedom from suffering and desire. In Eliot’s scheme the still point stands for the calm, serenity and certitude of timelessness as opposed to the feverish

commotion of the temporal. These lines in the second section of *Burnt Norton* sum up Eliot's concern:

Time past and time future  
Allow but a little consciousness.  
To be conscious is not to be in time  
But only in time can the moment in the rose-garden,  
The moment in the arbour where the rain beat,  
The moment in the draughty church at smokefall  
Be remembered; involved with past and future.  
Only through time time is conquered. (Section-II, 37-44)

What might a student of literature and intellectual history gain from reading *Four Quartets* today? The answer to this question must be attempted by returning to the discussion with which this article began. Since modern secularity has reached a point where the vertical dimensions of experience have been completely negated, it is no surprise that turmoil and disarray characterise both modern and postmodern conditions pervasively. An important difference between the modern and the postmodern attitudes perhaps lies in postmodernism's increasing self-consciousness of its ultimate failure, something nearly absent in modernism, to fill the void by created by the emptying of the sacred space with any substitute. As the French writer Gaston Bachelard put it succinctly, "Human being *qua* human being cannot live horizontally", a grim reminder of the fact that all attempts to replace the need for the timeless/transcendental are doomed to fail. (1990:108).

One might, following some critics, invoke the traditional concept of the sin of sloth to characterise the postmodern condition. While the besetting sin of modernity was pride: "pride in human reason, pride in human goodness, pride in human accomplishments", the besetting temptation of postmodernism is not pride but sloth. As Dorothy Sayers observes, sloth is the sin "that believes in nothing, enjoys nothing, hates nothing, finds purpose in nothing, lives for nothing, and remains alive because there is nothing for which it will die" (1969:152).

George Orwell in his unsympathetic review of Eliot's later poetry which includes *Four Quartets* opines that his poetry is full of "gloomy mumblings" and expresses a "melancholy faith" (Bergonzi, 1969:81). What Orwell perceives as decadence in Eliot's poetry, a kind of retrogression from what he terms as "glowing despair" to "melancholy faith" is in fact emblematic of the failure of Orwell and others of the secular ilk to fathom the real cause of human self-alienation. Kierkegaard was nearer the truth when he identified the malaise afflicting the modern man in his incapacity to relate to a higher sphere which transcends the aesthetic and ethical domains. If unreflective devotion is anathema to an authentic existence, hypercritical disengagement is no less inimical to the cultivation of human spirit. Postmodern condition is a condition of hypercritical disengagement resulting in acquiescence to the given. Eliot's concern in *Four Quartets* is not to argue for a suspension of critical thinking but,



within the Christian belief system which he inhabits, to draw attention to the vacuity and ultimate vanity of human life unless it is anchored in a deep religious conviction.

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