

THE CENTRE OF MEANING IN
ELIOT'S *FOUR QUARTETS*

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A recurring image throughout T.S. Eliot's poetry is of the journey or quest. It is one of several ways in which his poems remind us of seventeenth century literature in which the *via* and the *vita* were often intertwined – the correct choice of the way of life leading to the discovery of truth. Journeying and questing are prominent in the poems of Eliot's first major collection, *Prufrock and Other Observations* of 1917. The first, 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock', was written some seven years before (in Paris and Munich, in 1910-11, when Eliot, the American postgraduate philosophy student, was himself searching for an identity in Europe). The quest for meaning sets the verse in motion:

Let us go then, you and I,
When the evening is spread out against the sky.¹

It is in *The Waste Land*, however, of 1922, that Eliot makes the most sustained exploration, in his earlier poetry, of the idea of the quest for meaning. A principal source of the poem was the Grail legend, where the Stranger, seeking the cup of Christ's blood, would be able to reverse the impotence of the Fisher King and lift the curse off the wasted land. Moving through the five sections of the poem, we encounter a series of individuals and situations which indicate the insurmountable difficulty of the quest. This is a land which it is impossible to save. As the opening

¹ All references to Eliot's poetry are to *Collected Poems 1909-1962* (Faber, London, 1974).

incantation of the fifth and final section indicates, it is place from which the future has absented itself:

After the torchlight red on sweaty faces
 After the frosty silence in the gardens
 After the agony in stony places...

The images are from the story of Christ's passion, in the Garden of Gethsemane and at Golgotha, but the resurrection is denied: 'He who is living is now dead'. The subsequent recollection of the disciples' experience on the Emmaus road emphasises the failure of recognition of the risen Lord: 'who is that on the other side of you?' Faced with three commands to fulfil, at the end of his journey, the Stranger fails each of them, as Eliot conflates Peter's three denials of Christ with this episode taken from the Grail legend. The poem closes in fragmentation and in incomprehensibility, in meaninglessness.

Arguably the greatest misconception in studies of Eliot's life and of his work is the idea of his so-called 'conversion' to Christianity in 1927, after *The Waste Land* and 'The Hollow Men' (1925). No such event occurred. In that year, Eliot was baptised and confirmed in the Church of England. He had been brought up as a Unitarian in St Louis, Missouri, although his most vivid early memory of church-going was of being taken as an infant by his Irish nurse to mass and of being attracted by the numinous atmosphere in her church. Through the several years of his philosophical studies at Harvard and Oxford, Eliot was drawn to the study of eastern religions (leaving him in a state, he reported, of 'enlightened mystification'²) and then of the philosophical theory of Idealism for his doctoral thesis. It was a period of agnosticism, but certainly not of an abandonment of interest in transcendentalism and in religious systems, eastern and western.

² In *After Strange Gods* (1934), in Peter Ackroyd. *T.S. Eliot* (Hamish Hamilton, London, 1984), p.47.

The deep personal suffering of his first marriage, immediately following this period, combined with the widespread suffering in London and Europe at large during the First World War, intensified the poet's natural *aboulie* or tendency to despair.³ Gradually, through this harrowing *via negativa*, over several years, Eliot moved towards the realisation that only orthodox Christianity could provide a persuasive solution to his personal tragedy and a coherent explanation of the world's ills. It was an incremental process. By orthodox Christianity, Eliot meant the Catholic faith. But living in England, he recognised that Roman Catholicism there had the cultural status of a sect. For him, religion was inextricably bound up with culture. So, as he expressed it, the Church of England was the Catholic Church in England⁴ and he joined it officially in 1927 (the same year, significantly, as his naturalisation as a British subject) and remained a faithful member of its Anglo-Catholic wing, attending daily mass for many years, until his death in 1965.

There was no conversion experience (Eliot was deeply suspicious of such events), but perhaps it is even more important to recognise – precisely because of this – that the Eliot and the poetry which emerge after 1927, through to the completion of *Four Quartets* during the Second World War, do not present the radical departure from the man and the verse of *The Waste Land* period which so many commentators glibly affirm. The continuities are at least as remarkable as the discontinuities. Most significantly, the search for meaning continues unabated and unfinalised. What is different is that the searcher has, as he describes it in the third *Quartet*, experienced ‘hints and guesses, / Hints

³ To which Eliot refers as a ‘lifelong affliction’ in a letter to Richard Aldington, 6 November, 1921, in Valerie Eliot, ed., *The Letters of T.S. Eliot*, Vol. I (Faber, London, 1988), p.486.

⁴ See, for example, ‘Lancelot Andrewes’, in *For Lancelot Andrewes* (1928; Faber, London, 1970), p.15.

followed by guesses' ('The Dry Salvages', V), intimations of the spiritual life in its Catholic Christian manifestation.

It is instructive that those sections of the *Quartets* where tenets of orthodox faith are acknowledged and poetically explored – the fourth in each case – are the briefest sections of each poem. Longer are the other four sections where Eliot meditates upon the difficulties of belief and of the problems of expression, in language, of what it means to believe. The *Quartets* present, in other words, two quests for meaning: the search for spiritual truth in the midst of human experience (symbolised by 'the still point of the turning world' – 'Burnt Norton', II) and, as importantly, for the poet, the discovery of a suitable mode of expressing that experience in a language that will speak to a Western culture which had become largely sceptical about it. Eliot specifies the characteristics of the perfect utterance where

every phrase
 And sentence that is right (where every word is at
 home,
 Taking its place to support the others,
 The word neither diffident nor ostentatious,
 An easy commerce of the old and the new,
 The common word exact without vulgarity,
 The formal word precise but not pedantic,
 The complete consort dancing together).
 ('Little Gidding', V)

We need always to remember that Eliot remains a Modernist to the end of his artistry, committed to the quest to make language and poetry new, to express *les mots de la tribu*.⁵ The critics of the 'conversion' school, as we may call it, speak as if Eliot abandoned Modernism for Christianity.

⁵ The phrase is Mallarmé's, used in translation by Eliot in 'Little Gidding', II: 'speech impelled us / To purify the dialect of the tribe'.

In the first *Quartet*, 'Burnt Norton', written (unlike the others) without an idea of a sequence and before the Second World War, the philosophical cast of the writing is striking in comparison with Eliot's major poetic utterances of the same period, *Ash-Wednesday*, 1930, the religious pageant *The Rock* (1934) and *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935), written in the same year as 'Burnt Norton'. Those works are explicitly Christian, as their titles alone indicate. Moreover, they derive substantial inspiration from the public dimension of the faith – its liturgy, scripture and the stories of its saints and martyrs.

The title of the first *Quartet*, in contrast, refers to an obscure Gloucestershire country house and begins in speculation, incited by the pre-Socratic philosopher, Heraclitus, on the nature of time. The poem is at once deeply personal, referring to Eliot's visit to Burnt Norton and its beautiful rose-garden in 1934, with an American friend Emily Hale, and universal in its philosophical range: 'Time present and time past / Are both perhaps present in time future'. It is a meditation about journeying and questing, on several levels: first, to understand how, if at all, past experiences may be recovered to be made to live anew, taking on an eternal existence beyond time. Then, the poet ponders the journey of love he declined with Emily on that occasion:

Footfalls echo in the memory
Down the passage which we did not take
Towards the door we never opened
Into the rose-garden.
(‘Burnt Norton’, I)

But, unlike Prufrock's, the speaker's emotion, although wistful, is not ultimately regretful. On the contrary, the missed opportunity of that journey of unfulfilled love provides an inspiration, which the journey of memory has

facilitated, to make the speaker alert to future possibilities of happiness and ultimate fulfilment:

Other echoes
Inhabit the garden. Shall we follow?
Quick, said the bird, find them, find them,
Round the corner. Through the first gate,
Into our first world.
(‘Burnt Norton’, I)

Beyond autobiography and Gloucestershire, the literary symbolism is clear, of the rose garden as the *hortus conclusus* of virginity and of our ‘first world’ of the Garden of Eden. The location, firmly rooted in place and time, also has an eternal existence which expresses the promise of the recovery of innocence. This requires, however, a daunting surrendering of ourselves. Eliot writes later in the *Quartets* that

The only wisdom we can hope to acquire
Is the wisdom of humility: humility is endless.
(‘East Coker’, II)

The moral centre of the poems’ meaning is the attainment of humility. By means of that virtue we can be made receptive to the wisdom of others and of God. Precisely because of his emphasis on humility, Eliot never underestimates the difficulty of the quest, nor does he overestimate the susceptibility of flawed human beings to the knowledge of ultimate truth: ‘human kind / Cannot bear very much reality’ (‘Burnt Norton’, I). Such moments come unbidden and in the course of our bondage to sequential time:

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.
(‘Burnt Norton’, II)

Eliot acknowledges that the times are not propitious for the conquest of time he advocates. His criticisms, in the *Quartets*, of the wasteland world of the modern metropolis, ‘the gloomy hills of London’, and of wastelanders themselves are as caustic as anything in *The Waste Land* itself:

O dark dark dark. They all go into the dark,
The vacant interstellar spaces, the vacant into the vacant,
The captains, merchant bankers, eminent men of letters...
Industrial lords and petty contractors, all go into the dark.
(‘East Coker’, III)

The third level of the meditation, introduced in ‘Burnt Norton’ and recurring through the sequence, is about language. Like time, words move; and as we must experience timelessness in time, so, too, we are bound to use words in order to gesture towards the silence of eternity, where there is neither speech nor language.

Eliot called the sequence *Four Quartets*, with Beethoven’s last string quartets in mind, because of the character of music as the most abstract of the arts, but equally because of the highly patterned character of sonata form, used by Beethoven and, to a degree, mimicked here – the brief fourth section of each *Quartet*, for example, being a kind of *scherzo*. This aesthetic paradox goes to the heart of the theology of the quest for meaning in the poems. Although the dual object of the journey is the still point of the turning world, the eternal centre of meaning, and the ultimate expression of the experience of knowing it, this will only

be achieved through time and through the mutability of language:

Words move, music moves
Only in time....
Words, after speech, reach
Into the silence.
Only by the form, the pattern,
Can words or music reach the stillness.
(‘Burnt Norton’, V)

Like our time-bound existence, language is fallible:

Words strain,
Crack and sometimes break, under the burden,
Under the tension, slip, slide, perish,
Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place,
Will not stay still.
(‘Burnt Norton’, V)

This is the distinctive voice of the Modernist, constantly seeking a mode of discourse appropriate to his subject matter and, in the process of the search, providing a new poetry – in this case, about language itself. If the quest for the Word or logos, through mere words, could be completed, that would be the perfect poem. Eliot recognises that such an ultimate utterance will not be inscribed in this world. Nor will the mystical experience of God, reserved for the saints, be known:

For most of us, there is only the unattended
Moment, the moment in and out of time,
The distraction fit, lost in a shaft of sunlight,
The wild thyme unseen, or the winter lightning
Or the waterfall, or music heard so deeply
That it is not heard at all, but you are the music
While the music lasts.
(‘The Dry Salvages’, V)

As the lovely expression of the concept itself suggests, this is certainly not a counsel of despair. Rather, the recognition that complete truth and the fullness of its expression may exist, urges us, in humility, to seek to participate in what we can know of it and say about it:

We must be still and still moving
Into another intensity
For a further union, a deeper communion.
(‘East Coker’, V)

The focus of meaning for Eliot, in *Four Quartets*, is the intersection of timelessness with time. He explores the quest for that experience philosophically, morally and aesthetically. He also identifies it theologically. The centre of meaning in the poems, in this dimension, as indeed in Eliot’s own spirituality, was the doctrine of the Incarnation, when the eternal Word became flesh. This is what we are experiencing, Eliot writes, in those hints and guesses of a world of meaning beyond our spatio-temporal condition:

The hint half guessed, the gift half understood, is
Incarnation.
Here the impossible union
Of spheres of existence is actual,
Here the past and future
Are conquered, and reconciled.
(‘The Dry Salvages’, V)

Four Quartets itself is an incarnational poem where the arduous search for an appropriate discourse emblematises the speaker’s moral commitment and in which several exquisite images of transcendence express aesthetically what they symbolise spiritually. Eliot’s words speak of what he describes, in quotation from *The Cloud of Unknowing*, the medieval mystical work, as ‘the drawing of this Love and the voice of this Calling’ (‘Little Gidding’, V).