

# 'Oh dark dark dark: They all go into the dark': The *via negativa* in the poetry and thought of T.S. Eliot

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## Part One

T.S. Eliot's use of the teachings of the so-called 'negative mystics' is evident in several of his poems, notably in his last major poetic statement: the extended philosophical meditation on time, place and faith, *Four Quartets*, which was completed during the Second World War. The composite work of the sixteenth-century Spanish mystic, St John of the Cross, *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* and *The Dark Night of the Soul*, is Eliot's most important source for the *via negativa*. This essential characteristic of his experience of faith, as mediated in his poetry, derived both general inspiration and some specific modes of expression from St John's writings.

The best-known English translation of St John of the Cross is by E. Allison Peers which appeared in 1935 and remains authoritative.<sup>1</sup> The year before, in the *Criterion* magazine, Eliot told its readers that an edition of St John was small enough to put in one's pocket 'when leaving for the weekend or the summer holidays'. Noting this, Ronald Bush has suggested that Eliot took the volume, *The Mystical Doctrine of St John of the Cross*, translated by David Lewis, on a visit to the Cotswolds soon afterwards.<sup>2</sup> This would have assisted Eliot's use of St John's teachings in the composition of *Four Quartets* (begun in 1935) and *Murder in the Cathedral*, completed in 1935, where, in the final chorus, the women of Canterbury speak of 'the loneliness of the night of God'. In the first Quartet, 'Burnt Norton', Eliot also refers explicitly to 'the figure of the ten stairs' - St John's principal metaphor of spiritual ascent.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *The Complete Works of St John of the Cross*, (Wheathampstead, 1935). All references to St John's writings are to this edition, cited as 'E. Allison Peers'.

<sup>2</sup> Roland Bush, *T.S. Eliot: A Study in Character and Style*, (New York, 1983) pp203-4.

<sup>3</sup> All references to Eliot's poetry are to *Collected Poems 1909-1962* Faber and Faber (London and Boston, 1974); cited hereafter as simply *Collected Poems*. *Ash-Wednesday*, the poem sequence we will mainly be dealing with throughout the article, is found on pages 93-105.

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Peers' complete translation appeared too late for Eliot's purposes at this point, but he could well have known E. Allison Peers' earlier *Studies of the Spanish Mystics* of 1927. Indeed, St John's influence on Eliot had been exercised for some years before its appearance in the two works of 1935. In his essay of 1931 on the *Pensées* of Pascal, Eliot refers to the 'dark night' that is essential for the Christian mystic and refers to 'great mystics, like St John of the Cross'.<sup>1</sup> In the third section of *Ash-Wednesday* (a portion of the poem entitled 'Al Som de l'Escalina', 'To the Summit of the Stairway' published separately in 1929 prior to the full work) the mystic's symbolic process of stair-climbing through purgation to unity begins to be detailed and applied to the speaker's own arduous spiritual ascent. A year before that, in 'A Song for Simeon' (1928), Simeon, denied the 'ultimate vision' of Christ's redemption, instead sets about 'mounting the saints' stair'.

Also in 1928, in the preface to *For Lancelot Andrewes*, Eliot notes that the English Church has no devotional monument equal to that of St. John of the Cross,<sup>2</sup> while one of the epigraphs to *Sweeney Agonistes*, which he had begun to write in 1925, is taken from the *Ascent of Mount Carmel*:

Hence the soul cannot be possessed of the divine union, until it has divested itself of the love of created beings.<sup>3</sup>

In fact, Eliot's interest in mysticism had been stirred during his postgraduate study of Eastern religions at Harvard before the First World War. A few years later, his scholarship on the seventeenth-century English Metaphysical poets, especially John Donne, included an appreciation of the meditative tradition as exemplified in their divine poems. Worth bearing in mind is that Donne too was a poet of the dark night, as he writes in 'A Hymn to Christ, at the Author's last going into Germany':

Churches are best for Prayer, that have least light:  
To seek God only, I goe out of sight  
And to scape stormy days, I chuse  
An everlasting night.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> 'The *Pensées* of Pascal', in Eliot's *Selected Essays* (London, 1951) p416; cited hereafter as simply *Selected Essays*.

<sup>2</sup> Preface to *For Lancelot Andrewes*, (London, 1928) p13.

<sup>3</sup> *Collected Poems*, p121.

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In his Clark lectures of 1924, Eliot had endorsed the medieval wisdom of Richard of St Victor and St Thomas Aquinas, both of whom were influential in the formation of the mystical system of St John of the Cross.<sup>2</sup> By the time of his baptism and confirmation in the Church of England in 1927, Eliot had absorbed much of the medieval, Counter-Reformation and Metaphysical mystical traditions.

What becomes pertinent then, in probing the character of Eliot's developing Anglo-Catholic theology and spirituality from that point, is the undoubted appeal to him of St John's *via negativa* of the dark night of the soul; to what extent do its teachings go to the heart of the matter of our understanding of Eliot's Christianity?

## **Part Two**

St John of the Cross was born near Avila in 1542, received a Jesuit education and was ordained in 1567. He then joined his fellow Spaniard and mystic, St Teresa, in her attempted reform of the Carmelite order, and in 1572 became confessor at the Convent of the Incarnation at Avila where Teresa was prioress. Because of his work for the Discalced Carmelites, he was taken prisoner by the Calced Carmelites and while in prison at Toledo he began writing *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* and the *Dark Night of the Soul*. St John was canonised in 1726 and proclaimed a Doctor of the Church by Pius XI in 1926, bringing him to international attention again in the very years of Eliot's embrace of Catholic Christianity in its Anglican form.

Central to the great revival of mysticism in the later sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, led by St John of the Cross and St Teresa of Avila, was the acceptance of the reality that religion is, ultimately, something beyond reason. While spiritual ecstasy was a component of this conviction, as all who have read St Teresa's accounts of her mystical visions in her *Vida* know, both she and St John came to believe that 'the soul's highest realization came... through total obedience, or the habitual conformity of the individual will to the divine will'.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> John Donne, 'A Hymn to Christ, at the Author's last going into Germany' in Helen Gardner (ed) *The Metaphysical Poets*, Penguin (Harmondsworth, 1957) p89.

<sup>2</sup> See Bush, *op cit.*, p83.

<sup>3</sup> Judith Hook, 'Religion in the age of the Baroque', in Geoffrey Barraclough (ed.), *The Christian World*, London, 1981, p230.

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It was this complete submission and abandonment of the self which appealed so profoundly to Eliot, both philosophically and psychologically, as well as theologically and spiritually. In his literary criticism, especially in the *locus classicus* of his rejection of Romanticism in the essay 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' of 1919, Eliot stressed the impersonality which the artist must foster:

Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality.<sup>1</sup>

However, this aesthetic doctrine is then immediately softened with a crucial personal insight into the poet's own psychology:

But, of course, only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to want to escape from these things.<sup>2</sup>

The necessity for an absolute, impersonal authority was required by Eliot as the cure for what he derided, in 'The Function of Criticism' in 1923, as the 'inner voice', which 'breathes the eternal message of vanity, fear, and lust'.<sup>3</sup> As we know from the poems in Eliot's first published collection, *Prufrock and Other Observations* of 1917, these perpetual urgings, with all their debilitating manifestations in individual lives, are probed and exposed. From Eliot's letters of these years, too, we can now also perceive his own suffering self, subjected to the ravages of such emotions, especially in the nightmare of his disintegrating marriage. It is not surprising, therefore, in his reflection on St John of the Cross in *The Listener* in 1930, that Eliot described him as 'the greatest psychologist of all European mystics'.<sup>4</sup> It is the psychological dimension of Eliot's appropriation of the dark night of the soul which reveals most tellingly the personal motivations of Eliot's faith.

### **Part Three**

*Ash-Wednesday*, in general, represents the Lenten character of Eliot's faith. The poem's title, of course, is taken from the first day of Lent in the Church's calendar, a period of forty days' fasting

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<sup>1</sup> *Selected Essays*, p21.

<sup>2</sup> *Loccit*

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid* p27.

<sup>4</sup> 'Mystic and Politician as Poet', *The Listener*, 2 April, 1930, p590.

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and abstinence. In its opening section, the speaker repeats the phrase, 'because I do not hope'. Although he is embarking on a spiritual journey of disciplined self-denial, we are struck by his negativity, especially his pointed refusal to turn, or re-turn, to God, the very purpose of the Lenten exercise. This psychological despair, this hopelessness, is strikingly modified, however, by the fact that it is contained within the discipline of the abandonment of all hope as is prescribed by the *via negativa*. Perversely, it seems, the speaker celebrates his hopelessness, proclaiming a few lines later that

I rejoice that things are as they are and  
I renounce the blessed face  
And renounce the voice  
Because I cannot hope to turn again  
Consequently I rejoice, having to construct something  
Upon which to rejoice.

And as even this may sound too premeditated and programmatic, he remarks further, as the section approaches its end:

And pray to God to have mercy upon us  
And pray that I may forget  
These matters that with myself I too much discuss  
Too much explain...

A key word is introduced here: 'forget' (which will be developed upon later); both intellect and emotion, discussion and hope, are being set aside, forgotten, in accordance with St John's teaching about utter self-evacuation:

[i]t is supreme ignorance for the soul to think that it will be able to pass to this high estate of union with God if first it void not the desire of all things, natural and supernatural.... [f]or, as long as the soul rejects not all things, it has no capacity to receive the Spirit of God in pure transformation.<sup>1</sup>

By the third section of the poem, the first of the first five steps of the ladder of perfection has been climbed.<sup>2</sup> During the first stage of the negative way, or, as St John of the Cross describes it, the 'Active

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<sup>1</sup> Peers, *op cit* p29.

<sup>2</sup> In all, St John of the Cross expounds ten steps which make up what he terms the 'mystic ladder of divine love'; see chapters 19-20 of the *Dark Night of the Soul*.

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Stage', the penitent, with the assistance of grace, strips himself of worldly attachments:

[i]n order that the soul may be divinely prepared and tempered with its faculties for the Divine union of love, it would be well for it to be all absorbed, with all its faculties, in this Divine and dark spiritual light of contemplation, and thus to be withdrawn from all the affections and apprehensions of the creatures.<sup>1</sup>

The preliminary stages of this process seem to be accomplished in the second section through the renunciation of the physical body ('all things, natural') with its devotion to the world, the flesh and, by implication, the devil, represented here by the three white leopards. Eliot's speaker has been reduced to dry bones in the desert – again, a seemingly despairing notion, but linked to the idea of retreat into the desert places by the earliest mystics, and a sense of being hidden from the world:

Let the whiteness of bones atone to forgetfulness.  
There is no life in them. As I am forgotten  
And would be forgotten  
So I would forget  
Thus devoted, concentrated in purpose.

This is, apparently, a momentous achievement, but in the daunting process of the ten stairs to unity it is actually quite modest, just the beginning of the saints' stairway. Eliot never completes the process and writes in the *Four Quartets* of the distinction between the saints' vocation and that of us lesser aspirants to divine unity.

To apprehend  
The point of intersection of the timeless  
With time, is an occupation for the saint...  
For most of us, this is the aim  
Never here to be realised.

Yet nevertheless, this aspiration must still be constantly renewed through 'prayer, observance, discipline, thought and action'.

Such discipline animates the structure of the third section of *Ash-Wednesday*, where St John's figure of the ten stairs and the

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<sup>1</sup> Peers, *op cit* p394.

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temptations which bedevil the climber are explicitly present. St John of the Cross writes:

[i]f, then, the soul conquer the devil upon the first step it will pass to the second; and if upon the second likewise, it will pass to the third [and so on].<sup>1</sup>

Eliot, on the other hand, in the extremity of his humility (he was to reflect, in the second Quartet, that 'humility is endless') intensifies the arduousness of the exercise by adding several turnings to each progression from stair to stair:

At the first turning of the second stair  
I turned and saw below  
The same shape twisted on the banister  
Under the vapour in the fetid air  
Struggling with the devil of the stairs who wears  
The deceitful face of hope and of despair.

The turning is a turning towards God, but it still includes a backward turning glance (perhaps of triumph, but perhaps also of longing and regret) downwards toward the world that is being crushed underfoot. Nonetheless, the advance continues, but it is pursued in darkness:

At the second turning of the second stair  
I left them twisting, turning below;  
There were no more faces and the stair was dark,  
Damp, jagged, like an old man's mouth drivelling, beyond  
repair,  
Or the toothed gullet of an aged shark.

The 'old man' is both the unregenerate man of St Paul's theology, the old Adam, and the sequence of old men in Eliot's poetry prior to *Ash-Wednesday*, such as Gerontion, who abandon hope in, and desire for, this world, but without any ameliorating prospect of salvation.

The record of painstaking ascent is offset by the powerful appeal of worldly temptations. It is no accident that most of the poetry in this section – and its most beautiful poetry at that – is devoted to describing the sensuous, pagan world the aspirant would transcend.

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<sup>1</sup> *Ibid* p101.

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At the first turning of the third stair  
Was a slotted window bellied like the fig's fruit  
And behind the hawthorn blossom and a pasture scene  
The broadbacked figure drest in blue and green  
Enchanted the maytime with an antique flute.  
Blown hair is sweet, brown hair over the mouth blown  
Lilac and brown hair;  
Distraction, music of the flute, stops and steps of the mind  
over the third stair.

His vocation 'fading, fading', he calls upon 'strength beyond hope and despair' as he continues 'climbing the third stair'. The vision of lusty paganism is not utterly indecorous in the context, any more than it is spiritually vacuous. The broadbacked figure, for example, is dressed in blue, the colour of the Virgin and of heaven, as well as green, the colour of fertility and nature; and he is seen in 'maytime', the Virgin's month, as well, of course, as the season of natural fecundity. For those who have eyes to see, the so-called distraction is pregnant with spiritual possibilities which encompass the Orthodox and the Pagan.

The section closes in liturgical quotation as Eliot extracts the phrases referring to union with God from the priest's sentence prior to his communion in the liturgy of the Mass: '*domine non sum dignus ut intres sub tectum meum, sed tantum dic verbo*':

Lord, I am not worthy  
Lord, I am not worthy  
but speak the word only.

Notable though is that Eliot holds back the crucial last line of the traditional recitation: '*et sanabitur anima mea*' ('and my soul shall be healed'). The implication is that his soul has yet to be healed, to be made whole, so the word is not yet spoken. As the foregoing poetry has shown, for all the penitent's determination, he has allowed himself to be distracted by sensuous worldliness. He has yet even to begin the most terrible of all ascents which commences once complete renunciation of physical nature has been achieved. This occurs from the sixth stair, the so-called 'passive dark night' in which all hope of God's love must also be abandoned and 'the soul



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must keep itself from all revelations in order to journey, in purity and without error, in the night of faith, to union.'<sup>1</sup>

#### **Part Four**

In his *Four Quartets*,<sup>2</sup> written from 1935 to 1942, Eliot's principal symbol is of the still point of the turning world. This, for Eliot, represents the moment of perception of eternity in the midst of human involvement in spatio-temporality. As the musical structure and references of the four poems are, obviously (given the title), dominant, Eliot's climactic representation (in the last Quartet) of the experience of the still point is musical:

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.

What is importantly urged throughout the sequence is both the difficulty and the necessity of making possible in one's life not only the circumstances, but also the aptitude for awareness of such spiritual distraction – the very opposite of the sensuous distractions in *Ash-Wednesday*. This can only be achieved through discipline and that can only be nurtured through humility.

Where Eliot is most reliant on St John's teachings of the dark night in the *Quartets* we are struck by the psychological immediacy and urgency of the writing. In 'Burnt Norton', he speaks of the freedom which abandonment to this spiritual discipline promises:

The inner freedom from the practical desire,  
The release from action and suffering, release from the inner  
And the outer compulsion.

Entrapment in our mortal existence suggests permanence, but entails ignorance of, and resistance to,

darkness to purify the soul  
Emptying the sensual with deprivation

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<sup>1</sup> *Ibid*, p194.

<sup>2</sup> *Collected Poems*, pp187-223.

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Cleansing affection from the temporal.

Imperatively, Eliot urges

Descend lower, descend only  
Into the world of perpetual solitude,  
World not world, but that which is not world,  
Internal darkness, deprivation  
And destitution of all property,  
Dessication of the world of sense,  
Evacuation of the world of fancy,  
Inoperancy of the world of spirit;  
This is the one way, and the other  
Is the same, not in movement  
But abstention from movement; while the world moves  
In appetency, on its metallated ways  
Of time past and time future.

The two ways here are of course none other than the active and passive dark nights of the soul which make up the *via negativa*.

In the remaining three *Quartets*, the teachings of St John of the Cross continue to inform the spiritual discipline Eliot is advocating. He imagines in the second *Quartet*, 'East Coker', that all, but especially those who have been exalted in this world, will go 'into the dark', including 'eminent men of letters', such as himself. And now he speaks to himself in the imperative voice, echoing the Psalmist and St John of the Cross himself:

I said to my soul be still, and let the dark come upon you  
Which shall be the darkness of God.

This negative way was Eliot's way, for his Christianity was, as he described it in another poem in yet another liturgical reference, a 'cry' to God; that is: a prayer coming out of deep personal suffering; a deep-seated desire to escape from the demons of his psychology. Perfectly suited to this process was the highly disciplined and utterly self-abandoning mystical asceticism of St John of the Cross. Eliot's final imagery in the *Quartets*, and therefore in his major poetry at large, is taken from St John's 'dark night'; it is the 'Divine fire of contemplative love'. Painful in the extreme and all-consuming, it is the necessary and only sufficient redemption from the fires of the passions of this world. For Eliot,

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finally, human life was a choice between being consumed by one or the other of these fires:

We only live, only suspire  
Consumed by either fire or fire.