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The Context of Time in T. S. Eliot's Four Quartets

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Abstract

T. S. Eliot—considered widely to be the single most important poet of the twentieth century—had a strong fascination for dealing with time as a poetry subject in his works ranging from Prufrock to Four Quartets. As being an erudite student of philosophy during his years as an undergraduate at Harvard, and later at Sorbonne and Oxford, his philosophy of 'time' drew heavily from the influences of Henri Bergson, F. H. Bradley, and, to some extent, Bertrand Russell, which, together, were to mould his sensibility, and consequently help him develop his own notions through experience and meditation upon the subject, later on, after the complete attainment of maturity, in his life. The objective of this paper is to comprehend what time means to Eliot as a subject upon which some of his greatest works are built up, with Four Quartets being our supreme example. But Four Quartets also marks the culmination of his career as a poet, whereas, even the early Eliot—the author of such groundbreaking poem as Prufrock—was as conscientiously engaged in comprehending the concept of time as the mature Eliot, which shows a lifelong fondness for this abstract subject. The present paper takes into account the essential parts of Eliot's works like Prufrock, The Waste Land, and Four Quartets for expounding what, after all, is time in the context of his poetry.

I

Two most important qualifications must be made about T. S. Eliot, before we delve into the subject of this paper: first, that he was a poet whose philosophy synthesised the environment for the production of his poetry; and second, that his development as an artist—beginning with Prufrock and ending with Four Quartets—experienced a step-by-step evolution where, his poetic genius never essentially retrograded at any stage of his life.

Eliot's astuteness in terms of a growing preoccupation with the passage of time has very well been recorded by Peter Ackroyd in his biography T S Eliot: a life. He observes:

'In his early student poetry, there is a preoccupation with the passage of time - time running away, flowers that wither … but the old topos is explored with renewed concern. His seems to have been a temperament acutely aware of waste, of emptiness of passing days, of the need to use time, to put a stamp upon it.'[1]

Eliot did put his own stamp on time, so acutely as no one else could match his efforts, through two of his most eminent works: The Waste Land and Four Quartets. No doubt, The Waste Land reflects the time in which it was written in far too adroit a way than has ever been done by any other poem of the same magnitude. Moreover, it also deals sharply with the waste which the modern civilisation had become in all its aspects, during Eliot's time. The desiccation caused by the first world war was the raison d'être that compelled Eliot to register his response through the poem. The Waste Land is rife with passages that highlight this desiccation and the loss of values, morality, the decay inherent in modern day civilisations, alongside a quest for spiritual salvation among other things.

'What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow
Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,
You cannot say, or guess, for you know only
A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,
And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,
And the dry stone no sound of water. Only
There is shadow under this red rock,
(Come in under the shadow of this red rock),
And I will show you something different from either
Your shadow at morning striding behind you
Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you;
I will show you fear in a handful of dust.'[2]

Phrases such as 'this stony rubbish', 'a heap of broken images', along with other images such as the 'dead tree', 'the cricket', and 'the dry stone' weave together the scenes of barrenness and mass ruination, which the first world war caused to the twentieth century. The Waste Land meticulously pictures the fragmentary state of the modern world which brimmed with the plenitude of wreckage and destruction spread across nations. Of course, such horrid scenes scattered around one's eyes would have led any sensitive individual to call his city an 'Unreal city,' as does Eliot. Interestingly, if we find Eliot shocked and disillusioned by the catastrophic consequences of the war, then we find him simultaneously registering a caustic commentary upon the modern society's decadence, which he portrays efficiently through the pub scene conversations taking place, at the end of the second section A Game of Chess. There we find Albert (Lil's husband), one of the many characters of the poem who 'got demobbed,' and was on his way back to home, after having been in the army for four years. This character, Albert, was looking forward to getting a 'good time' from his wife. We find that his wife appears to have a sense of disapprobation about giving her husband what he demands from her, for obvious reasons. Apparently, her friends at the pub tell her that if she won't be able to 'give it him'—that is, fulfill his sexual demands—then there would be others who would be willing to serve the purpose, if at all they might be solicited for that matter, so to speak. In a sense, this is the projection of the sterility that seeped in human relationships by the advancing modernity which Eliot describes through the epic. The typist scene of The Fire Sermon is yet another portrayal of the insolence of the modern day society, where the typist, upon having had her sexual desires fulfilled by her lover, remarks,'Well now that's done: and I'm glad it's over.' Concurring with the time which it reflects, The Waste Land establishes its reputation as a timeless classic of the English language.

II

'Of all the modernist "time cult," the early T.S. Eliot was the one who engaged most rigorously with a variety of conceptions of time and the modern.'[3]

Such is the observation of Prof. Charles M Tung. So long as we are to look at Eliot's poetry through the glasses of Mr. Tung's observation, we shall always assent with what he says. But upon removing

this set of glasses we find that the later Eliot became much more proactively meditative on the subject time, than the early Eliot—something with which we don't find Mr. Tung disagreeing. In so far as the sources of Eliot's poetry are concerned, a substantial portion of it stems from the philosophies of Henri Bergson, F. H. Bradley, and Bertrand Russell—however, in some aspects we find Eliot closer to Begson than to Russell or Bradley. Other sources of his poetry are his personal experiences, the social conditions of the then society—especially during l'entre deux guerres—and certain other occasions on which he was called on to produce a particular type of work, for a particular purpose, as The Rock, for instance.

Eliot's poetry is not the poetry meant for the common readers; but solely for the most refined sensibilities—specifically for those who can go beyond the constraints of common understanding, and attune themselves to such an abstract thinking, as Eliot himself stoops towards. His subjects are not, in the cruder sense, such flowery subjects upon which poetry may be said to be composed with such a mind as might, for most of the time, be under cheerful spirits. He envisions the modern society in much an unfabricated way as it lies before him—shattered, directionless, barren, and supplicating for a spiritual salvation. And it is these voices which he imbibes, and freely gives an expression to, in his poems.

In his first published poem, Prufrock, there is something exemplary about time, which ought to be mentioned:

> 'There will be time, there will be time
> To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet;
> There will be time to murder and create,
> And time for all the works and days of hands
> That lift and drop a question on your plate;
> Time for you and time for me,
> And time yet for a hundred indecisions,
> And for a hundred visions and revisions,
> Before the taking of a toast and tea.'[4]

The allusion is from Ecclesiastes. The passage bears the mark of a perfect poetic reconstruction. To explain the difference, the original quotation needs to be quoted in full:

'To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven:
A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted;
A time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up;
A time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance;
A time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;
A time to get, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to cast away;
A time to rend, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak…'[5]

The differences between the two passages are the differences that segregate a theological work from a poetic work. Whereas the Ecclesiastes' passage is much elucidated, in a didactic way, we find that Eliot's extract bears the characteristic poetic abridgement, which is a common property to poets of all the languages by which, the capacious subject, usually that of prose, is adroitly condensed into becoming a poetry subject; the expression is trimmed to fit into tacit verses, and the principal idea is kept in the background, upon which the expression is built up, and turned poetic. The biblical passage by itself, does not seem to require any poetic reconstruction, unless we look at Eliot's specimen in which he takes up the second line from the biblical passage, 'a time to break down, and

a time to build up,' and converts it into 'there will be time to murder and create.' The theologist's business is to break down the subtle tenets of religion into intelligible forms so as to aid the common understanding grasp them better. But a poet is primarily concerned with the lucid expression of his thoughts. A theologist's subjects are richly unpoetic, or poetry reduced to prose; but a poet chooses what turns him on, and it is solely his own discretion that determines if a subject can be turned into poetry or not. It may in turn lead us to deduce that poetry must originate in a poet's mind and that it cannot be commanded at any rate by anyone. We cannot say that Eliot took up a blunt passage, and added poetry into it, through his verse—for, there had been poetry in the passage, since the beginning—but that he improved on the poetry in his distinct way. Moreover, Eliot, as a mature poet and even better a craftsman, knew how to steal things well from his surroundings and give them a better shape.

III

Burnt Norton, the first poem in Four Quartets, is Eliot's most profound meditation upon time than the other occurring poems in the cycle. At any rate, its opening lines are too indispensable to be avoided:

'Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future
And time future contained in time past.
If all time is eternally present
All time is unredeemable.'[6]

Burnt Norton emerged as a different poem when E. Martin Browne pruned away some of the lines from the third tempter's speech from the stage production of Eliot's Murder in the Cathedral (1935) (Burns, 2024). These discarded lines coalesced in Eliot's mind and formed an entirely different work. Originally, Burnt Norton is a manor situated in a village in Gloucestershire which Eliot, alongside Emily Hale, visited in 1934 during his trip to Chipping Camden. Our first observation, when we read the opening lines of Burnt Norton, is that Eliot is rejecting all the widely held linear notions of time—the notion towards which Western philosophy has largely tended—that we are sempiternally moving on a straight path from past to future. To show what the western philosophy says about the linear notion of time, we need to quote a passage from Aristotle, who is widely regarded as maestro dei sapienti. In his Physics, a collection of treatises dealing largely with the general philosophical principles of natural things, Aristotle maintains that:

'...time is: a number of changes in respect of the before and after. So, time is not change but in the way in which change has a number. An indication: we discern the greater and the less by number, and greater and less change by time; hence time is a kind of number'[7]

From before to after, the path is straight; no indication of recurrence or repetition, in a cycle. In Eliot, the Aristotelian before and after comes with an addition:

'Here is a place of disaffection
Time before and time after'[8]

What fetches affection to Aristotle, becomes the 'place of disaffection' for Eliot. Aristotle places a quantitative definition on time. Bergson, on the other hand, in his Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness segregates the mechanical time—as calculated by clocks—from pure duration (la durée.) He defines pure duration as:

'the succession of our conscious states assumes when our ego lets itself live, when it refrains from separating its present state from its former states…'[9]

A few sentences ahead, he says that this pure duration:

'forms both the past and the present states into an organic whole, as happens when we recall the notes of a tune, melting, so to speak, into one another.'[10]

Characteristically, this pure duration is:

'A qualitative multiplicity, with no likeness to number; an organic evolution which is yet not an increasing quantity; a pure heterogeneity within which there are no distinct qualities'[11]

Bergson's advantage is that while he was writing his essay, Aristotle wasn't alive. Consequently, it might be conceded that upon reading this extract, nobody would find it difficult to estimate Bergson as an anti-Aristotelian; for what the latter said earlier, the former refuted later. In the ordinary sense, Bergson's pure duration is one's lived experience which cannot be mechanically divided as distinct entities; he expresses clearly that time is a qualitative property instead of being a quantitative one—something that cannot be reduced to 'numbers,' and so forms an 'organic whole.' But it is not Bergson alone whose theories are the final verdict upon the matter. Bertrand Russell, for instance, refutes him in similar terms in which Bergson refuted Aristotle. In his Our Knowledge of the External World (1914) he says:

'The theory of continuity and infinity, as developed in modern mathematics, enables us to understand how an infinite series of instants may form a compact series, and how time can be assigned an order without assuming any mystical "flow"'[12]

To Russell, time was a discrete, measurable, and hence scientific entity, whereas Bergson viewed it as a living and indivisible entity. On the other hand we have F. H. Bradley, the realist, whose theories are entirely different both from Bergson as well as Russell. In Appearance and Reality (1893) he notes:

'Time, like space, is a contradiction; it is appearance, and it somehow must belong to reality. But to understand how this can be, is not easy.'[13]

The time which to Bergson, is 'an unbounded medium, different from space but homogeneous like the latter' is completely an appearance to Bradley. Perhaps, Eliot reciprocates Bradley the least in his works which is why we should not look up at him as the pivotal point of this paper. Moreover, in all these extracts, we don't find any mention of time being cyclical in nature, that it might recur in succession. Contrarily, to support his philosophy of time, Eliot banks on the oriental outlook of time, particularly on the Indian philosophy—discarding in its entirety the Bergsonian influence, as well as the influence of the entire western philosophy—to show how time exists in a cyclic order. We must make ourselves familiar with some of the principal theories of Indian philosophy which might support our argument. For instance, the Bhagavad Gita says:

भूतग्रामः स एवायं भूत्वा भूत्वा प्रलीयते।
रात्र्यागमेऽवशः पार्थ प्रभवत्यहरागमे॥[14]

which in its Roman form is:

Bhūtagrāmaḥ sa evāyaṁ bhūtvā bhūtvā pralīyate
Rātryāgame'vaśaḥ pārtha prabhavatyaharāgame.

which might be translated as:

‘With the advent of every day and every night of Brahma, the living beings are repeatedly manifested and destroyed, O Partha.’

Another instance we find in Bhagavata Purana:

कल्पे कल्पे पुनः सृष्टिः कल्पे कल्पे पुनः क्षयः।
कल्पे कल्पे पुनर्वृष्टिः कल्पे कल्पे पुनः दिनम्॥[15]

whose Romanised form is:

Kalpe kalpe punaḥ sṛṣṭiḥ kalpe kalpe punaḥ kṣayaḥ
Kalpe kalpe punarvṛṣṭiḥ kalpe kalpe punaḥ dinam

which means:

‘In every Kalpa, creation happens again; in every Kalpa, dissolution happens again. In every Kalpa, there is rain, and in every Kalpa, the day rises again.’

Similarly the Indian epic Mahabharata says:

कालचक्रं तु भूतानां संसाराय निबध्यते।
पुनः पुनरयं लोकः चक्रवत् परिवर्तते॥[16]

Kālacakraṁ tu bhūtānāṁ saṁsārāya nibadhyate
Punaḥ punarayaṁ lokaḥ cakravat parivartate

which translates:

‘The wheel of time binds all beings to the cycle of existence. Again and again, this world revolves like a wheel.’

Besides, why avoid the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, which had a considerable influence on Eliot, which too states a similar theory:

स यो ह वै तत् कर्म कुरुतेऽयं वै स पुनः पुनरायत्येव।[17]

its Romanised form:

Sa yo ha vai tat karma kurute ayaṁ vai sa punaḥ punar āyaty eva

which means:

‘Whoever performs actions (karma), they return again and again (to this world).’

The meaning is crystal clear. All these voices from the Indian scriptures agree on the same thing: that time is recurrent; that it flows in a cyclic process from birth to death and vice versa; that what exists today, will be destroyed tomorrow, and consequently be re-created the day after. According to Eliot, the future is an admixture of past and present, and the future itself is contained in the past. That implies, whatever we live up to is that which shall become a part of the past. The emphasis is on the eternal moment, in which all time is ‘eternally present’, and hence unredeemable. Whatever

shall be, shall become that which had been, since the future, according to him, is contained in the past. In that way, the present, past, and future shall continue to re-exist, against and again. Four Quartets affords us numerous instances to show how Eliot completely renounced the early Bergsonian philosophy of time, and by and large, the whole western concept of it.

> '...the enchainment of past and future
> Woven in the weakness of the changing body,
> Protects mankind from heaven and damnation
> Which flesh cannot endure.'[18]

Eliot assents on the fact that human beings are restricted by the constraints of time in such a way that makes them unable to experience 'heaven and damnation.'

> 'Only through time time is conquered'[19]

What Bergson perceived as a succession of conscious states, becomes, for Eliot, a cyclic repetition of past and future, leading to that eternal moment in which all forms of existence gain their meaning. Eliot believes firmly that from the cycle of time, there is no escape, and that no significance of either the mortal or the immortal things can evade this pattern of time. His 'still point of the turning world' is embedded deep in that ultimate truth around which every other truth revolves; the divine truth. According to Eliot:

> 'the world moves
> In appetency, on its metalled ways of time past and time future.'[20]

It is no doubt true that the world is indeed full of its own desires in whatever time or space it may exist in, and perhaps, this appetency is largely based on the harm of others. About appetency, Eliot himself remarks later on in the poem that 'Desire itself is movement/Not in itself desirable.' Eliot's desire revolves much convincingly around the 'rose-garden' of Burnt Norton, which still brings the prospect of 'what might have been' afresh to him. Time is important to him also because it is the sole factor which makes the recollection of the 'moment in the rose-garden' possible, for he perceives that mortal beings are subject to mortal fates, as highlighted in the verse:

> '...that which is only living
> Can only die. Words after speech reach
> Into silence.'[21]

But there does not persist silence forever, for time comes around again with its cacophony and still it goes into that silence.

> '...the end precedes the beginning
> And the end and the beginning were always there
> Before the beginning and after the end.'[22]

What better extract to demonstrate that time revolves around in a cyclical fashion than this. Time assumes an abstract meaning in Four Quartets, and perhaps no poet other than Eliot would have done justice in dealing with it in the way he dealt with it. Such works continue to shape the sensibilities of the generations that come to read them with their own interests. And such works are what constitute a heritage of the literature of a fixed language.

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