

Threes Time in *Four Quartets*

Philip Williams

From the period of his earliest published poetry, T. S. Eliot seems to have been almost obsessed with the problem of "time" and its meaning for mankind. The word appears in all his major works from the very earliest to the very latest. "Preludes" and "Rhapsody on a Windy Night"—begun in his student days at Harvard, 1909—are orchestrated around the changing times of the hours and the seasons. In "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" the word "time" recurs eight times in ten early lines:

And indeed there will be *time*
 For the yellow smoke that slides along the street,
 Rubbing its back upon the window-panes;
 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. . . .¹

The word "time" reappears several times later in the poem, and the theme here—as in the companion poem, "Portrait of a Lady"—is the vision of time's emptiness beneath the cracked veneer of modern culture. The theme dominates "Gerontion," where it is extended to embrace man's life in "History [with its] cunning passages, contrived

corridors" (p. 30).

"Time" and its meanings might be called the central subject matter of the later, greater poems such as *The Waste Land*, where the famous pub scene (Part II, "A Game of Chess") echoes at five points with the existentially symbolic line "HURRY UP PLEASE ITS TIME" (pp. 58-9). The subject gets its fullest treatment, of course, in *Four Quartets*; "Burnt Norton" (1935) begins with startling lines, later contradicted by the whole development of the poem's struggle with "time" and its meanings:

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 (p. 175, my italics).

So crucial is the question of Eliot's interpretation of "time" that hundreds of scholarly critical studies have explored the problem, and some of them—like Staffan Bergsten's *Time of Eternity* (Stockholm, 1960) on *Four Quartets*—are themselves of book length. One critic has summed the matter up rather well (though I shall indicate some misgivings later): "In Eliot's poetry, the idea of Time has the same kind of prominence as the idea of Nature in the poetry of the romantics."²

In this essay I want to expand the interpretation of a discovery of a prose study which I reported briefly twenty years ago as being the closest to a philosophy or theology of "time" for Eliot's general work, a study whose full implications have still not been worked out.³

If I were to state a short thesis, it would be that from the period

of the later *Quartets*, Eliot found that he had reached a conclusion similar to if not identical with that of Nicholas Berdyaev, the famous Russian Orthodox socialist and philosopher-theologian; that in fact everyman lives in "three kinds of time," and "three kinds of time" live in everyman. The book in which Berdyaev most explicitly and thoroughly explores this is *Slavery and Freedom* (*O rabstvo i svoboda cheloveka* in the original, a summary volume of Berdyaev's thought, published first in 1939). The English translation from which I shall take quotations (Charles Scribner's Sons, New York) was done by R. M. French. It was published in 1944 but Eliot had access to the book earlier through the French language translation. It is interesting to speculate on the question of his possible use of this work, which we will find to be so close to his poetic reflections in *Four Quartets* both in content and form. We do know that he was vitally interested in the author, accepting four articles and reviews on Berdyaev for his *Criterion* between 1931 and 1937, when *Four Quartets* were germinating.

*

*

*

Eliot's thought surely cannot be reduced to a conceptual pattern, not only because he speaks to us through poetry which defies paraphrase, but also because he insists at many points that efforts to establish too easy patterns of rational coherence miss the truth which is always ultimately revelation moving from an area of mystery. Having said this, however, I would like to quote Berdyaev's interpretation of "varieties of time" which seems to do more justice than all other interpretations I have seen to the fullness of Eliot's meditation on nature and history and on time and eternity in *Four Quartets*.

It is interesting not only because the theological views it contains seem unusually close to Eliot's but also because the three symbols Berdyaev uses will be noted to coincide exactly with those of Eliot: the cycle, the linear sequence, and the point which becomes the poet's "still point." Berdyaev's view parallels the thoughts and even the language of *Four Quartets*.

History is linked with time. To speak of time is not always to speak of one and the same thing. Time has a variety of meanings and it is needful to make distinctions. There are three times: cosmic time, historical time, and existential time, and every man lives in these three forms of time. Cosmic time is symbolized by the circle. It is connected with the motion of the earth round the sun, with the reckoning of days, months and years, with the calendar and the clock. This is a circular movement in which a return is constantly taking place, morning comes and evening, spring and autumn. This is nature's time, and as natural beings we live in this time. The Greeks were primarily concerned with the apprehension of cosmic time: among them the aesthetic contemplation of the cosmos predominated, and they almost failed to apprehend historical time (pp. 257-8).

This "cosmic time"—seen in the rhythms of the seasons and the cycles of all natural life—appears in many sections of *Four Quartets*, but its pattern of recurrences is *not* identified with the many other references to "history"! When Eliot speaks of the cyclic pattern, it is always in the context identified by Berdyaev. We find the cycles of natural (cosmic, or physical) time in Section II of each Quartet. "The circulation of the lymph . . . figured in the drift of stars" ("Burnt Norton," II) brings the images of natural processes seen throughout the cosmos, which moves "to that destructive fire/Which burns before the ice-cap reigns ("East Coker," II). It is this *natural*,

a-historical time that sounds through the haunting section of "Dry Salvages," II:

Where is there an end of it, the soundless wailing,
 The silent withering of autumn flowers
 Dropping their petals and remaining motionless;
 Where is there an end to the drifting wreckage,
 The prayer of the bone on the beach, the unprayerable
 Prayer at the calamitous annunciation? (p. 193)

The answer comes in the last verse with that "one annunciation" which is historic, not recurrent like the cycles of nature: the announcement of the coming of the Word of God into time to build a community that transcends and transforms natural life.

So also does the dissolution of the "four elements of the ancient tradition"—air, earth, water, and fire, each of which gives characteristic imagery to one of the *Quartets*—counterpoint natural time against the historic community which becomes the "end" in "Little Gidding."

I find no better commentary on *Four Quartets*, and its view of the cyclic character of nature and natural time's influence upon man, than Berdyaev's interpretation. He gives the definition by contrast with history:

Natural life, cosmic life in natural cosmic time rests upon the alternating change of birth and death. It knows a periodic spring of the revival of life but that revival takes places not for those whom death has carried away, but for others. Victory over death is impossible in cosmic time. The present, which cannot be seized because it falls between the past and the future, annihilates the past in order to be itself annihilated by the future. In cosmic time the realm of life is subject to death. Cosmic time is death-

dealing not for the race but for personality: it desires no knowledge of personality and takes no interest in its fate.

But man is a being who lives in several dimensions of time, *in several spheres of existence*. . . . Man is not only a cosmic natural being, subject to cosmic time which moves in cycles. Man is also a historical being. Historical life is actuality of another order than nature. History, of course, is subject to cosmic time also, it knows reckoning by years and centuries, but it knows also its own historical time. Historical time comes into being through movement and change of another sort than that of the cosmic cycle. Historical time is symbolized not by the circle but by the straight line stretching out forwards. The special property of historical time is precisely this stretching out towards what is coming, this reaching forward to determine. In what is coming, it waits for the disclosure of a meaning. Historical time brings novelty with it: in it that which was not becomes that which was. It is true that in historical time also there is return and repetition: resemblances can be established. But every event in historical time is individually particular, every decade and century introduces new life. And every conflict against historical time, against the lure and slavery of history, takes place not in cosmic time but in historic time (pp. 258-9, italics mine).

Like Eliot, Berdyaev contends that "historical time is also connected with the past and with tradition which establishes a link between periods of time" (*loc. cit.*). History has "internal" aspects, as we have seen, and memory is the key to liberation: "'the historical' is constituted by memory and tradition. Without that memory and that tradition in the inner sense of the word there is no history" (p. 259). This is echoed in "Little Gidding," III: "This is the use of memory: / For liberation . . . / From the future as well as the past. / . . . History may be servitude, / History may be freedom" (p. 205). Eliot shows, however, that history, beyond "nature," is always fraught with special dangers. To the degree man's freedom

surpasses that of the animal world, to that degree the *abuse* of power (the key here is "Sin," as T. E. Hulme stressed) opens life to greater evil. Berdyaev writes:

Historical time gives birth to illusions: the search in the past for what is better, truer, more beautiful, more perfect (*the illusion of the conservative*) or the search in the future for the fullness of achievement and the perfection of meaning (*the illusion of progress*). Historical time is time which is torn to pieces. It does not find completeness in any kind of present (*the past and the future are always a kind of present at the same time*). In the present man does not feel the fullness of time, and he seeks it in the past or in the future, especially in periods of history which are transitional and full of suffering. . . . The present in which there is fullness and perfection is not a part of time, but an emergence from time, not an atom of time, but an atom of eternity, as Kierkegaard says (p. 260, italics mine).

All of this matches Eliot's views. Yet in the paradoxes of poetry Eliot surpasses the philosopher when he says, "Only through time time is conquered" (p. 178). He avoids the extreme Kierkegaardian position by allowing more relevance to the social dimension of the self with the greater respect that this implies for history.

Eliot is in full agreement with the general bent of Berdyaev's thought, though he may affirm more and deny less than the Russian. Berdyaev's passage continues in a fashion which parallels Eliot's interpretation: "That which is experienced in the depth of this existential moment remains. The successive moments which enter into the sequence of time and represent a less profound reality, pass away" (*loc. cit.*). In defining "existential time," the moment of the "Still Point"—moments of the deepest revelations of love and good and evil, the meaning of life and of death—Berdyaev says:

In addition to cosmic time and historical time, which are objectivized subordinate to number, though in different ways, there is also existential time, profound time. Existential time must not be thought of in complete isolation from cosmic and historical time; it is a break-through of one time into the other. *Kairos*, about which Tillich is fond of speaking, is as it were, the irruption of eternity into time, an interruption in cosmic and historical time, an addition to and a fulfilment of time. With this is connected the messianic prophetic consciousness which out of the depth of existential time speaks about historical time (p. 261).

Berdyaev then describes the symbol for existential time, the "third kind of time" which transcends but never denies the other "times." His interpretation of this aspect can supply an excellent commentary for those who are always concerned to add to the minute elaboration of Eliot's symbol of the "Still Point," which has absorbed vast scholarly research.

Existential time may be best symbolized not by the circle nor by the line but by the point. That is precisely what is meant by saying that existential time can least of all be symbolized by extension. This is inward time, not exteriorized in extension, not objectivized. It is the time of subjectivity, not objectivity. It is not computed mathematically, it is not summed up nor divided into parts. The infinity of existential time is a qualitative infinity, not a quantitative. A moment of existential time is not subject to number, it is not a fractional part of time in a sequence of moments of objectivized time. A moment of existential time is an emergence into eternity. It would be untrue to say that existential time is identical with eternity, but it may be said that it is a participant in several moments of eternity. Every man knows from his own inward experience that he is a participant in several of his own moments of eternity. . . . Minutes which are short from the objective point of view may be lived through as an infinity, and an infinity in opposite directions, in the direc-

tion of suffering and in the direction of joy and triumphant rapture . . . (p. 261)

This account stands in precise parallel with the passage on the "Still Point" in "Burnt Norton" which is the earliest and most "Greek" (i.e. "least biblical") of the *Quartets*, written eight years before "Little Gidding" which we find transforming the radical existentialism of this passage.

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. And do not call it fixity,
Where past and future are gathered. Neither movement from
nor towards.

Neither ascent nor decline. 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.

The inner freedom from the practical desire,

The release from action and suffering, release from the inner

And the outer compulsion, yet surrounded

By a grace of sense, a white light still and moving,

Erhebung without motion, concentration

Without elimination, both a new world

And the old made explicit, understood

In the completion of its partial ecstasy,

The resolution of its partial horror (pp. 177-8).

In "Little Gidding" we are brought to share an experience of even more intense "joy and triumphant rapture." And there the poet *does* say where he has been, and why he comes to know that "History is now and England" (p. 208). The result is that the revelation there becomes far more "tongued with fire" in communicating to us;

it ties us to history and shows us how we are related redemptively to *all* "times," because "history is a pattern / Of timeless moments" (p. 208).

*

*

*

No study of *Four Quartets* is adequate which does not treat the unfolding of various levels of meanings throughout the poem's development. There is far less of the mystic's craving for the "Still Point" in the latter sections, and all the earlier meanings have been drawn into more orthodox Christian faith as Eliot comes to "Little Gidding," the place

Where prayer has been valid. And prayer is more
 Than an order of words, the conscious occupation
 Of the praying mind, or the sound of the voice praying.
 And what the dead had no speech for, when living,
 They can tell you, being dead: the communication
 Of the dead is tongued with fire beyond the language of the living.
 Here the intersection of the timeless moment
 Is England and nowhere. Never and always (p. 201).

However, one cannot subsume all the meanings within the latter poems, where the forthright Christian message rings so clearly with its churchly mood. The experiences of the "Still Point" reflected in "Burnt Norton"—and at other points, too—have their own inherent validity. The authenticity and the integrity of the verse, and of the experience on which they rest, prove themselves in the poetry and not through any doctrinal interpretation.

It must be acknowledged that by his emphasis upon the Still Point as the existential moment, Eliot *seems* to follow Berdyaev's ascending scale of "time" values. As historical time is "higher" than cosmic

(natural, physical) "time," so Berdyaev maintains that it is in existential time that the human spirit finally finds the pinnacle of revelation, for here the individual's experience is completely personalized. Eliot may weave these elements together somewhat differently, but for him too it is the moment of intense and existential vision that supplies the indispensable insight for every man, interpreting the revelations that come out of nature and history—the moment of the Creator and Lord and Redeemer revealing Himself by direct encounter in one's religious experience.

Eliot, however, at the end of *Four Quartets*, is moving to quite deliberately ground the personal experience upon history's central "objective correlative" of God's act for man's salvation, the "event Jesus Christ" around which the whole world's calendars today "keep time." This is seen in the section where he most clearly moves with Berdyaev-like symbols of the "Still Point" of existential time—the moment of eternity filling time's meaning—to the crucial revelation of the Incarnation which always has final place at the pinnacle of Eliot's (as also Dante's, Shakespeare's, Milton's) interpretation of the meanings of "time":⁴

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* [homonym pun, compare John Donne?] unseen
 . . . or music heard so deeply
 That it is not heard at all, but you are the music
 While the music lasts. These are only hints and guesses,
 Hints followed by guesses: and the rest
 Is prayer, observance, discipline, thought and action.
 The hint half guessed, the gift half understood, is Incarnation.

Here the impossible union
Of *spheres of existence* [Berdyayev, p. 259] is actual,
Here the past and future
Are conquered and reconciled. . . . ("Dry Salvages," V, pp. 198-9).

Eliot's treatment of the "spheres of existence" involving the different aspects of "time" as Berdyayev defines them, has been consciously grounded upon biblical interpretations. But it can also be claimed that the ways in which his experience has been expressed here can help mightily to enrich the modern reader's understanding of the Bible's interpretation of the relations of God and man in the three aspects of "time." At the risk of being marked a heretic, I would like to go one step further and note how Eliot's interpretation, like Berdyayev's, may also illustrate the symbolic meaning of the doctrine of the Trinity which is basic to the church's tradition. This Christian doctrine of the key message of the Bible is not, of course, explicable or even enlightening except by symbolic and analogical forms. It is fundamental for the faith of the church, I think, though many recent interpreters find it more divisive and conducive to confusion than to reasonable faith or faithful reasoning.

Nevertheless, the concept of Trinity seems to express in symbols what the believer actually does experience, and it does this very much as Berdyayev and Eliot illuminate tangents of life's meaning in the "three times" we have found in *Four Quartets*. We "know" the God of the cosmos, the creator and ruler who is the very power of all being and becoming and order in the natural universe; and we may experience His eternal presence as the beginning and the end of all aspects of physical change. We can "meet" the One who is

flesh-and-blood Man, the Son who incarnates the Father in history as the full revelation of Divine Love which works within history to create a new community of the whole family of mankind, the "kingdom on earth as it is in heaven." And we each may—in moments of fullest sensitivity to basic issues of guilt and forgiveness, beauty and truth, and the whole range of knowing Love in the discovery of deepest meanings of life and death—feel the influence of the Spirit proceeding from the Father and the Son at our experiences of the "Still Point," when the One God of all nature and of all history is known in our hearts as "the light within."

Like Berdyaev, Eliot shows that all formulas fail finally to fully "describe God," but one must allow for the revelations in nature, in history, and in existential experience, which work together in our "three times" to show us how the ground of all reality can confront us in these modes which are forever uniting from His eternal side, revealing not only the power and love of God but also the nature and destiny of man.

Notes

- 1 T. S. Eliot: *Collected Poems 1909-1962* (New York, 1963), p. 4; my italics. Subsequent references to Eliot's poems will be to this edition and will be given in the text.
- 2 L. G. Salinger, "T. S. Eliot: Poet and Critic," *The Pelican Guide to English Literature* (Middlesex, 1970), p. 330.
- 3 "Four Quartets and the Christian view of History," *The Tohoku Gakuin Daigaku Ronshū*, Sendai, May, 1955, p. 10. The second part of the 160 pp. monograph appeared in the same journal in May, 1957, where Berdyaev discussion is extended, 72ff.
- 4 See "The Resurrection Lyric of *Four Quartets*," *Eigo Seinen*, September, 1968, pp. 22-25, for my explication of "incarnation imagery" in the lyric portions of Eliot's masterpiece.