

## The Meaning of Time in the Still Point in T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*

—From Curse to Redemption—

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We might begin a description of *Four Quartets* by saying it presents a series of meditations upon existence in time, which, beginning from a place and a point in time, and coming back to another place and another point, attempts to discover in these points and places what is the meaning and content of an experience, what leads to it, and what follows from it, what we bring to it and what it brings to us. But any such description will be brief and abstract; we have to use words like 'time', 'memory', 'consciousness', words whose meaning we do not really grasp, abstractions from sensation.<sup>1</sup>

As the above extraction from Helen Gardner's summary of *Four Quartets* suggests, it would be rather dangerous to formulate a pattern of anything in it. That kind of attempt would even destroy the music in the work. Since it is there, however, I must venture to investigate the meaning of time in the still point.

Any reader of *Four Quartets* will notice that it has much in common with 'Tradition and the Individual Talent'. In fact, if the latter is the prose summary of T. S. Eliot's whole view of history, life and poetry, the former is the poetic summary of the same, even though it is more than that because it is comparable to music. The essential points of argu-

ment regarding time in 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' which are in common with those in *Four Quartets* are as follows.

- 1) The emphasis on the historical sense.
  - 2) The dual view of the idea of poetry and of life in terms of the acute consciousness of tradition.
  - 3) The awareness of the poet's responsibility.
  - 4) The idea of scientific depersonalization.
- 1) The first point is explained by the following quotation.

This historical sense, which is a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional. And it is at the same time what makes a writer most acutely conscious of his place in time, of his own contemporaneity.<sup>2</sup>

- 2) The following explains the second point.

.....what happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it. The existing monuments from an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them. The existing order is complete before the new work arrives; for order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the *whole* existing order must be, if even so slightly, altered; and so the relations, proportions, values of each work of art toward the whole are readjusted; and this is conformity between the old and the new.<sup>3</sup>

The reader will understand that the idea which is expressed in the above passage is applicable to that of life as you read the following explanation and later discussion of *Four Quartets* and *The Cocktail Party*.

I have tried to point out the importance of the relation of the poem

to other poems by other authors, and suggested the conception of poetry as a living whole of all the poetry that has ever been written. The other aspect of this Impersonal theory of poetry is the relation of the poem to its author. ....the more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates; the more perfectly will the mind digest and transmute the passions which are its material.<sup>4</sup>

3) The explanation of the third point is as follows.

Whoever has approved this idea of order, of the form of European, of English literature will not find it preposterous that the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past. And the poet who is aware of this will be aware of great difficulties and responsibilities. ....

And we do not quite say that the new is more valuable because it fits in; but its fitting in is a test of its value—a test, it is true, which can only be slowly and cautiously applied, for we are none of us infallible judges of conformity.<sup>5</sup>

4) The fourth point which helps us understand the idea of time in the still moment in *Four Quartets* is explained in the following.

It is in this depersonalization that may be said to approach the condition of science. I, therefore, invite you to consider, as a suggestive analogy, the action which takes place when a bit of finely filiated platinum is introduced into a chamber containing oxygen and sulphur dioxide.<sup>6</sup>

.....in suspension in the poet's mind until the proper combination arrived for it to add itself to.<sup>7</sup>

T. S. Eliot's acute consciousness of time as expressed in *Four Quartets* derives from his recognition of the unredeemable dark present. As we look through *Murder in the Cathedral*, *The Family Reunion* and *The Cocktail Party*, we come to realize how he is in despair with the cursed present and how he craves redemption and hope. In order to eliminate the cause of the curse and ill fate, Eliot studies the meaning of the present moment in the light of the past and the future.

A curse, according to Agatha in *The Family Reunion*, is formed in a moment of unconsciousness in an accidental bed.<sup>8</sup> The fate of characters in *The Cocktail Party* is made by their choice and the same importance of choice is mentioned in *Four Quartets*.

The only hope, or else despair  
Lies in the choice of pyre—  
To be redeemed from fire by fire.<sup>9</sup>  
.....

The transaction of the present moment is, thus, connected either to hope or to despair. This present moment, however, is not a mere flat moment. It has its depth. This depth can only be perceived in terms of the continuity of time. When Eliot says, 'Time present and time past/ Are both perhaps present in time future,/ And time future contained in time past.'<sup>10</sup> at the opening of *Four Quartets*, he thinks that time past and time present determine time future and that time future is determined by time past. There is thus a notion of the continuity of time in Eliot. When he thinks that 'the end precedes the beginning,/ And the end and the beginning were always there/ Before the beginning

and after the end' /; and that 'all is always now' /,<sup>11</sup> end and beginning assimilate in his idea. His idea of the continuity of time is distinct also in his comment on the effect of time, saying, 'People change, and smile: but the agony abides./ Time the destroyer is time the preserver,/ .....<sup>12</sup>

This notion of the continuity of time is expanded to that of the eternity of time as we see it in the following verse.

There is no end of it, the voiceless wailing,  
No end to the withering of withered flowers,  
To the movement of pain that is painless and motionless,  
To the drift of the sea and the drifting wreckage,  
.....<sup>13</sup>

When Eliot further says that 'There is no end, but addition'<sup>14</sup>, we understand that he has an affirmative view of time. It is in this way that his idea of tradition which is paralleled with his idea of fate is built. This idea of tradition is inseparable from the effects of the trans-action of the moments as is clear from the following.

.....And any action  
Is a step to the block, to the fire, down the sea's throat  
Or to an illegible stone: and that is where we start.  
We die with the dying:  
See, they depart, and we go with them.  
We are born with the dead:  
See, they return, and bring us with them.<sup>15</sup>

Possessed by the consciousness of the disease of the world as, for instance, is suggested by such lines as 'The earth is our hospital/ Endowed by the ruined millionaire'<sup>16</sup>, Eliot was much concerned with the new

beginning and the new start which often meant redemption from the curse of the present. Finding hope as is expressed in the passage, 'In my end is my beginning,'<sup>17</sup> he felt it his responsibility as a poet to try every attempt to bring about the new beginning.

Eliot considers a particular moment as a motivation for the new beginning and urges the necessity and the process of the movement toward it as follows.

We must be still and still moving  
 Into another intensity  
 For a further union, a deeper communion  
 Through the dark cold and the empty desolation,  
 .....<sup>18</sup>

The stillness is explained in 'a Chinese jar' that 'still moves perpetually in its stillness.'<sup>19</sup> In this way, the stillness has its expansion and its movement is sustained by his will that craves freedom from the curse of the present. This is why Eliot claims that 'the pattern is new in every moment/ And every moment is a new and shocking/ Valuation of all we have been.'<sup>20</sup> It is in this sense that Eliot cries out, 'Fare forward, voyagers'<sup>21</sup> like Walt Whitman does in 'Song of Open Road' and 'Song of Myself'. Eliot's goal is thus 'freedom from past and future also' which is obtained by means of 'right action'<sup>22</sup> in which the choice of the use of the still moment is properly done.

Time in the still point is reduced into a vacuum where nothing is invested its meaning nor has a form. This vacuum is a space where fluid elements of time before time are full. It is, therefore, an imperceptible microcosm where neither an electronic microscope nor a cymoscope can

see or touch through.

The still moment which is a turning point either to servitude or to freedom sits there. The vacuum is where history is made. The cause of the turning of history to either way is made in the vacuum by one's choice of action in it which exists in one's mind, for Eliot admits man's choice although it is not completely free.

The vacuum in my definition is where the only hopeful moment of existence before existence that Eliot conceived exists. As a poet, he has the insight of a scientist as he contemplates it strenuously. However, he does not, of course, clarify the vacuum in terms of scientific words but in terms of poetic words which are extremely flexible and have expansion and movement of meaning in themselves compared with the dry frigid scientific terms. Only the way Eliot puts words together is rational. This is clear if we compare him with Yeats, for Yeats' usage of words is mystic rather than rational. At least, Yeats dispenses with reason on principle and Eliot out of necessity.

Let us illustrate and discuss further now what is time in the still point according to the text. The following passage is the extraction from the second section of the first part.

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 <sup>23</sup>

Time in the still point here exists between 'neither flesh' and 'nor fleshless', between 'neither from' and 'nor, towards', between 'neither arrest' and 'nor movement', between 'neither movement from' and 'nor towards' and between 'neither ascent' and 'nor decline'.

When Eliot says, 'neither flesh nor fleshless', he means the state of time and place before their formation, in other words, the prototype of time and place. 'Neither movement from nor towards' means stillness in suspension, the state of human conduct before conduct which is governed by time and place. 'Neither ascent nor decline' suggests the world before moral judgement. In this way, it is the significance of time in the still point in history that it has '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'<sup>24</sup>

The moment of the decision and choice of one's direction in history thus lurks in the still point.

The third section of the first part begins with

Here is a place of disaffection  
 Time before and time after  
 In a dim light: neither daylight  
 Investing form with lucid stillness  
 Turning shadow into transient beauty  
 With slow rotation suggesting permanence  
 Nor darkness to purify the soul  
 Emptying the sensual with deprivation  
 Cleansing affection from the temporal.  
 Neither plenitude nor vacancy. Only a flicker

Over the strained time-ridden faces  
Distracted from distraction by distraction  
Filled with fancies and empty of meaning  
Tumid apathy with no concentration  
Men and bits of paper, whirled by the cold wind  
That blows before and after time,  
Wind in and out of unwholesome lungs  
Time before and time after.<sup>25</sup>

Here is the conception of time in the still point. It is a place of disaffection. It is time before and time after<sup>26</sup> in a dim light which is neither daylight nor darkness.

That it is 'neither plenitude nor vacancy and is a flicker filled with fancies and empty of meaning' is the content of the definition of 'vacuum' in my preceding discussion. Furthermore, time in the still point exists 'between un-being and being'<sup>27</sup>, that is, between 'where you are' and 'where you are not'.<sup>28</sup> It is also metaphorically expressed as existing between 'midnight' and 'dawn' and between 'when time stops' and when 'time is never ending.'<sup>29</sup> It is 'the point of intersection of the timeless with time' and is 'the moment in and out of time.'<sup>30</sup> It is compared to 'midwinter spring' 'suspended in time' and exists between 'melting' and 'freezing.' It is 'the spring time but not in time's covenant' and is 'neither budding nor fading.'<sup>31</sup> It is 'never and always'.<sup>32</sup> It is also 'both intimate and unidentifiable.'<sup>33</sup>

Eliot summarizes his view of time in the still point by saying that it is

The voice of the hidden waterfall  
And the children in the apple-tree

Not known, because not looked for  
But heard, half-heard, in the stillness  
Between two waves of the sea.<sup>34</sup>

By 'two waves', he means 'the beginning' and 'the end' which have historical meanings.

As it is clear from what we have so far studied, Eliot had to present us the meaning of time in the still point in all sorts of terms. This is why he thinks that any single phenomenon or thing cannot be regarded as separate from another phenomenon or thing. He is extremely sensitive to a particular individual thing or an incident. This comes from his historical sense or a sense of the continuity of time which has to do with man's fate together with his acute sense of tradition.

We have dealt with time as our essential topic of our discussion here. However, we must realize, at the same time, that Eliot's consciousness of time and that of a particular individual incident or phenomenon are based on his status as a poet who not only has a responsibility to the contemporary world but also lives on words.

When Eliot says,

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. And 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)

Every phrase and every sentence is an end and a beginning,  
Every poem an epitaph. And any action  
Is a step to the block, to the fire, down the sea's throat  
Or to an illegible stone: and that is where we start.<sup>35</sup>

we come to realize that this dual function of a poet intersects here.

What I have so far discussed and proved starting from the comparison of 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' and *Four Quartets* is applicable to other works by T. S. Eliot, because it is the fundamental marrow of his idea of history, life and art. We see that the fate of the characters in his plays is determined in the vacuum of time in the still point.

The fate of the characters in his plays could also be the fate of the people of the world today. That is why Eliot, who despaired of man, was so conscious of the meaning of the present. He craved freedom from a curse. He craved redemption. His wish is nothing but the wish of mankind.

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This thesis was written in 1963.

«Notes»

1. Helen Gardner, *The Art of T. S. Eliot* (London: The Cresset Press, 1949), p. 44.
2. T. S. Eliot, "Tradition and Individual Talent", *Major American Writers*, eds. Howard Mumford Jones, Ernest E. Leisy, Richard M. Ludwig (New York and Burlingame: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1952), p. 1766.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 1767.
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 1768-1769.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 1767.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 1768.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 1769.

8. T. S. Eliot, *The Complete Poems and Plays* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1962), p. 287.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 144.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 117.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 121.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 133.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 132.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 131.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 144.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 128.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 129.
18. *Loc. cit.*
19. *Ibid.*, cf. p. 121.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 125.
21. *Ibid.*, pp. 134-135.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 136.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 119.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 119.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 119.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 120.
26. Since Eliot thinks of time in terms of continuity, the connotation of 'Time before' and 'time after' is the same, though different in order, just as the beginning and the end mean the same.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 122.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 127.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 131.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 136.
31. *Ibid.*, p. 138.
32. *Ibid.*, p. 139.
33. *Ibid.*, p. 140.
34. *Ibid.*, p. 145.
35. *Ibid.*, p. 144.