

= East Coker (poem) =

East Coker is the second poem of T. S. Eliot 's Four Quartets . It was started as a way for Eliot to get back into writing poetry and was modelled after Burnt Norton . It was finished during early 1940 and printed for the Easter edition of the 1940 New English Weekly . The title refers to a small community that was directly connected to Eliot 's ancestry and was home to a church that was later to house Eliot 's ashes .

The poem discusses time and disorder within nature that is the result of humanity following only science and not the divine . Leaders are described as materialistic and unable to understand reality . The only way for mankind to find salvation is through pursuing the divine by looking inwards and realizing that humanity is interconnected . Only then can people understand the universe .

= = Background = =

In 1939 T.S Eliot thought that he would be unable to continue writing poetry . In an attempt to see if he could still , he started copying aspects of Burnt Norton and substituted another place : East Coker , a place that Eliot visited in 1937 with the St Michael 's Church , where his ashes were later kept . The place held a particular importance to Eliot and his family because Andrew Eliott , Eliot 's ancestor , left the town to travel to America in 1669 . A plaque dedicated to Eliot and his ashes reads " In my beginning is my end . Of your kindness , pray for the soul of Thomas Stearns Eliot , poet . In my end is my beginning . "

He managed to complete two sections by February 1940 , but finished the rest during that month . John Davy Hayward , Herbert Read and others helped review and edit it . East Coker was published in the March 1940 New English Weekly for its Easter edition . It was later reprinted May and June , and it was published on its own by Faber and Faber in September . With the completion of the poem , Eliot began creating the Four Quartets as a series of four poems based on the same theme with Burnt Norton as the first in the series and East Coker as the second .

= = Poem = =

East Coker is described as a poem of late summer , earth , and faith . As in the other poems of the Four Quartets , each of the five sections holds a theme that is common to each of the poems : time , experience , purgation , prayer , and wholeness . The time theme is stated in the first section as ' In my beginning is my end ' which , given proper attention , might prove to lead into the eternal moment .

The second section discusses disorder within nature , which is opposite to the discussion of order within nature found in the second section of Burnt Norton . Also , rational knowledge itself is described as being inadequate for explaining reality . Those who pursue only reason and science are ignorant . Even our progress is not progress as we continue to repeat the same errors as the past .

The third section discusses the rulers of secular society and their flaws . The fourth , which is a formal section , deploys a series of Baroque paradoxes in the context of the Good Friday mass . This past manner is regarded ironically by the poet in the fifth section as he looks back on his period of experimentation in ' the years of l 'entre deux guerres ' as ' largely wasted ' . He welcomes approaching old age as a new opportunity to find renewal , although it might only be a rediscovery of ' what has been lost and found and lost again ' .

Despite the poem 's doubt and darkness , a note of hope is struck by the first line of the fifth section , ' So here I am in the middle way ' . This refers to the first line of Dante 's Inferno , ' Midway in our life 's journey , I went astray ' . Although the descent is predicated on going astray , so also is persevering beyond it into the light .

= = Themes = =

East Coker gives a message of hope that the English communities would survive through World War II . In a letter dated 9 February 1940 , Eliot stated , " We can have very little hope of contributing to any immediate social change ; and we are more disposed to see our hope in modest and local beginnings , than in transforming the whole world at once ... We must keep alive aspirations which can remain valid throughout the longest and darkest period of universal calamity and degradation . " The poem also relied on the war as a way to connect to Eliot 's idea that there was a united humanity . In particular , Stephen Spender claimed that " the war modified [Eliot 's] attitude by convincing him that there was a Western cause to be positively defended . And after the war there was a Germany to be brought back within the Western tradition " .

The poem served as a sort of opposite to the popular idea that *The Waste Land* served as an expression of disillusionment after World War I , even though Eliot never accepted this interpretation . World War II itself has a direct mention in only a few of Eliot 's writings . However , World War II does affect the poem , especially with the disruption caused by the war being reflected within the poem as a disruption of nature and heaven . The poem describes society in ways similar to *The Waste Land* , especially with its emphasis on death and dying . The place is connected to where Eliot 's family originates , and , as such , is also the place where his family will symbolically end . In the second part of the poem , nature is experiencing disorder , and it is suggested that humans too may burn , and also that reason , knowledge , and science cannot save people . The errors of our past become the reasons for war and conflict and we need to become humble in order to escape the destruction . However , darkness consumes the rulers of the world and society . This is , in part , due to Adam 's fall , and the resulting concept of original sin . Christ is our savior and we need to seek redemption to overcome our human failings . Eliot states that he has been involved with fighting for humanity and trying to help mankind learn what is important . Only through Christ is man able to be redeemed .

In a twist from expectation , Eliot 's poem suggests that old men should go out and explore . He warns that people should trade wisdom for pointless experience and argues that men should explore human experience itself . This concept is hinted of in *The Waste Land* and draws from the ideas within Dante 's *Convivio* . Dante argues that old men are supposed to return to God and describes the process in a way similar to the travels of Odysseus . Unlike Homer 's hero , Dante argues that men should not travel in the material world but in the spiritual world . Both Dante and Eliot put forth a similar view to St. Augustine when they focus on internal travels . Through these travels , mankind is able to have faith in salvation and able to see that there is more to the world than darkness . Eliot explains within the poem that we are all interconnected through time and that we must realize this . Only through this realization is mankind able to understand the truth of the universe . This , in turn , would allow humanity to break free from the burden of time . As Russel Kirk explains : " That end , for those who apprehend a reality superior to ' birth , copulation , and death ' ? a reality transcending the rhythms of physical nature ? is to know God and enjoy Him forever . "

Family and family history also plays an important role in the poem . Eliot found information on his family from *Sketch of the Eliot Family* , which described how Eliot 's family lived in East Coker for 200 years . When Andrew Eliott left , he disrupted the family history . Similarly , Eliot broke from his own family when he travelled away from his family , a family that he saw was declining . Within the poem , Eliot emphasizes the need for a journey and the need for inward change .

= = Source = =

According to Eliot the poetic aspects of the poem are grounded in the tradition of John Cleveland , Edward Benlowes , William Blake , and William Butler Yeats 's early work . Additionally , many of the images are connected to the poetry of Stéphane Mallarmé . In terms of theology , Eliot is orthodox in his theory and relies primarily on the writings of St Augustine . There are some additional influences from the works of Thomas Browne and Saint John of the Cross . In applying these views upon society , Eliot was heavily influenced by the writings of Christopher Dawson and Dawson 's reliance on understanding God as the first step to a better society .

Besides the many literary sources , Eliot also draws on his personal feelings and experience ,

especially on the great stress that he felt while composing the poem . Similarly , Eliot used the image of pilgrims coming to America and the stories of them that were common throughout his childhood . In particular , his mother wrote poems about the pilgrims arriving to New England , and Eliot found information related to his family 's history in a book called Sketch of the Eliot Family . The location , East Coker , was where Andrew Eliott , T. S. Eliot 's ancestor , left when joining the pilgrimage .

= = Reception = =

East Coker sold almost 12 @, @ 000 copies during its initial publication . Eliot 's response was to claim that its popularity proved that it was a bad poem . Regardless of the truthfulness of the statement , he enjoyed the fact that the poem could inspire people during the war . Eliot 's friend , Emily Hale , liked the poem so much that she read the poem to her Smith College students " as if it were a love @-@ letter from God " . Early reviews focused on discussing the poem in terms of its content and not its style . In the Southern Review , James Johnson Sweeney , Spring 1941 , and Curist Bradford , Winter 1944 , discussed paraphrases of the poems and the sources of various passages . However , Andrews Wanning , Spring 1941 , stated that Burnt Norton was a better poem than East Coker and that " ' Burnt Norton ' is a poem of suggestion , ' East Coker ' a poem of argument and explanation " . Another American critic , Delmore Schwartz did not appreciate the tone within East Coker , especially that expressed in the fifth section .