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“Burn Norton” by T. S. Elliot

Thomas Stearns Eliot was born in 1888 in St. Louis, Missouri, on the 26 of September. His family could give a good education for the time, as his father was an industrialist and a philanthropist and his mother was a school teacher and a poet. He attended Smith Academy in St. Louis and then the Milton Academy in Massachusetts. In 1906 he studied at Harvard, and he graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree in three years, instead of four. After, he worked as a philosophy assistant for one year, which made him study philosophy in the Sorbonne, France. He finished his advanced degree at Harvard. He worked in England as a schoolmaster for a while and then as a bank clerk. He was also a literary editor in Faber & Faber, where he became the director. He also edited the influential literary journal Criterion.

In 1914, he met Ezra Pound, with the one he started a friendship. In 1915, he became highly recognised because of his poem “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”, which was considered a masterpiece of the Modernist movement. This poem was followed by other well-known poems like “The Waste Land” (1932), “The Hollow Men” (1925), and “Ash Wednesday” (1930). In 1915, he also married Vivien Haigh-Wood, who was mentally ill after 1933. She died in 1947 and then, he married Valerie Fletcher, who became his literary executor. Eliot was a prolific reviewer and essayist in both literary critics and technical philosophy as well. In 1919 he published *Poems*, that included the poem “Gerontion,” an interior monologue in blank verse.

In 1927 he became a British citizen, and he entered the Anglican Church. He believed that poetry should represent the complexity of modern civilization. With some poems like Prufrock (1917) or Four Quarters, he reflected the development of a Christian writer, even though he did not want to become a religious poet. On the contrary, he wrote some poems with Christian apologies: “Murder in the Cathedral” (1935) or “The Family Reunion” (1939). He was rewarded with The Nobel Prize in Literature and the Order of Merit in 1948. He died on January 4 in 1965 in London, being 76 years old.

“Burnt Norton” is the first poem of Eliot’s “Four Quarters”, published in his “Collected Poems” 1909-1935 in 1936. “Four Quarters” is composed by “Burnt Norton”, “East Coker”, “The Dry Savages” and “Little Gidding”, in which he explores his past, the past of humanity and the meaning of human history. A quartet is defined as a musical composition for four instruments or voices, so we have to consider the relation with the musical performance. “Burnt Norton” is a meditation on the nature of time and its relation to eternity. The “Four Quarters” was incredibly accepted by the public, even among people that did not accept the poems with Christian beliefs. It is suggested that the title of “Burnt Norton” is connected with some historical references to a house that Eliot used to visit in Cotswolds. The structures and the patterns that this poem would be described as free verse. The poem’s structure and form are very similar to the poem “The Waste Land”. The other titles that composed “Four Quartets” are places that were significant for T. S. Eliot.

“Burnt Norton” begins with the Epigraphs, that are translated in English as “Although logos is common to all, most people live as if they had a wisdom of their own” and “The way upwards and the way downward are the same”. These Epigraphs are placed under the title of this poem, so it is probably referring to only this poem. They are probably making a reference to Eliot’s conversion to Christianity, which was in 1927, and the soul’s salvation.

The poem starts by setting that present and past will be important in the future, as our actions and decisions in the past and in the present will have repercussions in our future. And then, it is said: “And time future contained in time past”, so it leads us to the present: “If all time is eternally present/All time is unredeemable”. With this conception of time, the lyrical voice establishes that humans are just able to control the present, and when the present is gone, we cannot change what had happened. It also explores an alternate path that was never taken: “Down the passage which we did not take/Towards the door we never opened”, and, at the end of this first section, it clarifies again that past choices cannot be changed “Time past and time future/What might have been and what has been/Point to one end, which is always present.”

However, this section is focused on the rose from the garden. This rose could be a reference to the Garden of Eden, due to Eliot’s Christianity, and the rose can even suggest Virgin Mary. Roses are normally a symbol that represents beauty and perfection, and sometimes, this is the reason why our memories are manipulated, as humans tend to embellish their memories. Some people believe that this rose is a reference to a close friend from Eliot, Emily Hales, and the relationship that they never had.

There is a bird that guides the lyrical voice through the place: “Quick, said the bird, find them, find them/Round the corner. Through the first gate”. This part is a reference to those things that could have happened, but they never did, as the echoes: “Other echoes/Inhabit the garden. Shall we follow?” could be some regrets. Some of these regrets have been accepted while others were not accepted yet: “There they were as our guests, accepted and accepting”. After, there is a metaphor or the process of acceptance: “Dry the pool, dry concrete, brown edged/And the pool was filled with water out of sunlight”, which is a slow process full op up and downs: “Then a cloud passed, and the pool was empty”. At this point, the bird decides to continue guiding the lyrical voice to a happy place “Go, said the bird, for the leaves were full of children/Hidden excitedly, containing laughter”. Finally, the bird explains that “human kind/Cannot bear very much reality”, as many people live taking refuge in the past and in their memories.

The second section starts connecting unusual images “Garlic and sapphires in the mud”. In the first verses we can find a variety of lexicon related to “blood”: “Clot the bedded axle-tree”, “The dance along the artery”, “The circulation of the lymph”, what can be related to internal pain or war, as it is even mentioned: “Appeasing long forgotten wars”, and after the poem will talk about consciousness and meditation. Then, the lyrical voice seems to be reconciled about it: “Pursue their pattern as before/But reconciled among the stars”. Later, it seems to be stuck: “Neither from nor towards; at the still point, there the dance is/But neither arrest nor movement” and it goes back to the theme of the first section: living in the present even though time is passing by, and what at first was “present”, is now “past”: “And I cannot say, how long, for that is to place it in time”. But then, something changes, and the lyrical voice is loose: “The release from action and suffering, release from the inner”.

After that, we find a word in German: “*Erhebung”*, which means “elevation”, and another in French “enchainment” which means “linking”. After that released, some reflections are made to end up affirming that we have to live in the present, and it talks again about coexisting temporalities: “To be conscious is not to be in time”. The theme of Christianity appears again with the salvation of our souls: “Yet the enchainment of past and future (…) Protects mankind from heaven and damnation”. Later on, the poem changes to start focusing on the consciousness, with the Christianity present: “The moment in the draughty church at smokefall/Be remembered; involved with past and future”. This could be understood as a way of saying that while we are in the present we have to do as many good things as we can, which is a common message from Christianity. It is something to take into account that every time the “rose” is mentioned, it is among vocabulary related to nature.

This third section is placed in London: “Driven on the wind that sweeps the gloomy hills of London”. It is probably describing the London Underground, which is a place with a particular conception of time and movement. People have to go up and down from the street to the Tube, and when they do that, they move from one world to another without actually moving, as they are moved: “Descend lower, descend only/Into the world of perpetual solitude/World not world”. When people take the London Tube train they are also moved: “But abstention from movememnt; while the world moves”. This is something that is part of the modern world. When people descend to this world, time seems to stop, as waiting there makes people feel that the time is not going by: “Over the strained time-ridden faces”. The Tube is described as a dark: “In a dim light: neither daylight”, solitude: “Into the world of perpetual solitude”, and cold place: “Men and bits of paper, whirled by the cold wind” place. It is also a place with no transcendence: “Nor darkness to purify the soul”, meaning: “Filled with fancies and empty of meaning” and beauty: “Turning shadow into transient beauty”. These descriptions could be considered as a description of the modern world, without spirituality: “Inoperancy of the world of spirit” and pure souls “Eructation of unhealthy souls”.

The brief fourth section is mainly composed of questions and vocabulary about nature. It is focused on the movement of time: “At the still point of the turning world” and the menace of it: the death. This is represented by the yew tree, which is known as the tree of death: “Fingers of yew be curled/Down on us?”.

The last section of this poem returns to the topic of time and the movement, however, this section is full of oppositions: music, words/silence, stillness/movement, beginning/end, un-being/being… Love is also present in this section, but it is referred to Christianity, as there is a clear reference to Jesus’ temptations in the desert: “The Word in the desert/Is most attacked by voices of temptation”. Therefore, devotion and the shortage of devotion is also a topic that is present through this part of the poem: “Words, after speech, reach/Into the silence”.

Different types of art are present that coexist in time and movement.: word (poetry and speech), music, ceramic… These arts have the capacity to become eternal. It is also mentioned that while desire is movement, love is the end of the movement: “Desire itself is movement (…) Love is itself unmoving”, and it is love that makes us get stuck: “Between un-being and being”.

The topic of the temporal simultaneity is mentioned as well: “Or say that the end precedes the beginning/And the end and the beginning were always there/Before the beginning and after the end/ And all is always now”, coming back at the idea present in the other sections that past and future belong to the present. Finally, the last verses go back to the garden with the rose of the first section: “There rises the hidden laughter/Of children in the foliage”.

Finally, as it is mentioned through the analysis, the main theme of this poem is time. There is a constant meditation about it and about how humans can interact with it. Past and future are coexisting with the present: “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.”

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