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PHILOSOPHICAL ELEMENTS  
IN *FOUR QUARTETS*

*Four Quartets* serves as an illustration of the undeniable fact that Western literature forms a unity, and bears out the truth of Eliot's statement that "the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer... has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order"<sup>1</sup>). Again, as is the case with most other critical remarks on *Four Quartets*, the contents of the poems themselves serve as timely reminders of this fact, and thus seem to provide a more legitimate material basis for critical enquiry. For on several occasions Eliot takes up this point, and perhaps nowhere as unambiguously as in East Coker:

"And what there is to conquer  
By strength and submission, has already been discovered  
Once or twice, or several times, by men whom one cannot hope  
To emulate – but there is no competition –  
There is only the fight to recover what has been lost  
And found and lost again and again..."

(EC: 182-187)

Eliot's intention with *Four Quartets* is, for lack of another term, nothing less than a remythologization of man's experience. The lines quoted above are echoed externally in such pronouncements as the one Eliot made in the introduction to Mark Wardle's translation of Valery's *Le Serpent* (1924) – "One of the qualities of a genuine poet... is that in reading him we are reminded of remote predecessors, and in reading his remote predecessors we are reminded of him"<sup>2</sup>) – and internally in passages such as the ones in *The Dry Salvages*:

1) "Tradition and the Individual Talent", in T.S. Eliot's *Selected Prose* (ed. J. Hayward), Penguin Books in association with Faber and Faber, 1963, p. 23.

2) Quoted by Sweeney, J.J., "East Coker: A Reading", in Ungewitter, L. (ed.), *T.S. Eliot: A Selected Critique*, Rinehart, New York, 1948, p. 395.

“I have said before

That the past experience revived in the meaning  
Is not the experience of one life only  
But of many generations...” (DS: 96-99)  
and “the way forward is the way back” (DS:129)<sup>3</sup>).

References to Eliot’s positive exploitation of the unity of Western literature all culminate in the meeting with the compound ghost in *Little Gidding* III (86-149)<sup>4</sup>). The identity of the ghost is deliberately blurred “in the ... instability of approach and response, and in the subtly shifting idiom in which the poet and the compound ghost speak”, so that his collective character “has implications on other levels than that of purely literary and poetic discipleship”<sup>5</sup>).

The purpose of this essay then is to concentrate on the debt *Four Quartets* owes to the philosophical tradition, which has at times reluctantly, at others almost too willingly, maintained a precarious unity with the world of art in literature. More specifically, the well-known Heraclitean elements will be surveyed together with the less frequently discussed<sup>6</sup>) Kantian and Aristotelian ones, and an attempt will be made to place them in the basically Catholic nature and grace framework that underlies *Four Quartets*. This excludes from our discussion the influence of Bradley’s idealistic metaphysics and his notion of Immediate Experience, although this has not been plumbed to the full by the commentators and critics who had set out to do so<sup>7</sup>) or re-

3) Cf. Blamires, H., *Word Unheard, A Guide through Eliot’s Four Quartets*, Methuen, London, 1969, p. 104; cf. too pp. 45, 56, 73, 76, 98, 147-149.

4) That this passage should be read together with *EC* 182-187, is reinforced also by the faint rhythmic correspondences of “lost/And found and lost again...” (*EC* 186-187) and “known, forgotten, half-recalled...” (*LG* 93).

5) Blamires, H., *op. cit.*, p. 148.

6) This is a euphemistic way of indicating that there is a total lack of discussion about Kant’s influence on Eliot.

7) Cf. Wolhelm, R., “Eliot and F.H. Bradley: an account”, in Martin, G. (ed.), *Eliot in Perspective*, Macmillan, London, 1970, pp. 169 ff., and more specifically, pp. 173 ff., and Kenner, H., “Bradley”, in Kenner, H. (ed.), *T.S. Eliot: A Collection of Critical Essays*, Prentice-Hall Inc., Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1962, pp. 36-57.

ferred to it in passing<sup>8</sup>).

How then does Eliot set about using old elements to create a new poetic experience<sup>9</sup>), making true his view that "all time is eternally present" (BN 4, cf. too EC 1, 14, 209)? One way is by making use of old philosophical data, dating as far back as Heraclitus' four elements, Augustine's exploration of the nature of time<sup>10</sup>) and Kant's a priori forms of intuition of time and space (or place, which is a locality *in* space), and placing them in a new scheme of reference.

Broadly speaking, the four Heraclitean elements figure prominently in the *Quartets* (*Burnt Norton*: air; *East Coker*: earth; *The Dry Salvages*: water; *Little Gidding*: fire)<sup>11</sup>). In the lyric at the opening of *Little Gidding* II their successive death is climactically recounted<sup>12</sup>): the passage "versifies, with amplification, a sentence of Heraclitus that dwells both on the ceaseless flux and on the reconciliation of opposites, 'Fire lives in the death of air, and air in the death of fire; water lives in the death of earth, and earth in the death of water.'"<sup>13</sup>)

*Burnt Norton* is packed, perhaps to a greater extent than any of the other *Quartets*, with references to the Heraclitean flux: "The lines are drenched with reminiscences of Heraclitus' fragments on flux and movement"<sup>14</sup>). Here we have the continual

8. Kenner, H., *The Invisible Poet: T.S. Eliot*, Methuen, London, 1965, and Smith, G., *T.S. Eliot's Poetry and Plays, A Study in Sources and Meaning*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1961.

9) Cf. Gardner, H., *The Art of T.S. Eliot*, The Cresset Press, London, 1961, p. 6, in particular the quotation from Eliot's *The Use of Poetry* (1933).

10) Williamson, G., *A Reader's Guide to T.S. Eliot*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1955, p. 205.

11) Blamires, H., *op. cit.*, pp. 45, 125; Kenner, H., *The Invisible Poet: T.S. Eliot*, p. 262; Williamson, G., *op. cit.*, p. 209 and Sweeney, J.J., in Unger, L. (ed.), *op. cit.*, pp. 409-410.

12) Cf. Blamires, H., *op. cit.*, pp. 134, 141 and especially 140; Smith, G., *op. cit.*, p. 288 and also EC 1-3, 66-67 and 133.

13) Matthiessen, F.O., *The Achievement of T.S. Eliot*, Oxford University Press, London, 1947, p. 190.

14) *Ibid*, p. 183.

movement in the “trilling wire in the blood” (BN 49), “The dance along the artery/ The circulation of the lymph” (BN 52-53), the movement “above the moving tree” (BN 56), the unceasing pursuit of boarhound and boar (BN 59), the disaffected movement of “Men and bits of paper, whirled by the cold wind” in *Burnt Norton* III, and the slippery semantic elusiveness of words in the final movement.

The ancient conception of flux is countered by “the still point” (BN 62, 135-136, EC 128, 204) which shares in the antiquity of the former, and is the peaceful opponent of the restless movement. Notwithstanding the implications of the second fragment of the epigraph, Heraclitus himself admits of no such still point<sup>15</sup>): “It remained for Aristotle to introduce an idea of form and matter which placed the source of movement outside the flux – in the unmoved mover”<sup>16</sup>). In Greek thought the “motive of the form-less eternally flowing stream of life is the matter-motive”<sup>17</sup>), while the concept of permanent being constitutes the form-motive<sup>18</sup>). The permanence in the midst of flux that is symbolized by the rock near the end of the second movement of *The Dry Salvages* is a good illustration of the stable, unchanging essence that is the dialectical opposite of the ceaseless flux of the matter-motive:

“And the ragged rock in the restless waters,  
Waves wash over it, fogs conceal it;  
On a halcyon day it is merely a monument,  
In navigable weather it is always a seamark  
To lay a course by: but in the sombre season  
Or the sudden fury, is what it always was.”

(DS 118-123)

15) Smith, G., *op. cit.*, p. 255.

16) *Ibid.*, p. 256. The unmoved mover is a typically Aristotelian notion, and was not introduced by Dante — cf. Matthiessen, F.O., *op. cit.*, p. 184.

17) Dooyeweerd, H., *A New Critique of Theoretical Thought*, H.J. Paris, Amsterdam, 1953, Vol. I, p. 62.

18) Dooyeweerd is in agreement with Smith (vide supra notes 15 and 16), since he says that “the philosophical concept of permanent being does not appear in Greek thought before Parmenides: and then it is immediately opposed to the principle of matter.” (*op. cit.*, Vol. III, note 2, pp. 7-8).

“Whether by intention or accident,” Philip Wheelwright comments, “this last phrase translates literally Aristotle’s idiom for unchanging essence, *to ti en einai*<sup>19)</sup>”.

The still point, the unmoved mover (“Except for the point, the still point,/There would be no dance” — BN 66-67, cf. too BN 163-164: “Love is itself unmoving,/ Only the cause and end of movement”) is the typically Aristotelian conception of a god, that itself does not move, yet is a first cause of all movement<sup>20)</sup>, a conception echoed in Thomas Aquinas’ so-called metaphysical ‘proofs’ for the existence of God<sup>21)</sup>.

In various other passages the originally Greek conceptions of form and matter, rest and flux, also figure prominently:

“Only by the form, the pattern,  
Can words or music reach  
The stillness, as a Chinese jar still  
Moves perpetually in its stillness.”  
(BN 140-143)

And:

“The detail of the pattern is movement”.  
(BN 159).

In *Little Gidding* I —

“And what you thought you came for  
Is only a shell, a husk of meaning  
From which the purpose breaks only when it is fulfilled...”  
(LG 30-32)

the phrasing displays almost exactly the separation of form (“shell”) and matter; the word “fulfilled” can be taken up in its most literal sense of “filling something up”.

That Eliot was familiar with Kant’s forms of time and space is evident in his calling them “inevitable categories”<sup>22)</sup>. We

19) Wheelwright, P., “Eliot’s Philosophical Themes”, in Rajan, B., *T.S. Eliot: A study of his Writings by Several Hands*, Dennis Dobson, London, 1948, p. 103.

20) Cf. Venter, E.A., *Die Ontwikkeling van die Westerse Denke*, Sacum, Bloemfontein, 1968, p. 33.

21) *Ibid.*, p. 53 ff.

22) Matthiessen, F.O., *op. cit.*, p. 125, quoting from Eliot’s essay on Lancelot Andrewes.

need look no further than the titles of the different *Quartets* to establish that they name different and specific localities which are points within the spatial realm. Thus Eliot's discourse on *time takes place* in four different localities<sup>23</sup>).

The first movement of each *Quartet* is a further reminder of this. In the first movement of *Burnt Norton* the subject of time is immediately taken up in the philosophical exposition (BN 1-10), material which is surveyed again in the last lines (cf. BN 165-166, 174-175). *East Coker* I opens with the line "In my beginning is my end", to proceed with an elaboration of how, in the succession of temporal things (EC 1-9),

"there is a time for building  
And a time for living and generation  
And a time for the wind to break the loosened pane..."  
(EC 9-11)

In *The Dry Salvages* the strong brown god of a river, throughout his various uses and abuses in history (DS 3-7) still keeps his seasons (DS 8) and bides his time (DS 10); and there is also the tolling bell measuring "time not our time" (DS 35 ff). And *Little Gidding* commences with an account of the seasonal paradox of midwinter spring, that is "suspended in time" in the space between "pole and tropic" (LG 3).

The moment of revelation, however, cannot be indicated adequately in local or temporal terms:

"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."  
(BN 68-69)

This experience is precisely an experience of escape from both temporality and locality, Blamires comments<sup>24</sup>). Therefore "the intersection of the timeless moment / Is England and nowhere. Never and always" (LG 52-53; cf. too BN 147-149, EC 49-50, DS 115 and particularly 131), since "this is the nearest, in place and time. / Now and in England"! (LG 38-39, cf. too LG 20 and

23) Cf. Williamson, G., *op. cit.*, p. 206: "Moments of time must be in places".

24) *Op. cit.*, p. 22. Cf. too pp. 103, 104.

23).

The paradox of the timeless moment that is not *of* time and space and yet must be experienced *in* time and space (cf. EC 200-201: "Love is most nearly itself / When here and now cease to matter") confronts us at every turn. The poet asks the voyagers of *The Dry Salvages* III to consider the content of the revelatory moment "Here between the hither and the farther shore / While time is withdrawn" (DS 152-153). Directly after the poet has given us a very specific indication of the time ("In the uncertain hour before the morning" – LG 78; cf. DS 43-45), and the place ("Between three districts whence the smoke arose" – LG 85) of his meeting with the compound ghost, he emphasizes the fact that the meeting takes place *outside* the realms of time and place ("at this intersection time / Of meeting nowhere, no before and after" – LG 105-106), only to return again, for the sake of *paradoxically* redefining the supra-temporal character of the meeting, to a specific indication of the time and place of parting ("The day was breaking. In the disfigured street / He left me ..." – LG 147-148)!

In denying the continuity of the self in the succession of time<sup>25</sup>), Eliot seems to be close to the historicistic theological position of Pannenberg, to Kierkegaard with his *nunc aeternum* (cf. LG 237), and to the dialectical theology of Barth and Brunner who emphasized the meeting with God in the fleeting moment<sup>26</sup>). Pannenberg, following Troeltsch and Dilthey, is, like Eliot, very critical of a closed, deterministic life and world view<sup>27</sup>) (cf. BN 124-126: "while the world moves / In appetency, on its metalled ways...", and DS 132 ff.) Pannenberg's criterion for freedom is a negative one, for, with overtones of Heideg-

25) Cf. Blamires, H., *op. cit.*, p. 106.

26) Cf. Strauss, D.F.M., *Begrip en Idee*, van Gorcum, Assen, 1973, p. 195. Cf. too Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1966), 6, 4311: "If we take eternity to mean not infinite temporal duration but timelessness, then eternal life belongs to those that live in the present."

27) *Ibid.*, p. 192. Cf. too Blamires, H., *op. cit.*, pp. 28, 30-31, 64, 106, 120.

ger, he views freedom as freedom *from* a given situation in order to liberate man to full historicity<sup>28</sup>) (cf. LG 162-163, BN 79 and DS 224).

Is history a pattern of timeless moments (LG 234-235) or a new (LG 165), false pattern in every moment (EC 84-85)? Eliot seems to suggest that for the unredeemed (cf. LG 233-234) history implies servitude, but for the believer it is freedom (cf. LG 162-163 and DS 200 ff., 224-225), because he recognizes the potentialities of history<sup>29</sup>).

Not only do the revelatory moments, by the way in which "the natural can be filled full of meaning"<sup>30</sup>) by them; and with the transcendent religious significance that Eliot allows them<sup>31</sup>), fit into the Catholic framework<sup>32</sup>) of nature and grace, but the same applies to the ancient Greek (Heraclitean and Aristotelian) and modern humanistic (Kantian) elements too. For the religious ground-motive of Roman Catholicism is indeed a true synthesist motive, that has tried to reconcile with the Christian ground-motive first the ancient Greek form-matter motive<sup>33</sup>), (which influenced and controlled the thought patterns of both Heraclitus and Aristotle) and later, in more recent times, the humanistic motive of nature and freedom, which was the religious basis of Kant's thought. This means that the religious position of nature and grace can be conceived in terms of matter and form or nature and freedom<sup>34</sup>), and explains, in part at least, how Eliot could have used material of such widely divergent character within the perspective that lies at the root of *Four Quartets*.

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28) Strauss, D.F.M., *op. cit.*, p. 193.

29) Cf. Matthiessen, F.O., *op. cit.*, p. 188.

30) Blamires, H., *op. cit.*, p. 96.

31) *Ibid.*, p. 56.

32) *Ibid.*, p. 56.

33) Dooyeweerd, H., *op. cit.*, Vol. 1, p. 63.

34) Cf. Strauss, D.F.M., *op. cit.*, p. 194.