

The Travail of The Soul: The Prolonged Struggle in T.S. Eliot's Four Quartets and The Waste Land

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The search for a tradition cast a new role for the artist of the twentieth century, which is that of establishing the tradition that fits the spirit of the age. The modern artists found it necessary to establish a cornerstone tradition aiming at curing the spiritual wounds of humanity as a whole. They worked hard to retain whatever they considered valid of the old literature that would help adjust common modern mood. One of the most influencing writers in this respect was T. S. Eliot. Eliot went back to review all the literary works of the past and worked to revive whatever tradition he saw valid for his age. He also theorized in the relationship between talent and tradition in order to limit the chaos in which modern artist was trapped. In Eliot's view, total innovation is danger, so there must be a balance between talent and tradition, between subjectivity and objectivity. However, when Eliot refers to tradition, he means all European tradition which he sees as undivided whole shared by all European countries. Eliot trespasses all geographical borders and linguistic boundaries. Eliot urges the poet to 'wear a mask', a correlative objective, behind which a poet can deliver his/her personal attitudes, because total personality is also a danger.

Key words: identity crisis, modernism, Eliot, Waste Land, Four Quarters

معاناة الروح: الصراع المطول في "الرباعيات" و"أرض الخراب" لت. س. إليوت

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المخلص

لقد ألقى البحث عن تقليد جديد دورًا جديدًا على الفنان في القرن العشرين، يتمثل في تأسيس التراث الذي يتناسب مع روح العصر. وجد الفنانون المحدثون أنه من الضروري إنشاء تقليد أساسي يهدف إلى شفاء الجروح الروحية للإنسانية. عملوا بجد للحفاظ على العناصر القيمة من الأدب القديم التي ستساعد في تعديل المزاج الحديث المشترك و يعتبر ت. س. إليوت واحدًا من أكثر الكتاب تأثيرًا في هذا الصدد. لقد أعاد زيارة الأعمال الأدبية من الماضي، ساعيًا لإحياء التقاليد التي يراها ذات صلة بعصره. كما نظر إليوت في العلاقة بين الموهبة والتقاليد من أجل التخفيف من الفوضى التي يعاني منها الفنانون المحدثون. في رأيه، فإن الابتكار التام خطر، لذا يجب أن يكون هناك توازن بين الموهبة والتقليد، وكذلك بين الذاتية والموضوعية. عندما يشير إليوت إلى التقليد، فإنه يعني التقليد الأوروبي الجماعي الذي يُعتبر ككل غير منقسم تشترك فيه جميع البلدان الأوروبية. هو يتجاوز الحدود الجغرافية واللغوية. يشجع إليوت الشعراء على "ارتداء قناع"، مما يسمح لهم

بالتعبير عن مواقفهم الشخصية من خلال موضوعية متكاملة، حيث يمكن أن تكون الشخصية الكاملة أيضًا خطيرة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: أزمة الهوية، الحداثة، إلبوت، أرض الخراب، الرباعيات

Introduction

The twentieth century was the age of rapid change on all social, political and economic levels resulting in the total devastation of humanity. It was the dawn of the rise of America as supreme power in the world and the era of the two catastrophic events in the human history: World War I and World War II resulting in millions of deaths and casualties, and taking people to the bottom of poverty. Passing through these calamities, humans lost confidence in the divine origin of man. Thinkers, as Charles Darwin, have suggested new theories about the ancestors of man: some tiny or ugly unicell creatures, casting a great deal of doubt on man's belief. Darwin also suggests the concept of the 'survival for the fittest' which he argues to dominate the living mechanism on earth. Such thoughts would divide humans into those deserving survival and those not, depicting humanity as a bestiary experience and justifying the humiliating of human race as a whole.

It follows that humans of the twentieth century were trapped within a cyclic sense of spiritual void. People did not have any meaning for their lives within the state of continuous panic and threat of what to come. They lived behind their closed doors avoiding any contact with others and trying to flee the chaos of the outside. Such a condition has affected the literature of this period resulting in un-unified tradition. A group of poets and writers saw it necessary to retain the original, Indian American tradition and started to explore this culture. Other group suggested the provincial life of America as a unifying element for their literary works. There were also other groups who hailed a return to the old tradition of Europe to set a tradition for the new age they were witnessing.

Christian Concepts as a Solution to the Struggle of the Soul

Eliot's *The Waste Land* represents a bible for the modern poet in establishing a modern tradition in themes and techniques. In the thematic domain, *The Waste Land* depicts the bleak condition which the modern man experiences as dealing with a series of zeros on all levels. In other words, modern man finds himself living in end spiritual vacuum in which he is neither able to understand himself nor others around him. *Four Quartets* represents Eliot's early maturity of how the life in the middle century would look like and reflects his perceptions of different worlds that not all human beings can feel. In other words, it adds to the definition he tries to outline for "modernism". The six years he spent publishing the four-section poem established for him new understandings of where humanity is heading to. The four poems are more subdivided into five sections.

In 1936, Eliot published the first poem which was entitled *Burton Norton*, which is originally the name of a burnt English country house. This poem sheds light on the most important aspect of the modern life, which is time and how it is far from the control of humanity to cope with at any moment of it, except the present. It shows the primary attempts of a speaker who was suffering to grasp the significance of the moments and act according to normal or universal roles. The speaker 'I' in the poem is moving in every direction like in a dream devoting a great effort toward keeping a steady image of his present. In *Four Quartets*, said Kenneth Paul Kramer (2007), there is “a continual back and forth movement occurs between ordinary time -a field of relentless distractions, struggle, and toil- and redeeming time.” (xiii) The poem opens with a domestic modern setting of a modern man patrolling his garden in search for creating a logical understanding of interacting with the common concepts of life. Dwelling around different places in the mind and moving through various worlds of deep human experiences, he ends up with the conclusion that Christian love is essential for maintaining a high level of awareness and sense of understanding about the demands of the modernity.

Four years later, Eliot introduced his second book which he called *East Coker* in which he elaborated more on the Christian concept of love he presented in his first book. The name of the poem refers to a real rural village that had a story to Andrew Eliot, T. S. Eliot's ancestor. He expanded this notion by adding to it practical rituals through sustaining the original contextual validity. These practices represent the efforts of humanity in the modern age to respond the questions that are inevitable to cope with life. In this poem, the poet brings controversial experiences of humans in the modern age that vary from various war, loss, and uselessness to experiences of gaiety and hope. While examining minutely the human experiences of other people which are at the heart of their personal maturity, the speaker is concerned more with his own adventures and continuous search to explore the meaning of man's life beginning and end. Again, he discovers another Christian notion that would offer him salvation in the middle of this modern chaos.

Eliot continued the same themes in the following poems elaborating more on the human experiences related to life, time, and death. He published the third poem in 1941 which he entitled *Dry Savages* which is again derived from three sea rocks that used to guide sailors during their sea journeys. This poem recurrently depicts the sea imagery and, thus, water was an essential topic in the lines of the poem. Eliot here tackles a very critical change in the fate of humanity in the modern age which is related to the role played by technology which dries the human emotions and, instead, establishes new kinds of practical bonds which are entirely built upon arid ground. The ultimate result of this new orientation is alienation, loss, and solitude. The poem proposes a solution at the end that humanity should always

relate their existence to the past to be aware of the natural role they should perform in the human history.

The practical experimentations of Christian meanings are introduced in the first two sections, while the other three sections allude more to the anticipated outcomes of hanging strongly to these meanings especially in the middle of the Modern age. Hence, in *Burnt Norton*, the human soul is put under a minute examination of different times whether past, present, or future. It is roaming in these three different, yet interdependent worlds. The poem opens enigmatically by a philosophical meditation of where exactly the soul can locate its presence, “Time present and time past/ Are both perhaps present in time future.” (“Burnt Norton,” I, 1-2). (Eliot, 1963, 175) The following lines immediately break with the abstract manifestation of time in the opening lines. The speaker moves toward exploring his excitement about experiences he is having in the “rose-garden”. The latter experiences that this philosopher is having are part of his attempts to allocate for his self-identification and acquiring knowledge and awareness about these new life modifications. For Eliot, this age omits the borders between the writer and his characters. Thus, in his introduction to *Introduction to Huckleberry Finn*, Eliot prepared for this crisis of proving an adequate self for the writer in this age revealing that:

There are, perhaps, only two ways in which a writer can acquire the understanding of environment which he can later turn to account: by having spent his childhood in that environment—that is, living in it at a period of life in which one experiences much more than one is aware of; and by having had to struggle for a livelihood in that environment—a livelihood bearing no direct relation to any intention of writing about it, of using it as literary material. (Eliot, 1950, Online Source)

The second method proposed by the writer is to have a personal experience to be able to understand the context even if it includes indulging in struggles just to cope and eventually harvesting the fully ripe fruits. Hence, the speaker keeps dwelling in search for perfect resolution that best guides the spirit to the light. With more confidence and encouragement, he attempts to find a way of uniting the spiritual freedom that should be constraining to the practical desire outside. Only through this suffering, he could escape the darkness of the soul into wider vision of life.

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, (Burnt Norton II, 177)

This transition is essential, and it is not bond to time in the sense that the spirit responds to necessity to move more than to the limits of the present. With the support of “a grace of sense,” he would be able to overcome the temporal agony. It is the same grace that would also prepares for another move for the spirit that is

based again on a change of spatial existence from darkness into a state of still and silent light that constitutes the final modification in his spirit's fate.

Descend lower, descend only into the world of perpetual solitude, World not world, but that which is not world, Internal darkness, deprivation and destitution of all property, (*Burnt Norton*, III, 179)

This meaning is clearer in Eliot's third book *Dry Savages* in which the idea of Christian salvation runs through severe circumstances before landing away from the worlds of anonymity. Here, the poet also alludes to an ancestor's experience of travelling into America His connectedness to the present and his endeavor for a clear vision about the modern landscape imposes a very nagging responsibility upon his shoulders to define time for the characters and for him as well. Thus, these attempts reflect experiments that he has to live to be able to identify the borders of time: Some day he may be remembered less for what he had to say about royalism, dogma, and free-thinking Jews, than for his critique of complacent liberalism, corporate exploitation, and secular visions of progress. Some day he may be remembered less for what he had to say about royalism, dogma, and free-thinking Jews, than for his critique of complacent liberalism, corporate exploitation, and secular visions of progress. (Scott, 1994, 60)

Hence, the essential religious concepts of the poem are introduced in the first two poems. The poem undoubtedly expresses a struggle in the religious thoughts of the characters in it. Part of the characters mandates is to live the struggle unwillingly and respond to the struggles of live in proper ways to be able to comprehend the experiences which are needed for coping with demands of the modern age.

Eliot always alludes to the permanent theme in the four poems which the continuous search for meaning in this life which all marked by an absolute chaos and gloominess. This search is sustained by the bringing the human efforts into extreme meditation about existence and identity of humans in relation to God.

Little Gidding was the last section of the *Four Quartets* in which Eliot manipulated a story of young Londoner, Nicholas Ferrar, who had been through a critical experience of establishing a religious society after severe political and social events in the early Seventeenth Century. This section examines more practically the outcome of religious devotion that the young man is experiencing through exalting the spirit. It also refers to all elements of life and the dramatic decline of their fusion. The speaker comments on the fatality of this decline and the human responses to it that should be based on acceptance. Air, earth, water, and fire are existed in this poem. The use of them is intended to deliver the jest of the poem that humans should surrender to what they cannot control. By doing so, they would surely be rewarded purification through fire that purifies his soul from the sins of the earthly world.

Four Quartets derives its significance from the interesting way of achieving resolution from religious contexts. At the same time, the poem tackles universal themes which are beyond these religious boundaries themselves. In the addition to spiritual quest of the characters involved in each section, they felt the greater necessity for self-identification in a world that devotes little interest to man's existence and dwelling in his surroundings. In addition to the personal excerpts, he tries to maintain a poetic coherence through linking these parts thematically. The reader can follow up the mental and spiritual maturity of the subject matter of the sections moving the artistic manipulation to the discussion of profound divine apprehensions.

Eliot's other masterpiece is *The Waste Land* which is considered as the major work that won him popularity and fame in the twentieth century. In a way, the poem could be seen as a way in which the author not only examines his own coping mechanism with the demands of the modern age, but also as a reaction toward the changes in the social structure. He was certainly aware of the deterioration of the ethics and manners of the society. Eliot expressed his own points of view about this destruction through the devastating imagery in the poem and the fragmented feelings and descriptions. The poem reflects the poet's primary observation of the remarks of the new age. Again, the imminent search for the meanings of everything surrounding the characters lies at the core of this poem. In his demanding portrayal of the modern landscape in *The Waste Land*, "Eliot has at last glimpsed the possibility of a cultural perspective that would allow him to be doctrinal" (Scott, 72). The views manifested by the characters are somewhere between the restraining objectivity of the age and the subjective embodiment of their personal suffering. Characterized by noticeable variety of different speakers, allusions, lack of apparent unity, and the continuous search for self-identification and self-recognition, *The Waste Land* represents the clear spirit of Modernism.

The poem begins with an epigraph in which a mythical character known as Sibyl of Cumae narrates the tale of a group of young boys who paid her a visit. The purpose of the visit is to know her most valuable immediate need. She astonishingly replies that the only thing she ever wanted was death. Immediately after the epigraph, Eliot sets out to outline the narrations of various characters that are beyond the limits of time and place. He made the poem in five sections. Like *Four Quartets*, each section in *The Waste Land* carries different title that is informative of the details anticipated in the lines of the poem. The first section is entitled "The Burial of the Dead" which a middle-aged woman is experiencing a very harmful nostalgia about a pleasant journey she had once to her cousin in Germany. The theme of loss is immediately established in the poem when this woman recalls the past times with a very joyful tone which is contracted with her present situation in which she is unable to find interesting moments that could be stored and shared later in coming

occasions. The opening lines clearly indicate the enthusiasm and excitement of her activities: My cousin's, he took me out on a sled, And I was frightened. He said, Marie, Mane, hold on tight. And down we went. In the mountains, there you feel free. I read, much of the night, and go south in the winter. (*The Waste Land*, 53)

The tone is directly changed then into a very painful rendition of some modern images that she cannot find a way to reconcile with. The woman brings two different images from the past and the present. She uses an analogical technique to comment on a very difficult state of uncertainty in the modern age through a harsh comparison of her past to the present. Throughout these stories, Eliot overgeneralizes the identity crisis beyond the boundaries of Christianity to include other religions around the world. He wants to bring the attention into a problem that is with the age that stands in-between man and faith. The first part of the poem in particular tackles the lack of interest and meaning of human experiences through the allusions that Eliot uses to traditional works. It sheds light on the incapability of humans to connect with the essential concepts that identify us as authentic human beings.

The paradox with which the poem opens that draws Spring as the “cruellest month” is extended in the following lines. It foreshadows the inability to find common senses of things before the coming of the modern age. This section continues with a prophetic speech that foresees monotonous and similar images in life that proposes meaningless and carelessness. Hence, this speech directs a general question that suggests a great confidence from the speaker’s side: “What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow/ Out of this stony rubbish?” (*The Waste Land*: 53). The answer is more shocking than the question since it hints to a terrifying change in the fate of all humanity. Men are no longer capable of leading the incidents of life. Hence: Son of man, You cannot say, or guess, for you know only A heap of broken images, where the sun beats, And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief, And the dry stone no sound of water. (*The Waste Land*, 53)

The speaker is already aware of the fact that these branches would not grow useful fruits. Symbolically, the “Son of man” would breed heirs who will not be able to be fully recognizable human beings. It could be either because they lack the necessary skills to stand up to these tasks in the modern life, or life itself does not offer them the chance to try their luck since they are seen as “broken images”.

The final lines of the poem portray a very overwhelming image that the speaker is observing over London Bridge of a group of people crossing it possibly not knowing of their magical journey. The bridge symbolizes a metamorphosis of the soul of those people who are escaping their harsh realities of the present into a dream-like world found only in their imagination.

Since the only sound that is heard is the sound of “death”, none of those people has the courage to look farther than around his existence. The lines emphasize a great fear from the unknown and unexpected that the walkers could encounter in their journey into the other world. Hence, the speaker was enthusiastic to speak only when he sees “Stetson” that he considers like him in the fate. This section is closed with this idea of the humanity having similar destiny in the modern life: “You! hypocrite lecteur! – mon semblable, – mon frère!” (The Waste Land, 55). Eliot here directs his speech directly to everyone on the world who will head unwillingly cross the bridge of life to the other side. He comments on an important fact that portrays all humanity that find in the unknown destination a better place than their present one. The section is entitled “A Game of Chess” which starts with a reference for unknown woman that could have a direct relationship to Eliot’s personal life. This woman owns a magnificent drawing room with interesting decorations. Eliot alludes to one of the stories from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* that serves a very critical identity crisis through the depiction of Philomela’s rape by her sister’s wife, King Tereus: Above the antique mantel was displayed As though a window gave upon the sylvan scene The change of Philomel, by the barbarous king So rudely forced; yet there the nightingale Filled all the desert with inviolable voice And still she cried, and still the world pursues, “Jug Jug” to dirty ears. (*The Waste Land*, 56)

The dramatic manipulation of Philomela’s story manifests a significant fact that characters would be keen to losing their identities just to give up the nagging memories of their harsh realities. The subsequent events that follow the rape of Philomela led to transforming all, Philomela, Tereus and his wife, into birds. Of them, Philomela was transformed into a nightingale that sings sadly at nights. This section closes with an extract that recalls the WW I and the subsequent useless attempts to reconcile with life by the miserable woman who tries hard to prove for herself a proper identity.

“The Fire Sermon” is the title of the third part that opens in a serene setting of a river with a pleasant breeze blowing over it. Eliot alludes to Thames River in Spenser’s “Prothalamion” in the line ““Sweet Thames, run softly, till I end my song.” The river is empty; “the nymphs” (*The Waste Land*, 59). (Online Source) The following lines immediately refer to an important change in the fate of all humanity when a great quarrel takes place between death and life in the modern world. This change includes cruel wounds to the body and soul that are brought by the modern orientations: “But at my back in a cold blast I hear/ The rattle of the bones, and chuckle spread from ear to ear.” (*The Waste Land*, 60). Heading towards the end of this section, Eliot recalls again the “Unreal City” that was mentioned in “The Burial of the Dead”. The speaker here experiences an identity crisis once

more to address the personality of “Tiresias”, the prophet who is blind and reflect both man and women. Hence, he addresses himself clearly as: I Tiresias, though blind, throbbing between two lives, Old man with wrinkled female breasts, can see At the violet hour, the evening hour that strives Homeward, and brings the sailor home from sea, The typist home at teatime, clears her breakfast, lights Her stove, and lays out food in tins. (*The Waste Land*, 61)

Although he has lost his sight, Tiresias gained the insight of all human beings of all worlds. On an occasion, he observes a young man whose soul falls into the darkness of lust. This young man makes use of young female typist who was “bored and tired” (*The Waste Land*, 62). Surrendering to her boredom and weakness, she gave up her body him without preparing for what is after this moment of temporal pleasure of man’s manipulation. Immediately after that, she falls into the nets of remorse and finds solace in her thoughts that this experience is over. Eliot seems to suggest a new understanding for most of the human activities in the modern world. In this story of the young typist, for example, clearly identifies a failure in the human senses where physical attachment replaces emotional connectedness.

The final two sections “Death by Water” and “What the Thunder Said” reflect an eventual resolution of humanity in an image of a dead corpse which cannot enjoy gifts of life around it anymore. In “Death by Water,” Eliot mentions the story of “Phlebas the Phoenician” but again he overgeneralizes the rest of the details of a man whose life and death has already been destined: As he rose and fell He passed the stages of his age and youth Entering the whirlpool. (*The Waste Land*, 65)

The journey of the soul and the amount of darkness and loss that accompany this transformation are central in Phlebas’ life or any other human being in the modern world. In “What the Thunder Said,” a similar thread is tackled showing the succession of the human souls from life to death dating their destiny back to Christ’s crucifixion. This section suggests a collective treatment of different traditions with an invitation to the reader to accompany him. It calls upon most of the religious resources around the world. Therefore, it discusses a very profound spiritual embodiment between man and God, or between below and above. It further explores the attempts to find a means of communication between earth and heaven.

However, the closing lines of this section foretell the crumbling of civilization during crossing London Bridge although the exact stage is not mentioned: “London Bridge is falling down falling down falling down” (*The Waste Land*, 69). The souls are heading toward the other side of a falling bridge but surely they left a greater suffering behind. This section closes with a benediction, “Shantih shantih shantih.” (*The Waste Land*, (69), that could be considered as Eliot’s final note that the souls

should directed mainly through a wider universal religious view instead of the fragments that could not be grouped to constitute a whole image. Regardless of the pessimistic images in the poem and the image of the whole world as a waste land, Eliot still proposes that some salvation is still at hand.

Conclusion

Eliot took on his own the role of creating a cultural bridge between the modern poet and all previous human tradition. This is part of bringing about a solution to what his generation considered a deep need for defining the new phase of humanity in its turbulent condition. The role that Eliot as an artist in his search for a tradition took as a corner stone looking for a source of religious belief, or a connection to a 'higher' power. Part of this acclaimed role was the ambitious project of finding a solution to the spiritual emptiness that humanity as a whole faced. In looking for what is valid for the age, he made a thorough investigation of the old heritage of humanity literature and to find whatever would mend the imbalance he considered to exist in modern life. The final solution he came to accept, beside the common cultural traditions for all the nations, is to adopt the Christian concept of religion and morality to bring peace to all humanity.

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