

ISSN-0976-8165



THE CRITERION

AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL IN ENGLISH

Bi-Monthly Peer-Reviewed eJournal

VOL. 15 ISSUE-3 JUNE 2024

15 YEARS OF OPEN ACCESS

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ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal
www.galaxyimrj.com

Reconciling Existential and Mystical Elements in T. S. Eliot's Poetry

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<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.12671536>

Article History: Submitted-17/04/2024, Revised-19/06/2024, Accepted-21/06/2024, Published-30/06/2024.

Abstract:

T. S. Eliot was triumphant in making poetry out of the philosophic, religious and mystic concepts that he imbibed. He realized that the true task of the artist in the modern world is one not of repudiation but of reconciliation. His journey from *The Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock* to his poetic swan song of *Four Quartets* is a journey in which he explores the spiritual status of man and the dark nights and barren territories of the modern mindset, uniting his skepticism with faith in divine transcendence. The poet moved beyond the dogma of religion to feel and experience the bliss of eternal world where the mind and spirit are joined and integrated in unitary consciousness. Through the detailed study of Eliot's poems, the present paper is going to highlight not only existential and mystical dimensions of his poetry but the novelty will be to trace the reconciliation between the two.

Keywords: triumphant, reconciliation, transcendence, skepticism, integrated, repudiation.

Existentialism is a philosophical movement started in France. The main exponents of existentialism are Kierkegaard, Martin Heidegger, Karl Jaspers, Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus. Existentialism is most commonly acknowledged with the modern French existentialist Jean Paul Sartre's famous anti-foundational dictum "existence precedes essence" which means that there is no pre-defined essence to humanity except that which it makes for itself. Existentialists out rightly reject pre-existing structures that might endow antecedent meaning to the human experience. Atheistic existentialists attached no importance to divine artesian, they refuted the existence of God. Rationality and reason, according to them are the mere linguistic constructs articulated to deceive man. Any outward imposition is not binding to a man according to existentialists. They believe that subjectivity and freedom makes a man sensitive to the

questions concerning the purpose of life which lastly drive him towards the crisis known as existential crisis. Death, suffering, meaninglessness, and identity crisis; keep on torturing man who becomes the victim of existential crisis. Henry Miller depicts a dismal picture of the modern world: "We are all dead, or dying, or about to die"(46). William Shakespeare, the artist and literary spokesperson of Elizabethan age, excellently sums up the absurdity and futility of life and man in his famous play, *Macbeth*. He points out the ephemeral nature of man's existence and his limitation:

Out, out, brief candle!
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more; it is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing (Muir 15).

Eliot as a modernist poet presented the modern man's growing sense of futile existence, alienation and loss of identity followed by the deadly effects of two world wars which have left the existence of modern man to insignificance. The poet displayed the themes of alienation and meaninglessness of modern world which has lost its stability and significance due to the widespread fragmentation. The poet considers the human life in relation to its unavoidable destiny, suffering meaningless existence and death, therefore, views human existence as diseased and disorganized. His poetry echoes the voices of existential philosophers such as Kierkegaard and Sartre. Anxiety, sense of nothingness, urban indifference, loneliness and a confrontation with death are the existential themes that T.S. Eliot makes modern man aware of.

Eliot gives us a peep into the existential void in which modern man is in conflict with. To start with Eliot's narrative poem, *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*. The poem symbolically depicts unsettling journey of modern man into his own mind. Prufrock, the narrator of the poem, remains locked within his neurotic self, moving from one situation to another to escape the hellish existence. The poem which seems to be apparently dialogue is rather a mental conflict and fragmented consciousness of the protagonist's 'divide self', demonstrating how beneath the seeming glitter of modern life, lurks degeneration. Prufrock thus is having a crisis of existence. His existential void is so intense that he fails to connect himself to the outer world. He

is the symbol of disintegrated personality of a modern man who is enduring the suffering in this meaningless world. The mind of Prufrock, "... reveals a patient etherized upon a table, a paralyzed intellectual whose mind is a prison, a Hell with no exit" (Brooker 14). Therefore, the poem, *Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, can be read as an examination of the tortured psyche of the prototypical modern man whose meaningless existence makes him to succumb to the disintegration of will. The schizoid personality makes him feel dehumanized and in this state of disintegration he speaks: "I should have been a pair of ragged claws / Scuttling across the floors of the silent seas" (73-74). The fragmentation of crab into claws and 'scuttling' convey the sense of disintegrated personality of Prufrock. The voices he hears around him symbolize the reality of life, but he fails to overcome his indecisiveness.

As a true existentialistic character, Prufrock understands the life around him from his own prism of subjectivity. It was flaw in his character to subjectivise everything he looks at, which subsequently gets developed into phobia. That is why instead of confronting the outer world, he escapes into his inner self of apathy and inertia by raising self-debating questions, which in reality speak about his existential anguish. Do I dare / Disturb the universe? (45-46), "How should I presume?"(54) are the riddles related to doomed and meaningless existence of man on earth. Prufrock meaningless and isolated life confines his existence to empty rituals of trivial routines. Free choice is denied to him in the world where he is shocked and tormented by the feelings of self-alienation and gloomy existence. The mortal nature of man makes him to question his own existence. His plight is similar to that of Vladimir and Estragon in Samuel Becket's *Waiting for Godot*, who aimlessly try to engage themselves in different trivial activities in order to escape the meaningless existence. Prufrock has been squeezed off in the flow of time; he neither comes out of it, nor can deny it. He represents the plight of the modern man who becomes the victim of time, which precipitates his suffering and reduces the man to the state of inaction and apathy. The question which has become obsession with Prufrock is the question regarding the meaning of existence. The wearing of social masks cannot give a modern man solace from the existential crisis. Prufrock fails to come to terms with the despair of doomed existence. Fear of death and meaningless existence shatter him to the core. It is this crisis which causes his alienation from the outer world and also his self-alienation from his internal self.

This existential anguish and futility of existence, is nowhere better portrayed symbolically than in *The Waste Land*. The Poem is prefaced with the epigraph from *Satyricon* by poet

Petronius, a work which Eliot had gone through during his undergraduate days at Harvard. The preface is showing that Sibyl at Cumae hanging in a bottle wants to die. This shows that Sibyl's existential bliss is superseded by death wish. She represents the decrepitude of the modern man, who inevitably endures the pangs of hollow existence, thus the poet at the very outset introduces his readers with the central theme: 'life devoid of meaning is death'. The people in *The Waste Land* languish in a state of crisis of existence. *The Waste Land* exemplifies with mingling of different genres, the existential uncertainty of human beings. It is a crippled world full of crises and no meaning. The denatured state of people under such condition is voiced in this poem: "He who was living is now dead / We who were living are now dying" (328-29). Eliot mirrors the picture of the modern humanity. The modern man has lost his sense of thinking. He cannot move beyond the circle of painful existence and aspire for nothing, thus are dead. The crowd of characters like, German princess, Madame Sosostriis, Belladonna, one-eyed merchant and crowd over London bridge, all are overpowered by 'death in life existence' and they drown their existential grief in different futile and insignificant activities. Beneath the apparent glitter and pomp in their life, lies boredom and angst which meaningless life offers to a man in the present disgusted world

The 'fragments' of conversation between the lady and her lover in with the repeated question endorses that the man in the modern world cannot think of anything which can guide him to any meaningful direction. She questions her lover again and again who stays silent and does not answer. The lady tries to know what has occupied his mind. He responds late with the puzzling and shocking revelation which sums up the meaningless existence of the human beings in this world. Human beings are like rats in their holes. They keep running around their confined holes. Not only life but death too is without any significance for them. It is life which bestows meaning to death. When life is meaningless, death loses its significance automatically. In such condition 'nothingness' prevails everywhere:

What are you thinking of? What thinking? What?

Nothing again nothing.

Do

You know nothing? Do you see nothing?"

I never know what you are thinking. Think.

I think we are in rat's alley

Where the dead men lost their bones (113-16).

The Hollow Men is the poem about despair, pessimism and lack of vision and hope. The theme of hopelessness and meaninglessness runs through the poem. In *The Hollow Men*, people suffer the same agony which develops into trauma like experience. They face the same crisis which the people in *The Waste Land* have met. They are paralyzed, hollow and inactive almost dead: "Shape without form, Shade without color, / Paralyzed force, gesture without motion" (11-12). The insignificant futile life makes them paralyzed. They display complete estrangement and their unreal vision of modern society is brought out in the poem. They are pervaded by a sense of alienation and failure of communication not with each other only but also within their own internal selves. Hollow from inside, not in position to confront time as they are thrown into utter helplessness and helplessness. Life is burden to them and death they are reluctant to face. The poem is the expression of modern society without any vision and purpose in life their futility and uselessness is writ on their faces:

We are the Hollow men

We are the stuffed men

Leaning together

Headpiece filled with straw. Alas! (1-4)

The Symbols of "Cactus land" (38), and "fading star" (42) represent the dilapidated condition of modern existence which is falling, therefore, has lost the sense of value and significance. The poem ends with a sad note representing the fatal and tragic end of human beings: This is the way the world ends / Not with a bang but a whimper (97-98).

Eliot besides mirroring the objective correlative of the modern mind gives also an insight into those significant moments which lead man to the transcendental reality through the spiritually highest state of consciousness, called as mystical consciousness. This is the merit in Eliot's poetry that besides being a modernist intellectual he exhibits mystical sensibility in an age

of chaos and disorder. Mystical consciousness is one such main state of consciousness, an awareness originating from one's soul through which man can transcend his senses and approach the unseen. It is a supra-sensible experience which acquaints a mystic with realities and states of affair that one can hardly apprehend through sense perceptions. The mystical experience transcends the apparent and the physical and merges into deeper mysteries of the universal soul. It is, therefore, an organic growth of man's transcendental consciousness. William James while giving an account of mystical experience said that "In mystic states we both become one with the absolute and we become aware of oneness. This is an everlasting and triumphant mystical tradition, hardly altered by differences of clime or creed" (30).

As an intellectual saint, Eliot revealed to the fragmented modern world that the anguish and nothingness can be transcended by moving to a place of spiritual serenity, which gives a man place to stand in the world. His poetry from *The Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock* to *Four Quartets* is the clear endorsement of this. He reconciles the polarities of experience in the still point and taking God consciousness to be this still point rather than some abstraction. He believed that, "All human faculties are ultimately grounded in mysticism" (Child 145). He upholds with all the force and conviction the claims of the transcendence. His poetry is much dabbling in paradoxes which reveal the complexity of opposite view points. He expresses himself in modernist language of paradoxes and tightly holds seemingly contradictory positions or both poles of binaries. His philosophical preoccupations and evolutions reveal diverse dimensions of his poetry. His interest in mysticism is not simply an escape from the modern hellish existence; rather it is a move towards higher truth. He takes us the eternal world of 'still center' where the differences between the binary opposites get resolved. The poet creates an eternal moment where the apparent gap between time and timelessness is bridged. In *Four Quartets*, Love, redemption and true pattern of history are the themes which interact with the central theme of time and timelessness. The poet expresses how in time, time is conquered and redeemed. The poem in this way is an attempt to move beyond existentialism to repair the chaotic and fragmented modern world by offering a mystical synthesis, reconciling the aesthetic world of *The Waste Land* and *Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, with the renewed mystical world of 'still center', of *Four Quartets* where empirical distinctions of the temporal and eternal, birth and death, flux and stillness, light and darkness, are obliterated and transcended.

“Burnt Norton” is the first poem in *Four Quartets*, which refers to a manor house the poet once visited in Gloucestershire in England. Its rose garden had tremendous effect upon Eliot which he uses as an important symbol in this quartet. The poem starts with the paradox, sandwiching past, present and future:

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 (1-5).

Eliot creates an eternal moment by shattering the notion of age-old divisions of time into present, past and future. The poet under the mystical and philosophical influences, experiences here the eternal, cyclical time, moving beyond the bondage of linear time. Time is, therefore, a stream of flow without any divisions. Such an eternal moment is created in spirituality as time in its spiritual sense entails eternity. Helen Gardner evaluated the subject of time used in Burnt Norton. She communicates that “It is an experience for which theology provides an explanation and on which religion builds a discipline, the immediate apprehension of a timeless reality, felt in time and remembered in time, the sudden revelation of ‘the one end, which is always present’” (63)

It is the rose garden where one can feel the bliss of timelessness in time temporal or earthly garden which may convey ultimate real or meeting of the eternal and temporal. Eliot writes:

Footfalls echo in the memory

Down the passages which we didn't take

Towards the door we never opened

Into the rose garden. My words echo

Thus, in your mind (11-15).

The rose garden, as per the analysis of Paul Kramer, “is filled with echoes – earthly and mythic, personal and universal, from the present situation and from inner recesses of ... memory. A feeling of excitement enters the poem. The sound of birds fills the rose garden and urges the poet to risk the terror and ecstasy of entering a new world” (36).

The rose garden is a starting place of a mystical journey, a journey which bestows meaning to meaningless moments in time that Eliot presents in *The Waste Land*. The symbols presenting sterility and meaninglessness are reconciled with the image of rose.

At the end of “Burnt Norton”, The significance of timeless moments is emphasized here sudden illumination is expressed which transfigures the world. This is the reality which dawned upon Eliot when he concludes:

Sudden in a shaft of Sunlight

Even while the dust moves

There rises the hidden laughter

Of children in the foliage

Quick now, here, now, always

Ridiculous the waste sad time

Stretching before and after (172-78).

“East Cooker” is associated with the ancestral home of T. S. Eliot. The poem meditates on the passage of time experienced by the poet in his own life time. The first line, “In my beginning is my end” (1), reveals the ephemeral nature of life and inevitability of change. In this quartet, Eliot foregrounds the eternal cycle of creation and destruction. This cyclic change occurs in temporal time lined in history. The circular nature of history is thus pointed out here with musical pattern. It shows that temporal existence lived in history end in death. Eliot continues:

The association of man and woman

In daunsynge, signifying matrimonie

A dignified and commodious sacrament. Two and two, necessary coniunction,

Holding eche other by the hand or the arm/ which betokeneth Concorde. Round and round the fire

Leaping through the flames, or joined in circles (31-37)

The celebration of the matrimonial event, involving dancing by the villagers gives a freedom of joy and communion to the scene. Though the peasant finds joy and transcends time, yet it proves to be ephemeral. “East Cooker” symbolizes earth and its activities, associated with the human beings, and other animals. Eliot thus brings out the triviality of life absorbed in the rhythms of nature. People get completely engrossed in the various temporal cyclic activities, which hardly lead a man towards timelessness. The circular pattern of life leads down through various stages of change and ends in ultimate death.

Humility can uplift man to eternal, asserts Eliot, “The only wisdom we can hope to acquire / Is the wisdom of humility” (101-2), which has no end. This humility is important, as it has to do a lot with man’s spiritual growth. Man needs to cultivate humility in the temporal world, so that he can envisage a possible union with the divine.

This state of bliss and ecstasy guarantees a deep spiritual consciousness as said before, which is a dawn of the new order:

The wild thyme unseen and the wild strawberry,

The laughter in the garden, echoed ecstasy

Not lost, but requiring, pointing to the agony

Of death and birth (132-36)

These lines echo the voice of St. John of the Cross. Eliot believes that one can attain divine grace by following the mystic way of saints like St. John of the Cross. The poet doesn’t

only advocate Christian concept of self-denial but also Eastern way of emptiness to suggest the implications of the dark night of the soul. The soul is lost in ignorance and darkness which is paradoxically movement towards timelessness. Eliot's persona expresses belief in trying only and not thinking beyond it. He utters "For us there is only trying. The rest is not our business"(193). Striving shouldn't cease even if one gets bogged down by the suffering and the ordeals of inner life. This seems to be the echo of *The Gita*, where Krishna says to Arjuna the action is important not its fruit. Eliot considers life as a journey starting from home. In this journey nothing is static, as everything is in flux.

The first line of "East Cooker" "In my beginning is my end" (1) is reversed, as this section is concluded with "In my end is my beginning" (213). The fusion of beginning and end is a movement from temporal to the eternal, towards a new dawn.

The third section, "The Dry Salvages" actually is a small group of rock off the coast of Cape Ann, Massachusetts. Eliot used to play there as a boy during his vacation. The memories of this aspect stayed with him. Eliot used imagery of this place out of fascination for such a place (Reibetanz 99). River here is the earthly or temporal dimension of one's life and on the other hand, the image of sea symbolizes eternity. The river is shown to have god like power which has been neglected and forgotten by urban people who are "the worshippers of the machine" (10). The river keeps on maintaining the "seasons and rages" (8), "The river is within us" (15), as we can never be freed from our own mortality, it is engrained within each and every one of us. Temporal time becomes a necessary entry through which we can enter the higher realms of timelessness. Thus, Eliot does not advocate renouncing the temporal completely because it is ultimately through it one reaches eternal. "The sea is all about us" (15) with its "many voices, / Many gods and many voices" (24-25). It is, therefore vast and limitless. Santwana Haldar makes a wise observation when he says, "The 'river', is 'within us', is time that is experienced by us, as is suggested through the references to the four seasons. And the sea which is 'all about us' is likely to symbolize all time in timeless extension. The rivers merges in the sea" (110).

Eliot maintains that "Time the destroyer is time the preserver" (115). If time is cruel which inflicts sufferings and miseries, it can be moment of eternity within time also. "The bitter apple and the bite in the apple" (117) remind us of the Garden of Eden .

In the third section of “The Dry Salvages”, there is mention of *The Bhagavad-Gita*. Eliot wonders “what Krishna meant” (124). The poet expresses what Krishna teaches his disciple, Arjuna in an insightful moment. “The future is a faded song’, a Royal rose or a lavender spray” (128). It is a ‘wistful regret for those who are not yet here to regret” (129). Time is in a state of flux it cannot be captured, it keeps on changing. The future changes into the present, the present into the past and then after remote past, is heard of no more. Therefore, every moment is new, even body is changing in every moment. For a mystic present *now* is important, not the future and past. Eliot emphasizes the teaching of Krishna to Arjuna: “do not think of the fruits of action / Fare forward” (163-64). The statement is about the going ahead in one’s journey. As far as present context of the poem is concerned, this statement can be interpreted as the need to move forward in transcendence experience the ultimate reality which is eternity, keeping the desire aside. The advice of Krishna may be taken as a call to purge one’s self off the temporal longings and desires. This section end with the Lord Krishna’s admonition to Arjuna when he directs “Not fare well, / But fare forward, voyagers” (169-70)

Eliot in the last section of “The Dry Salvages” conveys that all the approaches to fathom the ultimate reality futile and misleading. Psychoanalysis, Magic, tarot cards and other means, get at the surface of reality and they cannot give us the real spiritual vision. He stresses “But to apprehend / The point of intersection of the timeless / with Time, is an occupation for the Saint” (187-89). Saints are, very rare, and their teaching should be beneficial for those who live an ordinary life without rejecting the same. It must bring fulfillment to everyone. Saints and mystics should come out of the cocoon of a blessed state of transcendence to benefit the human kind so that the spiritual revitalization is extended to the entire human kind.

The final reconciliation between timelessness and times takes place in the last quartet, “Little Gidding”. The poet believes that there is need to achieve union with the divine being through purgation. This purgatory stage exonerates – one’s self from the desire which is detrimental to love. The narrator now proceeds to lay down the route of attachment and detachment which is inevitable sacrifice in the direction of achieving religious synthesis:

There are three conditions which often look alike

Yet different completely, flourish in the same hedgerow

Attachment to self and to things and to persons, detachment

From self and from things and from persons; and growing between them indifference (152-56)

History in attachment is servitude and when there is a shift from attachment to detachment, it becomes freedom as stated by the poet:

History may be servitude,

History may be freedom. See know they vanish

The faces and places, with the self which, as it could, loved them,

To become renewed, transfigured, in another pattern (165-68).

Therefore, history is servitude when we remain glued to the phenomenal self and it is freedom only when 'our significant self-moves closely to the nominal self' (Patrick 347). In this state one lives in peace and stability, where one sees the pattern of the past 'transfigured' having the divine source.

The narrator now seems to be content and it looks that he has overpowered the evil within him. He declares his faith in the tradition of Julian of Norwich that all things shall be well and the riddle and guilt of existence shall finally be over. He is sanguine and speaks thus: "Sin is behovely, but / All shall be well, and / All manners of things shall be well" (173-75). The optimism emerging here can be attributed to Bradley. However, its main source is the saint, Julian of Norwich. The idea of good and bad, sin and virtue are of no value till the motive is purified. Thus, what matters in the long run is the motive that has undergone purification. This is the end of the journey of the dark night of the soul, which evacuates the sin from the hearts of men. The persona moves ahead and celebrates the 'refining fire'. The trumpet of the descent of the Holy Spirit on the Apostle is blown:

The dove descending breaks the air

With a flame of incandescent terror

Of which the tongues declare

The one discharge from sin and error.

The only hope else despair

Lies in the choice of pyre of pyre-

To be redeemed from fire by fire. (203-09)

Fjordbotten on elucidating it comments:

The dove is ... traditional symbol for the Holy spirit which breaks the air in its descent to earth. ... when the spirit comes, it prompts a choice – either remaining in sin and thus being subjected to the fire of Judgment or becoming subject to the spirit’s enlightening and refining fire and thus being set free from sin and death. Thus, these... lines relate back to the end of immediately preceding section, with the suggestion of purification of motives” (290).

The poet brings the final reconciliation in the last section of “Little Giddings”. We are again reminded of the cyclical time. The narrator avers: 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” (217-19).

Thus Eliot’s words do not strain and fail here; rather they are ‘transfigured’ into a ‘pattern’ which attains atemporal stillness.

Leaving behind the course of secular time and seeking the circular pattern of dance needs to descend into the darkness that leads to the divine light. The narrator sees history as “a pattern / of timeless moments” (237-38) and this is the pattern of God in history.

The poet advises that we should go on exploring the journey further for a deeper communion with the eternal:

We shall not cease from exploration

And the end of all our exploring

Will be to arrive where we started

And know the place for the first time (243-46).

The narrator highlights the inevitability of cyclical time, as the poem completes its cycle by returning to the garden of Burnt Norton. "The children in the Apple- tree" (252) . The tree is the way of 'ascent', leading to the goal which the persona seeks to achieve. At last the narrator experiences peace, as the soul has reached to the world of 'Shantih', where beauty and suffering; time and eternity exploring and arriving, birth and death are reconciled. It is a real transcendence from the binaries of time and timelessness:

All manner of things shall be well

When the tongues of flame are in-folded

Into the crowned knot of fire

And the fire and rose are one (260-63).

The faring forward and waiting without any hope and desiring spiritual journey enables a man to rise to the summit of spirituality where he can find redemption from the divisions of time. Time for a mystic is a moving image of eternity. Through this mystical synthesis the 'death in life' situation is transformed into a new life of vivacity where the soul released from the prison (body) gasps freely in celestial light. In this way, Eliot succeeds in showing how timelessness is achieved in time. The last three lines possibly advocate that " all shall be well" (259) when the "tongues of flame" (260), an image of expression of man controlled by the spirit of God, are in unity in the crowned trinity-knot, where all opposites are reconciled and the fire of love and rose of desire are one and the same thing. The poem, thus ends at mystical affirmation of non- duality of things, which is the basic foundation of mysticism.

It is, therefore, true that, the vision of *Four Quartets* can be read as a revision of the earlier poetry. In the final synthesis of the poem lies the solution of the riddle of overwhelming question, raised by Prufrock in *The Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock*. From the beginning to the end of Eliot's poetry, there exists a continuity showing a quest and the longing of mind for the spirit.

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