INTRODUCTION

Four Quartets (1935-42) is T.S. Eliot's last and most important work; it has been deemed the greatest poem written in English during the last century. After its publication he received the Nobel prize in 1948. He brings in ordinary things into these four poems: a stay in the countryside, dancing, music, birds, flowers, riding the underground, going for a sail, even air-raid duty during the London *blitz*. He reflects on his own life and his family, on our age and its history, but also on the "world" in the twofold sense of the reality created by God and of a godless waste land. In fact, *Four Quartets* is his "answer" to *The Waste Land*. In this work he wished to "retune" —as he said each age must do— "the delicate relation of the Eternal to the transient".[1]

Eliot suggests how the timeless may break into our own time, as it split the life of St. Augustine or of the Buddha into a before and after. Eliot will tell us about a similar experience in a rose garden.[2] For within the ordinary the extraordinary may appear at disconcerting "moments",[3] signaling certain truths, perhaps initiating a "conversion", which Eliot thought of as a t*urning*—a turning both *away, from* and *toward, beyond*. He was curious about what these moments mean in themselves and especially what they imply for the rest of life: what do converts do after their conversion?

Eliot's interpretation of spiritual experience is traditional. The canon of the Christian Scriptures and liturgy is foundational as well as the theology behind the mysticism of St. Augustine, Dionysius, Dame Julian of Norwich, the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, and above all St. John of the Cross. He thought that timelessness touches time objectively in Christ. But as in *The Waste Land*, the religious heritage of India is essential: the Bhagavad-Gita, the Upanishads, and Buddhist writings.

Literary echoes reverberate throughout the quartets from Dante to Tennyson, from Milton to Mallarmé —even *Alice in Wonderland* and Sherlock Holmes![4] Philosophy, his major subject at Harvard University, is also present. He begins *Burnt Norton* with a quotation from the Greek philosopher Heraclitus which sets the tone for all four *Quartets*. Each Quartet is marked by

one of the four "elements" of Greek philosophy: air, earth, water, and fire.[5] The elements bind the four poems into a universe, and, since for the Greeks they were linked to gods, they hint at a divine presence. Traces of Aristotle, especially his *Metaphysics,* of American idealist F. H. Bradley, topic of Eliot's dissertation, of Henri Bergson, metaphysician of the "surge of life" whom Eliot heard lecture in Paris, and of other philosophers appear in the work. The combination of philosophy, poetry, and mysticism is uncommon today; but in this, too, Eliot was traditional: early Greek philosophy was written in verse. Actually, philosophy has always been a "servant" of theology and theology an inspiration for philosophy.

Eliot thought of his poetry as music. Each poem is like a Beethoven string quartet, and just as its musical counterpart, is "scored" into five "movements" having various "tempos": lyric, colloquial, reflective, academic.... As in music, "themes" are developed and woven together, both within one quartet and, with increasing complexity, in later ones.

The first movement of each quartet sets the scene at the place named in the title. These places were of great personal significance to Eliot; in *Burnt Norton*, for example, he describes his own surprising "moment" in the rose-garden. In the second movements he reflects on time, change and decay.

In the third movements he ponders detachment, purification, especially, but not exclusively, from the viewpoint of St. John of the Cross.[6] They reflect the intense mood of the long third movement of the quartet in A minor by Beethoven, of which Eliot was especially fond. The composer called the slow part of this movement a "holy song of thanksgiving to the Divinity by a convalescent, in the Lydian mode" of medieval Gregorian chant.[7] The composer entitled the second, livelier, part "feeling new strength". The development in the movement suggests "recovery", going from illness to health— and this is the basic theme of *Four Quartets*: healing and deliverance, asceticism and mysticism.

The short fourth movements are lyrical, sometimes prayerlike. And, again as in music, there is resolution, not only in the fifth movement of each poem, but in the *Four Quartets* as a whole. The turning point of the work is found in the fifth movement of *Dry Salvages*:

> The hint half guessed, the gift half understood, is Incarnation.

The final movement of the last quartet, *Little Gidding*, sums up —eschatologically— a number of strands developed in the four quartets: when

> …the fire and the rose are one.

THE EPIGRAPHS

At the beginning of *Burnt Norton* Eliot quotes two sayings of Heraclitus, the Greek philosopher called "dark" or the "riddler".[8] As young man, Eliot was influenced by him and at the end of his life avowed that "this influence was a permanent one".[9] The many-layered meanings of these short phrases (some are Christian interpretations) will run through all four quartets, not only the first.

THE WORD

The first quotation suggests a paradox reminiscent of the waste land: the "logos" or

> Word is common [to everything],
> yet most live as if they had a wisdom of their own.[10]

Heraclitus contrasts two basic facts here, one about the world and the other about people. In the first place, reality has a surface and a depth:

> * Seen on the outside, things are in constant change, at "war"
> with one another, for
> war is father of all, king of all,
> and the world is like a stream where
> different waters flow around those wading into the
> same rivers.[11]

* Things are ultimately penetrated by *logos*: word, reason. *Logos* keeps all things together, keeps them in balance. It is their underlying coherence, meaningfulness, understandability. It is the logic behind things in change.

On the other hand, *logos*, depth, is lost on most people. Heraclitus introduced the passage that Eliot quoted with the phrase:

> what is common ought to be followed.

But most people live on the surface, caught up in, bound by, the goings-on in their lives, always changing, yet staying ever the same. They may take becoming, "dialectic", for reality, forgetting what is common: *logos*, meaning.

Heraclitus's word suggests the Christian Word of God. In the prologue of St. John's Gospel, Christ is called the "*Logos*" of God. The passage was influenced by Jewish wisdom literature: Christ is the Wisdom of God as He brings the world about:

> In the beginning Word was,
> and Word was ever with God, and Word was God;
> by Word all came about, was made,
> but without Word nothing that was made came to be.

Word is the source of all meaningfulness.

THE WAYS UP AND DOWN

The second saying from Heraclitus is:

> The way up and down is one and the same.[12]

Eliot will repeat this saying in *Dry Salvages*:

> And the way up is the way down, the way forward is the way back.[13]

Clash

The saying in general suggests that coherence underlies the clash of things changing. Heraclitus's distinction between surface and depth reflects the Greek understanding of reality as a tangle of "world" and "chaos". "Fire" symbolizes both.

* *Kosmos* (like "*mundus*" in Latin) is the "world" of things that are as they mean: orderly, meaningful, "formed", adorned, beautiful. World is timeless and spaceless; it is is still and unchanging. This is the *logos* of Heraclitus, the "measure", balance, behind change. *Kosmos* is fire:

> this world, selfsame in all things,
> neither by gods made nor men,
> but ever was, is, shall be:
> everliving fire,
> kindling in measure, burning out in measure.[14]

Kosmos is as it *means*. It is open to our understanding, because our understanding is itself *logos*, word, reason. Plato spoke of a world of "forms", the "contents" of things, their patterns or meanings— their "truth", which we reach through our mind without "feeling" them in sensation or imagination.

* *Chaos* is things *becoming* through time and space, things betwixt meanings, going from one form to another, fleeting, perhaps "deformed", unlovely. Change is fire. The comings and goings of things and in ourselves are flames, flickering up and down. Our minds cannot lock into things as they are becoming, yet to be, but we see, hear, picture them as they share meaning.

Heraclitus tells us we ought to hold for his *logos* (= his saying and what it means) because it is *objective*:

> It is wise to hearing not me but my word —that all things are one.[15]

The Fathers of the Church interpreted this Greek world-view in accordance with the Christian Scriptures. God is Alpha, Source, beyond "this world" that He brings about, grounding its meaningfulness. But God, in Christ, is also Omega, the ending of history in the "world-to-come". This is the setting for *Four Quartets*: Eliot speaks of reconciling the before and after, the here and there, at the still point.

The Christ-song

The "ways up and down" was one of the first images Christians used to profess their understand of Jesus Christ. *Burnt Norton* will echo the Christ-song, an early creed in Aramaic quoted by St. Paul in Greek:

* *down* —lowering, "emptying" (*kenōsis*)

> Christ, being in the form of God… emptied himself,
> taking the form of a slave, coming to be in the likeness of men,
> he lowered Himself, becoming obedient until death, even the death of the cross

"therefore"

* *up*— raising (*hypsōsis*)

God raised Christ up
giving Him the name above any name: "Lord".[16]

The Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins expressed this faith in his sonnet "That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire and of the Comfort of the Resurrection":

...nature's bonfire burns on,
But… her clearest-selvèd spark
Man… how fast his mark on mind, is gone!...
Enough! The Resurrection…
In a flash, at a trumpet's clash
I am all at once what what Christ is, since He was what I am…[17]

In Dark of Night

For St. John of the Cross, the way up and the way down have another sense found in *Four Quartets*: they are "the same steps to go up and to go down" in the contemplation of the Godhead. His background here was "Jacob's ladder". Jacob, we read in Genesis, had a dream:

a stairway rested on the ground, its top reaching to the sky,
and on it angels were going up and down.
And behold God stood above it and said:
"I am the Lord God; …behold, I am with thee,
wherever thou goest...".[18]

The mystical doctor mentions the ladder or stair in his most famous poem, *Dark Night*. He describes how the "soul", the bride burning with love for God, leaves her home "in dark of night" to be with her Beloved;

in dark, but safe,
down the secret stair, in disguise,
oh blessed grace,
in darkness, lurking,
my home stilled at last.

In his prose commentary on this passage, John explains why he calls the contemplation of God, a "secret" stair.

the same steps lead up and down;
so also this secret contemplation,
by bringing to the soul the same communications,
lifts her up into God, yet brings her down.
For the communications that are really from God have this characteristic:
at the same time they both raise and lower the soul,
because along this way, coming down is going up:
for whoever raises himself shall be humbled,
and whoever lowers himself shall be exalted….
God often has the soul go up on this stair
that she come down, and come down that she go up;
and so fulfilling the words of Wisdom:
high is the heart before its downfall,
but humility goes before honor.[19]

Rising to the dark of silence

Apophatic or negative theology is an important key to understanding *Four Quartets*.[20] John of the Cross was following Dionysius the Areopagite,[21] who in his *Mystical Theology* ("Hidden Godword") stressed that in reference to the Divine

> we should sing of what we affirm and what we deny in different ways:
>
> * we *affirm* by beginning with first things and going *down* through mid to last things,
>
> * then, by going *up* from the last things to the highest, we *deny* them all,…

in order to see that dark above being, hidden away from all light in beings.

Dionysius adds:

> my word, after rising above, beyond, all ascent, will be all voiceless and all made one with the Unspoken.[22]

We go down, away, from God by attributing to him less and less appropriate features, and we go back up, nearer, to God by denying of him more and more appropriate features, until we see him above all attribution and denial.

The *Mystical Theology* inspired a long tradition about "progress" in the changing "ways" (stages) of thinking and speaking of God:

> * The *affirmative* (*kataphasis*) way; when we say that God is "good", "wise", "just".
>
> * The *negative* (*apophasis*) way; when we take back these affirmations in a sense, realizing that God's goodness, wisdom, and justice are other than these traits in things that are familiar to us.
>
> * Both yield to a *higher* way, ("*hyper*"), when we disclaim both the statements and their denials, because we recognize that God is above all affirmation and negation.

The ways are one, then, in the beyondness of God. St. Thomas Aquinas, thought that we come to see in God

> not what is but what is not;
> and the more maturely we know God in this life
> the more we understand Him to lie beyond all our mind grasps.[23]

The search for God, then, demands that our thought and language be "cleansed" more and more.

Asceticism, what the "soul" does, is traditionally connected with the affirmative way, and what it undergoes (in mystical contemplation) is connected with the higher ways. Eliot says that the way we take when we "descend lower" though asceticism

> ...is the one way, and the other
> Is the same, not in movement
> But abstention from movement
> by which we "ascend" to God.[24]

Ultimately it is Christ`s way and our way that is "one and the same". Jesus said:

> I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life.[25]