

T. S. Eliot's Concept of Time (1)

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I

On the relation between a writer and his main or dominant theme Graham Greene (1904–1991) holds quite an enlightened opinion. He states it in his essay on Henry James (1843–1913):

In all writers there occurs a moment of crystallization when the dominant theme is plainly expressed, when the private universe becomes visible even to the least sensitive reader.⁽¹⁾

This is true to the case of T. S. Eliot (Thomas Stearns Eliot, 1888–1965) in which the crystallization of his dominant theme — the problem of time — might be said to occur as early as in 1920 when his first collection of essays was published under the title of *The Sacred Wood*. There is a passage like this in one of the essays “Tradition and the Individual Talent”:

The existing order is complete before the new work arrives; for order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the *whole* existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered; and so the relations, proportions, values of each work of art toward the whole are readjusted; and this is conformity between the old and the new. Whoever has approved this idea of order, of the form of European, of English literature, will not find it preposterous that the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is

directed by the past.⁽²⁾

Who has said 'that the past should be altered by the present? Eliot's interest in time continued without any break. Three years later in 1922 *The Waste Land* was published, and the poem begins with a rather abstract description of spring in the present tense:

April is the cruellest month, breeding
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
Memory and desire, stirring —
Dull roots with spring rain. (*ll.* 1-4)

Then it suddenly changes into the description of a certain past winter with the tense also changed into past:

Winter kept us warm, covering
Earth in forgetful snow, feeding
A little life with dried tubers. (*ll.* 5-7)

Again it abruptly changes into quite a concrete memory of one summer in a German resort:

Summer surprised us, coming over the Starnbergersee
With a shower of rain; we stopped in the colonnade,
And went on in sunlight, into the Hofgarten,
And drank coffee, and talked for an hour.
Bin gar keine Russin, stamm' aus Litauen, echt deutsch.
And when we were children, staying at the arch-duke's,
My cousin's, he took me out on a sled,
And I was frightened. He said, Marie,
Marie, 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. (*ll.* 8-18)

The Waste Land is clearly characterized by an abrupt shift of time or tense.

Eliot's interest in time continued as far as to his final series of poems published under the title of *Four Quartets* (1943) where the theme is much more esoterically expressed:

Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future,
And time future contained in time past. (ll.1-3) ⁽³⁾

Thus time is one of Eliot's main themes. The purpose of this paper is to make clear the characteristics of Eliot's concept of time and to examine how they function in his poems.

II

We believe that time flows ordinarily from the past to the present and then to the future in a linear way. We live with this view without any trouble. However, is it really so? Especially when we contemplate in our mind? Eliot's concept of time is quite different from the prevalent view. In the above-mentioned essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent," Eliot also says:

No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead. I mean this as a principle of aesthetic, not merely historical, criticism. The necessity that he shall conform, that he shall cohere, is not onesided; what happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneous to all the works of art which preceded it. The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the

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new (the really new) work of art among them. ⁽⁴⁾

Notice here the past is not something that is perfectly completed and cannot be changed at all afterwards. He says it is alive. The past is always present in the present time and can communicate with the present things, so it can be easily 'modified by the introduction of the new work of art among them' to form a new order. The reverse is also true. The past has the power of modifying the present conditions; the dead poets can change the present poetic situation. So in his earlier days Eliot actively introduced various dead poets or writers who he thought would be of much significance to the modern world and reevaluated them from the quite modernistic viewpoint. In "The Metaphysical Poets" (1921) he says:

A thought to Donne was an experience; it modified his sensibility. When a poet's mind is perfectly equipped with for its work, it is constantly amalgamating disparate experience; the ordinary man's experience is chaotic, irregular, fragmentary. The latter falls in love, ore reads Spinoza, and these two experiences have nothing to do with each other, or with the noise of the typewriter or the smell of cooking; in the mind of the poet these experiences are always forming new wholes.⁽⁵⁾

He emphasized the importance of 'feeling their thought as immediately as the odour of a rose'⁽⁶⁾ in the time of what he says the 'dissociation of sensibility.'⁽⁷⁾ Thus for Eliot the past is not something past, but something always present in the present time.

Furthermore the future is not simply something to come. It is already present now. As we have seen, Eliot places such view on the beginning of "Burnt Norton" in *Four Quartets*:

Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future,

And time future contained in time past. (*ll.*1-3)

Though the verse has much more profound meanings, in quite a limited sense, at least we can say that the future has much to do with the past; for example, all future things derive from the past except for a mutation.

Thus according to Eliot's concept, time is not chronological or diachronic but rather synchronical.

III

There is another noteworthy aspect to be considered in Eliot's concept of time. When reading his works — poetry, (poetic) dramas or criticisms — the usual flow of time in the ordinary life of people is sometimes suspended for some reason, starting to flow in quite a different way.

One of the most ordinary or even trivial people in all Eliot's works may be Prufrock. He is not a hero but quite a commonplace middle-aged man 'with a bald spot in the middle of' his hair.⁽⁸⁾ In his 'Love Song' he has decided to go to declare his love for a woman but cannot bring himself to do so. On his way to make a confession of his love for the woman he hesitates, thinking a lot of trivial things. Even during the course of such nonsense monologues he suddenly presents such everlastingly impressive images as follows:

Shall I say, I have gone at dusk through narrow streets
 And watched the smoke that rises from the pipes
 Of lonely men in shirt-sleeves, leaning out of windows? . . . (*ll.* 70-
 72)

In spite of Prufrock's awkward hesitation, the image that 'I have . . . watched the smoke that rises from the pipes / Of lonely men in shirt-sleeves, leaning out of windows' certainly touches upon the eternal

aspect of man's life — his loneliness. How can a trivial person make such a profound statement? Quite a different kind of time must have been flowing in his mind at that time.

Four Quartets gives another example like this kind of time, too. An everyday commuting scene in "East Coker" becomes atypical when the underground is suddenly suspended by a power failure, or something like that, and the train stops between stations for a while. At first there is a conversation probably about the cause of the abrupt stop. But soon it fades into silence. That is when a different kind of time starts to flow and then immediately another aspect of man's state appears :

Or as, when an underground train, in the tube, stops too long
between stations
And the conversation rises and slowly fades into silence
And you see behind every face the mental emptiness deepen
Leaving only the growing terror of nothing to think about; (III,
18–21)⁽⁹⁾

Thus abruptly thrown away from the usual world into an unusual one, they cannot but face their own real selves, which they dare not confront in their ordinary life before — their 'mental emptiness' of having 'nothing to think about.' Undoubtedly at this time, time must have had a feeling of eternity.

There is a much more beautiful image in "Burnt Norton" in *Four Quartets*. A narrator of this poem might be looking up the starry night sky and describing constellations, when an unusual time starts flowing and crystallizes into a beautiful expression:

At the still point of the turning world. Neither flesh nor fleshless;
Neither from nor towards; at the still point, there the dance is,
But neither arrest nor movement. And do not call it fixity,
Where past and future are gathered. Neither movement from

nor towards,
 Neither ascent nor decline. Except for the point, the still point,
 There would be no dance, and there is only the dance. (II, 61–66)

The phrase 'the still point of the turning world' reminds us of John Donne's famous simile of 'a pair of compasses.'⁽¹⁰⁾ Indeed the center of any revolving thing is unique in that it does not move and is always still, so probably symbolizing eternity. For Eliot it is eternity that matters and it is eternal time that is flowing in all the above-mentioned scenes.

Thus, according to Eliot's concept of time, time has two aspects or there are two kinds of time — usual time and eternal time. In our ordinary life we always live in the flow of usual time without any inconvenience, or rather effectively getting along with others. But that is not the only world we always live in. We also belong to and live in the world of eternal time. And there are moments when these two kinds of time cross in our ordinary life. Probably the most famous example of this kind is the 'madeleine experience' written by a French novelist Marcel Proust (1871–1922). In his *A la Recherche du Temps perdu* or *In Search of Lost Time* (1913–27) the protagonist came back home one winter and unusually ate a piece of madeleine that had been in tea after a long time, when quite a strange but beautiful moment happened — 'Et tout d'un coup le souvenir m'est apparu'⁽¹¹⁾ — the taste of madeleine soaked in the tea immediately brought him back to his childhood, far into the past, and the present world disappeared. That is undoubtedly the moment when two kinds of time miraculously cross in our ordinary life. There are such moments in Eliot's works and they are often crystallized into beautiful expressions.

Thus Eliot's concept of time has two characteristics: first, time is not chronological but synchronical; and secondly, there are two kinds of time — usual time and eternal time — and these two sometimes cross in our everyday life. Then how do they function in his works? The problem must be examined in the next part.

Notes

- (1) Graham Greene, "Henry James: The Private Universe," in *Collected Essays*, p. 21.
- (2) T. S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," in *Selected Essays* (Faber and Faber, 1932), p.15.
- (3) T. S. Eliot, "Burnt Norton" (1936)
- (4) T. S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," in *Selected Essays* (Faber and Faber, 1932), p.15
- (5) T. S. Eliot, "The Metaphysical Poets," in *Selected Essays* (Faber and Faber, 1932), p. 287.
- (6) *Ibid.*, p. 287.
- (7) *Ibid.*, p. 288.
- (8) T. S. Eliot, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," l. 40
- (9) T. S. Eliot, "East Coker" in *Four Quatets*, III, 18-21
- (10) John Donne (1572-1631), 'A Valediction: forbidding mourning'
- (11) Marcel Proust, *A la Recherche du Temps perdu*