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### T. S. Eliot's Four Quartets and St. John of the Cross

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**Abstract:** Four Quartets (1942) is a sequence of four poems: 'Burnt Norton' (1936), 'East Coker' (1940), 'The Dry Salvages' (1941) and 'Little Gidding' (1942). The main sources of the mystical symbols in T.S. Eliot's masterpiece, Four Quartets, are some of Saint John of the Cross's writings and this has not been given its due of study. This paper aims at exploring St. John of the Cross's influence on Eliot's Four Quartets, especially his Dark Night of the Soul and The Ascent of Mount Carmel. The downward movement, the descent into the inner darkness and the symbols of ascending and descending of the stairs in Eliot's poems were among the outstanding mystical symbols used by John of the Cross. Eliot also strongly echoes John of the Cross in his emphases that one must die to self and undergo mortification of the body before one can hope for the perfect union of the soul with God. The paper attempts to investigate Eliot's use of these and other symbols relating them to their counterparts in the works of St. John of the Cross .

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أثر القديس يوحنا الصليبي على  
الرباعيات الأربعة للشاعر ت. س. إليوت

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<p><b>الخلاصة:</b> الرباعيات الأربعة (1942) أربعة قصائد صوفية كتبها الشاعر ت. س. إليوت بين 1926-1942. ومن أهم مصادر الشاعر الصوفية في هذه القصائد مؤلفات القديس الأسباني يوحنا الصليبي الشعرية والنثرية. ولذلك فإن هدف هذه الدراسة هو تسليط الضوء على أثر يوحنا الصليبي على إليوت في هذه القصائد بالذات وبشكل خاص تأثير كتابي يوحنا الصليبي: ليل الروح المظلم و الصعود على جبل الكرمل. فالحركة إلى الأسفل، والنزول الى الظلام الداخلي وبعض الرموز الأخرى كصعود السلالم والنزول منها كلها مستوحاة من رموز يوحنا الصليبي الصوفية. كما أن توكيد إليوت على إماتة النفس والجسد لأجل الوصول إلى حالة الفناء الصوفي في الذات الإلهية. بعد مقدمتين تعريفيتين بالقديس يوحنا الصليبي والتصوف تخصص أربعة مباحث للقصائد الأربعة لتتبع تأثير يوحنا الصليبي في كل منها على انفراد. وينتهي البحث بخاتمة تلخص ما توصلت له الدراسة من نتائج.</p>	<p><b>الكلمات المفتاحية:</b> - الرباعيات الأربعة -يوحنا الصليبي -التصوف -الرموز</p> <p><b>معلومات البحث</b></p> <p><b>تاريخ البحث:</b> الاستلام : 2019/4/12 القبول : 2019/4/18 التوفر على الانترنت : 2019/6/30</p>
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## I. St. John of the Cross

Saint John of the Cross (1542-1591), the Spanish mystic and poet, was born June 24, 1542, in Fontiveros, Spain, and originally named Juan de Yepes y Álvarez. He became a Carmelite monk in 1563 and was ordained as a priest in 1567. He was imprisoned in 1567 and 1577 for his attempts to reform the church and he wrote most of his works in prison. All his prose and poetry deal with Divine love and how to attain the mystical union with the Divine. (*Encarta*, 2009 DVD). His most outstanding poems are 'The Spiritual Caticle' (39 stanzas, 'The Dark Night of the Soul' (8 stanzas, and 'The Living Flame of Love' (4 stanzas. He wrote four books of prose as commentary on his own poems. His major books are *Dark Night of the Soul*, *Ascent of Mount Carmel* and *A Spiritual Canticle of the Soul and The Bridegroom of Christ*. However, he is always credited for *Dark Night of the Soul* for its great influence on mysticism and mystics. In the first two books he expounds and comments on his own poem 'Dark Night of the Soul' and in the third he comments on the other poems.

## II. Mysticism

It is not an easy task to reach at a comprehensive definition of 'mysticism', or to trace the germination of mystical doctrines. Definitions of 'mysticism' include a bewildering variety. R. A. Nicholson, the outstanding orientalist, in his effort to come out with a comprehensive definition of 'mysticism', collected about two hundred definitions of the term and after arranging them chronologically he admitted the impossibility of finding such a comprehensive definition. However, the word 'mysticism' is historically connected with those mystery cults of the Greeks,

or what is related to the knowledge of the mysteries. It was not used by the Christians until the fifth century by the writer known as pseudo-Dionysius in his treatise 'Mystical Theology'. And though this treatise was translated into Latin, the word 'mystical', says Cuthbert Butler, 'did not become current until the later Middle Ages, "mysticism" is quite a modern word'. He adds that the word 'contemplation' was used instead of it by St. Augustine, St. Gregory and St. Bernard 'to designate what is now commonly called 'the mystical experience!'" (Butler: 2-3). Margaret Smith maintains that this word which comes down from the Greeks 'is derived from the root meaning "to close" and she adds that the term "mystical" ...might be applied to any secret cult revealed only to the initiated' (Smith, 1930: 1). Hence, anything that remains unknown, inexplicable, or kept hidden from, or obscure to, human knowledge or comprehension may wrongly be described as mystical. Mysticism is still a controversial term as Cuthbert says:

There is probably no more misused word in these our days than 'mysticism'. It has come to be applied to many things of many kinds: to theosophy and Christian science; to superstition and clairvoyance; to demonology and witchcraft; to occultism and magic; to weird psychical experiments, if only they have some religious colour, to revelations and visions; to other-worldliness, or even more dreaminess and impracticability in the affairs of life; to poetry and painting and music of which the motif is unobvious and vague....It has been said that love of God is mysticism; or that mysticism is only the Christian life lived on a high level; or that it is Roman Catholic piety in extreme form.(Butler 2).

Many definitions of "mysticism" by Western writers are also quoted by W. R. Inge in his *Mysticism in Religion*. For instance Otto Pflieger defines mysticism as 'the immediate feeling of the unity of the self with God'. Pringle Pallison looks philosophically at mysticism as 'an endeavour of the human mind to grasp the divine essence or the ultimate reality of things, and to enjoy the blessedness of actual communion with the highest', while R. L. Nettleship has a Platonic view of mysticism as 'the consciousness that everything we experience is an element and only an element in fact, i.e. that in being what it is, it is symbolic of something more' (qtd. In Inge 25). From the religious point of view, R. C. Moberly defines Christian mysticism as 'the doctrine or rather the experience of the Holy Spirit –the realization of human personality as characterized by and consummated in the dwelling reality of the spirit of Christ, which is God' [according to Christians] (Inge 25). E. Caird shares this religious view of mysticism 'that attitude of the mind in which all other relations are swallowed up in the relation of the soul to God' (Inge 25). Sidney Spencer defines Mysticism as the 'immediate contact with the transcendent' (*Encyclopedia of Philosophy* 420). A definition which sums up the religious point of view that looks at the chief goal of mystical experience as the union of the soul with God. Mysticism, therefore, has always been described as a religious experience', according to E. Caird 'in which the feeling of God is at its maximum...'. (Smith, 1973: 2). Mysticism in the west is not always associated with religion. In her article 'Mystical Union.', Ileana Marcoulesco says that various abnormal states of trance, similar to those of the mystical union, are 'induced by the use of hallucinogenics or psychic drugs' such as mescaline, psilocybin, lysergic and acid diethylamide (*Encyclopedia of Religion*, 1987, Vol. 10: 239).

Both H. C. Zaehner and Aldous Huxley acted as guinea-pigs to be the subjects of experiments with mescaline.

Zaehner, in *Mysticism Sacred and Profane*, concludes that his experience with mescaline was an anti-religious experience and that; 'mescaline was quite unable to reproduce the "natural mystical experience" I have described elsewhere' (Zaehner: 226). On the other hand, Huxley, in *Doors of Perception*, relates his personal experience with mescaline believing that it can induce mystical experience (Huxley: 130). Mescaline, in fact, according to an account given by Mrs. Rosalind Heywood, induces 'a temporary condition of schizophrenia' (Zaehner, 1961: 208).

The difficulty to define mysticism, therefore, is due to the non-mental, illogical, paradoxical and unpredictable aspects of the mystical experience that even the great mystics who have genuine mystical experiences declare that their experiences cannot be expressed in words. Hence the language of the mystics is that of symbols. 'No scientific field', says E. Alison Peers, 'perhaps has so many zones which are apt to become vague and obscure as has that of mystical theology' (Peers: xliii). John of the Cross believes that mysticism 'signifies secret wisdom of God; for it is secret even to the understanding that receives it,' (St. John of the Cross: *Ascent* 113). That is why he uses the image of darkness in *Dark Night of the Soul* and in *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*. Another reason for the difficulty of defining mysticism lies in the various affinities between mysticism and different branches of experience and knowledge namely philosophy, psychology, spiritualism, magic, art and poetry as well as religion. On the other hand, natural science and experimental analysis can never penetrate beyond the physical, the phenomenal or the material.

### **III. T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets***

Eliot's acknowledged masterpiece is *Four Quartets* (1942) which is a sequence of four poems. Like 'The Hollow Men' and 'Ash Wednesday', *Four Quartets* originated out of separate poems, the first one of them was 'Burnt Norton' (1936) which was intended to be published at the end of the *Collected Poems 1909-1955*. 'It was only in writing "East Coker"', says Eliot in *New York Times Literary Review*, 29 November 1953, that he 'began to see the *Quartets* as a set of four' (Bergonzi 23). However, after the publication of the other three separate poems: 'East Coker' (1940), 'The Dry Salvages' (1941) and 'Little Gidding' (1942), the four poems were published under *Four Quartets* in 1942.

Concerning Eliot's interest in mysticism and particularly in St. John of the Cross, Peter Ackroyd says that by the mid of July 1914 Eliot attended a 'summer programme in philosophy' and added that

Upon his religious poems –he was planning to write a long poem called 'Descent from the Cross'. It would contain an insane section, a mystical section, a love song and a Fool-house sequence in which the protagonist gets to a masquerade ball dressed as St. John of the Cross. (Ackroyd: 54)

This is enough evidence that he knew very well the works of St. John of the Cross. Furthermore, 'in a later essay', [*The Times Literary Supplement* 31 March, 1921], adds Ackroyd, 'Eliot wrote of the wish to surrender to "something outside himself"' (Ackroyd: 139). In 1926, in his epigraph to 'Sweeny Agonists', Eliot quoted St. John of the Cross: 'Hence the soul cannot be possessed of the divine union, until it has divested itself of the love of created beings' (qtd. in Ackroyd: 159).

This emphasized his absolute belief in renunciation and mortification of physical desires to be suitable for union with the Divine which is a basic precept of mysticism in the writings of St. John of the Cross.

### **III. i. Burnt Norton (1936)**

Burnt Norton is a manor house and a garden in Gloucestershire, England. It was burnt by its owner William kyte in the eighteenth century. Eliot 'visited Burnt Norton in the Summer 1934 at which time it was vacant' (Hargrove: 134). This visit in fact was the direct personal reason behind this meditative poem and behind its title though the place has no personal associations for the poet like those of East Coker and Dry Salvages.

In *The Art of T. S. Eliot* (1949), Helen Gardner maintains that 'Burnt Norton' can be read in various ways and that three sorts of meaning can be distinguished: 'a literal, a moral and a mystical meaning'. However, the literal meaning according to her 'is simply that the poet has felt a moment of inexplicable joy, a moment of release'. The whole poem, in fact, starts from this inexplicable moment of vision. The moral meaning, adds she, is 'the virtue of humility: a submission to the truth of experience', while the mystical 'subject...is grace: the gift by which we seek to discover what we have already been shown' (Gardner, 1949, 163-64). In fact, all these three sorts of meaning identified by Gardner, are related to mystical experience in the sense that the 'inexplicable joy' and the 'moment of release' in the first meaning, humility and submission in the second are related to the third level of meaning and are parts of the mystical experience which will be the concern of the whole paper.

As for the moment of release (humility and grace will be discussed in due time) it echoes St. John of the Cross's poem 'Dark Night of the Soul' where he expresses his joy for the moment of release his soul enjoys in the dark night to leave the house (the body):

On the dark night, Kindled in love without yearning – oh, happy chance!—  
I went forth without being observed, My house now at rest.

.....  
Oh, night that guided me, Oh night more lovely than the dawn, Oh, night  
that joined Beloved with lover, Lover transformed in the Beloved.  
(John of the Cross: *Dark Night*: 16)

In this moment of vision, the past and present, the people of Burnt Norton (of the past) and himself are one and the drained pool is filled with water till he comes back to reality when his mystical vision is veiled by a cloud and the pool is drained again

And the pool was filled with water out of sunlight.  
And the lotus rose, quietly, quietly,  
The surface glittered out of heart of light,  
And they were behind us, reflected in the pool.  
Then a cloud passed, and the pool was empty. (I. 35-39)

Even the image of the cloud is reminiscent of what St. John, in *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* says

...even as the vapours darken the air and allow not the bright sun to shine; or as a mirror that is clouded over cannot receive within itself a clear image; or water defiled by mud reflects not the visage of one that looks therein; even so the soul that is clouded by the desires is darkened in the understanding and allows neither the sun of natural reason nor that of the supernatural Wisdom of God to shine upon it and illumine it clearly. (*The Ascent*: 46-47)

In these moments of vision, a bird appears to him telling him to go because he is still not suitable for such a vision and that men cannot bear such moments of mystical vision in which reality or the timeless world is perceived as contrary to unreal phenomenal world which is a mere illusion of the real one

Go, go, go, said the bird: human kind  
Cannot bear very much reality. (I. 42-43)

Part I ends with the same idea of the opening lines that both past and future 'point to one end' (l. 46), to the timeless moment, i.e. of mystical union with the Divine.

In Part II, the main theme is the union between the earthly and the heavenly. Man is a microcosm of the cosmos; man is created in the image of the universe. This idea recurs in almost all the mystical doctrines

The dance along the artery  
The circulation of the lymph  
Are figured in the drift of the stars (II. 53-55)

In Part III, the poet chooses the underground train as a modern image with its light and dark effects to convey the un-mystical state of the modern man. In *The Composition of Four Quartets* (1978), Helen Gardner says that Eliot 'travelled daily from Gloucester Soad Station whose two means of descent, by stairs or by lift, suggested to him movement down and the, abstention from movement'. To suggest that Eliot was used to meditate in the lift, she quotes Julia in *The Cocktail Party* 'In a lift I can meditate, (Gardner 1978: 86). The second major image in this part is the journey which stands for life in mystical writings where the people are passengers. However the state of the people in this passage is that of spiritual sterility (like the people of *The Waste Land*); they are like bits of paper driven by the cold wind

Men and bits of paper, whirled by the wind  
That blows before and after time. (III. 104-5)

The darkness in this part of the poem is exactly the same darkness of the soul which St. John advocates and which means mortification of animal desires, renunciation of the earthly world and 'emptiness' of the senses.

The poet yearns for such a state of darkness:

No darkness to purify the soul  
Emptying the sensual with deprivation  
Cleansing affection from temporal (III. 96-98)

This exactly echoes John of the Cross: 'This night, which we say, is contemplation, produces in spiritual persons two kinds of darkness or purgation, corresponding to the two parts of man's nature –namely, the sensual and the spiritual' (*Dark Night* 29). It also recurs in *The Ascent* where even the image of the tunnel recurs literally, St. John says

...in order to reach the Union of Light, the soul must pass through the Dark Night –that is to say through a series of purifications, during which it is walking, as it were through a tunnel of impenetrable obscurity and from which it emerges to bask in the sunshine of grace and to enjoy the divine intensity. (*The Ascent*: 2)

The time-bound souls in Eliot's poem, therefore, are in a wretched condition because they live without the Timeless. They live in a state of three-fold distraction: 'Distracted from distraction by distraction' (l. 101).

In the final passage of this part, we have downward movement; a descent into internal darkness which becomes a descent into the innermost darkness of the self, into the 'dark night of the soul' to avoid this sterile reality and to enjoy prolonged cleansing and purgation of the senses and renunciation of all property and material things

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,  
Desiccation of the world of senses  
Evacuation of the world of fancy,  
Inoperancy of the world of spirit;  
This is the one way and the other  
Is the same (III. 114-23)

This 'internal darkness' is described by John of the Cross saying 'through this aridity and lack of sensible sweetness which the soul finds in spiritual things, it is freed from the impurities which we there noted' (*Dark Night*: 40). This darkness is in fact the purgation of the soul in order to be suitable for union with the Divine. On the other hand, descending means going down which again echoes John of the Cross's '*Dark Night*: 'upon this road, to go down is to go up, and to go up, to go down, for he that humbles himself is exalted and he that exalts himself is humbled' (*Dark Night*: 81). The protagonist believes that this is the only way to attain timelessness and if

there is any other way, it is necessarily the same; by 'abstention from movement' because such a state of blessedness –according St. John —is a grace of God, and what the mystic has to do is to stand still and wait in complete watchfulness:

This is the one way, and the other  
Is the same, not in movement  
But in abstention from movement; while the world moves  
In appetency, on its metalled ways,  
Of time past and time future. (III. 122-26)

The darkness of Part III turns in Part IV to suggest the darkness of death which is suggested by the word 'bell':

Time and the bell have buried the day,  
Black cloud carries the sun away (IV 1-2)

Again we have the cloud as a symbol of distraction which veils the sun and makes the rose-garden dim and dark.

Eliot's meditation on time and the timeless is extended in part V to include art: 'words' and 'music'. Words, he says, are doomed to silence after speech unless they are set into form or pattern which makes them timeless as a Chinese jar. This meditation on words leads him to meditate on 'the Word in the desert' with the biblical allusion to Christ as the 'Word' or 'Logos'. This reference to Christ as 'Logos' is emphasized at the end of the first passage:

Word in the desert  
Is most attacked by voices of temptation.  
The crying shadow in the funeral dance,  
The loud lament of the disconsolate chimera (V, 155-58)

However, the most important image in this part is that of the stairs in which the same idea of lines (114-121) is emphasized; the idea of ascent and descent into the dark night of the soul. The figure of the ten stairs is derived from St. John of the Cross's 'ten steps of the ladder of love' in the *Dark Night of the Soul* (Book II, Chapters xviii, xix and xx, entitled 'Explains How This Secret wisdom is Like a Ladder'). St. John of the Cross, says Gardner, 'calls his secret wisdom a ladder because a ladder is used for ascent and descent and communication from God' (Gardner 1978: 79). This calls to mind what he says:

We may call it a ladder because, even as the ladder has those same steps in order that men may mount, it has them also that men may descend: even so it is likewise with this secret contemplation, for those same communications, which it caused in



the soul raise it up to God, yet humble it with respect to itself. For communications which are indeed of God have this property that they humble the soul and at the same time exalt it. For upon this road, to go down is to go up, and to go up, to go down, for he that humbles himself is exalted and he that exalts himself is humbled' (*Dark Night*: 81).

Hence to 'Descend lower, Descend only/ Into the world of perpetual solitude' (III. 114-15) is to ascend because when the mystic humbles himself by purgation of his senses and desires and by renouncing the material world. Attains to the love of God and achieves communication and union with God. The poem is concluded with a moment of blessedness; a timeless moment where 'now' becomes 'always'. It is a moment in and out of time while the sad time stretches before and after this timeless moment

Sudden in a shaft of sunlight  
Even while the dust moves  
There rises the hidden laughter  
Quick now, here, now, always—  
Ridiculous the waste sad time  
Stretching before and after, (V, 169-75)

As in the previous part, laughter here symbolizes joy and mystical ecstasy whereas children according to Hargrove symbolize 'innocence' (Hargrove: 146). The garden symbolizes a state of blessedness beyond time enjoyed by the protagonist in brief moments of revelation and mystical union with the Divine.

To sum up, in Part I of 'Burnt Norton' we have a passage leading to the rose-garden though this door is closed. The speaker enjoys brief moments of insight into the rose-garden. Part II attempts to establish a link between the mundane, earthly world and that of the spirit where the opposites are to be reconciled; an attempt to remember the timeless moment of the rose-garden which can only be remembered in time. The protagonist fails to attain timelessness. In Part III the protagonist escapes from 'transient beauty'; from the world of earthly love and desire by travelling in the London Underground as a symbol of the darkness of the soul and as an image of humility (descending down) and purgation. The short lyric of Part IV with its atmosphere of darkness and death suggests the possibility of intercession in this life with the images symbolizing Virgin Mary and Christ and with the bird pointing to the timeless. And through meditation on words in Part V, the protagonist is led to meditate on the Word, on desire and love where art becomes an analogue for the spiritual experience. However, the timeless moment of blessedness is momentarily attained in this part of the poem.

### **III. 2. East Coker**

Like 'Burnt Norton' and the other quartets, the title of this poem is a place-name which has personal associations for Eliot. East Coker is a small village near Yovil on the borders of

Dorsetshire and Somersetshire in England. Originally, 'East Coker' is a meditation poem partly prompted by the fears of the collapse of the entire culture through war. 'The events of March in 1938', says Kearns, 'had shaken Eliot in a way from which one does not recover' (Kearns 240). According to Eliot, September 1938 seemed to demand an act of perpetual condition, of humility, repentance and amendment. The poet visited East Coker, the home of his ancestors in 1937 and he might have meditated upon the cycles of time, on the houses of his 'ancestors falling and crumbling, destroyed and removed; Eliot's attachment to this village was culminated by his burial in it.

In my beginning is my end. In succession  
Houses rise and fall, crumble, are extended,  
Are removed, destroyed, restored, or in their place  
Is an open field, or factory, or a by-pass.  
Old stones to new buildings, old timber to new fires,  
Old fires to ashes, and ashes to earth  
Which is already flesh, fur and faeces,  
Bone of man and beast, cornstalk and leaf. (I, 1-8)

The first line is central to the theme of the poem. It is an echo of the motto inscribed upon the chair of state of Mary, Queen of Scots '*en ma fin est mon commencement*' (in my end is my beginning). In spite of the ambiguity of this motto which is sometimes described as a 'riddle' (Sweeney 40), it carries the dominant theme of the poem and in spite of the variety of interpretations of this motto, the spiritual interpretation is the more sound one. Mystics (of all religions) believe that earthly life is a prison; the soul is imprisoned in the body and hence is spiritually dead because it is veiled from the vision of God and it is released with the death of the body which is the beginning of a new, eternal life. This very idea recurs, for instance, in Mansur al-Hallaj, the Islamic mystic who says

كان موتي في حياتي      فحياتي في مماتي

Which carries the same meaning of Eliot's lines.

In Part II, the poet returns to the theme of humility and wisdom advocated in 'Burnt Norton', Part III. However, this part starts with a lyric which talks about a war in heaven among the constellations which is certainly a result of his reflection on the Second World War. In the second passage, the poet meditates on words and meaning and on writing poetry which leads him to the wisdom of the elders. This sort of wisdom, for Eliot is worthless and equal to stupidity because it is derived from experience, and experience is changeable and new in every moment:

... There it seems to us,  
At best only a limited value  
In the knowledge derived from experience  
The knowledge imposes a pattern, and falsifies,  
For the pattern is new in every moment (II, 81-86)

The knowledge he looks for is the wisdom acquired by intuition; the mystical wisdom reached at through humility and through love of God, and that is why he describes the elders as being afraid of any attachment even 'of belonging to another, or to others, or to God' (II, 96). This humility and intuitive knowledge are also reminiscent of his use of St. John of the Cross in 'Burnt Norton', Parts III and IV. Hence, he dismisses the wisdom of old age as a collection of useless facts:

....Do not let me hear  
Of the wisdom of oldmen, but rather of their folly,  
Their fear of fear and frenzy, their fear of possession,  
Of belonging to another, or to others, or to God (II, 93-96)

To belong to another (earthly love) and the attachment to God provide the true access to wisdom because love teaches humility and humility according to St. John of the Cross and Eliot leads to communication with the Divine and intuitive wisdom. In *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, St. John of the Cross says that 'in order to come to union with the Wisdom of God, the soul has to proceed rather by unknowing than by knowing' (*Ascent*: 31), Eliot says:

The only wisdom we can hope to acquire  
Is the wisdom of humility: humility is endless (II, 97-98)

This theme is further manipulated in the third part of the poem. Here, Eliot strongly echoes St. John of the Cross that one must die to self, must undergo the mortification of the body and the passivity of the dark night of the soul before one can hope for the perfect union of the soul with God through divine love. In many places of his books St. John emphasizes the passivity of the mystic because Divine revelation is a grace of God, Eliot also emphasizes such passivity:

I said to my soul, be still and let the dark come upon you  
Which shall be the darkness of God. As in a theatre,  
The lights are extinguished, for the scene to be changed  
With a hollow rumble of wings, with a movement of darkness on darkness.  
(III, 112-15)

The passivity and the inaction of the mystic in this state of darkness waiting for the 'grace' of God in 'emptiness' and stillness is also emphasized in these lines:

I said to my soul, be still and wait without hope  
For hope would be hope for the wrong thing; wait without love  
For love would be love of the wrong thing; there is yet faith  
But the faith and the love and the hope are all in the waiting,  
Wait without thought, for you are not ready for thought (III, 123-28)

After this emphasis on the passivity of the mystic, 'the second step', says Malcolm Cowley is his commentary on the poem, 'should be taken only by those who intend to follow the mystic or contemplative life. It consists of a rigorous attempt to empty the mind of all passions, fancies, analytical ideas and mere distractions, while directing one's thoughts solely towards union with God' (Cowley 565). It is only through this path that the protagonist reaches at the state of

blessedness symbolized here in the 'stillness of dancing', in 'the whisper of running streams. (of paradise) and 'the laughter in the garden' (III, 129-320).

The influence of St. John of the Cross is also strongly felt in the last passage of Part III. The 'you' in this passage may refer to the reader or it may be used by the poet to suggest that he is addressing himself. More interestingly is the language of paradox used by the poet borrowed from St. John of the Cross:

Shall I say it again? In order to arrive there –  
To arrive where you are, to get from where you are not,  
You must go by a way wherein there is no ecstasy.  
In order to arrive at what you do not know  
You must go by a way which is the way of ignorance.  
In order to possess what you do not possess  
You must go by a way of dispossession.  
In order to arrive at what you are not  
You must go through the way which you are nit.  
And what you do not know is the only thing you know  
And what you own is what you do not own  
And where you are is where you are not. (III. 137-48)

That is the way to the purity of the soul; the mystical emptiness and ignorance in which the soul passively waits for mystical vision and union with God. Here is what St. John of the Cross says in *Dark Night of the Soul*, which is quoted by Sweeney, and which was the direct source of Eliot's passage above:

-In order to arrive at having pleasure in everything  
Desire to have pleasure in nothing...  
-In order to arrive at knowledge of everything,  
Desire to know nothing,  
-In order to arrive at that wherein thou hast no pleasure  
Thou must go by a way wherein thou hast no pleasure.,  
- In order to arrive at that which thou knowest not,  
Thou must go by that thou knowest not.  
– In order to arrive at that which thou possessest not,  
Thou must go by a way that thou possesses t not.  
– In order to arrive at that which thou art not,  
Thou must go through that which thou art not.  
(qtd. In Sweeney 49-50)

Eliot, according to Sweeney, intentionally kept the similarity between his lines and those of St. John of the Cross because 'he wants the source of these lines to be readily recognizable in order that his reference may enjoy the advantage of all the accumulated commentary and explanation linked to St. John of the Cross's mystical philosophy' (Sweeney 49), and in this sense the reader will not miss the mystical meaning of the passage.

Death as an end and a beginning or rebirth is also associated in Part IV with Christ as the wounded surgeon whose passion of dying with bleeding hands is necessary to rebirth. This idea of the surgeon can also be traced back to St. John of the Cross's *Dark Night of the Soul* where the soul is 'under medical treatment for the recovery of its health, which is God Himself' (Ibis. 51). On the other hand, 'the steel/ That question the distempered part' (IV, 1-2) is also traced back by Sweeney to St. John of the Cross's *The Living Flame of Love* where 'the soul will be conscious of an assault upon it made by a seraph armed with a dart of most enkindled love, which will pierce the soul' (ibid. 51). Hence, the pain of the soul is the living pain of purgation through love. This is why disease becomes health, 'Our only health is our disease' (IV, 153), since through this disease the soul is purified and made ready for the divine love, and therefore, 'To be restored, our sickness must grow worse' (IV, 157), for only through this suffering, the soul can be purified. This suffering is described as singing fever which undoubtedly means the fever of love, and the 'mental wires' are reminiscent of the 'trilling wires of blood' in 'Burnt Norton'. The introduction of Christ in this part means that our suffering and penance are almost worthless without Christ; without his passion and his dripping blood:

The dripping blood our only drink  
The bloody flesh our only food (IV, 167-68)

In Part V, the protagonist announces that he is still 'in the middle way' suggesting that he is not nearer neither to the beginning nor to the end though they are one and the same. After a digression, in which he meditates on words (V, 172-98), in the concluding section of this part, he declares that 'home' is the beginning. And again 'home' should not be taken literally to mean the lodging place. 'Home' is the spiritual birth or beginning because the more one 'grows older' the more one becomes a stranger as one becomes isolated from that 'home'; that 'intense moment' which has 'no before and after' (V, 190-93). Hence, the soul is always craving for that home in which it was, in the pre-natal state (before descending into the body), in the presence of the Divine, to have another longer experience of communication with the Divine:

We must be still and still moving  
Into another intensity  
For a further union, a deeper communion  
Through the dark cold and empty desolation  
The wave cry, the wind cry, the vast waters  
Of the petrel and the porpoise.  
In my end is my beginning (V, 204-9)

This union can only be achieved through the 'dark cold and empty desolation' i.e. the dark night of the soul, and through passivity. This part is concluded by the same yearning to reach the end (death) which is a new beginning. This fact is strongly emphasized by the memorial plaque on Eliot's grave in St. Michael's Church, East Coker, Somersetshire which reads:

"In my beginning is my end"  
OF YOUR CHARIY  
PRAY FOR THE  
REPOSE  
OF THE SOUL OF  
ELIOT  
POET  
26<sup>th</sup> SEPTEMBER 1888-4<sup>th</sup> JANUARY 1965  
"in my end is my beginning"

This plaque certainly means that he looks at death as a spiritual rebirth and a new beginning and this very idea is symbolically rendered in the form of the poem which opens with 'In my beginning is my end' and closes with 'In my end is my beginning'.

In brief, the mystical experience of the protagonist clearly develops throughout this poem. While Part I deals with the transient and ephemeral nature of the world of reality, earthly seasons are linked in Part II with the revolutions and wars in heaven. The poet then meditates on knowledge and wisdom which cannot be acquired by old age. The only way to wisdom is humility. Part III, therefore is concerned with emptying the mind of worldly desires and preparing the soul for mystical union by entering the dark night of the soul. In Part IV, Christ as the 'wounded surgeon' is introduced to cure the world 'the hospital' and to intercede for man. And in Part V, the protagonist craves for 'home', for the 'intense moment, which is out of time and for means of continual communication with God.

### **III. 3. The Dry Salvages**

In his prefatory note to the poem, Eliot explains the title which is a name of a group of rocks near the coast of Cape Ann, Massachusetts where he spent part of his childhood. The poem, then, is associated with his memories of his early life beside the Mississippi river and the New England coast. Eliot, therefore, opens his poem with a sort of meditation on the theme of time and movement by meditating on the river and the sea. The river acquires symbolic, spiritual and religious meaning through contrapuntal balance with the sea:

The river is within us, the sea is all about us;  
The sea is the land's edge also, the granite  
Into which it reaches, the beaches where it tosses  
Its hints of earlier and other creation: (I, 15-18)



apple and the bite in the apple' (11.117) and Christ's death.

In fact, the reward the mystic receives for leading an ascetic life and for curbing his desires is the ecstatic sense of oneness with God. This state of blessedness is described by Eliot in various ways. Sometimes it is the 'still point' when 'past and future are gathered' as in 'Burnt Norton' II, and sometimes 'The point of intersection of the timeless/ With time' as in 'The Dry Salvages' (V. 201-2).

The real intersection of the timeless with time is the Incarnation of God in Christ. Most people aspire to achieve this impossible state through devotion and routine religious performance 'prayer, observance, discipline' but all that they have is to enjoy brief moments of illumination. However, the most important thing is that we try and go on trying to achieve this intersection with the timeless though this can only be achieved after death which is here symbolized by the yew tree, or after dying to self in this life by mortification of earthly desires:

For most of us, this is the aim  
Never to be realised;  
We are only undefeated  
Because we have gone on trying,  
We, content at last  
If our temporal reversion nourish  
Not too far from the yew-tree)  
The life of significant soil. (V.226-233)

Though the 'yew-tree' may refer to Little Gidding this does not make much difference in the meaning. This time, to be 'not too far from the yew-tree' means to spend one's life in devotion and prayer near Little Gidding, leading an ascetic life, enjoying moments of illumination and attempting, to achieve the final goal of the mystical path.

To conclude, at the beginning of this poem the poet expresses the same yearning for attaining the timeless moment of mystical illumination. In Part II, an escape from the destructive force of time seems impossible but it ends in a note of hope. This escape is achieved in Part III in the symbol of the voyage where the voyagers should 'fare forward' freeing themselves of the past and the future. Part IV, as in the other quatrains, is a lyric prayer to the Virgin announcing the need to her intercession. In Part V, having the brief moments of illumination and release from time in his mind, the protagonist decides to go on trying to attain 'the moment in and out of time': the intersection with the timeless.

#### **III. 4. Little Gidding (1942)**

Little Gidding is a village in Huntingdonshire where Nicholas Ferrar (1592-1637) and his family established a religious Utopian community in 1625. The reference to the yew-tree at the end of 'The Dry Salvages' links it to 'Little Gidding' which is a place of yew trees. The evergreen yew tree, says Elizabeth Drew, is a symbol of 'death and rebirth' and, therefore, it is planted in churchyards (Drew 188). Eliot made an actual journey 'on May 25, 1936 in the company of Dr. H. F. Stewart' to Little Gidding, and 'It is possible to suppose', says Hargrove,



'that the mystical experience described by the protagonist in Part I had its roots in that visit' (Hargrove 185)

The poem opens at the shortened day of midwinter where lightning is identified with 'Pentecostal fire. This moment of spring time belongs to the timeless covenant like a moment of sudden illumination. Symbolically speaking, the sun which stands for God's love, according to Hargrove, brings a spiritual spring or rebirth to the barren soul where 'the light/heat images symbolize God's love, divine illumination, the timeless, and/or the Holy Spirit, all of which can transform a lifeless soul into a fulfilled one' (Hargrove 188). The protagonist is shown spring in midwinter and is made to feel brightness in the darkness of winter, and heat in the 'windless cold'. This spiritual awakening is similar to the experience of the rose garden as a union of time and the timeless; it is a spiritual summer 'unimaginable/Zero summer'. It is not in time but in eternity, out of time.

However, in the third passage, and in a didactic tone, he addresses the reader who intends to make a journey that the purpose of his journey should be prayer and devotion, and here he talks like St. John in *The Ascent*, saying that prayer is not to be a mechanical performance or utterance of the words of prayer, but a speechless communication 'with fire beyond the language of the living' (1.51). He also echoes St. John of the Cross's *Dark Night of the Soul* in his call to abandon the world of 'sense and notion' in order to achieve communication with the Divine:

It would always be the same; you would have to put off  
Sense and notion. You are not here to verify,  
Instruct yourself, or inform curiosity  
Or carry report. You are here to kneel  
Where prayer has been valid. And prayer is more  
Than an order of words, the conscious occupation  
Of the praying mind, or the sound of the voice praying  
And what the dead had no speech for, when living,  
They can tell you, being dead: the communication  
Of the dead is tongued with fire beyond the language of the living.  
Here the intersection of the timeless moment  
Is England and nowhere. Never and always. (I, 42-53)

The inscription over the door of the tomb of Nicholas Ferrar might have had a great spiritual effect on the poet: 'This is none other but the house of God and the gate of heaven' (Hargrove 186), for Eliot, throughout this poem, looks at Little Gidding as the gate of heaven. Even in the speech of the Ghost one can feel the influence of John of the Cross. According to the ghost's speech the only way by which to avoid spiritual degeneration and death is submitting oneself to purgatorial refining fires. These refining fires can purify man from the fires of the senses and desires:

Proceed, unless restored by that refining fire  
Where you must move in measure, like a dancer (II, 45-6)

However, the most significant passage in the poem is the concluding one where the soul arrives at the garden as a symbol of spiritual innocence, ecstatic happiness and the goal of the mystical journey. The first lines of the passage look at man's life as a period of ceaseless exploration which calls to mind Part V of 'The Dry Salvages', and which means a journey back to the beginning, to explore things known and seen before. This is also reminiscent of Yeats's 'Byzantium' where he elaborates the same theme of the soul which unwinds 'the winding path', or dreaming back its previous life or lives. Here exploration leads the soul back where we started:

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 (V, 239-42)

Two things may be suggested by 'where we started': the pre-natal state of the soul when it was in the presence of the Divine before descending into the body and the Garden of Eden before the fall of Adam, and that is why the poet says 'And know the place for the first time'. The use of the river as symbol, which was used earlier in "The Dry Salvages", emphasizes the same theme of the mystical source:

At the source of the longest river  
The voice of the hidden waterfall  
And the children in the apple-tree  
Not known, because not looked for  
But heard, half-heard, in the stillness  
Between two waves of the sea. (V, 246-51)

The fountain of the river, 'the source' or the 'hidden waterfall' here, as in other mystical writings, stands for God as the source of all creation. The children are symbolic of innocence and happiness and the joy of attaining the goal of mystical experience. In this state of blessedness--at the end of 'Little Gidding'--the protagonist addresses himself or his soul to make haste using 'here' and 'now' to refer to place and time, but this 'now' becomes 'always', or a timeless moment:

Quick now, here, now, always--  
A condition of complete simplicity  
(Costing not less than everything). (V, 252-54)

As St. John of the Cross advocates in all his mystical writings, the price of this timeless moment in which the soul arrives at its goal -- mystical union with the Divine, -- is very expensive, costing everything, because the mystic should renounce everything, should mortify the senses and desires and abandon every mundane thing and purify his soul in order to be suitable for this blessed state; the mystical union with God.

The last three lines of the poem are very essential to the mystical interpretation of the poem:

When the tongues of flame are in-folded  
Into the crowned knot of fire  
And the fire and the rose are one. (V, 257-59)

The use of the expression 'crowned knot', according to Williamson, means that 'the Pentecostal tongues of flames are folded into the interwoven knot of fire, when the fire of love and the rose of desire are one' (Williamson 253). The mystical union, which is described in 'The Dry Salvages' as 'impossible union', is finally attained. The intersection of the timeless with time fulfilled and 'the fire and the rose are one'.

This poem follows the same compact structure of the previous three 'Quartets'. In Part I of the poem, the protagonist enjoys moments of vision; he sees spring in mid-winter and he declares that the intersection of the timeless moment is there in 'Little Gidding' and decides to 'put off/ Sense and notion' .and to kneel in prayer. In the second part the protagonist is instructed, by the ghost who is seen in a vision, to proceed till he is 'restored by the refining fire', Part III asserts the possibility of redemption through divine love while in Part IV the poet affirms that to be redeemed one must be purgated by the fires of the love of God in contrast with the fires of lust and self-love. In the final part of the poem the goal of the mystical experience is achieved and the end and the beginning become one and the same when the moment of the intersection of the timeless with time is achieved.

## **Conclusion**

So far, Eliot's masterpiece, *Four Quartets* has been examined mainly as mystical poems strongly influenced by the Spanish mystic and poet St. John of the Cross. The goal of any mystic is to attain spiritual union with the Divine. However, this union is very hard to achieve. The mystic should undergo hard discipline and spiritual exercise involving cleansing of self, curbing love passion, mortification of all animal desires, humility, patience and prayers.

Eliot is greatly interested in mysticism in most of his poems but his *Four Quartets*, which is his masterpiece, is completely mystical and, therefore, is greatly influenced by the great Spanish mystic St. John of the Cross that he sometimes quotes him literally in his poems. The works that influenced Eliot most were *Dark Night of the Soul* and *Ascent of Mount Carmel*.

Eliot excessively uses St. John's mystical terms, metaphors and symbols such as 'dark night', humility, ladder or stairs, ascension and descent, purgation, the voyage, the rose-garden, emptiness, timeless moment, union with the Divine, as well as many others. However, despite this influence, Eliot's *Four Quartets* is an original mystical poem par excellence that most of the critics consider it his masterpiece rather than *The Waste Land*.

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