

The Dialectics of Knowledge and Being in T. S. Eliot's "Burnt Norton"

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I-Abstract:

Almost all the biographers of T.S.Eliot (1888-1965) affirm that Eliot's earlier interest was philosophy rather than poetry. In fact, his main interest was philosophy ever since his days at Harvard University.

To practice this interest, Eliot traveled to Europe for the completion of a dissertation on F. H. Bradley (1846-1924), who was a late Victorian metaphysical thinker and a neo-Hegelian idealist. In effect, Eliot attended Sorbonne, Merton College, Oxford, and Marburg University in Germany, but his interest had shifted from philosophy to poetry. Therefore, although he completed his doctoral dissertation on Bradley's philosophy, he never returned to Harvard for the degree.

Eliot's classical and anti-romantic bent with his deep belief in religion helped him to meditate on the ontological and epistemological issues concerning Man's existence on this earth. So after his religious conversion and becoming a member of the Anglican Church, his poetry was colored with religious commitment.

As a result, Eliot's poetry of this period grew more meditative and philosophical. *The Four Quartets* (1935-1942) are considered to be among the best poetry he wrote during this period because they tackle philosophical issues especially those related to Man's existence and knowledge of the pre-natal world and this world. These ideas originally emanate from Plato's philosophy and Kant's metaphysics. The present study is an analysis of "Burnt Norton" (1935) in the light of these philosophical concepts and Eliot's view of life.

II- The Dialectics of Knowledge and Being in "Burnt Norton"

"Burnt Norton" is a poem fraught with philosophical ideas and concepts. To attract the reader's attention, from the start the poet superposes this poem with two philosophical epigraphs from Heraclitus

(c.544-483 B.C.), the Greek materialist philosopher and dialectician. The two epigraphs, which make use of the technique of "Superposition" in the imagist sense, serve as an introduction to understanding the ideas Eliot wants to convey.

The first epigraph's translation is: "Although the law of reason (the logos) is common, the majority of people live as though they have an understanding (or wisdom) of their own."¹ Whereas the second epigraph's translation is: "The way upward and downward are one and the same."² A deep look at the first epigraph reveals that it is about the philosophical problem of "Knowledge" of this material world from the point of view of dialectical materialism, while the second one is about the philosophical problem of "Being". So the way upward means life and the way downward means death. Besides, the second epigraph looks at "Being" from the same point of view of dialectical materialism but it stands in direct opposition to the first epigraph not as stated by Mr. Al-Doori as "the reconciliation of opposites".³

It is quite clear that in the first epigraph Heraclitus refers to Man's understanding of the external world, but in the second one he comes out with a different conclusion of his philosophical treatise on the nature of "Being". To Heraclitus "The world as a whole, separate things and even souls, originated from fire."⁴ As such, Heraclitus thinks that "the eternal fire" is the source and originator of every thing and the world process is cyclical. According to Heraclitus when "the great year" expires, all things again turn into "fire". So "being" and "not being" are the same. Therefore, the first epigraph supports relativism whereas the second one supports absolutism.

This philosophical concept of Heraclitus is explained further in the body of the poem which makes use of the philosophical ideas and concepts of two other prominent philosophers: Plato and Immanuel

¹ Cleo McNelly Kearns, T. S. Eliot and Indic Tradition, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987) p.231.

² George Williamson, A Reader's Guide to T. S. Eliot, (New York: The Noonday press, 1962), P.208.

³ Hamdi Hameed Yousif Al-Doori, "Mystical Experience in Modern English Poetry: A Study of W.B.Yeats and T. S. Eliot "PhD Dissertation, Baghdad University, 1999.P.189.

⁴ M.Rosenthal and P.Yudin, A Dictionary of Philosophy, (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1967) P.188.

Kant. It is not for nothing that D.W. Harding described "Burnt Norton" as being concerned with the creation of the concepts.⁵

The poem is well understood in the light of Plato's theory of existence. "To explain Being, he developed the theory of the existence of immaterial form of objects, which he called "Forms or Ideas" and identified them with being. To these "Ideas" Plato counter posed non-being, identified with matter and space."⁶ According to Plato, the real and authentic knowledge about the reality of being is possible only of truly existent "Forms". "The source of such knowledge is the immortal human soul's reminiscence of the world of ideas, contemplated before its incarnation in the mortal body."⁷ In other words, Plato maintains that there is the pre-natal existence of the soul through "ideas" and what human beings know in the "present" is the recollection of what they experienced before coming into this world. Plato thinks that all the phenomena of this world are the replica of the former world, "the past", and when the body dies, the soul returns to its pre-natal abode: the "time future".

The image becomes even clearer if we quote some philosophical concepts of Kant who "considered that space, time, causality laws are not properties of nature itself, but of the human cognitive faculty."⁸ To Kant "knowledge is possible only of "phenomena"; i.e., the way through which things reveal themselves in our experience."⁹ That is, time and space have no reality in themselves but they are reflections of human beings' perception to nature. In this theory, Kant's aim was to restrict the domain of knowledge so that God would have a place above and beyond it. As such, Heraclitus', Plato's and Kant's philosophical concepts have their echoes in Eliot's *Four Quartets*.

Helen Gardner in her book The Art of T. S. Eliot describes the five parts of each poem of the *Four Quartets* as "movements"¹⁰. She applied this musical term to these poems because she looked at them from the

⁵ D.W.Harding, "T. S. Eliot, 1925-1935" in T. S. Eliot: A Collection of Critical Essays, Hugh Kenner (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1963), p.108.

⁶ M.Rosenthal and P.Yudin, A Dictionary of Philosophy, P.351.

⁷ Ibid., P.351.

⁸ Howard Selsam, Handbook of Philosophy, (New York: International Publishers, 1949) p.61.

⁹ Rosenthal and Yudin, P.229.

¹⁰ Helen Gardner, The Art of T. S. Eliot (London: Faber and Faber, 1972) p.37.

perspective of their musical structure. In fact, the movement of each poem is the starting point of a journey from ignorance to the spiritual knowledge of existence. Therefore, each part can be considered as a stage in that journey.

The first part of "Burnt Norton" opens with the three dimensions of time: past, present and future. These dimensions of time are "abstract" entities in themselves but if past is correlated with the platonic concept of pre-natal existence, present with this phenomenal transient world we live in and future with the return of soul after death to its original abode, only then the picture will be transparent and clear:

Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future,
And time future contained in time past.¹¹

Eliot has manipulated the relations between the three dimensions of time in the most artistic and philosophical way. To him, time and its dimensions are not abstract entities but are concrete since they refer to Man's pre-natal and post-mortem existence:

If all time is eternally present
All time is unredeemable.

("Burnt Norton" lines: 4-5)

If time (with all its dimensions) which means this transient world is "eternally present", the dimensions of time (past, present, and future) lose meaning since they cannot be restored (or compensated). What exists in this world is an "abstraction" of the real pre-natal existence and it is possible to understand this "abstraction" only through the recollection of the former life of the soul. All of a sudden, the memory of the pre-natal existence is re-awakened with the echo of the footfalls. This echo of the footfalls refers to the immortal human soul that remembers the world of ideas before its incarnation in the mortal body:

Footfalls echo in the memory

¹¹ T. S. Eliot, Collected Poems 1909-1962 (London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 1963), P. 189. Lines: 1-3. Subsequent references to line numbers will appear in the text.

Down the passage which we did not take
Towards the door we never opened
Into the rose-garden. My words echo
Thus, in your mind.

("Burnt Norton" lines: 11-15)

Here "the rose-garden" is highly symbolic. It could refer to paradise where Man dwelled before his fall on earth or might refer to the pure, nice-looking and harmonious world of ideas in the memory of pre-natal existence. As presumed by Plato, since all souls are made up of ideas, they have a common understanding (See epigraph I). Therefore, the words of the poet echo in the mind of others. There are also "other echoes (that) inhabit the garden" (**lines: 19-20**). Then the bird that represents the awakening of the soul from its slumber to the pre-natal experience encourages man to search and find "them" that is, other souls and go:

...Through the first gate,
Into our first world, shall we follow
The deception of the thrush? Into our first world,...

("Burnt Norton" lines: 22-24)

Both "the first gate" and "our first world" are direct reflections of the pre-natal experience analyzed from Plato's view point in previous pages of this research paper.

Later, Eliot makes this experience even more transparent when he refers to the prototype "idea" of "the rose":

...for the roses
Had the look of flowers that are looked at.

("Burnt Norton" lines: 30-31)

Here, Eliot tries to convey that idea to the reader that the roses (of this world) are only phenomenal since they are "forms" of the idea of the rose from Plato's point of view. These roses are "in a formal pattern" (**Line: 34**) and are placed in an "empty alley, into the box circle" (**Line: 35**). "The empty alley" and "the box circle" represent this

transient world that is like "the box circle "and "drained pool" (**Line: 36**).

Suddenly there is flashback to the world of memory and hence the Garden of Eden before the fall of man. Then, very "quietly" the pool was filled with water, and the "lotus rose" started to appear. All these happened while "they were behind us" (**Lines 38-41**). Here, the pronoun "they" refers to the Angels and Archangels that appear stealthily behind the narrator. After that, a cloud (return from memory to the real world) passes and the pool becomes empty again. Once again the bird incites human beings to start the journey of the soul and search for innocence (in the poem referred to as children) which could also stand for the source of happiness and joy.

The bird emphasizes on the word "go" for three times. The reason behind this insistence of the bird on the journey is because "human kind cannot bear very much reality." (**Lines: 45-46**)

The first part ends with the focus on the present time which is the grand total of the past and the future time. Indirectly Eliot tries to attract the reader's attention to the Kantian concept of time and space as having no reality in themselves but being the reflection of Man's perception of existence.

In part II. Eliot presents his overall view concerning the co-existence of what seems to the human mind as contrary on the surface but in the deep layers they are very much similar because they are the product of the harmonious world of ideas. Superficially "Garlic" and "sapphires" are opposite objects but from the bottom they are tied to the same "axle-tree". This tree, according to Norse mythology is called Yggdrasil or the world tree, a great ash tree supporting the universe. One root of this tree extends into the underworld; another into the land of the giants, and the third into Asgard, home of the gods. At its base were three wells.¹² The other contrary objects now seem harmonious as:

The circulation of lymph
Are figured in the drift of stars
(**"Burnt Norton" lines: 56-57**)

And:

Below, the boarhound and the boar

¹² The New Encyclopaedia Britannica, Micropaedia. S.V. "Yggdrasil"

Pursue their pattern as before
But reconciled among stars.

("Burnt Norton" lines: 62-63)

In the above lines, Eliot reminds the acute and careful reader that what seems as contradictory in the world of reality is the reflection of Man's contradictory mind because all things in this universe are related to each other and follow "their pattern as before" –that is, as they were in the pre-natal world of ideas. Eliot expounds that these contradictions are "reconciled among stars" because they are only the phenomena of this transient contradictory world. In part II, once more the poet explicitly refers to the "first world" mentioned in the first part:

I can only say, there we have been: but I cannot say where.
And I cannot say, how long, for that is to place it in time.

("Burnt Norton" lines: 75-76)

Only through "Erhebung" (which in German means elevation or rise from a state to another) can Man get rid of his suffering and inner conflicts. Therefore, the soul which contains both "past" and "future" is projected into "the changing body" and it is the soul that protects human beings from "heaven" that is bliss; and "damnation" that is, suffering "which flesh cannot endure." **(Line: 90)**

In the last eight lines of part II, the focus is again on time and timelessness (as seen in part I). Eliot states that only through time which is a phenomenon of this transient world can Man transcend from his illusory reality and reach the moment in "the rose-garden" (of paradise). And only through this moment of recollection (which is placed in time) one can conquer the past and the future (both of which are dimensions of time). So only at that celestial moment, the three dimensions of time become one and the present moment can hold both the past and the future.

Part III focuses on different aspects of this transient and meaningless world. According to Eliot, this world which is referred to by the word "Here" is the place of dissatisfaction because it is a mere "shadow" of the real beauty. The moment of immersion into the sensuality of this material world leads to "darkness" which is necessary "to purify the soul" **(Line: 105)**. According to St. Augustine's words that Great sinners

become great believers, the moment the soul is cleansed of all the phenomena of this sensual world, the real beauty of the soul becomes manifest to all. But without this purification, people's faces remain "time-ridden" and they are three times distracted from the reality of their souls. Consequently, they are filled with fancies (illusions) and they see no meaning in their lives. As such, they become "hollow men" and they are:

Men and bits of paper, whirled by the cold wind
That blows before and after time,
("Burnt Norton" lines: 113-114)

Later on these men pass from one station to another, thinking that the change of location will give joy and meaning to their absurd and gloomy lives.

Such men try to get rid of their anxieties through drinking and they will have "Unwholesome lungs" that belch out their "unhealthy souls". They descend lower and lower into the world of loneliness and from there into "internal darkness". This way of sin at the end will lead to the path of faith. The idea here is purely Heraclitian because according to Heraclitus "All things and all properties change into their opposites: cold becomes hot, hot becomes cold, etc."¹³

In comparison to the other parts, Part IV is very short because it represents the quick moments of death symbolized in "the bell". "The black cloud" here represents the different phenomena of this world which veil human being's vision of reality. Then the poet asks rhetorically whether the restoration of "the Paradise Lost" is possible or not? His answer to this question is symbolically referred to in the light on the "kingfisher's wing" (**Line: 142**). Hence this part which starts with "death" ends with a note of hope.

Part V is a contrast between the world of spirit which is in a timeless motion and the world of body or flesh which is in a timed movement. Both worlds are juxtaposed to contrast them and make the differences apparent. The world of spirit is referred to as "words" , "music" , "the violin" , "the Chinese jar" which are all from the world of art, whereas the world of body is referred to as "crying shadow" , "funeral dance" and

¹³ Rosenthal and Yudin, P.188.

the bestial "chimera"(**Lines: 165-166**). Consequently, the fleshy desire of human beings and the movement of all objects of the phenomenal world are only an interval or a "limitation" between un-being (that is pre-natal existence) and being (post-mortem existence of the soul) (**Lines: 175-176**). Once again the poet uses flashback and shifts to the rose-garden and hears the joyful but "hidden laughter of children in the foliage"(**Lines: 178-179**). Then the poet urges human beings to turn the life "here" on this earth at this moment "now" into a timeless bliss through knowledge of the soul. The last two lines sums up the main ideas and concepts expressed in the whole poem since he considers the time before (that is before postmortem existence) and the time after (that is after prenatal existence) as "ridiculous" and a "Waste sad time"(**Lines: 181-182**).

III-Conclusion

In "Burnt Norton", Eliot tackles the two concepts of "Knowledge" and "Being" philosophically. These two concepts are related very closely to the phenomena of "time" with its three dimensions and the space represented by macrocosm (or the universe).

To explain his views clearly, Eliot relied on the philosophical ideas of three giant philosophers: Heraclitus, Plato and Kant. The first one, though a dialectical materialist philosopher, his ideas add tremendous depth to the poem. The other two, Plato and Kant, were both idealists. In fact, Kant's ideas were the development of Plato's concept of the existence. Kant's concepts of time and space, in relation with human beings cognitive faculty have a clear echo in the lines of "Burnt Norton". But it was Plato's concepts concerning "Ideas" and "Forms" and the spiritual knowledge of human beings that infiltrated the body of the poem line by line. No doubt, Eliot's purpose behind this was to prove to human beings the triviality of life and the immortality of the soul. Such a conclusion strengthened to a great degree his religious belief.

This poem, as analyzed above, is a journey from ignorance to spiritual knowledge of existence. In each stage, the philosophical ideas and concepts of Heraclitus, Plato and Kant give a new impetus and a profound depth to Man's understanding of his existence and position in this world.

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پوختەى لىكۆلىنەۋەكە

دىئالىكتىكى "زانىارى" و "بوون" لە شىعەرى "بىرنىن نۇرتىن" ت . س . ئىلىيەت دا

ئەۋەى كە لەلەى ھىچ كام لە ژياننامەنوسەكانى ت . س . ئىلىيەت (1888-1965) شاراۋە نىيە ئەۋەىيە كە ئەم كەلە شاعىرە لەسەرەتادا مەىلى بەلەى فەلسەفەۋە بوو پتر لە شىعەر . ئەم ھەز و خوليايەشى دەگەرئىتەۋە بۇ رۇژانى خويىندكارئىتى لە زانكۆى ھارڧەرد . بۇ بەجىگەياندىنى ئەم مەبەستەش گەشتى بۇ ئەۋروپا كىردوۋە تاكو دىكتورانامەكەى لەسەر ف . ھ . برادلى (1846-1924) كە بىرمەندىكى كۆتايى سەردەمى ئىكتورى و ئايدىئالىستىكى ھىگلى بوو بنووسىت . ھەربۆيەش، ئىلىيەت سەردانى زانكۆكانى (سۆربۆن، مېرتن كۆلىچ، ئۇكسڧورد و مابۇرگى لە ئەلمانىا) كىردوۋە، كەچى لەۋى مەىلى پتر بەلەى شىعەردا شكايەۋە . مەىلى كلاسىكىانە و نارۇمانسىيانەى ئىلىيەت وڭپراى بىرۋاى قوۋلى ئايىنى يارمەتىدەرى بوون تا بەۋردى بىر لە مەسەلەى "زانىارى" و "بوون" كە پەيوەندىدارن بە بوونى مرؤف لەم سەرزەمىنەدا

بكاتوه. جا دواى گۆپىنى بېرواى ئايىنى و بوونه ئەندام لە كلىساي ئەنگلىكانى، شيعرهكانى ئىليهت مۆركى ئەو پابه ندبوونهيان پيوه دياربوو. سهره نجام، شيعرهكانى ئەم سهرده مەى ئىليهت پېر راما نانه تر و فەلسەفيا نه تر بوون. ئەوه بوو كه له سالى (1935-1942) "چوار كوارتيت"ى نووسى كه به باشترين چوار شيعرى ئەو سهرده مەى ئىليهت داده نرين چونكه له ويدا چەندىن مەسه لهى فەلسەفى خسته به رياس و ليكۆلينه وه، به تايبه تيش مەسه لهى بوون و زانبارى بهرله هاتنه ئەم دونيايه و دواى هاتنه ئەم دونيايهى مرؤفە . ئەم ليكۆلينه وه يه شيكر د نه وهى شيعرى "بيرنى نورتىن" (1935) له ژيئر تيشكى ئەو روانينه فەلسەفى و تيپراما نانهى ئىليهته بۇ ژيان.

ملخص البحث

جدلية "العلم" و "الوجود" في قصيدة "بيرنى نورتىن" للشاعرة . س . ايليوت

ان مما لا يخفى على احد من كتاب سيرة ت. س . ايليوت (1888-1965) هو ان هذا الشاعر الفحل كان في البداية لديه ميول فلسفية اكثر من الشعر. وتعود هذه الرغبة والاهتمام الى ايام دراسته في جامعة هارفرد.

وسافر الى اوروبا لتحقيق هذا الغرض، كي يكتب رسالة الدكتوراه عن ف. ه. برادلي (1846-1924) المفكر المثالي الهيكلى في العصر الفكتوري. لذا قام ايليوت بزيارة جامعات (سوربون ميرتن كوليج، اكسفورد و ماربورك في المانيا). لكنه هناك بدا يميل نحو الشعر اكثر من اى شىء اخر.

ان ميوله الكلاسيكية و غير الرومانسية الى جانب ايمانه العميق بالدين ساعدته الى الخوض في مسألة "المعرفة" و "الوجود" اللذان لهما صلة بوجود الانسان على سطح الأرض. فبعد تغيير معتقده الدينى و انضمامه كعضو الى الكنيسة الأنكليكانية، انعكس هذا الالتزام في شعره. و بالنتيجة كثرت المعاني والتأملات.

وهكذا كتب في عام (1935-1942) مجموعة (القصائد الأربعة) التي تعد افضل اربعة قصائد ايليوت في هذه الفترة لانه تناول فيها العديد من المسائل الفلسفية وخاصة مسألة "الوجود" و "المعرفة" قبل مجى الانسان الى الوجود وبعدها.

ويتناول هذا البحث تحليل قصيدة "بيرنى نورتىن" (1935) في ضوء هذه المفاهيم و نظرة ايليوت للحياة.