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T.S. Eliot and the Tradition of Christian Mysticism: The Spatial Paradox in Burnt Norton

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Abstract

The present article seeks to identify T.S. Eliot's affinity to the tradition of Christian mysticism by analyzing the spatial paradox in the poem Burnt Norton, the first of the Four Quartets. Parting from a general reflection on the importance of the paradox with regard to God's ineffability, the poem is analyzed from a spatial perspective. It becomes obvious that the spatial paradox is not only used as an argumentative pattern, but also as a compositional key element that structures the whole text, generating a particular down-up-down dynamic. The most curious aspect, in this context, is that the poem continuously formulates and subsequently denies its own spatial movement, thus, in the end, also denying itself.

Keywords: T.S. Eliot, Burnt Norton, Paradox, Christian Mysticism, Pseudo-Dionysius

The poetry of T.S. Eliot shows an increasing affinity to the tradition of Christian Mysticism, as can be outlined on the basis of his major lyrical

works¹. The Waste Land, quoting from St. Augustine's Confessions, Buddha's Fire Sermon and the Upanishad², is still a somehow disorientated conglomerate of fragments of Christian thought and oriental mysticism. Ash Wednesday, Eliot's conversional poem and a sort of poetic via purgativa that relates the renouncement to selfishness with the idea of a spiritual rebirth, expresses a mystical ascension by the metaphor of a stairway to God³. In this case, however, the ascension gets interrupted, it does not yet come to a direct vision of the divine. The Four Quartets, finally, continuously fathoming out the borders of the inexpressible, seem to touch, in certain passages, the core of the divine mystery. The enigmatic momentary visions these poems contain are embedded in philosophical reflections that follow the tradition of negative theology. Moreover, Eliot refers to, and sometimes quotes directly from, canonical Christian mystics such as Saint John of the Cross and Julian of Norwich in this work.

A poetic procedure that reveals in particular Eliot's affinity to Christian Mysticism is the frequent use of the paradox. At the turn of the 6th century, Pseudo-Denys showed the necessity of this figure of thought as a consequence of God's ineffability in his *Mystical Theology*⁴, and it has become a key element of mystical writings ever since⁵. The main ideas of this influential treatise can be summed up in the following way: in order

1. In general, Eliot's poetical work has been divided into a period before and after his religious conversion, in the words of Leitch (1979, p. 35): "With the perspective of half a century, we can now see Eliot's religious conversion as the major turning point in both his art and life. Clearly, the early secular poetry of *Prufrock and Other Observations* (1917), *Poems* (1920), *The Waste Land* (1922) and *The Hollow Men* (1925), differs substantively from the later poetry of religion in *Ariel Poems* (1927-54), *Ash-Wednesday* (1927-30), *Choruses from 'The Rock'* (1934) and *Four Quartets* (1935-42)". Without contradicting this commonplace among the critics, it is also possible to see a more linear development with regard to Eliot's affinity to Christian Mysticism.

2. To mention just the religious fragments of the poem, not the literary fragments in general.

3. Namely in the third part of the poem, where the speaker climbs up until the "third stair".

4. The term "paradox" is not used in his work, but the excessive use of this figure is conspicuous.

5. As Haas (2007b) has shown, the paradox lies at the core of the thought of Meister Eckhart and Nicolas of Cusa, among others.

to understand God, we have to consider his positive attributes (“God is light”) first, even though they arise from a human perspective and are thus inadequate. After that, we have to contemplate the negation of these positive attributes (“God is not light”, that is, “God is darkness”). Negation is principally superior to affirmation as it makes us understand that God’s being is beyond words and concepts, but it is still inadequate because, ultimately, negation is also a human concept. Taken together, the two complementary ways of affirmation and negation can at least set up the human mind for the perception of the divine reality, which reveals itself –if the soul receives this divine grace– in a paradoxical manner, as a “ray of darkness”⁶. It is important to mention that the paradox is not an attribute of God himself, but a necessary consequence of our limited perception. God literally bursts our mind, and the breaking point towards Him, so to speak, is the paradox. Eliot knows this and, in his *Quartets*, poetically elaborates the paradox as the highest form of recognition of the divine. He does this in multiple ways, and to such an extent that the whole work can be read as an accumulation of paradoxes that constantly lead to one another. A remarkably interesting example is the spatial paradox in the first of the quartets, *Burnt Norton*. In this case, as we shall see, the paradox functions as a compositional element that structures the text and gives it its own very particular dynamic.

Burnt Norton, as the *Quartets* in general, can be described as a poetical attempt to overcome the categories of space and time in order to contemplate God, conceived in philosophical terms as the Absolute Being. Language is obviously reaching its limits here, as can be seen, as already said, by the repeated use of paradoxes. Precisely, there are two types of paradoxes Eliot makes use of: negative paradoxes, following the concept of *neither...nor*, one of the poem’s most frequently used expressions (“neither flesh nor fleshless”, “neither arrest nor movement”,

6. “πρὸς τὸν ὑπερούσιον τοῦ θεοῦ σκότους ἀκτῖνα” (the passage refers to the moment the mind enters ‘into the superessential radiance of the divine darkness’, *Mystical Theology*, l.1.).

“neither ascent nor decline”), and positive paradoxes, determined by the idea of *both...and* (“both a new world / And the old”, also implicitly contained in formulations such as “at the still point, there the dance is”). As Beierwaltes⁷ explains, both types have a specific effect on our intellect. The negative paradox excludes the Absolute from all that can be expressed in words and, in this way, creates a linguistic limit to which it leads us at the same time, indicating at least the possibility of crossing over. The positive paradox, on its part, asserts the unity of mutually exclusive concepts and, contradicting the principle of non-contradiction, disturbs categorical thought. The excessive use of both complementary types of paradoxes shows that Eliot really wants to break the reader’s mind.

The poem is introduced by two Greek quotes of Heraclitus⁸ that work as an epigraph: “τοῦ λόγου δὲ ἐόντος ξυνοῦ ζῶουσιν οἱ πολλοὶ ὡς ἰδίαν ἔχοντες φρόνησιν⁹” and “ὁδὸς ἄνω κάτω μία καὶ ὡστῆ.” Right at the beginning, Eliot thus refers to an ancient ‘master’ of the paradox¹⁰ whose work represents, at the same time, an original union of poetry and philosophy. A similar unity characterizes the *Quartets* with their continuous alternation of philosophical reflections and visionary images (even though the most decisive and profound passages are necessarily more poetical than philosophical in nature as they go beyond rational thought). The first quote introduces the antique notion of a *logos*, in the sense of a collective law governing the entire universe. The knowledge of this law and, more importantly, of its transcendent source, is what the poem seeks. The second quote announces the aforementioned spatial paradox that structures the whole poem: “The way up and the way down is one and the same.”

7.1979, p. 357.

8.The pre-Socratic philosopher is highly relevant to modern thought. It is known that Nietzsche was particularly fascinated by the “darkness” of his philosophy. Moreover, it seems that the fragmentary form of his philosophy (we do not possess his texts in their complete and original form) is particularly akin to modern aesthetics.

9.‘Even though the *logos* is universal, the many live as if they have wisdom of their own’.

10.As Cooper puts it, “taking Heraclitus as guide, the poem makes paradox its central heuristic device” (2006, p. 98).

In the context of Heraclitus' thought, this expression indicates an ultimate dimension of reality, a profound unity of contradictions behind, or deep within, the continuous transformation of the world¹¹, incomprehensible from a logical point of view. Understanding this unity is for the pre-Socratic philosopher a secret wisdom, equivalent to waking from a nebulous sleep¹². Eliot christianizes this idea in the above explained sense: the reality of God can only be perceived by us in a-logical manner; in other words, it cannot be properly understood, but in the awareness of this lies its secret understanding.

The spatial paradox introduced at the beginning causes a double dynamic in the text: in search of the mystery, the speaker¹³ seems to go up and down at the same time. On his way, in a typically fragmentary style, he expresses a continuous alternation of philosophical reflections and visionary images. In order to understand the particular movement of the poem, we shall analyze its individual parts from a spatial perspective. The first part begins with a time paradox, corresponding to the spatial paradox. All time, including past and future, is *eternally present*, and this absolute presence, in spatial terms an all-embracing *point*, seems to be what the speaker seeks. He follows an echo that leads him “*down the passage which we did not take [...] / into the rose-garden,*” where he has an enigmatic vision. The “garden” (the “hyacinth garden” in *The Waste Land*, “the Garden / Where all loves end” in *Ash Wednesday*) is a nuclear metaphor in the poetic work of Eliot. In a mystical context, it can be interpreted as a secret inner space, the “sparkle of the soul” (“Seelenfünkeln”), in words of Meister Eckhart, that connects us with and is inhabited by God. The

11. Maansfeld states that the “quintessence of Heraclitean philosophy is the conviction that all is one” (2008, p. 232). The concept of unity goes along with the idea of continuous transformation, as expressed in the famous river fragment.

12. Cf. Mansfeld (2008, p. 234).

13. Cooper (2006, p. 95) detects various different voices or speakers in the poem. One could likewise suppose one speaker who is talking from different perspectives.

idea of going *down*¹⁴ is associated here with the concept of memory¹⁵—the vision takes place in the past and seems related to childhood, but, at the same time, it transcends time categories by revealing that unique moment of eternal presence¹⁶:

[...] and the bird called, in response to
the unheard music hidden in the shrubbery,
and the unseen eyebeam crossed, for the roses
had the look of flowers that are looked at.
There they were as our guests, accepted and accepting.
So we moved, and they, in a formal pattern,
along the empty alley, into the box circle,
to look down into the drained pool.
Dry the pool, dry concrete, brown edged,
and the pool was filled with water out of sunlight,
and the lotos rose, quietly, quietly,
the surface glittered out of the heart of light,
and they were behind us, reflected in the pool.
Then a cloud passed, and the pool was empty.

These verses are indeed enigmatic. They seem to express the revelation of life itself, described paradoxically as a filling of the “dry pool” by “water out of sunlight” that causes a “lotos”¹⁷ to rise. This revelation is framed by two metaphorical expressions which indicate a momentary presence of God and follow the tradition of negative theology¹⁸: “the unseen eyebeam crossed” and “a cloud passed”. As His manifestation cannot be adequately processed by the human mind, it is necessarily “unseen”, or perceived as a sort of darkness. In another, complementary

14. “Going down a road” (or “passage”) and “going up a road” are both frequent formulations in English. Whereas everyday language is unconscious of their spatial dimension, Eliot, with poetic sensibility, consciously uses the first option to indicate spatial orientation.

15. The idea of recognizing God through our memory reminds of St. Augustine (*Confessions*, X, 7, 19).

16. Later in the poem, Eliot puts it like this: “But only in time can the moment in the rose-garden / [...] be remembered [...]. / Only through time time is conquered.”

17. The lotos is a symbol of oriental mysticism. In Hindu and Buddhist mythology, it stands for purity, insight, and the creation and harmony of the world (Nicklas, 2012, pp. 251-252). In spite of the clearly Christian orientation of the *Quartets*, oriental symbolism is still present.

18. I refer to the already explained idea that God is more adequately referred to in words by negation than by affirmation, systematized by Pseudo-Denys (*Mystical Theology*, also *The Divine Names*).

and even more paradoxical sense, it is the speakers own look that passes over the garden –God, the essence of our being, is more we than we are– and is therefore unseen. Looking and, at the same time, being what we are looking at¹⁹, we are at the peak of Eliot’s poetry. The “cloud”, on its part, is a metaphor of biblical origin²⁰ frequently used by occidental mystics. It is especially suitable to express the idea of the dissolution of rigid concepts and defined structures in the human mind at the moment of the mystical experience. A famous example in English Literature is the anonymous treatise, *The Cloud of Unknowing* (late 14th century, whose author develops his ideas on the basis of the *Mystical Theology* of Pseudo-Denis). Eliot’s affinity to the Christian mystical tradition becomes particularly obvious in the quoted passage.

It is important for the understanding of the poem that the revelation of the mystery takes place after, and maybe as a consequence of, a movement “in a formal pattern” –a term Eliot uses in accordance with the Heraclitean *logos*²¹– on the part of the speaker. The *logos* leads us, one could argue, to its own transcendent origin and cause, which cannot be recognized anymore by philosophical contemplation, but only by poetic vision²². Obviously, logic comes to an end here (enigmatic is also the presence of “them,” but who are *they*?²³). What is important for our purpose: all this is happening *down below*.

The second part of the poem, from a spatial perspective, is dominated by an up-down opposition. It starts with a sort of micro-‘poem within the poem’:

19.A thought of Meister Eckhart and another profound Christian paradox. See Haas (2007a, p. 145).

20.In both the *Antique* and the *New Testament*, God reveals himself in or even as a cloud (Éxodus 13, 21-22 and 20, 21; *Matthew* 17, 5; *Mark* 9, 7; *Luke* 9, 34).

21.*Logos* (λόγος) can be translated as “pattern”, even though the Greek language knows other words that express a similar concept, such as *metron* (μέτρον).

22.In this sense, the poem suggests the superiority of poetry over philosophy when it comes to get closer to the essence of God.

23.I see a relation to “children in the foliage” at the end of the poem, and the “children in the apple-tree / Not known [...]” that appear at the end of *Little Gidding*. It is curious that these enigmatic children, in a very similar setting, also appear in the poetry of Paul Celan.

The dance along the artery
 the circulation of the lymph
 are figured in the drift of stars
 ascend to summer in the tree
 we move above the moving tree
 in light upon the sodden floor
 below, the boarhound and the boar
 pursue their pattern as before
 but reconciled among the stars.

Terms like *artery*, *lymph*, *sodden floor*, *boarhound*, *boar*, and *below* remind of the earthly and material dimension of existence, whereas *drift of stars*, *ascend*, and *above the moving tree* indicate a celestial purification process. The speaker, continuously using the “we” form as if to identify with the entire humankind, is moving upwards now, and this ascension seems to cause a reconciliation of creation (“reconciled among the stars”; the passage echoes the Christian idea that man, as a follower of Jesus Christ, is the redeemer of the world as his spiritual rise leads creation back to its divine origin). The upwards directed movement reminds of the traditional idea of mystical ascension, enshrined in antique and medieval cosmology: our impure, material existence is related to the center of the earth, whereas God inhabits the top of the celestial spheres²⁴, the Empyrean. The aim, obviously, is to climb up and leave our dark, material existence behind (below).

The poem continues with a passage that can again be interpreted as a revelation of the cosmic mystery, this time expressed in philosophical terms, and probably resulting from the aforementioned ascension. We arrive “At the still point of the turning world”, a central concept in Eliot’s poetry that has already been fathomed out in *Ash Wednesday*²⁵. This ineffable point is described by a series of negative paradoxes: “Neither

24. The earthly existence is considered impure because here the four elements constantly mix with each other, whereas the celestial spheres are regarded as pure because supposedly they are composed of a single element, the ether.

25. Here, in dialogue with the prologue of the gospel of John, the key concept is not the “point”, but the “Word”, but the idea is very similar: “And the light shone in darkness and / Against the Word the unstilled word still whirled / About the centre of the silent Word” (V).

flesh nor fleshless; / neither from nor towards; at the still point, there the dance is". In self-reflective manner, the speaker's mystical way is now referred to as "neither ascent nor decline" and an "*Erhebung*²⁶ without motion." Consequently, the movement of the poem is annulled in these verses, the aforementioned ascension has, in fact, not been an ascension. Formulations like these aim for a blasting of our mental categories and make the text somewhat difficult to read, but they follow a certain logic: in their opposite structure (movement-stillness, past-future, up-down), these categories are consciously played off against each other as they exist only in our human perspective and not in an absolute one (if one believes in the existence of such a perspective), and the poem constantly tries to switch between these two, an audacious undertaking. From God's point of view, going up and down at the same time would likely make perfect sense, just as, for him, the future would not be essentially different from the past²⁷.

After having reached this moment of stillness that denies the idea of movement, the poem falls back into sequentiality and continues its particular dynamic. The third part contains a further descent. Contradicting, again, what has been stated before, the idea of purification is now associated with the *darkness* below. The following passage remind once more of the Christian mystical tradition:

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,
desiccacion of the world of sense,
evacuation of the world of fancy,
inoperancy of the world of spirit;
this is the one way, and the other
is the same, not in movement
but abstention from movement [...].

26. Eliot puts the term in italics. The German "*Erhebung*" can be translated as *uprising* or *ascension* and has a mystical connotation.

27. A perspective that, curiously, reflects the four-dimensional space-time continuum of 20th century physics.

These verses echo Eliot the work of St. John of the Cross, who relates the *via purgativa* to the motif of the night²⁸. As the Spanish monk and poet explains theologically in several of his treatises, and lyrically in his famous poem with the same title, in order to melt together with God, the human soul has to undergo a *dark night* in the sense of a purgatory of its sensitive and intellectual faculties.²⁹ Only if it is capable of renouncing not only the exterior objects of the material world, but also the concepts of the intellectual world, can the *unio mystica* take place. In other words, the soul's faculties must be completely empty to be filled by the pure presence of God. Like Eliot in the quoted passage, St. John also uses the term *desiccacion* ("sequedad"), complementary to *night* with regard to suggesting a state of absence, in order to describe this purification.

The idea of a descent into a purgatory night seems quite clear, but then, similar to the previous passage, the last three verses of the quote make nonsense of the spatial movement indicated before, this time in a positive manner. The aforementioned ascent has not been an ascent at all, now the descent is at the same time an ascent. It is curious that also St. John of the Cross reminds us of the fact that, when communicating with God, the descent is an ascent: "Porque las comunicaciones que verdaderamente son de Dios esta propiedad tienen, que de una vez levantan y humillan al alma; porque [en] este camino el abajar es subir, y el subir abajar"³⁰. The implications of this paradox are, in fact, not restrained to the spatial dimension, but effect the temporal as well; both the space and the time paradox are intimately related. In this manner, the mystical way is deprived not only of a spatial orientation, but also of a temporal sequence. Something similar happens in the poem: the descent follows the ascent, logic tells us it should be the other way round, but in reality

28.The connection between Eliot and St. John of the Cross has been studied, among others, by Gardner (1978), Gordon (1998), Murray (1991), and Carballo (1996).

29.Saint John sums up his ideas concerning the purgatory night in the prologue of *Súvida del monte Carmelo*.

30."Because the communications that really come from God do have this characteristic: they lift the soul up and humiliate it at the same time, because in this way, going down is going up, and going up is going down" (*Noche oscura*, II, 18.2.).

all is happening at the same time. It becomes obvious that the spatial paradox suggests the notion of simultaneity, another key idea in Eliot's work and thought³¹.

The switching between sequentiality and denial of movement and temporal succession in the poem corresponds to the impossible attempt of expressing a switching between the human and the divine perspective. What the poet can do, and Eliot does it like no other, is indicate the inefability of the divine perspective obtained during the mystical experience. From this perspective, conceived as a point of eternal presence and absolute stillness ("the still point"), *descend* and *ascend*, *this way* and *the other*, are one and the same, although they seem different from a human perspective, which is part of the moving world. In this sense, again in a paradoxical manner, the mystical way can be regarded as a moving towards immobility. In another passage of the poem, Eliot expresses a corresponding idea with respect to time: "Only through time time is conquered". It is characteristic of the *Quartets* that Eliot, in spite of the visionary impact, repeatedly insists on our limited human condition which is, precisely, defined by the categories of space and time.

The final part of the poem continues the dialectical movement of the text by suggesting once more the idea of ascension, with a second reference to St. John of the Cross:

The detail of the pattern is movement,
as in the figure of the ten stairs.
Desire itself is movement
not in itself desirable;
love is itself unmoving,
only the cause and the end of movement,
timeless and undesiring
except in the aspect of time
caught in the form of limitation
between un-being and being.

31. The idea of simultaneity is highly relevant in Eliot's literary theory with regard to the notion of the "whole of literature", that is, a simultaneous coexistence of all that has ever been written (Cf. *Tradition and the Individual Talent*).

The “ten stairs” of the second verse refer to St. John’s *ladder of love* (“escala de amor”), such as is described at the end of *La noche oscura*³². The motif derives from Jacob’s Ladder, an archetypal biblical image of mystical ascension: “Viditque in somnis scalam stantem super terram, et cacumen illius tangens caelum: angelos quoque Dei ascendentes et descendentes per eam, et Dominum innixum scalae dicentem sibi: «Ego sum Dominus Deus Abraham patris tui, et Deus Isaac»”³³. The Spanish poet uses this metaphor to illustrate a gradual climb of the soul to its Creator, from a state of tiredness towards worldly things (the first stair, which marks the beginning of the *via purgativa*) until total assimilation with God (tenth and last stair, equivalent to the *unio mystica*), also described as the *quiet state* (“estado quieto”), not to be reached in this lifetime, or only by a very few chosen ones. Also in Saint John, thus, movement has the final aim of transcending itself, that is, it leads us to immobility, and it is this ultimate and primordial immobility that Burnt Norton continuously circles around.

The final transcendence of movement via movement at the end of the poem would be, in Heraclitheat terms, a transcendence of the *logos* through the *logos*. In fact, Eliot begins with, but does not stay within, pre-Socratic thought as he introduces the Christian concept of love in the sense of an unmoving ground of Creation,³⁴ manifesting itself to us within the limits of space and time. A keyword for understanding the final passage of the quote is “between”. The timeless itself cannot be reached directly, but the point, or moment, of its temporal manifestation can, and

32. “Decimos, pues, que los grados desta escala de amor por donde el alma de uno en otro va subiendo a Dios son diez” (“Let us say, then, that the ladder of love by which the soul ascends to God has ten stairs”). *La noche oscura*, II, 19.1.

33. *Genesis* 28,10–13. The attractiveness of these biblical words lies not only in the fact that angels, as divine messengers, climb down the ladder, but also in the implication that man may be able to leave his dark, material existence behind (or better, *below*) by using the same to ascend to God, waiting at the top. Apart from Jacob’s ladder, various schemes of mystical ascension have been developed by the Church Fathers and their successors. In spite of slight differences, mainly concerning the number of levels or stairs, they all share the same spatial orientation (Cf. Köpf, 1998, pp. 35-37).

34. Obviously, this concept has a certain affinity to the Aristotelian notion of the unmoved or prime mover.

this “still-point” is a bridge between two worlds. We are at the core of the mystery, facing the mother of all paradoxes: Incarnation. As Eliot puts it in *The Dry Salvages* (V): “The point of intersection of the timeless / With time, is an occupation for the saint”.

Burnt Norton is a unique example of how the paradox is not only used as an argumentative pattern, but also as a compositional element that structures a whole mystical text, as we have seen by the particular down-up-down dynamic of the poem. Probably the most curious characteristic, in this context, is that the poem continuously formulates and, subsequently, denies its own movement and sequentiality, thus, in the end, also denying itself. This can be seen as an act of despair: Eliot is surely aware of the inevitable dilemma that the negation of time and space is necessarily its affirmation because the negation takes place in time and space³⁵. Maybe this is why, in another famous passage of the *Quartets*, we read: “The poetry does not matter”³⁶.

A phenomenon that should be studied with more detail is the different functioning of the paradox in philosophical thought and poetic vision. Whereas, it seems, the highly speculative passages of the poem reveal an unbreachable conceptual border³⁷ and *exclude* the divine of human thought by using this figure, the paradoxes in the visionary passages, especially the garden-scene (“water out of sunlight”), seem to correspond to a perception of God in an *inclusive* manner. Somehow, the border, for a glimpse of a moment, is gone. Poetry, transcending the principle of non-contradiction, is superior to conceptual thought when it comes to expressing the inexpressible. The work of Eliot proves that, as does the work of St. John of the Cross. The most enigmatic passages of the *Cántico espiritual*, for example, surpass by far the theological and

35. Once more in words of Meister Eckhart: “Sic iterum qui negat tempus, ponit tempus [...], quia negare tempus est in tempore” (quoted in Haas, 2007a, p. 147).

36. *East Coker*, II.

37. Haas (2007b, p. 170) defines the functioning of the mystical paradox as leading us to an “absolute border” that reminds us of the fact that God, as the unthinkable and inexpressible, necessarily withdraws himself from us.

philosophical comments on his poem. In this sense, poetry does indeed matter a lot.

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