

Helen Gardner: On "Burnt Norton"

The more familiar we become with *Four Quartets*, however, the more we realize that the analogy with music goes much deeper than a comparison of the sections with the movements of a quartet, or than an identification of the four elements as 'thematic material'. One is constantly reminded of music by the treatment of images, which recur with constant modifications, from their context, or from their combination with other recurring images, as a phrase recurs with modifications in music. These recurring images, like the basic symbols, are common, obvious and familiar, when we first meet them. As they recur they alter, as a phrase does when we hear it on a different instrument, or in another key, or when it is blended and combined with another phrase, or in some way turned round, or inverted. A simple example is the phrase 'a shaft of sunlight' at the close of 'Burnt Norton'. This image occurs in a rudimentary form in 'The Hollow Men', along with a moving tree and voices heard in the wind:

There, the eyes are
Sunlight on a broken column
There, is a tree swinging
And voices are
In the wind's singing
More distant and more solemn
Than a fading star.

At the close of 'Burnt Norton' a 'moment of happiness', defined in 'The Dry Salvages' as a 'sudden illumination' is made concrete by the image of a shaft of sunlight which transfigures the world:

Sudden in a shaft of sunlight
Even while the dust moves
There rises the hidden laughter
Of children in the foliage
Quick now, here, now, always --
Ridiculous the waste sad time

Stretching before and after.

This is the final concrete statement of what 'Burnt Norton' is about; but it recalls the experience we have been given in a different rhythm and with different descriptive accompaniments in the second half of the first movement, as the sun for a moment shines from the cloud, and the whole deserted garden seems to become alive:

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 heart of light,
And they were behind us, reflected in the pool.
Then a cloud passed, and the pool was empty.

The image repeated, but with such a difference, at the close establishes the validity of the first experience. Brief and illusory as it appears in the first movement, it has not been dismissed. It has remained in thought and it returns. Though

Time and the bell have buried the day,
The black cloud carries the sun away

when the 'sudden shaft' falls, it is time that seems the illusion.

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