

## F. O. Matthiessen: On "Burnt Norton"

It seems doubtful whether at the time of writing 'Burnt Norton', just after *Murder in the Cathedral*, Eliot had already projected the series. His creative energies for the next three years were to be largely taken up with *The Family Reunion*, which, to judge from the endless revisions in the manuscript, caused him about as much trouble as anything he has done. With 'East Coker' in the spring of 1940 he made his first experiment in a part for part parallel with an earlier work of his own. Again Donne's practice is suggestive: when he had evolved a particularly intricate and irregular stanza, he invariably set himself the challenge of following it unchanged to the end of his poem. But in assigning himself a similar problem for a poem two hundred lines long, Eliot has tried something far more exacting, where failure could be caused by the parallels becoming merely mechanical, and by the themes and rhythms becoming not subtle variations but flat repetitions. 'East Coker' does indeed have something of the effect of a set piece. Just as its high proportion of prosaic lines seems to spring from partial exhaustion, so its resumption of themes from 'Burnt Norton' can occasionally sound as though the poet was merely imitating himself. But on the whole he had solved his problem. He had made a renewal of form that was to carry him successively in the next two years through 'The Dry Salvages' and 'Little Gidding'. The discrimination between repetition and variation ties primarily in the rhythm; and these last two poems reverberate with an increasing musical richness.

A double question that keeps insisting itself through any discussion of these structures is the poet's consciousness of analogies with music, and whether such analogies are a confusion of arts. One remembers that Eliot, in accepting Lawrence's definition of 'the essence of poetry' as a 'stark, bare, rocky directness of statement', drew an analogy with the later quartets of Beethoven. This does not mean that he has ever tried to copy literally the effects of a different medium. But he knows that poetry is like music in being a temporal rather than a spatial art; and he has by now thought much about the subject, as the concluding paragraph of 'The Music of Poetry' shows:

I think that a poet may gain much from the study of music: how much technical knowledge of musical form is desirable I do not know, for I have not that technical knowledge myself. But I believe that the properties in which music concerns the poet most nearly, are the sense of rhythm and the sense of structure. I think that it might be possible for a poet to work too closely to musical analogies: the result might be an effect of artificiality.

But he insists -- and this has immediate bearing on his own intentions -- that 'the use of recurrent themes is as natural to poetry as to music'. He has worked on that assumption throughout his quartets, and whether he has proved that 'there are possibilities of transitions in a poem comparable to the different movements of a symphony or a quartet', or that 'there are possibilities of contrapuntal arrangement of subject-matter', can be known only through repeated experience of the whole series. All I wish to suggest here is the pattern made by some of the dominant themes in their interrelation and progression.

'Burnt Norton' opens as a meditation on time. Many comparable and contrasting views are introduced. The lines are drenched with reminiscences of Heraclitus' fragments on flux and movement. Some of the passages on duration remind us that Eliot listened to Bergson's lectures at the Sorbonne in the winter of 1911 and wrote an essay then criticizing his *durée réelle* as 'simply not final'. Other lines on the recapture of time through consciousness suggest the aspect of Bergson that most stimulated Proust. But the chief contrast around which Eliot constructs this poem is that between the view of time as a mere continuum, and the difficult paradoxical Christian view of how man lives both 'in and out of time', how he is immersed in the flux and yet can penetrate to the eternal by apprehending timeless existence within time and above it. But even for the Christian the moments of release from the pressures of the flux are rare, though they alone redeem the sad wastage of otherwise unilluminated existence. Eliot recalls one such moment of peculiar poignance, a childhood moment in the rose-garden -- a symbol he has previously used, in many variants, for the birth of desire. Its implications are intricate and even ambiguous, since they raise the whole problem of how to discriminate between supernatural vision and mere illusion. Other variations here on the theme of how time is conquered are more directly apprehensible. In dwelling on the extension of time into movement, Eliot takes up an image he had used in 'Triumphal March': 'at the still point of the turning world'. This notion of 'a mathematically pure point' (as Philip Wheelwright has called it) seems to be Eliot's poetic equivalent in our cosmology for Dante's 'unmoved Mover', another way of symbolising a timeless release from the 'outer compulsions' of the world. Still another variation is the passage of the Chinese jar in the final section. Here Eliot, in a conception comparable to Wallace Stevens' 'Anecdote of the Jar', has suggested how art conquers time:

Only by the form, the pattern,  
Can words or music reach  
The stillness, as a Chinese jar still  
Moves perpetually in its stillness.

From *The Achievement of T.S. Eliot*. Oxford UP, 1958.

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