

# Existential Crisis and Spiritual Struggle in the Poetry of T.S Eliot's

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**Abstract:** *The paper examines a ground that the chosen philosophers share. It will address man's existential crisis - his confusion and despair over his existence. T. S Eliot believed that his insight could pull humanity out of the despair and hopelessness of modern era. The paper emphasizes the self transcending character of human existence. The eternal human situation offers liberation of mankind which starts with a total knowledge of man by himself. Through philosophical and existential exploration we can enter into, in effect, another state of consciousness, where we reconnect with each of our will at a deeper and satisfying level.*

**Keywords:** Existentialism, Transcendence, Modern

## I. INTRODUCTION

This paper is in response to an angry cry from the torn edge of a world war, a resigned anthem to hopelessness. and attempts to define the nature and limits of the extreme human situation of our time - the experience variously described as "existential finitude" (Tillich), "cosmic exile" (Slochow), "ontological solitude" (Nathan Scott), "metaphysical exile" (Camus), and exile in the imperfect" ( Baudelaire). The terminological differences state the same experience as that of modern man's alienation from the ultimate ground of being and meaning. T.S Eliot moves from depression and nothingness to a resignation to the inevitable. The voice of moral and spiritual degradation, chaos of the age and loss of human values is heard and provides scope to the transcendental themes in a refocused form offered by existentialism. The anger of the age flares up in the poems like 'The Hollow Men' and 'The Waste Land' which tends to imply what is wrong in life is not absolutely inevitable. T.S. Eliot detailed the alienation and meaninglessness in his poems and participated in the search, exploring the philosophy of Existentialist thinkers, Buddhism, Hinduism for doctrines to explain and repair the fragmentation and meaninglessness of modern culture.

Modern Existentialism is confined to human existence. The paper is an introduction to the main currents of existentialist thought which finds transcendental treatment in T.S Eliot's poetry. Due to approaches taken by philosophers such as Kierkegaard, Heidegger and Sartre, we encounter an assortment on ontological possibilities. The potential for transcendence is linked to the resolution of the existential crisis and mental breakdown. The fundamental aspects of existentialism provide the impetus for much of the work of T.S. Eliot and his contemporaries.

Kierkegaard's leap of faith, Sartre's hot rhetoric of existential choice, Heidegger's cooler image of the heroic modern man, William James's will to believe, Paul Tillich's courage to be have been Eliot's energisers to get on with the search. Existentialism tells us of the conditions of existence, and to be aware of existence is to know them.

Economic slavery, triumph of science, materialistic approach to life and preoccupation with the idea of the welfare state have paralysed humanity. In his supreme conquest over material things, the individual has become a stranger to his own inner being and to the world. In their efforts at systematisation, the so called 'intellectuals' have created economic man, political man, military man. The individual has lost his uniqueness, and a disorientation of personality has set in. Such a crisis always leads to the ultimate human tragedy, the tragedy of meaninglessness of life:

A sick, toss'd vessel, dashing on each thing. 2

It is the realisation of one's true being and its destiny, not its standardisation that is to be achieved if mankind is to be emancipated and saved from its inevitable catastrophe. The existentialists believed in the ability, the necessity of the individual to construct the self. They believe life is given meaning by individuals. Eliot evinced this existentialist trend

in his thought. He saw the vast horror of the world war and contemporary man being cut off, alone, estranged, absurd. This limitation of modern man's existence reminds one of the American nightmare, the "long day's journey into night" (O'Neill). In one way or another, as Eliot says in East Coker III, "We all go into the dark". Nevertheless, against all evidence, this paper affirms the existence of a transcendent human nature and inherent meaningfulness. It is a conviction that the very power of blackness, agony, and despair which threatens our existence is also a hope of making the journey to the end of night. It is here that Eliot and Nietzsche demonstrate the self in writing.

This paper offers Eliot's findings within the conditions and dynamics of modern life the agonizing meaningfulness of the *genti dolose*, the sorrowful people in Canto III of Dante's *Inferno*. The bleaker aspects of existentialism: alienation, nausea, absurdity, sanity, anomie, ennui (which Tolstoy brilliantly defined as 'the desire for desires'), anxiety, estrangement, weightlessness, meaningfulness, purposelessness, and nihilism find expression in T.S Eliot's poetry. In this "the disillusionment and the wasteland" feeling created by war is voiced. In his early poetry, Eliot records the perceptions of psyche and historical time with an extreme precision of tone and phrase. In his later poetry, his mystic vision finds a verbal equivalence in terms of concrete symbolism and revealing paradox. His first important poem, and the modernist masterpiece in English, was the radically experimental 'Love Song of J.A. Prufrock'. T.S. Eliot quotes Einstein, "Weakness of the attitude is the weakness of the character". Prufrock epitomises this statement; by failing to take action, he is forced to live a life of futile wants and utter loneliness. 'The Waste Land' expresses with startling power the disillusionment of the post-war years. 'Four Quartets' becomes an assertion in desperation, a falling off from the poetry of experience to the more prosaic, discursive mode of "a man reasoning with himself in solitude", with a consequent loss of intensity and even credibility. Unlike postmodern literature, however, modernist literature saw fragmentation and extreme subjectivity as an existential crisis or a Freudian internal conflict. T.S. Eliot's later significant poems are exquisite philosophical musings on the nature of time and history. Eliot's "timeless moments", those instants of blinding epiphany and heightened existence that make the rest of life seem pathetically tame, are common to all humans, as is the lament for the rarity of such experience in Burnt Norton:

Ridiculous the sad waste sad time  
Stretching before and after.

The despair has been articulated by existentialist philosophers like Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Camus and Kafka. The poetry of T.S Eliot sees fragmentation and extreme subjectivity as an existential crisis. The images of dryness and infertility dominate the earlier parts of 'The Waste Land'. The earth is seen as 'the dead land' with 'dull roots', a 'stony rubbish' in which nothing will grow. In this desolation there is no hope for life:

And the tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief  
And the dry stone no sound of water.

These images of desolation are metaphorically linked to the lack of spiritual belief and loveless relationships in the modern world. In Section Two, 'A Game of Chess' an allusion to the splendour of Cleopatra ('The Chair she sat in, like a burnished') is juxtaposed with the pretentiousness of the neurasthenic woman. The world of fertility and love is replaced with alienation, loneliness and implied sterility:

My nerves are bad tonight ...stay with me Speak to me.

The horror and destruction of World War I transferred these suspicions of ultimate meaningfulness from the realm of mere speculative philosophy into the reality of tragic personal experience. Essentially, both the intellectual and the personal life of western culture became dominated in part by this timeless dialectic questioning meaning or meaningfulness of the universe and human experience.

Literary expressions of Eliot and other modern writers like W.B. Yeats, Joyce show connections with major figures - Bergson, Proust, Kafka, Camus, Sartre, Heidegger, Nietzsche, to name just a few. They have presented the tragedy of modern man obsessed with the own self only to find it caught in the maelstrom of socio-cultural forces, metaphysically suppressed, scattered and dissolved into a stream of consciousness with no centre of integration or orientation. In the social context, the struggle for selfhood is equally if not more frustrating. This paper endeavours to show the influence of the existential philosophers on Eliot, who moulded his shaping spirit of imagination regarding the doctrine of transcendence.

On reading T.S. Eliot one will gain a keen insight into a host of movements and trends in modern intellectual life - existentialism being the key issue. In 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock', Eliot through Prufrock reflects and predicts

the two dominant philosophies that shaped the twentieth century western civilization: Psychoanalysis and Existentialism. Eliot mourns the loss of chance, sobbing in existentialist despair, lamenting of passive indecision and inaction. In the opening lines, he says:

Let us go then you and I  
When the evening is spread out against the sky  
and following with the imagery of absolute impotence,  
Like a patient etherized upon a table.

It is in this way, that Eliot creates a sense of doing, and a sense of being dragged through the evening, tied to the back of a great fatalistic carriage. Towards the end of the poem, Eliot writes

Now I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be; Am an attendant lord. This is symbolic of the depersonalisation within the poem. Prufrock's private musings communicate the consciousness of an anti-hero who dreads human contact and, especially, sexual intimacy, a man virtually castrated by his own inhibitions. "Prufrock" prefigures Joyce, Kafka. To put it concisely, all twentieth century writers specialising in the personal, psychological, even unconscious point of view are clearly indebted to Eliot's groundbreaking effort.

Eliot drew on Bergson's methodology for new poems in which he cultivated indirect habits of mind. He thought that the most important passage in Bergson's work had to do with the difference between the heterogeneous qualities which succeed each other in our concrete perception, perceptions which are continuous, and an underlying harmony which one should be able to deduce. In the 'Love Song', Eliot has accepted the psychological time of Henri Bergson rather than quantitative measure of existence:

Time for you and time for me,  
And time yet for a hundred visions and revisions  
Before the taking of a toast and tea.

In 'Rhapsody on a Windy Night', time in the present is measured by the street lamps, but there is also a far more significant change in time between the past and present. On this point, Eliot has to say this about Bergson's view:

The past exists in the present, which contains the future. The concrete and ever present instant of duration is life, for each of us living individuals in his own time.

In 'Rhapsody on a Windy Night' Eliot experimented with Bergson's method of grasping truth not by means of analysis but by casting oneself on a current of immediate perception as it flowed through time. Authentic experience may be realized in the experience of anxiety as well as joy. The multiple locations of the same experience in space and time suggest its transcendental status. For Proust, the experience comes up spontaneously to repeat itself in the Present. In Eliot's 'Four Quartets' we find a parallel sense to this experience. We can hear through memory the unheard music of the early days, and the deserted garden and the empty pool are brought to life by memory, which, through the present, holds them alive. There is a glad note that reality has after all been grasped:

Quick now, here, now, always

The poetry of T.S. Eliot is filled with despair, helplessness, hollowness or separateness from any hope of salvation: "For thine is the Kingdom" and "Life is very long". Something fundamental prevents the hollow men from translating thought, however tepid into action. Faith, the substance of things hoped for, is beyond them. It is this shadow, the inability to believe in anything to the point of sacrifice, which prevents them from any action that might earn them entrance into the next world. In

'The Hollow Men',  
Between the desire  
And the spasm  
Between the potency  
And the existence  
Between the essence  
And the decent  
Falls the shadow.

Eliot seems to struggle with the possibility of faith. Ackroyd rightly says:

He was aware of what he called ‘the void’ in all human affairs - the disorder, meaninglessness, and futility which he found in his own experience; it was inexplicable intellectually ...and could only be understood or endured by means of a larger faith”.

Now to come to St. Augustine, he pointed a transcendent reality, in which time is non - existent. He held that Time was always passing and never is. Eliot’s notion of time is also expressed in ‘Burnt Norton’:

Time present and time past  
Are both perhaps present in time future  
And time future contained in time past  
If all time is eternally present  
All time is unredeemable ...  
What might have been and what has been  
Point to one end, which is always present.

The fluidity of temporal experience is tentatively suggested in these formulaic lines, which also lend themselves to theological constructions. One interpretation of this experience supports a religious reading: “If all time is eternally present / All time is unredeemable”. Eliot suggests that the time that grounds metaphysics may be what separates the believer from the possibility of personal redemption. The speaker strongly questions “a world of speculation” that prevents us from coming to terms with time in some way.

St. Augustine’s notion of time is closer to the moderns because it stresses the subjective nature of the temporal and allows for the eruption of the eternal into sequential time. He explained time as a psychological phenomenon. He holds that “time is in man’s soul and that it is man’s apprehension of time that gives it reality”.

This paper is a reflection of the partial modification of the philosophies of Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Sartre and their influence shaping Eliot’s notion of time consciousness. Eliot’s notion of a timeless moment, whose plenitude abolishes duration, that eternal instant of which Kierkegaard spoke. This seems to be an imaginative and partially intellectual insight which reproduces on a lower plane some of the conditions of mystical intuition. A sudden hint of eternity is obtained, and the time process seems momentarily suspended. Such moments of release free us from any eternal compulsion; they are surrounded by ‘... a white light still and moving’. The early nineteenth century Danish philosopher, Kierkegaard, insisted that ours is not a world of tendencies and ideas, but of men, each of whom is a mystery both in and to himself. Hence Kierkegaard is thought of as the first existentialist. For him the most important thing in life was man’s relationship to God. Reason could not prove either god’s existence or his goodness. Faith was a leap in the dark to which men were driven by awe and dread and anxiety. It is only in taking Kierkegaardian leap to faith; Eliot is able to embrace a transcendental signifier, which serves as a source of meaning and basis of hope. Some of Kierkegaard’s later successors, for instance the French philosopher novelist and playwright Jean Paul Sartre, are not men of religious belief but atheists; but the dread, awe, and anxiety with which they regard what appears to be the unnecessary and arbitrary intrusion of human consciousness into the world - man, ‘a useless passion’ - makes them as eager as Kierkegaard to insist on the unique significance of every individual human life.

Kierkegaard, Heidegger and Sartre have in their different ways assigned a crucial role to anxiety for the revelation of true being. Kierkegaard sought to discover the recurrence of things in eternity, and he believed in the continuous integration of past and future in the present which, with the exception of a more marked stress on the importance of the past, was very close to Bergsonian duration. He holds that the moment in time has an essential, not just an accidental, relationship to union with God. Therefore Kierkegaard calls it the “Fullness of Time”. Moreover, the conversion which takes place within man involves a transition as momentous as that from non-being to being. Therefore, Kirkegaard calls it the “New Birth”. Kirkegaard’s conception of authentic existence has been summarised as follows:

To be a person is to exist in the mode, not of being, but of becoming and what a person becomes in his own responsibility, the product of his will. Repetition is an essential and recurrent ideal in existentialist thinking. In repetition inheres the earnestness and reality of life. Eliot’s use of the idea of ‘Repetition’ and ‘Recollection’ reminds one of Kierkegaard: When one does not possess the categories of recollection or of repetition the whole of life is resolved into a void and empty noise.<sup>7</sup> By repetition, Kierkegaard does not mean the type of recurrence with which scientific laws are concerned. It is not the repetition that is characterised in ‘Portrait of a Lady’ when the young man loses his self-possession and is irritated when he hears a reiterated tune.

I remain self- possessed  
Except when a street-piano, mechanical and tired  
Reiterates some worn out common song

Like Proust, he considers repetition in the perspective of personal history. It occurs through grace. Kierkegaard compares repetition and recollection. Repetition and Recollection are the same movement, only in opposite directions; for what is recollected has been, is repeated backwards whereas repetition properly so called is recollected forwards.<sup>8</sup> Eliot adopts this sense of Repetition and Recollection in weaving the pattern of his poetry. Kierkegaard holds that man can transcend the temporal flux. Again he says that we can do justice to human history by defining the instant as the point where eternity touches time. History is the setting in which man exercises freedom in seeking a right relationship with eternity and there is no way of describing man's "present" without taking into account the fact that man transcends the present. The "instant", viewed as an atmosphere of eternity, may be called a finite attempt to fulfil time. To him man is a synthesis of the infinite and the finite, of the temporal and the eternal, of freedom and necessity. This conception of man is in harmony with Eliot's conception that man is a product of the natural and supernatural.

A close analysis of Heidegger's lecture shows that he himself had not in mind a theoretical and conceptual construction, but a way of philosophizing that consisted in an "experience" and moreover in an "experience of truth". Heidegger was one of the first philosophers to denounce what he called literally "the drunkenness of lived experiences". It is not only now that everything must be an object of a "lived experience". It is this frantic quest of lived experiences that shows in the present time the human being has lost "Being" and that he has become the prey of his chase after lived experiences. In this context, Heidegger introduces the beautiful expression of "temporal escapings" that liberate us from the traps of the image of horizontality. In Heidegger's opinion, we discover the different stages of the forgetting of Being, which go together with new understandings of truth, find an echo in similar transformations of the conquest of experience. If we accept the legitimacy of an enquiry regarding the historical transformations of truth, we should have no difficulties in developing a similar inquiry regarding the transformations of the idea of experience. In the first stage, truth is no longer what it was. In the second stage, the concept of experience is linked closely to the idea of a spatial and temporal crossing. An experience can only be understood if we accept the corresponding itinerary. T.S. Eliot's famous verses in 'The Waste Land' are worth remembering in the context, which describe the peregrinations of the pilgrims toward Jerusalem:

We will not cease from exploration  
And the end of all our peregrinations  
Will be that we come back to where we started

And then we will know the place for the first time. It is exactly this point that Heidegger stresses in his early lectures. He emphasises the fact that man can transcend time, he sees the totality of human existence, including knowledge as contained in the structure of temporality. Although man can never stand outside temporality, temporality stands outside itself by producing what he calls the three "ecstasies" of past, present, and future. The fully human way to approach the problem of temporality is in terms of historicity. Man as a being in history finds the meaning of his own existence only by taking account of history of the race. For him, the repetition of the past in the present, is oriented forward toward the fulfilment of possibilities. Sometimes Heidegger insists that this limit on human detachment is a condition of existence rather than a product of recent history; only sensations of giddiness and despair hint a technology and inauthenticity. Elsewhere in the 'Letter of Humanism', he argues that Marx correctly gives "the estrangement of man" its "essential; dimension of history". The sad course that humanity has followed since the dawn of Western Philosophy now returns to "its roots in the homelessness of modern man". As a consequence, America's self-satisfied inheritance of the old European tradition is not only an increasingly dismaying "life style", but also another "dawning".

A brief analysis of the poetry of T.S. Eliot brings to the front the major existential preoccupations - anxiety, fear of nothingness, urban indifference, the absurd, loneliness and a confrontation with death. These are evoked with animated countryside or urban scenes and with mythological and literary allusions. Allusions in T.S. Eliot's Poetry create a metaphoric structure in which bits and pieces of history, myth and literature create a dismal contemporary world of memory. The Woman in 'Preludes' is trapped and limited by life's mundane pretensions and the onward march of time:

To early coffee-stands  
With the other masquerades

That time resumes,  
One thinks of all the hands  
That are raising dingy shades  
In a thousand furnished rooms.

T.S. Eliot touches on the limitations of time on the individual in 'Prufrock', 'Preludes' and 'Rhapsody on a Windy Night'. The sections from 'Preludes' suggest that time limits the individual to its continual cycle. Prufrock admits that he is incapable of predicting the future and therefore the future is risky and uncertain:

I am no prophet- and here's no great matter

The wisdom and pre-existential anguish found in Eliot's poetry could only have been achieved through much suffering. Eliot constantly displays his 'world-weariness' towards life. Through 'Prufrock' Eliot demonstrates the tiresome, tedious nature of city life as the smile describes the street, comparing it to a "tedious argument":

Let us go, through certain half-deserted streets,  
The muttering retreats  
Of restless nights in one- night cheap hotels  
And saw-dust restaurants with oyster shells;  
Streets that follow like a tedious argument  
Of insidious intent.

Living is portrayed more forcibly as painful in both 'Preludes' and 'Rhapsody' preparing for a pedestrian life is "the last twist of the knife". In 'Preludes' the human condition is illustrated as one of suffering:

The notion of some infinitely gentle  
Infinitely suffering thing.

The poetry of T.S. Eliot is filled with the despair of human condition. Eliot invokes pathos in many of his poems to depict the pitiful situation of mankind in the modern world. For example, pathos is employed in 'Preludes':

I am moved by fancies that are curled  
Around these images, and cling:  
The notion of some infinitely gentle  
Infinitely suffering thing.

In 'Rhapsody on a Windy Night' themes of decay and death permeate the imagery as every street lamp "Beats like a fatalistic drum", and the imagery connected with the broken and rusted spring conveys:

A broken spring in a factory yard,  
Rust that clings to the form that the strength has left  
Hard and curled ready to snap.

The fact that there is nothing behind the child's eye suggests that the universe is empty and lacks meaning. 'I could see nothing behind the child's eye'

There are echoes of Kafka in Eliot's work, but our reading of Kafka noticeably refines and diverts our reading of the poem. The fact is that each writer creates his precursors. His work modifies our conception of the past, as it will modify the future, images and allusions resurface throughout the poem transcending the divisions between narrators and narratives of the past and present. This kind of recycled imagery makes sense in the light of Eliot's vision of cyclical time, for although Eliot uses the cycle as the central structural and thematic shape of 'The Waste Land', there is a sense in which this narrative and conceptual form symbolises a kind of stasis for Eliot. Pessimism pervades the poetry of T.S. Eliot. 'The Waste Land' is a suitable example, a poem scarred by war, filled with images of impotence, sexual and metaphorical.

'What is that sound high in the air', Eliot asks.  
Who are those hooded hordes swarming  
Over endless plains, stumbling in cracked earth  
Ringed by the flat horizon only  
What is the city over the mountains?  
Cracks and reforms and bursts in the violet air  
Falling towers  
Jerusalem Athens Alexandria

Vienna London  
Unreal.

The participation of consciousness in divine presence means that we are always both somewhere and nowhere; along with the nightmare workplace or city dominates expressionist drama as the mechanism of bureaucracy does Kafka and a haunting automatism the London Eliot's 'The Wasteland'. Such generalisation of trauma and dissociation to a whole environment, society, or landscape is especially noticeable after World War I. In the wake of the Second World War, existentialist writers such as Sartre and Albert Camus affirmed human freedom. The "immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history" is an agonizing inescapable task, whether in the work of our greatest writers such as Eliot, Kafka, or in the mind and life of any person who wishes to make moral sense of being alive. Jean-Paul Sartre, the most famous existentialist philosopher, puts it this way:

We are condemned to be free.

Freedom alone makes us human. Sartre always speaks of human condition and his description of it is the analysis of modern world. What Sartre postulates as the radical freedom is identical with what T.S Eliot said about modern individual's loss of traditions, roots and orientations under the conditions of 20th Century civilization. Sartre felt that human beings simply existed, and were alone. Meaninglessness and absurdity of life was the most basic discovery by the existentialist philosophers. The absence of eyes, the windows to the soul, frightening, but equally frightening is the fact that the people find themselves speechless, waiting to be conveyed across the River Styx, unable to see the future unless the "multifoliate rose", Dante's symbol of paradise, "the hope only of empty men" should suddenly appear to save them. Sartre may capture the exhilaration of freedom exercising itself in the immediacy of the present - but can the subtlest explorations of time compensate for the loss of eternity?

Albert Camus, the great French writer of the century, is probably closer to Kafka in philosophical orientation than in style, but Kafka's influence is still immense. Hope and the absurd in the work of Franz Kafka, "the appendix to Camus' influential essay, 'The Myth of Sisyphus', serves to link Kafka's ideas with Camus's own. Both authors treat 'existentialist' themes of estrangement, death, absurdity, and anxiety as can be known from the discussion of Eliot's poetry. Kafka depicted a meaningless bizaree world in The Trial. Camus's most famous novels owe much to Kafka; the trial in The Stranger clearly evokes Kafka's own trial, The Plague alludes to Kafka too.

Camus's Le tranger and T.S Eliot's description of an anti-hero or alienated soul, running away from or confronting the emptiness of the existence is drawn in comparisons. In the Love Song of J.Alfred Prufrock, Prufrock fails to identify with the world of 'cakes and ale and ices'. The voices of the world recede from him, and he ultimately declares that he cannot hear the mermaids singing. Here a comparison can be drawn with Meursault in Albert Camus's novel The Outsider. The two figures are the products of heightened realism, and this is reflected in the quest of truth. They can be seen as consecutive stages in the development of modern man's predicament. The thought of Karl Jaspers, one of the foremost philosophers of existence, has been devoted to the explication of man's situation in the world and the possibilities of his self-transcendence. It concerns itself with a general statement of the principle of philosophic categories which have given uniqueness to Jaspers thinking: existence, freedom, and history, and the limit-situations of death, suffering and sin. Writers shortly after Jaspers's major systematic work and before his analysis of the problem of truth, reason and existence, occupy a primary position in the development of his thought. Jaspers in his Man in the Modern Age points to the emergence of human masses, the dissolution of traditional values, and the rise of nihilism, as signs of what he calls the "despiritualisation of the world".

One might call the root nature of being awareness, an awareness that is concerned about its own being- in- the- world. Jaspers's basic philosophic concern was with the concrete individual, and he believed that genuine philosophy must spring from one's individual existence and address itself to other individuals to help them again a true understanding of their existence. The basic concept of his philosophy is the "encompassing", an essentially religious concept, intended to suggest the all- embracing transcendent reality within which human existence is enclosed. In spite of ambiguities and uncertainties, he had a yes to life and shared an interest in existentially relevant knowledge and despised the empty speculation of merely academic philosophy for its lack of reference to reality. Eliot's writings speak, using Jaspers's beautiful expression from philosophy I of the "inaccessible ground of human awareness". This spiritual unconscious is within us, which seeks meaning, and which cannot be known analytically or as an object, but which underlies existence. The lines from the Vedas are also relevant to the context: "that which does the seeing, cannot be seen; that which does

the hearing, cannot be heard; and that which does the thinking cannot be thought". Buddhists might call it the dharmakaya or Budhhanture, and their practices, like those of existentialists seek to know it but do not analyse it materialistically or take it for a thing. Eliot's contempt is for people living unreal lives, engaged in willful distraction, who are 'wasting' their 'sad time'.

His exhortation is open to all, and refers to here and now in Burnt Norton.

Quick now, here, now, always  
Ridiculous the sad waste time  
Stretching before and after.

T. S Eliot was aware of the void in human affairs – “the disorder, meaninglessness, and futility which he found in his own experience; it was inexplicable intellectually ...and could only be understood or endured by means of larger faith”. Eliot's poetry may be regarded as a deeper and more intense probing into the perennial questions. In 'Four Quartets' we are transported to a vedantic landscape, where empirical distinctions of the temporal and eternal, the particular and universal, birth and death, flux and stillness, light and darkness, are obliterated and transcended.

Eliot realised in language a potential route to salvation. He appears concerned primarily with “the still point of the turning world” where

Words, after speech, reach  
Into the silence.

His concept of “auditory imagination” implies one of the basic tenets of Indian Philosophy. The auditory imagination operates on the level of the unconscious. Behind the word is the sound which reveals its truth to the mind which is attuned to it. Indian philosophers believed that every word vibrates with the meaning that is embedded in it. The mind in contemplation rests on the object, more specially on the sound. Once the mind is still, then a technique of contemplation can connect the discipline with the centre of his being. This is the process of self realisation. The Vedas describe this primal sound “OM”. Indian mysticism endows the word with the power to awaken the consciousness to a realisation of the Absolute. The first and final cause is both nothing and absolute: in his equation of ontological plenitude and ontological vacancy is a virtually certain case of Buddhist influence on Eliot's developing philosophical position.

Caught up in a daily cycle of meaninglessness, victims repeat actions that perpetually deny humanity and rob life of hope. The depiction of the reign of a Fisher King, a vegetating authority figures over a sterile land. It symbolises the impotence and fruitlessness of his kingdom which is now reduced to a dry bone. It is hoped that a worthy warrior can lift the curse through a dual initiation rite - by entering the castle and explaining a series of obscure symbols, which the poet depicts as the Buddhist triad “Datta, Dayadhvam, Damayata” (give, sympathise, control). Eliot ends the poem with the ritual call to peace, repeated three times in pattern with the Buddha's three part command. Written over two decades after his early master pieces, 'Burnt Norton' is the first of the 'Four Quartets', Eliot observes his typical stylistic patterning with an erudite epigraph drawn from Heraclitus and a division into five staves, a parallel of the movements of a musical composition. Lulling the reader with repetition in “Time present and time past”, “time future”, and “all time”, the poet mimics a Buddhist chant, a compelling intonation that, like self hypnosis, draws the reader into a veiled, mystic consciousness. The mesmerising effect of these time oriented phrases embodies T.S Eliot's philosophical consideration of history, which comprised time and action.

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