A Study Of Four Quartets In Poetry

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Abstract: As the material of poetry, language projects the most faithful and indispensable picture of thought and expression of human experience. Since language offers the greatest opportunity for any kind of symbolic activity, poetry is the most concentrated form of speech known to man. Due to the limited structure of the language we use, an experience is difficult to describe. To experience is to know. In poetry, this knowledge which leads to an understanding of its "depth-structures" can be acquired by the mind which contemplates. The use of metaphor and symbol ultimately project a silence, a state that goes beyond mere speech. Heidegger, the German philosopher, stated that the essence of language lies in stillness –the rest in which all motion is gathered together. Language is "the chime of stillness." Heidegger asserts "Men are capable, in their way, of uttered speech only in so far as they belong to the chime of stillness" (1967). This reality was first made known to philosophers, and then to poets. Though Heidegger's views are not entirely identical with the framework I have chosen for my essay, it is interesting that he highlights through the image of "the chime of stillness" an area of human experience that falls outside the limits of what can be thought or said.

Key words: Poetry, Language, Four Quartets, Heidegger, Metaphor, Communication.

INTRODUCTION

Once this view is accepted, then poetry acquires a wider dimension. Language is culture specific, but the language of poetry is meta-language. It is a medium which activates the process of self-actualization. Seen from this angle, there is a particular role assigned to poetry. It can be considered as an analogue to contemplation which suggests a movement from knowledge to "a peace that passeth understanding." Poetry thus becomes an act of sadhana (1977). Exposed to the horrors of the psychic and moral emptiness of his times, Eliot realized in language a potential route to salvation. Poetry, he held, can communicate before it is understood. The poet has to communicate an experience "which is not an experience in the ordinary sense, for it may only exist, formed out of many personal experiences ordered in some way which may be very different from the way of valuation of practical life, in the expression of it" (1933).

Four Quartets In Poetry:

In Four Quartets, Eliot states that the poet's experience of the ultimate reality beyond the spatio-temporal is incommunicable for "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 (1969). As Unger, observes, "the idea of isolation, the impossibility of communication and understanding, has a direct bearing on Eliot's style, his mode of composition, and the structure of his poems, for the thematic problem is not only that of communication between one person and another but, finally, that of articulation itself." Articulation of the inarticulate remains Eliot's major concern (1961).

He appears concerned primarily with "the still point of the turning world" where "Words, after speech, reach/into the silence". In Hindu thought the sound beyond speech is called anahata (1971). 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 (1964). (The Vedic hymns were originally recited as part of the religious rituals to instill an awareness of the "divine" in the hearts of the devotees.) The mind in contemplation rests on the object, or more specifically, on the sound. Once the mind is still then at technique of contemplation can connect the disciple with the "centre of his being." This is the process of self-realization. The Vedas describe this primal sound as "OM" or "AUM." "OM" is not a word but a sound (1936). When pronounced correctly, "OM" is said to be the purest syllable, the sound from which all other sounds may be developed. In "The Waste Land" Eliot uses the Sanskrit equivalent for peace "Shantih/ but not "OM," as "OM" is intractable to language. When recited orally "Shanthih" (a mantric formula) is always prefixed by "OM." If stillness is the perfection of motion, then silence is the perfection of sound. Silence can thus "Speak" from the heart of the cosmic "stillness."

Eliot's concept of the "auditory imagination" implies this basic tenent of Indian philosophy. Eliot defines auditory imagination as ... the feeling for syllable and rhythm; penetrating far below the conscious levels of...
thought and feeling, invigorating every word; sinking to the most primitive and forgotten, returning to the origin and bringing something back, seeking the beginning and the end. It works through meanings, certainly, or not without meanings in the ordinary sense, and thus fuses the old, and obliterated, and the trite, the current and the new and surprising, the most ancient mentality.

The auditory imagination operates on the level of the unconscious, by Indian philosophers. It connects sound (the beginning of the word) with silence (the end of the word). This is the condition beyond the apparent meaning of a word, i.e., nissabda. Nissabda is not mere silence, but the condition beyond the word, i.e., sabda. Since it is beyond sabda and artha (meaning) it can work even in the absence of meaning. This theory implies that the mind possesses varying levels of perception, and it is the auditory imagination which transcends the level of the text-into the realm of "silence" through an awareness of its own inherent processes of transcendence.

Seen in this light, Four Quartets can be interpreted as a map of consciousness preparing the "deluded" mind for the actualization of a unified consciousness. The Self is the unified consciousness which perceives everything but is not itself an object of perception. It is timeless, eternal, and unchanging.

Four Quartets is structured around the idea of change. Lord Krishna described His Nature thus: "Earth, water, fire, air, aether, mind, intellect and the thought of I (individuality) are My "Nature" in its eight-fold division and verily my lower Nature. But know too my other (higher) Nature that of the Soul, by which the world is sustained" (1939). Four Quartets centers around the four elements of Air (Burnt Norton), Earth, (East Coker), Water (Dry Salvages) and Fire (Little Gidding). The union of these four elements creates "life", a life that is often "filled with fancies," "empty of meaning: One can "descend lower, descend only/In to the world of perpetual solitude". Is there "an end to the drifting wreckage "to the"... Soundless wailing, The silent withering of autumn flowers"? Can we even think "of a time that is ocean less. . . Or of a future that is not liable/Like the past, to have no destination". It is through contemplation that the mind can transcend this "lower nature" and reach the level of the "higher nature where the "tire" and the "rose" are one.

The Word, or Logos, is the organizing principle of the total scheme which is "reconciled among the stars". In Four Quartets the task of understanding the whole pattern and finally arriving "At the still point of the turning world" is closely related to the poet's task of understanding, finding words for, and finally communicating his discovery. The proper creation of a poem is a religious duty of a poet. In "Little Gidding" Eliot elaborates: Since our concern was speech, and speech impelled us to purify the dialect of the tribe and urge the mind to after sight and foresight let me disclose the gifts reserved for age, to set a crown upon your lifetime's effort (1988).

In Indian aesthetics, at this moment of transcendence, the word becomes a mantra. Orientalists generally describe mantra as "prayer," as "mystic syllables" that are chanted during the performance of religious rituals. However, mantra is a power which lends itself impartially to any use. Mantra, in short, is a power (sakti), a power in the form of sound which can evoke the primordial reality behind the uttered sound.

Eliot himself realized the significance of the incantatory element in poetry. Eliot once said that "all poets would like their work to be said or sung by the common people ...." (1980). He also said that he would prefer an audience that could neither read nor write. In Four Quartets each poem is structurally a poetic equivalent of a classical symphony, or quartet. The meaning of the poem arises as a whole when all the four poems are considered in relation to each other. When the mind dwells on its inner essence, then the absence of "thought" is silence. It is this auditory imagination that is needed to perceive the wisdom that is inherent in all of us.

This fragmented use of language finds a symbolic analogy in man's own disordered and chaotic thoughts as he follows, "The deception of the thrush"... It is the poet who can rescue him from this delusion. But human-kind cannot bear too much reality. The moment of illumination in the rose garden, the mystic glimpse of the lotus rising quietly out of the "heart of light", are rare and often unknown experiences in a world where little mind is conscious but conscious of nothing." To be restored our sickness must grow worse. "If to be warmed.. then I must freeze! And quake in frigid purgatorial fires/of which the flame is roses and the smoke is briars" (1969).

This process of mental purgation is needed to realize any form of wisdom. A psychic and cultural renewal is possible through the power of sound in poetry. Eliot extended the mantra power to the language of poetry where meaning is communicated through the intricate nuances of rhythm, breath and sound. Listening attentively expands the mind, frees it from distractions and fancies, from " ... the dark cold and the empty desolation" to reach out to the Infinite. The mind is stilled, controlled and disciplined, For "We must be still and still moving/Into another intensity/For a further union, deeper communion ...." Similarly, shunyata is Eliot's strongest argument for the power of silence which sounds in poetry can evoke. Shunyata is the absence of subject-object relation. Silence is a necessary condition for wisdom. It is the inner freedom from the practical desire, The release from action and suffering, release from the inner And the outer compulsion. Yet surrounded by a grace of sense, a white light still and moving.

This faculty of the mind is not available to vision, only to experience. In "The Dry Salvages," a final solution is sought and " an approach to the meaning restores the experience/In a different form, beyond any meaning/We can assign to happiness". Indian mysticism endows the word with the power to awaken the
consciousness to a realization of the Absolute. It holds material existence to be existence in time. The timeless is experienced only when the mind apprehends the Divine by transcending the limitations of the temporal.

For most of us there is only the unattended moment, the moment in and out of Time. The rest is realized through prayer, observance, discipline thought and action. It is to this intense meditative state that the Four Quartets leads. "little Gidding" concludes with the evocative line, And all shall be well.. When the tongues of flame are in-folded Into the crowned knot of fire And the fire and the rose are one.

For every beginning is an end and every end a beginning. One has to be redeemed from the fire of "death" by the fire of redemption. Through this baptism of fire, the soul transcending the sacred and the profane shall reach that moment of timeless presence where,"The moment of the rose and the moment of the yew tree/Are of equal duration".

The philosophic resolution is made when the fragments fall into place it resolves itself into a unified harmonious whole. So also in the use of words, the moments of illumination can be evoked in the mind of an ordinary man through the use of the right word by the poet. When every phrase and sentence is right, when every word is exact and precise without being vulgar or pedantic, then every phrase, and every sentence is an end and a beginning, and every poem is an epitaph.

Thus interpreted, Four Quartets is an analogue to the process of manana (contemplation) implicit in mantra. In Four Quartets Eliot goes beyond Time and suggests the ultimate unification of all experience and reality. Unless awareness penetrates into the very core of the mind and heart, and unless it alters in its quality by an inner change in the whole psyche, no "illumination" is possible. Poetry, therefore, "may make us from time to time a little more aware of the deeper, unnamed feelings which form the substratum of our being, to which we rarely penetrate; for our lives are mostly a constant evasion of ourselves, and an evasion of the visible and sensible world".

It is the poet, consequently, who has to struggle to find the right word to stimulate knowledge of the Word. To do so the poet has to painfully begin the process of learning all over again by breaking away from the conventional use of the word, "Leaving one still with the intolerable wrestle/With words and meanings". Four Quartets is itself in the nature of a ritual, a psychological ritual of insight, loss, searching, praying, finally, ending in the rapture of a mystical awareness of the hidden laughter of children in the foliage". This, according to Eliot, is the highest point that poetry can reach, or will ever reach.

REFERENCES