

## T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*: The Employment of The Mystical Elements to Address the Individual State of Uncertainty During World War II

Dr. Mahmoud Alkhayer\*  
Mher Ghazarian\*\*

(Received 30 / 7 / 2008. Accepted 22 / 9 / 2008)

### □ ABSTRACT □

Mysticism is a religious tradition that has long existed in every religion, culture, and literary form, and indicates a direct experience of the Divine. It has been a rich theme for poets who have long used it to add intensity and depth to their poetry. Some poets have employed certain mystical elements to convey certain perspectives and answers concerning international and individual issues. This research aims at illustrating how T. S. Eliot employs the mystical elements of "paradox", "the Center" and "Via Negativa" in his poem *Four Quartets* to remind his readers of their divine essence and the way they should follow in order to get salvation, and relief from the individual state of uncertainty, on the spiritual and personal levels, that prevailed in the time of atrocities and chaos of World War II.

**Keywords:** Mysticism, Mystical Elements, T. S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*, Paradox, The Mystical Center, Via Negativa, World War II

---

\*Professor – Department of English – Faculty of Arts and Humanities – Tishreen University – Lattakia – Syria.

\*\*Postgraduate Student – Department of English – Faculty of Arts and Humanities – Tishreen University – Lattakia – Syria.

## قصيدة ت. س. إيليوت "الرباعيات الأربع": توظيف العناصر الميسيتية لمعالجة حالة الشكوكية الفردية في فترة الحرب العالمية الثانية

الدكتور محمود الخير\*

مهير قازريان\*\*

(تاريخ الإيداع 30 / 7 / 2008. قبل للنشر في 22 / 9 / 2008)

### □ الملخص □

الميسيتية تقليد ديني موجود منذ زمن بعيد في كل ديانة وحضارة وشكل أدبي، وتشير إلى الإدراك المباشر للمقدس. لقد شكلت الميسيتية موضوعاً غنياً للشعراء الذين قاموا بتوظيفها لإضافة عمق وقوة إلى أشعارهم وقام البعض منهم بتوظيف عناصر ميسيتية محددة لإيصال وجهات نظر معينة أو للإجابة عن بعض القضايا على الصعيدين العالمي والفردى. يهدف هذا البحث إلى إظهار كيف قام ت. س. إيليوت بتوظيف عناصر "التناقض" و"المركز" و"الطريق السلبي" في قصيدته "الرباعيات الأربع" ليذكر قراءه بجوهرهم المقدس والطريق الذي عليهم إتباعه للوصول إلى الخلاص والراحة من الحالة الشكوكية على الصعيدين الفردى والروحي التي سادت في زمن الفظائع والفوضى إبان الحرب العالمية الثانية.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** الميسيتية، العناصر الميسيتية، ت. س. إيليوت، "الرباعيات الأربع"، التناقض، المركز الميسيتى، الطريق السلبي، الحرب العالمية الثانية

\* أستاذ - قسم اللغة الإنكليزية - كلية الآداب والعلوم الإنسانية - جامعة تشرين - اللاذقية - سورية.

\*\* طالب دراسات عليا (ماجستير) - قسم اللغة الإنكليزية - كلية الآداب والعلوم الإنسانية - جامعة تشرين - اللاذقية - سورية.

## **Introduction:**

World War II was one of the periods of the human history that burdened man's psyche with devastating disorders directly related to faith and morals. The atrocities of war, destruction, and loss of every humane sensation have led the individual of that time to lose faith, and meaning of life. Poets have tried to address the individual state during this unique period in the human history using different means and techniques. T. S. Eliot is one of these poets who used a special approach in his poem *Four Quartets*, employing certain elements of a distinguished religious trend known in every religion and culture as mysticism.

## **The Significance of the Research:**

It is important to present the mystical approach poets use in their attempt to give answers to different social issues related to human suffering in times of total uncertainty and misorientations. It is also essential to illustrate how the mystical elements, which are religious in content, can be employed in poetry to produce the highest poetic effect and to add to the splendor and sublimity of poetry. In this respect, T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets* is one of the poems that need special consideration. It approaches the individual loss, on the psychological and spiritual levels, in a time of international confusion, employing the mystical elements as a means of attaining salvation. Thus, the poem becomes the best example of blending the mystical theme with poetic structure.

## **The Methodology of the Research:**

The research follows the two types of the Content Analysis Method: the conceptual analysis and the relational analysis. The research identifies certain concepts for examination and defines these concepts presenting their proper characteristics and explanations, that is, breaking them into meaningful and pertinent units of information. At the same time, the research builds on the conceptual analysis in examining the existent relations among the concepts in the text and the relation of these concepts with another field of inquiry: the individual state of uncertainty during World War II.

## **The Discussion:**

As the human being has always been the center of investigation, different literary genres tackle issues related to the human position in the universe, and the psychological and physical impacts of the surrounding events on him. Poetry, as a literary form, has always dealt with and expressed the deepest human concerns. The poetic expression is, then, highly sophisticated and articulated due to its special power over language. Poetry "feels itself often up against the 'limits of language', and forced to modify, maybe do violence to, normal syntax. Theory of knowledge and philosophy of religion cannot ignore poets' claims to 'timeless (visionary) moments' – 'epiphanies'" (Honderich, 1995: 691). The uniqueness of the poetic language is of great importance especially when employing elements of religious nature like mysticism which many consider symbolic, hard to express, or even ineffable.

Mysticism has always been a field of highly religious import that carries philosophical and conceptual implications. In popular use, the term stands for anything mysterious, incomprehensible, or vague, but its philosophical and religious implications transcend such simple interpretations to indicate a highly spiritual state that was always attributed to saints. In itself, it entails the acquisition of the most pious secrets of the

Divine through a direct contact with that Divine. The Divine in the mystical sense is any center around which any religion is, or was, structured and thus worshiped.

The original meaning of the term is "to conceal", developed later to gain more conceptual and philosophical dimensions besides its religious implications. According to Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy:

The term 'mysticism,' comes from the Greek  $\mu\upsilon\omega$ , meaning "to conceal." In the Hellenistic world, 'mystical' referred to "secret" religious rituals. In early Christianity the term came to refer to "hidden" allegorical interpretations of Scriptures and to hidden presences, such as that of Jesus at the Eucharist. Only later did the term begin to denote "mystical theology," that included direct experience of the divine. ... Thus, in general, 'mysticism' would best be thought of as a constellation of distinctive practices, discourses, texts, institutions, traditions, and experiences aimed at human transformation, variously defined in different traditions. (2008)

Different poets have long used mysticism as the main theme of their work. While some poems are purely mystical, expressing spiritual states and experiences, others make use of certain mystical elements to address more social, individual, and universal issues. T. S. Eliot, as a prominent name in this field, employs the mystical theme around which he structured issues concerning the human self, suffering, man's relation with the Divine, and salvation in the time of World War II. His *Four Quartets* can be considered the best representative of his works in terms of the poetic employment of the mystical elements, leading to an experience of the Divine in its most direct and sublime manner and offering the only answer in a time of confusion and uncertainty.

The *Four Quartets* is composed of four poems, each stands as a representative. In this poem Eliot

uses for his location places that are reminiscent of childhood (the Gloucestershire Garden of Burnt Norton), of ancestry (the village of East Coker from which the poet's ancestors emigrated to America in 1627), of craggy shores (the rocks of the Dry Salvages at Massachusetts) and of religious devotion (Little Gidding of Nicholas Ferrar). (Ishak, 1970: 107)

In combining childhood, ancestry, history, and religion, the poem symbolizes the entire life of the human being. Within this structure, Eliot employs certain mystical elements in depicting the spiritual ascend of the human being towards salvation. *Four Quartets* as one whole stands for a mystical progression at the end of which the person gains illumination and spiritual relief. The mystical elements employed in the poem are paradox, the Center, and Via Negativa.

Paradox is the language mysticism and the language of poetry: it is the essence of mystical experience and expression. The mystic attempts "to capture momentary experience and to frame and preserve these moments in language" (Edel, 1973: 127). But since these moments are beyond human reasoning, and since logic heavily relies on multiplicity and diversity, paradox is used to reconcile the conflicting opposites. The mystical experience, then, culminates in the unity with the Divine in whom all multiplicity reconcile and become one. The inability of the human mind to conceptualize the Divine and the undifferentiated unity with that Divine lead to statements such as "illuminating obscurity," "darkening light," and "one yet distinct" as objective expressions of the experience without interference in term of interpretation. On the other hand, paradox has always been considered by critics as the language of poetry. According to Cleanth Brooks:

Paradox is the language of sophistry, hard, bright, witty; it is hardly the language of the soul ... paradox is the language appropriate and inevitable to poetry. It is the scientist whose truth requires a language purged of every trace of paradox; apparently the truth which the poet utters can be approached only in terms of paradox. (Brooks, 1983: 292)

He continues saying that "the paradoxes spring from the very nature of the poet's language: it is a language in which the connotations play as great a part as the denotations" (Brooks, 1983: 295). Eliot masterfully combines the mystical paradox as a method of expression with the poetic paradox as a technique to introduce issues directly related to a world of confusion on the international level and to a total loss and uncertainty on the individual level that prevailed in the period of World War II, the time span of the *Four Quartets* – "Burnt Norton" was written in 1935, "East Coker" in 1940, "The Dry Salvages" in 1941, and "Little Gidding" in 1942.

The combination of mystical and poetic paradoxes is part of the main structure of the openings of each of the four poems of the Quartets in order to introduce the notion of time in its spiritual and physical senses. In its spiritual sense, time entails eternity while in the physical sense it entails transiency and decay. "Burnt Norton" opens up with:

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. (1969: 171)

According to Helen L. Gardner:

The subject of ["Burnt Norton"] is an experience for which theology provides an explanation and on which religion builds a discipline, the immediate apprehension of a timeless reality, felt in time and remembered in time, the sudden revelation of 'the one end, which is always present' (1947: 63)

The same sense of the theological "immediate apprehension of a timeless reality" in contrast to the transiency of our physical time exists in the opening of "East Coker":

In my beginning is my end. In succession  
Houses rise and fall, crumble, are extended,  
Are removed, destroyed, restored, or in their place  
Is an open field, or a factory, or a by-pass.  
Old stones to new building, old timber to new fires,  
Old fires to ashes, and ashes to earth  
Which is already flesh, fur and faces,  
Bone of man and beast, cornstalk and leaf. (1969: 177)

Both "Burnt Norton" and "East Coker" present images of land, history, and culture, emphasizing the notion of timelessness in every form of human culture. "Burnt Norton" presents an image of the history of a civilized society. "East Coker" presents the history of ruder, less cultivated society. This image of time is used as a reminder of the existence of two versions of time: the transient time of our worldly life and the eternal timelessness of the spiritual world. The image of the worldly time is emphasized further in the third poem of the Quartets. "The Dry Salvages" presents the image of the sea-coast. This poem introduces time as directly connected to the existence of the human being. The contrast in

the opening of the poem is metaphorical, between the metaphor of the river and the metaphor of the sea: "The river is within us, the sea is all about us" (1969: 184). According to Gardner:

The first movement [of "The Dry Salvages"] is built on the contrast between two metaphors, the river of life and the sea of life. The river is an old metaphor for the life of man, and its flow of the seasons from spring to winter, and that of man's life from birth to death. The river is a reminder of what we should like to forget, our bondage to nature. Though it can for a time be ignored, it can assert its power by catastrophe as well as by its inevitable progress. 'The river is within us'; we feel it in our pulses. (1947: 67)

On the other hand, the sea is "time of another kind, the time of history ... Individual man launches himself on this ocean of life and makes his short voyage, one of countless similar voyages" (Gardner, 1947: 67-8). These paradoxical images are statements of the position of the human beings in the period of the poem where the sense of the perpetual time flux was lost and was replaced by an insistence on repetition without pattern that is, in one word, spiritual and physical stagnation. In recognizing the passage of time, the human being becomes aware of his/her position on earth as passing creatures bound by time. This image is enhanced by the notion of destiny and redemption presented in the first part of the last of the Quartets, "Little Gidding", as reminders of the relation with the Divine and the position of the human being on earth. In this poem all contradictions reconcile and the one and only route towards salvation is stated. The paradoxical statements become direct and, for Eliot, the establishment of true connections with divinity is the only path of salvation:

If you came this way,  
Taking any route, starting from anywhere,  
At any time or at any season,  
It would always be the same: you would have to put off  
Sense and notion. You are not here to verify,  
Instruct yourself, or inform curiosity  
Or carry report. You are here to kneel  
Where prayer has been valid. And prayer is more  
Than an order of words, the conscious occupation  
Of the praying mind, or the sound of the voice praying. (1969: 192)

After the introduction of human history, civilization, culture, and position, and drawing the way out of the present individual psychological and spiritual restlessness, Eliot makes use of the most important mystical concept; the concept of the Center. The entire mystical structure revolves around a Center, prominent in every form of mystical writing. In simple words, the mystical center is the source point from which every form of life has emerged and in which every form of life shall end. In an attempt to reach, comprehend, or even have a visual contact with this center, the mystic seeks a journey which is often called a mystical pilgrimage to the Origin. As manifested in almost every mystical philosophy and theology, the mystical center towards which the mystical pilgrimage is oriented is either immanent in the human self or the source from which the human self emitted. In both cases, the human spirit is of a Divine nature and origin, and any mystical ascend towards the Center is actually a journey or a pilgrimage towards the origin of the human spirit:

There is a root or depth in thee from whence all these faculties come forth as lines from a centre, or as branches from the body of a tree. This depth is called the centre, the fund, or bottom, of the soul. This depth is the unity, the Eternity,

I had almost said the infinity of thy soul, for it is so infinite that nothing can satisfy it, or give it any rest, but the infinity of God. (Underhill, 2007)

In *Four Quartets* Eliot makes use of the concept of the Center in order to remind the individuals who suffer loss, pain, and uncertainty in the time of World War II of the true beginning and end of existence and of their Divine origin. In "Burnt Norton" Eliot presents the mystical Center as the beginning and end of every human quest:

At the still point of the turning world. Neither flesh nor fleshless;  
Neither from nor towards; at the still point, there the dance is,  
But neither arrest nor movement. And do not call it fixity,  
Where past and future are gathered. Neither movement from nor towards  
Neither ascent nor decline. Except for the point, the still point,  
There would be no dance, and there is only the dance.  
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: 173)

In "East Coker" Eliot discusses the vanity of our life of the senses, temptation and the necessity of finding the origin of our existence that is the end of it at the same time. For Eliot, the search for the final union with the Divine must be the end of our desire. He presents the image of stillness as a symbol of surrender to the will of the Divine and abstraction from action out of physical drives:

We must be still and still moving  
Into another intensity  
For a further union, a deeper communion (1969: 183)

In "The Dry Salvages" Eliot gives a description of the mystical center:

Here the impossible union  
Of spheres of existence is actual,  
Here the past and future  
Are conquered, and reconciled,  
Where action were otherwise movement  
Of that which is only moved  
And has in it no source of movement (1969: 190)

It is in "Little Gidding" where Eliot moves from description to action, from the yearning for the Center to the necessity of acting towards that Center that is, according to Eliot, the final resort from the worldly atrocities, the eternal relief from suffering, and attainment of salvation. Eliot reminds his audience of the Divine nature and the Divine origin of the human race:

We shall not cease from exploration  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time.  
Through the unknown, remembered gate  
When the last of earth left to discover  
Is that which was the beginning; (1969: 197)

Eliot shows the inhabitants of his world that the path of salvation and redemption is through the mystical way which is called *Via Negativa* or the negative way. According to the concept of *Via Negativa*, mankind in its state enjoyed familiarity with God. This first state of innocence and familiarity "is held to have been lost, together with the intuitive apprehension of God which attended it" (Mondello, 2006). The consequences of this breach "not only profoundly altered and vitiated our relationship with God, but our very

cognition of the Divinity is held to have been subsequently impaired as well" (Mondello, 2006). This is exactly the state of the society Eliot attempts to address in his *Quartets*. The loss of familiarity with the Divine and the impairment of the relationship with that Divine have led, according to Eliot, to the state of uncertainty and confusion of the human beings. The way back to the origin through the mystical negative way is the only way to restore and save the self. This journey back to the origin is called the mystical pilgrimage, and it is called the negative way because it necessitates a total negation and renunciation of the senses and everything worldly. It involves a total concentration of the faculties on the Divine so as to return to the original state of purity:

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,  
 Desiccation 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 abstraction from movement (1969: 174)

Eliot presents the negative way to the Divine in the form of total renunciation of the self, rejection of the senses, and, consequently, a purification of the body and soul. And as Mondello says:

The return, so to speak, to this original state can only be achieved, or perhaps better yet, approximated by the mystic through what is essentially a purgative process in which the mystic strives to center consciousness entirely and exclusively upon God. This process basically consists in the categorical negation of all that is *not* God, both externally according to the senses, and internally according to the spirit. Mystical theology therefore employs a *negative epistemology*, proceeding through what is known as the *via negativa* (or the negative way) to arrive at a veridical cognition of God. (2006)

In "East Coker" Eliot presents the state of total surrender to the will of the Divine using the image of stillness once again as a symbol of this surrender: "I said to my soul, be still, and let the dark come upon you / Which shall be the darkness of God" (1969: 180). He brings in the implications of the total negation of the senses and the reward of patience through complete submission. For Eliot, hope, love, faith, and thought should be only for God. The end of this state is divine relief and rejoice:

I said to my soul, be still, and wait without hope  
 For hope would be hope for the wrong thing; wait without love  
 For love would be love of the wrong thing; there is yet faith  
 But the faith and the love and the hope are all in the waiting.  
 Wait without thought, for you are not ready for thought:  
 So the darkness shall be light, and the stillness the dancing. (1969:180)

In "The Dry Salvages" Eliot brings together the Western mystical philosophy presented in *Four Quartets* and the Eastern mystical philosophy represented by Krishna – through echoing Krishna's famous words "Fare forward" – in order to imply the universality of the state of the negative way:

Fare forward, travellers! Not escaping from the past



Into different lives, or into any future;  
You are not the same people who left the station  
Or who will arrive at any terminus,  
While the narrowing rails slide together behind you (1969: 188)

In "Little Gidding" Eliot states the final conclusion to his audience making the final statement concerning following the correct path towards salvation and renouncing worldly desires. The message is clear: everything people are attached to on earth is vanity and all shall be well by following the path of God:

And all shall be well and  
All manner of thing shall be well  
By the purification of the motive  
In the ground of our beseeching. (1969: 196)

Eliot directly addresses his audience in order to convey his notion of the way out of the situation the human beings are undergoing. Eliot, in the *Quartets*, uses this technique to enforce the poetic effect and to create a kind of emotional and intellectual reflection in his audience:

You say I am repeating  
Something I have said before. I shall say it again.  
Shall I say it again? In order to arrive there,  
To arrive where you are, to get from where you are not,  
You must go by a way wherein there is no ecstasy.  
In order to arrive at what you do not know  
You must go by a way which is the way of ignorance.  
In order to possess what you do not possess  
You must go by the way of dispossession.  
In order to arrive at what you are not  
You must go through the way in which you are not.  
And what you do not know is the only thing you know  
And what you own is what you do not own  
And where you are is where you are not. (1969: 181)

In these lines Eliot sums up the entire mystical trend of the *Quartets*. By combining the paradoxical statements, Eliot goes back, in a circular manner, to the first paradox of time, the time of eternity and the time of our transient physical world, but with more extensive insight, integrating the notion of total negation directly indicated by the negative statements of the lines. In these lines Eliot makes his final statement: in order to reach the positive center of existence, the human being must follow the negative way.

### **Conclusion:**

The *Four Quartets* can, by no means, be looked at as a purely religious poem. Instead, it is a skillful employment of a religious trend that is mysticism in order to convey the best outlet from a disturbed individual situation. The atrocities of war and the associated emotional carelessness were prevalent. The individual had already lost not only faith and spiritual direction but also any meaning of life leading to a total loss of humanity. *Four Quartets* represents the perspective of a poet of order in a time of dominant chaos.

## References:

1. BROOKS, C. "The Language of Paradox". *20<sup>th</sup> Century Literary Criticism*. Ed. David Lodge. The United States of America: Longman, 1983.
2. EDEL, L. "Literature and Psychology". *Comparative Literature: Method and Perspective*. Ed. Newton P. Stallknecht and Horst Frenz. The United States of America: Southern Illinois University Press, 1973.
3. GARDNER, H. L. "*Four Quartets: A Commentary*". *T. S. Eliot: A Study of his Writings by Several Hands*. Ed. B. Rajan. London: Dennis Dobson Ltd., 1947.
4. HONDERICH, T. ed. *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*. New York: Oxford University Press: 1995.
5. ISHAK, F. M. *The Mystical Philosophy of T. S. Eliot*. The United States: College & University Press, 1970.
6. MONDELLO, G. K. *The Metaphysics of Mysticism: A Commentary on the Mystical Philosophy of St. John of the Cross*. 2006. n. pag. Retrieved 13. Aug. 2006.<[www.johnofthecross.com](http://www.johnofthecross.com)>
7. "Mysticism". Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. n. pag. First published Thu. 11. Nov. 2004; substantive revision Mon. 10. Jan. 2005. Retrieved 23. June. 2008.<<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/mysticism>>
8. *T. S. Eliot: The Complete Poems and Plays*. London: Faber and Faber, 1969.
9. UNDERHILL, E. *Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness*. n. pag. Retrieved 29. March. 2007. <[www.ccel.org/ccel/underhill/mysticism.toc.html](http://www.ccel.org/ccel/underhill/mysticism.toc.html)>