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ON HIS TIME: TEMPORAL STRUCTURING OF ELIOT'S POETRY

U ovom radu razmatra se Eliotov koncept vremena i naročito njegov uticaj na Eliotov poetski rad. Teorijski aspekti ovog koncepta detaljno su obrađeni u Eliotovim esejima prikazivanjem povezanih ideja kao što su tradicija i istorijski smisao. Konvencionalni koncept podjele vremena na prošlo, sadašnje i buduće u slučaju Eliota predstavlja kompromis koji treba preformulisati, prevashodno zbog činjenice da ovi činioci ne mogu stajati odvojeni jedni od drugih zbog njihove međusobne povezanosti u svakom vremenu i kontekstu.

Ključne riječi: *T.S. Eliot, vrijeme, vremenski, tradicija, istorijski smisao*

Despite the fact that in Eliot's poetry time emerges from the very start as a central preoccupation, in his later poetry, especially in *Four Quartets*, it takes on an entirely new dimension. The same applies to his criticism since with his 1919 essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent". In this article, I would first like to address very briefly his concept of tradition and history and the way that they relate to Eliot's notion of time.

What most people imply when they use the word "tradition" is a feeling of moments of the past, people of the past or the past in general. In his well-known definition of it in the essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent", Eliot states:

Tradition is a matter of much wider significance. [...] It involves, in the first place, the historical sense, [...] a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence; the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature

of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order. This historical sense, which is a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional.

[...] The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them. The existing order is complete before the new work arrives; for order to persist after the super-vention of novelty, the *whole* existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered; and so the relations, proportions, values of each work of art toward the whole are readjusted; (SW: 28)

This statement clearly makes tradition something that has a very different temporal dimension: a coexistence that is caused by the present awareness it involves. Eliot's *whole* is in fact a system¹ that operates into the present, without closing doors for future modifications. Many (Hamilton 1996:48) relate this picture to Hegel's concept of the logical idea², with which Eliot was certainly familiar and which focuses on the succession of new ideas only due to a former one. Thus, the latter has the capacity to contain the former and to serve as a platform for the future. In my view, Eliot's modification of the notion assigns to the present and future units an obvious increased freedom from the past by accepting more novelty into the system and seeing the new less as a product of the old and independent to a larger extent. The awareness of the new regarding the old does not necessarily make the former superior to the latter, as it is implied in Hegel's approach, neither does it make the old revered by the new. They seem to have an equivalent role in the system, or at least, an equal possibility to occupy equivalent roles in the existing order. The age alone does not constitute a criterion of hierarchic ranking. Thus, in the 'whole' Eliot refers to this system as, time does not exist.

Tradition and the historical sense introduced in the above quotation share in common the underlying component of time. The importance of such an outlook is reflected in Eliot's work, where an evolution of the concept can be traced from early poems to *Four Quartets*.

Eliot's historical sense has also been compared to Henri Bergson's concept of *durée* (Matthiessen 1947:61), an influence that can be detected on many levels on Eliot's concepts, especially in his early poems and criti-

¹ See Assmann, Aleida. "Exorcizing the demon of chronology: T. S. Eliot's reinvention of tradition" in *T. S. Eliot and the Concept of Tradition*. Edited by Giovanni Cianci and Jason Harding. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007, p. 19.

² Wallace, William. Tr. *The Logic of Hegel*. Translated from *The encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences*, 1959, as appearing in www.books.google.com.

cism (Gillies 1996:65), (Gordon: 1998:55). Bergson's concept was primarily a reaction against scientific time, the one measured by clock. In his *Time and Free Will*, published in 1910, he explains that our consciousness affects our perception of time and the traditional timeline division of past, present and future cannot function in practice. Bergson's notion involved coexistence of all these three partitions, due to the fact that the isolation of one from another would be impossible. Eliot's account of the concept of tradition explains from a practical point of view that the impossibility of the conventional divisions due to their interaction with one-another, which is also highlighted in Bergson's outline of *durée*. On the other hand, it is worth mentioning that Eliot's vision of time, which includes tradition and the historical sense in his criticism, as well as time representation and the temporal structuring of his poems is a very complex composition that can only partly be explained by detecting the sources that inspired it.

Is there time?

In "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock", the title character's affirmation of having enough time is repeated in some form of positive term 10 times in an attempt to reassure himself before admitting that time is scarce and is not mentioned again in its primary meaning in the poem³. What we see with Prufrock is the usual preoccupation of a person, that of being afraid of the passing of time, old age and eventually, death.

He connects inactivity [the yellow smoke (the cat) falling asleep] with the idea that life is long and that there is room for wasting time, since the lines that follow after the cat passage, read:

And indeed there will be time
For the yellow smoke that slides along the street,
Rubbing its back upon the window panes;
There will be time, there will be time
To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet; (Eliot 23-27)

In the one negative instance, time is seen as endowed with a capacity far greater than human time, and for that, unconquerable:

Do I dare
Disturb the universe?
In a minute there is time
For decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse. (Eliot 45-48)

These lines highlight the contrast between the time of human life and the duration of the universe, hinting at a theme to which Eliot gives central

³ It is mentioned twice as part of the expression "at times".

priority in his future poems, and on which we shall concentrate longer in this article.

The contrast repositions Prufrock's viewpoint, which is reflected in the darker tone that he employs afterwards. He starts to articulate his ideas in a more direct form, which leads us to believe that the meeting with his fear of time makes him bolder in his facing of other individuals. The change of tone immediately after this crucial utterance indicates the reach of a climax in the poem. Among Prufrock's many insecurities, fear of time takes on the leading role.

It is important to make a distinction between Prufrock's own concept of time and the poem's temporal structuring. In terms of organization, the linear progression of the first lines of the poem is interrupted by juxtaposed fragments which imitate the process of thinking, using the stream of consciousness technique.

The end of the poem reaches a dream-like atmosphere where the ideal is reached very briefly, only to have a tragic end. The intertwining of these time – platforms makes room for a very smooth transition from one viewpoint of the title character to another.

What is time?

When discussing time in Eliot's poetry, another undisputable landmark is "Gerontion". Completed less than a decade after the "Love song", the old man delivering the monologue in this poem has been compared to Prufrock by many critics (Sigg 1989:171). Between these characters exist parallels in the themes they refer to, attitude and gravity of tone. There is however a steady difference in the wideness of their perspective. Prufrock maintains a more personal view, while Gerontion's focus involves society and the course of life almost throughout the poem. His location is not specified, or to be exact, he simultaneously places himself on various locations, as it is made clear by the toponyms he mentions. At the same time, he depicts people of different origins, bearing typical names of many races and peoples. It is in this way that Gerontion reaches for the universal with more confidence than Prufrock, accounting for society and the human race as much as for himself. His conclusions are colder and more distant, his cynicism more commonplace and his fear even more central than in Prufrock.

Gerontion's ubiquity is concurrently associated with a challenge to time-boundaries, which is done by means of both historic and literary allusions. The dream that brings Prufrock's monologue to a conclusion is encountered in "Gerontion" as an epigraph. *Nor youth, nor age* is actual and real, they

are both part of a dream. These notions can be seen as future and present, and as it becomes clear in the original context of Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*, youth will be replaced by old age, being thus lost and age (experience, the past) will obliterate all senses and feelings, destroying all that has been gained. The nihilism of this epigraph contains an interesting time perspective: time progression is absurd and cruel, we do not own our past or future, resultantly, we do not have a present, but a dream that stands for it. This time emptiness is only of the very varied chronological representations in the structure of "Gerontion". Lines 1-6 allude to 25 centuries of human war history making quick transitional stops before situating the speaker to the unclear modern location of the present.

In the second movement of the poem, the religious and spiritual elements that emerge possess a two-fold temporal function: firstly, the allusion to the First and the Second Coming reveal the eternal design and reduce the feeling of fear, death as well as diminish the function of temporal flow. Although this does not affect the chronologic rhythm, it influences the importance of past, present and future by making their dividing boundaries less significant. Time receives a spatial attribute, becomes readable and comprehensible, completely devoid of the absurdity of the epigraph and the futility of the history of human struggle in the first stanza. Secondly, especially in lines 19-23 and 48, these elements are presented with more emphasis on the ritualistic aspect and the yearly celebration of Christ's birth and crucifixion (Perloff 2004:33), giving it cyclic chronological traits. This prospective is much more in line with the speaker's cynical approach to life and living, as it is highlighted by the lines:

In depraved May, dogwood and chestnut, flowering judas,
To be eaten, to be divided, to be drunk
Among whispers; ... (Eliot 21-23)

His disillusionment with life is stretched to encompass a salvation that is hoped for year after year in a closed predictable cycle that ends not with Christ the Lamb who comes to bring deliverance, but with Christ the Tiger, who devours the meek. The similarity of some of the elements in "Gerontion" to *The Waste Land*⁴ does not apply to this particular detail. If in *The Waste Land* the symbolism and allusions pointing to the cycle of seasons represent the expected transition of time and the revival of nature as part of the natural order (water being the central element), in "Gerontion" all this is seen as evidence that *the signs* are not present and that there is no hope for escaping

⁴ Eliot considered using the poem as a preface to *The Waste Land*. See T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound. *The Waste Land: The Original Facsimile of the Original Drafts Including Annotations of Ezra Pound* Ed. Valerie Eliot. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt (1974) p.127

the impending doom. The cycle here is vicious, and this fatality serves as another universalizing factor that joins people of particularly different origins and background, as are Mr. Silvero, Hakagawa, Madame de Tornquist and Fraulein von Kulp.

Human life is part of this permanent cycle of seasons and it is to the old Gerontion as just as predictable as seasons. His age, of which his name is drawn as a generic labeling rather as a personal name, allows him to generalize and diagnose. When he addresses history as possessing “cunning passages, contrived corridors”, he is generalizing to the extent that makes specific time meaningless. The description merges into one all ages of human history and all the different stages of human life. If it initially seems that he is referring as “too soon” and “too late” respectively to childhood and old age, on a closer reading, it becomes clear that he is in fact presenting another general view that applies not to a specific time, but to the timing of specific elements in relation to a broader context that involves all the spectrum of what is seen both as negative and as positive human traits and tendencies, as well as a considerable range of other extremes that do not fall under these categories. It seems as if Gerontion, is keeping in his dry brain all the meaning of everything, including the mystery of time which to him is as readable as anything else. The closing of the poem brings us circularly to the time of the beginning, and it seems as if not a second has passed from the initial sentence, pointing again to the futility of his entire world-and-history-encompassing monologue, a parallelism to the old man’s waste of life.

Time as presence and as absence

If “Prufrock” is the first to utter Eliot’s concern regarding temporal flux and “Gerontion” represents another important stage in the understanding of the notion, as it is further elaborated in *The Waste Land*, the full cycle of this quest for knowing and “*set[ting one’s]...lands in order*” is completed with *Four Quartets*. From the opening of “Burnt Norton”, the poem’s first quartet, it becomes clear that time constitutes the principal theme:

Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future,
And time future contained in time past.
. . . all time is eternally present. (Eliot 1-4)

These lines put in simple words Eliot’s vision of absent boundaries between the three accepted chronological divisions. If we were to go back to his concept of tradition, we would see that the above fragment follows an identical temporal logic. Thus, the existing works, and the newly-introduced works form a new whole after the reorganization of the balance of the old works to

make room for the new one. This new whole will be revisited in the future, when another new work will enter the system. But the work of the future will somehow be related (Eliot, SW 1920: 27) to the old and thus be contained in the past. The ever-present Eliot spoke about in his collection of essays *The Sacred Wood* is being translated into art no longer as a concept that calls to logic, but as a union of thought and feeling (SW: 49). This deeper language represents a much fuller panorama of Eliot's personal history of thought and at the same time provides a more tangible way of getting in touch with the artistic properties of such a remarkable vision. The *Four Quartets* revolve around a very atypical view of time and the above lines uncover only a fraction of it. Eliot develops his notion further in the following lines, which constitute perhaps the most quoted passage of a poem of the XX century:

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. (Eliot 64-71)

Thus, instead of a merging of the boundaries between time fragments, these lines refer to a new dimension, where time does not exist. The still point does not conform to the parameters of time and is not limited to movement or fixity; it should not be seen as a meeting of opposites or a union of extremes, as carefully highlighted by the multitude of descriptive details in these lines. Earthly boundaries do not seem to work in defining the entity of the still point, and the mystique is introduced very early in the quoted passage through the words "neither flesh, nor fleshless", which pushes it even further from the human life frontiers both in terms of time and materiality. In defining the still point, Eliot chooses to speak of the "not-s", what it is not, and what it is uncovers itself partly through a series of negatives. The positives affirm the presence of a *dance, white light, grace of sense, movement AND stillness, resolution of horror, fulfillment of ecstasy*, etc.

In understanding timelessness and the still point of the turning world, it is a necessity to refer to the origins of this concept in Eliot. The dance metaphor serves a central function as one of the few *presences* (as opposed to absences) in the still point.

In line with the conclusion of many other critics⁵, in his article on “Time, Eternity, and Immortality in T. S. Eliot’s Four Quartets”, Terry Fairchild states:

Many critics believe Eliot’s use of dance refers specifically to the Dance of Shiva, the spinning out and maintenance of all creation from the silent, eternal, pure consciousness that changes without changing, creates without creating, manifests without manifesting through the power of *Lila* or divine play. (1997: 64-65)

Eliot’s extensive knowledge on the Hindu-Buddhist tradition (Shusterman 1994:32) has affected both his philosophy of life and his work. Symbols, myths, allusions and other important components of Eliot’s work appear in his poems throughout his poetic career. The presence of the Hindu god Krishna in “The Dry Salvages” is only one of the instances of this use. But the still point, with the details Eliot provides is not a product of one tradition alone. The dance, with its regular pattern and rhythm is a symbol of order and perfection. Rajendra Verma points out the influence of Dante on this concept, as indicated among other things by the use of the symbol of rose (portrayed more explicitly in *the multifoliate rose of* “The hollow men”) and the white light permeating the still point:

The still point being the crowning point of eternal love becomes the fountain source of all creation. The dance of creation is the joy inherent in the divine rhythm which permeates the universe. The perfect concept of motion and rest fused into the image of the still point is of course from Dante and so is its significance in terms of eternal love that moves without itself moving. Eliot has not transplanted Dante’s images, but has used them as a prism for perfecting the subtle imagery scheme. (Verma 1979: 23).

The study of the above sources confronts Eliot’s vision with other views on timelessness and encounters with the Absolute powers of the universe. In terms of temporal organization, the most interesting encounter of the *Four Quartets* is that between the timelessness of the still point itself and the temporal dimension that precedes and follows it. This meeting is announced in the first epigraph from Heraclitus, that would more or less be translated: “Although the *logos* is common to all, most people live as if they had an understanding of their own”. The *logos*, which is in turn translated as “the word” has received attention due to its Christian use of this term (Gish, 1981: 97), a capacity which it takes further in “Burnt Norton”. But even if we admit the implication, this is only one of the meanings it entails. As it is often the

⁵ See D. Ghosh (1978: 5-11) P. S. Sri (1985: 31), A. D. Moody (1994: 30-47), R. Verma, (1979: 24), etc.

case with Eliot's epigraphs, they not only add to the respective poem, but also channel its reading into fundamental directions. This epigraph, out of the two the poem has, confronts what is consistent, unwavering and central to what is subject to changes according to circumstances. In a possible interpretation, the logos represents facts and the personal dimension involved stands for the personal experiencing of these facts, or, to take it a step further, the logos stands for the objective and the personal stands for the subjective. This dichotomy is a constant point of concern for Eliot, since his discussion of the personal and impersonal in his early essays. The Absolute, the objective, the truth, are only other names for the divine, of which in the *Four Quartets* we receive among other aspects, a temporal description that can be portrayed as timelessness. The uncovering of this immensity in contrast to presence of time reframes its dimensions just as much as its existence reframes temporal perception. This vision is one of the major differences between the *Four Quartets* on the one hand and *The Waste Land* together with Eliot's earlier poetry on the other.

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This article presents a general view on Eliot's concept of time and especially on its effects on his poetic work. The theoretical aspects of this notion are discussed extensively in Eliot's essays through the depiction of related ideas such as tradition and the historical sense. Although in their work and theoretical argumentation most modernists challenged the idea of linear progression of time, the ways they chose varied to a considerable degree. In the case of Eliot, the conventional concept of time division into past, present and future was a compromise that needed to be reframed, due to the fact that practically speaking, these partitions could not stand apart due to their close inter-relatedness at all times and contexts. Another very important contrast that is treated in this article is Eliot's presentation of the lack of time, or timelessness rather than the usual coining of it as eternity. The introduction of this concept in the Four Quartets as "the still point of the turning world" involves another important dichotomy with a wider background in his theoretical essays, which is also reflected in his poems.

Key words: *T.S. Eliot, time, temporal, timelessness, tradition, historical sense, the still point*