

# Eliot's Concept of Time in *Four Quartets*

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**Abstract:** T. S. Eliot as literary critic is most famous for his theories about literary tradition and individual talent, which, however, have been seriously misunderstood by some of his own critics. This paper is an attempt to prove, by focusing on the concept of time in *Four Quartets* and with supportive evidence from Eliot's critical essays, that Eliot is actually proposing a balance between individuality and tradition in poetic creation and that his sense of responsibility towards life has never died.

**Key words:** time tradition individuality balance

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**标题:**论艾略特《四个四重奏》中的时间观

**内容提要:**作为文学批评家,T. S. 艾略特因其关于文学传统的理论与个人天赋而广为人知,但也遭到严重误解。本文借用艾略特本人评论文章中的观点解读他的《四个四重奏》中的时间观,证明艾略特极力倡导诗歌创作中个性与传统之间的平衡,他的人生责任感从未消亡。

**关键词:**时间 传统 个性 平衡

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T. S. Eliot, both as poet and critic, has aroused much controversy in his own times and afterwards. F. R. Leavis is perhaps an outstanding one, though not the only one, among many of Eliot's critics, who cannot bring himself to accept Eliot's poetic theory, yet at the same time cannot help marvelling at his genius for poetic work. After reading *The Sacred Wood*, especially the most famous essay in the collection — "Tradition and the Individual Talent," Leavis wrote his own essay entitled "T. S. Eliot as Critic" in which he criticised, rather severely, Eliot's doctrine of impersonality (179). To him, the negation of personality equals that of the "distinguished individual" in a creative writer; and because Eliot is against the direct representation of living experience or emotion in poetry, he is thought to be denying the relation of literature to life, which also seems to indicate his lack of "courage of responsibility" towards life (179,181).

I find Leavis's charges wrong in every of its aspects. First of all, he misunder-

stood the word “personality” used by Eliot in its particular sense. By that word, Eliot does not mean the individuality or uniqueness of a poet or his art, but rather the kind of actual, crude, and private emotions the poet might be feeling at the moment when writing his poem.<sup>①</sup> It is the latter, not the former, that Eliot thinks should be erased from poetry, because it is too personal. In Eliot’s view, literature is related to life, but it is a refined form of life worked out through “the process of transmutation of emotion,” especially in the case of poetry (“Tradition” 55). Besides, he is not at all trying to evade his responsibility towards life as poet. The contrary might be closer to the fact, as I will show later in this paper.

The argument I am going to put forward in this paper, partly in response to Leavis’s criticism of Eliot’s poetic theory and partly as a reflection on my reading of several of Eliot’s critical essays and his poem *Four Quartets*, is that, instead of denying the individual totally, Eliot is seeking a balance between the individual and the traditional. This we can see from Eliot’s concept of time in *Four Quartets*.

The first section of *Four Quartets*, “Burnt Norton,” begins with the poet’s thoughts about time:

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. (189)

In his highly condensed poetic language, Eliot describes time not as developing in one direction but as going around in a circle. According to his concept of the cyclic time, the past can only find its meaning in the present, and the present must go further into the future. The future, however, relies on the present as its past, just as the present comes from its own past. So the past, present and future are linked together with no division in between, and are forever moving as well as still within the circle.

While Eliot was trying to frame his concept of time as he wrote the poem, he was probably having his Christian belief in mind, the idea of Jesus’s sacrifice, man’s faith in God, and the final redemption in correspondence with time past, present and future. But this is only something loose in the background as against the poet’s all-too-obvious obsession with the relation between literary tradition and individual talent at that time, supported with evidence from many of the lines in the poem that either allude to or discuss overtly the tradition of writing and its problems in the present time. Actually, Eliot’s consideration of the issue begins much earlier, especially in that essay attacked by Leavis, where he states his view with regard to the title clearly and systematically for the first time.

Eliot’s emphasis on the importance of literary tradition is made in the following long quotation from the essay:

Tradition is a matter of much wider significance. [...] It involves, in the first place, the historical sense, which we may call nearly indispensable to any-

one who would continue to be a poet beyond his twenty-fifth year; and the historical sense involves 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 the 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. (“Tradition” 49)

The sincere and lengthy words of Eliot convey to the reader an overwhelming sense of tradition and of the individual writer being submerged in literary tradition. In terms of the past-present relation, it is the past that is being established here as the greater power, for the present exists only in relation to the past. Later in the essay, however, Eliot puts more weight on the present, and makes it a counter force to the past. He does this by showing how the existing order of literary works is always modified by the introduction of new works of art. Eliot calls it the “conformity between the old and the new”, which actually contains the lesson that “the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past” (Eliot, “Tradition” 50). It is not difficult to see that Eliot is trying to find a balance between the past and the present, the traditional and the individual. To reach the balanced point, or “The point of intersection of the timeless / With time,” one must go through the way of self-surrender (*Four Quartets* 212).

The way Eliot points at is a negative way, a process of “continual sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality” (“Tradition” 53). Such a “process of depersonalisation” is caused by “the sense of tradition” (53). In contrast to Wordsworth who declares that “all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” (139), Eliot says that “Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion” (“Tradition” 58). While Leavis finds the idea of forgetting oneself extremely uncomfortable, Eliot regards it most necessary for the perfection of art itself, because art, or the emotion of art, is impersonal (“Tradition” 59). In Eliot’s conception of creative art, especially poetry, the negation of the personal in the artist is for the assertion of his art; or in other words, the cultivation of the sense of tradition and the sense of the whole in the artist will ultimately lead to the individuality of his artistic creation and also the uniqueness of his place in history.

Reading Eliot’s essay in the early 1990s, Michael Levenson comes to a totally different conclusion from Leavis’s. Instead of being disturbed by Eliot’s apparently negative attitude towards the living experience or the present, Levenson finds a disquieting element in the “aggressive appropriations” of the past by the contemporary poetic self (162). From the long passage I quoted earlier in this essay, especially the image of a simultaneous order, Levenson detects an attempt on the part of Eliot to “spatialize” time. He analyses the effect like this:

To use the past to solve the problems of the present, to see the dead poets

unbiased by time, as contemporaries, to see all history as a panorama displayed before the scanning eye of the critic — this is to take a view of tradition which avoids the challenge of temporality and jeopardizes the notion of literary change. (164)

Levenson might be going too far in accusing Eliot of being “the most cunning enemy of historical time” (163), but he is rather justified to see in that early essay by Eliot “a rival strain of emphasis” on the present along with that on the past (161).

Indeed, Eliot at that time sounds much more confident than later when he comes to write *Four Quartets* and some other critical essays. From his own life experience and poetic practice, the older poet sees more clearly as well as feel more acutely the temporality of one’s sensibility (“Social Functions” 20). He ponders on this problem in “East Coker”:

[ . . . ] There is, it seems to us,  
At best, only a limited value  
In the knowledge derived from experience.  
The knowledge imposes a pattern, and falsifies,  
For the pattern is new in every moment  
And every moment is a new and shocking  
Valuation of all we have been. (199)

It is impossible, then, to rely on the present only and look at it as if it were the final end, for that is to get oneself stuck in time, which is actually always changing and moving. Just as Eliot says at the beginning of “Burnt Norton”: “If all time is eternally present / All time is unredeemable” (189). Therefore, to get out of time and to redeem time, we must look forward to the future.

To understand Eliot’s view of the future, we must first of all know his ideas about the classics. In another of his famous essays “What is a Classic?”, published in 1944, Eliot proposes his definition for a “classic.” In this definition, to be classical means to be mature, to exhaust all the possibilities for the better (54 – 59). Judged by this standard, English literature has neither classic age nor classic poet, which, in the opinion of Eliot, “is not in itself any more a matter for regret than it is for congratulation” (54). Eliot is indeed much consoled by his own judgement that English language is far from perfection, for that means unexplored possibilities for the present and the future (66). He even sets it as a criterion for a great writer by saying,

The predecessors should be themselves great and honoured; but their accomplishment must be such as to suggest still undeveloped resources of the language, and not such as to oppress the young writers with the fear that everything that can be done has been done, in their language. (58)

Eliot is no doubt speaking from the point of view of a present writer to the old and the dead, but he is also speaking of himself and his contemporaries in anticipa-

tion of what must happen in the future. He knows that they as the present writers cannot accomplish everything, and therefore have to expect their followers to continue their work, in the same manner as their predecessors pass on to them the unfinished work. This is Eliot's idea of tradition, not as a dead end, but as a stream of life flowing forever, from one generation to another; and this is, in my opinion, Eliot's sense of responsibility toward life. He feels responsible not only for the past and the present, but also for the future. Like what he says in the essay: "If we cease to believe in the future, the past would cease to be fully our past; it would become the past of a dead civilisation" (65), the poetic voice in "Burnt Norton" repeats: "time future contained in time past" (189).

But time future and time past can only be linked together through the present. Therefore in Eliot's poem, we have: "Time past and time future / What might have been and what has been / Point to one end, which is always present" (190). The significance of the present moment, of being "in time," is reinforced later in the poem:

Time past and time future  
 Allow but a little consciousness.  
 To be conscious is not to be in time  
 But only in time can the moment in the rose-garden,  
 The moment in the arbour where the rain beat,  
 The moment in the draughty church at smokefall  
 Be remembered; involved with past and future. (192)

It should be noticed that the emphasis on the present here in the poem is a bit different from that in his early essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent." Here appears a new development in Eliot's concept of time with the addition of the element of the future, because in the presence of the future, the past and the present will be the same, be equally past. When the present is felt to be passing soon, what need is there to concern much about the result of the present work?

Unlike most of his contemporary poets who are eager to have their value recognised by renouncing the past or by creating something new in revolt against their predecessors, Eliot chooses to locate himself in tradition as a way of establishing his own position in history. He is not at all against the idea of being new, but the new, as he explains in the following passage from "East Coker," is not something out of a competition with the ancestry, but rather the thing that has not been done yet. Therefore he says,

[... ] And what there is to conquer  
 By strength and submission, has already been discovered  
 Once or twice, or several times, by men whom one cannot  
 hope  
 To emulate — but there is no competition —  
 There is only the fight to recover what has been lost

And found and lost again and again; and now, under conditions  
That seem unpropitious. But perhaps neither gain nor loss.  
For us, there is only the trying. The rest is not our business. (203)

Here again, we have this marvellous combination of the negative way and the positive way, the way down and the way up. On the one hand, we have to “wait without hope / For hope would be hope for the wrong thing” (*Four Quartets* 200); on the other hand, we must “fare forward” in order to fulfil our obligation of linking up the past and the future (*Four Quartets* 211). What Eliot requires here is actually “the purification of the motive” (220), which may enable one to get at the end at last, just as he says in the poem that: “In order to arrive at what you do not know / You must go by a way which is the way of ignorance” (201). In the passage that follows, however, Cleo McNelly Kearns observes Eliot’s double ways from a different perspective: “The negative way seeks, through a process of progressive elimination of the partial, to attain a posture of complete humility and self-erasure before the void; the positive way calls for escalating degrees of recognition and self-affirmation, proceeding from like to like to a place commensurate with contemplation of the whole” (132). What Kearns has successfully grasped here is the relation between the partial and the whole, or between the individual and the traditional, that Eliot has been ruminating in his mind for a long time.

We can see the relation more clearly in the title line of this paper quoted from “Burnt Norton” (192). In the context of the poem where it is from, the word “time” in its first appearance in the line means the present time, representing the individual life. Therefore, the whole line conveys the message that it is through the individual effort of the present time that the past revives, gets enriched, and continues into the future, which will ultimately free the poet from his bondage to time. If we consider poetic work as a form of limitation, like Edward Lobb does, then the poet can only conquer or transcend his limitation through the limitation itself, just as time is conquered through time (30). On the other hand, however, if we take the title line out of its context in the poem but not out of the larger context of Eliot’s concept of time, then the word “time” may also refer to historical time, or literary tradition. In that sense, tradition is the means by which the poet transcends time, or the limitation of individual talent. To explain Eliot’s idea in other words, the traditional and the general need to work through the individual, while the individual will have to go back to the traditional and the general and become part of it as time goes by. This, again, reflects Eliot’s concept of the cyclic time: “In my beginning is my end,” and “In my end is my beginning” (*Four Quartets* 196, 204). Eliot is so wise and subtle that, despite his consistent emphasis on the individual, he never appears personal. He seems to prefer to hide himself among the many individuals, which, together with the tradition, make up the ceaseless flow of time. In his firm but humble voice, the poet declares that time is the only conquering power: “Time the destroyer is time the preserver” (*Four Quartets* 209).

When Leavis came to read *Four Quartets* much later than he read *The Sacred Wood*, he gave it his generous praise in one of his lectures on “Eliot’s Classical

Standing.” What he appreciated most, and what he found incoherent with the poet's professed Anglo-Catholicism and classicism that he once noticed in Eliot's earlier book, is the traces of “positive aspiration and movement” in the poem (54). Leavis was sharp in his observation of the positive aspect of the poem, but he was wrong, again, in judging it as in conflict with the negative aspect of Eliot's thinking. He failed to see the balance between the positive and the negative emotions Eliot holds towards life and literary creation, behind which is the balance Eliot is trying to achieve between literary tradition and individual talent. To end my essay, therefore, I'd like to quote Eliot's own words speaking of the balance:

The persistence of literary creativeness in any people, accordingly, consists in the maintenance of an unconscious balance between tradition in the larger sense — the collective personality, so to speak, realised in the literature of the past — and the originality of the living generation. (“What is a Classic?” 58)

### 【 Notes 】

① The meaning of the word “personality” can be inferred from its context in “Tradition and the Individual Talent.” But a more explicit explanation of its meaning appears in another essay by Eliot—“The Social Functions of Poetry,” in the following one and a half sentence: “A thought expressed in a different language may be practically the same thought, but a feeling or emotion expressed in a different language is not the same feeling or emotion. One of the reasons for learning at least one foreign language well is that we acquire a kind of supplementary personality; . . .” (19).

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