

Temporal Relativity in T. S. Eliot's "Prufrock," "The Waste Land," and "Four Quartets"

Alireza Farahbakhsh¹

Associate Professor in English Literature

Zahra Habibi²

M.A. English Literature,
University of Guilan, Iran

Abstract: *The present paper aims to observe to what extent Heraclitus' "Unity of Opposition" and Bergson's "duration" are discernible in Eliot's "Prufrock," "The Waste Land," and "Four Quartets," which consists of four sections – "Burnt Norton," "East Coker," "The Dry Salvages," and "Little Gidding." It seeks to see in which passages and to what purpose Eliot has distanced himself real time and replaces it with cyclic and subjective or inner time. Neither Heraclitus in his negation of opposition nor Bergson in his duration admit separation among past, present; they are both of the opinion that time should be approached in terms of unity, continuity, and totality. The paper shows that among other kinds of time, such as real, sequential, biographical, and objective time, there are passages in Eliot's poems which can be said to be in line with Heraclitan and Bergsonian conception of temporality.*

Key words: *Unity of Opposition, Durée, Time, T. S. Eliot*

Introduction

As one of the most influential literary men of the twentieth century, T. S. Eliot (1888 – 1965) has impressed many readers and stimulated a great amount of critical analyses. Throughout Eliot's career as a poet, time and its various kinds and implications were always a serious preoccupation. His poetry exhibits elements and instances of real time, biographical time, autobiographical time, internal or subjective time, and objective or chronological time. The purpose of the present paper is to trace and explore temporal relativity in Eliot's "Prufrock" (1917), "The Waste Land" (1922), and "Four Quartets" (1942). It draws upon Heraclitus' and Bergson's understanding of time as a flux to capture the moments when Eliot pulls away from the rigidity of the logic of the clock time and approaches a more subjective and flexible time. In their point of views, there is no separation between parts of the time as past, present, and future are interchangeable or indivisible; they cannot be separated from one another and should be observed as a whole. In his "Tradition and the Individual Talent," Eliot contends that "the values of each work of art toward the whole are readjusted; and this is conformity between the old and

the new ... the past should be altered by present as much as the present is directed by the past" (1974, p.56). The paper starts with a brief review of Heraclitus' and Bergson's interpretations of time and then endeavours to trace them in Eliot's selected poems.

Heraclitus was a Pre-Socrates Greek philosopher of the late sixth century B.C. The main reason for Heraclitus' fame is his "Doctrine of Flux" and "The Unity of Opposites." For Heraclitus, everything is constantly changing and opposite things are identical, so everything is and is not what it is at the same time (qtd. in Graham, 2010, p.2). According to Bryan Magee, Hegel's concept of "antitheses" and "the process of change" are derived from Heraclitus' philosophy (2001, p.159). In Heraclitus' view, as Freeman explains, life emerges as a perpetual stream of creation in which "all things are an exchange for fire and fire for all things" (1983, p.90). In other words, the world consists of interchangeable elements which are symbolised by fire. For him, fire is the origin of everything, and the fundamental element out of which other things arise. Heraclitus' notion of "The Unity of Opposites" implies that opposites cannot exist in isolation. Things are constantly being transformed in an endless cycle of conversion to trigger unavoidable convergence of opposites. For Heraclitus, time like everything else, is never fixed as past, present, and future are continuously changing and interchanging to create an interrelated and indivisible whole.

The notion of temporal totality is also upheld by the twentieth century French philosopher, Henri Louise Bergson (1859 – 1941). According to Hall, his doctrine offered an escape from materialistic determinism of the Darwinian school and he transcended the position of poets and artists by claiming that it is the artist not the scientist who penetrates reality (1963, p.147). Bergson has attempted to redefine the conceptions of time and space in his concept of "duration" or "la durée." He has introduced "duration" in his doctoral thesis *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness* (1889). For him, "duration" is a mobile and fluid concept. In *Creative Evolution*, he has expanded this concept and has argued, "our duration is not merely one instant replacing another, [but] ... it is continuous process of the past which gnaws [ceaselessly] into the future" (1993, pp.4-5). Bergson's "real time" is "duration" which must be differentiated from sequential time; it is not a dimension and cannot be defined spatially. In the preface of *Time and Free Will*, he has written: "Kant, for whom freedom belongs to a realm outside of space and time, had confused time with spatial representation" (qtd. in Lawlor

and Moulard, 2010, p.4). As Liyod has argued, in Bergson's view, the mind constructs homogeneous space to assist its practical dealings with reality. Homogeneous space is a mental construction, but it has a basis in reality, whereas homogeneous time is an illusion. Bergson believes that we take moments in the course of "duration." The line through which we symbolise the passage of time is here the source of its illusory specialisation. The line is divisible into parts and ends in points, but we cannot conclude that "duration is composed of separated points" (1993, pp.98-99). In his *Creative Evolution*, Bergson claims that "rather than seeing duration as reality we take snapshots, as it were, of the passing reality, ... stringing them on a becoming abstract, uniform and indivisible, situated at the back of the apparatus of knowledge" (1993, pp.322-23). As Magge has argued, in Bergson's eyes, we are living in two worlds: the internal world in which everything is continuous, and the external world that is made of our logic and in which things are placed in distinct places in a measurable time. (2001, p.215). For Bergson, eternity is not also a real time, but an abstraction from change which hangs over it. Like Heraclitus, Bergson believed that reality is indivisible change, in which the past is one with the present and the future, so reality is constant change or "cosmic flux." In the following sections of the article, we shall see how such "cosmic flux" is applicable to Eliot's "Prufrock," "The Waste Land," and "Four Quartets," which comprises of four sections, namely, "Burnt Norton," "East Coker," "The Dry Salvages," and "Little Gidding."

Discussion

Eliot was interested in philosophy and began his career by training as a philosopher rather than as a poet or a critic. He followed the academic study at major philosophical centres such as Harvard, Sorbonne, and Oxford, between 1908 and 1915. Eliot even published a number of philosophical articles and reviews. As Shusterman has written:

Most studies of Eliot recognize that his early absorption in philosophy was very important for his development as poet and critic, though opinions sometimes differ as to which ways and through which thinkers the philosophical influence was most powerfully and beneficially expressed. (Qtd. in Pinion, 1986, p.31)

In the autumn of 1910, Eliot spent an academic year in Paris, studying French literature and philosophy, so it was an opportunity for him to attend Bergson's lectures. As Singh has stated, Bergson's critical faculties astonished his audiences, and his philosophy worked on Eliot

and reactionary consequence was to strengthen his tendencies toward authority, tradition and conservatism (2001, p 35). Bergson's ideas permeate Eliot's criticism as well as his poetry; from his earliest works to his mature masterpieces, Eliot grapples with concepts central to Bergsonian philosophy. To start with "Prufrock," it can be argued that the poem is situated on two time levels: external time (clock time) and internal time (*durée*). Donald J. Childs has stated that "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" represents Bergson's concept of time (qtd. in Marsh and Lockerd, 2010, p.176). The external time of the poem is very short; it is early evening: "when the evening is spread out against the sky" (Eliot, 1974, p.3). The real time of the poem is when Prufrock "stretched on the floor," and contemplates possible action in his internal time. As Gillies has claimed, "although the real physical time of the poem is no more than a few hours, the mental time, or duration, is considerably different in scope and length" (1996, p.83). Prufrock's "duration" ranges through his thoughts about the tea party, to contemplation of both past events and eras, as well as to the possible future events. The first "duration" begins when Prufrock thinks if he were at the party, what would happen. Then, Prufrock thinks about time for all existence, and the constant flow of time, especially where communication with others or making decisions is concerned:

There will be time, there will be time
To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet;
There will be time to murder and create,
And time for all the works and days of hands ...
And time yet for a hundred decisions,
And for a hundred visions and revisions,
Before the taking of a toast and tea. (1974, p.4)

Prufrock's insistence on the merging of moments is depicted in these lines: "For I have known them all already, known them all / have known the evenings, mornings, afternoons" (p.4). Prufrock's sense of the past, in the Heraclitan conception of time, coexists with his present experience of time. All of these speculations are internal; therefore, they also reflect Prufrock's "*durée*" or his personal experience of time. Human's mind cannot be enchained and calculated by

external time, and our internal experience of time varies from moment to moment. As Scofield has stated:

Prufrock's thoughts move from future tense to the past, back to the future ('shall I say ...?') and to the conditional ('should I ...?'). The tenses are the proper medium for memory, deliberation, indecisions, speculation. Very rarely does Prufrock's mind come to rest in the present, the time of statement, assertion, command or action; when it does briefly, it is merely to question his own mental processes ('Is it perfume from a dress / That makes me so digress?') or to describe a circumstantial detail ('And the afternoon, evening, sleeps so peacefully!'). So when he says, finally coming to conclusion, ('No! I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be,' part of his meaning is that he was not meant *to be*, in the present tense, but only to inhabit the twilight tenses of the past, the future and the conditional. (1988, p.59)

Similarly, the chaotic flow of time in "The Waste Land," reflects Bergsonian "durée." The speaker's constant movement between past, present, and future can only be justified by the concept of internal time. In this poem, all events in history and all individual experiences are described as part of an endless flow of time which moves in different directions. In "The Burial of the Dead," Eliot sets up the time structure of the poem. As Gillies has asserted, there is a seasonal progression in this section: spring ("April is the cruelest month") follows winter, which "kept us warm, covering / Earth in forgetful snow," and "surprised" by summer. April is between the past winter and the future summer and contains bits of both. Spring becomes the perfect symbol for "durée" because it shows how the two coexist in one season or one moment (1996, p.90). In Marie episode, there is the coexistence of past and present. The memory of the winter spent with Marie is alongside with the present state of going "south in the winter." In the lines 19-30, Eliot refers to the voices of various Old Testament prophets and brings a universal past into the present. Madame Sosostris episode embodies the coexistence of different sections of time. She predicts the future, but the prediction is based on the past and the present knowledge. The final episode, the "Unreal City" section, ties together the various stands of time. As Gillies has claimed, Eliot's description of the city alludes to Dante's *Inferno*; thereby, he combines the

present-day London with medieval Italy. The new persona travels throughout the city and, when he spies Stetson, he joins past and present together. And the reference to the corpse, "Has it begun to sprout?", is a question about a future action that depends on a past action (1996, p.87). In fact, the first section is convergence of past, present, and future.

In "A Game of Chess," again, Eliot juxtaposes past and present. In the first section, Eliot alludes to a scene from Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* which is itself based on a historical event. Here, the past is reshaped in the present. The reader is sent further into the past by a reference to Philomel's story. In the following lines, the idea of the past is connected to the present by a shift from Philomel to a neurotic woman. In the second section, there is a representation of a contemporary London pub, which connects with the past. In the last lines, the repetition of good nights is an allusion to mad Ophelia's departing words. In this section, the movement of time runs into two directions: from the past to the present and then from the present to the past.

In "The Fire Sermon," there are many references to the past which coexist with the present. In this section, there are movements through time and Eliot tries to offer the coexistence of the different sections of time via two main symbols. "Sweet Thames" is a symbol which parallels Heraclitus and Bergson's flowing river of flux and connects all times together. It flows from Spenser's time to the further past and then to the present. The other central symbol is Tiresias who lives in all times and embodies the convergence of past, present, and future.

In "Death by Water," Eliot suggests the union of flux and "stillness." Phlebas the Phoenician, who appears in Madam Sosostri's section, is died by water which is the symbol of the continuity of life. According to Gillies, "Phlebas, however, is free from the wheel of life because he escapes from the tyranny of time: his death brings freedom. His failure to locate in his own duration, which resulted in his enslavement by time, is erased by his death" (1996, p.92). This section is closely connected with the last section of the poem in which the quester, like Phlebas, failed to find freedom in the flow of "duration."

In "What the Thunder Said," the absence of water suggests the flow of "duration" has stopped. Eliot may have ceased the flow of time to reconsider Bergsonian time. Here, it is difficult to distinguish times because there is no past, present, and future; there is only "durée."

Many of the images, personas, and themes of the previous sections reappear to make this section both the resolution of the poem and a representation of "durée." "What the Thunder Said," ends when the thunder speaks its commands: "Shanith, Shanith, Shanith." According to Gillies, the Thunder presents Eliot's central problem with the Bergsonian time. These commands provide a structure upon which we may formulate reality. A Bergsonian would internalise them, making them part of a personal world, while a non-Bergsonian would use them as external guides. Eliot does not seem to choose between the two (1996, p.90). The ambiguity of the final lines signifies Eliot's inability to accept Bergsonian relativistic view of time and his desire for a more unified time, which he achieves in "Four Quartets."

"Four Quartets," as one of the greatest philosophical poems of the twentieth century, considers the relationship between life in time, a life of bondage and suffering, and life in eternity, a life of freedom and immortality. The basis of the poem remains Eastern and *The Bhagavad-Gita* is the primary source of its inspiration. Bergsonian time reverberates throughout the poem, whose central theme is the union of the flux of time with the stillness of eternity. As Farahbakhsh has asserted, "Eliot's "Four Quartets," which embodies different approaches to the concept of time, opens with his struggling to think through the implications of the Bergson's "durée" (2009, p.45). According to Gillies, in "Four Quartets," Eliot tries to create an uneasy union of Bergson's flux of time with permanence of eternity (1996, p.99). In "Four Quartets," Eliot is testing the concept of circular time and eternity. "Burnt Norton" poses the problem of time, "East Coker" and "The Dry Salvages" elaborate on time, but "Little Gidding" redeems time and presents Eliot's most definite spiritual vision. Eliot gravitated toward circular structures, so in his first quartet, he prefigured the whole poem. According to Fairchild, "Burnt Norton" functions as a kind of road atlas for the journey from the ignorance of time to an awakening in eternity (1999, p.58).

"Four Quartets" begins with two epigraphs which are drawn from Heraclitus and expresses the conflict between the two types of time. The first one is paraphrased by Smith: "Although there is but one Center, most men live in centers of their own" (qtd. in Gillies, 1996, p.99). "One Center" represents eternity, while the "centers of their own" refer to our "durée." The second epigraph, "the way up and the way down are the same," unites eternity and "durée." The opening lines of "Burnt Norton" also introduce this main conflict. The first three lines of "Burnt

Norton" suggest Bergsonian idea that all time is coexisting: "Time present and time past / Are both perhaps present in time future, / And time future contained in time past" (p.177). The next two lines offer eternal time: "If all time is eternally present / All time is unredeemable." In the rest of "Four Quartets," Eliot deals with each of these concerns in turn. The second movement of "Burnt Norton," begins with an exposition of eternity: "Where past and future are gathered." But it ends with Bergsonian notion of time as a flux: "only in time can the moment in the rose-garden ... / Be remembered; involved with past and future / Only through time time is conquered" (p.180). Only by living in "time," submerging ourselves in "durée," may "time," eternity, be "conquered." In the fifth movement of "Burnt Norton," there is a union between these two conflicts. The moving life exists within time: "Words move, music moves / Only in time" (p.181). But it is subject to time's limitations: "that which is only living / Can only die" (p.181). By finding a way to join with eternity, "the form, the pattern," one "may [live] perpetually in its stillness" (p.182).

"East Coker" introduces the idea of succession as an aspect of temporal experience. The opening lines connote Heraclitus' "Unity of Opposition":

In my begging 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 bypass. (p.184)

The fifth movement of this poem conceptualises the personal and universal aspects of time. The personal aspect of time or "durée" is stressed in these lines:

Home is where one starts from. As we grow older
The world becomes stranger, the pattern more complicated
Of dead and living. Not the intense moment
Isolated, with no before and after,
But a lifetime burning in every moment ... (p.190)

Immediately, Eliot stressed the universal time: "And not the life time of one man only / But of old stones that cannot be deciphered" (Ibid.). The poem ends with an inversion of the beginning sentence to accentuate Heraclitus' "Unity of Oppositions": "In my end is my beginning." Gillies has argued that "by changing the positions of the words "end" and "beginning" from their places in the first line, Eliot draws attention to the idea that beginning and end are contained in the same time" (1996, p.104).

The opening movement of "The Dry Salvages" offers two apparently opposing symbols: "the river" and "the sea." The river stands for personal or experimental time which is constantly flowing and changing, while the sea stands for eternity and "stillness." Here, the two are brought together: "The river is within us, the sea is all about us." The symbol of the river is taken from Heraclitus' statement ("You could not step twice in the same river" (in Freeman 1983, p.91) and offers Bergson's internal time or "durée" which flows into eternity. The second movement of "The Dry Salvages" recalls the fifth movement of "East Coker." Eliot once more underlines Bergsonian personal time: "as one becomes older, / that the past has another pattern, and cease to be a mere sequence" and then, the universal time:

I have said before
That the past experience revived in the meaning
Is not the experience of one life only
But of many generations ... (p.195)

Eliot does not seem to be content with the metaphysical implications of Bergson's doctrine. So he rejects Bergsonian time as insufficient and links it with eternity. They must be combined together in order to give a comprehensive picture of time: "Time the destroyed is time the preserver" (p.196).

In the third movement of "The Dry Salvages," Eliot, again, depicts the constant change in the world and directly alludes to Heraclitus' "Unity of Opposition": "And the way up is the way down, the way forward is the way back" (in Freeman, 1983, p.60). He also refers to his "Doctrine of Flux": "Not escaping from the past / Into different lives, or into any future; / You are not the same people who left that station" (p.197).

In the rest of this movement, Eliot offers Bergsonian time in which past, present, and future are indivisible:

You shall not think 'the past is finished'
Or 'the future is before us'...
While time is withdrawn, consider the future
And the past with an equal mind. (Ibid.)

In the fifth movement of "The Dry Salvages," Eliot clearly states the problem of time and provides a solution. The problem is how to unite "the point of intersection of timeless / With time." One achieves "the point of intersection," uniting "durée" and eternity, through Incarnation:

Here the impossible union
Of spheres of existence is actual
Here the past and future
Are conquered, and reconciled ... (p.199)

Incarnation unites temporal and eternal existences with each other. As Gillies has asserted, "In the Christian doctrine of Incarnation, Eliot found the resolution to his own conflicting ideas about time: God may be both flesh and spirit Christ is both man and God but through this capacity, he can be both mortal and immortal, in time and out of time" (1996, p.105).

"Little Gidding" proceeds to a more specific time – both the world of history and the present day of London during World War II. And it moves finally to the still point, the moment of Incarnation. In the first movement of "Little Gidding," Eliot deals with the same tone of the last movement of "The Dry Salvages" and restates the essential conflict between "durée" and eternity: "Here the intersection of the timeless moment / Is England and nowhere. Never and always" (p.202). And in the last movement of this section, Eliot consciously recalls "East Coker's" problem of the beginning and the end and tries to create unity within the different

sections of "Four Quartets": "What we call the beginning is often the end / And to make an end is to make a beginning" (p.208). In the following lines, Eliot upsets objective chronology:

The moment of the rose and the moment of the yew-tree
Are of equal duration. A people without history
Is not redeemed from time, for history is a pattern
Of timeless moments. So, while the light fails
On a winter's afternoon, in a secluded chapel
History is now and England. (Ibid.)

"The moment of the rose" – eternal life – and "the moment of the yew-tree" – experiential life – contribute equally to the temporal experience and Incarnation. In the final image of the poem, Eliot's desire to reconcile "durée" and eternal time becomes fulfilled: "When the tongues of flames are infolded / Into the crowned knot of fire / And the fire and the rose are one" (p.209). "Fire," the symbol of perpetual change in Heraclitus' philosophy, and "the rose," the symbol of eternity and permanence in mysticism, are united to underline Eliot's belief that the true time is that which is united in God. The movement towards Christianity allows Eliot to resolve his desire to understand time and its conflicting forms. But as Gillies has written,

Eliot no longer views "durée" as the incorrect representation of our time as human; rather, he sees it as the true description of our existence when we are devoid of faith in God ... In his later poetry, he contrasts that time with eternal time, God's time, and he restates his conflict as durée versus eternity. But as "Four Quartets" so amply demonstrates, Eliot is still preoccupied with the problem of closing the gap between the two temporal realities; although the terms may have changed and the solution may be different and more firmly accepted, the essential nature of the discussion is identical to the one in his early poems. (1996, p.106)

Conclusion

From what was said concerning time as a flux, it can be concluded that all of the poems selected for discussion, namely, "Prufrock," "The Waste Land," and "Four Quartets," which are among the finest and most influential poems written in the twentieth century, reflect Eliot's general interest in Heraclitan and Bergsonian notion of temporal relativity. In "Prufrock," time is a central issue; in his self-deceptions, Prufrock desperately tries to escape the boundaries of real time and resort to internal and subjective time. Prufrock's sense of the past, in the Heraclitan conception of time, coexists with his present experience of time. Similarly, in "The Waste Land" the speaker's constant movement between past, present, and future as well as abrupt and frequent shifts in style, setting, narrative mode, and subject matters can be said to represent Bergsonian "durée." In the poem, all events in history and all individual experiences can be taken as part of a continuous and unbroken flow of time which stretches in different directions. The central theme of "Four Quartets," which begins with two epigraphs by Heraclitus, is the union of the flux of time with the stillness of eternity. In the poem, Eliot keeps suggesting that all opposite forces can be reconciled and combined in a unified whole. Here, he depicts the life of change and time which can be supported by spirituality, a quality of life through which two extremes of time and timelessness can be rendered non-distinguishable. Eliot, in his last poetic effort, finds a spiritual unity in life and envisages the triumph of life over time – a life away from the wasteland suffering and towards the spiritual life in eternal harmony.

References

- Bergson, Henri. (1993). *Creative Evolution*. Trans. Arthur Mitchell. London: Macmillan.
- Eliot, T. S. (1974). *Collected Poems: 1909-1962*. London: Faber & Faber.
- Fairchild, Terry L. (1999). "Time, Eternity and Immortality in T. S. Eliot's Four Quartets." *Modern Science and Vedic Science* 9.1: 51-71.
- Farahbakhsh, Alireza. (2009). *Tracing Postmodernism Back in T. S. Eliot's Major Poems*. Tehran: Rahnama Press.
- Freeman, Kathleen. (1983). *Ancilla to the Pre-Socratic Philosophers*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Gillies, Mary A. (1996). *Henri Bergson and British Modernism*. Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press.
- Graham, Daniel W. (2010). "Heraclitus." *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

<<http://www.plato.stanford.edu/cgi-bin/encyclopedia>>. Accessed on 15. 7. 2014.

Hall, Vernon. (1963). *A Short History of Literary Criticism*. London: the Merlin Press.

Lawlor, Leonard, and Valentine Moulard (2010). "Henri Bergson." *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. <<http://www.plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2008>>. Accessed on 15. 7. 2014.

Liyod, Genevieve. (1993). *Being in Time: Selves and Narrators in Philosophy and Literature*. London: Routledge.

Magge, Bryan. (2001). *The Story of Philosophy*. London: Methuen.

Marsh, Alec and Ben Lockerd. (2010). *Pound and Eliot*. Muhlenberg College and Grand Valley State University. <<http://www.muse.jhu.edu/americanliery>>. Accessed on 15. 7. 2014.

Pinion, F. B. (1986). *T. S. Eliot Companion*. London: Macmillan.

Scofield, Martin. (1988). *T. S. Eliot: The Poems*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Singh, Sukhbir. (2001). "T. S. Eliot's Concept of Time and the Technique of Textual Reading: A Comment on 'Cross' in The Waste Land." *ANQ* 14.1: 34-40.