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**THE CONCEPT OF TIME AND ETERNITY: A STUDY IN RELATION TO
ELIOT'S 'FOUR QUARTETS'****Gazi Abdulla-hel-Baqui****Office of the Registrar, Khulna University, Khulna-9208, Bangladesh*

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Abstract: The transgression of time which glides into eternity is a metaphysical concept. The meditative human mind has been profoundly influenced by this concept throughout the ages. T S Eliot, a great poet of English literature, deals the element of time in his 'Four Quartets' in a wonderful manner. This paper relates Eliot's views on time as subjectivistic and at the same time philosophical. It also shows how Eliot builds a deceptively quiet piece of graceful lyric out of the metaphysical theme 'time' and how far Eliot's success in the treatment of theme and the explanation of the concept is realistically convincing.

Key words: Time; eternity; space, universe; philosophy; future

Introduction

Time is an eternal element and an alluring theme. Since time immemorial, this element has been stirring human emotions very powerfully and has at times been dealt with as a metaphysical concept. 'Time' moved the meditative mind of T.S. Eliot who, in his poetic effort, interprets the philosophical concept of time and its relation to eternity in his 'Four Quartets'. His individual interpretation clearly involves his indebtedness to the philosophical views of Henry Bergson, a French intuitionist. Bergson held that the flow of time can be conceived only by non-rational intuition. He, in his honest endeavours, tried to focus our concentration to real time, or duration as against spatial time, or 'objective reality of time'. Like him, Eliot stands 'for subjectivistic or psychological view of time'.

What is Time and What is Eternity

Time has no beginning and end, and so time is timeless and eternity is endless. Time flows into time and time runs into eternity. So there is a continual flow of time. Humans think and act, feel and express, sleep and wake, advance and recede in this perennial flow of time. In fact, need of time is felt in human experiences and it is observed in different situations and environments. Thus, generations keep going ahead with time. On the other hand, permanence and mutability are the two conflicting principles of time.

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Again all the days of the past, present and future are time, and eternity is time without end. It is also said that time is the fourth dimension. Though time seems to contain seconds, minutes and hours, time is indivisible. None can divide, start, check and stop time. Time exists in time and endlessly glides into timelessness that is eternity which is realised, understood and sensed within the single concept of 'time'. Time has no synonyms and antonyms. Time is above and beyond time.

The theMes of 'Four Quartets'

In the matter of theme, 'Four Quartets' contains the meditative four poems, each of them containing five movements and the whole process is essentially singular. The central theme of the poems is related to religion. It is concerned with the discovery of peace in the flux of time in a 'twittering world'. Again, this common theme has made an attempt for the discovery of God 'here' 'now' and 'always'.

In the four poems within one concept and symphony, time is glanced at in four different ways. Time which is reflected through human memory is the theme of 'Burnt Norton'. That time has a cyclical pattern is the theme of 'East Coker'. 'The Dry Salvages' explores time in a constant flux and 'Little Gidding' deals with history 'as a pattern of timeless moments'.

'Four Quartets' is conspicuous for its theme of affirmation as suggested by its sequence of titles. The first poem 'Burnt Norton', a deserted manor house in Cotswold, represents the whole problem of the continual meaning of the past in the present and therefore in the future. It also shows the inter-relation of all time and the existence of a timeless present transcending our temporal one. East Coker, the ancestral village of the poet's family, relates the meaning of the past with particular reference to personal history, to the questions posed in 'Burnt Norton'. 'The Dry Salvages', a small group of rocks off the coast of Cape Ann in New England, ushers in the future, in relation to the English past. The last poem 'Little Gidding', remembered in English history as a refuge for Charles I and also as a place where the Anglican religious community was founded, 'unites all considerations for a devotional self-reassurance'.

Eliot's Views on Time and Eternity

Time, as we perceive it, is likened to space and is thus measured by units. We also call time as the fourth dimension. But Eliot spatialises 'time' and likens it to a river in 'The Dry Salvages'

'The river is within us, the sea is all about us' (The Dry Salvages). But he concludes:
'While time is withdrawn, consider the future
And past with an equal mind'. (The Dry Salvages)

To him 'past is all deception, and future futureless'. So 'real time' is not dimensional and confined spatially, because space in fact implies fixity, and time is in constant flux or flow. This time is non-quantitative and therefore its nature is psychical and its order is psychological. Thus it cannot be measured and divided. Actually time is not 'the division

of reality into existent and non-existent parts'. This is called by Bergson as 'duration' where there will be no obstacles between past, present and future. Eliot says:

'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'. (Burnt Norton)

The first half of 'Burnt Norton' is devoted to the fact that past, present and future are unreal. They exist only in relation to eternity in which they are embedded. Temporal life on this mutable world is therefore, according to Eliot, essentially negative. It is rather a part of the eternal scheme, 'for eternity involves change and change points to eternity'. In the context of the poem, Eliot shows memory as a device by the image of 'the dust on a bowl of rose-leaves' Through this device the 'eternally present' through 'what might have been and what has been' may be understood. The possibility of unsatisfied life's redemption is also suggested here.

TS Eliot mentions 'still point', where time and the timeless meet. That point is placed in time or in space. The 'still point is like the divine center in the vision of heaven' where all time and places are present. The 'still point' which refers to the eternal can be attained in art as well as in life. The transient materials of an art may acquire an eternal quality only through a kind of discipline. It is possible that a unique moment in the rose garden can be remembered in time in which eternity is revealed. Time can be conquered only through time because consciousness transcends time.

In 'East Coker' Eliot shows time is not the development of past, present and future, but the sequence of birth, maturity, decay and death. Time in the form of succession is a process of reducing 'old fires to ashes, and ashes to earth'. This explains Eliot's motto 'In my end is my beginning'. Here the flux of time is comprehended in the form of vision which is the past that is again revealed in 'stillness', transcending the limitations of time. The poet mentions that literal words, because of their limited characteristics, cannot properly evaluate the 'stillness'. 'The union of opposites, of time and timeless, of light and darkness, is brought about by a feeling of humility which is endless'.

'The Dry Salvages' ushers in the future in relation to the past. Here time, which is spent in our lives, is represented by the image of the river where the image of the sea represents time as 'a universal process' that contains history of mankind. Eliot's own belief in the incarnation is upheld here that through it our temporal life can be redeemed and submerged in the flux of timelessness as well. In reality, we do not exist in time but at the moment without action or inaction while time is withdrawn.

Little Gidding' is a place of destiny. It is 'the world's end and the end of temporal where eternity supersedes time'. One positive theme of this poem is how we live in this world and in eternity at the same time. Thus it has a relation to history which is seen as a 'pattern of timeless moment'. Any sort of bondage is withdrawn here. In the last

movement of this poem the themes such as the themes of beginnings and ends, of illumination and of redemption' from time within time are recapitulated.

Thus we see that Eliot's concept of time is inseparably linked up with Eternity and his perception is quite singular. Eternity includes Time, but it is above and beyond time. It somehow transcends time. This view, once again, coincides with the principal view of St. Augustine. Eliot and Augustine both cancelled the division of time. Instead of past, present and future, there is 'in the mind a present, a present of things past, and a present of things future; the first in attention, the second in memory and the third in expectation'. Once again Eliot echoes:

'What might have been and what has been
Point to one end, which is always present'. (Burnt Norton)

In 'Four Quartets' there is the conception of a 'moment' or this moment may be an 'instant' which is a particle of time. It is neither in time nor out of time. This 'moment' possesses the characteristics of eternity and is paved with unlimited possibilities. It is the meeting point of time and eternity, 'the point of intersection of the timeless with time'. This 'instant' is ultimately an atom of eternity, in relation to time. According to Eliot, only the saint has the ability to realise a moment's enormous significance and limitless possibilities.

Relation between Philosophy and Poetry

The problem of the relation between poetry and philosophy is highly controversial. Yet the line dividing poetry from philosophy is not so distant. All great poets are more or less philosophers because they are inconceivably wise and at times susceptible to let their mind work on metaphysical concepts and problems. They greatly delight and excel in such philosophical musings.

Time is a purely philosophical theme, a metaphysical subject-matter that is notoriously difficult to be dealt with. The element of time is a great personal chosen theme of Eliot who discourses on time through wonderful lyricism. A life-long disciple of Eliot Williamson says, "In consequence 'Four Quartets' is Eliot's most philosophical poem or sequence, and its method of subjunctive ideas is most reminiscent of 'The Waste Land', eliciting deeper significance from memory and desire." (p. 210)

The treatment of time in Eliot's poetry reminds us of how a profound harmony between philosophy and poetry can be drawn. Through intuition, a sense of history and an unparalleled poetic faculty, Eliot galvanizes the theme of philosophy into a beautiful piece of poetry. In the words of Williamson, "The problem of time and the temporal- the constant problem of the poem - now moves into the realm of art. Words and music move only in time, and hence have the limitation of death." (p. 215)

Actually philosophy is not a hindrance to poetic creation, rather some crude abstract themes of philosophy are modelled and fashioned into some finer elements of literature.

Thus ‘time’ and ‘eternity’ from the world of philosophy, were thrust into the immortal world of Art where a harmonious concept of these two finds eloquent expressions through the prolific poetic faculty of Eliot who makes his ‘Four Quartets’ a great lyric of literary history. Sharrock says, “in the ‘Quartets’ Eliot is still mediating on language”.

‘Every attempt
Is a wholly new start, and a different kind of failure
Because one has only learnt to get the better of words.
For the thing one no longer has to say.....’ (East Coker)

The poems are rather wordy and paved with philosophical musings. Various opposites are drawn together into a harmonious whole which is an essentially Eliotian achievement.

Eliot's Success in Defining His Concept

Eliot’s temper was essentially metaphysical. He has transformed ‘Four Quartets’ into an indubitable masterpiece. With the help of his intellect, technical achievement of the poems is gained. In defining his concept, Eliot introduces ‘auditory imagination’ which in the words of the poet “is the feeling for syllable and rhythm penetrating far below the conscious levels of thought and feeling, invigorating every word”, Deutsech says, “Nowhere does the poet exhibit it more amply, nowhere with greater depth and power” (p. 173 and 180). Eliot uses images, symbols, echoes, repetitions and references to drive his ideas home, thus ultimately creating an admirable lyric on ‘time’.

Besides a host of logical interpretations, Eliot finally shows that time can be conquered only through time and this moment or present is the time of Divine inspiration, ‘for it is in the moment that the Eternal reveals itself, and thus the moment is made eternal’. The image of ‘rose garden’ explains the relativity of temporal time with eternity. ‘The hidden laughter of children in the foliage is the perception of the timeless in time. This is a vision of the Age of innocence in the Garden of Eden which is timeless. Eternity can be reached only when we are out of temporal, and this sense is a kind of non-attachment. We hear Eliot again:

‘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,
-- -- -- -- --
Be remembered; involved with time past and future.
Only through time, time is conquered’. (Burnt Norton)

Moreover, in each quartet there is a contrast between ‘life in time’ and ‘the timeless moment’ or ‘the point of intersection of the timeless with time’. There is the central problem which is both personal and universal. This problem is the unreality of time, ‘the unreality of life so governed by time that the present dissolves into the memories of the past and desires for the future. So time flows from the past through the present to the future’. Time runs into time, time runs into eternity. In this way Eliot examines and categorizes Time and Eternity in his ‘Four Quartets’.

AC ward says, "Its ultimate rank in English poetry may depend more on its distinction of language than upon any originality or depth of thought, though it has been credited with remarkable qualities in that respect. The intertwining complexity of the poems is ascertained in terms of Eliot's intellectual planning, composing them". So real Eliot is to be discovered in the deliberate complexity and obscurity of the poems. He set the potency of language above the originality of his thoughts.

Eliot used in, ' Quartets' the word 'perhaps' which is generally a popular word for a philosopher, because philosophy cannot reach any conclusion, only it can say 'this may be', it cannot say 'this should be' . On the other hand, if anybody uses the word 'perhaps', it is understood that he is not clear of his own concept, or he has some shadow of doubt about the discourse . In this sense Eliot rightly used the word 'perhaps' because he simply desired to create a beautiful piece of poetic art out of the philosophical 'time' theme.

Conclusion

Eliot's interpretation of time and eternity has revolutionized the process of contemplation on a purely abstract theme. In view of this, it can be further elaborated that since the birth of the universe, there is the only one and the same time. Some 5000 years ago in Egyptian civilization, there was time; today after 5000 years since then, there is the same time, and again in future, since today after 5000 years, there will be the same time. Time existed in the ancient civilization in Egypt; Egyptian civilization on the other hand existed in time. Again the same time existed throughout there 5000 years. Here all time exists at one point which is the present moment. There is no change in its nature, characteristics and position and so it is changelessly the same.

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