

Let us “Bear Very Much Reality:” T. S. Eliot’s Outsider in “Burnt Norton”

“Çok Fazla Gerçeği Taşıyalım:” T. S. Eliot’ın ‘Burnt Norton’ Şiirindeki Yabancı

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Abstract

“Burnt Norton” (1935), the first section of T. S. Eliot’s *Four Quartets* (1942), mirrors the poet’s inquisitive approach towards the complexity of human condition in the modern age, particularly focusing on the central concepts of life, time, death, or eternity. Engaged in an existentialist exploration of such notions, Eliot designs the *Quartets* as an analogical musical composition. “Burnt Norton,” as the leading movement of the whole piece, becomes the first notes in Eliot’s poetic musicality in his entire work, with its variance in tone and poetic form and a rhythmical obsession with certain themes such as life, time, infinity, or memory. This paper aims to analyze such modernist pursuits voiced in the poem by treating its persona as a “Stranger,” or a typical quester of existentialist philosophy. As an English philosopher/author, Colin Wilson contributes to the development of the continental philosophy of existentialism, specifically identifying major characteristics of the Outsider figure. Wilson’s analytical work, *The Outsider* (1956) serves as a theoretical frame to characterize the speaker of the poem as an Outsider in this paper. It argues that the speaker of the *Quartets*, as primarily reflected in “Burnt Norton,” presents similar central existentialist crises of simultaneously searching for the ways to explore reality or denying its possibility. He questions how much reality a human being “bears” without any meaningful attempt to understand it, and invites the reader to recognize their own unfit answers that deny their position as Outsiders in modern life.

Key words: T. S. Eliot, modernism, “Burnt Norton,” Outsider, existentialism, Colin Wilson, *The Outsider*

Öz

T.S. Eliot’ın *Dört Kuartet* (1942) eserinin ilk bölümü olan “Burnt Norton” (1935), özellikle hayat, zaman, ölüm veya sonsuzluk gibi temel kavramlara odaklanarak, şairin modern çağdaki insan hâlinin karmaşıklığına yönelik sorgulayıcı yaklaşımını yansıtır. Bu gibi kavramları varoluşsal bir incelemeye tâbi tutan Eliot, *Kuartet*’ı analojik bir müzikal kompozisyon olarak tasarlar. Ton ve şiirsel formundaki çeşitlilik ile yaşam, zaman, sonsuzluk veya hafıza gibi konulara olan ritmik takıntısıyla “Burnt Norton,” bu kompozisyonun ilk parçası olarak, Eliot’ın tüm eserde görülen şiirsel müzikalitesinin ilk notalarını oluşturur. Bu makalenin amacı, şiirin konuşan kişisini varoluşsal felsefenin tipik maceracısı olan bir Yabancı olarak kabul edip, şiirde dile getirilen söz konusu modernist arayışları incelemektir. İngiliz filozof/yazar Colin Wilson, özellikle Yabancı figürünün temel özelliklerini belirleyerek kıtasal varoluşsal felsefesinin gelişimine katkıda bulunur. Bu makalede, Wilson’ın analitik eseri *Yabancı* (1956) şiirin konuşan kişisini bir Yabancı olarak karakterize etmek için kuramsal bir çerçeve oluşturur. Öncelikle “Burnt Norton” şiirinde görüldüğü üzere, *Kuartet*’ın konuşan kişisinin gerçeği keşfetmek ya da bunun olasılığını reddetmek gibi benzer temel varoluşsal sancıları vardır. Dizelerde bir insanın gerçeği anlamak için herhangi bir anlamlı çabası olmaksızın o gerçeğe ne kadar “katlanacağını” sorgular ve okuyucuya birer Yabancı olarak modern yaşamdaki yerlerini reddettiren kendi eksik cevaplarını bulmak için çağrıda bulunur.

Anahtar Kelimeler: T. S. Eliot, modernizm, “Burnt Norton,” Yabancı, varoluşçuluk, Colin Wilson, *Yabancı*

Introduction

T.S. Eliot’s *Four Quartets* consists of four individual poems, “Burnt Norton” (1935), “East Coker” (1940), “The Dry Salvages” (1941), and finally “Little Gidding” (1942), written at different times and published together by Eliot later in 1942. Exploring “the possibilities of musical development in the idea of sequence without entirely giving up on narrative” (Hart, 2007, p. 188), Eliot presents in the *Quartets* the complex nature of human reality through his inquisitive approach to the central concepts of life, time, eternity, or death. Though it is possible to observe such a philosophical search in Eliot’s earlier works, as in his ground-breaking work, *The Waste Land*, what Eliot introduces in the *Quartets* is not “merely a repetition of old ideas and themes” (Dwivedi, 2002, p. 157), but “it is a new discovery, [...] a fresh exploration in poetic imagery and diction, [as well as] a fresh probe into the patterns of rhythm and theme” (Dwivedi, 2002, p. 157). The title of the poem is based on the musical terminology:

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"Quartet" means a set of four voices or instruments. Each part of the poem, in this sense, represents a different poetic voice, or a different aspect of Eliot's poetic search within this analogy, which underlines the wholeness of the poem's effect through difference or variation. As Sarker (2008) explains, though each part is written individually, "[t]he four Parts of *Four Quartets* are not independent poems, because of all the four Parts make a definitive pattern which is the unity of the poem" (p. 124). Eliot also divides each part into five sections or movements, which is interpreted by Schneider (1975) and many other critics as a deliberate choice in order to echo "the parts of *The Waste Land*" (p. 172). Therefore, although Eliot in the *Quartets* seems to focus on common themes within a similar form to *The Waste Land*, and it is quite acceptable to draw certain parallelisms between these two masterpieces, *Four Quartets* is generally regarded as "his ripest, most complex and most complete in expression of 'the experience of believing a dogma'; of the moments of intuitive apprehension of its truth, and of the relation of these to a view of history and to the general living of life" (Drew, 1950, p. 178).

Four Quartets is deeply concerned with the "conceptual terms such as 'end,' 'beginning,' 'motion,' 'stillness,' and 'meaning'" (Perkins, 1987, p. 28), which draws us closer to an existentialist questioning. In his biographical work on T.S. Eliot, Peter Ackroyd (1993) makes it explicit that *Four Quartets*, "in spite of the poem's air of formal deliberation, and the sense of which it appears to offer gnomic statements or injunctions" (p. 230) still defies any "paraphrasable 'content'" (p. 230). In other words, each part invokes certain questions in relation to human reality, especially, its dependence on the inconceivable nature of time, which can be interpreted as philosophical quests into the world through the use of poetic diction. Each movement of the *Quartets* follows a different pattern to undertake their existentialist quest into "a process of exploration, both *along* the movements of time, and *inward* into the stillness of 'consciousness'" (p. 179) as Elizabeth Drew (1950) rightly observes. Similarly, George Williamson (1998) proposes,

On the personal side, *Four Quartets* might be regarded as a "series of images of migration" which explore "time present and time past" only to collapse their meaning; or, more generally, as a series of images of history by which time is explored until it reveals the circular journey of man. The ultimate discovery is that if man enters the garden of the past and follows his history, he arrives at the garden from which he set out (p. 208).

The vicious circle of human life, presented in the *Quartets* from its specific relation to the concept of time itself, is then based on an existentialist search, which seems to lose its linearity within Eliot's representation.¹ "Known as a great lyric reflecting history, time and other philosophical concerns as well as personal feelings," argues Haldar (2005), "*Four Quartets* basically explores movement by movement and Quartet by Quartet, a point of intersection of "timelessness with time," which Eliot drew initially from his own life" (p. 94).

"Burnt Norton"², the first section of T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets* (1942), mirrors the poet's inquisitive approach towards the complexity of human condition in the modern age, particularly focusing on the central concepts of life, time, death, or eternity with its variance

¹ Modernist literature has long been regarded as "an ideal medium for the transcription of traumatic experience" mainly because of its "emphasis on interiority, memory, psychological verisimilitude, and personal isolation, and its development of fragmented, non-linear plots" (Moran, 2007, p. 3). In this sense, Eliot's use of temporal disorder in the modernist poem *Burnt Norton* can be considered as "the poetics of temporal veering in trauma representation" (Sarıkaya-Şen, 2018, p. 1047).

² However, it is well-known that Eliot did not start "Burnt Norton," intending an individual poem, but, as Helen Gardner (1958) states, "[it] began from 'bits left-over from *Murder in the Cathedral*, which he thought 'too good to waste'" (p. 572).

in tone and poetic form and a rhythmical obsession with existentialist themes. This article analyzes Eliot's modernist pursuits voiced in the poem by treating its persona as an "Outsider," or a typical quester of existentialist philosophy. With this aim, it particularly discusses how English philosopher/author Colin Wilson contributed to the identification of major characteristics of the Outsider figure, by which he served the development of the continental philosophy of new existentialism. Through his detailed analysis of various literary, cultural, artistic examples of the Outsider figure, Wilson reveals that this particular existentialist anti-hero has dominated the imagination of the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century writers in Europe. He combines all these characteristics associated with the Outsider of the existentialist philosophy and shows their reflections in his analytical work, *The Outsider* (1982), which serves as the theoretical frame for this article to characterize the speaker of the poem as an Outsider. It reveals that the speaker of the *Quartets*, as primarily reflected in "Burnt Norton,"³ presents similar central existentialist crises of simultaneously searching for the ways both to explore reality and deny its possibility. T. S. Eliot questions how much reality a human being "bears" without any meaningful attempt to understand it, and invites the readers to recognize their own unfit answers that deny their position as Outsiders in modern life.

Affiliated as friends, T. S. Eliot and Colin Wilson share similar existentialist visions and tackle with the problem of being an Outsider throughout their lives. According to Wilson (1982), the primary step to define someone as an Outsider is related to his or her own realization and identification as such. So, he claims, "the Outsider's first business is self-knowledge" (Wilson, 1982, p. 71). But, such self-knowledge only leads them to go back where they started, or into another pandemonium. Both Eliot and Wilson, in this sense, accept that their position in the world is not that of the centre but of the Outsider. As Wilson (1982) further observes, the Outsider is "a man who has awakened to chaos" (p. 15). However, Wilson claims, the Outsider might not have any reason "to believe that chaos is positive," or it is "the germ of life" (p. 15). He speaks of chaos more in the sense of *tohu bohu* in the Kabbala, which accepts that it is an orderly state in the first place as "the egg is the chaos of the bird", but he continues, "in spite of this, the truth must be told, chaos must be faced" (p. 15). So, the Outsider needs to embrace the chaos as an outcome of his own realization that he is not an ordinary person but a stranger in his society. Eliot's position in the *Quartets* as well as in *The Waste Land* displays an affinity with the existentialist paradox of the Outsider who needs to start chaos at the expense of creating another void that lacks any sense of reality. Eliot sophisticates his vision by combining it with Buddhist and Hindu elements such as references to the *Bhagavad Gita*, the sacred Hindu scripture, and more specifically the Four Dharma Seals of existence of Buddhism.⁴ In her article, "Not One, Not Two: Eliot and Buddhism," Christina Hauck (2009) explains how Eliot's notion of reality is deeply influenced by the Four Dharma Seals of existence as such:

Four Quartets seems permeated from beginning to end with Eliot's awareness of the Four Seals of Existence, expressing impermanence ("In my beginning is my end"), extreme suffering ("Where is there an end of it, the soundless wailing"), assertions of non-self ("You are not the same people who left that station/ Or who will at any terminus") and (possibly) *shunyata* [emptiness or void] ("the still point of the turning world") (p. 47).

³ The title of the poem is the name of an actual manor house with a garden in Gloucestershire, which Eliot visited in the summers of 1934 with "his American friend, Emily Hale" (Ackroyd, 1993, p. 229). The autobiographical relevance of this particular landscape is concealed in the poem, offering a more suggestive symbolism through the image of the rose-garden. That's why, Grover Smith (1996) calls "Burnt Norton," a poetic revisit, or "a vision within poetic vision" (p. 92).

⁴ In the third movement, "The Dry Salvages," Eliot refers to Lord Krishna as the eternal embodiment of god, echoing Christian idea of God incarnated in human body to universalize his concept of timelessness of time.

These fundamental truths of Buddhism seem to reflect Eliot's ideas about the impermanence of being, the weight of reality humans have to bear in this world, questioning the notion of the self, or the "the still point" in the flux of time, which brings us once again closer to the Outsider's existentialist position.

From the very first lines of "Burnt Norton" onwards, Eliot's persona reflects on "Time present and time past" (2002, p. 189) which might be "both present in time future" (2002, p. 189). Thus, the audience are given an opportunity to consider their reality from an alternative conception of time and history within "a multisided perception of reality as though through a prism in which each side reveals the whole of the prism" (Srivastava, 1977, p. 99). What is reality? How can we know what is real and what is not? The speaker first attempts to try reason as a means of rendering reality meaningful and he refers to Logos or God as the two epitaphs from the Greek philosopher Heraclitus introduced at the beginning show: "Although the Word (logos) is common to all, most men live as if they had each a private wisdom of his own," and "The way up and the way down are one and the one." The first epitaph emphasizes the crucial status of logos, reason, or meaning within a religious perspective, God or the Word of God in shaping human lives. On the other hand, the latter underlines the contradictory nature of reality, presenting it as a unity of oppositions. Through the epitaphs, the poem sets its primary concern for the modern individual's existentialist struggle, that of questioning the meaning of life and the epistemological possibility about such reality. Heraclitus's dynamic view of time and his belief in logos as the key moderator in life is here appropriated by Eliot (2002) with explicit references that embrace time as "the still point of the turning world" (p. 194). Wilson's Outsider is similarly defined by such an inquisitive tendency to search for the logos in life, consequently to deny the possibility of finding it, and taking a solemn position about life.

"Burnt Norton," generally regarded as "the best poetic portion of *Four Quartets*" (Sarker, 2008, p. 132), engages religious and philosophical insights from the very opening lines that target at developing rhetorical questions rather than arguments concerning modern man's existence in the world. Reminding us of the idea that the *Quartets* are basically religious poems, Elizabeth Drew (1950) further suggests,

the poet is not persuading us to believe anything, he is revealing the fact what it feels like to believe his religion. And to believe it not intellectually but with the whole personality. He is creating in language the steps of thought and feeling, and the moments of sudden apprehension, in and through which he has felt the conflicting oppositions of the worlds of nature and of 'spirit'; of time and the timeless; of the personal and the social; of inner and outer actualities; of life and death, to be 'conquered and reconciled in the central symbol of Incarnation, although that remains only 'half-guessed, half understood' (p. 178).

The religious orientation of the poem is presented not as a way to direct people into Christian doctrines but to depict such religious sensation as a potential to answer existentialist questions of the speaker. The poem rather portrays the futility of such concepts as time, reality, truth, or stability in life: "If all time is eternally present/ All time is unredeemable" (Eliot, 2002, p. 189). He arrives at "a world of speculation" (Eliot, 2002, p. 189), in which the co-existence of the present, past, and future instantly becomes an obstacle for the persona to conceive reality. The world of speculation that the persona arrives is the utmost destination that an Outsider would eventually hope to find himself in. Last but not the least, he resorts to memory as another dead-end effort, and remembers a passage that is not taken, towards the door that has never been opened into "the rose-garden" (Eliot, 2002, p. 189). This is not an ordinary rose-garden since the persona specifically speaks of it as *the* rose-garden, which is inhabited by "other echoes" (Eliot, 2002, p. 189). He also continues his contemplation as if presenting a dialogue, and the hypothetical journey seems to be taken not only by the speaker but also by

other company or the readers. Then, he hears the sound of a bird- a thrush- urging them to enter into the garden, heaven, or “[i]nto our first world” (Eliot, 2002, p. 190). The following lines might imply the state of the human beings before the Fall: “There they were, dignified, invisible,/ Moving without pressure, over the dead leaves,/ In the autumn heat, through the vibrant air” (Eliot, 2002, p. 190). Among the roses, they look down into “the drained pool” (Eliot, 2002, p. 190) despite the passing cloud. This pool, “filled with water out of sunlight” (Eliot, 2002, p. 190), can signify in this respect the world, itself, where “[...] human kind/ Cannot bear very much reality” (Eliot, 2002, p. 190). This reality is repeated again in the concluding lines of the first part: “Time past and time future/ What might have been and what has been/ Point to one end, which is always present” (Eliot, 2002, p. 190). This is what the persona rightly identifies in relation to the desolate condition of human beings, as Wilson’s new existentialist Outsider also confirms with his qualities that “carry the same stigma of futility” (1982, p. 118).

The same despair can be observed throughout the second part of the poem, in which the persona focuses on “Garlic and sapphires in the mud” (Eliot, 2002, p. 190) together with all other oppositions that “[p]ursue their pattern as before/ But reconciled among the stars” (Eliot, 2002, p. 191). In his observations that mostly reveal him the oppositions, disconnections, or interruptions about reality, the speaker tries to come up with a meaningful explanation for life. All these add up to what he identifies as the complex unifying effect of the intersection of time and timelessness, leaving the speaker in the position of a stranger since he is capable of committing to both views. The following lines well explain this idea:

At the still point of the turning world. Neither flesh nor
fleshless;
Neither from not 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 ascend nor decline. Except for the still 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. (Eliot, 2002, p. 191)

The speaker’s hesitation in tone increases in these lines to such an extent that he cannot be sure whether his existence belonged to a place or not. His perception of time, unlike the traditional understanding of it as progressive, linear, or causal, demands no existentialist position from human beings. Wilson (1982) contends that people who are at peace with their illusionary faith in “a mechanical civilization that runs in grooves like a gramophone record, precluding freedom” (p. 47) do not question time at all. However, Eliot’s speaker here composes such notes –to use Eliot’s musical terminology– and creates an alternative voice that explores the Outsider’s vision of life. His Outsider persona then reflects a structure of time in his reference to “the still point” which is at perpetual motion, tuning in more with a Bergsonian concept of time as he states, “To be conscious is not to be in time” (Eliot, 2002, p. 192), and concludes the second section by the line, “Only through time time is conquered” (Eliot, 2002, p. 192). Bergson’s *durée réelle* cannot be conceived as a measurement or unit, but it is the indivisible continuity, just like the fleeting time concept of Eliot. This notion of time invoked by the

speaker is one of the major distinctions that he has as an Outsider and that makes him question his own existence in relation to such a fluid concept of time.

The third part, on the other hand, brings into the scene the city of London (the Unreal City of *The Waste Land*) "a place of disaffection" (Eliot, 2002, p. 192) with its "gloomy hills," (Eliot, 2002, p. 192). The Outsider persona's experience among modern men or "unhealthy souls" (Eliot, 2002, p. 192) is marked by the process of "[e]mptying the sensual with deprivation/ Cleansing affection from the temporal" (Eliot, 2002, p. 192). They become eventually "[d]istracted from distraction by distraction" (Eliot, 2002, p. 192) and "[f]illed with fancies and empty of meaning" (Eliot, 2002, p. 193). These lines might be the best lyrical representations of what Wilson would identify as how the Outsider feels as "the hole-in-corner man" (1982, p. 11). Eliot achieves this with reference to London, which is in its twittering light, presented as a spiritual purgatory where the Outsider suffers from his liminality. The following lines take the journey into the lower depths of hell, or "[i]nto the world of perpetual solitude" (Eliot, 2002, p. 193):

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 abstention from movement; while the world moves
 In appetency, on its metalled ways
 Of time past and time future. (Eliot, 2002, p. 193)

The Outsider persona attempts to give meaning to his life through various faculties, all of which fail him to conceive it as meaningful. He cannot clearly see any difference among them as they lead to the same path in the end. The way down is characterized by the destruction of "the world of sense" (Eliot, 2002, p. 193), "the world of fancy" (Eliot, 2002, p. 193), and "the world of spirit" (Eliot, 2002, p. 193). However, it comprises human reality together with the way up, which cannot be differentiated from the other since they are in constant change or flux, leading the speaker with "something nauseating, anti-life" (Wilson, 1982, p. 47). This is how both Eliot's persona and Wilson's Outsider become an errand of existentialism particularly through identifying life as anti-life.

The fourth part, respectively the shortest one, reveals the speaker's doubts whether his existence will continue tomorrow or not as he wonders "Will the sunflower turn to us, will the clematis/ Stray down, bend to us; tendril and spray/ Clutch and cling?" (Eliot, 2002, pp. 193-194). He is not certain whether the physical reality around him will still exist the next day as he compares his own existence to theirs. It is evident that his are rhetorical questions and never meant to be answered by either the speaker or the reader, but they are rather raised for both. This mysterious but concise section is regarded by George Knox (1951) as "the concentrated effort to reach more than "hints and guesses of the reality at "the still centre of the turning world," more than the sudden flash of light on the kingfisher's fleeting wing" (p. 312). So, this section itself becomes a still centre for the on-going depictions of life and anti-life images that interweave the whole poem. Building on what Knox expresses, it is possible to maintain

that the Outsider speaker in the poem involves both himself and the reader with an existentialist search about life and reality with no affirmation about finding the answers.

The speaker's concern with both the fluidity and futility of life is more explicitly voiced in the fifth and last section of the poem as he continues: "Words move, music moves/ Only in time; but that which is only living/Can only die" (Eliot, 2002, p. 194). In this death-in-life atmosphere, which is the everyday reality for the Outsider, as expressed by Wilson (1982, p. 70), the speaker of the poem this time relies on the power of "the form, the pattern" (Eliot, 2002, p. 194), through which he thinks permanency can be achieved. Is it possible to create a pattern for our reality that would help us be carried away with the illusion of it? At this point, he uses the example of "a Chinese jar" (Eliot, 2002, p. 194), which embodies his understanding of time. Chinese jar is both in motion -due to its illustrations- and in stillness - due to its material-, unifying these two contradictory notions in its nature. This is very similar to the concept of time for an Outsider as the speaker continues this particular simile with such lines: "Or say that the end precedes the beginning,/And the end and the beginning were always there/Before the beginning and after the end" (Eliot, 2002, p. 194). We fail to recognize the beginning and end of time as human beings although we incline to form patterns to use it. As George Williamson (1998) points out, in this part, "[t]he problem of unchanging unity is pursued with the violin, again attempting to rise above the limitations of time, where 'all is always now'" (p. 216). Therefore, in order to challenge the limits of time, an artist or a composer must be involved in the wholeness of time since "[w]ords strain,/ Crack and sometimes break, under the burden,/ Under the tension, slip, slide, perish" (Eliot, 2002, p. 194). Nevertheless, there is "the Word," which is the ultimate, transcendent, and timeless artistic production for the speaker. It is the pattern that gives artistic expression the ability to transcend time and become timeless although we cannot be certain whether it is attainable for the Outsider speaker of the poem or not, since at the end of the poem, the persona returns "to the beginning of the meditation" (Spanos, 2009, p. 243), "the hidden laughter/ Of children" (Eliot, 2002, p. 195), which was told about by the thrush in the first part.

To conclude, the persona of the *Quartets*, as particularly exemplified in the first section "Burnt Norton," presents his existentialist concerns with variance in tone changing from meditative to gloomy or from stanzaic form to free verse, even within a play of the length of the lines to create a distinct musicality in the poem. Eliot's Outsider speaker in this poem embodies all the steps that are necessary to identify him as a stranger in his society: his futile attempts to make meaning of life through reason, time, religion, or order, his denial/acceptance of the epistemological status of reality, being, and nothingness, his deep suffering following this denial and acceptance, his circular journey that ends where he started, and his solemn solitude that he only reveals through his verse. As a typical Outsider of the modern world, he cannot bear very much reality in this unreal city as he keeps his lyrical monologue on and on.

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