

## Milestones

- T. S. Eliot (1888 - 1965)
- Four Quartets: published by Faber and Faber in 1944
- Burnt Norton: a country house in the Cotswolds visited by Eliot in 1934. The poem Burnt Norton was first published in Eliot's Collected Poems in 1936. Later republished as the first of the Four Quartets.
- East Coker: a village in Somerset visited by Eliot in 1940. Eliot's ashes lie in the church of St Michael in the village.
- The Dry Salvages: A rocky outcrop off the coast of Maine, USA and familiar to Eliot from his childhood. The poem was written in 1941.
- Little Gidding: An Anglican community established in Huntingdonshire in 1626 by Sir Nicholas Ferrer. Eliot visited Little Gidding in 1936. The poem was written in 1942.

## Poetry as Philosophy

The Four Quartets are as much philosophy as they are poetry. One way to approach the Quartets is to think of them as the work of a philosopher writing in poetic form.

The Quartets are abstract contemplations unified by two themes: the relationship between humanity and the natural world (understood in the concepts of time and place); the relationship of humans to spirituality and Divine presence (timelessness).

The Quartets are full of references to nature. More often than not Eliot's observations of human relationships and experience are set in the context of nature: the garden in Burnt Norton; open fields seen from the lane heading towards East Coker; the rocks and seascape of The Dry Salvages; the sensuality of a bright mid-winter's day in Little Gidding. The Earth lives and breathes in the Four Quartets. Its rhythms contextualise the life process.

The Quartets contrast the activity of everyday life with the stillness (serenity) which Eliot finds in his contemplation of the Divine. Human beings, Eliot observes, have a near insatiable need for experience but devote too little time to the search for life's deeper transcendent spiritual meaning.

## Connections

I started reading the Four Quartets many years ago when I was in the sixth form at school. Although I did not understand what I was reading I think I was intrigued by the mystery (perhaps the mysticism) and intensity of the poetry. I still have the edition of the Quartets that I bought in 1971. The poetry of the Quartets has been with me ever since and although I have returned to it on many occasions, it has been slow to reveal its power and meaning.

When I was diagnosed with cancer in 2015 I returned once again to the Four Quartets. Faced with an existential sense of the end of my own life, the Four Quartets were and have remained a great stimulus for contemplation.

My paintings are not illustrations of the poems but responses to them. There is something literal in each painting that flows directly from each Quartet. I would say however that in each of my paintings I am expressing my emotional and intellectual response to the poetry. I am not trying to represent Eliot's words in images. Once you start a painting it becomes another kind of conversation. As a participant in that conversation the artist tries to control and direct the flow. But the medium and the form always answer back. So however a painting is grounded to start with it will take on its own life and character. My paintings have a life in relation to Eliot's poetry but at the same time, they stand apart.

## **Burnt Norton**

*"Time present and time past  
Are both perhaps present in time future,  
And all time present in time past.  
If all time is eternally present  
All time is unredeemable.  
What might have been is an abstraction  
Remaining a perpetual possibility  
Only in a world of speculation.  
What might have been and what has been  
Point to one end, which is always present."*

The poem Burnt Norton begins with Eliot engaged in philosophy reflecting upon the nature of time. This is a good starting point since we constantly take the past, present and future for granted. But think for a moment about *time* without taking it for granted.

First it might occur to us that there is nothing concrete about the idea of future. In fact the future never happens. If the future exists at all it does so as what we hope or intend to happen. Perhaps think of the future as what is in our imagination as we act in the present? We act towards our sense of future.

Think of the past. Perhaps the past is as elusive as the future? We often think of the past as if it has certainty: it certainly existed. But very often what we remember about past events is quite hazy, is contested by others with different recollections or is forgotten altogether. We know the past to be there but it is often difficult to find. Our sense of our personal past might be constructed by objects such as old photographs or family stories. We trust to the integrity of these (we make sense of them and incorporate them into our personal narratives) but often we cannot verify their absolute truth. The past it turns out, is no more of a certainty than the future.

Think of the present. As soon as we do think of the present it becomes the past. Events that we think of as being in the present come to mind as past events. Suddenly the present is as uncertain as the past.

What we think of as time, the time we take for granted, is in fact our process of calibration: what we have in our watches and calendars. A philosophical sense of time is much harder to take for granted as every element of time is perpetually present and so unredeemable.

What we experience in fact is a "living present" within which we continuously act into a future that we anticipate informed by the narratives that we have constructed and which make sense of our past.

Our actions are therefore never free but simultaneously enabled and constrained by the movement of time as also by our environmental conditions, our social and historical context and our relationships with others.

This painting is of objects that are important to me. The vases were present throughout my childhood and passed on to me later in life. The photographs are images from my early years. The painting melds these images in the same way that they appear and disappear in my memory and imagination. Some are harder to see than others: we look; we peer into a past which we know to be there but which at the same time is tantalisingly elusive. There are images which seem clear but which are of events and people who we remember only because the image says we should. They were there, but who are they? The vases sit in a clearly defined context but which at the same time lacks detail: it is hard to fill the missing space. The memories are just not clear enough. At the same time these artefacts from the past shape a sense of the present: they are after all, present to us now. For this reason they play a part too in the future as we might anticipate their appearance in future stories.

## **East Coker**

*"In my beginning 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 by-pass.*

Old stone to new building, old timber to new fires,  
Old fires to ashes, and ashes to the earth  
Which is already flesh, fire and faeces,  
Bone of man and beast, cornstalk and leaf.”

The process of change in the natural world is unending. Our lives are played out in a timeless process of becoming: no beginning, no ending. The hubris of the human condition is to ignore the fact that we are as much *of* these natural processes as we are *makers* and consumers of artefacts. But what lies beyond the fleeting moment of our mortal presence?

East Coker is a poem about the search for meaning. It is a poem about Eliot’s search for “another intensity”, a “further union”, a “deeper communion”.

There is a passage early on in the poem where Eliot, walking along the lane to East Coker, pauses to look across a field. As he looks he sees the past life of this field animated in his imagination and he uses an old form of English to evoke this sense of past coming to life in the present:

“In that open field  
If you do not come too close, if you do not come to close  
On a summer midnight, you can hear the music  
Of the weak pipe and little drum  
And see them dancing round the bonfire  
The association of man and woman  
In daunsinge, signifying matrimonie -  
A dignified and commodious sacrament.”

My painting engages with these themes. The landscape is in transition. Trees falling, trees thickening, leaves moving: everything falling to earth. There is fire in the colour of the leaves. This purges, purifies and regenerates. There are dancers too, moving across the horizon in juxtaposition with the changing scene.

The dancers in my painting are Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, not characters from an imagined Shakespearean idyll. Why? Well, when I think of people who in some way define dance I think of Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers. It’s a generational thing: like black and white war movies and great British character actors of the 1940’s and 1950’s. When I was a child the Sunday ritual was lunch followed by the movie on TV. Most often these were films of the second world war or the song and dance films of Broadway musicals. I was brought up on a road called The Broadway and I remember as a child being terribly confused by the thought that the films were made somewhere on a Broadway that was not ours. So if I were to look through a landscape across a field and see dancers, I would see Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers. This would be my particular past interfering with my sense of the present.

The vision of East Coker is that we all fall back to the earth. In so doing we are renewed as we become the loam of a universal process of renewal. But in life our sentience provides the opportunity to know the Divine presence which for Eliot, so embraces us.

## **Dry Salvages**

The Dry Salvages are rocks lying off the coast of Maine, New England. The rocks speak of the movement of the sea and its inherent danger: “the menace and caress” of the waves. In the early stages of the poem bells toll and a buoy groans a constant warning. Each in some way signifying timelessness, passage, time that is “older”, Eliot tells us, “than the time of chronometers”. There is no end. There is only “addition”: the accumulation of flotsam:

“We cannot think of a time that is ocean less  
Or of an ocean not littered with wastage  
Or of a future that is not liable  
Like the past, to have no destination.”

Dry Salvages is perhaps the most visually descriptive of Eliot's Four Quartets. The poem teams with imagery that conveys a sense of frenzy and profound spiritual alienation in the conduct of human life.

The poem starts with a reflection about Gods and rivers. The river is a metaphor both for the idea of universal process and the natural world from which human beings through their obsessive focus on the material have become detached. "We had the experience but missed the meaning", says Eliot midway through the poem. But I think too that Eliot is saying something quite profound about opportunity and loss. There are moments to be seized or to be missed and never to be repeated: moments otherwise lost to time but which nonetheless punctuate the passage of our lives until the point of death. Moments when we might achieve a deeper, more profound understanding of the nature of the Divine:

"..to apprehend  
The point of intersection of the timeless  
With time, is an occupation for the saint -  
No occupation either, but something given  
And taken in a lifetime's death in love,  
Ardour, selflessness and self-surrender.  
For most of us there is only the unattended  
Moment, the moment in and out of time,  
The distraction fit, lost in a shaft of sunlight,  
The wild thyme unseen, or the winter lightening  
Or the waterfall, or music heard so deeply  
That it is not heard at all, but you are the music  
While the music lasts..."

To miss the moment is to live one's life lost, devoid of hope, without meaning.

In this painting I have tried to convey the intensity of feeling that the poem arouses in me whenever I read it. The sheer drama of life, ceaseless, chaotic, incremental in the detritus left behind: a process which differs in time only in the superficial differences of appearance but not in the substance of living.

I have often gone to the Wash on the north Norfolk coast to watch sea birds on the mudflats. When the tide is right you see great flocks in which thousands of birds rise up: wheeling, whirling, racing, settling. As I have watched this spectacle I have sometimes found myself absorbed with the thought that this phenomenon of nature pre-dated and will post-date my life by millennia. Set against the passing flash that is any human life, the flocking behaviours of the birds on the Wash, the journeys that they make to get there and will make when they leave, the movement of the tides that force them skywards in their thousands, are a timeless presence.

To be *there* at such a time in the moment of this spectacle is also to be in a moment of *presence* such as that which Eliot describes in this poem.

## **Little Gidding**

Little Gidding describes a place of pilgrimage and spiritual awakening. The poem also describes Little Gidding as a religious community and a place of sanctuary.

When I started working on this painting I found myself increasingly preoccupied with Eliot: his psychology, his visual imagination, his religiosity.

The painting takes its compositional cues from the Renaissance. The temporal is separated in space from the the spiritual.

The painting depicts the church at Little Gidding but fuses this with the ghosts of those who shared Eliot's sense of pilgrimage over hundreds of years. Pilgrims come and go, called perhaps by the bell ringing across time. The events of Little Gidding that preoccupy Eliot are shown in the montage and so too are the images of war with which Eliot would have been surrounded as he wrote the poem. Spitfires and angels coexist in place, time and imagination. Spitfires with angels are the intermediaries of imagination connecting the spiritual with the temporal.

The Madonna is painted from Bellini's *Madonna of the Meadow* (1500) and the angels too are a reference to another painting by the same artist: *Madonna dei Cherubini rossi* (1490)

Eliot was born into a family of Unitarians. In 1927, by then living in England, he converted to Anglo-Catholicism and in 1933 he took a vow of chastity. When I think of Eliot's experience of religious development I imagine him as a person who found spiritual resonance in the iconography of the Catholic church and the cultural artefacts for which it was directly and indirectly, responsible for commissioning. Eliot's Four Quartets are strongly ascetic, mystical and Catholic.

Such emotions must in some way have framed Eliot's visual imagination sufficient to motivate and reflect his struggles to express these poetically. Eliot makes reference in the Four Quartets to the difficulties of words as an expressive medium. My painting simply imagines, however inadequately, Eliot's devotion by way of reference to the principal visual contexts (Little Gidding, the second world war, the classical iconography of the catholic church) with which the poem is engaged.

"If you came this way,  
Taking any route, starting from anywhere,  
At any time or at any season,  
It would always be the same: you would have to put off  
Sense and notion. You are not here to verify,  
Instruct yourself, or inform curiosity  
Or carry report. You are here to kneel  
Where prayer has been valid. And prayer is more  
Than an order of words.... "