

**T. S. ELIOT'S "EAST COKER" DANCE:
AN AFFIRMATION OF TIME AND PLACE**

BY
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From ““Burnt Norton””, II

Garlic and sapphires in the mud
Clot the bedded axle tree.
The trilling wire in the blood
Sings below inveterate scars
Appeasing long forgotten wars.
The dance along the artery
The circulation of the lymph
Are figured in the drift of stars
Ascend to summer in the tree
We move above the moving tree
In light upon the figured leaf
And hear upon the sodden floor
Below, the boarhound and the boar
Pursue their pattern as before
But reconciled among the stars.

At the still point of the turning world. Neither flesh nor fleshless;
Neither from nor 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 now towards,
Neither ascent nor decline. Except for the point, the still point,
There would be no dance, and there is only the dance.

From "East Coker", I

...In that open field
If you do not come too close, if you do not come too close,
On a summer midnight, you can hear the music
Of the weak pipe and the little drum
And see them dancing around the bonfire
The association of man and woman
In daunsinge, signifying matrimonie—
a dignified and commodious sacrament.
Two and two, necessarye conjunction,
Holding eche other by the hand or arm
Whiche betokeneth concord. Round and round the fire
Leaping through the flames, or joined in circles,
Rustically solemn or in rustic laughter
Lifting heavy feet in clumsy shoes,
Earth feet, loam feet, lifted in country mirth
Mirth of those long since under earth
Nourishing the corn. Keeping time,
Keeping the rhythm in their dancing
As in their living in the living seasons
The time of the seasons and the constellations
The time of milking and the time of harvest
The time of the coupling of man and woman
And that of beasts. Feet rising and falling.
Eating and drinking. Dung and death.

The “East Coker” Dance in Eliot’s Four Quartets: An Affirmation of Place and Time

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INTRODUCTION

T. S. Eliot’s last poem, Four Quartets, is often considered his masterpiece. It meditates on the theme of time and eternity, specifically the intersection of eternity with time in a moment of incarnation or mystical union. Written after Eliot’s conversion to Anglo-Catholicism, the poem is highly religious, considering topics such as meaning in daily activity, peace in time’s change, joy, and God. Eliot attempts to *intellectually* convey understanding of the problem of the alienation and emptiness of the present world, and the solution that he finds for that – the mystical union which infuses meaning in the world. The mystical solution, however, transcends intellectual understanding. Thus, his poem is complex, reflecting the “difficulty of giving artistic expression to profound religious apprehensions” (O’Connor 26).

Eliot’s cosmology includes the idea of *time* (temporality), that is, the material, transitory, here and now, the physical world, and *eternity*, the intangible, transcendent realm where one finds God, and for Eliot, meaning and order in life. Four Quartets discusses the dichotomy between eternity and temporality, and the moments of union between the two. Eliot “strives to transcend that [temporal] dimension, to apprehend the timeless pattern in time, to find an eternal purpose in temporal life” (Bergsten 36-37). Eliot speaks in paradoxes to convey these ultimate truths. “In the temporal world of desire and movement, of hope and despair, the ‘only hope’ lies in redemption from the consuming fire of desire by the consuming fire of the Holy Spirit” (Schuchard 76). Redemption from the fire of desire is through the mystical path.

The mystical path starts at the beginning of the poem, with a poetic recounting of Eliot’s real-life experience of his mystical illumination in the rose garden of “Burnt Norton”, but does not end there:

The fleeting illumination is not sufficient; the new meaning is barely touched, not firmly grasped. Thus this moment of crystallization impels the poet to seek its intimated and inner meaning and the poem is the account of that search, and is, in fact, the search itself. (Bergsten 67)

The mystical illumination in the rose garden of “Burnt Norton” is a starting place, not an escape, resting place, or final solution. “The virtue of the moment must be diffused through the time process, since man must sooner or later return to the changing world” (Gregory 104). Thus, Eliot writes not just of mystical moments, but of a journey begun by just such a moment. The journey is his search to incorporate meaning into a world of physical entities and events in a progression of time - often disconnected, meaningless moments in time that he portrays in his earlier poem, The Wasteland.

Eliot uses the metaphor of the wheel and the still point to communicate his view of mystical illumination, or the intersection of one aspect of time, eternity, with another, temporality. Both are dependent on each other. The physical world provides the ground of being for the spiritual; the spiritual gives purpose to the physical. At the center of the wheel, and throughout the poem, lies the dance metaphor. The poem’s title, with its reference to music, is a perfect complement to the importance of the dance metaphor, as one is dependent (or harmoniously conjoined) with the other.

In T. S. Eliot's Four Quartets, the dance, residing at the center of the still point, is the controlling symbol with which Eliot describes the experience of the incarnation -- the divine, spiritual infusion into earthly activity. Why the dance? Dance is a highly structured, ordered activity; instead of random, meaningless physical actions, each individual movement ties with all the other movements to create a whole that is harmonious within itself, as well as outside itself (with the music). While the dance gives connectedness to each individual act, creating a unity that has meaning, it also becomes a thing of beauty.

Thus, the image of the dance, repeated many times throughout the poem, resonates on many levels to indicate the redeeming presence of the eternal in the material and transitory world, representing the mystical union of the soul with God that gives meaning and beauty to an otherwise purely physical realm. Many characteristics of the mystical union are evident in the image of the dance. Since dance is a movement of harmony and rhythm and order, the cosmic order of the universe is symbolized. Like the moment of illumination, the dance is intimate connection, not alienation, because the dancer is usually accompanied by others, in synchronicity. The joyful celebration inherent in the mystical union characterizes the dance – in other traditions as well as in Eliot.

Two important passages in T. S. Eliot's Four Quartets that focus on the dance are (1) the still point of the wheel in "Burnt Norton" and (2) the peasants' matrimonial dance in "East Coker". Both portray the eternal presence imbuing significance to daily activities; however, "Burnt Norton's" abstract dance at the still point is universally acknowledged as redemptive while the "East Coker" dance scene, because of its earthy, this-worldly characteristics, is often misunderstood as unredeemed and meaningless. However, the tone, symbols, imagery, and allusions of the passage indicate that, instead of a "crass earthiness" that brings only "death" and "dejection" (Verma 82-83), the matrimonial dance scene is a joyful incarnation of meaning, love, and communion with God and community and history, affirming time and place.

STRUCTURE OF THE POEM

The title, Four Quartets, refers to its structure, four poems with five "movements" or sections, within one work. It follows the musical allusion of quartets, and it echoes Eliot's previous poem, The Wasteland, (in its five part structure within each quartet) as well as in its theme. Each poem is named after a particular place of particular meaning for Eliot, affirming his belief that it is through attachment to a particular place and time that one finds meaning and can transcend that place and time. "Burnt Norton" refers to an old estate in England in which he had a mystical experience in a rose garden, "East Coker" refers to Eliot's ancestral home, "Dry Salvages" refers to a rocky shoreline in America, and "Little Gidding" refers to a village in Cambridgeshire, England, in the county of Huntingdonshire, home of a religious community founded in the 1600s. Also, each quartet represented a different season and different element. "Burnt Norton" is early spring, air; "East Coker" is late summer, earth; "Dry Salvages" is autumn, water; and "Little Gidding" is deep winter, fire.

Within the quartets, the five movements of each have parallel structure and themes. The first movement consists of prose statements and counterstatements set against each other and left unreconciled. Divided into two parts, the first discusses time, the second, eternity. The lines are irregular, and the quartet's theme is stated, which connects to its place.

Each quartet's second movement consists of short, highly formal lyrics followed by prosaic meditation of a single theme undertaken in bold, contrastive ways. It is a formal statement about form; art; pattern; structure, with references to Yeats. The third movement, sometimes the most important, is a flat prosaic reconciliation of opposites written in irregular iambic lines that explores a journey into the dark, moving in and out of time. The fourth movement is a short lyric, brief rhyme, often a prayer, asking God to intercede. Usually this is a brief Christian allegory paralleling the Wasteland's fourth section, Death by Water. The fifth movement is a coda, a return to beginning. It sums up the central themes and combines major images from the quartet. This last movement meditates on problem of language and of the artist who "moves in stillness/keeps time in time." Litz elaborates:

The first half of part 5 is always devoted to the struggle with language and form, the attempt to incarnate feelings into words; and this leads to the concluding second half, which in each case speaks of the spiritual communion or Incarnation of which the poem – 'The complete consort dancing together;' – is a material reflection. (185)

Pattern and order are clearly important to Eliot in the Four Quartets. "In each quartet the eternal stillness of a divine pattern of reality is set against the endless movement of a temporal pattern, a pattern characterized by action and appetency, desire and knowledge, hope and despair, and in Little Gidding, sin and error" (Schuchard 69).

ELIOT'S RATIONALISM AND EMPHASIS ON TRADITION AND ORDER

The elaborate structure of Four Quartets reflects Eliot's appreciation of order in the universe. Also, Eliot's themes reveal his strong belief in conforming to a given, orderly theological system, not one of subjective invention. His works reflect the saving grace of order giving meaning to random, disconnected moments in time. Tradition connects the past to the present to the future bringing continuity to the fabric of life. Eliot praised Dante for his adherence to orthodox Catholic theology, while he criticized the mystic and poet William Blake for inventing his own mythology (Bergsten 72). Eliot says, "I prefer a clear philosophical pattern...a definite and dogmatic philosophy, preferably a Christian and Catholic one" (Bergsten 72).

Eliot's rationalism and need for order extends to his view of mysticism.

For Eliot, emotional mystical moments, while edifying, must still be filtered through intellect. Eliot believes, "Even the most exalted mystic must return to the world and use his reason to employ the results of his experience in daily life...[and]... Spontaneous illumination should be followed by spiritual and intellectual discipline" (Bergsten 66-67). The intellectual filter Eliot chooses to apply to his mystical experience is his christian, Catholic one.

Eliot's paradigm of tradition and order takes precedence over random mystical moments, including the mystical moments that sparked Four Quartets, as well as his faith journey. In examining Four Quartets, we see that the key to transcendent union, salvation from a wasteland existence, is not passing illuminative experience. Nor is it so much choosing to "move" or "not move", or in denying temporality (earth, time, place) and seeking eternity (air, stars), or even in seeking eternity through embracing the temporal moment. It is in *finding order out of chaos*, of which the dance is the metaphor. There is order in stars and eternity (the dance at the still point of the turning wheel), and there is order in earth

and time (the matrimonial dance of “East Coker”), but it is through humble obedience to this order that the mystic finds the eternal.

Through perception, awareness and alignment with order, of which tradition is a vehicle and dance is a symbol, Eliot finds redemption from meaninglessness.

THE WHEEL AND THE DANCE AT THE STILL POINT

The dance is at the center of the still point of Eliot’s turning world - a symbol for the material world circling around eternal. The dance is ordered movement and as such, it becomes a metaphor for order - order out of chaos. Eliot writes in his last quartet: “you must move in measure [order], like a dancer.” A dancer’s movement is measured and ordered, disciplined and centered.

Eliot may have drawn from many sources to choose to paradoxically place a dance (movement) at the center (stillness) of the wheel. The Renaissance Wheel of Fortune is echoed in this passage as well as Hindu tradition. Like Eliot’s wheel, a ring of flames surrounds Shiva (god of the dance) who resides at the center of the Hindu wheel:

It seems that there is a subtle suggestion of the cosmic dance of Shiva, one of the Hindu Trinity. Shiva creates and destroys and recreates; each of these cosmic acts is expressed in terms of his dance. His Tandava dance is the one that heralds deluge, after which all elements which were in a state of conflict, resolve into perennial peace; and out of this ‘peace’ he creates the world anew...In [Eliot’s] dance there is a semblance of eternity as an unending process. The ‘still point’ where the dance is, reflects the cosmic dance which brings warring elements into a state of peace. (Verma 24)

But not only does the dance represent order and harmony, it represents the results of finding and following that order - joy and love. Dancing is a celebratory movement. In this, Eliot’s use of the dance and wheel also echoes Dante’s circle of light (Dante’s vision of God in “Paradiso” of the Divine Comedy):

The still point being the crowning point of eternal love becomes the fountain source of all creation. The dance of creation is the joy inherent in the divine rhythm which permeates the universe. The perfect concept of motion and rest fused into the image of the still point is of course from Dante and so is its significance in terms of eternal love that moves without itself moving. Eliot has not transplanted Dante’s images, but has used them as a prism for perfecting the subtle imagery scheme. (Verma 23)

Using many references and allusions, Eliot creates the symbol for order and meaning, joy and love in the dance.

The experience of the dance in mystical illumination or in everyday life then becomes the antithesis of the feeling of alienation and meaninglessness described in *The Wasteland* and so many of his other earlier poems: “‘There is only the dance’ (BN 69) releases the man from dancing forever just here; it focuses the real dance; makes the dancer’s dance

but a manifestation of THE dance; THE dance is like the joy of the Creator without which the ecstasy of the creature would not be joy but madness” (Thompson 116).

Another dance in “Burnt Norton”, the “dance along the arteries/the circulation of the lymph” (BN II), suggests that the dance is the source of life -- life blood in the arteries and veins that feed the heart. “The description of the movement of the blood of the arteries as a dance which has its type in the movement of the stars, recalls Milton’s dance of the planets, which, in turn, resembles the mystical dance of the angels (Paradise Lost, V, 616-627)” (O’Connor 46). In addition, Blamires finds order symbolic in this reference to dance. The “trilling wire” (telegraph wires; air); the “dance along the artery” (roadway, earth); the “circulation of the lymph” (waterway, water); the “drift of the stars” (fire) reflect cosmic order and the order of the four quartets (18). Note that the stars seem to be drifting and aimless, but the hidden dance is “figured” - patterned, ordered - in them.

“EAST COKER” DANCE - THE PROBLEM

The dance in “East Coker” differs from the dance in “Burnt Norton”. “Burnt Norton’s” representation of dance is abstract and spiritual compared to “East Coker”, which is earthy, temporal. However, because of its this-worldly characteristics, many critics perceived the “East Coker” dance as unredeemed and meaningless:

Despite the earlier references to matrimony as ‘A dignified and commodious sacrament’, the ‘coupling’ of man and woman in the peasant world is associated with that of animals....Through their brevity and their lack of connection with one another, the three concluding phrases suggest the triviality and meaninglessness of life absorbed in the rhythms of nature.
(O’Connor 70-71)

Verma agrees with O’Connor’s assessment that the “East Coker” dance is so bound in earthiness it cannot reach transcendence or incarnation, despite the dancing imagery: “The imagery is of unlovely things, or of lovely things turning unlovely. The new fires become old and subsequently turn to ashes, the grey of the ashes mixes with the brown earth which is already ‘flesh, fur and faeces;’. The suggestion of perpetual decay is not enlivened by any hint of renewal” (79-80). He adds:

The subtle rarefied spirit of somatic joys crossed with a sense of heaviness, which settles on a mind devoid of a vision. ‘Earth feet’, ‘loam feet’ lend to human feet the crass earthiness of the soil. / Yet the dancers signify a pattern, but the pattern has not still point at its center...A plunge into a death which may become a renewed life is ruled out. ‘Dung and death’ sums up the quintessence the Earth. Dejection claims the poet’s mind as he sits meditating on the beginning of his lineage...(Verma 82-83)

Both of these interpretations convey the idea that spiritual purpose or meaning, the incarnation, God, can only be found through abstract meditation or philosophy, such as Eliot’s experience in meditating in Burnt Norton’s rose garden. The

wheel of “Burnt Norton” is an intellectual construct, not a tangible reality. For some, the insignificant everyday realities of daily, physical life are to be escaped through meditation and cannot in themselves be infused with the divine.

HOLY EARTH DANCING - AFFIRMATION OF TIME AND PLACE

However, this earth dance does *not* convey the trivial meaninglessness of the Wasteland, as these critics claim. Time IS redeemed here. The eternal IS present in the temporal and, despite its earthiness (or because of its earthiness), the peasants at the dance transcend time and find joy.

First, the passage’s location at the second part of the first movement, suggest it is a window to eternity and not trapped in temporality. The first movements of each quartet are divided into two parts; the first discusses time, (here manifested through earth images, the “East Coker” element), the second, eternity (again using earth images). The houses crumbling in succession (“In succession/Houses rise and fall, crumble, are extended,/ Are removed, destroyed, restored...”) are followed by the entry to the eternal through the temporal – the dancing. However, “East Coker's" dance is a just a different manifestation of the same order, joy and eternal reality found in “Burnt Norton”. “The ‘dancing’ is not that of “Burnt Norton”, containing ‘neither arrest nor movement’, and located ‘at the still point of the turning world’ but is the very opposite, the dance of the turning world itself. A seasonal festivity in the earth-bound rhythm of peasant life” (O’Connor 70). Thus, in the second part, this village scene, we see eternity’s effect on the earth (through dancing) - the connected community, the love and commitment of the couple, and death, when it does occur, “nourishing the corn”.

Also, Eliot uses many images and allusions to make the earth holy and the “East Coker” passage a joyful one. First of all, fire is referred to three times: “dancing around the bonfire”, “round and round the fire”, and “Leaping through the flames.” Four Quartets refers to “fire” as redemptive: “the only hope, or else despair/Lies in the choice of pyre or pyre/To be redeemed from fire by fire,” Eliot concludes in “Little Gidding”. Eliot alludes that redemption from the purgatorial fire, or the fire of desire, is by the fire of the Holy Spirit, or the fire of Shiva, or Dante’s fire in “Paradiso”. The association of fire references in this passage with dancing, and with circle imagery (alluding to Hindu tradition or Dante’s circle of light), and with laughter, imply that this fire is not the fire of desire (temporality), but the redemptive fire.

In addition, the circle is a whole, representing the unity of the married couple (as in a marriage ring), as well as the unity of the peasant village. Other references show that, rather than an alienated wasteland of triviality and death, this earthy scene is steeped in connection, intimacy, and unity that reveals the joy of the dance of redemptive love in daily life. Eliot says they are “joined in circles”, as well as “two by two, necessary conjunction,/ Holding each other by the hand or arm/Which betokeneth concord.” There is “rustic laughter” and “mirth.”

Eliot affirms place and time as the means to find meaning. In fact, this manifestation of the dance is *necessary* after “Burnt Norton's" airy, abstract discussion of it, lest some readers of his poem mistakenly think that path to meaningful redemption is found in separation from time and the world. For Eliot, it is found IN the world. Eliot himself says in Four Quartets, “Only through time time is conquered.”

THE SACRAMENT

Eliot's conversion to Anglo-Catholicism affected his poem. Marriage, for the Catholic, is one of the seven sacraments. The dance of "East Coker" is a marriage dance, a sacramental dance. A sacrament is an earthly action that has been invested with the presence of Christ or God. For example, the Eucharist (the communion, the eating of the body and blood of Christ) is a sacrament. For Catholics, the doctrine of transubstantiation defines the Eucharist. That is, the earthly bread and wine are not only *symbolic* of the body and blood of Christ, they not only contain the *presence* of the body and blood of Christ, but they actually *ARE* the body and blood of Christ. The sacrament is a point of incarnation, of the presence of God (the eternal) in the earth (time, temporality, movement). Thus, O'Connor's and Verma's view of the "East Coker" dance as an earthly, animalistic ritual devoid of meaning is an erroneous one. For Eliot, this dance is the other side of the still point coin. The eternal is present in this dance, and the earthly movement is full of meaning, joy of God:

In contrast to "Burnt Norton", with its lotus-vision...and the still point beyond time, "East Coker" presents an antithetical vision of our bondage to time, a vision of ceaseless and apparently purposeless activity. [Houses rise and fall...]...we are inclined to read the whole poem as black comedy, a Beckettian vision of 'dung and death'. On the other hand, the echoes of Ecclesiastes later in the passage ('there is a time for building / And a time for living and for generation') seem to imply a divine context for human activities, and the consequent possibility of their being meaningful. (Lobb 27)

The Old Testament Ecclesiastes reference brings the divine to simple everyday life. The rhythm of the language's repetition ("there is a time for") echoes the rhythm of life, recalling that there is a natural order to life, and, according to Genesis, it is good. Furthermore, its use of repetition in its original source, and here, creates order, as the dance creates order, and is one of the means by which Eliot reinforces tradition and mythology (Litz #). Order is important for creating meaning in a wasteland existence.

Eliot affirms the earth (time and place) when it is ordered and patterned. The order and pattern of the movement, in order to intersect with the eternal moment, is away from the earth (descent into the dark, the ascetic's self-denial, obedience to the moral and spiritual tradition and order), towards eternity. Yet, the finding of eternity, the incarnation, the intersection of eternal with temporal, then brings the mystic back to the earth, and now the earth is affirmed. It has meaning and joy, instead of despair. It is an ironic intersection; it is a paradox that the temporal leads to the eternal and the eternal leads to the temporal and back again.

THE MYSTICAL PATH

For Eliot, the mystical path to the dance at the center of the still point must be done through daily earthly activity - time and place - and must not stop with the moment of mystical illumination in the rose garden, symbolized by the still point. The mystic must go through the "dark night of the soul".

At the transfiguration, the mountaintop illumination of Christ's divinity, Christ admonishes and condemns Peter when Peter wished to build tabernacles to preserve the moment. Christ knew he still had the crucifixion, death, and burial - earth activities - before the resurrection and union with God. Eliot knows, too, that we cannot rest in the mystical moment in the garden: "...For a further union, a deeper communion/ Through the dark cold and the empty desolation." We must be crucified in a particular time and place on the earth ("earth feet"); die ("dung and death") (EC II); and then descend into hell, "o dark dark dark" (EC III). Eliot alludes to many literary sources: Dante's journey begins with an awakening in a dark world before the descent into hell, and St. John of the Cross writes of the dark night of the soul before the mystic reaches "a deeper communion" with God. Thus, after the illumination of "Burnt Norton", the real journey to God (the eternal, meaning) must begin - and that journey is through the earth (the element of the East Coker quartet), and through a particular moment in time and place.

WASTELAND CLOSED ROOM COMPARISON TO MARRIAGE DANCE

Eliot's earlier poems had a feeling of claustrophobia, a feeling of being trapped and alone. Lobb refers to "the closed room motif" (20). Two manifestations of it are the loneliness of individuals in separate rooms, and a lack of communication between two people in the same room (though conversation may occur) (Lobb 21-22). A significant parallel to the "East Coker" marriage is the Wasteland scene of the meaningless tryst between the typist and the young man carbuncular. As the center of The Wasteland, the latter scene is perhaps symbolic of the theme of the poem as a whole -- the lack of meaning, love, purpose in the temporal realm. The sexual union, the most intimate communication, and what should be a spiritual (eternity) as well as physical (time) communication, fails. The scene occurs in a closed room, with no spiritual communication or connection. It is a disconnected moment in time, preceded by no history (past) and followed by no future.

The "East Coker" union, however, occurs in an open field and is connected to the past and future. It has the history of tradition (symbolized by the marriage ceremony, the traditional language, and Eliot's reference to his own ancestors/history) and will be followed by the couple's future together and with the villagers, who presumably have known them all their lives. The matrimonial dance and the celebration of the villagers lends a feeling of freedom and joy and communion to the scene, unlike the closed loneliness of The Wasteland couple. The Wasteland affair gave birth to nothing, besides alienation; the "East Coker" scene is an integral part of the ordered cycle and rhythm of life; it fertilizes the earth ("Nourishing the corn").

SIR THOMAS ELYOT AND THE BOOK OF THE GOUVERNOUR

The "East Coker" "daunsynge" passage is a condensed version of The Book of the Gouverneur, a 16th century text written by T. S. Eliot's ancestor and namesake, Sir Thomas Elyot. The Book summed up the morals and manners of the Christian religion. Sir Thomas Elyot also had lived at "East Coker", Eliot's ancestral home and the title of this second quartet. This passage's addition (as well as its archaic language) firmly grounds the marriage dance in the past and in tradition. "Its [the passage's] inclusion helps to fix Eliot's own lineal 'beginning', of which he must have been so

conscious on visiting the village. It also helps to fix the ‘beginning’ of the historical phase of modern Europe. Apart from these functions, the lines point to a certain dignity and harmony in the old village life glimpsed in the vision” (O’Connor 70).

His use of The Book of the Governour alludes to tradition and order, both means of redemption from the wasteland of insignificant alienation. Tradition creates a connection in time and history. Tradition - the ritual, repetitious continuation of past customs into the present - gives meaning and order, and is a window through which the eternal can intersect with the temporal. It connects the past to the present, so the present is not an alienated moment in time. This moment, the East Coker matrimonial dance of the present, is connected to Eliot’s past because he alludes to the form and content of this work from his past

Connection is achieved in many ways: by blood, since Eliot is his ancestor, and by place, since “East Coker” is the site of the former Elyot family home.

Reference to tradition is also achieved in the setting of the open field. The open field is centered in the reader’s view by its repetition, which also reminds the reader of the ‘cyclic orderliness’ of the crop rotation by medieval estates. . Eliot’s borrowing from Sir Thomas Elyot’s Book of The Governour, included the archaic spelling, further invoking tradition, and the connection to the past.

Eliot’s use of his ancestor’s book reinforces his theme of order. Sir Thomas Elyot’s book begins as...

...a standard sixteenth-century account of the hierarchical order governing the universe. It is preservation of degree which distinguishes creation and order from chaos. The four elements...of which natural order is compounded, must keep their proper places. Man, who is fashioned of the same elements, a microcosm of the whole, must order his life accordingly. At the cosmic, social, and personal levels, the hierarchically ordered dance is the basis for all harmony and the true expression of that Love which must govern all things.

(Blamires 44-45)

Order was important to the mindset of Elyot’s day. The intrusion of disorder into cosmic order was a theme for tragedy and evil. “Thus Elyot’s 20th century treatment of universal themes on the basis of the four elements... recapitulates the work of his family and philosophical ancestor, Elyot, as it does that of his poetic ancestors, Shakespeare and Sir Thomas Davies.” (CITATION?)

Also, Sir Thomas Elyot viewed the marriage dance as a reflection of order and connection, not of trivial meaningless alienation. “For Sir Thomas, dancing is not just a symbol of marriage and social harmony; it is a symbol of universal harmony” (Blamires 44). Eliot’s use of this passage invokes Elyot’s understanding of the dance.

CONCLUSION

Dancing is infused with order, harmony and rhythm - and whether it takes place in the abstract still point of wheel, or the ever so tangible “East Coker” marriage, its joyful orderly movement represents the incarnation of the moment:

Dancing round the fire (its leaping flames and flying sparks are an essential feature of the elemental cosmic dance for the sixteenth-century mind), joining in circles, blending and balancing solemnity with laughter (the dance of the ‘humours’ matching the dance of the elements), the long-dead peasants lift earth-laden feet above the earth and plant them back on the earth, thus repeating in miniature the whole cycle of human life. So doing, they ‘keep time’,,[and] reproduce the rhythm of the seasons just as in the ‘constellations’ the cosmic dance of the stars continues, (BN 54)..” (Blamires 46).

The “East Coker” marriage dance, for many reasons, is a moment of incarnation, a mystical moment of the infusion of eternal in temporality. It affirms the daily life and activity of the temporal world, which is not a meaningless wasteland because it is temporal and passing, but only when it is not redeemed by ordering itself to the presence of the eternal. Not only is the temporal world tolerated and merely accepted, it is essential to living “the dance” as we see in “East Coker”:

The timeless moment, in fact, can *only* occur in a specific place...The places permit glimpses of what is beyond place; they constitute, in a special sense, a way to transcendence. ‘Only through time time is conquered’; only through place place is conquered. (Brooker 95)

In the midst of the timeless still point, the mystical illumination, there “rises the hidden laughter/Of children in the foliage/Quick, now, here, now, always...” Hidden laughter at the still point of illumination is the dance, the hidden joys of God, the soul’s celebration. The children are in the “foliage,” a reference to earth, and to life and to fertility, grounded in the time and place, of earth, which is affirmed. Eternity found in the still point gives joy to the temporal realm, which then finds its soul, purpose, being.

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