# "AND THE FIRE AND THE ROSE ARE ONE": SPIRITUAL ENLIGHTENMENT IN T. S. ELIOT'S *FOUR QUARTETS* (1936-42)

# "Y LA ROSA Y EL FUEGO SON UNO": ILUMINACIÓN ESPIRITUAL EN LOS *CUATRO CUARTETOS* (1936-42) DE T. S. ELIOT

ANDREA ISABEL INGELMO-PÉREZ
Universidad de Salamanca (USAL)
andreaingelmo@usal.es
https://orcid.org/0009-0009-8733-5690

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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes enlightenment from a cross-cultural perspective in T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets* (1936-42). It highlights symbols from Hinduism and Buddhism and the interrelations between Eastern and Western traditions. The aim of this research is to show how Eliot establishes a dialogue between Hindu-Buddhist references and the Christian ethos, whose ascetic pilgrimages are comparable in their teachings of sensual detachment. This study focuses on concrete images that condense spiritual wisdom: "the still point of the turning world", the Hindu-Buddhist "lotos" juxtaposed to the Christian "rose garden" and the rose "in-folded" in the flames of divine love. Eliot uses images of enlightenment in *Four Quartets* to reconcile the "mind of Europe" with the soul of the East and draw the reader nearer to the experience of the sacred.

KEYWORDS: Christianity; enlightenment; *Four Quartets*; Hindu-Buddhism; mysticism; T. S. Eliot

RESUMEN

El presente artículo analiza la iluminación espiritual desde un enfoque intercultural en los *Cuatro cuartetos* (1936-42) de T. S. Eliot. El objetivo de esta investigación radica en mostrar el diálogo que Eliot llevó a cabo entre el pensamiento hindú-budista y el cristianismo, cuyos caminos ascéticos son comparables en su enseñanza del desapego sensorial. Este estudio se centra en las imágenes concretas que concentran la sabiduría espiritual: el «punto fijo del mundo en rotación», el «loto» hindú-budista, yuxtapuesto a la «rosa» cristiana, y la rosa rodeada de las llamas del amor divino. Eliot utiliza imágenes de la iluminación en los *Cuatro cuartetos* para reconciliar la «mente de Europa» con el alma de Oriente y acercar al lector a la experiencia de lo sagrado.

PALABRAS CLAVE: *Cuatro cuartetos*; cristianismo; hindú-budismo; iluminación; misticismo; T. S. Eliot



## 1. INTRODUCTION

T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets* (1936-42) expresses aspiration towards the absolute. Eliot's interest in Eastern traditions began as he ended his studies at Harvard in 1911, when he became acquainted with Hindu philosophy, the Buddhist Pali Canon and delved into the intricacies of Mahayana Buddhism under Masaharu Anesaki, the father of religious studies in Japan (Jain, 1992: 102-103, Patterson, 2015: 666). Although he was attracted to the complexity of Indian thought, he was aware that, in order to be fully immersed in Eastern teachings, he ought to abandon the Western literary tradition to which he was indebted, something "which, for practical as well as sentimental reasons, I did not wish to do" (Eliot, 1934: 40-41). In his appendix to *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* (1948), he wrote: "Long ago I studied the ancient Indian languages, and while I was chiefly interested at that time in Philosophy, I read a little poetry too; and I know that my own poetry shows the influence of Indian thought and sensibility" (Eliot, 1948: 113). Indeed, as Manju Jain rightly argues, his deep knowledge of the

Hindu-Buddhist tradition is intertwined "by means of analogy, comparison or congruity" (1992: 150) with Christian allusions in his *oeuvre*. I contend that F. O. Matthiessen and Helen Gardner's critique of Eliot's Eurocentrism does not do justice to the cultural breadth of his *oeuvre*. Manju Jain accurately observes that Eliot honors Hindu-Buddhist voices without diluting their authenticity as a way of enlarging cultural horizons. Indic images, which are not drawn from a romanticized, exoticized orientalism, are instead reconciled with Eliot's Anglo-Catholic beliefs in a universal spiritual ethos (Jain, 2023: 47).

A turning point in Eliot's life was his embracing of British citizenship and his conversion to Anglo-Catholicism in 1927. In his prologue to "For Lancelot Andrewes: Essays on Style and Order" (1928), he defined himself as an "Anglo-Catholic in religion" (Eliot, 1928: 513), a decision that showed his double national and religious identities and honored his English ancestry (Kramer, 2007: 68). Eliot disclosed a most mature religiosity when he proclaimed that doubt ought to be present in religious belief in an attempt, as he promulgated in his essay "Leçon de Valéry" (1964), "to unite the profoundest skepticism with the deepest faith" (Eliot, 1964: 754). His spiritual evolution aspired to reach, as he puts it in "East Coker", "into another intensity / For a further union, a deeper communion" (Eliot, 2015: 192).



*Four Quartets* represents the apex of Eliot's literary aspiration: to weave "a constellation of cultures" (Eliot, 1960: 132). It is divided into four parts that refer to the four elements in the universe: "Burnt Norton" is the poem of air; "East Coker" is rooted in the earth that reconciles life and death; "The Dry Salvages" releases the sacred waters that nourish the spirit and, finally, "Little Gidding" ignites the fire of purgation that culminates in the love of the divine. This study analyzes the way in which Eliot's symbols allude to different religions. Thus the "lotos" (Eliot, 2015: 180) – the symbol of spiritual liberation in Eastern thought – finds its homologue in the mystic rose of Western literary tradition. "The still point of the turning world" (Eliot, 2015: 181) at the intersection between stillness and movement, suffering and peace and time and timelessness, is reached through the cessation of desire by means of the *via negativa*. The dynamic processes of the cosmos are expressed through the dance as a twofold illustration: the depiction of the cycles of life in "East Coker" and "The Dry Salvages" and of the Hindu god Shiva, who enacts the *tandava* or dance of destruction. The flame of purification is at a crossroads of different ascetic pilgrimages, Buddhist, Hinduist and Christian, and it preludes the infinite light of the absolute. Thus, T. S. Eliot presents in *Four Quartets* several images of enlightenment without overlooking their differences in order to reconcile the "mind of Europe" with the soul of the East.

## 2. "THE LOTOS ROSE": THE COMPLETION OF "OUR FIRST WOLRD"

"Burnt Norton" was first published in 1935 as the ending poem of T. S. Eliot's *Collected Poems 1909-1935* (1936). Eliot thought of the four poems as a whole only when World War II erupted, an episode which caused him to temporarily abandon his dramatic production and focus on a meditative poem. Eliot confessed in a 1953 interview that it was after he finished writing "East Coker" in 1940 "that I began to see the *Quartets* as a set of four" (1969: 23). The remaining poems, "The Dry Salvages" and "Little Gidding", were published in 1941 and 1942 respectively. The first of the *Four Quartets* bears the name of a manor which was reduced to ashes in 1774. In the mid-30s, Eliot visited the building with Emily Hale, an event which triggered a mystical experience as he looked into the "dry pool" in "the rose garden". Eliot's lyric rendering of his illumination in "Burnt Norton" is an example of his "objective correlative", materialized in the poem – a physical expression of the poet's interiority and "the place and things which utter themselves" (McLuhan, 1969: 239-240).

*"*Burnt Norton", and *Four Quartets*, are introduced by Heraclitus' aphorisms, left untranslated as the poet always did. These epigraphs announce the main ideas explored in the poem: "Although the Logos is universal, many act as if they have a wisdom of their own" (Diels, 1922: 77) and "the way up and the way down are one and the same" (Diels, 1922: 89). The first quote hints at the *logos*: the goal of life common to all. *Logos* can be interpreted as the Universal Law, Word, or Truth. Kenneth Kramer argues that Eliot used this Heraclitan quote as the introduction of *Four Quartets* "to situate the poems in the realm of a common *logos*: the immediate presence of unreserved, spontaneous mutuality common to each person, yet reaching beyond the sphere of either" (2007: 55). The homonym of *logos* in Hindu-Buddhist asceticism is *dharma*, a word translated as the law of the universe.[1]



The second Heraclitan aphorism illustrates the spiritual quest and claims "the way up" (the *via postiva*) and "the way down" (the *via negativa*) "to be one and the same". To ascend in the ascetic pilgrimage does not involve the elevation of the isolated "I" or ego, but rather its descent into darkness, deprivation and silence to reach the divine through grace. St. John of the Cross, the 16th century Spanish mystic, Carmelite reformer and poet, insightfully cautions that: "Porque las comunicaciones que verdaderamente son de Dios esta propiedad tienen: que de una

[1] See P. S. Sri's *T. S. Eliot, Vedanta and Buddhism* (1985), Manju Jain's *T. S. Eliot and American Philosophy* (1992) and "Through the Looking Glass: T. S. Eliot and Indian Philosophy (2023)" and Viorica Patea's study "Eliot, *La tierra baldía* y la épica de la modernidad" in her 2022 edition of *La tierra baldía* (trad. Natalia Carbajosa, Madrid, Cátedra).

vez levantan y humillan al alma; porque en este camino el bajar es subir, y el subir, bajar" (De la Cruz, 2018: 341). Although contradictory, the way of light and darkness are each a complementary "raid on the inarticulate" (Eliot, 2015: 191). By choosing Heraclitus' aphorisms, Eliot consciously underlines the interdependence between a timeless consciousness interwoven with the transience of daily existence (Kramer, 2007: 29).

"Burnt Norton" begins with a philosophical meditation on time followed by an experience in "the rose garden". The lyric "I" takes his first steps on the spiritual pilgrimage and replicates Eliot's route through the garden towards its center:

> Footfalls echo in the memory
> Down the passage which we did not take
> Towards the door we never opened.
> Into the rose-garden. My words echo
> Thus, in your mind.
> [...]
> Other echoes
> Inhabit the garden. Shall we follow?
> Quick, said the bird, find them, find them,
> Round the corner. Through the first gate,
> Into our first world, shall we follow
> The deception of the thrush? Into our first world. (Eliot, 2015: 179)



The Edenic landscape – "our first world" – is the primordial realm of innocence where "the leaves were full of children". Jewel Spears Brooker reads this passage as the lyric "I" imagining himself in the reverie of an unmaterialized paradise (Brooker, 2018: 155), "down the passage which we did not take / Towards the door we never opened" (Eliot, 2015: 179). Hesitantly, he decides to pursue a bird: "quick, said the bird", a little commanding creature, "find them, find them". The poetic persona is aware of the illusion, since he does not wonder "shall we follow the thrush?", but, instead, frames his question to suggest pursuing "the deception" of the biblical serpent in the guise of a thrush (Brooker, 2018: 155). Eliot's "I", with his unnamed companion, enter an imaginary landscape surrounded by the "unheard music in the shrubbery" (Eliot, 2015: 179).

As Barry Spurr's "Poetics of the Incarnation: T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*" clarifies, "the rose garden" alludes to the rosary, a word which derives from the Latin term *rosarium* – the

*hortus conclusus* of virginity (Spurr, 2025: 14) –, a devotional Catholic practice dedicated to the Virgin Mary. We read in "Little Gidding" that "prayer is more / Than an order of words, the conscious occupation / Of the praying mind, of the sound of voice praying" (Eliot, 2015: 202). As David Moody stresses, prayer is significant since it is "the action of receiving and conceiving the divine Word" (1979: 245). Furthermore, it reconciles "time present and time past" (Eliot, 2015: 179), since it binds the lyric "I" to all supplicants before him through a language "tongued with fire beyond the language of the living" (Eliot, 2015: 202). Barry Spurr interprets that the lyric "I" directs his voice to "the Virgin as mediatrix" (Spurr, 2025: 15) in a litany for protection in "The Dry Salvages":

> Lady, whose shrine stands on the promontory,
> Pray for all those who are in ships, those
> Whose business has to do with fish, and
> Those concerned with every lawful traffic
> And those who conduct them.
>
> Repeat a prayer also on behalf of
> Women who have seen their sons or husbands
> Setting forth, and not returning:
> Figlia del tuo figlio,
> Queen of Heaven. (Eliot, 2015: 198-199)



The Rosary is a core invocation of the Catholic faith and it is, in Pope St. John Paul II's words: "a compendium of the Gospel" (2022: 1). As Barry Spurr contends, praying the Rosary is intertwined with the Incarnation because it reenacts three core scenes, or mysteries, of Jesus' life through the figure of his Mother: the Annunciation, the Visitation, and the Nativity (Spurr, 2025: 14). This ritual was, indeed, a "daily and enduring discipline of Eliot's spiritual life" (Spurr, 2025: 14). As Eliot upholds in his "Introduction to *Revelation*" (1937): "the fullness of Christian revelation resides in the essential fact of the Incarnation, in relation to which all Christian revelation is to be understood" (1937: 472). He agrees with Evelyn Underhill that Incarnation "is […] a perpetual cosmic and personal process" (Underhill, 1912: 128) for the mystic to apprehend timelessness in time: "Here, the intersection of the timeless moment / Is England and nowhere. Never and always" (Eliot, 2015: 202).

The lyric "I" reaches a "dry pool" at the center of the "rose garden", a catalyst for sudden illumination: "And the lotos rose, quietly, quietly, / The surface glittered out of the heart of light," (Eliot, 2015: 180). The "lotos rose" reconciles Western and Eastern thought. A lotus is the flower of enlightenment in the Hindu-Buddhist religions (Sri, 1985: 30). Eliot noted, at Masaharu Anesaki's 1913-1914 course on "Schools of Religious and Philosophical Thought of Japan, and their Connections with those of India and China" at Harvard, that the lotus has a myriad of meanings: it has "many flowers and many fruits at once. The flowers and fruit are simultaneous" (in Jain, 2023: 37).[2] Jain interprets the complex symbolism of the lotus: "the real entity is represented in the fruit, in its manifestation in the flower, so that there is a mutual relation of the final reality and its manifestation" (1992: 199). Consequently, the lotus condenses an interwoven potentiality, the process and bloom of awakening.

The Indian lotus is intertwined with the mystic rose of unconditional love, which holds a central role in the Christian ethos. Both are common symbols from different religions. In his exploration of universal archetypes across several traditions, Mircea Eliade interprets the lotus as a manifestation of "the cosmic forms" (1974: 56). The lotus that blooms out of water is an image that corresponds to the rose of the Christian tradition which is a symbol of divine love.



"Burnt Norton", like *Four Quartets* as a whole, is a circular poem, a return to the past in an attempt to redeem it. The poem operates in a two-fold manner: the lyric persona visualizes himself travelling in a particular moment *in time* in order to remedy the present; while redemption, as Jewel Spears Brooker argues, is in the present moment at the "intersection of movement and stillness that opens a window for ultimate reality" (2018: 143):

> Sudden in a shaft of sunlight
> Even while the dust moves
> There rises the hidden laughter
> Of children in the foliage
> Quick, now, here, now always—
> Ridiculous the waste sad time
> Stretching before and after. (Eliot, 2015: 184)

[2] Eliot's notes from his lectures under Masaharu Anesaki are in the Eliot Collection, Houghton Library, Harvard (underlining in the original). See Jain, *T. S. Eliot and American Philosophy* (1992), pp. 198-199, and "Through the Looking Glass: T. S. Eliot and Indian Philosophy" (2023), pp. 36-37. Anita Patterson also underlines the significant influence Anesaki exerted on Eliot, which "would last the poet a lifetime", especially in the refinement of his understanding of Buddhism and "valuable lessons about moral action and impersonality" (2015: 666).

From the temporal "shaft of sunlight", the reminiscence of the timeless arises in memory in "Burnt Norton", as the rose in flames appears in the last lines of "Little Gidding": "Quick, now, here now, always" (Eliot, 2015: 209), as the children laugh. Jewel Spears Brooker insightfully deciphers that the circle completes itself when the bird in the rose garden at the beginning of "Burnt Norton" becomes the dove of love in the last of the *Quartets* (Brooker, 2018: 159). The symbol of the mystic rose is charged with a twofold meaning, in her words: "(1) the moment in the rose garden and (2) the memory of the moment that grounds the quasi-mystical experience" (Brooker, 2018: 157) of the rose in flames. Therefore, in Eliot's poetic expression: "What might have been and what has been / Point to one end, which is always present" (Eliot, 2015: 180).

## 3. "OH DARK DARK": REVELATIONS IN EMPTINESS

After Eliot's *persona* witnesses the "lotos", a cloud passes, and with it the pool becomes "empty" (Eliot, 2015: 180). Emptiness as a synonym for enlightenment mirrors Nagarjuna's philosophy of *sunyata* – the vacuity of phenomena. The Indian sage and Buddhist philosopher Nagarjuna (1st c. A.D.) paraphrased the original teachings of the Buddha when he defined reality to be "empty of inherent existence […] or self-nature or, in most Western terms, an *essence*" (Garfield, 1995: 20). He fully develops the axiom found in the *Heart Sutra* (1st c. A.D.), a core text in the Buddhist canon: "Emptiness is form. Form is emptiness" (Hanh, 2014: 110). Every phenomenon – form – is empty of a separate essence, and that very emptiness encompasses an ontological, cognitive and semantic significance (Westerhoff, 2009: 20). *Sunyata* refers to reality as it is and the "goal of enlightened understanding" (Kearns, 1987: 82) in the here and now.



The unification of the inner and outer dimensions of the self is the pinnacle of the spiritual quest, which manifests itself

> 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 nor towards,
> Neither ascent nor decline. Except for the point, the still point,
> There would be no dance, and there is only the dance. (Eliot, 2015: 181)

Eliot's "still point" is the quintessential image of the intersection of time and timelessness. It symbolizes the quidditas of the All which sustains the phenomenal world in an eternal dance. Dídac Llorens-Cubedo insightfully contends that it is a representation of "the coexistence of movement in stillness, of the physical and the metaphysical, of past and future. In these pairings, neither element prevails: it is neither one nor the other, and both at the same time" (2013: 68). This realization leads to "a knowledge by contact of the Flaming Heart of Reality, which includes in one great role the planes of Being and Becoming" (Underhill, 1912: 406). "The still point" displays a myriad of Western and Eastern spiritual allusions: the mystical moment in which the soul is united with God for the Christian ascetic, the *Brahman* for the Hindu, the (Neo)platonic One, Shiva *nataraja* as the consciousness that emanates phenomena and the Zen Buddhist *ensō* as the circular brushstroke of awakening.

"The still point" is beyond reason, and the poetic "I" repeats a series of negations to emulate the method which St. John of the Cross adopted in his mystical treatise *Subida del Monte Carmelo* (1618):

> Para venir a lo que no gustas,
> has de ir por donde no gustas.
> Para venir a lo que no sabes,
> has de ir por donde no sabes.
> Para venir a lo que no posees,
> has de ir por donde no posees.
> Para venir a lo que no eres,
> has de ir por donde no eres. (De la Cruz, 2018: 150)



*Subida del Monte Carmelo* is structured through the symbol of the stairs, an image which also appears for the first time in *Four Quartets* in the last movement of "Burnt Norton": "The detail of the pattern is the movement, / As in the figure of the ten stairs" (Eliot, 2015: 184). Dídac Llorens-Cubedo pinpoints that the stairs is a "satellite image" of "the still point", which alludes to St. John of the Cross' teachings of "the soul's journey, divided into ten stages" (2013: 68-69). Furthermore, María Teresa Gibert recognizes that the saint also uses the stairs in his volume *Noche oscura* (1577), where he explains "los diez grados de la escala mística del amor divino, según San Bernardo y Santo Tomás" (De la Cruz, 2018: 343; Gibert, 1985: 86). The poetic persona in "Burnt Norton" almost reproduces St. John's message when he declares that:

> […] In order to arrive there,
> To arrive where you are, to get from where you are not,
> You must go by a way wherein there is no ecstasy.
> In order to arrive at what you do not know
> You must go by a way which is the way of ignorance.
> In order to possess what you do not possess
> You must go by the way of dispossession.
> In order to arrive where you are not
> You must go through the way in which you are not. (Eliot, 2015: 189)

Pablo Luis Zambrano analyzes in depth Eliot's recreation of St. John of the Cross' verses in *Four Quartets*. He contends that the above passage condenses the saint's doctrine of "la necesidad del alma de negar todo apego sensual y espiritual" (Zambrano, 1994: 282), which permeates his doctrine. The emphasis St. John of the Cross placed on deprivation and darkness was a detail Eliot did not overlook, as Zambrano argues: "no extraña en absoluto que eligiese el fragmento que eligió como síntesis de la 'via negativa' sanjuanista" (1994: 283). The lyric "I" fully refines his expression and reconciles all opposites like a mystic:



> And what you do not know is the only thing you know
> And what you own is what you do not own
> And where you are is where you are not. (Eliot, 2015: 189)

The apophatic device to define enlightenment is also present in Buddhism. In the Buddha's words, awakening is referred as the

> unborn, unbecome, unmade, unconditioned. If, monks, there were no unborn, unbecome, unmade, unconditioned, no escape would be discerned from what is born, became, made, conditioned. But because there is an unborn, […] therefore an escape is discerned from what is born, become, made, conditioned. (Bodhi, 2012: 366)

Eliot's "still point of the turning world" is the coincidence of opposites that transcends logical understanding.

"The still point" is depicted as existential freedom but also as *kenosis* (self-emptying). As Jewel Spears Brooker observes, this word is used by St. Paul in the Epistle to Philippians, where he describes the "self-emptying" of Christ when, while also being the Son of God, he voluntarily became human in "the form of a servant" (Phil 2: 7, in Brooker, 2018: 156). The lyric "I" replicates Christ's steps to apprehend

> The inner freedom from the practical desire,
> The release from action and suffering, release from the inner
> And the outer compulsion, yet surrounded
> By a grace of sense, a white light still and moving,
> *Erhebung* without motion, concentration
> Without elimination, both a new world
> And the old made explicit, understood
> In the completion of its partial ecstasy,
> […] (Eliot, 2015: 181)

Enlightenment represents freedom from sensual, mental and existential desires and reconciles the opposition between phenomenon and noumenon, time and timelessness, and being and becoming. Christ's *kenosis* is synonymous with Buddhist detachment, since the Buddha preaches: "there are these four kinds of clinging: clinging to sensual pleasures, clinging to views, clinging to rules and observances, clinging to a doctrine of self. […] The way leading to the cessation of clinging is just this Noble Eightfold Path; that is, right view, […] right concentration" (Bodhi, 2012: 328-329). Eliot's lines illustrate both Christian and Buddhist asceticism when the "I" is: "Emptying the sensual with deprivation / Cleansing affection from the temporal" (Eliot, 2015: 182). The "cleansing" of desire entails the transmutation of his worldly affections into unconditional love, which dissolves the boundaries between self and other:



> Love is most nearly itself
> Where here and now cease to matter.
> […]
> We must be still and still moving
> Into another intensity
> For a further union, a deeper communion. (Eliot, 2015: 191)

The mystic journey requires the surrender of the self to the absolute. This process involves the obscuration of the ego, which Eliot's "I" undergoes, in language that echoes St. John of the Cross' emphasis on descent and darkness:

> Descend, descend only
> Into the world of perpetual solitude,
> 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;
> […] (Eliot 2015. 182-83)

The lyric "I" echoes Heraclitus' words as he concludes his ruminations on the way towards darkness:



> This is the one way, and the other
> Is the same, not in movement
> But abstention from movement; while the world moves (Eliot, 2015: 183)

St. John of the Cross describes the dark night of the soul as an emptying of desire, reason and volition. Pablo Luis Zambrano defines it as "una metáfora de la que se vale el místico para expresar de la manera más gráfica posible un proceso de purgación y purificación que el alma debe realizar para poder merecer la unión final con la Divinidad" (1994: 30). In St. John of the Cross' words:

> es suma ignorancia del alma pensar que podrá pasar a este alto estado de unión con Dios si primero no vacía el apetito de todas las cosas naturales y sobrenaturales que le pueden impedir […], porque la doctrina que el Hijo de Dios vino a enseñar fue el menosprecio de todas las cosas, para poder recibir el precio del espíritu de Dios en sí; porque, en tanto que de ellas no se deshiciere el alma, no tiene capacidad para recibir el espíritu de Dios en pura transformación. (De la Cruz, 2018: 138-139)

In the phase of the dark night of the soul the self works to divest itself of everything. He continues to affirm that this process unfolds due to two simultaneous reasons:

> la primera, porque, como actualmente queda absorta y embebida el alma […] no puede estar en otra cosa actualmente […]; la segunda […], porque aquella transformación en Dios de tal manera la conforma con la sencillez y pureza de Dios […] que la deja limpia y pura y vacía de todas formas y figuras que antes tenía, purgada e ilustrada con sencilla contemplación. (De la Cruz, 2018: 471)

Eliot's "I" expresses a process of self-surrender as he dissolves into the unknown darkness:

> I said to my soul, be still, and let the dark come upon you
> Which shall be the darkness of God. As, in a theatre,
> The lights are extinguished, for the scene to be changed
> With a hollow rumble of wings, with a movement of darkness on darkness,
> […] (Eliot, 2015: 188)



The yielding of the self to "internal darkness", "solitude" and "desiccation" represents the climax of the *via negativa*. The lyric "I" has no other choice but to "wait" with steadfastness and faith, without certainty:

> I said to my soul, be still, and wait without hope
> For hope would be hope for the wrong thing; wait without love
> For love would be love for the wrong thing; there is yet faith
> But the faith and the love and the hope are all in the waiting.
> Wait without thought, for you are not ready for thought:
> So the darkness shall be the light, and the stillness the dancing. (Eliot, 2015: 189)

The dark night involves, as Kenneth Kramer illustrates, becoming "reduced to a state of emptiness, poverty, and abandonment, for the sensual part is purified in emptiness and the spirit is purified in darkness" (2007: 54). The voiding of the senses and mental faculties that St. John of the Cross discloses is the same process of the *Heart Sutra*:

> [i]n emptiness there is no form, no feelings, no perceptions, no mental formations, no consciousness. No eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, or mind. No form, sound, smell, taste,

> touch, or phenomenon. No eye-realm […] until no realm of mind-consciousness. […] Therefore […], having relied on the insight that brings to the other shore, he dwells without obstacles of the mind [and] […] without fear, having overcome wrong perceptions, he arrives at perfect *nirvana* […], fully awaken to the highest complete enlightenment. (Hanh, 2016: 110)

Spiritual darkness is preliminary for inner regeneration, and the renunciation of the mystic's old self leads to the belief: "So the darkness shall be the light, and the stillness the dancing" (Eliot, 2015: 189).

## 4. *TANDAVA*: THE DANCE OF THE UNIVERSE

Eliot's "I" reconciles stillness with movement:

> At the still point of the turning world. Neither flesh nor fleshless;
> Neither from nor towards; at the still point, there the dance is, […]
> Except for the point, the still point,
> There would be no dance, and there is only the dance. (Eliot, 2015: 181)



Dance in Hinduism is an art associated with Shiva, the god of destruction, the embodiment of time and the centrality of Being "which sustains the phenomenal world of constant Becoming" (Kearns, 1987: 98). Metaphysician and historian Ananda Coomaraswamy illustrates that, as Shiva enacts his *tandava* – the cosmic dance – as the king of dance or *nataraja*, the drum in his right hand sends out *Om* in waves of creation, his middle hand forms the gesture that sustains the universe and the flame in his left palm dissolves the cosmos to reinitiate the cycle. He reveals the ultimate meaning of Shiva's dance: "first, it is the image of his Rhythmic Play as the source of all movement [...]; secondly, the purpose of his Dance is to release the countless souls of men in the snare of Illusion; thirdly, the place of the Dance, [...] the Centre of the Universe, is in the Heart" (Coomaraswamy, 1974: 77). Shiva remains unaffected in the middle of a whirling circle of flames. He stands, thus, in the intersection between time and timelessness, the image of stillness in the midst of wreckage.

Impermanence is a key concept in Buddhism:

> Whether Buddhas arise, O priest, or whether Buddhas do not arise, it remains a fact and the fixed and necessary constitution of being, that all its constituents are transitory. […] Whether Buddhas arise, O priests, or whether Buddhas do not arise, it remains a fact and the fixed and necessary constitution of being, that all its constituents are misery. […] Whether Buddhas arise, O priests, or whether Buddhas do not arise, it remains a fact and the fixed and necessary constitution of being, that all its elements are lacking in an Ego. (in Warren, 1986: xii)

The Buddha's teachings coincide with Heraclitus' philosophy of change, one of the few Western thinkers whose thought describes the flux of the universe (McCarthy, 1952: 42). A similar notion is found in the Hindu sacred text of the *Bhagavad Gita* (3rd c. B.C.) where Krishna exhorts: "from the world of senses, Arjuna, comes heat and comes cold, and pleasure and pain. They come and they go; they are transient" (*Bhagavad Gita*, 2003: 49). I agree with Wheelwright, Sri, and Jain's claim that Krishna's presence alongside Heraclitus in *Four Quartet* shows the importance of Eastern religions in the poem. Furthermore, Eliot brilliantly correlates the Hindu concept of reincarnation – the transmigration of the soul – with Heraclitus' philosophy of transience (Wheelwright, 1947: 103-105). Eliot's *Four Quartets*, hence, integrates Krishna's, Heraclitan, Buddhist (Jain, 2023: 41) and Biblical understandings of change in order to highlight Western and Eastern teachings.



The dance of impermanence brings forth destruction of cosmic proportions:

> Thunder rolled by the rolling stars
> Simulates triumphal cars
> Deployed in constellated wars
> Scorpion fights against the Sun
> Until the Sun and Moon go down
> Comets weep and Leonids fly
> Hunt the heavens and the plains
> Whirled in a vortex that shall bring
> The world to that destructive fire
> Which burns before the ice-cap reigns. (Eliot, 2015: 187)

Shiva's *tandava* is the vortex that shall turn the world afire to dissolve the cosmos. Destruction and preservation of the universe are two sides of the same coin: "Time the destroyer is time the

preserver" (Eliot, 2015: 196). Darkness may contain the potential for regeneration when it is understood in consonance with the spirit.

## 5. THE ETERNAL FLAME OF WISDOM

The lyric "I" began his journey outside the "rose garden" and, after countless endeavors, has been granted the vision of the rose in flames in "Little Gidding":

> Quick now, here, now, always—
> A condition of complete simplicity
> (Costing not less than everything)
> And all shall be well and
> All manner of things shall be well
> When the tongues of flame are in-folded
> Into the crowned knot of fire
> And the fire and the rose are one. (Eliot, 2015: 209)



Eliot's "I" witnesses the mystic rose, "a symbol of completion [...] of the reality beyond appearances [which] is the Western equivalent to 'the thousand-petal lotus' [...] of Eastern mysticism" (Sri, 1985: 93). Easy to visualize, it embodies a reality beyond language, since it amalgamates and transcends all voices in Eliot's poem that are dissolved "To become renewed, transfigured, in another pattern" (Eliot, 2015: 206). The conjuration of "the spectre of a Rose" (Eliot, 2015: 206) and the paradise "full of children" morph into the Rose of Love. Jewel Spears Brooker brilliantly identifies Eliot's echoing of Dante's transmutation of the red rose of *eros* – sensory love – into the white rose of unconditional love, of *agape* (Brooker, 2018: 183): "So now, appearing to me in the form / of a white rose was Heaven's sacred host, / those with His own blood Christ made His bride" (Dante, 1961: 365). Moreover, Eliot's rose has the redness of blood – the symbol of Christ's Passion, as well as the horrors of the Second World War and universal suffering.

The flower is surrounded by flame tongues "in-folded" into a crown of fire, an image of Christ's ordeal by means of a "blood-soaked crown" of thorns (Brooker, 2018: 183) which anticipates his resurrection to redeem humanity. Eliot's "crowned knot of fire" alludes to the rose as the fire of "wisdom" in the *Bhagavad Gita* (2003: 80). When Arjuna sees Krishna in his full majesty, he exclaims: "I see the splendour of an infinite beauty which illuminates the […]

universe. It is thee! with thy crown […]. But I see thee: as fire […], blinding, incomprehensible" (*Bhagavad Gita*, 2003: 117). Jewel Spears Brooker observes that, in the Book of Acts, the Apostles witness the apparition of the tongues of the Holy Spirit above their heads (Acts 2: 3, in Brooker, 2018: 161). The fiery dove of love is corrupted into the Blitz bomber in the image of the "dark dove with the flickering tongue" (Eliot, 2015: 203). She perceptively describes the dove as a superimposition "of a gray dove on the image of a gray German bomber" (Brooker, 2018: 163):

> The dove descending breaks the air
> With flame of incandescent terror
> Of which the tongues declare
> The one discharge from sin and error. (Eliot, 2015: 207)

David Moody interprets the image of fire in depth, as an opportunity for universal purification: "The enemy bomber is apprehended as the Holy Spirit, its fire-bombs as his revelations, and death by fire as the only way of spiritual fire. It seems the entire world is turned into holy fire" (1994: 150). The "dove" paradoxically juxtaposes universal suffering and the presence of the Holy Spirt as the promise for atonement (Brooker, 2018: 173).



Fire is also a symbol in Buddhist thought. The Buddha preaches in his "Fire Sermon", a text Eliot alludes to in *The Waste Land*, that "all is burning [...] Burning with what? Burning with the fire of lust, [...] hatred, [...] delusion; burning with birth, aging, and death" (Bodhi, 2012: 346). Humanity is afire with the thirst of sensory gratification. The Buddhist path, as Viorica Patea explains, is an ascetic endeavor that demands "a burning of the self's forms of identity, rooted in the immediate and the phenomenal world in an attempt to awaken its spiritual consciousness" (2022b: 124). The Buddha does not preach a destructive message but describes the universal nature of suffering. Both the lyric "I" and the reader have the alternative to "diligently work out your salvation" (Warren, 1963: 93) and put an end to the unreality of existence.

The flame is the force which leaves the self "restored by that refining fire / Where you must move in measure, like a dancer" (Eliot, 2015: 205). Eliot echoes the words of the mystic Julian of Norwich: "all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well" (1998: 53). On the other hand, McCarthy points out that "Buddhism rests on the idea of knowing and regarding reality as it is; but having accepted things as they are, Buddhism then goes on to find a way of

life that is both possible and desirable within the context of the facts of existence" (1952: 47). Hence, to understand suffering as universal and impermanent is a way to awaken to spiritually nourishing values.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

T. S. Eliot reconciles Eastern and Western traditions in *Four Quartets* to convey a unified spiritual message. He displays images alongside philosophical meditations to delineate the evolution of consciousness. Indeed, one of Eliot's deepest aspirations is to establish a communion with the reader through poetic expression.

*Four Quartets* shows different symbols of the same spiritual wisdom. "The lotos rose" embodies enlightenment by uniting the lotus of Hindu-Buddhist religions and the Rose of Christian mystics and Dante. Eliot's "I" realizes that the paradisiacal beatitude lost because of original sin can be regained through diligence and humility.

"The still point of the turning world" is one of the central images of the poem, which condenses the reconciliation of the opposite dimensions in the self. The phenomenal world is not rejected in favor of the transcendent. Eliot's display of the *via negativa* shows that darkness and deprivation are part of the ascetic pilgrimage. Again, he does not limit his poetic references to the Christian tradition, but he also alludes to the teachings of the Buddha and Nagarjuna's philosophy of the void. All spiritual masters, Eastern and Western, preach detachment from desire as the requirement of enlightenment.



At the end of the poem, Eliot uses the destructive nature of fire as synonymous with enlightenment. The refining flame of desolation, which represents Christ's suffering in his Passion, is transmuted into the tongues of the Pentecost and the blinding fires of the *Bhagavad Gita*. Eliot also recalls the Buddhist "Fire Sermon", which teaches the dangers of attachment and advocates living on a spiritual plane.

T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets* reconciles the poetic I's consciousness with the world he inhabits. The poem suggests that, although different, all spiritual paths convey a perennial truth not yet realized and intuited through the yearning towards transcendence. In a late essay titled "Goethe as the Sage" (1955), Eliot concluded that

> there is the Wisdom that we can all accept […]. But wisdom is λόγος ζυνός (the common logos), is the same for all men everywhere. If it were not so, what profit could a European

> gain from the *Upanishads*, or the Buddhist *Nikayas*? Only some intellectual exercise, the satisfaction of some curiosity, or an interesting sensation like that of tasting some exotic oriental dish. (Eliot, 1957: 226)

Eliot honors Hindu-Buddhist voices without diluting their authenticity to broaden cultural horizons. Although his sense of tradition is Western due to his Anglo-Catholic identity, he reaches out to Eastern creeds in order to "overcome the paralyzing isolation of the European traditions" (Patea, 2022b: 108). Furthermore, he also confronts the "rationalist prejudice of Western culture" (Patea, 2022b: 109) that removes the divine and conceives reality in terms of scientific thought.

"The lotos" and "the rose", "the still point of the turning world", Buddhist *sunyata*, Christ's *kenosis*, Shiva *nataraja* and the flames of wisdom embody enlightenment in different forms. Union with the absolute involves, as the apophatic mystic Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite claims: "an undivided and absolute abandonment of yourself and everything, shedding all" (1987: 135) into a rebirth in the freedom from the snare of the senses. Enlightenment encompasses a sincere and spontaneous surrender of a spiritless personality to the fires of love. Eliot, often criticized as a Eurocentric writer, is in fact a respectful mediator between the East and the West who attempts to offer a wider perspective to the sacred.



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