

T. S. Eliot's "Burnt Norton": Past, Present, and Future

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ABSTRACT

Critical interpretations of "Burnt Norton" have varied widely over the nearly 80 years since its first publication. While many early scholars saw it as an abstract meditation on philosophy, the revelation in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s of the relationship of Eliot and Emily Hale changed to some extent the way in which it is read, with more of a personal view, at least in its inspiration. Indeed, I suggest that "Burnt Norton" and specifically the rose garden passage presents the two figures in the poem at a moment fraught with the possibility of rekindling their earlier romance. Our knowledge of the subsequent poems and of the failure of the further development of their relationship greatly colors our reading of the poem, preventing us from seeing the tension and suspense of this experience as it balances between the attraction of human love and that of a demanding spiritual commitment.

Keywords: T.S. Eliot, "Burnt Norton," Emily Hale

INTRODUCTION

My title has a double meaning as it refers both to the changing scholarly interpretations of "Burnt Norton" over the years as well as to a reading of the poem that I will suggest later.¹ In the nearly 80 years since the publication of "Burnt Norton" as the last poem in Eliot's *Collected Poems 1909-1935*, the ways in which this very difficult and elusive poem has been read have changed considerably as more and more information about it has been discovered – and we are not at the end yet, as with most things about Eliot. The massive 8-volume Eliot project, launched in 2014 with the appearance of the first two volumes, as well as the opening in January 2020 at Princeton of the Emily Hale Bequest of more than 1000 letters from Eliot to her will add a great deal to our knowledge of the man and his works, particularly "Burnt Norton."

¹ This paper is a revised version of the keynote lecture presented at Burnt Norton at the 2013 T. S. Eliot International Summer School.

EARLY CRITICAL COMMENTARIES

A review of critical commentary will reveal how our readings of the poem have altered over the years. Early Eliot scholars were in effect blazing a trail through uncharted territory as they wrote about "Burnt Norton," and we should apply to them Eliot's own statement about earlier writers in "Tradition and the Individual Talent": "Someone said: 'The dead writers are remote from us because we *know* so much more than they did.' Precisely, and they are that which we know" (Eliot 1975: 40).² However, new information has significantly changed the ways in which we read and interpret this poem as well as his other works. And we are at this very moment on the threshold of discoveries which will add immeasurably to our insights so that it is truly an exciting time to be an Eliot scholar.

Most of the immediate reviews of "Burnt Norton" in *Collected Poems 1909-1935*, when it was seen as a single poem, possibly the last he would write, characterized it as a philosophical and meditative work: Edwin Muir proclaimed it "a pure intellectual inquiry into the nature and forms of Time" (Muir 2004: 354), and D.W. Harding called it "a linguistic achievement ... in the creation of concepts" (Harding 2004: 372) which were "at once religious and philosophic," as Jewel Spears Brooker points out in her introduction to *T. S. Eliot: The Contemporary Reviews* (Brooker 2004: xxxiii).

As the three succeeding poems that would ultimately make up *Four Quartets* were published in the early 1940s, other reviews of "Burnt Norton" appeared with essentially the same assessment, perhaps best represented by F. R. Leavis, who wrote, "it seems to me the equivalent of a philosophical work – to do by strictly poetical means the business of an epistemological and metaphysical inquiry" (Leavis 2004: 448). George Orwell asserted that it "is not easy to say what 'Burnt Norton,' 'East Coker,' and 'The Dry Salvages' are about [other than] a gloomy musing upon the nature and purpose of life, with [a] rather indefinite conclusion" (Orwell 2004: 453).

A few years later important books on Eliot's works began to appear by emerging New Critics such as Elizabeth Drew, Helen Gardner, and Grover Smith. Drew in her 1949 book *T.S. Eliot: The Design of his Poetry* suggested that "Burnt Norton" "may be the scene of a memory, or a place where the vision of a 'might have been' formed itself in his consciousness" (Drew 1949: 151). Concerning the lines, "My words echo / Thus in your mind," she speculates that Eliot may be "addressing the reader and that such experiences are common to all; or [that] the echoes may be in the mind of the woman in the imaginary scene." "The interpretation of the lovely scene in the rose-garden itself," she says, "must depend on personal readings," whether a memory of childhood or her own reading that "nature becomes a symbol of a spiritual truth which

² Gail McDonald has noted, "It will not do to assume that the most recent views are the most enlightened or that past readers were benighted ... [warning against] an arrogance that wrongly discounts the voices of the past, voices that will eventually include our own" (McDonald 2004: 177, 191).

transcends it" (Drew 1949: 153). Gardner in *The Art of T. S. Eliot*, published in 1950, comments that "in the garden what might have been and what has been, for a moment, are" (Gardner 1950: 160) and suggests that the poem's literal meaning is "simply that the poet has felt a moment of inexplicable joy," that its moral meaning is the virtue of humility, and that its spiritual meaning is grace (Gardner 1950: 163-4). For Smith in his 1956 book *T.S. Eliot's Poetry and Plays: A Study in Sources and Meaning*, "Burnt Norton" concerns "the lost potentiality never fulfilled" in time, but fulfilled in eternity (Smith: 1956: 257); he suggests that the passage beginning "Footfalls echo in the memory" is "addressed apparently to someone with whom the experience might have occurred" and that the rose garden is symbolic of the moment drawing all times together and of the moment "immediate to God" (Smith 1956: 259).

In the late 1960s I wrote my doctoral dissertation on Eliot's use of landscape as symbol in his poetry, but without seeing the actual landscapes. In revising it for publication as a book, I felt that it was imperative to see them for myself. In those days, there were no personal computers nor, obviously, the Internet where one today can type "Burnt Norton" into Google and instantly see a variety of color photos of the manor house and its garden, so in 1973 I applied for and received a grant from my university to go to England and visit London, Burnt Norton, East Coker, Little Gidding, Margate Sands, Usk, and Rannoch by Glencoe. My husband and I packed up our 22-month-old daughter and our 5-year-old son and set out on our grand adventure, despite the dismay of my parents and the astonishment of our friends.

So the first time I visited Burnt Norton was 40 years ago with two small children and a very indulgent husband in tow. I remember my sense of anticipation and excitement as we approached up that long winding road.



Figure 1. The manor house at Burnt Norton in 2010 (photo by Nancy D. Hargrove)

At that time, the estate was a school for disadvantaged boys (Fig. 1) who were everywhere, running and shouting, during our visit. Thus it was hardly a quiet or serene place, but its magic nevertheless immediately took hold. Actually seeing the

rose garden and the drained pools (Fig. 2) – exactly as they are described in the poem – was thrilling then, and after six visits here, all of which astoundingly took place on sunny days, it still is today.



Figure 2. The drained pools in 2010 (photo by Nancy D. Hargrove)

It was immensely helpful – indeed, I felt, necessary – in unpacking and explicating the multi-leveled and complex symbolism to see this incredible place and to discover that Eliot grounded his symbols in reality, and I am convinced that it made me a better reader of all his poems, and this one in particular, realizing that I was to some extent flying in the face of the dictates of New Criticism on which I had been raised, academically speaking; that is, that one must focus on the poem itself to the exclusion, almost entirely, of biography, non-literary sources, and the like. While I embraced close reading, to omit these other types of information seemed to me to limit a more complete understanding of any poem, especially those of Eliot.

When soon afterwards I came across Helen Gardner's article "The Landscapes of Eliot's Poetry" in *Critical Quarterly*, I completely agreed with her description of her first trip to Burnt Norton: "The moment I entered the garden of Burnt Norton, I recognized it. I felt that, if I had been blindfolded and dropped there by helicopter, and the [blindfold] taken off had been asked to say where I was, I should have replied at once that I was in the garden of Eliot's poem" (Gardner 1968: 320). And, while she admitted, "I think I was wrong many years ago in making too little of the places which give their titles to the Quartets, and if I were to rewrite my book on *The Art of T. S. Eliot* I should give much more space than I did to Eliot as poet of places" (Gardner 1968: 330), this eminent Eliot scholar qualified her recognition of the importance of landscape to the poetry by arguing that knowledge of the specific places is interesting to the reader on a personal level, but that it has nothing to do with critical evaluation:

[T]he sense of place is fundamental to these poems ... [and] is their profoundly felt basis. This sense of the actual moves me very deeply in Eliot's poems. It can so easily be lost if we concentrate on his philosophical and religious thought, and his literary sources. At times scholarship seems in danger of turning him into a theorist on the nature of time, or a walking card-index of quotations. It may be simple and naïve and retrograde [the prevailing critical attitude at the time, which she clearly felt obligated to acknowledge] to want to visit the places he lived in, and to indulge in this kind of rambling biographical and geographical annotation. It has only slight relevance to critical evaluation. It has, I think, great relevance to understanding. If we think of a poem as a work of art, like a beautiful pot, a structure of meanings and symbols, self-consistent, to be judged for what it is, I would agree that discussion of sources, whether literary or actual, is irrelevant. (Gardner 1968: 329)

Since these words undermined my entire thesis, I had, it seemed to me, two choices: I could ignore the statement and pretend that I had not seen the article before my book went to press, but, with the daring – or foolishness – of youth, I took her on (and the New Critical establishment as well, I guess), in a respectful way, of course, quoting the entire passage on the next to last page of my book and commenting, “On the contrary, it seems to me that this kind of knowledge has much to do with valid critical interpretation of landscape in Eliot's work. Because [it] functions as a major symbol, lack of knowledge about the actual sources, as well as insufficient or incorrect knowledge, can distort or even reverse its symbolic import. ... Knowledge of the real locations enriches and deepens our understanding of the poems as a whole” (Hargrove 1978: 214).

My discussion of “Burnt Norton” in my book, published in 1978 and containing photographs of the house and garden (among the first to be published), began with a detailed description of the grounds themselves, followed by a commentary on their complex symbolic import, including literary sources. I argued that, while most scholars had limited their discussions of its meanings to a single concept, in reality it has multiple levels and offered six to my readers, progressing from a completely earthbound experience to a completely spiritual one that gave value and meaning to human existence. At the time, I thought that I had covered everything.

My essay up to this point illustrates that one *can* read the poem without the additional knowledge, in particular that about Emily Hale, discovered since the work of these early scholars, but this new information provided further levels of meaning that made important contributions to our understanding.

ENTER EMILY HALE

In 1973, the same year as my first visit to Burnt Norton, T.S. Matthews published what he called a “biography, of sorts” (Matthews 1973: xix), not sanctioned by Valerie Eliot, entitled *Great Tom: Notes Towards the Definition of T.S. Eliot*. It

contained a chapter of 13 pages (Matthews 1973: 139-51) on Eliot and Emily Hale, without specific citations of his sources for that information, although it seems to have been based on interviews with Hale's friends and former students. It was, as far as I can tell, the first published revelation of their relationship and was largely focused on Hale herself, with two lovely photographs of her, one as a young woman and the other as an older woman.

In 1978, Gardner published *The Composition of Four Quartets*, noting in the Preface that Mrs. Eliot had given her access to all the unpublished material as well as "information that I might otherwise not have found and been most generous in answering my questions" (Gardner 1978: vii). In the section on the sources of "Burnt Norton," after pointing out that actual experiences underlie the poem, she offers additional information on Eliot's visits to Hale and her aunt and uncle during several summers in the 1930s in Chipping Camden, as well as on Eliot and Hale's visit to Burnt Norton in September 1934, quoting from Eliot's thank you note of September 4 to her aunt: "My weekend ... gave me still more happiness than the previous one" (Gardner 1978: 35). Gardner remarks that the poem "arose out of what would seem to have been the happiest experiences" of this period of his life (Gardner 1978: 34). The careful language indicates how cautious she and other Eliot scholars were at that time when treading close to "personal" ground pertaining to this supposedly most impersonal of poets, as does her footnote that she suspects, "although I have no evidence," that Hale and Eliot were together in New Hampshire in the summer of 1933 (Gardner 1978: 36).

In 1988, Lyndall Gordon's *Eliot's New Life* and in 1998 her *T.S. Eliot: An Imperfect Life* fleshed out our knowledge of Hale and her relationship with Eliot with exhaustive and well-documented research that included interviews with and letters from Hale's friends and students, adding to as well as correcting earlier information. There were also five photographs of Hale, including two with Eliot.

According to Gordon, the two met in 1912 at the home of Eliot's cousin Eleanor Hinkley and performed in a stunt show there in February 1913 (Gordon (1998: 78-9). He told her that he was in love with her before leaving for a year at Oxford in the summer of 1914 (Eliot 2009: xix) and in November 1914 asked Conrad Aiken to send her red or pink roses for him when she appeared in an upcoming play (Eliot 2009: 76). After his sudden marriage to Vivienne in June 1915, which was a shock to Hale, for years they had no direct personal contact, although he wrote her a letter in April 1919 and sent her a signed copy of *Ara Vos Prec* in September 1923. However, in May 1927 he received a letter from her written in Florence, Italy, just before he joined the Church of England, followed by his taking a vow of chastity in March 1928. One can only imagine his conflicting emotions. They met often throughout the 1930s both in America and in England, including the memorable visit to Burnt Norton in 1934.

Their close, but unusual, relationship continued, with the belief on her part and that of others that they would one day marry when he was free to do so. However, when Vivienne died in 1947, Eliot made it clear that he could not or would not marry

her. Gordon quotes a letter of August 1947 from Hale to a friend in which she writes that the "mutual affection he and I have had for each other has come to a strange impasse, whether permanent or not, I do not know. Tom's wife died last winter very suddenly. I supposed he would then feel free to marry me as I believed he always intended to do. But such proves not to be the case" (qtd. in Gordon 1998: 411). He called it a "catastrophe," while she called it a "miscarriage" (qtd. in Gordon 1998: 412). There are a variety of possible reasons why he chose not to marry her, but, unless the Princeton letters reveal his thinking, we may never know exactly, although that has not stopped speculation.

Their relationship, however, managed to survive for nearly ten more years until a series of betrayals and counter-betrayals finally led to its demise. In 1956, Hale informed Eliot that she was giving his letters to her to Princeton University, which shocked and angered him as he felt that she was trading on his fame. In January 1957, Hale was completely shaken when she learned of his marriage to Valerie and suffered an emotional breakdown. The break between the two was complete. Later in 1957 Eliot had her letters burned (as he had burned a good part of his correspondence with his mother and brother after their deaths). Hale wrestled for some years about what and how much to say about the letters that she had given to Princeton, writing in a letter of November 1965 to a friend of "the association with a man I loved, . . . who I think did not respond as he should have to my long trust, friendship, and love" (qtd. in Gordon 1998: 430). As Gordon suggests, their relationship for now remains largely mysterious and indeed "defies definition" (Gordon 1998: 432-3) – until, that is, his letters "burst upon the world" (qtd. in Gordon 1998: 435), in Hale's words, on January 1, 2020.

ELIOT'S YOUTH AND EARLY ADULTHOOD

So with this information in mind, before we proceed with our exploration of "Burnt Norton," I want to go back to Eliot's youth and young adulthood. He had what Gordon calls in *The Early Years* "a remarkably happy childhood" (Gordon 1977: 14)³ – a statement deleted without explanation in *An Imperfect Life* – and, until his marriage to Vivienne, his adolescence and young adulthood were not as grim as they have been often portrayed; having "metaphysical" questions and being shy with young women are not unusual for young men, even today. His undergraduate years at Harvard were full of discoveries, some fun, and a hopeful view of the future; Howarth

³ Jayme Stayer's essay "Eliot as a Schoolboy" supports this view. He points out that in "American Literature and the American Language," collected in *To Criticize the Critic*, Eliot notes that his "memories of Smith Academy are on the whole happy ones" (Eliot 1965: 44-5; Stayer 2013: 621-2), and, after presenting a detailed account of his life in those years, Stayer concludes that it was "as charmed a childhood as could be hoped for" (Stayer 2013: 637).

tells us that he possessed "the urbane dandyism, the perfection of dress, manners, and accomplishments, which was the Harvard style of his time and in which he excelled" (Howarth 1964: 102). He also had a definite plan for his future –to become a professor of Philosophy after a year in Paris searching for his poetic voice followed by graduate study back at Harvard.

He had what he himself called "the exceptional good fortune" (Eliot 1944: 94) to spend a magical year in Paris in 1910-1911, where he attended the lectures of the wildly popular philosopher Henri Bergson at the Collège de France, established close friendships with two young Frenchmen, and took in all that Paris had to offer. As I wrote in *T.S. Eliot's Parisian Year*, the French capital boasted a host of "exciting, innovative, and often conflicting [intellectual] views"; extraordinary cultural events such as the first exhibition of the Cubists, the startlingly original programs of the Ballets Russes, and the performance for the first time ever in Paris of Wagner's tetralogy *Der Ring des Nibelungen*; technological advances such as the Métropolitain, automobiles, and an occasional airplane overhead; and great achievements of the past both in art and architecture (Hargrove 2009: 1). He looked back on this *annus mirabilis* with nostalgia, describing Paris in this way: "On the one hand it was completely the past; on the other hand it was completely the future; and these two aspects combined to form a perfect present" (Eliot 1944: 94). Frances Dickey in a review of my book notes, "I was particularly struck by the sheer joie de vivre expressed in every aspect of Parisian life, which contrasted with my mental picture of Eliot moping about the city like a well-to-do Raskolnikov. ... Hargrove gives us a sunlit room where anything must have seemed (and perhaps was) possible for both Eliot and Europe" (Dickey 2010: 135-6). And, despite the very different circumstances at the end of Milton's *Paradise Lost*, this slightly altered quotation always echoes in my head as regards Eliot at the end of his Paris year: "The world was all before him / Where to choose."

Back at Harvard, he pursued his studies for a Ph.D. in Philosophy, dressed in "exotic Left-Bank clothing" (Aiken 1965: 20-21), took boxing lessons, learned the latest dances, participated in theatrical performances, and fell in love with Emily Hale. In March 1914, he was notified that he had received a Sheldon Travelling Fellowship in Philosophy for the following academic year, which he would spend at Merton College, Oxford, a wonderful opportunity and one which altered the course of his life. For then, as we say today, Life happened, a combination of circumstances out of his control (such as World War I) and personal decisions both good and bad that led him to say in a speech given in Brussels in 1949 that, when he had first visited the city in early July 1914 as an unknown young American of 25, his plan for his life was to become a professor of Philosophy at an American University; however, he revealed, that design was drastically altered and his life followed a quite different course from what he had imagined (Eliot Collection, King's College Library)

The first drastic alteration happened just a few weeks after his visit to Brussels. He had gone on to Marburg, Germany for an intensive course in German when World

War I began on August 1; ironically in a letter of July 26 to Eleanor, he had written, "I shan't have anything very exciting to narrate this summer; this is as peaceful a life as one could well find" (Eliot 2009: 54). After several harrowing weeks, he arrived safely in London and in October began his studies in Oxford.

In March 1915 he first met Vivienne, and on April 24 he wrote to Eleanor about two British girls, one of whom was Vivienne, who were very good dancers: "They are charmingly sophisticated (even disillusioned) without being hardened; and I confess to taking great pleasure in seeing women smoke" (Eliot 2009: 105). Vivienne's daring and open nature clearly attracted him, and they married precipitously on June 26. Although I have rarely seen this reason cited as one of many put forth to explain their sudden marriage, people have often married quickly during war-time, becoming suddenly aware of the fragility of life, especially when one has lost friends in battle, as was the case with Eliot. His two close French friends had died within seven months of each other before the war was a year old: Henri Alain-Fournier on September 22, 1914, and Jean Verdenal on May 2, 1915, less than two months before the marriage. Harder to understand is the fact that, as he said later, he was still in love with Hale (V. Eliot 2009: xix). As we all know, the marriage was disastrous for and because of both of them; as Eliot revealed, "To her the marriage brought no happiness . . . T[o] me, it brought the state of mind out of which came *The Waste Land*" (qtd. in V. Eliot 2009: xix).

The ensuing years brought a host of other problems and disappointments which contributed to Eliot's (and Vivienne's) miserable state: financial problems; his guilt over having disappointed his parents with his marriage and his decisions to stay in England and to give up his intended career as a professor of philosophy; his and Vivienne's ill health; overwork; Vivienne's affair with Bertrand Russell; his failure to obtain a military commission; the general disillusionment following the war's end; his flirtation (possibly an affair) with Mary Hutchinson, who apparently dumped him for Aldous and Maria Huxley (yes, both of them; see Murray 2002: 143 ff); the stressful visit of his mother, sister, and brother; and his breakdown – to list only the most glaring. In 1916, he wrote to Aiken, "I have *lived* through material for a score of long poems in the last six months. An entirely different life from that I looked forward to two years ago" (Eliot 2009: 138). Our long knowledge of these difficulties, I think, deadens or at least reduces for us their devastating impact on him.

THE RETURN OF HALE TO HIS LIFE

After *The Waste Land* appeared in 1922, his fame was widespread, but his problems did not lessen, especially as concerned his marriage. Perhaps in part seeking relief and comfort, he joined the Anglo-Catholic church in June 1927 and took a vow of celibacy in March 1928, as mentioned earlier. Just prior to these momentous events, Emily Hale's letter from Italy arrived, and, on that sunny day, according to Gordon, in

response to his friend William Force Stead's comment that "it would be nice to be in love on a day like this," Eliot told him that her letter "brought back something to me that I had not known for a long time" (Gordon 1998: 234). So she was back in his life again; although she had never been totally out of it, now her presence was again palpable and must have been both exciting and frightening. Their close relationship soon resumed, but with different parameters. They met often in the 1930s both in England and America. Perhaps his anticipation of their first meeting was the inspiration in July 1929 for "Marina," in which a father recovers his lost daughter:

What is this face, less clear and clearer
 The pulse in the arm, less strong and stronger—
 Given or lent? more distant than stars and nearer than the eye . . .
 The awakened, lips parted, the hope, the new ships." (Eliot 1963: ll. 17-19, 32)

This rather sensual description does not seem to fit an aged father in what Elizabeth Drew calls Eliot's "only purely joyous poem" (Drew 1949: 127), but it does fit a recovered earlier beloved.

During his 1932-33 trip to the United States, they were together in the winter at Scripps College in California and in the summer in New England, where memories of his childhood merged with his re-connection with his first love in the poem "New Hampshire," written at that time:

Children's voices in the orchard
 Between the blossom- and the fruit-time
 . . . Twenty years and the spring is over;
 To-day grieves, to-morrow grieves (Eliot 1963: ll. 1-2, 6-7)

In my first published essay, which appeared in 1972, before Emily Hale's name had surfaced, I wrote that the poem is "a symbolic expression of the poignant beauty and brevity of youth and innocence" (Hargrove 1972: 274), which is true, but not the whole truth as we now know.

Near the end of his year in America, Eliot began proceedings for a legal separation from Vivienne. In July 1934 Hale took a leave from Scripps and came to stay with her aunt and uncle in Chipping Camden, where she was visited on several occasions by Eliot, who could only have been feeling a cauldron of conflicting emotions – excitement at the possibilities of a re-awakened love from his past, fear about where it would lead, remorse and regret over the loss of so many years of possible happiness, including children, guilt about both Vivienne and Hale, not to mention uncertainty about how to reconcile his spiritual commitment to the church and his vow of celibacy with the reappearance of Hale in his life. If anyone ever faced a more difficult and painful situation, I cannot imagine it. As Ron Schuchard notes in his essay on Eliot and George Herbert, "The clash of his determined drive for purity and the unexpected renewal of an old desire brought on an intense personal and moral

dilemma – greatly aggravated by his impending separation from Vivien” (Schuchard 1999: 178).

VISIT TO BURNT NORTON AND THE POEM

It was in this framework that Eliot and Emily Hale visited Burnt Norton in September 1934, a place where they could not help but think of what might have been, what had been, and, I want to suggest, what perhaps still might be. For me, it is now impossible not to read this poem, which was written within a year of that visit, as a deeply personal and intensely moving exploration of an anguishing human situation. Eliot indeed, as Gordon points out, said in a speech given in March 1927 and published as “Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca,” “What every poet starts from is his own emotions” which may be “his nostalgia, his bitter regrets for past happiness” and from which he may “fabricate something permanent and holy out of his personal animal feelings – as in [Dante’s] *Vita Nuova*” (qtd. in Gordon 1998: 233).

The poem opens with a meditation on time, beside which, as an undergraduate, I wrote in my book in 1962 “Pure Abstraction,” the standard interpretation at that time. However, today I read the passage quite differently. The lines “What might have been and what has been / Point to one end, which is always present” (Eliot 1963: ll. 9-10) suggest that the meaningful love relationship between Eliot and Hale which might have been but did not happen and the painful reality of the miserable marriage with Vivienne which did happen have led to this present living moment at Burnt Norton, when, I would suggest, the future is still to be decided; the past cannot be changed, clearly, but the possibilities of which way to go now remain open. Perhaps renewed love can create a new beginning. This seems to me a moment of high drama both personally for Eliot and Hale and for the two figures in the poem, fraught with tension and fear but also hope, as they are poised at the entry to the garden, remembering the past, but also faced with the present and the future:

Footfalls echo in the memory
Down the passage which we did not take
Towards the door we never opened
Into the rose-garden. (Eliot 1963: ll. 11-14)

The ambiguity and tension of the moment lead the speaker, who moves now from the plural to the singular, to admit, “But to what purpose / Disturbing the dust on a bowl of rose-leaves / I do not know” (Eliot 1963: 16-18). He seems to be asking, “Why are we here? Are we re-opening our failed relationship? What might the outcome be? Isn’t the past as dead as the dried leaves of the dead roses?” In *The Great Gatsby* when Nick tells Jay, “You can’t repeat the past,” he replies incredulously, “Why of course you can” (Fitzgerald 1925: 116). Neither Eliot nor the speaker in “Burnt

Norton" believes that the past can be repeated, but perhaps it can be redeemed in the present and future.

Then the speaker – or perhaps the other person – says that echoes besides those of the speaker's words fill the garden and asks, "Shall we follow [?]" (Eliot 1963: l. 23). And they do, "Through the first gate, / Into our first world" (Eliot 1963: ll. 22-3), where they see as in dream or memory overlapping scenes and sounds that merge into and out of each other. This long passage has provided a field-day for many an Eliot scholar, who has taken a shot at unpacking its lines – and I'll take another shot that will add to my earlier one in the 1970s and that will entertain simultaneous and multi-leveled possibilities. On one level, "our first world" refers to the world of Eliot's childhood, evoked by his recent visit to childhood scenes in New England, suggesting innocence, goodness, happiness, and hopeful futures:

Go, said the bird, for the leaves were full of children,
Hidden excitedly, containing laughter.
Go, go, go, said the bird: human kind
Cannot bear very much reality. (Eliot 1963: ll. 42-5)

These lines suggest that the reality of what those children, and Eliot in particular, have become – the failure of all that promise and all that happiness and innocence – is too painful to bear. It has been often suggested that the "dignified, invisible" figures refer to the children's parents, who provided an ordered and secure way of life for them. But they also, and more strikingly, may refer to Eliot and Hale as young people in love, "dignified" evoking their proper upbringing in a culture with well-defined codes of conduct and "our first world" evoking first love. The children hidden in the leaves might be the children that they could have had if they had married. One of Eliot's great regrets was having no children, and he enjoyed the children of the Morleys and the Fabers, for whom he had originally written *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats*.

But the centerpiece literally and figuratively of this experience in the garden of Burnt Norton is the passage that many of us know and love, the description of the moment of illumination as they go past the roses,

Along the empty alley, into the box circle,
To look down into the drained pool.
Dry the pool, dry concrete, brown edged,
And the pool was filled with water out of sunlight,
And the lotus rose, quietly, quietly,
The surface glittered out of heart of light. (Eliot 1963: ll. 34-39).

Most scholars, including myself, have interpreted this vision as a mystical revelation of the "point of intersection of the timeless / With time" (Eliot 1963: ll. 207-8), which Eliot links to the Incarnation of Christ in "The Dry Salvages." In my *Landscape book*,

I explained it as "evidence attesting to the ultimate union of eternity and time, or immortality with mortality, of divine and human in and through Christ" (Hargrove 1978: 137) and linked it with both Dante's Earthly Paradise on the top of the mount of Purgatory and with his vision of the Godhead in the Paradiso. Concerning the latter, I pointed out that the circle of boxwood⁴ recalls the geometric design of the vision, with God as the center of concentric circles of angels; that the brilliant sunlight parallels the radiance of his description of the Empyrean ("We have won beyond the worlds, and move / Within that heaven which is pure light alone: / Pure intellectual light, fulfilled with love" (Alighieri 1962: XXX 38-40); and that the roses in the garden evoke the Dantean rose, symbol of divine love ("a rose / Of snow-white purity" (Alighieri 1962: XXI 1-2).

But now I want to suggest that the brilliant illumination operates also as an insight into their human love, as it was in the past, as it is in the present, and as it might be in the future, if that direction is what they choose. Without knowing of Emily Hale then, I did include as one of the six meanings of the garden experience the ecstasy of fulfilled human love, although I didn't get it quite right: "Eliot's garden ... can easily bear interpretation as a place where two human lovers experience the joy of passionate love" (Hargrove 1978: 138). I am quite sure that I did not mean that a sexual union took place on the spot, though that would have been dramatic and shocking, but that they experienced the ecstasy of being passionately in love. I think that Marianne Thormählen is right about the striking absence in Eliot's work of what the Renaissance sonneteers called the *innamoramento*, the heady experience of falling in love and the reality of loving another person (Thormählen 1996: 5), but I'd suggest that here he comes close. I think, or would like to think, that for Eliot and Hale that type of joy, which existed in the past, was not just a beautiful memory but might at this moment or in the immediate future be rekindled, both in actuality and in the poem. We know, of course, that it was not to be, and that it was Eliot's choice, not Emily's. He was, at least until 1957 when he married Valerie Fletcher, to choose the spiritual path of self-discipline and renunciation.

In the lyric of Section IV, on a literal level evening is falling at the end of their visit: "Time and the bell have buried the day. / The black cloud carries the sun away" (Eliot 1963: ll. 129-30). The moment of the ecstatic illumination, however we interpret it, has passed, and darkness and a chill in the air descend as the speaker's questions suggest a state of doubt:

Will the sunflower turn to us, will the clematis
Stray down, bend to us; tendril and spray
Clutch and cling? Chill

⁴ It is possible that Eliot here describes not the lower pools, which are rectangular and semi-circular in shape (see Fig. 2), but the isolated upper pool in the shape of a circle.

Fingers of yew be curled
Down on us? (Eliot 1963: ll. 131-5)

Since sunflowers, clematis, and yew trees are actually in the garden where the moment of magical memory and the possibility of rekindling this past love took place, we may read these questions as the speaker's wondering about its validity. In that reading, the kingfisher's wing that reflects the last rays of the setting sun is an affirmation that their human love, whether in memory or in the future, is significant, its light being still "At the still point of the turning world" (Eliot 1963: l. 137).

However, the lyric is more often seen in the framework of the ecstatic moment's being a revelation of the intersection of the timeless with time, so that the speaker first questions its validity, a reading that I ascribed to in my 1978 book, noting that, as Grover Smith had revealed, the sunflower is an archetypal symbol for the life-force and the white and blue clematis is a symbol for the Virgin Mary (Smith 1956: 265). The kingfisher, which, according to Gardner, Eliot imported into the scene from his 1935 visit to the Anglican community at Kelham (Gardner 1978: 38), is symbolic of immortality and a type of Christ (Smith 1956: 266), while the light symbolizes eternity – thus re-affirming the reality of spiritual illumination and union with God to which the speaker now turns. But now I wonder if the lyric is more complex, conveying two separate options between which the speaker is torn – human love or spiritual love. And it has occurred to me that the life-force symbolized by the sunflower might refer to that between human beings as well as to that denoting a supernatural power. A third option – reconciling the two rather than having to choose between them – is also possible at this moment in the poem.

The second passage of Section V, while often read as setting human and divine love in opposition, as I myself did in 1978, I am now compelled to read as contrasting desire (sexual passion) with a more encompassing vision of human love:

Desire itself is movement
... Love is itself unmoving, ...
Timeless and undesiring
Except in the aspect of time. (Eliot 1963: ll. 162, 164, 166-7)

I detect a yearning for this type of human love in the moving return to the vision of joy, light, and children in the rose-garden:

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– (Eliot 1963: ll. 170-4)

The last line, which has always puzzled me, perhaps suggests that that type of joy and happiness is still possible in the present with the repetition of "now." Or maybe it is only that the memory of the fulfilled life of what might have been is constant. In either case, the hauntingly sad final two lines comment on the lost, un-reclaimed, or wasted years of happiness represented by the vision: "Ridiculous the waste sad time / Stretching before and after" (Eliot 1963: ll. 175-6).

CONCLUSION

"Burnt Norton" is, as Schuchard has said, "a deeply personal conversation with Emily Hale; it reads as a love poem of great regret" and "a poem of painful human loss . . . in conflict with a greater call toward the possibility of beatitude through deprivation and solitude" (Schuchard 1999: 181). But, as I've been suggesting, it can also be read as presenting the possibility, the hope, of renewed love. Our knowledge of the subsequent poems and what actually happened later in the relationship of Eliot and Hale colors and greatly influences our reading of "Burnt Norton," but, if we can come or come back to it as a single poem written in 1935 that captures their 1934 visit to Burnt Norton, there is a tension, a suspense, within it about which way this experience will turn out as it balances between the attraction of human love and that of a demanding spiritual commitment. So, to return to the double meaning of my title, the future in "Burnt Norton" is as significant as the past and the present.⁵

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⁵ At the conclusion of the paper, Dr. Guy Hargrove, Tenor, sang Sir John Tavener's musical setting of the lyric of "Burnt Norton," which is avant-garde and difficult, but captures the essence of the lyric. The sound of the bell, as in the lyric, indicates the closing of the day, while the dissonance suggests the speaker's uncertainty and ambivalence. Tavener was only 19 years old when the famous British soprano Jennifer Vyvyan commissioned him in 1963 to compose songs to the lyrics of *Burnt Norton*, *The Dry Salvages*, and *Little Gidding*. She sang them at a concert in 1966, with Tavener himself at the piano.

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