

# JEFFERSON EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

## *Book Notes #205*

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By Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence  
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### A “Mini” Note: T.S. Eliot and the Question of Time



As I relayed in the July 17, 2025, installment of **Book Notes**, for the past several months, with two or three exceptions, the JES has been running “**Classic**” **Book Notes** as I completed a short book on leadership that we plan to release later this year. Although, when I wrote that, I was about to be at the Chautauqua Institution delivering a series of presentations on the future of the American Experiment, I thought it was time for some fresh material.

Noting that of all the **Book Notes**, those that generate the most animated reader response are not about history or contemporary events but poetry, one of my editors, Ben Speggen, suggested that I occasionally write a “mini” **Book Note** highlighting a poet I particularly admire.

Last week, I focused on two poems by Louise Glück (pronounced “Glick”); here, I want to turn our attention to T.S. Eliot’s “Four Quartets.”

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Do you believe in the future? If yes, then it must be a destination to which we are *now* (in the *present*) traveling. If so, then where is the future *now*? For that matter, what is *now* – what is the *present*? And how are either different from the *past*? Is it possible that *now*, the *present*, is merely a synapse in which the *past* and the *future* interact?

As Eliot says,

*from* Burnt Norton

Time present and time past  
Are both perhaps present in time future,  
And time future contained in time past. [1]

The *present* a synapse that fires so quickly that if one is not paying the closest, the most mindful attention, one misses it. Again, as Eliot says,

*from* Burnt Norton

Footfalls echo in the memory  
Down the passage which we did not take  
Towards the door we never opened  
Into the rose-garden. [2]

Not missing it — *opening the door* — is the entire point of mindfulness, of being **present-to-the-present**, the importance of which in poetry I have written about before. Helping us mere laypeople be **present-to-the-present** is, from my aesthetic perspective, the entire purpose of art. Others may disagree, which is fine, although the resultant confusion might not be fine for, again, as Eliot says quoting Heraclitus, “Though the logos (the word) is common to all, most people live as if they have a wisdom of their own possession.” [3] Eliot was not a post-modern who rejected “truth;” he sought “the Truth” within the many truths.

It is not possible in a “mini” note to say anything definitive about Eliot’s “Four Quartets,” a poetic sequence containing four long poems: “Burnt Norton,” “East Coker,” “The Dry Salvages,” and “Little Gidding” – each of which is a physical

location at which Eliot spent time. Burnt Norton, a manor house; East Coker, an English village at which Eliot's ashes are interred in a local chapel; the Dry Salvages, a rock formation in the sea off the coast of Cape Ann in Massachusetts; and Little Gidding, a small Anglican community in Cambridgeshire, England. Taken together, the four poems are usually understood to metaphorically trace Eliot's spiritual journey as he sought to understand his (and by extension humanity's) relationship to time, the universe, and the divine.

Note I said "usually understood..." for I take a slightly different tack. I think Eliot sought through his journeys, both meditative and actual, to understand himself, the life he lived, and that life's relationship to time, to the places and the people where and with whom it was lived, and ultimately to himself and his memories of those people, places, and times. I think Eliot understood Louise Glück's comment in "Nostos." In ancient Greek literature, "Nostos" is a common theme about an epic hero's return home. In *The Odyssey*, think of Odysseus' 20-year journey returning home by sea to Ithaca and the ever-patient Penelope. Eliot seeks to return to the beginning – the *past* -- in order to understand the *present*.

*from Nostos*

We look at the world once, in childhood.  
The rest is memory. [4]

And, understanding Glück, Eliot, like Vladimir Nabokov, who titled his autobiography *Speak, Memory* (the comma is important), sought to understand the *past* by understanding the *present* and what it portended for the *future*. For it is only by understanding the present (*now*) that one can understand the *past*. Eliot said it better,

*from Little Gidding*

We shall not cease from exploration  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time. [5]

In that moment, Eliot the devout Christian found transcendence in the Holy Ghost's cleansing fire when, as he writes in Little Gidding:

All manner of thing 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. [6]

Others have found in Eliot a more Peggy Lee – “Is that all there is...” – insight as did Gilgamesh, King of Uruk, hero of the oldest known human story: the Sumerian ***Epic of Gilgamesh***.

After the death of his closest confidant, Enkidu, in his grief Gilgamesh renounces everything as worthless. He embarks on a quest seeking to understand death and the meaning of life. He travels to the ends of the known world seeking the meaning of death and his own looming mortality. He asks the woman at the bar at the end of the world the meaning of life. She tells him this is it; this is all there is. He learns life is its own meaning. With that veil lifted, he sees the world for the first time; returning home, he sees Uruk for the first time:

*from Gilgamesh*

This is  
The wall of Uruk, which no city on earth can equal.  
See how its ramparts gleam like copper in the sun.  
Climb the stone staircase, more ancient than the mind can imagine... [7]  
Which vision is correct?

Eliot's or Gilgamesh's?

It's the oldest question in the world.

Maybe the answer is both.

In any event, the insight common to both is that we can only understand ourselves by understanding from whence we came . And we can only understand from whence we came and the journey we took by understanding what we became, for:

Time present and time past  
Are both perhaps present in time future,  
And time future contained in time past.



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## End Notes

1. Eliot, T.S., *"Burnt Norton,"* in **T.S. Eliot The Complete Poems and Plays 1909-1950** (New York: Harcourt Brace and Jovanovich, 1971), p. 117.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Glück, Louise, *"Nostos,"* in **Louise Glück Poems 1962-2012** (New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux, 2012), p. 342.
5. Eliot, T.S., *"Little Gidding,"* in **T.S. Eliot The Complete Poems and Plays 1909-1950** (New York: Harcourt Brace and Jovanovich, 1971), p. 145.
6. Ibid.
7. Mitchell, Stephen, tr. Gilgamesh (New York: The Free Press, 2004), p. 198.

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