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**T.S. ELIOT'S *FOUR
QUARTETS* AND
SALVADOR
ESPRIU'S *FINAL
DEL LABERINT:
WAYS TO
TRANSCEND***

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INTRODUCTION: A thick web of references

T. S. ELIOT (1888-1965) and SALVADOR ESPRIU (1913-1985) might be referred to as “cultural gurus.” They both produced solid complex literature which has traditionally been studied isolatedly, not considered as part of a literary movement or contrasted with their contemporaries’ works.

It is unlikely that they ever read –and so influenced- each other. ALBERT MANENT has listed a number of Catalan poets who eagerly read Eliot during the forties and fifties, and Espriu is not among them ¹. He also refers to Eliot’s meeting of his father MARIÀ MANENT as his closest contact with Catalan literature (MANENT 1989: 68).

Esprriu and Eliot are formally two very different poets. Eliot’s poetry became increasingly expositive and some of his verse lines have what we could call an “essay tone.” Espriu’s style is condensed and economic; he does not often explain ideas, but expresses them in symbolic terms.

However, they have one important thing in common: an intellectual approach to literature. Their readers are referred to different periods and cultures. In giving an outline of Eliot’s critical work, SAM ABRAMS names the components of this thick web of cultural references, which the poet termed “tradition:”

Eliot creu que no hi ha cap creador poètic que es pugui desvincular de la seua tradició i per tradició Eliot entenia la tradició pròpia. En aquest cas seria la tradició anglo-americana, ... després les dues cultures que fonamenten la cultura occidental, que eren la greco-llatina per un costat i la judeo-cristina per l’altre, i després la gran cultura universal... ²

A complex web of references is similarly woven by Espriu. One of his aims as a writer was studying various traditions, which he considered dispersed fragments of an original unity, as a way to reconstruct it (this is a cabalistic idea):

... la Llei havent estat donada a l’home per Déu (la *Torà*, els Llibres del *Pentateuc*), només l’estudi i interpretació de la Llei (i qui diu la Llei, en allò que fa referència a com Espriu pensa aquesta doctrina, diu de la Paraula, de tots els llibres de la Bíblia, i, més àmpliament, de tota la tradició, de tota la cultura), pot donar a l’home accés a la totalitat fragmentada, a la veritat feta trossos. ³

A deep knowledge of Jewish / Christian tradition was a basic shaping element of the literary productions of both authors. Eliot was brought up as a Unitarian, and Unitarianism having puritanical roots (ABRAMS 1995: 31, 32), we may assume that he regularly read the Bible from childhood. As far as Espriu is concerned, he once confessed the Scripture to be his only poetic influence:

Potser serà pretensió el que jo li vaig a dir, però pel que respecta a la poesia crec que no m’ha influït ningú d’una manera directa, si no és potser la Bíblia. ⁴

INFLUENCES: An angry God and a journey through darkness

In this paper, I will analyse how both Espriu and Eliot build bridges leading to transcendence, giving examples from two of their works: *Final del Laberint* (1955) and *Four Quartets* (1943). The word “transcendence” here is obviously connected to man’s desire to get closer to God -the whole point of mystic poetry- but also to spirituality in general, including man’s attempts to find out about life and death, about the meaning of existence.

The reason why I have stopped to consider the meaning of the word is Espriu’s religious outlook. He admitted his agnosticism –which in my opinion is the key to interpreting *Final del Laberint*- and he often thought about life after death, eventually developing an interesting –and of course tentative- idea:

... més que parlar de transcendència o d’eternitat, que és un concepte absolutament alié a l’home, jo voldria dir-ne perdurabilitat, perquè potser sí que d’alguna manera l’home perdura, fins a acabar de realitzar el que no ha realitzat en aquesta vida.⁵

But before I go into further analysis, I would like to refer to the influence of the *Book of Job* on the works studied. The two poets drew on the image of God as an angry, cruel, merciless ruler who can make defenceless men suffer:

I have sinned; what shall I do unto thee, O thou preserver of men? why hast thou set me as a mark against thee, so that I am a burden to myself? (Jb 7:20)

In “The Dry Salvages,” Eliot uses a beautiful metaphor: God as a river which can burst its banks all of a sudden if man defies nature by breaking its laws. The opening lines also evoke the shaping of America as a nation, as the river described is probably the Mississippi:

I do not know much about gods; but I think that the river
Is a strong brown God ³/₄sullen, untamed and intractable,

...

(TDS I, ll.1,2)⁶

Job cries to God for help, he asks Him to explain why He is inflicting such a great suffering on one of his most loyal servants, but God seems not to listen, he seems not to be there at all:

Behold, I cry out of wrong, but I am not heard: I cry aloud, but *there is* no judgement.”
(Jb 19:7)⁷

Bruce Luckermann, in his book *Job the Silent*, has stressed the originality of the *Book of Job*, as opposed to previous writings belonging to the same tradition. Its author was bold enough to raise the question of the ruthlessness of the God of the Old Testament, who accepts Satan’s challenge and puts Job to the test:

... the issue of the righteousness of (a) god. It is the question that is ... at the heart of the Poem of Job: If a god can allow or even instigate adverse action against a righteous and worshipful human being, can he be viewed as a moral deity?⁸

In *Final del Laberint*, the anxiety resulting from the lack of a solid faith can be linked to Job’s feeling abandoned after receiving no answer to his desperate call. The poet sets off on a mystic

journey, not knowing whether God will be awaiting him at the end of “the tunnel”, or if he will be confronted with sheer nothingness – what he calls “el no-res”:

El pobre amor
de la meva ànima
diu el nom del no-res
amb odi de paraules.
(XVIII, ll.14-17)⁸

Espriu's “No-res” stands for transcendence, which is linked to the “original unity” referred to in the introduction; the quotes which precede the poems hint at this idea.

There could also be a tinge of irony: nothingness, meaning the non-existence of God, as a possible destination for a mystic journey (the very last lines of the poem go: “*dic en el silenci / el nom del no-res*”, poem XXX, ll.20, 21)¹⁰.

The verse lines from poem XVIII which I have quoted above are so reminiscent of mystic poetry, that the reader cannot help reading them in the light of the different phases and components of a mystic cycle: love (“*el pobre amor*”) is the force which allows a mystic experience to progress; the “*no-res*” could be associated with the *via negativa* or *via purgativa*, that is, the process of preparing oneself for the union with God by getting rid of anything earthly (feelings, memories, desires); “*odi de paraules*” could refer to the mystics being overcome by an ineffable joy as they approach God.

This interpretation of Espriu's lines leads us to look at another important influence on both poets: **St John of the Cross**. PABLO ZAMBRANO has analysed in detail the traces of the Spanish mystic's poetry on the whole production of T.S.Eliot¹¹.

Final del Laberint is also rich in imagery which St John created or consolidated, though images sometimes appear mingled with others:

... les imatges del pastor i del caçador, en definitiva, no són alienes a la tradició bíblica ni al culte ni a la literatura cristianes: el cèrvol del poema VII acaba de concretar la imatge de la caça en aquestes tradicions, des del Psalm 41 fins a Juan de la Cruz.¹²

The imagery having to do with light and darkness is common to both poets, as well as the image of the stairs, which are the symbol of a mystic paradox: one must go down the stairs into darkness in order to ascend towards God. The image is used in both books from the very beginning: Eliot includes a quote from Heraclitus which could be translated as “The way up and the way down are one and the same”; Espriu's first poem includes the following lines: “*sóc endinsat en obscura presó, vaig davallar per esglaons de pedra*”¹³.

Parallelisms with St John's poetry are more obvious in *Four Quartets*; they sometimes extend to whole sections of the poems, as though the author wanted to make the influence as explicit as possible. However, Eliot's masterpiece does not cover the three long-established phases of a mystic experience (ZAMBRANO 1995: 233): there are allusions to the “emptying of the self” (*via purgativa*), to man glimpsing signs of God's presence (*via illuminativa*), but not to the final stage (*via unitiva*), in which souls are received by God. Unlike Eliot, Espriu completes the mystic cycle –which determines the structure of the book- with the assimilation into the “*No-res*”.

These are some of the ways in which the *Book of Job* and St John of the Cross' poetic work relate to the *Four Quartets* and *Final del Laberint*, but they are also interrelated. The "Dark Night of the Soul" is the last and hardest stage of a mystic experience. A passive attitude is required: one has to wait for God to finish purifying the soul. This is not an easy phase to go through, as St John himself admits:

Pero de lo que está doliente el alma aquí y lo que más siente es parecer lo claro que Dios la ha desechado y, aborreciéndola, arrojado en las tinieblas, que para ella es grave y lastimera pena creer que la ha dejado Dios.¹⁴

Zambrano adds that only clinging to faith can a soul complete the "Dark Night of the Soul" successfully:

...al mismo tiempo que Dios pone al alma en esta difícil tesitura, la dota de fe y entereza espiritual para que pueda hacer frente a esas circunstancias adversas.¹⁵

The anxiety inherent to the crucial moments preceding the mystic union is connected with Job feeling deserted until he can actually communicate with God¹⁶. However, throughout this time of troubles, Job keeps the faith:

But he knoweth the way that I take: *when* he hath tried me, I shall come forth as gold. (Jb 23:10)

COMMON GROUND: Ways to transcend

Not only the *Book of Job*, with the theme of the abandonment of man by a strict God, must have had an impact on Eliot. He was equally fascinated by *Ecclesiastes*:

The thing that hath been, it *is that* which shall be; and that which is done *is that* which shall be done: and *there is* no new *thing* under the sun. (Ec 1: 9)

The scepticism about humanity ever making any significant progresses, the insistence that man cannot break completely with the past by doing something which is radically new found their way into the *Quartets*. Eliot used these ideas to **put into question a linear vision of time**, probably influenced by contemporary philosophic theories. These are the opening lines of "Burnt Norton:"

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

(BN I, ll. 1-3)¹⁷

I have quoted above the first lines from "The Dry Salvages," in which an unpredictable powerful river is compared to God. The stanza following these lines could be interpreted in the light of the widespread metaphor "life as a river." If rivers (=lives) flow into the sea (=life after death), "the sea" in the poem is made of all the moments contained in lives. The metaphor suggests totality, which we

could associate with the “original unity” to which Espriu aspires to go back through literature¹⁸. The sea stands for eternity, as opposed to the way we experience time –as a continuum:

The river is within us, the sea is all about us;
The sea is the land's edge also, the granite
Into which it reaches, the beaches where it tosses
Its hints of earlier and other creation:

(...)

(TDS I, ll.15-18)¹⁹

However, the two co-ordinates (flowing time and eternity) can intersect (the contact of water and sand in the previous quote), making us feel closer to God. This is a basic idea in the *Quartets*:

... aprehender a partir de ahí ... el punto de intersección de lo intemporal y del tiempo; es decir, trascender las tres dimensiones temporales, el tiempo presente, pasado y futuro, en una única dimensión que ya no es temporal, es decir, intemporal.²⁰

Eliot insists on the importance of these moments (which would be considered by mysticism as belonging to the *via illuminativa*) by giving a further example: the mystery of the Incarnation. The timeless (God) and the temporal (a mortal woman, Mary, who is referred to as “*Figlia del tuo figlio*,”²¹ indicating that the logical chronological sequence is broken) meet at what the poet calls “the still point”²².

Another way to resist the overwhelming power of linear time is **memory**. Memory is not only a core element in the process of writing, but it can also be a great help to successfully go through the *via purgativa*, together with **meditation**²³. Memory and meditation are interrelated or even intertwined, though meditation is a conscious activity which requires determination.

Both Espriu and Eliot compared memory to an enclosed space, a garden. In section I of “*Burnt Norton*,” the poet enters the rose garden²⁴, as if in a dream –and so, out of time, and finds himself “surrounded” by memories:

Other echoes

Inhabit the garden. Shall we follow?

(BN I, ll.19, 20)²⁵

Eliot's garden has something in common with Espriu's:

L'espai del record, la vida viscuda o que podia haver estat viscuda és el món de la felicitat perduda, sobretot exemplificat pel jardí dels cinc arbres –on té lloc l'acció de *Primera història d'Esther*–: “Solitari, en la pau / del jardí dels cinc arbres, / he collit ja el meu temps, / la meva rosa blanca”²⁶

I have already hinted at the importance of memory, as one of the “raw materials” for literature. The following lines by Espriu, which could be read as an attempt to define poetry, can make this point clear:

Obria a cops de pic,
en el record de marbre,

un clot on ben colgar
les mortes esperances.
(XVI, ll. 5-8) ²⁷

But **writing** is not easy: it is hard to put ideas, memories, feelings down in words. The difficulties of writing can make us think of Job's struggle to explain the state of his mind to his friends and to God, or of St John of the Cross abruptly finishing a book because he cannot find the right words. It is interesting that both poets, using very different tones and types of language, should write about this, expressing a similar concern:

Trying to learn to use words, and every attempt
Is a wholly new start, and a different kind of failure
Because one has only learnt to get the better of words
For the thing one no longer has to say, or the way in which
One is no longer disposed to say it.
(EC V, ll. 178-182) ²⁸

Treballo durament
en àrides paraules.
S'agosta la cançó,
quan provo d'entonar-la.
(XVI, ll. 9-12) ²⁹

The urging necessity to communicate (with oneself, with a reader) can be paralleled to **praying**, which is a way to use language in order to communicate with God and, as a result, be closer to Him.

Poem XII in *Final del Laberint* contains a beautiful metaphor: man as a "praying tree." As prayer gets no immediate response from "el no-res," man's arms become branches:

En suplicar més llum
d'estrelles allunyades,
els braços molt alçats
esdevenien branques.
(XII, ll. 5-8) ³⁰

In "Little Gidding," praying is seen as a path leading to God, a meaningful act, not merely form, sound. It is an anticipation of the deep ineffable knowledge achieved after the mystic union which follows death. There is a reference to the Apostles mastering "other tongues" as a result of receiving the Holy Spirit and having purged their sins ³¹:

... And prayer is more
Than an order of words, the conscious occupation
Of the praying mind, or the sound of the voice praying.
And what the dead had no speech for, when living,
They can tell you, being dead: the communication
Of the dead is tongued with fire beyond the language of the living.
(LG I, ll. 48-53) ³²

The “**Dark Night of the Soul**,” as described by St John of the Cross in his prose commentaries to his poems, is the threshold of the “fusion” with God. This stage of the mystic experience has been described in the previous section, as well as its echos on the works studied:

I said to my soul, be still, and let the dark come upon you
Which shall be the darkness of God.

(EC III, ll.112, 113) ³³

The Dark Night has the effect of cleansing souls of anything earthly, anything which might hinder them on their way to God:

Sol, sense missatge,
deslliurat del pes
del temps, d'esperances,
dels morts,
dels records ...

(XXX, ll.15-19) ³⁴

The whole new awareness which is attributed by Eliot to those who truly have reached God is the consequence of **death**. That is why mystics are not afraid of death, rather the opposite:

La muerte es el último obstáculo que el alma deberá superar para alcanzar la unión ya eterna. ³⁵

However, this conception of death and the idea that the righteous and the sinners “go” to two different “places” when they die is characteristic of the New Testament. In the books of the Old Testament, including Job (Zuckerman 1991: 119), death means quite a different thing:

La mentalitat bíblica imaginava una regió subterrània on anaven a parar tots els difunts, independentment de la seua condició o de la seua conducta moral ... Aquest lloc rep habitualment el nom de “país dels morts” (en hebreu, *xeol*), i se situa a l’abisme ... Era considerat un lloc sense retorn, de solitud, d’absència de Déu i dels hòmens ... La desgràcia més gran en el país dels morts era trobar-se apartat de Déu i sense possibilitat de lloar-lo o de comunicar-s’hi... ³⁶

Espriu seems to use this idea in poem XII, which is a dialogue between the poet and the dead. The dead are deeply sad, because they are afraid of being forgotten forever. They ask the poet to remember them:

Recorda’t de nosaltres,
per sempre allunyats de la llum de la barca,
privats dels camins del mar i de les ales.

(XXII, ll. 1-3) ³⁷

Despite this reference, both *Final del Laberint* and *Four Quartets* are coherent with the vision of death of the New Testament. Death is actually the way out of the labyrinth for Espriu ³⁸ and life prevents the poet from having access to his longed for “no-res”. In “East Coker,” life is seen as an interim state, a disease, the world being a hospital ³⁹. The poem begins with the sentence “In my beginning is my end,” and finishes “In my end is my beginning.” The two sentences are

connected with the Genesis⁴⁰: man comes from God and will eventually come back to him. The two meanings of the word “end” (1.-final point / 2.-aim) are also relevant: in life, man’s priority should be walking towards God.

Similarly, the allusions to the Annunciation in “The Dry Salvages” bring life and death together. The Annunciation of Christ’s birth is at the same time a warning of his redeeming death.

TO SUM UP

It has been interesting to read Eliot and Espriu contrastively.

Their styles are very different, and it would be hard to do a similar exercise focusing on language. However, there are a few common traits, if we see their work from a thematic point of view, and certain images are used by both authors in comparable ways. The reason for this is probably their common knowledge of the Bible and mystic poetry, as well as their fascination for distant cultures.

Both poets are prone to spirituality (which can appear in their poems in a variety of forms), they are interested in the meaning of existence and in life after death, they share a sceptic attitude about the act of writing, which is expressed in strikingly similar terms.

All these ideas can be found in *Four Quartets* and *Final del Laberint*. Comparing other works by Espriu and Eliot would probably result in new stimulating insights.

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FOOTNOTES

- ¹ A. MANENT: "La recepció de l'obra de T.S. Eliot a Catalunya," *Homenatge a T.S. Eliot* (ed. À. SUSANNA). Acta / Quaderns (no. 3), Barcelona: 1989.
- ² S. ABRAMS: "Thomas S. Eliot i la impersonalitat artística," *Subjecte i Creativitat* (eds. J.BERMÚDEZ, M. FARRELL i L. MESEGUER). Universitat Jaume I (Col·lecció summa. Filologia, no. 4), Castelló: 1995, 22.
- ³ C. MIRALLES: "VIII.-Salvador Espriu," *Història de la literatura catalana. Part Moderna* (eds Riquer, COMAS I MOLAS, vol. X). Ariel, Barcelona: 1987, 431.
- ⁴ A. BATISTA: *Salvador Espriu. Itinerari personal*. Empúries, Barcelona: 1985, 38.
- ⁵ BATISTA 66
- ⁶ T.S. ELIOT: *The Complete Poems and Plays 1909-1950*. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Publishers, San Diego: 1980, 130.
- ⁷ See also Jb 23: 3-5, 8, 9; Jb 30: 20-22. For the edition of the Bible used, see final bibliography.
- ⁸ B. ZUCKERMAN: *Job the Silent. A Study in Historical Counterpoint*. Oxford University Press, New York: 1991, 99.
- ⁹ S. ESPRIU. *Obres completes. Anys d'aprenentatge I. Poesia 1* (ed. FRANCESC VALLVERDÚ). Edicions 62, Barcelona: 1985, 376.
- ¹⁰ ESPRIU 388
- ¹¹ P. ZAMBRANO: *La mística de la Noche Oscura. San Juan de la Cruz y T.S. Eliot*. Universidad, Huelva: 1996.
- ¹² MIRALLES 420
- ¹³ ESPRIU 359

- ¹⁴ ZAMBRANO includes this quote from St John (22)
- ¹⁵ ZAMBRANO 20
- ¹⁶ Of course it is connected with Christ's passion as well (ZAMBRANO 1995: 228): "And about the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice saying Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani? that is to say, My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? (Mt 27: 46, or alternatively Mk 15: 34)
- ¹⁷ ELIOT 117. This idea is elaborated in the rest of the section and in section II as well. "Burnt Norton" contains some very expository lines: "... the end precedes the beginning, / And the end and the beginning were always there / Before the beginning and after the end." (BN V, ll. 149-151)
- ¹⁸ In poem XIX (ESPRIU 377), Espriu lists a number of things- always together with "l'aigua" (water)- which he wants to write about, conveying an idea of totality too. He uses antithesis, chiasmus and syntactic parallelism (the pattern is "Diré de $\frac{3}{4}$ i de l'aigua"). At the end of the poem, the sea is linked to the eternal: "Dic el nom del no-res, / enllà del fons de l'aigua." (XIX, 19, 20)
- ¹⁹ ELIOT 130
- ²⁰ J. GIL DE BIEDMA: "Los cuatro cuartetos," *Homenatge a T. S. Eliot* (see note 1) 42.
- ²¹ ELIOT 135 (TDS IV, l. 181)
- ²² See ELIOT 119 (BN II, ll. 64-71).
- ²³ N. BAYM et al. *The Norton Anthology of American Literature* (vol 2). Norton, New York: 1996 (4th ed.): 1287 (footnote 1).
- ²⁴ The rose is a symbol of perfection, finality, spiritual and sexual love (CIRLOT 1997: 392). It has also been associated with the Virgin Mary (BAYM 1996: 1287, footnote 3), and is of course the symbol of England, which we could connect -against his idea of criticism- to Eliot becoming a British citizen and an Anglo-Catholic. Furthermore, Gil de Biedma (1989: 44) has stated that the structure of the four poems resembles "a spiral." In any case, the rose is an important image in the *Quartets*, which end with an allusion to it ("Little Gidding" V, ll. 260-263).
- ²⁵ ELIOT 117
- ²⁶ MIRALLES 441
- ²⁷ ESPRIU 374
- ²⁸ ELIOT 128. See also BN V, ll. 152-156.
- ²⁹ ESPRIU 374
- ³⁰ ESPRIU 370. The metaphor is carried on to poem XIV: falling leaves stand for words (i.e. prayer / poetry), the tree's roots are the poet's heart or his soul, a trunk would be a defenceless man, and so on.
- ³¹ Ac 2: 3,4. "And there appeared unto them cloven tongues like as of fire, and it sat upon each of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and began to speak other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance."
- ³² ELIOT 139
- ³³ ELIOT 127. The whole section (EC III) refers to the "Dark Night." See also section III of BN, especially the second stanza and TDS, ll. 89-91.
- ³⁴ ESPRIU 388. See also XXX, ll. 13-16.
- ³⁵ ZAMBRANO 25

³⁶ La Bíblia. Editorial Saó A.B.C., Castelló: 1996, 538 (“Vocabulari,” under “país dels morts”).

³⁷ ESPRIU 380

³⁸ See poem II, ll. 15-17 and poem IV, ll. 10-14.

³⁹ See EC IV.

⁴⁰ “In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shall thou return.” (Gn 3: 19)