

## LIDO BECOMES BURNT NORTON

To skip forward a little; 'The Wasteland' whose gestation owes much to our town, was first published in 1922. But an arguably equally great, though much less experimental work of Eliot's was 'The Four Quartets', a symphonic piece of writing finally completed in its entirety in 1942, but whose inception was begun in the late, hot summer of 1934. On a day in early September, a day of 'autumn heat,' Eliot, who by that time was living separately, clandestinely from Vivien, went walking deep in the heart of the Gloucestershire countryside in the company of a lady called Emily Hale.

Emily was also an American and had known Eliot as a teenager in Boston, as their families were closely associated; indeed, she would have been considered a much more suitable wife for him than the eccentric, nervous, colourful English woman he had married in 1915. Miss Hale taught English and Drama at a women's college in California, but at the time, she was staying here in England with her Aunt and Uncle. She and Eliot had renewed their close acquaintance during his recent lecture tour in the States, and both were keenly aware of the hidden depths and possibilities that existed between them. Since the publication of 'The Wasteland', Eliot had spent a good deal of time trying to heal his fractured psyche, searching for peace, indeed for mystical revelation, and also attempting to extricate himself from marriage to a woman he was quite simply unable to love or understand. A woman he found a wretched source of embarrassment.

Gloucestershire for those of you who know it, is a very beautiful County with rolling hills and houses of a deep honey coloured stone. The 'Burnt Norton' of the title refers to a park in the grounds of what had been large country house, which had burned down during the late Eighteenth Century and it was there that Eliot and Emily found themselves on the afternoon in question. One of the problems Eliot had grappled with in his life and his poetry was an inability to bridge the gap between transient perception and an awareness of the Eternal in human activities, how it was possible for the mind to literally stop time and to grasp the sense that certain instants are eternal and how consciousness can become aware and articulate those moments when they occur.

Because it was a hot afternoon, and weather is one aspect of human experience that is eternal, Eliot could convey the essence of that heat and because he and his companion had once been in love (and love can be eternal) when they were young, he captured the sense that the powerful feeling they had shared was still within reach, its missed opportunities still unexplored, possibly existing in another dimension. Because light and its shades have always and always will exist they conjure ghosts of the past - the couple see a drained pool, that when the big house was standing would have contained water; but because light encloses the light of all past moments, the sunlight becomes water and they are acutely aware of a very present past. And Art *does* outlive time which like the ancient Chinese vase he cites, like a note of music becomes still and immortal if there are eyes to see and

ears to listen, and because he is absorbed in his craft, in the act of writing, in the flow of creativity, time stands still for him *at that moment*.

The poem finishes on a jarring return to the present. The sun vanishes behind a cloud and he becomes conscious that he and Emily are middle aged unable to recapture youth again. But they have glimpsed a moment of eternity, his search for spiritual perfection has been enlarged; he and Emily have shared a moment and we have inherited that moment, the hot day, the pool of Sunlight, the poetry they created between them.

But this alchemy was only achieved at the expense of Vivien Eliot, for at the time they were walking out together she was suffering Eliot's desertion, a desertion that was to culminate in her committal to a psychiatric hospital three years later. Nor was there a happy outcome for poor Emily, as Eliot had led her to believe he would, if free, marry her. When Vivien died in 1947 and she might reasonably have expected a proposal, he travelled to America to explain he could never marry; he had become impotent, although Emily confided to a friend that she hoped his condition might be improved, her story might have a happy ending after all. But when ten years later, without warning, he did marry his young English secretary she herself collapsed and was admitted to hospital, suffering a severe nervous breakdown.

What a slippery, devious, impenetrable man Eliot was ; Pound's Possum, an enigma, possibly plugged into The Great Mind, a conduit for Jung's universal. Perhaps...

NOW LET'S TALK ABOUT VIVIEN.