

WORKING WITH ELIOT

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PONDERING “BURNT NORTON”

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Prefatory Remarks

What follows my thoughts about the first five verses of Eliot's **BURNT NORTON** from his **FOUR QUARTETS**. Clearly there is a philosophical meaning to them (and other parts of the poem) and my aim here is to determine if they make sense.

Eliot's poetry can at times be quite obscure to the general reader, and it is up to the reader as to what they take away after reading his work. There may be allusions to other events which the reader is not familiar with, but Eliot makes no apologies for this.

Along with my interpretation, I will include some analysis of his metrics which may or may not prove to be of some interest. The verses of interest are as follows:

BURNT NORTON

Verses 1-5

Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future,
And time future contained in time past.
If all time is eternally present
All time is unredeemable.

Past, Present and Future

As for interpreting **past**, **present** and **future**, I have had some previous thoughts regarding the matter. I believe that the most *fleeting* of the three is *present*, but this depends on what one is referring to as **the present**. For me, the *present* is the *immediate now*. As a result of this idea, we expect an infinite number of *presents*. As to what duration these *presents* are is pure conjecture, but every *present* moves swiftly into the realm of the *past*.

In a similar fashion, the many and varied *futures* stream into a series of *presents* and then into the *past*. However, it is the *past* which is the only entity that we can give any real meaning to in terms of ordering, knowing, or recalling in any detail.

The entire concept of *time* itself is mysterious because there is no *physical-ness* about it. We can say that we can measure time, but this is only for the purpose of organization and creating what we call a **history**. Our *history* can never be rewritten, what is in our *past* remains in the *past*.

We cannot see our *future* until it becomes our *present*, in which case we may be tempted to say that we never really *see* our future. As our future becomes our present, we obtain the briefest glimpse of it, infinitesimal in duration before it becomes the *past* and so another element of our *history*.

A Philosophical Statement?

The first five verses of **BURNT NORTON** come across as being more of a philosophical statement to stimulate the thoughts and consciousness of the reader. Although there is good reason for this type of beginning, the very nature of the verses may leave the reader a little perplexed, or their full meaning may not be taken in.

- 1 Time present and time past
- 2 Are both perhaps present in time future,

The first two verses make sense in that *past* and *present* existed at some point in time in the individual's *future*. It is not until *future* makes itself known to us as the *present* that we identify it as being different to what we had previously (which is now in our past).

- 3 And time future contained in time past.

The third verse too can make sense only by acknowledging what *was* future is *now* in the past. With this, the descriptor of *past* takes precedence over the use of the word *future* because it is no longer something that we have not experienced. Whatever lays in our future has never been experienced before. There may be some similarities, but the events, emotions and so forth can never be repeated in the same manner. Their effect is different because we **age**. Even if somehow there existed two events the same, we would experience them in a different manner.

Hence, we can say that the first three verses are sound in how we may feasibly interpret them, and the only point of ambiguity appears to exist in verse three, but this is easily overcome by careful thought and the consideration of future now being in the past.

- 4 If all time is eternally present
- 5 All time is unredeemable.

Verses 4 and 5 allude to something else and create a certain ambiguity with the use of the word *present*. Now is the meaning to be taken as *all time* is **always** present, which it may well be, or as *all time* is *present*? Here we have a different interpretation of the word *present*. Is it *here and now*, or does it simply mean all time is present, as in **always** here?

The use of *eternally* puts a different spin on this, but still it can be taken one of the two ways. *If* (in verse four), then all time is unredeemable, can set up a vastly different meaning, and as a result, a more complex meaning is attached to these two verses.

What is it about the word *unredeemable*? In some ways it comes as having a deeply religious connotation. Can we take it back or are we atoning for something? Introducing such a concept may seem very strange indeed, but there may be reasons. (I have only considered the first five verses and nothing else. As we are aware, thoughts or verses should never be considered in isolation.)

A religious meaning would not be unusual coming from Eliot, but whether it is implied here is another question altogether. It is possible that too much has been read into the word's (present) placement.

Does Eliot mean some possibility of atonement for past or future sins, or to be able to replay the past in a better way, that is, for a better outcome. I am doubting this last interpretation.

Irrespective of the interpretation, we are unable to replay the past, delay the present or predict the future. Unless you go for Nietzsche's Eternal Recurrence. Here whatever has occurred will occur again assuming there is a fixed amount of energy in our Universe. There can only be so many combinations and then it must be replayed. But! Does it restart at the beginning, or can it start at any random place in **life**? How exceedingly odd. The so-called *glitch in the matrix*. Although the thought appears to continue with verse six onwards, it is appropriate to halt after verse five. There appears a common thread of memory running through the first section.

Other Questions

An interesting question can arise from these considerations. This is: How am I connected to my past? Others who have knowledge of me can connect me to my past. It must be a memory or a record (a history). Noteworthy events are chronicled in documents, photographs, recordings, or memory (which may prove unreliable). But is there a direct connection? I cannot simply pull myself from the past, no matter how brief an instant has passed since *now*.

How am I connected? To physically disconnect would mean death and then there is no personal connection with the past, but others can still connect me with themselves using their record of my past.

Does time exist, or do we make it exist? Anything purely in time cannot exist in any physical-ness. Considering verses four and five further: What does it mean for something to be eternally present? There is clearly some religious flavor in this verse (and followed up by the next). This almost sounds or reads as omnipresent.

If we consider the statement otherwise: If all time is *not* eternally present. Does this imply: All time is redeemable? Notice the mention of *all time*, not just *time*. The significance is that past, present, and future are *always* present, which I suppose are in a philosophical sense. This would certainly fit with all time being unredeemable. We cannot select what we want.

If all time is *not* eternally present, at some point the past *vanishes* from *all* memories, which means that it would be possible to replay or visit the same event in a unique way and alter the outcome to something more to our liking. We know this is impossible. Hence, we conclude that Eliot's verses four and five are logical and do make sense in the manner Eliot has relayed them to us.

Metrical Analysis

Eliot would likely be insulted with the analysis or meter, but it may serve some purpose to show his technique which is not strictly formal, nor is it vers libre.

Verse 1

Time present and time past

As one would expect, there are several ways in which these verses can be read. Regardless of the way, the scansion should still demonstrate the appropriate meter.

Reading this verse, there is clearly a pause after present, the medial caesura. We may be tempted to scan the verse as:

Time prēsēnt and tīme pāst

This would give the combination of an amphibrach and anapest. Albeit that this combination is compatible with the syllabic nature, it is not the case. The medial caesura after **present** renders the second syllable of **present** as hypermetrical.

Time prēs(ent and tīme pāst

Thus, what we are presented with is an iamb and anapest creating a far better combination since hypermetrical syllables are not counted in the scansion.

If we were to emphasize **time** at either position, it would give a very awkward beginning, and the remainder of the verse would not be able to recover the rhythm. We do notice that the verse takes on a more formal construction. Typical Eliot.

Verse 2

And both perhaps present in time future

The initial scansion produced:

Are bōth pēr | hāps prēsēnt | in tīme fū | tūre (x)

What we have here is a wonderful combination of three amphibrachs because the last syllable of future is hypermetrical. We may be tempted to say it is feminine since the space of the hypermetrical syllable is taken up with the continuation into the next verse.

Are bōth pēr | hāps prēsēnt | in tīme fū(ture

Verse 3

And time future contained in time past

Scansion once again shows the hypermetrical syllable of **future** prior to the medial caesura.

And tīme fū(ture cōntained in | tīme pāst

Verse 4

If all time is eternally present

Here we find that **is** is hypermetrical since we can sense a minor medial caesura. The pause is not possibly the greatest, but it is still clear.

| ĭf āll tĭme (is | ětĕrnāl | lŷ prĕsĕnt

We may interpret this as a continuation of amphibrachs giving a welcome rhythm to the verse.

Verse 5

| All time is unredeemable

This final verse scans as:

| Āll ĭime | ĭs ūnrĕ | dĕemă(ble

The final syllable being hypermetrical.

Final Comments about Scansion

As is typical with Eliot's verse, we find that at first it may appear to be vers libre, but upon closer examination we find otherwise. He is very formal with his verses and makes some minor changes so that it does not appear to be the norm, as in iambic pentameter. He learnt this from Pound.

One may scan verses very differently, but the fact is that the scansion must make sense. This can be a challenging task, but with care the scansion mirrors the way we would speak the verses. It must be the case!