

# ***THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES & SOCIAL STUDIES***

## **Time through Time Discourse: A Close Reading of T. S. Eliot's and Anna Akhmatova's Latter Poetry**

**Anna Kurasova**

Ph.D. Student, University of Salamanca, Spain

### **Abstract:**

*Thomas Stearns Eliot and Anna Akhmatova are considered to be among the most influential representatives of Modernism, Eliot - in Anglo-American Literature, and Akhmatova – in Russian. Modernism emerged in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and intended to point out the failure of modern people to maintain a culture based on spiritual values. This idea was central to the works of Eliot and Akhmatova, especially for their latter poetry. Two last major poems of these authors were to become Four Quartets and Poem without a Hero. This paper aims to present Eliot's and Akhmatova's perception of time and modernity, by applying the framework of discourse analysis to their poems, Four Quartets and Poem without a Hero. Both poems were written during World War II and were influenced by it. Faced with tragedy, Eliot and Akhmatova turned to reflecting on notions of time and history. Despite the difference in the poets' experiences, mentality, and background, Four Quartets and Poem without a Hero seem to bear a resemblance in many respects, and to express the common for Akhmatova and Eliot perception of time. A close reading of the poems gives us a chance to see how similar they are in terms of conceptual perspective and stylistics. The poets perceived time as the whole unit, where everything is closely interconnected. Time is a complex continuum, in which every element has its place and persistently interacts with all the other elements; thus, the past is present in our today's lives and shapes our destiny. This perception of time as of the indivisible whole implies that history also is not a sequence of events in the past, that has nothing to do with the present, but rather an active creator of every moment of our present lives. For Eliot and Akhmatova, the past, the present and the future are the one; hence, everything that happened in the past affects our present. Nevertheless, they consider the past unredeemable, as it cannot be erased and there is no way back. Establishing the immutable connection between the past, the present and the future, the poets remind their readers of the notions of sin, guilt and responsibility. Both Eliot and Akhmatova claim that the present world bears the weight of everything that all the previous generations of people have ever done. Their usage of language, on the contrary, seems to be rather different, which allows seeing how within common for the authors perspective on time and history, Eliot and Akhmatova manage to emphasize what appears more significant to each of them. Detailed analysis of their lexeme choice provides evidence that Eliot's major preoccupation were dimensions of the past and 'what might have been', whereas for Akhmatova the past is closely related to the feeling of guilt and regret so that the present becomes the centre of her attention.*

**Keywords:** *Modernism, Comparative Literature, Discourse Analysis*

### **1. Introduction**

Communication is an essential function of language. While oral communication might address to the usage of non-verbal tools, such as gestures, facial expressions, environment, written one has no other way of transmitting information but words. This makes writers be especially attentive to the choice of lexemes they create their works with. Yet the apparatus available for poets is even more reduced. One might claim that it is poets' prerogative to work on the edges of language, experimenting with it in an attempt to bring into play lexical meaning of words as well as the words themselves, their phonetic and visual portraits.

According to R. Carter, one of the most important functions of discourse analysis is “to help us distinguish what is said from what is done, i.e. from the actions performed with the words” (62). Thereby, the mentioned approach appears to be capable of providing a new perspective on literary discourse, which may bring us closer to the understanding of author's concepts and revelation of their techniques. Despite the fact that linguistic approach to literature can barely be conceived as any sort of innovation, there is a wide range of literary works that only are to become the centre of scholars' attention. One of such missing pieces would be Modernist poetry.

Like any other artistic movement, Modernism intended to answer the essential questions of existence. Modernism as a movement emerged in the XX century, the century that brought technological progress and ethical regress. Due to the unprecedented changes in different spheres of people's living, the key concepts of existence, such as history and time, had to be redefined. Modernism suggested a new perception of time and history. For Modernists, primarily Ezra Pound and Thomas Stearns Eliot, “historical understanding became a way of uncovering the past realities that live in the present” (Patea 2006: 55)

Therefore, the aim of the present paper is, by applying the methodology of discourse analysis, to define T.S. Eliot's and Anna Akhmatova's concept of time, reflected in their literary discourse. In order to do so two pieces of their work have been chosen: "Burnt Norton" from *Four Quartets* by T.S. Eliot and "Year 1913" from A. Akhmatova's *Poem without a Hero*. The reason for such choice is that in spite of a significant difference in the poets' biographies, backgrounds, experiences, their poems seem to present a quite striking resemblance in terms of both their stylistics and their concepts. The analysed pieces belong to the latter poetry of Eliot and Akhmatova and a post-war period, and also are the first parts of their last major poems, *Four Quartets* and *Poem without a Hero*. In these works, the poets intend to define spiritual values, that have been forgotten by their generation; moreover, the authors put time at the centre of their aesthetics. It seems to be of a particular interest to focus on the poets' usage of verb tenses, for this is the most direct tool to refer to a period of time.

### 1.1. Part I. Time in *Four Quartets* and *Poem without a Hero*

In words of D. Nutan, "discourse brings together language, the individuals producing the language, and the context within which the language is used" (6). Consequently, it might be of use first to introduce the context of the poems by Eliot and Akhmatova. The poets must have been the most emblematic representatives of Modernism for American and Russian literature respectively. Modernism was to become the last cultural current which prospered both in the West and in Russia before the October Revolution. In 1917, Russian history changed its course radically, and almost all of the connections between Western and Russian writers, poets, thinkers, artists were broken.

Anna Akhmatova was born in 1889, in Odessa and spent all her life in Russia, which became part of the Soviet Union when the poetess was 30 years old. Together with Osip Mandelstam and Nikolai Gumilev, Akhmatova founded a movement called Acmeism. Even though it lasted only three years (1912-1914), Acmeism had a great impact on the poetical process of Russia in general and on Akhmatova's creative career. It seemed to emerge as a reaction against Symbolism, which was keen on the irrational and intended to transfer truth indirectly, through the use of symbols. However, contradictory to principles of Symbolism, Acmeists rejected mystical images and idealizations, and instead they decided to return to the clarity of words and images as well as placing humanity at the centre of the poet's attention. After the October Revolution in 1917, Akhmatova's life changed drastically. Her first husband and the father of her son, Nikolai Gumilev, was arrested and shot by the Bolsheviks in 1921. She had an opportunity to leave the country, but it was not an option for Akhmatova, who felt deeply that she belonged to Russia. She stayed to endure Stalin's dictatorship, Soviet censorship, the loss of her friends and family, and the ordeal of World War II.

Thomas Stearns Eliot was born in the St. Louis, Missouri, in 1888, but eventually settled in England. He got a degree in philosophy at Harvard University, then spent a year (1910-1911) in Paris only to come back to Harvard in order to study Indian philosophy and Sanskrit. In 1914 Eliot moved to Europe, first to Germany and afterwards to England. In 1922 he published his most famous poem, *The Waste Land*, that was meant to become the most influential piece of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in English language. Eliot also left a lot of critical articles and essays, many of them were dedicated to the forgotten Metaphysical poets. He was acknowledged as an outstanding poet and critic during his lifetime and he was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1948.

*Four Quartets* were published over six years. "Burnt Norton", the first part of it, was published in a collection of Eliot's poems in 1936, and, as a complete set, the poem was first published in 1943 in New York. *Poem without a Hero* is also the fruit of years of work. All in all, Akhmatova wrote the poem over a period of 20 years and did not manage to publish it herself.

Therefore, *Poem without a Hero* was, as well as *Four Quartets*, written under the impressions and experiences of World War II. The works reflect how the war affected their vision of the world and contemporary age. Akhmatova and Eliot believed that human beings cannot reach the ultimate truth, for "human kind / Cannot bear very much reality (*Four Quartets*, BN: I 44-45). People are incapable of grasping the full meaning of time and its grandiosity. Eliot believes that we can capture the meaning of time and life in short moments of illumination, when we see everything perfectly clear. However, Akhmatova is not so optimistic in this sense, because the only way to live that she sees is to face whatever time brings with it, for the poet seems to feel uncertain about people's ability to grasp the time's purport.

Still, neither of the writers thought that the flow of time is capricious. It is unknown to us because we are not able to grasp its meaning, yet there is nothing accidental in the world and everything has a reason. Time (and consequently, history) is a highly-organized system, where every element has its place. Even though both poems deal with the dimension of "what might have happened", it seems that for Akhmatova this subject is more relevant, than it is for Eliot, as she is the one that mentions the theme of guilt in Part One of the *Poem* (which is also the longest part): "Whose turn is it now to blench with / Fear, back away, surrender, / Ask mercy for an ancient sin?.. (*Poem without a Hero*, 106)<sup>1</sup>. She blames her contemporaries and herself for having missed the opportunity to shape a different course of history. But for Eliot and Akhmatova the past is unalterable, because "If all time is eternally present / All time is unredeemable" (*Four Quartets*, BN: I 4-5)<sup>2</sup>, and therefore everything that is left for us is acceptance and humility.

Akhmatova and Eliot were disturbed by modern life and people. Eliot reproaches our tendency to forget the past and even deny it. For him, there can be no present or future without the past, as it is present in every moment of our lives. For Akhmatova modernity is a place of suffering and misery too, yet, she is not broken; she believes, the same as Eliot, that time and history can be invested with meaning. So, whatever happens now, in this earthly life, as Eliot says, "everything points to one end". And, death is not perceived as

1 All the quotations of Akhmatova's poems are taken from Akhmatova, A. *Selected Poems*. London: Penguin Classics, 2006.

2 All the quotations of Eliot's poems here and further are from the *Four Quartets*, T.S. Eliot *Collected Poems 1909-1962*. The abbreviations "BN", "EC", "DS" and "LG" stay for "Burnt Norton", "East Coker", "Dry Salvages" and "Little Gidding" relatively. Roman numerals stay for movements' numbers, and Arabic figures – for line numbers.

the annihilation, but rather it is another step forward, towards eternity: “And all shall be well... / And the fire and the rose are one” (*Four Quartets*, LG: V 42-43).

Therefore, living in a world overwhelmed by materialism, Eliot and Akhmatova put time and response to the challenge of history at the centre of their aesthetic and ethical systems. Witnesses of World War II, they created two major poems, that were to become the last in their careers – *Four Quartets* and *Poem without a Hero*. Despite the difference in their experiences, mentality, and background, these works seem to present an evident resemblance. Both poets perceive time as the whole unit, where everything is connected to everything and cannot be taken out of the context of the system to which it belongs. They claim that history is not a closed sequence of events in the past that has no relation to the present, but rather it is seen as an active force that has an impact on every moment of our present lives and affects our future. The past, the present, and the future are one; yet there is no way back, which means that our actions in the past cannot be corrected or erased. By means of this connection, the poets remind their readers of the notion of sin, guilt and responsibility.

### 1.2. Part II. Time Discourse in T.S. Eliot's “Burnt Norton” and A. Akhmatova's “Year 1913”

To begin with, it seems to be of significance to keep in mind that the poets in question belong to different nationalities, moreover, to different linguistic and ethnic groups, as Eliot was from the USA and his mother tongue was English, while Akhmatova was born and lived all her life in Russia. According to A. Easthope, a poem is “like a machine – it works through its meaning, and meaning inheres in words, since language is in public ownership... an utterance constructed according to and within the system of a language” (6-7). Nevertheless, so as to be able to perform a comparison between these two poets, in the present study I am referring to both a translation of Akhmatova's poem and its original in Russian, for dealing with tenses, one should take into account that English and Russian have different linguistic systems. There are only three tenses in Russian (one for each the past, the present and the future), whereas English offers nine (three for each reference in time).

In order to approach to the concept of time, created by the poets not so much with lexemes but through words, I would suggest focusing on the first parts of *Four Quartets* and *Poem without a Hero*, which are “Burnt Norton” and “Year 1913” respectively. As a close detailed analysis of the whole texts would require quite more substantial word count, it might be reasonable to stay within the limits of the first parts of the poems. In doing so, I should be able to get closer to the very first impression of the notion of time, offered by Eliot and Akhmatova to their readers.

“Burnt Norton” from *Four Quartets* by Eliot opens with three lines that foreshadow the central theme of the whole poem:

- Time present and time past
- Are both perhaps present in time future
- And time future contained in time past. (BN: I 1-3)

As it is evidence from his opening lines, Eliot states the main thesis that he will develop further in all *Four Quartets*. For him, time is an inseparable continuum, in which one becomes another so that there is no past or future; both of them are always present in this very moment of our existence. The opening lines are clear and confident, as a manifesto itself, claiming that all the rest of the poem will confirm this truth and reassure the readers of its certainty. From the very beginning, Eliot addresses the Present Simple, which endows the sense of an indisputable argument, a timeless verity.

This sense only deepens throughout the poem, as the Present Simple appears to be the most common tense for “Burnt Norton”. Overall, there are 50 examples of usage of the tense, in contrast to 17 cases of the Past Simple, 5 - of the Present Perfect and 5 - of the Future Simple. It is worth mentioning that the Present Perfect may also be considered a part of a frame of the present, because even though it is to describe some event in the past, it is closely connected to the present and inseparable from it.

As one can see, the present is dominant for Eliot's poem, not only in terms of the topic that the poet has chosen; it is also reflected in the massive in comparison to other tenses usage of present tenses, the Present Simple and the Present Perfect. In doing so, the narrator evokes a range of meanings and sensations. Firstly, the Present Simple seems to be the most appealing tense, as it establishes an automatic reference to presents lives of each and every one of use. Whatever the narrator says is perceived as an eternal truth, that is always relevant to our being. Therefore, the Present Simple excludes any discussion of the subject and suggests to accept what is said without any further doubting. Such a manoeuvre puts the narrator in a position of the unique source of wisdom, consolidating an authority to lecture readers about what is wrong and what is right. Another consequence of “utter” relevance of the Present Simple to our day-to-day existence is that reading Eliot's lines, one should find themselves strongly attached to the subject. Every statement becomes, on the one hand, a timeless truth and, on the other hand, a truth that is essential for your particular life. In other words, it brings a sense of personal attachment to what the narrator is relating to his readers. Furthermore, being linked with present simple verbs, every word of Eliot turns into such a narration that people are to listen and lend an attentive ear to, for his word reveals the truth that has been ignored, but yet is vital to acquire in order to change the course of our lives for the better. This articulation appears to highlight the motif of all the Quartets: “All time is present” (BN I 4).

Another significant point in relation to the tenses used in “Burnt Norton” is that Eliot avoids any complex tenses (the only exception might be the Present Perfect, which almost does not appear). As well as the Present Simple there are cases of the Past Simple and the Future Simple. Curiously enough, even for a description of a moment of enlightenment, the poet prefers the Past Simple to the Past Progressive, which is commonly used to picture an event in the past. Nevertheless, in doing so, the poet achieves such an effect that his narration does not ever stop, even in order to depict a moment of revelation; the narration only flows and flows further. Besides there seems to be a sort of succession of the narrative, from “simple” past actions we move to “simple” present ones, that will result in

“simple” future acts. This articulation appears to highlight the motif of all the *Quartets*: “All time is present” (BN I 4), as the chosen tenses form part of the same time framework (simple tenses) and present that concept of unity of all the time, the past, the present and the future, that Eliot aims to transmit throughout the poem.

Akhmatova's “Year 1913”, as well as the whole *Poem without a Hero*, intends to bring a sense of a play into the poem, for there are quite a few narrator's remarks, describing a location where a scene takes place. Naturally, Present Tense is used in these sorts of director's notes. However, this fact should be considered as well, because it results in a dominance of present tense, which is also apparent in lines of the poem themselves. It should also be clarified that speaking of “Year 1913” I am going to address the original in Russian, as it only logical to do so in order to interpret author's discourse.

All in all, there might be found 138 examples of present tense, 77 - of past and 25 - of future. There is no difficulty to see that a reader faces more or less the same distribution of time reference, as in Eliot's “Burnt Norton”. Present tense is the most commonly used throughout “Year 1913”, followed by references to the past and only then – to the future. By these means, Akhmatova converts the topic she addresses to in a more relevant issue to each of her readers than if she had preferred to link her narration in the past or in the future. A reader finds him- or herself in a centre of the mascaeraed, described by the narrator, as if he or she were a part of the event, expanding in front of Akhmatova's audience. Nevertheless, I would not say that readers perceive the same image of an all-knowing narrator behind the lines, as Akhmatova's statements might be considered of a more personal kind. While Eliot's narration is quite abstract, there are few references to living human beings, the poetess tells us her own story, in which one might be capable of seeing something that is true not only for the narrator but also for every person, reading the poem.

According to the numbers, given above, past tense is also actively used by the poet. In contrast to Eliot, whose reference to the past averages the third part of “Burnt Norton”, Akhmatova's “Year 1913” is more explicit in terms of bringing the past into the narration. The majority of its examples appear in the third part of the poem, which the poet herself defines as follows:

Lyrical interlude: last recollection in Tsarskoye Selo (116)

The same as Eliot, Akhmatova uses extensively past tense, picturing a moment belonging to the past, yet having an impact on her present, in contrast to another common usage of past tenses, which would be to tell a story happened some time ago. Yet the poets give preference to such a usage of past tense so that to depict a moment of revelation for them, diminishing a possibility to use it for simply narrating past events, and emphasizing a role of the past as a container of our memory, for:

... in the past, the future is maturing (107).

Both poets seem to avoid talking about future. The reason for this might be that Akhmatova and Eliot shared a pessimistic view on modern people, who tend to deny their past, which is inadmissible for the poets. For them, all the time is one, and it is not only impossible to separate or to “cut out” any part of it, but also is wrong, as denying one element of the time, we lapse into denial of all the other parts of it as well.

## 2. Conclusions

In this paper, I have attempted to explore issues related to the meaning expressed not only in words but also in language usage. “When we speak, or write we always take a particular perspective on what the “world” is like” (Gee 2). Thereby, even though we always find ourselves in the limits of language, we as users of it are able to choose between different options, suggested by the language, to transmit what is needed or wanted. That leads to the significance of word choice in any communicative situation. However, it appears to be especially important, when one deals with written discourse, and even more, when it is a poetic one at the centre of scholars' attention, for poets are supposed to strengthen language potential within their texts in order to create a piece of poetry.

The study has addressed two texts, belonging to Modernist literature - “Burnt Norton” by T.S. Eliot and “Year 1913” by A. Akhmatova. Modernism emerged in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and intended to point out the failure of modern people to maintain a culture based on spiritual values. This idea was central to the creative works of two outstanding representatives of Modernism in Anglo-American and Russian Literature – T. S. Eliot and A. Akhmatova. Living in a world overwhelmed materialism, Eliot and Akhmatova put the past and the present and response to the challenge of history in the centre of their aesthetic and ethical systems. Both poets perceive time as the whole unit, where everything is connected to everything and cannot be taken out of the context of the system to which it belongs. Through this connection, the poets remind their readers of the notion of sin, guilt and responsibility.

So, the two major poems of the latter period of Akhmatova's and Eliot's writing are concerned with history and time as the main point of perspective on the world and humanity. Despite the fact that those poems are, of course, not identical, the resemblance between them is evident and is expressed both in the way the poets approach the issues of time in their works, as well as in the images and language tools they use throughout the poems.

A closer reading of “Burnt Norton” and “Year 1913” that the stated ideas, transmitted throughout the poems, are also manifested in the usage of tenses. Claiming that the past, the present, and the future are one, Eliot and Akhmatova accent the significance of the present by preferring present tenses to any other. Their use of past tense appears to emphasise the poets' perception of it as a recollection, or a memory that should never be left aside, instead of addressing to the past as if it were a story happened some time ago, but not that relevant to the present. Curiously, both poets avoid referring to the future, for the examples of future tenses are few. It might be so because Eliot and Akhmatova have doubts about people's future unless they learn to appreciate and to draw lessons from their past.

Thereby, the present paper provides evidence of that “grammatical concepts can be used as a macro artistic resource to construct alternative ways of expression” (Alonso, Hernandez 4). In the case of the discussed texts, those grammatical concepts are tenses, used by Eliot and Akhmatova in their poems, through which the poets highlight the ideas, reflected in their rhymes.

### 3. References

- i. Akhmatova, A. (2006). *Selected Poems*. London: Penguin Classics.
- ii. Alonso, P., & Hernandez, R. (2012). *Constructing Meaning through Creative Categorical Extension in Poetic Discourse*. *Codis Working Papers*, 1, 1-22.
- iii. Anderson, N. (2004). *Anna Akhmatova. The Word That Causes Death's Defeat. Poems of Memory*. Yale: Yale University Press.
- iv. Booty, J.E. (1983). *Meditating on Four Quartets*. Cambridge: Cowley Publications.
- v. Bodelsen, C.A. (1966). *T.S. Eliot's Four Quartets*. Copenhagen: Copenhagen University Publications Fund.
- vi. Carter, R. (1989). *Poetry and Conversation: An essay in Discourse Analysis*. In R. Carter, & P. Simpson (Ed.), *Language, Discourse and Literature. An Introductory Reader in Discourse Stylistics* (pp. 60-71). London, 1989.
- vii. Eliot, T.S. (1963). *Collected Poems, 1909-1962*. New York: Faber&Faber.
- viii. — (1967). *The Sacred Wood. Essays on Poetry and Criticism*. London: Methuen & Co LTD.
- ix. Easthope, A. (1990). *Poetry Discourse*. London: Routledge.
- x. Gee, J.P. (1999). *An Introduction to Discourse Analysis. Theory and Method*. London: Routledge.
- xi. Harrington, A. (2006). *The Poetry of Anna Akhmatova: Living in Different Mirrors*. London: Anthem Press.
- xii. Nutan, D. (1993). *Introducing Discourse Analysis*. London: Penguin Books.
- xiii. Patea, V. (2004). *Pound and Eliot's Sense of History and Tradition as Re-Lived Experience*. Web. URL: <http://retro.seals.ch/digbib/view?pid=spe-001:2006:18::259>. 23 June 2014.