

# Time and the Present in Eliot and Ecclesiastes

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*Time, like an ever rolling stream, bears all its sons away.  
They fly, forgotten, as a dream flies at the opening day.<sup>1</sup>*

I have long had an uneasy fascination with time. As a young boy I would lie on my bed and weep as Zero Mostel sang "Sunrise, Sunset" on the phonograph. I knew that one day time would sweep me, too, out of my childhood home and into some unknown future. I watched it turn the woods behind our house into boring developments. I saw its work in the short lifetimes of beloved pets. Yet my favorite reading at that time was science fiction, always set in the distant future, and I longed to live in that future. I was fascinated by the depiction of time in Kurt Vonnegut's Slaughterhouse Five, and tried to imagine what the world would look like if we could move freely in time as we do in space.

Later, I was even more intrigued to contemplate that space and time are inseparably related, perhaps aspects of the same thing: that we live not in space and time but in this context called spacetime. Yet only the dimension called time has that relentless directional arrow; we can move freely in space, but not in time. With regard to time, we are like flies in amber, or like flotsam carried along by a river without banks.

Over the years, I continued to be drawn to this subject, pondering the relationship between entropy and the arrow of time, learning from Hawking of the spacetime singularity which occurs as one works "backwards" to the first moment of the "Big Bang". I puzzled over the implication of time's arrow for understanding causality, origins, and freedom of the will. Finally, how could one bring all these ideas to bear on the concept of an eternal, omniscient creator-God?

All this cogitation could not affect the experience of time itself, of course. I have continued to find myself grieving over the losses entailed by time's passage: the babies and busy children now gone, the lost laughter of my young wife, dreams abandoned piecemeal along the way, the exuberant strength of youth. How can one bear this loss? How can we understand? How can we live in time without being continually depressed?

I have for many years returned to two works for solace and a way of understanding: T. S. Eliot's "Four Quartets" and the Book of Ecclesiastes. Both concern themselves deeply with the enigmas and frustrations of temporal life. They afford solace by affirming that our discomfort with time is normal and ultimately unavoidable to the thoughtful soul, and they both recommend appreciation of the present moment as the means of living well and happily amidst the breakage of life in this world.

In the opening lines of the first quartet, "Burnt Norton", Eliot lays before us a first frustration of living on a unidirectional timeline in what may in fact be a timeless

eternity: each choice in time excludes all other possible choices, which collapse out of our reach into "abstraction...in a world of speculation." (BN I.6-7)<sup>2</sup>

Eliot's personal context for this poem was probably a walk in the garden at Burnt Norton with Emily Hale, a woman he had come to love late in life.<sup>3</sup> He had known her as a youth in New England, but had not chosen her as his mate. Instead, he had moved to Europe and ultimately married the brilliant but volatile and destructive Vivian Haigh-Wood. The choices were made, the lives were lived, and there was no way back to the past, to what - perhaps-had been a better choice.

Footfalls echo in the memory  
Down the passage which we did not take  
Towards the door we never opened  
Into the rose-garden. My words echo  
Thus, in your mind. (BN I.11-15)

There is no point tormenting, no real point in stirring up speculation of what might have been: "But to what purpose / disturbing the dust on a bowl of rose leaves / I do not know". (B.N. I.16-18) What has happened, and what will happen, come together at the present moment only. Furthermore, Eliot realized that if there exists a perspective from which all time is equally present, what the theologians would call an eternal perspective, then from that perspective all of history is fixed and hence "unredeemable". *Que será, será*, and anything else, however beautiful to think about, is illusory and will "fade with the blowing of the horn".

The poem opens with a simple statement of the fundamental problem in its abstract form:

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. (BN I.1-5)

He then moves to a haunting depiction of the unrealized world of what might have been, a world which only exists in a certain light, which collapses with the passing of a cloud, a world of hidden potential symbolized by the laughter of unseen children in the foliage, and from which he is driven by the urgent "Go, go, go" of the same bird who had urged "find them, find them" only moments before. (BN I) One cannot live in this abstract garden of possibilities, one cannot even remain there long. We must return to the realized world, the world of mud and blood, of artery and lymph, in which we are incarnate, and in which we are entrained in time. (BN II)

In subsequent Quartets, Eliot considers more deeply the experiential aspects of life in "time's covenant", but here in Burnt Norton he speculates more abstractly. Time, perhaps, is a designed context, limiting experience so as not to overwhelm our finite minds.

...human kind  
cannot bear very much reality. (BN I.44-45)

.....  
 Yet the enchainment of past and future  
 Woven in the weakness of the changing body,  
 Protects mankind from heaven and damnation  
 Which flesh cannot endure.

Time past and time future

Allow but a little consciousness.  
 To be conscious is not to be in time  
 But only in time can the moment in the rose-garden,  
 The moment in the arbour where the rain beat..be remembered.  
 Only through time time is conquered. (BN II.33-44)

Time is our necessary context; we cannot even think without incorporating a reference to time. Every sentence incorporates tense, a reference to an experienced timeframe. Likewise music is a pattern of sounds in time. "Words move, music moves, only in time." (BN V.1) Yet, Eliot does not see time as ultimately fundamental to reality. There is at the bottom (or at the top) of it all, a view, perhaps a Viewer, in which and to whom "all time is eternally present." This is the "still point of the turning world", the place (like the axis of the earth, or like the singularity at the beginning of time) about which everything moves, but which is itself unmoved and unmoving, where "past and future are reconciled."

Except for the point, the still point,  
 There would be no dance, and there is only the dance.  
 I can only say, *there* we have been: but I cannot say where,  
 And I cannot say, how long, for that is to place it in time. (BN II.20-23)

We cannot experience this "still point" in its fullness, but Eliot suggests that, for us, the Present is the point at which our own past and future are reconciled, and in which we must learn to live if we would live well.

Time past and time future  
 What might have been and what has been  
 Point to one end, which is always present. (BN I.46-48)

The second Quartet, "East Coker", depicts the deep rhythms of incarnate existence, which produce on the one hand a reassuring regularity and on the other an exasperating inevitability to our lives. The recurrent phrase, "In my beginning is my end", and its inverse in the last verse, suggest a circularity to life as well as a sense of predetermination. The spectral dance of the dead in the first section communicates this both in its content and in the strong rhythm of its words when spoken:

Lifting heavy feet in clumsy shoes,  
 Earth feet, loam feet, lifted in country mirth  
 Mirth of those long since under earth  
 Nourishing the corn. Keeping time,  
 Keeping the rhythm in their dancing  
 As in their living in the living seasons  
 The time of the seasons and the constellations

The time of milking and the time of harvest  
The time of the coupling of man and woman  
And that of beasts. Feet rising and falling.  
Eating and drinking. Dung and death. (EC I.37-47)

The sense of circularity and repetition, the apparent recurrence of the same pattern over and over, is illustrated in the depiction of the collapse and recycling of the house in the first section, and in the poet's lament in the fifth section in which he recognizes that even his own intellectual conquests are merely rediscoveries, and not really discoveries at all:

.. what there is to conquer  
By strength and submission, has already been discovered  
Once or twice, or several times, by men whom one cannot hope  
To emulate--but there is no competition--  
There is only the fight to recover what has been lost  
And found and lost again and again: and now, under conditions  
That seem unpropitious. (EC V.11-17)

Whereas the Book of Ecclesiastes has no abstract reflections upon the nature of time, it famously depicts this repetitious characteristic of our experience of time.

A generation goes and a generation comes,  
But the earth remains forever.  
The sun also rises and the sun sets;  
And hastening to its place it rises there again.  
Blowing toward the south, then turning toward the north,  
The wind continues swirling along;  
And on its circular courses the wind returns.  
All the rivers flow into the sea,  
Yet the sea is not full.  
To the place where the rivers flow,  
There they flow again.  
All things are wearisome;  
Man is not able to tell it. (Ecc 1:4-8)<sup>4</sup>

The sense of inevitability is likewise depicted throughout Ecclesiastes, as in:

What is crooked cannot be straightened, and what is lacking cannot be counted. (Ecc 1:15)

I know that everything God does will remain forever; there is nothing to add to it and there is nothing to take from it, for God has so worked that men should fear Him. That which is has been already, and that which will be has already been, for God seeks what has passed by. (Ecc 3:14,15)

Given this circularity and inevitability of experience in this temporal world, what meaning can we elicit from our lives? On the first pass, both books reply, "None." In "The Dry Salvages", Eliot does not shrink from depicting the depth of our experience of apparent meaninglessness. The poem is filled with Biblical images of the inevitable destruction wrought by river and sea, symbolizing the always-present chaos of existence, the inevitability of the "last annunciation" of the sailor's death.

[the river] implacable,  
 Keeping his seasons and rages, destroyer, reminder  
 Of what men choose to forget. Unhonoured, unpropitiated  
 By worshippers of the machine, but waiting, watching and waiting. (DS I.7-9)

[the sea] tosses up our losses, the torn seine,  
 The shattered lobsterpot, the broken oar  
 And the gear of foreign dead men. (DS I.22-24)

The tolling bell  
 Measures time not our time, rung by the unhurried  
 Ground swell, a time  
 Older than the time of chronometers, older  
 Than time counted by anxious worried women  
 Lying awake, calculating the future,  
 Trying to unweave, unwind, unravel  
 And piece together the past and the future,  
 Between midnight and dawn, when the past is all deception,  
 The future futureless, before the morning watch  
 When time stops and time is never ending;  
 And the ground swell, that is and was from the beginning,  
 Clangs  
 The bell. (DS I.37-50)

Where is there an end of it, the soundless wailing,....  
 The prayer of the bone on the beach, the unprayable  
 Prayer at the calamitous annunciation?  
 .....  
 There is no end, but addition: the trailing  
 Consequence of further days and hours... (DS II. 1,5,6 -8)

We cannot think of a time that is oceanless  
 Or of an ocean not littered with wastage  
 Or of a future that is not liable  
 Like the past, to have no destination.  
 We have to think of them as forever bailing... (DS II. 21 -25)

There is no end of it, the voiceless wailing,  
 No end to the withering of withered flowers,  
 To the movement of pain that is painless and motionless,  
 To the drift of the sea and the drifting wreckage,  
 The bone' s prayer to Death its God. (DS II.3-35)

All die. And whatever meaning we think we might perceive, whatever ideas we may  
 have, they will be wrong:

0 dark dark dark. They all go into the dark,  
 ...The captains, merchant bankers, eminent men of letters,  
 The generous patrons of art, ...all go into the da rk,  
 And dark the Sun and Moon, and the Almanach de Gotha  
 And the Stock Exchange Gazette, the Directory of Directors,  
 And cold the sense and lost the motive of action.  
 And we all go with them.....  
 I said to my soul, be still, and let the dark come upon you

Which shall be the darkness of God. (EC III.1, 3-4, 6-10, 12-13)

I said to my soul, be still, and wait without hope  
 For hope would be hope for the wrong thing; wait without love  
 For love would be love of the wrong thing; there is yet faith  
 But the faith and the love and the hope are all in the waiting.  
 Wait without thought, for you are not ready for thought: (EC III. 23-27)

A similar view is expressed in Ecclesiastes: all die, and we cannot perceive any meaning when we consider our lives from an earthbound perspective, "under the sun." "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity", saith the Preacher over and over again throughout the book.

I hated all the fruit of my labor for which I had labored under the sun,  
 For I must leave it to the man who comes after me.  
 And who knows whether he will be a wise man or a fool?..Therefore I completely  
 despaired...(Ecc 2:18 -19)  
 He has set eternity in the hearts of men, yet so that man will not find out the work which God has  
 done from the beginning even to the end. (Ecc 3:11)  
 For the fate of the sons of men and the fate of beasts is the same. As one dies, so dies the other;  
 indeed, they all have the same breath..all is vanity. All go to the same place. All came from the  
 dust and all return to the dust. (Ecc 3:19,20)

Pretty grim fare, ruthlessly honest. Yet encouraging to me, as it affirms my own experience as normative, even as inevitable. There is no fault in my understanding to engender the deep misgivings I have had toward time. It is even as it seems. In establishing a correspondence between my own and the poets' experience of life in time, both works gain the validity needed to recommend a response to the situation.

That response is to forego "...trying to unweave, unwind, unravel and piece together the past and the future," and to instead focus upon the present moment, living in our own local "still point" where past and future intersect. Every moment is our last moment, the end of our former life, and the beginning of our coming life. If we are to be live well and be happy, we must do so now, for it is only in the present moment that we can do anything. Seen in this way, every moment is the moment of our death.

Eliot brings this idea forward explicitly in "The Dry Salvages" section III.

You cannot face it steadily, but this thing is sure,  
 That time is no healer: the patient is no longer here. (DS III.7-8)

Here between the hither and the farther shore  
 While time is withdrawn, consider the future  
 And the past with an equal mind.  
 At the moment which is not of action or inaction  
 You can receive this: ' on whatever sphere of being  
 The mind of a man may be intent  
 At the time of death' --that is the one action  
 (And the time of death is every moment)  
 Which shall fructify in the lives of others... (DS III.29 -37)

Again, in "Dry Salvages" section V:

...Men' s curiosity searches past and future  
 And clings to that dimension. But to apprehend  
 The point of intersection of the timeless  
 With time, is an occupation for the saint--  
 No occupation either, but something given  
 And taken, in a lifetime' s death in love,  
 Ardour and selflessness and self-surrender.  
 For most of us, there is only the unattended  
 Moment, the moment in and out of time,  
 The distraction fit, lost in a shaft of sunlight...(DS V.16 -25)

In Ecclesiastes we find a similar thought repeated throughout the book. The best one can do is enjoy one' s present life, quite apart from understanding it in any deep sense:

There is nothing better for a man than to eat and drink and see good in his labor..This also I have seen that it is from the hand of God. (Ecc 2:24)

I know that there is nothing better for [man] than to rejoice and do good in one' s lifetime, moreover, that every man who eats and drinks sees good in all his labor..it is the gift of God. (Ecc 3:12, 13)

Here is what I have seen to be good and fitting: to eat, to drink, and enjoy oneself in all one' s labor in which he toils under the sun during the few years of his life..(Ecc 5:18)

And so on for many similar verses such as Ecc 9:7-1 and 11:7-8.

There is a further admonition intimated in the verses just quoted, and expanded upon in both books: to live well, one must seek to *do good* in the present This good is to be done not because it will reliably produce any particular consequences, for both works have already established that such *quid pro quo* causality cannot be foreknown or relied upon. No, but it is precisely because we do not apprehend the future, and can only live in the present, that we ought to live well and live unto others. This involves abandonment of the self' s securities, and a reaching out in spite of the unknown. In addition to the section of Dry Salvages III quoted just above, consider:

In order to arrive there,  
 To arrive where you are, to get from where you are not,  
 You must go by a way wherein there is no ecstasy.  
 In order to arrive at what you do not know  
 You must go by a way which is the way of ignorance.  
 In order to possess what you do not possess  
 You must go by the way of dispossession.  
 In order to arrive at what you are not  
 You must go through the way in which you are not. And what you do not know is the only thing you know And what you own is what you do not own  
 And where you are is where you are not. (EC III. 36-47)

Love is most nearly itself  
 When here and now cease to matter.  
 Old men ought to be explorers

Here and there does not matter  
 We must be still and still moving  
 Into another intensity  
 For a further union, a deeper communion  
 Through the dark cold and the empty desolation... (EC V. 29 -36)

And right action is freedom  
 From past and future also.  
 For most of us, this is the aim  
 Never here to be realised;  
 Who are only undefeated  
 Because we have gone on trying; (DS V.41-46)

Ecclesiastes recommends the same hopeful liberality in the face of uncertainty:

Cast your bread on the surface of the waters, for you will find it after many days. Divide your portion to seven, or even to eight, for you do not know what misfortune may occur on the earth. If the clouds are full, they pour out rain upon the earth; and whether a tree falls toward the south or toward the north, wherever the tree falls, there it lies. He who watches the wind will not sow, and he who looks at the clouds will not reap. Just as you do not know the path of the wind and how bones are formed in the womb of the pregnant woman, so you do not know the activity of God who makes all things. Sow your seed in the morning, and do not be idle in the evening, for you do not know whether morning or evening sowing will succeed, or whether both of them alike will be good. (Ecc 11:1-6)

Both works recommend this attitude in full view of the inevitability of death and sadness. Both see us as being ultimately consumed, either by self or by love and detachment from self. Both end with segments in which old age and death are squarely faced.

Eliot' s final quartet, "Little Gidding", is all about the end of life. The setting is a churchyard. The poet contemplates the death of the four classical elements--earth, air, water and fire-as they become dead to us at our own deaths. In the second section the poet meets a composite specter of former professors, who "disclose the gifts reserved for age, to set a crown upon your lifetime' s effort...

First, the cold friction of expiring sense  
 Without enchantment, offering no promise  
 But bitter tastelessness of shadow fruit  
 As body and soul begin to fall asunder.  
 Second, the conscious impotence of rage  
 At human folly, and the laceration  
 Of laughter at what ceases to amuse.  
 And last, the rending pain of re-enactment  
 Of all that you have done, and been; the shame  
 Of motives late revealed, and the awareness  
 Of things ill done and done to others' harm  
 Which once you took for exercise of virtue.  
 Then fools' approval stings, and honour stains.  
 From wrong to wrong the exasperated spirit  
 Proceeds, unless restored by that refining fire  
 Where you must move in measure, like a dancer." (LG II.76-93)

The Preacher likewise ends his work with a description of old age:

Remember also your Creator in the days of your youth, before the evil days come and the years draw near when you will say, "I have no delight in them;" before the sun, the light, the moon and the stars are darkened, and clouds return after the rain; in the day that the watchmen of the house tremble, and mighty men stoop, the grinding ones stand idle because they are few, and those who look through windows grow dim; and the doors on the street are shut as the sounes of the grinding mill is low, and one will arise at the sound of the bird, and all the daughters of song will sing softly...Remember Him before the silver cord is broken and the golden bowl is crushed, the pitcher by the well is shattered and the wheel at the cistern is crushed; then the dust will return to the earth as it was, and the spirit will return to God who gave it. (Ecc 12:1-7)

Eliot sees our choices in life as leading inevitably to consumption as if by fire: either the fire of self and sin, or the fire of love, specifically the love of God, which consumes the self. This can be seen in the final lines of the "Little Gidding" passage just above ("unless restored by that refining fire..") , and elsewhere in Little Gidding:

The only hope, or else despair  
Lies in the choice of pyre or pyre--To be redeemed from fire by fire.  
Who then devised the torment? Love.  
Love is the unfamiliar Name  
Behind the hands that wove  
The intolerable shirt of flame  
Which human power cannot remove.  
We only live, only suspire  
Consumed by either fire or fire. (LG IV.5-14)

A similar choice is presented in Ecclesiastes, though more indirectly.

..young man... follow the impulses of your heart and the desire of your eyes. Yet know that God will bring you to judgment for these things. (Ecc 11:9)

The conclusion, when all has been heard, is: fear God and keep His commandments, because this applied to every person. Because God will bring to judgment every act, everything which is hidden, whether it is good or evil. (Ecc 12:13,14)

Hence, our lives can be lived only in the present, the intersection of time past and time future, and the future is pregnant with the unknowable consequences of our choices. We are only freed from past and future by living well in the present, but we shall ultimately be consumed, in a sense, by the choices we make. I have always found Eliot's closing verses of the Four Quartets very comforting and encouraging.

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.  
Through the unknown, remembered gate  
When the last of earth left to discover

Is that which was the beginning;  
At the source of the longest river  
The voice of the hidden waterfall  
And the children in the apple-tree  
Not known, because not looked for  
But heard, half-heard, in the stillness  
Between two waves of the sea.  
Quick now, here, now, always--  
A condition of complete simplicity  
(Costing not less than everything)  
And all shall be well and  
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. (LG V.26-46)

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<sup>1</sup> Watts, Isaac. "O God Our Hope in Ages Past", 18<sup>th</sup> century hymn.

<sup>2</sup> Eliot, T. S. Complete Poems and Plays 1909-1950. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1971.  
(When referring to the "Four Quartets", I will use initials of the specific Quartet, its section, and the line numbered from the beginning of the section.)

<sup>3</sup> Gordon, Lyndall. T. S. Eliot: An Imperfect Life. New York: W. W. Norton & Co, 1998.

<sup>4</sup> New American Standard Bible. LaHabra, CA: The Lockman Foundation, 1971.