

Sequence, Causality, and Determinism: Anxiety over the Collision of Past and Future in Eliot's
Poetry and Joyce's Prose

Writing in the 1920s, T. S. Eliot and James Joyce were swept up in the tide of Modernism in which the collision of past and future was an ever-present, threatening reality that put both the identity of the self and the identity of culture as a whole at risk of dissolution. Their writing reflects the anxiety of uncertainty over the future and the belief that perhaps knowledge of the future can be sought by interpretation of the past. Eliot's poetic speakers and Joyce's prose characters live in a constant state of uncertainty regarding the future they know is coming but cannot see. While both Eliot and Joyce attempt to use the past—through references to old texts and historical details as well as through characters who affirm their present through memories of their pasts—to illuminate the future, both authors reveal that the past cannot be used as an indicator of future fortune, and the only way to find the future is to keep living through the present.

The concept of sequence, while integral to the experience of time as linear, is a concern for Eliot throughout much of his poetry. "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" begins with a scene set not only through location, but also in time: "Let us go *then*, you and I, / *When* the evening is spread out against the sky" (1-2, emphasis mine). Temporal concerns are further manifested by the way time changes place, as the repetition of the lines "In the room the women come and go / Talking of Michelangelo" (13-4; 35-6) suggests; although the place remains the same, the sequence of women entering and then leaving this place changes the place itself. The speaker's anxiety about sequence is mostly due to the paradoxical desire for more time to deliberate (the repetition of "And indeed there will be time" [23; 37]) and the desire for an impetus towards action: "Do I dare / Disturb the universe?" (45-6). Despite the way time moves

ever forward, the speaker explains that “In a minute there is time / For decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse” (47-8). The speaker is afraid to act because as long as he maintains the status quo, even though he cannot be accepted, he also cannot be rejected. His relationship with the woman in the poem is both alive and dead, in a sense, but while this double-existence of their relationship is safe, it is not satisfying, and the speaker expresses his frustration: “No! I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be; / Am an attendant lord, one that will *do* / To swell a progress, *start a scene or two*” (111-3, emphasis mine). The reference to an older work of literature, common in Eliot’s writing and in Modern writing as a whole, seems an entreaty to history to inform the future. Eliot’s speaker is determined *not* to live in the footsteps of the famously indecisive prince, but he is still inversely influenced by that which has come before him. In a sense, “Prufrock” is a warning against being swallowed by the over-analysis of the past when seeking the future, for the speaker falls into the very trap he is determined to avoid, and the paralysis of indecision allows the past to usurp his present, a condition that threatens us all “Till human voices wake us, and we drown” (“Prufrock” 130-1).

“Portrait of a Lady” contains similar concerns. Like “Prufrock,” it also begins with a time setting rather than a place setting: “Among the smoke and fog of a December afternoon / You have the scene arrange itself—as it will seem to do— / With ‘I have saved this afternoon for you’” (“Portrait” 1-3). This temporal scene has “[a]n atmosphere of Juliet’s tomb / Prepared for all the things to be said, or left unsaid” (“Portrait” 6-7); because linear time only allows for the possibility of *one* opposing condition to be true, linear time is a matter of presence and absence. Eliot’s use of future tense—the idea that the place is “prepared” (“Portrait” 7) for things “*to be*” (7) said—is critical because it is only in the future that *all* possible things to be said or left unsaid exist. Once the event has passed, there is no more possibility. The event will exist in the past, and

once something is in the past, there is no more potential in it. This idea becomes what Vincent Miller calls the “central motif in all Eliot's endeavor and to see him, as in general his critics have, as moving toward an escape from time when he was in fact moving toward a greater submission to it” (452).

Eliot's preoccupation with the future is really an effort to keep a situation's potential in the future, to keep the possibilities open so that reality cannot collapse into just *one* possibility. Even once it has collapsed from “all the things that might happen” to “the one thing that did happen,” however, one can rebel against this almost deterministic reality—that things will play out the way they play out, and no one can change that—through imagination, which is explored in “La Figlia Che Piange”:

She turned away, but with the autumn weather
Compelled my imagination many days,
Many days and many hours:
Her hair over her arms and her arms full of lowers.
And I wonder how they should have been together!
I should have lost a gesture and a pose.
Sometimes these cogitations still amaze
The troubled midnight and the noon's repose. (17-24)

Despite the ability of the brain to reinvent the outcome of a scenario and to imagine other possibilities, there is a dissatisfaction in this; one can differentiate between the fiction and the reality, and there is an absurd pointlessness to reimagining that which has already come to pass. Eliot asks in “Gerontion,” “After such knowledge, what forgiveness?” (34), a question suggesting that the memory of reality, while just as immaterial as the imagined other outcome, is something that cannot ever be changed or escaped. Once one has the knowledge of what *has* happened, there is no point in re-imagining it, but only productivity in accepting or “forgiving” it even if it is difficult. After this question, history itself is called into question:

Think now

History has many cunning passages, contrived corridors
 And issues, deceives with whispering ambitions,
 Guides us by vanities. Think now
 She gives when our attention is distracted
 And what she gives, gives with such supple confusions
 That the giving famishes the craving. Gives too late
 What's not believed in, or if still believed,
 In memory only, reconsidered passion. Gives too soon
 Into weak hands, what's thought can be dispensed with
 Till the refusal propagates a fear. Think
 Neither fear nor courage saves us. (34-45)

This lengthy passage is worth quoting in full because it expresses quite succinctly the entire root of Eliot's temporal anxiety. History is both internal and external to Eliot, for one's interaction with the past is a matter of remembering his own history and of all that has come before him: every story, event, work of literature or art. The modern man always already operates with the weight of history behind him, and so history can be at once "cunning" and "contrived" even though these words are in a sense contradictory, for something contrived is well-known enough that it should not be confusing. It is the mixing of the individual with the absolute that challenges Eliot's concept of time, the mixing of past and future, and the collision of the two which is the paradoxically eternal present.

Eliot also expresses a great deal of anxiety over the way awareness influences the experience of time. There is a strange sort of intellectual hierarchy in Eliot's writing that seems to struggle with the contrast between those who are well-educated but have a tendency to become paralyzed by over-analysis and those who (like animals) simply act without thinking. This is particularly evident in "Whispers of Immortality," which juxtaposes references to Webster and Donne (revealing Eliot's status as a well-educated scholar) with the animalistic sexuality of Grishkin. Eliot describes the way the intellectual mind "[sees] the skull beneath the skin" (2) and "[knows] that thought clings round dead limbs" (7); but even though clever

individuals have enough awareness to see that there is “no substitute for sense” (10), they cannot seem to access this sense, and so “our lot crawls between dry ribs / To keep our metaphysics warm” (31-2). Eliot places himself in the stratum of the brilliant scholar who, despite awareness that he is missing out on the rich sensory experience of life, can only seem to access the death that goes along with overthinking and a lack of action. Eliot’s statement in “The Dry Salvages” of *Four Quartets*, “We had the experience but missed the meaning” (95), expresses the similar idea that experience *must* have a meaning, and Jurate Levina says that “[e]xperience is the given ground of existence, and it is given as meaningful: the world somehow always already makes sense to us...Eliot, like phenomenological thinkers of his time and after, is balancing on the precipice of the unnamable. There are no other means to understand and speak except in conceptual systems, and yet one needs to keep one’s eye on what remains outside the terms they offer” (195). Eliot cannot let an experience simply be as it is, for that would allow it to lapse into the past. He implies that there is no experience without meaning, and Eliot’s determination to keep the past alive through analysis of memory is both tragic and glorious. He is valiantly rebelling against the passage of linear time despite his own admission that this is a failing quest.

Eliot was certainly not the only Modern poet concerned with the experience of passing time; James Joyce confronts these same concerns in his prose, whose tone regarding the passage of time shifts throughout his oeuvre. In Joyce’s earlier works, like “The Dead,” the final story in *Dubliners*, Joyce expresses the weight of history as something bleak that haunts the present and even detracts from it. In “The Dead,” Gabriel discovers the ghost of Michael Furey, his wife’s dead lover from years prior, haunting their relationship through Gretta’s memory of him. Although Michael Furey is only present in the last five pages of the text, the impact of the story comes from his absence throughout the majority of the story. What Gabriel experienced as

normal, everyday life is always different to Gretta because of her memory of the short time spent with Michael. As Shari Benstock says, in *Dubliners*, “characters are defined not by their presence, but by their absence; ...in the coda story, ‘The Dead,’ where the gnomonic method becomes both narrative mode and subject matter...the ghost of Michael Furey—the dead lover—is endowed with a vitality which makes Gabriel Conroy—the living husband—pale and ineffectual by comparison” (399). The memory of Michael is more powerful than the living Gabriel, and in this instance, the past has eclipsed the present in its importance, a dangerous condition that renders both Gretta and Gabriel powerless. “The Dead” explores circumstances that conflate the living and the dead so thoroughly that the story must be called “The Dead” as if everyone in it were already dead—living in the past is a stasis similar to death. Joyce’s final paragraph makes this particularly clear when he says,

Yes, the newspapers were right: snow was general all over Ireland. It was falling on every part of the dark central plain, on the treeless hills, falling softly upon the Bog of Allen and, farther westward, softly falling into the dark mutinous Shannon waves. It was falling, too, upon every part of the lonely churchyard on the hill where Michael Furey lay buried. It lay thickly drifted on the crooked crosses and headstones, on the spears of the little gate, on the barren thorns. His soul swooned slowly as he heard the snow falling faintly through the universe and faintly falling, like the descent of their last end, upon all the living and the dead. (225)

The power of this paragraph is contained mostly in the distinction between living and dead and the eventual collapse of this distinction. The snow links the dead to the living (and thus the past to the future) because it is “general all over Ireland” (225); it is a constant condition that affects everyone, living or dead. Of further note is the idea that there is separation between “*all the living*” while “the dead” is its own entity. While the living is a collection of separate entities, that which is dead is one unit, so it is not necessary to say “*all the dead*”. For Joyce, that which is past is still present; the lack of distinction between all of the living and the dead suggests that there is

no escape from the collapsing past-future of reality, and the hopelessness of “The Dead” closes *Dubliners* with a sad acceptance that is present but not dominant in *Ulysses*.

Ulysses provides a rather confounding view on the concerns of linear temporality because different characters interact with time differently and with different attitudes. Stephen Dedalus says in one of the most famous quotations from the book that “History...is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake” (34); the fear of history and the omnipresence of that which is past is a constant concern for Joyce, whose entire novel is, of course, a re-imagination of the already-written story of Odysseus returning from the Trojan War. The idea of repetition within the sequence of linear time—that is, the idea that no story is truly original, and everything that is done has been done before even as one is experiencing it for the first time—is a major concern of many Modern texts because it causes the idea of the individual to dissolve within the vast ocean of the macrocosm. But Joyce refuses to allow this dissolution to occur by his very insistence upon memorializing one objectively unimportant day within the lengthy text that is *Ulysses*. Linking the story of a single day in a somewhat unimpressive hero’s life to the story of the Odyssey gives the story power by revealing the capacity for tragedy and victory that occurs in every moment; it does not diminish the importance by suggesting that everything there is to do has already been done. Stephen Dedalus and Leopold Bloom are individuals of value, just as the story of what happens in Dublin on 16 June 1904 is of value.

In fact, scholars such as Weldon Thornton have stated that “the basis of much of the greatness of this novel lies in Joyce’s audaciously choosing so ordinary and imperfect and marginalized a figure as Leopold Bloom as his central character” (27). In spite of his ordinariness, however, Bloom does fulfill the role of the epic hero, at least in a sense: “Bloom is shown to have some very admirable human qualities: he is a sensitive and considerate man, a

man of wide-ranging interests and inveterate curiosity, of sympathy and charity—a good man” (Thornton 27). Bloom is also characterized by an awareness and acceptance of himself that seems unconscious; although Bloom cannot be called introspective in an active sense, his belief in the workings of the world allows him to function, in general, gracefully. When the other passengers in the taxi ignore him, he makes no effort to force himself into the group (*U* 371-3), and his comportment throughout the day is for the most part appropriate. Despite the fact that Bloom is not an intellectual, per se, he is given enough realistic depth to observe and comment upon the world, and in “Nausicaa,” he states, “Back of everything magnetism. Earth for instance pulling this and being pulled. That causes movement. And time? Well that’s the time the movement takes. Then if one thing stopped the whole ghesabo would stop bit by bit. Because it’s all arranged” (*U* 357). The movement of time for Bloom is best considered as a material view—rather than abstracting time into memory the way Eliot’s and Joyce’s early works so often do, Bloom observes the material changes that occur because of time. Bloom is grounded in the real world (in fact, even the name “Bloom” suggests an earthly bent in his character), and his interactions with it are not paralyzed by the indecision and angst that affects Eliot and some of Joyce’s other characters, like Stephen Dedalus (whose name appropriately evokes the story of Daedalus and Icarus and the wax wings that took them *away* from the earth, at least until Icarus fell). Sheldon R. Brivic notes that “[o]ne of the major distinctions between the two characters is the fact that Bloom is a physical or materialistic person, while Stephen is spiritual or intellectual” (30); Bloom’s interaction with the world is an easy acceptance of time’s passing, whereas Stephen is plagued by his own over-analysis like the speaker in much of Eliot’s poetry.

Stephen’s inability to escape the past which he obsesses over is repeatedly displayed throughout the book in both the *Hamlet* references and the references to his dead mother, whose

death he fears he caused by refusing to pray for her at her deathbed. The book itself is haunted by the ghosts of the past (past literary works and characters' pasts), and Shari Benstock asserts that "Stephen's artistic paralysis on this day is caused by his mother...It is by memory that Stephen is chained to the old form, the child, and to his mother" (401-3). The significance of memory and the link between past and future (the constant present) is revealed through Stephen's interactions with the hallucinatory ghost of his mother in "Circe." The ghost of May Gouilding tells Stephen of death, "All must go through it, Stephen. More women than men in the world. You too. Time will come" (540). The inevitability of the future and eventual death becomes a matter of agency versus determinism when Stephen replies, "They said I killed you, mother...Cancer did it, not I. Destiny" (540). The matter of how much control humans have over their lives when they are up against the power of time is a constant concern in *Ulysses*, but there is no clear resolution to this concern. Like Bloom's idea that time is "pulling and being pulled" (357), the past is constantly dragging Stephen backwards while the future is pulling him forwards. Stephen is torn apart by the present, and his epic tragedy is his inability to ever truly live in the moment; even when he is drunk, he is trapped and haunted by a past he cannot escape.

It is Molly Bloom who holds what is perhaps the most reassuring perspective on time. Instead of being torn apart by the collision of past and future, Molly drives home the idea that the past can reaffirm the future rather than haunting it the way Michael Furey's ghost haunts "The Dead" or May Gouilding's ghost haunts Stephen. Molly's stream of consciousness narration at the end of *Ulysses* is a positive affirmation of the confluence of past and future, for her affection for her husband (and the implied continuation of this affection) is reaffirmed by a description of the moment years before when Leopold asked Molly to marry him: "I asked him with my eyes to ask again yes and then he asked me would I yes to say yes my mountain flower and first I put my

arms around him yes and drew him down to me so he could feel my breasts all perfume yes and his heart was going like mad and yes I said yes I will Yes” (732). Molly is willing to accept and live within the present more than any other character. Despite her descriptions of the past in “Penelope,” Molly’s repeated “yes” expresses an acceptance of the present that neither Stephen nor Leopold quite achieves. Molly’s view of time is balanced: she can review the past, live in the present, and accept that the future will come without being overtaken by any of the three. She understands that the only way to live is, essentially, to continue living. She understands the need to recognize the past and believe in her choices, but she is not defined by absence, and her “yes” is a constant affirmation of life and presence, and, in fact, of the present moment.

The collision and conflation of past and future in the works of Eliot and Joyce is a matter of searching for the moment when the future becomes the present and then the past—it is a matter of interpreting reality, of the evolution of consciousness, and of the continual collapse of future possibility into one event that actually happened. As time moves on, possibility collapses into story, and even though the loss of potential can trigger anxiety and disappointment, it is only through the passage of time that any story can exist. For this reason, “Prufrock” is a static description of nothing happening despite the seemingly high stakes of the poem, whereas the story of 16 June 1904 can be as epic and rich as *The Odyssey*. Eliot’s speakers and Joyce’s characters reveal that bravery is living in the uncertainty of the future, accepting that the present *is* an eternal collision of past and future, and learning to negotiate between the past and the future without being torn apart. It is a matter of finding balance between thought and action, between analyzing the past and living into the future. Perhaps Prufrock, Stephen, and even Hamlet himself would be more at peace if they could recognize that what Laertes assumes about Hamlet’s love for Ophelia in Act I, Scene III of *Hamlet* is really a truth about the human

experience of life and of time: “Forward, not permanent, sweet, not lasting, / The perfume and
suppliance of a minute; No more” (I.III.9-10).

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