

Sense of Time in A. Akhmatova's and T.S. Eliot's Latter Poetry (Comparative Analysis of *Poem Without a Hero* and *Four Quartets*)

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ABSTRACT

Anna Akhmatova and Thomas Stearns Eliot are considered among the most influential representatives of Modernism, Eliot - in Anglo-American Literature, and Akhmatova - in Russian. Modernism emerged at the beginning of the 20th century, seeking to point out people's failure to maintain a culture based on spiritual values, an idea that was central to the works of Eliot and Akhmatova. By analysing and contrasting their last major poems, *Four Quartets* and *Poem Without a Hero*, this paper aims to present Eliot's and Akhmatova's perception of time and modernity. Faced with the tragedy of World War II, Eliot and Akhmatova turned to reflecting on notions of time and history. Despite the differences in the poets' experiences, mentality, and background, *Four Quartets* and *Poem Without a Hero* bear a resemblance to each other in many respects and express the common for Akhmatova and Eliot perception of time. The poets saw time as 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 lives today and shapes our destiny. Therefore, history is not simply a sequence of past events unrelated to the present, but rather an active creator of every moment of our present lives. 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. The poets also shared an attitude towards modernity, which they saw as a time of lost people who deny their past and for that reason will have no future unless they change. Therefore, in the face of eternity, which is wiser than we are capable of seeing, all that remains for humanity is acceptance and humility.

INTRODUCTION

Modernism as a movement emerged in the 20th century, the century that brought technological progress but ethical regress, important scientific discoveries yet two world wars. In the drastically changed world, the key concepts of existence, such as history and time, needed to be redefined. Modernist philosophers suggested a new perception of the terms. According to the new view, history was not a linear sequence of events in the past, but rather a set of facts, open to and depending on scholarly interpretations. As for the notion of time, for Modernism, it could not be divided into the past, present, and future, as all of these three are in constant interaction and influence on one the other.

Anna Akhmatova and Thomas Stearns Eliot, two Modernist poets, shared these views on time and expressed them in, probably, the clearest way, in their poems - *Four Quartets* and *Poem Without a Hero*. Even though Akhmatova and Eliot were contemporaries, their lives had almost nothing in common. Akhmatova's decision to stay in Russia after the Revolution in 1917 drew the thick line between herself and her Western contemporaries. She witnessed the Bolsheviks come to power and shoot her first husband, the poet Nikolai Gumilev; the horrors of Stalin's terror, one of

which manifestations was fifteen years of imprisonment for her son, Lev Gumilev; World War II that almost destroyed the country she loved so dearly; and the censorship, due to which her name was forgotten for decades in her own patria. Eliot became a witness to the war too, yet his experience was very different indeed from Akhmatova's. His life rather had to do with internal doubts, "visions and revisions", than with outer pressure and imposed boundaries that were so familiar to the Russian poet. Strikingly, despite geographical distance and all dissimilarities in their biographies, Akhmatova and Eliot prove close in their views on philosophy and the main values of human existence.

Thus, the aim of the present paper is to establish parallels between the last major poems of Akhmatova and Eliot, through the analysis and comparison of the two, in order to discover the way in which each of the poets perceived the concepts of time and history. The paper consists of three parts. Part 1 presents an overview of Modernist perception of time and history, which meant to see time as an inseparable unity, while history was considered a concept that might vary according to its interpreter. Part 2 is dedicated to Eliot's *Four Quartets* and the vision of time as depicted by the poet in this work, whereas Part 3 is concerned with the analysis

of *Poem Without a Hero* and Akhmatova's understanding of temporality and eternity. Conclusion aims at juxtaposing the two poems, presenting the outcome of reading *Four Quartets* and *Poem Without a Hero* side by side through the concept of time.

Time and History in Modernism

The 20th century turned out to be emblematic in many respects. Two World Wars, scientific discoveries, and technological progress changed the world irretrievably, but what is more remarkable is how different our understanding of crucial concepts has become. Such terms such as "dehumanisation", "deconstruction", "individualism", "unconscious", "subjective" have redefined the world around us. Due to the circumstances of a drastically changing environment, the quest for eternal verities becomes even more important. As any other artistic movement, Modernism aimed to form its own philosophy and find answers to essential questions of existence. Even though Modernism is mainly associated with literature, it formed part of an influential "intellectual development that produced significant changes in philosophy, the arts, and other fields" of twentieth-century cogitation (Longenbach 1987: X).

It is not surprising that time and history were to be key concepts that Modernists intended to define. As is the case with almost all other concepts, these two changed their meaning significantly and were not an exception. Before Modernism, history was seen as an objective discipline, for it described different historical facts and events in the past. Philosophically speaking, history was conceived as the complete past of humankind, a linear change of actions and events, and their successive sequence. Modernism's elaboration of a new perspective on time and history saw philosophers, such as José Ortega y Gasset, Robin George Collingwood, and Benedetto Croce, formulate a new perception of those basic ideas.

In *History as a System*, Ortega y Gasset presents his viewpoint on history, mainly inspired by Albert Einstein's Theory of Relativity. According to the philosopher, the truth of reality is influenced by every historical epoch, because every person has their own perception of it. History, as well as reality, is relative and depends on a concrete individual and a concrete moment of time. Ortega y Gasset defines history as an "inexorable chain of human experiences" (1961: 38), putting emphasis on a personal, individual, experience as a centre and point of departure for his approach to history. Furthermore, for Ortega y Gasset, history acquires meaning through human actions. Consequently, he argues that we are free in our actions; with those actions individuals create history. Of course, in a world where everything is relative, there are no universal principles or absolute truths. Ortega y Gasset further elaborated in his approach is his view of the continuity of historical process, that is, that the past generates the present, which, in turn, entails the future, or inter-conditionality of all time, the unbreakable ties between all its parts.

R.G. Collingwood also considered history to be one of the principal issues of his philosophical system. He expressed his thoughts on the subject in *The Idea of History*, arguing

that the past is a full-fledged part of the present reality. The problem with it is that we are not able to perceive the past directly, so we have to deal with testimonies and various criteria of verifiability. Collingwood also claims that in spite of the fact that history describes the past and tells us about it, it is important to take into account that history does not have to do with every little thing that happened in the past but with "only that that pertains to the thoughts of men and actions which derive from those" (1993: 216). That is, many past events and occurrences remain outside the field of historical interest because not everything is a subject of history. Yet, all the facts that are to become its part are closely interconnected and cannot exist in disconnection from all the other facts of the past. They interact and exist only due to interpretations presented by historians. As regards the meaning of history, Collingwood states that only through our understanding of history and of the past do we attain self-knowledge.

James Longenbach emphasises that Modernism was particularly concerned with history, characterising it as an "active interest in history" or "creative interest in past" (1987: 11). That is why, for Eliot, poetic inspiration should come from a knowledge of history. For Modernists, history is not just a recollection of the past, it is also a process and methodology of that recollection, a meditation on it and its analysis, that lead to some sort of interpretation of historical facts. So, history does not exist as a sequence of past events, rather it is a function of a historian's effort to understand the past in the present. To understand the past, a historian must breathe his own life into the past.

Those ideas conveyed a whole new perspective on the world, elaborated by Modernism as an artistic movement, that embraced philosophy, poetics, aesthetics, and visual arts. For the Modernists, primarily Pound and Eliot, "historical understanding became a way of uncovering the past realities that live in the present" (Patea 2006: 55). Modernism was to become the last cultural current which prospered both in the West and in Russia. In 1917, Russian history changed course dramatically, and almost all of the connections between Western and Russian writers, poets, thinkers, artists were broken. The October Revolution became the event that was to stop the cultural and intellectual exchange, leaving the country marginalised the Soviet Union was no longer a part of the process. Yet, Modernism was still the unifying factor for Europe and Russia. If we were to highlight the brightest representatives of it in each "cultural zone" that would be Thomas Stearnes Eliot, Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, and Wallace Stevens for Anglo-American literature and Anna Akhmatova, Osip Mandelstam, Marina Tsvetaeva, and Boris Pasternak for the Russian, yet among them Eliot and Akhmatova are the most emblematic.

Eliot and Akhmatova, while living in very different worlds, were contemporaries and shared many artistic views. This may be because they both came from poetical movements with many similarities. Nevertheless, it does not seem to be fortuitous that both of them authored major poems, that were to become the last of a kind for Eliot and Akhmatova. *Four Quartets* and *Poem Without a Hero* were written during World War II, and are obviously linked with time and

history. Witnessing the fall of the contemporary world, Eliot and Akhmatova are meditating on the extent to which the past can be considered as bygone times and therefore be excluded from present life. Since both poets perceive time, the past and today as a persistent continuum, in which all the elements are closely interconnected, everything that has happened in the past, no matter how long ago, affects our present. Yet, Eliot and Akhmatova insist that the past is unredeemable, and the present world bears the weight of everything that all the previous generations have ever done. The comparison of these poems is of significant interest, considering that due to the long isolation of the Soviet Union, its literature and culture have been absent in the major European artistic movements of the present.

Time in *Four Quartets*

Both *Four Quartets* and *Poem Without a Hero* belong to the later periods of the poets' creative works. *Four Quartets* was published over six years. The opening part, "Burnt Norton", was published in a collection of Eliot's poems in 1936, and it was until 1943 that *Four Quartets* was first published in its entirety in New York. The poem consists of four parts: "Burnt Norton", "East Coker", "Dry Salvages" and "Little Gidding". All of them are names of geographical locations, among which three are in England (Burnt Norton, East Coker, Little Gidding) and one is in the United States (Dry Salvages). By the time the poem was published, Eliot had become a part of English Society and also of the Anglican Church, yet, as he will claim throughout *Four Quartets*, one must not forget his past, hence the inclusion of the United States.

The first Quartet 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.¹ (BN: I 1-3)

Here, Eliot lays out the main thesis that he will develop and deepen throughout the poem. For him, there is no past or future: time is an inseparable continuum, in which one becomes another and both are always present in this very moment of our existence. The lines are clear and confident, as a manifesto itself, claiming that all the rest of the poem will confirm this truth and reassure its readers of its certainty. Cooper characterises this opening as "quiet, donnish. it calms us and takes us tonally into the safest havens of the intelligence, the seminar room and lecture hall" (2008: 140). It is an interesting and reasonable comparison, as we may expect a poem to contain allegories and double-meanings, whereas here we deal with absolute clarity and no metaphorical tools of any kind.

Eliot goes on by raising the question of whether time can or cannot be redeemed. For him:

If all time is eternally present
All time is unredeemable. (BN: I 4-5)

There is no way back, by no means, we are capable of fixing or changing the past. Furthermore, the unchangeable past forms part of our present-day life. So whatever happened centuries and millennia ago leaves traces in the present, "pre-defining" the current moment. Such an understanding

of time and historical processes is related to the statement that "past, present and future are parts of a continuum of cause and effect" (Childs 2001: 113), which means that such elements as predictability and fate are involved.

Following the voice of the poet, we seem to be in "the rose-garden", Eden, from where man has been expelled. Eliot brings us back to notions of the sin and guilt of humankind. Considering that all time is unredeemable, the reference to sin acquires different meanings. This is not a forgotten history that happened once and long ago, but rather an actual present, one that is always with every one of us. The description of Eden is quite nostalgic and idealistic, which perfectly conveys the Christian perspective on the history of mankind; as we were innocent there, in "the rose-garden", but ever since the fall, we are doomed to carry the burden of our ancestors' sin:

...Into our first world.
There they were, dignified, invisible,
Moving without pressure. (BN: I 24-26)

The contrast between the past and the present becomes even more evident throughout the Quartet, as in the third movement we find an image of modern life, particularly, one of the London Tube. It is the world of "a dim light"; darkness, cold winds, faded air, gloomy hills, etc. Opposed to the peaceful and harmonious past, we are facing the "time-bound hurry of present-day life" (Bodelsen 1966: 40). The image of the London Tube is probably the perfect description, as it is what can be called "non-place", where people never stay, it is a point of passing through. Here, everything is in perpetual movement, nothing ever stops, and if it does, it brings a total collapse of the system. It is utterly impersonal; metallic, grey, monotonous colours, no access to the "real world" of sunlight and fresh air, going either right or left. All of this dramatically contrasts with the garden, full of sunshine and wind, where they moved "without pressure" (BN: I 26).

Between the picture of the abandoned Eden and the rush-hour in the London Tube, Eliot presents Movement II, where he introduces the concept of "the still point". One chapter of Ethel Cornwell's *The Still Point* is dedicated to Eliot's vision of this articulated primarily in "Burnt Norton". Cornwell sees Eliot's description of the still point as "the point where at which all opposites are reconciled, but this reconciliation is a matter of balance or tension" (1962: 29). Presented as an isolated moment, nothing before or after - the still point is equal to the achievement of the wholeness of being, "the complete integration of personality" (Cornwell 1962: 44). Hence, the point, where one obtains eternal wisdom or eternal truth is the point of non-time, there are no temporal limits.

The still point appears along with the images of dance and reflection. Bodelsen characterises this part as "a mystical experience that is 'out of time'" (1966: 46). It is true that the movement is structured as a kind of visionary experience, that culminates in a mystical moment of illumination:

The release from action and suffering, release from the inner
And the outer compulsion, yet surrounded
By a grace of sense, a white light still and moving. (BN: II 25-27)

Therefore, the still point is described as a moment of revelation, when “both a new world and the old [are] made explicit” (BN: II 29-30). It closely reaches a state of ecstasy, the point of the strongest exertion of all feelings and senses. There is again, an image of “the rose-garden”, reminding us that everything is one and cannot be fractured. Eliot stresses the importance of moments, as only through them can we arrive at the “still point”. As the bird from the first movement states:

...human kind

Cannot bear very much reality. (BN: I 44-45)

Consequently, everything that is left for us is short moments of illumination, when we can see reality, the world as it is. Throughout the *Quartets*, Eliot will return again and again to “the notion that reality is too intense for human beings to bear except in moments” (Cornwell 1962: 32). That idea is consonant with Plato’s belief that our souls were able to see reality for several quick moments before arriving at earthly existence, and so now, we struggle to remember that true world that was open to our eyes for such a short time.

Besides the past and the present, Eliot operates with the dimension of “unreal time”, found in Movement I:

What might have been and what has been

Point to one end, which is always present. (BN I 9-10)

According to Bodelsen’s interpretation, Eliot implies that even what you thought you had missed is actually still there, waiting for you (1966: 58). Again, as all time is one, here and now, nothing is lost forever. At some point in one’s lifetime, they will encounter this moment that has not actually happened. The bird’s phrase “Quick, now, here, now, always”, that would be repeated in the last Quartet as well, echoes the idea of the never-closing door to the past. Another image of “what might have been” found in the poem is the image of unseen children. They first appear in the rose-garden, where roses “had the look of flowers that are looked at” (BN: I 31). The narrator is not able to see the children, yet he can hear their “hidden laughter” (BN: V 34) and senses their invisible presence. The children of the garden have not been born, they are a part of the missed, lost past, that is still present and still exists, because everything “point[s] to one end” (BN: I 10).

The second part of the Quartets opens with another leitmotif of the poem, which is a reference to Mary Queen of Scots’ motto “In my beginning is my end” (EC: I 1). This statement becomes a refrain, repeated time and again throughout all parts; “East Coker” ends with its variation as well: “In my end is my beginning” (EC: V 39). It brings the readers back to the thesis, argued repeatedly in Eliot’s works: death is not a final destination, it is rather one more step towards eternity. So, this is why end and beginning are one, because the ending becomes something new, and everything new is going to end:

Old stone to new building, old timber to new fires,

Old fires to ashes, and ashes to the earth. (EC: I 5-6).

In Movement I the narrator pictures the natural order of being as a constant change between the old and the new, light and darkness, day and night. As Ecclesiastes claims that there is a time for everything, and a season for every

activity under the heavens, in the same way, Eliot believes that everything has its moment to come:

The time of the seasons and the constellations

The time of milking and the time of harvest

The time of coupling of man and woman

And that of beasts. Feet rising and falling.

Eating and drinking. Dung and death. (EC: I 43-47)

Therefore, if in “Burnt Norton” the poet deals with the question of whether there is anything that can be left in the past, and affirms directly that this is not possible, for all time is present, in “East Coker” Eliot meditates on the concept of cyclic time, within which everything changes and becomes something else. “All time is repetitive” (Verma 1979: 60), it is a constant continuum. In coming up against the unbearable reality, that we can grasp only in some very short periods of time, and the eternal continuity of existence, Eliot gives us the key to confronting it, which is the wisdom of humility, as this is the only wisdom “we can hope to acquire” (EC: II 47).

The last Movement of “East Coker” starts with the words “So here I am, in the middle way, having had twenty years” (EC: V 1), which reminds readers of the opening lines of Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, as Eliot again uses his famous technique of quoting to create the feeling of a constant dialogue with all world literature. It perfectly conveys the ideas that Eliot formulated in, probably, his most famous essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent”. These ideas apply to literature his general belief that the flow of history and time is unstoppable and participates actively in our everyday life. The same happens with literary works because none of its elements can exist independently, as no historical fact or event can be separated from the wholeness of historical sequence.

In this Movement we also find the lines:

There is a time for the evening under starlight,

A time for the evening under lamplight

(The evening with the photograph album). (EC: V 26-28)

The contrast between starlight and lamplight evokes a parallel with opposing natural and artificial light, or more generally, the world of nature and that of humans. Hence, Eliot claims that there are a time and a place for both of them, and there is no need to reject either; we should rather find space in our lives both for nature and starlight and for modernity and its lamps. The image of “the photograph album” introduces again a theme of memory and remembering, as an album is usually a collection of pictures, in which the past is stopped and fixed, so that later, by looking at them, one can revive those moments, feelings, and impressions.

Unlike the first two sections of *Four Quartets*, “Dry Salvages” begins with a doubt:

I do not know much about gods. (DS: I 1)

This opening line may show a hint of the humility that has been increasingly present in the poem. The beginning of the fourth Quartet (“Midwinter spring is its own season” (LG: I 1)) seems to be even more humble, where no personal pronoun is included, and yet the statement is much less direct than in “Burnt Norton”.

Movement I introduces images of a river and an ocean, which symbolise two types of time: the human time and the eternal one. The river is seen as an “unhonoured” (DS: I 9),

unworshiped god, that is still there, "waiting, watching and waiting" (DS: I 10). Its force and power can destroy us at any minute, still, we prefer to forget about it, comfortable in the thought that we are safe in our urban world. In this Movement an image of "the tolling bell" also appears, which measures time, but not ours:

...a time

Older than the time of chronometers. (DS: I 38-39)

It establishes an opposition between the two types of time. Our human time can be measured with tools we have created. Yet, there is time, which before did not need to be measured, that is "the time that was before Cosmos" and that "replaced Chaos" (Bodelsen 1966: 85).

Movement II opens up with a question: "Where is there an end of it?" (DS: II 1), which echoes the leitmotif "in my beginning is my end". The answer is:

There is no end, but addition: the trailing

Consequence of further days and hours. (DS: II 7-8)

Never ending cyclical time goes on and on. Furthermore, time, like reality, is too grandiose and immense for us to comprehend, for "we cannot think of time that is oceanless" (DS: II 21). The human mind seeks out certain limits or tools to measure the world in its quest to understand and accept it.

Eliot sees time, on the one hand, as a destroyer and, on the other, as a preserver. It is a destroyer because it instantly eats the future, creating "now" and immediately destroying it again as a present reality, relegating it of the past which is no longer seen as having actual existence (Bodelsen 1966: 91). Just as the river in "Dry Salvages", time is an ambiguous phenomenon as it contains a huge power, yet is preoccupied with maintaining the natural order of things.

Movement III brings us another image of a history that "might have happened", a book "that has never been opened" (DS: III 4). Linking the opposites in the same line, the narrator proclaims anew the unity and wholeness of everything that existed, exists and will exist in the world. However, he urges the readers to live in the present, since any attempt to plunge completely into what was before, or what has not happened yet, is seen as an attempt to escape from reality.

The Quartet ends with a meditation on the crucial role of those moments "in and out of time"; moments of revelation, which are the highest and most intense points of human existence. Eliot makes fun of those who do not have faith and instead try to foresee the future through different means, going wholeheartedly for Freud's theory and Oedipus complex, or other forms of divination and fortune-telling:

The recurrent image into pre-conscious terrors -

To explore the womb, or tomb, or dreams. (DS: V 9-10)

Returning to our roots seems to be the only way to understand ourselves, otherwise, we are not capable of collecting all the elements of the puzzle, which is reality. Going deep into the unconscious, or pre-conscious, is an act enabling self-discovery

The last part of *Four Quartets* – "Little Gidding" – recollects all the previous leitmotifs and main images, summing them up to provide a new understanding. The coexistence of opposites, the "unbearable" reality and time that we struggle to grasp in some short moments, and a quest for the meaning

of being are reaffirmed and established once again in the last Quartet. We return again to "the children", that are "not known, because not looked for/But heard." (LG: V 36-37), the bird, that guided the narrator to the rose-garden, where he experienced a moment of illumination, with its hail "Quick, now, here, now, always" (LG: V 39), and a rephrased Queen Mary's motto "What we call the beginning is often the end" (LG: V 1). Even still, Eliot states that it does not matter where we come from or where we are going because the destination will be the same for all, regardless of when we have started or what route have chosen, for everything "points to one end". The ideas of Heraclitus, which obviously were one of the sources of Eliot's inspiration for the poem, become clearer than ever before. Childs states that Eliot "was fascinated by the Heraclitean question about the identity of objects in time: nothing is in time except time itself" (2001: 116). One of the key ideas of the ancient thinker - it is not possible to step twice into the same river – finds its reflection in "Dry Salvages", where Eliot warns that "You are not the same people who left the station" (DS: III 15). Heraclitus' theory of the unity of opposites also leaves its trace throughout the poem. Still, the most evident influence of Heraclitus' theory is affirmed in Movement II of "Little Gidding", in the mention of the four elements - earth, fire, air, and water - as foundations of the world and how they transform into each other in due course. Therefore, "Little Gidding", by reviewing what was experienced before, and by pointing to the common denominator, claims that history "is not a nightmare or chaos, but an unending process of self-discovery" (Childs 2001: 152). The poem ends with a meditation on the significance of history through this consolation and resolution:

And all shall be well.

And the fire and the rose are one. (LG: V 42-43)

Time in *Poem Without a Hero*

Poem Without a Hero is the fruit of years of work. All in all, Akhmatova had been writing the poem for 20 years and did not manage to publish it herself; it was brought out only after the poet's death. Akhmatova started working on the poem in 1940 and kept revising until the end of her life. Therefore, *Poem Without a Hero* was, as well as *Four Quartets*, written under the impressions and feelings of the World War II. The poetess could not write the poem down, as in the times of Stalin's terror that would be equal to self-murder, so she and her close friends had to memorise it.

The basic structure of the *Poem* consists of three main parts, each of them with a distinctive character. There are also two more parts, the "Foreword" and "Dedicatory Poems", that do not make up the "body" of the *Poem*. In the "Foreword", Akhmatova warns her readers against any attempts to find hidden meanings in her poems, as "it contains no third, seventh, or twenty-ninth thoughts" (Akhmatova 2006: 99). Apparently, Akhmatova had received different responses from readers who intended to give their own view on it, seeking what lay beneath the "false appearance" of Akhmatova's lines. However, she herself was not in favour of such attempts, probably because these quests for the hidden could not see what was evident; the simple and true meaning.

The first part of the poem has a simple and unpretentious title: "The Year Nineteen Thirteen", and consists of four parts. This year had a special meaning in the poetess' life as it was the year that preceded World War I, a war that might have had a bigger influence on Russia than on any other country involved, as its consequences for Russia were the Revolution and the establishment of the Bolshevik government. From then, Russia would never be the same. Neither would Akhmatova's life, as, unlike many of her friends and relatives, she chose to stay in her country and did not emigrate when she had an opportunity. Instead, she became a witness to all the dramatic changes that Russia was to undergo. Hence, when writing "The Year Nineteen Thirteen," Akhmatova, in fact, looks back at her past and at the generation she belonged to. She begins with a sort of stage direction, indicating the exact time and place of the scene:

New Year's Eve. The House on the Fontanka.² (105)

In spite of the directness and clarity of the first two notes, later on, the narrator talks about herself "visited by shadows of 1913". There is a masquerade taking place on New Year's Eve. But, as we are about to find out, it is not an ordinary New Year's celebration, but rather a mystical sacrament, happening at the meeting point of two epochs (from Akhmatova's perspective); the moment when the old world is perishing and a new world, violent and cruel, is taking its place. The narrator seems to fear those changes that are coming with the new world:

No measure in my terror,
I'm a shadow on the threshold
Defending my last peace. (105)

"Threshold" highlights the idea of being in between, as if some camera managed to capture the very moment when everything is just about to fall down, but at the same time, it is evident to everybody that there is no other option for this world of 1913, except to disappear forever.

Like Eliot, Akhmatova seems to be under the influence of Heraclitus' idea of the unity of all the opposites, as she claims that she is "stone. Ice. Fire". Thus, the author associates herself with three of the four basic elements that are transforming one into another, creating a never-ending process of life and being.

Constantin Ponomareff, among other Akhmatova scholars, believes that the first part of the *Poem* reflects a tragic story, that actually took place within Akhmatova's circle. Vasily Kniazev, a young poet, fell in love with a ballerina Olga Glebova-Sudeykina, Akhmatova's good friend. Unable to bear that she was in love with another poet, Alexander Blok, he shot himself on the threshold of the ballerina's house. As Donald Michael Thomas states in the introduction to the *Selected Poems*, "his pathetic and senseless death is the obsession that the poem brings into the light and 'weeps out'" (1994: 5).

The poem begins with a masquerade, and a series of protagonists of world literature flash by before our eyes: Faustus, Don Juan, John the Baptist, Dorian Gray, etc. All this bacchanalia, full of literary characters is an allusion to Akhmatova's generation. Like many others, she blamed the people of her generation for what had occurred in Russia. Akhmatova avers that the Russian intelligentsia could have

stopped the coming terror, but had they not been lost in their sins and idleness, caring only about their own concerns, interests, and pleasure. This is why for Akhmatova the death of this young poet, though she empathises with the tragic and sudden ending to a short life, is pathetic, for unhappy infatuation cannot be a reason to take one's life:

So many ways for a poet to die,
Stupid child, to choose this one. (119)

Akhmatova believed that the society that let it happen was artificial in their feelings and beliefs, or had none at all. The entire masquerade looks like an example of the aimless movement of people who have no other worry in their lives besides seeking entertainment, so "the whole festive occasion had to do with guilt and conscience" (Ponomareff 2006: 20):

Whose turn is it now to blench with
Fear, back away, surrender,
Ask mercy for an ancient sin?. (106)

Akhmatova introduces the subject of "sins" and the impossibility of redemption. The combination of words "ancient sins" forces us back to the association with the Original Sin; the narrator does not believe we have any right to ask mercy, this is the cross that humanity is now supposed to bear. As seen in the description of the malicious festivities, Akhmatova is concerned with the notion of time and history:

As in the past the future is maturing,
So the past is rotting in the future. (107)

For Akhmatova, all time is one and everything in it is interconnected and dependent. So maybe what came after 1913 was not something that could not have been expected, but rather a logical consequence of the previous actions of the people who lived before.

In the second part of "The Year Nineteen Thirteen", Akhmatova directs the scene again when she specifies the place and the time. However, some powers that are beyond rational thinking interfere with these dimensions of our common existence:

The blunderer comes alive, glides from the portrait, and she [the heroine] hears a voice reading aloud. (112)

The unexpected guest talks to the heroine about her past and future, encouraging her to face whatever is awaiting her, for "long ago your horoscope was cast". The idea of destiny and fate are clearly and firmly established. There is nothing to be worried about, one should simply accept their destiny and meet it with dignity. There are visions of the heroine's past; her friends and acquaintances, together with the voice, reproach her for the death of the young poet, repeatedly asking if she ever felt remorse.

In the third part, Akhmatova's thoughts are voiced by a wind that speaks in nostalgic and sad tones about the past and evokes images of misery, death, and the forsaken. Here, Akhmatova points to the discrepancy between the calendar, which is formal time, and actual time:

While along the embankment of history,
Not the calendar – the existing
Twentieth century drew near. (117)

It seems that for the poet this contradiction is disturbing; it would be easier if significant changes in history were connected to certain special dates in order to prepare for them,

but, in real life, we never know when something significant will occur. The opposition between the “calendar” and the “existing” century also highlights how this time-mark interferes with the routine life of everyday people, as the majority of the time a year is just another year, while under conditions of drastic alternations, time does not seem to be a dimension, distant from our present life, but rather an active creator of it.

The fourth part is set in an old building, that will soon be destroyed by a bomb. This time it is not a wind, but the silence itself that speaks. It tells us that there is time for everything, and it is not our place to rush things, to decide when and what takes place. In this context, the poet's suicide is not seen as a reason to grieve, it is a sin on which to cast blame. In other words, the last part of “The Year Nineteen Thirteen” intends to “recapitulate the theme of guilt” (Ponomareff 2006: 25), the theme that is central throughout all the first chapter of Akhmatova's triptych. That is representative of the guilt of Akhmatova herself, her friends, contemporaries and nationals that did not do enough to stop the upcoming tragedy, which created so many victims, suffering and pain, and changed the course of their lives once and for all.

Section two is titled “Obverse”, a name which brings up a set of associations. First of all, the literal meaning refers to the back of a coin, which is linked to the opposition between heads and obverse. So, it can be seen as a symbol of the dualistic nature of existence. Also, obverse is associated with loss and defeat, the feeling that will fill the second part of the poem. However, in Russian, there is also a third association: “obverse” - “reshka” is similar to the word “reshetka”, which is a type of gate or metal enclosure which brings images of imprisonment, fear, and terror, which for Akhmatova became all too familiar after the Revolution.

There are two epigraphs in the second part, both of which are linked to the subject of time. The first one is “My future is in my past”, and for some reason, Akhmatova does not reveal the origins of the quotation. Yet, according to her notebook, it is a reference to T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets* (Thomas 1994: 145). Joseph Brodsky, one of her protégés, mentioned that Akhmatova did not have access to many of Eliot's works, but what she was able to read impressed her. She thought of him as a kindred spirit and even warmly referred to him as her younger brother (Volkov 2002: 146).

Another epigraph presents a fragment of a Pushkin's poem. I should mention here that Pushkin is considered to be “the creator” of modern Russian language, he is crowned as “the sun of Russian poetry” and, the Russians would often say that “Pushkin is our everything”. For Akhmatova, Pushkin was one of the most outstanding poets, holding the same importance as Dante. Thus, as an introduction to “Obverse”, she chooses his lines: “I drink the water of Lethe./My doctor won't allow me depression” (106). With “Lethe” the motif of memory and remembering once again enters the scene of the *Poem*. It was introduced in “The Year Nineteen Thirteen” as well, but not as clearly as in the “Obverse”.

“Obverse”, as in previous parts of the *Poem*, opens with the narrator's directions. The place is again the House of Fontanka (the poetess' house by the Fontanka river in Saint-Petersburg); time, however, has moved one year later.

The second part consists of 24 strophes in which we are witnesses to a dialogue, in a sense, between the poetess and her editor. It seems to not only be a conversation between two people, but rather a sort of confrontation between a poet, artist and “the Soviet doctrine, its espousal of censorship and control” (Harrington 2004: 133). The title of the section also implies another meaning: the reverse side of poet's life, which is often ignored. In the course of the dialogue, the editor insists on fulfilling formalities, such as deadlines and a poem's simplicity, so that when you read it you know “who's in love/With whom”. What the editor requires from the poet shows the decadence of modern culture. There is no longer an interest in truth or moral values; what people are concerned with is a trivial plot from some cheap novel. The poet sees that her attempts to explain something, to deliver a meaning, are pointless, but in spite of that, she still believes:

The time will come for my lyre. (124)

Time is perceived as an objective judge, a nonchalant referee of earthly events, that decides whom to praise and when. These kinds of decisions are beyond our wishes or will. Moreover, time is the element that brings peace and consolation to a restless soul:

...Time I confessed

At least to one crime: I write

In invisible ink. (125)

Censorship, one of the main features of the Soviet Union, would not let the poetess speak openly, so before writing anything, she had to consider whether it may affect her life and the life of her family and friends. Surely, there were dozens of lines that Akhmatova never wrote down, because she knew that the consequences would be terrible, not so much for her as for her son.

“Obverse” ends with a vision of the great poets of the past that are waiting for the poetess to join them, as a poet's destiny is to deliver truth to this world, and once this fate is carried out, the muse “will compensate with a royal/Kiss your wicked midnight”.

Part Three is simply titled “Epilogue”. Following the principle of clarity, Akhmatova does not attempt to provide an extraordinary or shocking ending to what would be her last major poem. As is the case in the other two, this part is set in Saint-Petersburg, but in the year 1942, and “the city (is) in ruins”. The whole “Epilogue” is dedicated “to my city”. It starts with an image of the ever so familiar House of Fontanka from “The Year Nineteen Thirteen” and “Obverse”. It is empty now, yet full of memories and images of the past:

...with an out-of-place laugh I

Hallooed to a distant echo, shattered

The unbroken sleep of things (129)

Among other reminders of the past, a maple tree, that witnessed the tragedy that took place in Part One. It is introduced as a “witness of all in the world”, and is also the one to “foresee my absence”. So a maple tree, a creature of nature, is seen as a sort of time-keeper that is here to observe everything that happened and that will happen. It initially belongs to something greater than human existence, that was here before us and will be here after we are gone. The ability of the tree to see the future returns us to the idea of a pre-

dictable fate, because everything has its reason and nothing comes from nowhere.

“Epilogue”, and the *Poem*, finishes with a sorrowful picture of the destiny of the country that was Akhmatova’s home even after it has lost almost all resemblance to the country where she was born and raised:

From all that to ash is rendered,
Filled with mortal dread yet
Knowing the calendar
Of vengeance, having wrung her
Hands, her dry eyes lowered, Russia
Walked before me towards the east. (132)

The ruined country is personified as a woman, near death from all the losses and miseries she has endured, who moves towards the East, further from the West and from a border which is now closed. This moving to the east can be seen directly, as an allusion to the thousands of convicts that were sent to Siberia because they did not fit in the system for one reason or another. One such victim of the regime was Akhmatova’s son. Another view of the “eastern migration” is that the East is traditionally associated with the cruelty and violence that arose in Russia after the Revolution, while the West is linked to the terms of civilisation and culture. Evidently, for Akhmatova the new order meant going back to the “dark ages” of Russia and turning to the worst, “barbarian” part of the Russian mentality.

CONCLUSION. TIME FOR AKHMATOVA AND ELIOT: CONTRAST AND COMPARISON

Four Quartets and *Poem Without a Hero* were destined to become the last major poems written by Akhmatova and Eliot. Considering the importance of these two poets in their respective languages, and in literature in general, this fact may be seen as the end of an outstanding and influential literary epoch. Both poems can be considered war or postwar pieces of art, as World War II had an evident impact on both poets. The *Quartets* and the *Poem* reflect the impression that the war made on the poets through images and metaphors (e.g., a war plane in Eliot’s *Quartets*, a house ruined by a bomb in Akhmatova’s *Poem*), but more importantly, on their vision of the world and the contemporary age, as the poets share quite a pessimistic and tragic view of what was around them. Obviously, this view was not formed by the War only, none of them had ever expressed a belief in the happiness of humanity, yet it seems logical that their previous scepticism increased, as they witnessed the terror of the War.

In circumstances when everything seems to be falling apart and people appear to have forgotten everything their history was supposed to teach them, it is not surprising that Eliot and Akhmatova are turning to meditate on what time means for each of them and on the role of history. Yet, the resemblance between their interpretations of these notions is quite striking. One of the reasons for that can be seen in their background, as both poets shared an admiration of Greek philosophers, considered Dante one of the greatest poets of all time and were Christian in the most reasonable sense.

Akhmatova’s and Eliot’s poems present time as a sort of dimension that is superior to humans. Time existed before people appeared on Earth, and quite likely it will continue after all of the people of Earth pass on. Time is too grandiose for us to understand, and the poets suggest different attitudes concerning this fact. 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 she sees is simply to accept whatever time brings with it.

Still, neither of the writers see the flow of time as capricious and unknown. 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. Eliot elaborated this idea in more detail than Akhmatova did in the *Poem*. At the same time, 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 dedicates Part One of the *Poem* (the longest part) to the theme of guilt by blaming her contemporaries and herself for having missed the opportunity to shape a different course of history: “Eliot, like Akhmatova, creates ontological disturbance by remembering what did not happen. However, Akhmatova develops the idea (which existed in her poetry long before it did in Eliot’s) further than he does – the other world is described in more details and penetrates this world more aggressively” (Harrington 2004: 135). So while for Akhmatova the past is a signifier of guilt and responsibility, Eliot seems to be concerned with the liberating power that the past possesses. However, for both Eliot and Akhmatova the past is unredeemable, and it has been so since the Fall, so everything that is left for us is acceptance and humility.

As I have mentioned before, Akhmatova and Eliot were disturbed by modern life and people. Eliot reproaches humans for their tendency to forget their past and even deny it, while 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, which is not surprising, considering what the poetess had to endure. Yet, she is not broken; she believes, as does Eliot, that everything will find its time to come into existence. So whatever happens now, in this earthly life, is in fact not that significant, for, as Eliot said, “everything points to one end”. And, death is not perceived as the full-stop, but rather it is another step forward, towards an eternity, which is wiser and sager than we are capable of seeing.

END NOTES

1. All the quotations of Eliot’s poems are taken from “Four Quartets”, T.S. Eliot (1963) *Collected Poems 1909-1962*, New York: Faber and Faber. The abbreviations “BN”, “EC”, “DS” and “LG” stand for “Burnt Norton”, “East Coker”, “Dry Salvages” and “Little Gidding” relatively. Roman numerals stand for the number of a movement, and Arabic figures – of a line.

2. All the quotations of Akhmatova's poems are taken from "Poem Without a Hero", Akhmatova, A. (2006) *Selected Poems*. London: Penguin Classics.

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