

METAPHYSICS AS A MEANS IN “BURNT NORTON”

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doi.org/10.3998/phimp.4064

I. Introduction

What exactly “philosophy and literature” is concerned with as a subfield continues to generate discussion.¹ At a broad level, most acknowledge at least three different clusters of discourse: those related to philosophical questions arising from literature, mostly works of fiction (e.g. questions about the cognitive benefits of reading fiction), usually dubbed “philosophy of literature”; those related to philosophical content in literature (e.g., moral motivation in Steinbeck’s novels), usually dubbed “philosophy in literature”; and finally, those centered on literary forms in which philosophical works are written (e.g. Zhuangzi’s non-sequiturs, Plato’s dialogues), usually dubbed “philosophy as literature.”²

The aim of this article is to expand the way we understand philosophy *in* literature. Many literary works address philosophical ideas or find their inspirations from philosophical questions. But the problem with focusing on the way philosophy provides the important *content* in a literary work is the implicit assumption that literature is to be put in service of philosophical ends. Philosophy is prioritized over liter-

1. Defining ‘philosophy’ and ‘literature’ and explaining how they might be distinguished from each other are tasks far beyond the scope of this paper. But insofar as we need a preliminary distinction to ground our inquiries about their relationship, I’ll follow Eli Hirsch, Terry Eagleton, and Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen’s leads and define the two functionally: by ‘literature’ and ‘philosophy’ I mean works that literary scholars and philosophers would consider paradigmatic instances of ‘literature’ and ‘philosophy,’ respectively. This functional-institutional approach helps us see how the relationship between the two have been understood by those in the philosophy-and-literature subfield.
2. Chen (2017) distinguishes philosophy “and,” “of,” and “in” literature and argues that only those discussions seriously attempting to answer Plato’s epistemological and moral worries about literature should be considered philosophy *and* literature. Danto (1984) discusses how the form in which we write (analytic) philosophy is connected to our view of truth in “Philosophy as/and/of Literature”; Lamarque and Olsen (1994) discusses the difference between philosophy *through* literature and philosophy *in* literature (see p.392); Quinton (1985) discusses philosophy “as,” “through,” and “in” literature. In “Why Plato Wrote Dialogues,” Hyland (1968) laments the lack of philosophical—as opposed to merely “artistic”—assessments of Plato’s literary form.

ature when literature is seen as a "decorative ornament," dependent on philosophy as its *raison d'être*.³ Literature's role is usually that of "supplying concrete, sensual images, of providing the content to the abstract truths that philosophy distills."⁴ In other words, philosophy is often considered the message, and literature, merely the vehicle.⁵

Even when literary form is the focus in philosophy and literature, its relevance is often analyzed in terms of its philosophical usefulness. For instance, scholars argue that Plato wrote dialogues for pedagogical reasons: to show that philosophy is a process, to produce a sense of puzzlement, to train students, to ask pedagogical questions.⁶ The reason for instrumentalizing form in part comes from a hierarchical way of understanding "philosophy and literature." Literary devices are seen as handy tools for philosophical expression, something that can be apt in varying degrees but lacking worth in their own rights.

Those working in philosophy and literature tend to agree that literature should not be seen as a mere instrument. For instance, John Gibson writes there is something odd about celebrating poems by calling them philosophy-by-other-means since the supposed compliment privileges philosophy over poetry.⁷ However, it is uncommon to see discussions of some other way in which philosophy and literature might relate, including how philosophy might be put in service of literature. Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen write that philosophy and literature can share a relationship "where philosophy is subordinated to the purpose and function of literature, and consequently the aspect identified as philosophical in a literary work can only be identified as an integral part of, or as partially constitutive of, aesthetic value," but

examples are few and far between.⁸

So, my aim is to explore, and suggest one concrete instance of, a literary work where philosophy is a tool employed for poetic ends. T.S. Eliot's "Burnt Norton"—the first quartet of *Four Quartets*—is often read as an expression of his philosophical inclinations, and many critics mention his philosophical training to explain the overtly metaphysical themes. I will offer a different reading of "Burnt Norton" that instrumentalizes the philosophical commentary. Arguing for the truth of some claim isn't the point of the philosophical statements found in the poem. Rather, the statements—and the quartet's—foremost aim is to induce a reading experience that foregrounds the various temporal phenomenology. Philosophical commentary contributes to this by drawing our attention to the temporal phenomenology.

Important to my argument is Jonathan Culler's insight regarding lyric poetry's "attempt to itself be an event rather than the representation of an event."⁹ "Burnt Norton," in attempting to be an event (of the recurring poetic "now") and induce events (remembering, imagining, etc.), makes use of metaphysical statements only insofar as they contribute to the task of bringing about these effects on the reader. By the end of the discussion, we will see how philosophy can be in the service of poetics, thereby deepening our understanding of the ways in which philosophy and literature can enrich each other.

One last note: I'm focusing on the first section of the first quartet only due to space constraints, and the aim isn't to read "Burnt Norton" as a separate poem. In fact, the literary effects achieved in "Burnt Norton" are utilized in other quartets, which makes the poetic aims of the first quartet a part of a more holistic goal of the *Four Quartets*. For example, "East Coker," the second quartet, focuses on the flow of time—seasons, dancing, aging—and builds on the multiple temporalities present in "Burnt Norton" as the speaker comments on the village dancers and his own life from a point of view removed from the flow. The opening

3. Chen, 475

4. Ong, 169

5. Nussbaum (1990) argues that in some cases, form and content (the 'how' and the 'what', the 'vehicle' and the 'message') are inseparable, e.g., when a novel's literary form is essential to the novel's ethical insight.

6. See Kraut's "Plato" entry in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2017 Edition) and Landy's *How to Do Things with Fiction*, especially ch.4.

7. See Gibson, 2018

8. Lamarque and Olsen, 392

9. Culler, 35

("In my beginning is my end") and the ending ("In my end is my beginning") echo the already-all-there kind of timelessness that I'll discuss below. The third and fourth quartets, "Dry Salvages" and "Little Gidding," continue to feature time as a central theme, too. But since I am focused on highlighting a possibility, and not setting out to offer a complete reading, I take the liberty of focusing on a section of the *Four Quartets*.

II. Approaches to "Burnt Norton"

"Burnt Norton" begins and ends with a string of philosophical statements, and more generally, the *Four Quartets* deals heavily with the metaphysical topics of time, eternity, and possibility, among others. Given this, it would be reasonable to think that Eliot is arguing for a particular metaphysical thesis in the poem and that he uses poetic language, religious symbolism, and even the reading experience to support his claim. Indeed, critics point to Eliot's philosophical training and read "Burnt Norton"—and the *Four Quartets* in general—as an expression of philosophical preoccupations he's had since a student. In *A Philosophical Study of T.S. Eliot's Four Quartets*, Martin Warner notes the way Heraclitus, Plato, Aristotle, and Augustine's ideas are handled and concludes that Augustine's philosophy of time is of central importance to "Burnt Norton".¹⁰ F.R. Leavis writes that "Burnt Norton" accomplishes "the business of an epistemological and metaphysical inquiry."¹¹ Bernard Bergonzi writes that Eliot "has made poetry out of his philosophy" while Morris Weitz argues that making Eliot's "doctrine of time" explicit makes his poetry "more intelligible and richer than it now is"—a doctrine that he thinks is found in the poem.¹² These critics read Eliot as trying to do philosophy. Karl Shapiro went as far as to accuse the *Quartets* of "the complete abandonment of poetry," writing that Eliot has traded philosophy for "philosophical abstraction without

poetic content."¹³

If philosophizing is what Eliot was after, why did he write long form poetry? Some argue that poetry afforded a form that worked better for Eliot's philosophical goal. "Although Eliot was a serious student of philosophy, his poetry is not philosophical in the sense that he is recording already formulated ideas," writes Lille d'Easum. Rather, the poetry is "itself part of the process, the working out and realization of his philosophy."¹⁴ Kevin Hart reads the poem through a phenomenological lens, explaining why the poem allowed Eliot to write philosophy both in the "language of philosophy" as well as "the language of poetry."¹⁵

Saying that Eliot wrote a poem—and not, say, an essay—because poetry allowed him to philosophize in a way otherwise unavailable to him is to instrumentalize the poetic form for a philosophical end. So, I'd like to suggest another reading of the poem that reverses this relationship. In "Burnt Norton," philosophical commentary is provided to prime the reader for a particular literary experience. Despite sentences that look like metaphysical assertions, we shouldn't look for a theory of time in the poem because its omissions show us that it is not trying to lay out a doctrine of time. Instead, its foremost aim is poetic; its primary goal is the inducing of an experience that complicates our philosophical understanding of time. This reading provides a way of marrying philosophy and literature in a way that is underdiscussed: philosophy as a means for literary ends.

Even if it ends up being that Eliot did in fact intend *Four Quartets* to advance a philosophical view, my contribution is to show that philosophical insight can be communicated without anything being asserted. Sometimes philosophical commentary is meant to induce an experience that is in line with a work's literary aspirations. Sometimes philosophical claims are the road, not the destination. In this particular case,

10. Warner 1986

11. Leavis, 94

12. Weitz, 139

13. Shapiro, 246-7

14. d'Easum, 1

15. Hart 2015

the early philosophical claims in "Burnt Norton" highlight the limits of only utilizing philosophical reasoning to inquire about topics we care about. The metaphysical claims in the beginning don't provide the conceptual space to talk about other timelines, such as a time internal to a work of art that the poem induces the reader to experience.

Roger Scruton discusses "Burnt Norton" along these experiential lines. He writes about "Burnt Norton" as a challenge to the dichotomy he draws between philosophy-as-argument and literature-as-embodiment. Though "Burnt Norton" is full of philosophical abstractions, Scruton argues that the poem doesn't—and couldn't—make an argument due to the "partial inseparability of content and form, and of thought from experience."¹⁶ Crucially, the poem's reliance on the double meaning of "present" (as 'now' as well as 'gift'), and the resulting ambiguity, make the poem untranslatable, a hallmark that we have a literary work at hand. What's important is the "sound, sense, and order of the given words" which provide an experience of time's continuity and the subtle identity of past, present, and future.¹⁷

I agree with Scruton that what's special about the poem is an inducement of a particular experience. But I want to go beyond ambiguity as the crucial element in its experience-generating mechanism. Others have also focused on creative ambiguities when analyzing what literature can do that philosophy can't. Warner interprets "Burnt Norton" through an Augustinian lens, reading the "perhaps" in line 2 as an echo of Augustine's tentative definition of time as a kind of *distensio*, the double meaning of which (extension; distraction) provides the key to understanding the poem.¹⁸ In the context of another work, Eileen John, too, focuses on ambiguity. She analyzes Grace Paley's "Wants" by pointing out the double meaning of "want nothing" (as 'lacking nothing' and 'desiring nothing'), which invites the reader to notice just how distinct the two meanings are, the "relation and tension between

the two meanings becom[ing] an underlying question of the story."¹⁹

Ambiguity may indeed be one way in which literature can provide the kind of meaning and experience that philosophy can't, but I aim to show that a literary work can go beyond ambiguity to achieve its effects. A careful examination of what is said, how it's said, and what is *not* said in the opening portion of "Burnt Norton" will be crucial to see how the metaphysics present within the poem contributes to the poem's effects. Of course, literature can express philosophical ideas, and philosophy can use various literary forms to communicate its point. But philosophy can also play second fiddle to literature, contributing to literary ends by calling attention to the kinds of experience that literature tries to induce. Let me turn to the poem now.

III. What "Burnt Norton" isn't Trying to Do

"Burnt Norton" begins thus:

Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future,
And time future contained in time past

The statements evoke the thoughts that

- (a) the present and the past can be found in the future
- (b) the future is contained in the past

If we think that the future reflects the present and the past in some capacity, then (a) is a natural thought; the future is, in part, constructed out of what was past and present. And if past and present things partly or wholly determine what is future (depending on whether, to what degree, one is a determinist or fatalist), then (b) also naturally follows; the future is implicit within the past if the future follows from what's past.

However, what makes the opening lines more than (a) and (b) is the word "perhaps." "On the one hand," C.O. Gardner writes, "the

16. Scruton, 81

17. Scruton, 82

18. Augustine, *Confessions*, XI, 26.

19. John, 337

word suggests the exactness and the tentativeness of a serious philosophical utterance; on the other it evokes the feelings of a person who is apprehensive about his situation in the midst of time's compelling flow."²⁰ I believe the word "perhaps" brings about the second effect more poignantly—the tentative qualification brings down what is otherwise a lofty and detached statement to the level of human uncertainty.²¹ The speaker is more interested in introducing a hypothesis than sharing a philosophical truth he is already confident of. We might even say that this is poetry imitating philosophy: "When philosophical statements are allowed into a poem on the understanding that they convert into a tone," Barbara Everett writes, "then abstraction may come to suggest uncertainty or solitude, obliquity or discretion, delicacy or scepticism or wit... This [opening] is abstract and full of thinking, but it is neither philosophy nor quasi-philosophy."²² A certain *tone* is set through the philosophical commentary in the opening.

Now, it's worth pausing and thinking about what *hasn't* been said in the metaphysical opening. It's curious to note that the poem doesn't cover every combination of times being contained in different times, though it covers most. A quick cataloging shows us that the missing combinations are time present in time past and time future in time present—a surprising pair of omissions since it forms the exact order in which time flows.

Why does the speaker withhold from stating the two most obvious time-containment relations, the present coming from the past and the future coming from the present? It might mean that the present is constituted by something other than the past, and that the future is constituted by something other than the present—or that the present, as the middle term between past and future, has no functional significance.

20. Gardner 1970, 327

21. Also see Joshua Landy's discussion of the role "perhaps" plays in Mallarmé's "Ses purs ongles très haut...". He writes that the word signals the poet's presence: "clearly *someone* is looking at this scene, otherwise there would be no one to doubt what is being witnessed." (2012, 83, emphasis his).

22. Everett 1974, 201

If the past generates the present, it also generates the future—so who needs the present?

Omissions constitute an important reason why the opening of "Burnt Norton" should not be read as a series of metaphysical assertions that sketch out a theory of time. Any plausible theory of time is going to have to account for the most basic intuitions about time, namely that time flows from past to present to future.²³ The opening stanza of "Burnt Norton," by refusing to do this, hints that its project is not to produce a theory of time.

The choice of what's remembered—an unreal past—also suggests that the poem isn't interested in talking about the actual past, a topic that a philosopher of time would be interested in. It's interesting that the speaker immediately delves into a memory after the opening sequence, a present reality of a past event—and not just *any* event, but an event that never took place:

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.

Through poetry, the reader partakes in "remembering" without having to bear the right temporal or experiential relationship to the event remembered. She hears now footfalls in the past that did not actually take place. The speaker's words, echoing in the reader's mind, gives us the material from which we can construct the (non-occurred) past event that gave rise to the present echoing words. Gardner writes that the "poet recognizes, and invites us to recognize, that 'what might

23. Of course, the presentism vs. eternalism, dynamic time vs. static time, or A-theory vs. B-theory debates in philosophy of time question time's flow and tense: does time really "flow"? Are tenses objective facts of the world, or are they merely "indexical" notions such as "here" in an unchanging universe? All I mean to say here is that *if* one were to talk about tense as a part of one's theory of time, *then* one ought to be able to account for the intuition that tense changes from past to present to future.

have been' is a reality for us; it is a part of us."²⁴ The focus on this unreal past suggests that the poem isn't interested in articulating a metaphysical view of time since the rose garden passage challenges the idea that the present contains the past, the natural flow of time that any metaphysician of time would need to explain.

"Burnt Norton" starts from a tentative positing of a hypothesis ("Time present and time past / Are both perhaps present in time future"), which is followed by a conditional argument ("If all time is eternally present/All time is unredeemable"), after which comes a qualified assertion ("What might have been is an abstraction/ Remaining a perpetual possibility / Only in a world of speculation"), a straightforward assertion coming last ("What might have been and what has been / Point to one end, which is always present). We thus see that philosophical expressions become bolder in their forms as the poem progresses, and it is only when the expression reaches its boldest form—an unqualified assertion—that the imaginative encounter with what has not been begins. This suggests that the purpose of the metaphysical sentences has little to do with making an argument, especially since "for Eliot, the poet is *not* an original philosopher, or one whose business it is to argue the *truth* of any particular set of convictions."²⁵ A poet doesn't give new theories; a poet gives new possibilities.

IV. What "Burnt Norton" is Trying to Do

The previous section showed why the poem's metaphysical opening doesn't aim to propound a philosophical thesis. In this section, I'll suggest what I think the philosophical commentary is out to achieve instead.

The repetition of the word "time" in the opening suggests that past, present, and future are three of the same kind of thing, the repeated word creating a kinship among the three modes of time. The speaker might also be trying to distinguish "time present," "time fu-

ture," and "time past" from present, past, and future that are not based on temporality—for instance, "memory," "attention," and "anticipation" might be considered a kind of past, present, and future that isn't based on time or the flow of time *per se*.²⁶

The rest of the poem goes on to create an experience of past, present, and future that are not reliant on our temporal lives outside the poem. The kind of temporality "Burnt Norton" is concerned with is "within language," less connected with "objective" time and more connected with the special sense of time created through fictionality and self-referentiality. The poem's opening invites us to "experience the world from the perspective of which the words speak," and lines 68-69 make clear that the speaker's use of temporal terms point to a timeline different from the one we usually occupy²⁷: "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." The "time" of *Four Quartets* is the time of its own unfolding. Narrative time (time in relation to the speaker, the time over which the speaker tells a story), readerly time (time in relation to reader, the time over which the reader encounters the poem) and fictional time (time in relation to the work, the time over which the poem refers to itself) blur together in "Burnt Norton."

The different kinds of time merge when the speaker's unlied and imagined past events are "remembered" in the fiction created by the poem, specifying one sense in which what has been and what could have been point to one end—the reading moment of the poem. The conclusion of "The Dry Salvages," another quartet, refers to a point in time created within the poem: "Here the impossible union/ Of spheres of existence is actual, / Here the past and future / Are conquered, and reconciled." The use of indexicals within the poem such as "here" and "now" must be taken as self-reference, saying "here, in these lines, the impossible is actual, the past and future reconciled."²⁸ Hidden in the

24. Gardner, 328

25. Traversi, 88

26. See Augustine's *Confessions* book XI.

27. Warner, 230

28. Bellin, 428

opening lines are "not merely an abstract metaphysics of time, but an experience of continuity... a 'reverberation' of the choice of words, and of their placing in the text" which "has to be caught and lived in the act of reading."²⁹ The first three lines summarize the reading experience because they "can only be understood in retrospect, and thereby illuminate (and be illuminated by) the self-referential lines of the final section."³⁰

Metaphysics is relevant within the poem only insofar as it leads the readers to a temporally expansive experience where multiple timelines can be encountered. Eliot is prompting an engagement, and metaphysics is useful because it shows how the work can help us engage with experiential time. The philosophical statements are important to set up their own limitations; the relative conceptual clarity of times past, present, and future doesn't make it obvious "where" the *might-have-been*, or the *lyric now*, is located.

We had asked why the poem consciously neglects to state that the present is in the past and that the future is in the present. Now we can work towards answering this question. The speaker doesn't mention the (obvious) thought that time present is in time past because the experience of the poem highlights, and complicates, that truth; the poem, as an inducement of a (nonexistent) memory of a rose garden, demonstrates firsthand that (materials for) the present could be found within the past, even ones that are unactualized. Merely telling us that time present is in time past would be to teach us a truth about the relationship between the past and the present. "Burnt Norton," however, induces us to live the truth and see for ourselves how the present moment can comprise of past events—and not a mere repeating but a fresh, new rendering of past events since it is the unactualized, hypothetical past we are imaginatively concerning our present with. The poem provides a reality we can walk into, something real for the reader; there is a clear sense of a dramatic speaking voice that is driving

the poem and controlling its projection.

Culler observes that "the lyric works to create effects of presence" as a "distinctive feature of lyric seems to be this attempt to create the impression of something happening now, in the present time of discourse."³¹ Rhythm is important for creating a sense of presence as well as a sense of something happening—and in the footfalls passage where the unreal past flows to the lyric present, the rhythm adds a dream-like feel to the imaginative experience of the unactualized past. The poem's musicality comes after the metaphysical claims as if a response. The first line of the stanza forms a neat trochaic tetrameter: **Footfalls echo in the memory / Down the passage which we did not take.**³² Echoing is intrinsically rhythmic, and the line reflects this conceptual necessity. The fact that "take" is an extra syllable suggests that there is something unexpected about the taking, perhaps because it is an unexpected journey taken by the reader into the unactualized past. "Take" is also an agency verb, something that we *do*, unlike "echo," something that merely happens—and this contrast shows up as an extra syllable, which then shifts the stress pattern as the next line becomes an iambic tetrameter: "Towards the door we never opened." Another extra syllable at the end of "opened" begins an iamb but there's no completion, which is both like an open door and an unactualized possibility.

The poem also provides the reader with a kind of timelessness. The reader knows what came first and what came later in the poem, and this allows us to recognize repetitions. But we can also hold everything in our heads at once, mimicking timelessness in which objects exist without change, without duration, all-there-at-once. Recall how we, when describing the plot of a novel we know well, use the present

29. Scruton, 82

30. Warner, 227

31. Culler, 37

32. The witches in *Macbeth* speak in trochaic tetrameter (e.g. "**Double, double toil and trouble...**"), a choice made by Shakespeare to highlight their unusual and chant-like way of speaking; (human) spoken English tends toward iambic pentameter, which adds a foot and reverses the stress pattern. Eliot might have had the trochaic tetrameter's otherworldly feel in mind here.

tense: after Anna anxiously waits for Vronsky's return, she gets on a train. This timeless present tense points to the unique temporality that immersive art works gift the reader; it has its own timeline, its own present, and even its own timelessness.

In section III of "Burnt Norton," we get a hint at another way in which time present is in time past: allusion. We hear an echo of the "Unreal City" stanza of *The Wasteland* in the section. The lines "Here is a place of disaffection / Time before and time after," "Only a flicker / Over the strained time-ridden faces," "Driven on the wind that sweeps the gloomy hills of London" remind us of the ghosts from *The Wasteland* that "flowed over London Bridge" "Under the brown fog of a winter dawn" with "Sighs, short and infrequent." Section III invites a knowing reader to make an association between the poem and a previous work with similar imagery, the past effortlessly weaving itself into the present experience of a new poem. Allusions point to yet another kind of time, a time relative to an oeuvre. We talk about "early Eliot" and "late Eliot," and allusions allow works to tap into the kind of time relied upon by such descriptions.

The metaphysical claims in the opening of "Burnt Norton" is a part of the poetics that leads the reader to first-hand experience the complex relationship among the past, present, and future. The philosophical claims within the poem make this experience possible; the poem lives "not in relation to abstract concepts or general 'truths,' but as the expression of a developing experience."³³ What the poem aims for is an experience of the "lyric now," the experience of something presently happening alongside the reading of the poem.

Furthermore, the reading of the poem itself generates memories—memories, specifically, of earlier lines in the poem. This generates a sense of time out of time as we hold the events described by the speaker in our head while also harkening back to earlier parts of the poem; there's a before-and-after relation, as well as a kind of "now" that is generated by the reading experience itself. Allusion to previous works

33. Traversi, 97

also expands this sense of time outside of time as the poet's oeuvre becomes a kind of non-temporal extension that can be experienced like time.

The repetitions, foreshadowing, allusions, and "rememberings" continue to illuminate what has already been said such that an attentive reader "will be unable to read key words without catching internal reverberations (from other usages within the poem) and certain external reverberations (from other usages in literature)."³⁴ Again, the effect is a significant experience, a kind of "showing" "to make the total experience of the poem an existential encounter with what, in loose terms, the poem might be said to be 'about'."³⁵ By the end of the first section ending with the lines "Time past and time future/What might have been and what has been/Point to one end, which is always present," the reader has created a time within time with memories of earlier lines, the end that is "always present," an entrance into a condition beyond time where the world is experienced on a new plane.³⁶

What is this new plane? In exactly what sense does everything point to one end? The answer: in the lyric now. The poem's repetitive form and philosophical content "transforms living into art," and it is in the reading that we find the poem's "meaning" rather than symbolism or systems of thought which tell us what the poem is really "saying."³⁷ The poem is special because what it does to us, and not because what it tells us—and philosophical statements, through priming us to notice our temporal experience, helps the poem provide a lyric now where "all is always now."

Of course, there are alternative interpretations of the poem that can foreground the philosophical assertions it might be making. For example, a poem that induces experiences about a past that did not actually take place might be of interest to philosophers working on counterfactual modalities. I'm not saying that there aren't any philo-

34. Blamires, 4

35. Blamires, 1, 4

36. de Masirevich, 13

37. Gardner, 128, 134

sophical ends that we can derive from the poem. Just as Plato's dialogue form serves philosophical *and* literary ends, it might be that the poetics of "Burnt Norton" serve both philosophical and literary ends. My point is simply that an interpretation of "Burnt Norton" can instrumentalize philosophical content towards a literary end. It is the welding of philosophical content in poetic form that serves as a tool in service of literary ends. Metaphysical claims are made not to ultimately stake out a philosophical position, but to induce a particular readerly phenomenology.

V. Biographical notes

Burnt Norton is a manor in Gloucestershire, and T.S. Eliot and Emily Hale had visited the place in 1934. Building on the continually unfolding revelations about their relationship, Hargrove (2014) offers a biographical interpretation of "Burnt Norton," taking the rose garden passage to concern a moment in their relationship where Eliot and Hale might have rekindled an earlier romance. Reading the poem in light of emerging knowledge about Eliot's relationship with Hale, including greater attention to contexts surrounding the poem's creation, recommends a more concrete understanding of the poem, one that is less philosophical and more personal in nature.

My approach to the poem had been more formal, focusing on the features of the text itself without much regard for biographical or historical context. Again, there are multiple ways to approach "Burnt Norton," and I don't see why the poem couldn't be both philosophical and personal, abstract and concrete at once. The poem might be aiming at a particular readerly phenomenology all the while serving as a personal meditation on a potential romantic relationship that might have been. The overarching aim had been to show how it is possible for philosophy to be used as a means. Even if this particular example ends up being untenable, it would take more to show that the possibility itself is untenable.

Sometimes, abstraction isn't utilized for the sake of finding something general and universal. Instead, the abstract philosophical language

of the poem might be read as an attempt to make room for the reader, inviting a more personal mode of relating to the poem. As biographers note, Eliot converted to Anglicanism later in his life, and the subject matters of his later works became religious to reflect this new direction. Perhaps he became more interested in applications of philosophy, and what we notice in his later works is a movement away from strong images to more abstract terms. Recall, for instance, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." Temporal themes are present within that poem too, but its most direct treatment is a biblical allusion, and it is the concrete images and metaphors, not the metaphysical claims, which arrest us: the evening spread out like an etherised patient, the cat-like yellow smoke, the scuttling man-crab, the singing mermaids.

Comparing "Prufrock" to the *Quartets* suggests that Eliot tried to find a new mode of expression. He uses language in less concrete and sensual ways—or at least he doesn't rely as much on striking images. Instead, he uses formal aspects of language, such as rhythm and repetition, to bring about particular reading experiences. When this is coupled with an overtly philosophical theme, language's effect is less sensual and more meditative. Instead of images that arrest us, abstract hypotheticals engage our imagination. In fact, Eliot insisted that *Four Quartets* was written to be simple, "like conversing with your reader."³⁸ The introduction of abstraction was meant as an invitation for the reader to read themselves into the poem. Stephen Thompson writes:

If the poems vacillate between abstraction (philosophical musing, cryptic poeticizing) and personality (autobiography), the result is a dialectic, a dynamic implication of the reader's personality. As we come to participate in the poems' philosophical or theological speculation, we also come to inhabit their more concrete spaces, and ultimately we stand with Eliot in the place of self-understanding. We are given just enough of Eliot's biographical

38. Gardner, 4

self to see that the poems are personally staked, and just enough abstraction to allow us to enter the poems ourselves, to stake our own persons. We watch Eliot thinking, but at every turn he is inviting us to think with him, and also to think for ourselves. The ultimate achievement of the poem is to prompt in the reader the same meditative engagement that produced it and that it models.³⁹

The invitation for readerly participation is important because the poem's intended effect is to provide a particular experience, the poem itself being the event that the reader experiences.

The critics might have been right that the metaphysical language of the opening is less sensually noteworthy, and it's possible that Eliot meant the opening of "Burnt Norton" to form a short argument. However, a poem can include a philosophical argument without *being* a poem of philosophical argument.⁴⁰ Unlike a philosophical essay, the poem can't be summarized without losing its essential contribution since content assertion is not its point. Instead, Eliot sought to show that what "poetry proves about any philosophy is merely its possibility for being lived. . . poetry is not the assertion that something is true, but the making that truth more fully real to us; it is the creation of a sensuous embodiment."⁴¹ And this is why Eliot avoids strong imagery in "Burnt Norton"—to do so would be to give a direct object of attention, drawing away from the poem's ability to provide an extended imaginative experience where the value is in the temporal processes and changes it makes possible.⁴²

VI. Conclusion

"Burnt Norton" serves as one example of how philosophy might be enlisted to help poetry achieve its intended effect. In this case, philo-

sophical commentary isn't offered to argue for the truth of some claim, but to generate reading experiences that don't neatly fit the intuitive past-present-future flow of time.

When I say that "Burnt Norton" uses omission and imaginative description of unreal pasts to go beyond philosophizing, I don't mean that philosophy can't also use literary features or fictionalizing to demonstrate philosophical truths. Philosophy isn't always in the business of presenting a theory, and philosophy, too, can use the kinds of resources available to poetry for its ends. But being open to this possibility doesn't challenge the point of this paper, which was to show that in some literary works, philosophy is instrumentalized. Philosophical ideas can serve literary functions just as literary features can serve philosophical functions.

It might very well be that literary achievement can be rendered instrumental to philosophical goals. But even if we were to point to how the literary effects of "Burnt Norton" help us gain a richer understanding of time⁴³, we must first recognize its poetic achievement in its own right and notice how philosophy can be in service of such an end. Examples of philosophy informing the content of literature abound, but examples of philosophy contributing as a form—as a part of how literature does what it does—are few and far between. This lack has been unfortunate as it constrains how we understand the relationship between philosophy and literature.

"Burnt Norton" is a testament to the fact that no matter our history, while we are reading the poem we are in its own "now," the lyric present of the poem, trafficking in its special timeline that it creates. This experiential affordance is the poem's achievement, and philosophical commentary is instrumentally valuable towards that end. The subfield of philosophy and literature would benefit from more discussions of

39. Thompson, 441

40. Gardner, 127

41. Eliot in a letter, quoted in Moody 1980, 362

42. Alford 2020, 266

43. Philosophers might attempt to extract from the poem a philosophical thesis, such as a kind of possibility argument that time need not literally flow for there to be a kind of before/after relation. This would be consistent with the "B-theory" of time where time is fundamentally ordered by before-and-after (and not past-present-future) relations. See McTaggart 1908.

philosophy's instrumental contribution to poetry's achievements, and I hope to have begun with this one example from Eliot.⁴⁴

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44. I'd like to thank Jim Dawes, John Gibson, David Hills, Eileen John, Josh Landy, Melih Levi, Thomas MacDonald, Blakey Vermeule, participants at the 2019 Stanford-Duke Graduate Philosophy and Literature conference, the 2021 Philosophy and Literature workshop, and colleagues and students at Macalester College for helpful conversations and comments on previous drafts.

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