

A Structural Deconstruction of Language in T. S. Eliot's "The Waste Land"

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Abstract

"The Waste Land" is the "GUERNICA" (Pablo Picasso: 1910-1911; Galliere Vollard, Paris) in modern literature. This paper focuses an interpretation of the poem in the light of post modernistic art, especially Cubism, and seeks a linguistic deconstruction of the fragmentary yet methodical structure of the poem. This paper will extract these elements by arguing that the poem posits a complete breakdown of rationality of thought and the language in its chaotic presentation of the cultural fragments from the western heritage. It will also try to prove that the poem goes against the idea of "logocentrism" and takes to portray the panorama of futility and anarchy by using disintegrated language. This paper will examine the deconstructive themes and methods which inform "The Waste Land" and demonstrate that, long before Jacques Derrida intervened in the area of literary analysis, Eliot had already developed the principles now enshrined as "Deconstruction".

"The Waste Land" runs to 434 lines in length, so it is not really the 'long poem' that Eliot planned or anticipated. First published in "The Criterion" (London, October 1922) and "The Dial" (New York, November 1922), it has been the cause of more consternation and controversy than any other poem of the twentieth century. In the twentieth century textual aesthetics became a part of art and artistic practices influenced writers, as the Modernists collectively strived to follow Ezra Pound's credo: 'Make it new'. Surprisingly, when Picasso and Braque were revitalizing the world of art, Eliot was preparing himself in Harvard for a new poetic discourse.

Keywords: Deconstruction, The Wasteland, T. S. Eliot

The association between T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound began around 1912 in England. Their association remained close, and Pound played a huge effort in the production of "The Waste Land",

acting as an editor and reducing the poem into something significantly shorter than the work Eliot wrote:

“It was in 1922 that I placed before him in Paris the manuscript of a sprawling chaotic poem called *The Waste Land* which left his hands, reduced to about half its size, in the form in which it appears in print.” (Eliot, T. S. (1988), *The Letters of T. S. Eliot, I: 1898–1922*, ed. Valerie Eliot, London: Faber & Faber.)

Yet the poem, though it may look like an arbitrary assemblage, does comprise five distinct sections in a specific sequence; and it aspires to a mythical structure rather than to any other kind of ‘narrative method’. The fragmentation and re-integration observable in “*The Waste Land*” can be regarded as the same process as that used by the Cubists and Futurist, springing from a similar intention, and having comparable effect. The myth of the Fisher King has been connected to and visualized from as many mythical perspectives as possible. The coexistence of history, myth and religion – Cleopatra, Fisher King, Tiresias, St Augustine, the Brhadarannyaka and the Dhammapada - only resembles the multidimensionality cubism; Eliot broke away from the oppressive “definitive authority of language” and ‘logocentrism’ of the European heritage to embrace and collage oriental philosophy and images to end in “*Shantih*”. Eliot’s experiment alters the rules of time and space in such a way that the apparently invisible is produced before our eyes. The significance of *The Waste Land* too lies beneath the text and between the lines.

The Waste Land, too, can still have hidden meanings under its taken-for-granted interpretations. Some of the collages look apparently like jungle of lines, but the very lines form their bodies, and they have no separate existence without them. The same can be applied for the network of allusions, images and subtexts in *The Waste Land*. Erasing them is destructing the whole poem.

A key technique in reading Eliot is to stop looking for conventional means of coordinating a long poem (a story, a developing description, an argument) and to focus instead on what each apparently discontinuous part of the poem reveals about the consciousness of the speaking voice, for the definition of the consciousness is the main purpose of the poem. There we have a multiplicity of voices, male and female, young and old, in a variety of languages and styles, and the shifts are unannounced, so that often we do not even know who is speaking, simply that it is someone who sounds different from the voice immediately before. But the unity of the poem emerges from the fact that these all merge into a single personality, something we might call the voice of the modern consciousness.

What Eliot construed poetically, Derrida emancipated in his external philosophy of deconstruction. On numerous occasions, perhaps starting with the amazing early essay ‘Force and

Signification' (1963), Derrida has spoken of what impels his writing as a trembling, a 'shaking' or 'soliciting'. He has written again and again, but always differently, about 'producing a force of dislocation that spreads itself throughout the entire system', about deconstruction as 'de-sedimentation', about a force of irruption that '[disorganizes] the entire inherited order'. Deconstruction is an earthquake: "The earthquake can show up in the smallest crack, the slightest tremor. Deconstruction involves a seismological attentiveness to the tiniest details. It happens in relation to a specific context, even if the crack or fissure detected opens up into a far more general effect." (Jacques Derrida; ed. Nicholas Royle, Routledge 2003, London. 26-28)

How appropriate it then seems that the first of the five sections of the poem is called 'The Burial of the Dead' (the title taken from the Anglican funeral service); and how chillingly apt that the burden of this section is a congeries of markedly different voices speaking of the horror of the living dead, that what seemed satisfactorily dead is 'stirring' back to the surface, the return of remembrance and pain. The world invoked and evoked here is literally ghastly: we are presented with a series of zombies finding voice alongside images of a desiccated landscape – "stony rubbish . . . A heap of broken images . . . fear in a handful of dust" (the last phrase being ultimately derived from a sermon by John Donne). The point is grisly horror; not decent, blessed burial but the utterly unwilling resuscitation of memory and desire, failed love, betrayed love. The section includes the ghoulish suggestion that last year's corpse might 'sprout' back into life. Eliot's readers are denied the prerogative of standing in judgement; we are trapped in complicity, in misery, sufferings with those we see suffer. Eliot's title refers to the ancient legend of the Fisher King, the ruler of the Waste Land, so-called in the Perceval versions of the Grail legend because it was doomed to barrenness until the King, who was wounded in the sexual organs, was healed by a knight of great purity.

In this opening section of "The Burial of the Dead", Eliot includes a latter-day Sibyl (Cumaean Sibyl was the priestess prophetess presiding over the Apollonian oracle at Cumae) in decadent modern dress: "Madame Sosotris" and explains: "I am not familiar with the exact constitution of the Tarot pack of cards, from which I have obviously departed to suit my own convenience. The Hanged Man, a member of the traditional pack, fits my purpose in two ways: because he is associated in my mind with the Hanged God of Frazer, and because I associate him with the hooded figure in the passage of the disciples to Emmaus in Part V. The Phoenician Sailor and the Merchant appear later; also the "crowds of people," and Death by Water is executed in Part IV. The Man with Three Staves (an authentic member of the Tarot pack) I associate, quite arbitrarily, with the Fisher King himself". (Eliot's Notes)

She is a 'famous clairvoyante', alias fortune-teller, who can't get the hang of her Tarot cards and so is unable to comprehend the counsel she hands out. A perverse, catch-as-catch-can and decadent prophetess, she suborns her own authority when she ends up by voicing her very own

anxieties in this form: “Thank you. If you see dear Mrs Equitone, / Tell her I bring the horoscope myself: / One must be so careful these days.”

Following the initial presentation of language and its problems, the section entitled “A Game of Chess” illustrates the demise of language stylistically. The movement leads from Enobarbus’ description of Cleopatra in “Antony and Cleopatra” to the neurotic “upper class” couple and finally to the “lower class” exchange. This deliberately depicted class-conscious account is paralleled by the “fall” of diction. At the regal level, language “drowns the senses”. Eliot provides a frame within a frame. His nameless woman’s chamber is adorned with pictures depicting rape and other barbarities; it exhibits a glut of poly-perverse gratification, most notably: “Above the antique mantel was displayed.../...Jug jug’ to dirty ears.”

(The story of the violation of Philomel by King Tereus is best known in the version retailed by Ovid in *Metamorphoses* VI.)

Confusion, linguistic slight-of-hand, and the brutal negation of everything that is ostensibly said combine in a scathing attack on canonized examples of poetic linguistic and poetic achievement of the authoritarian and logocentrism of the western heritage.

Sexual rapaciousness and abuse (as well as sordid indifference), exploitation, violation, mutilation, abandonment and voicelessness, all figure again in the following section, “The Fire Sermon”, which includes the notorious – and, ironically, formally rhyming – quatrains describing a wretched, dissociated encounter: the casual, indifferent coupling of the typist and ‘the young man carbuncular . . . A small house agent’s clerk’. It represents a snatch of sex without joy or comfort. This section significantly closes with baleful lines convoking St Augustine’s appeal for redemptive grace and the gospel of purgation according to the Buddha’s most famous sermon, *Maha-Vagga* (Kearns, 1987, p. 75): “Burning burning burning burning.../...O Lord Thou pluckest...”

Typographically, the passage represents a kind of expressionist motif: the broken syntax is in key with the prevalent disjunctions, the anti-discursive strategy, the ellipses, the upsetting dislocations and incompleteness, of the poem as a whole. Yet the apostrophized appeal to the Lord is unavailing: we are left with a dangling gerund, ‘burning’, which may suggest either a satisfactory purgation, the burning-out of sin, in the divine fire that transforms and purifies, or a sense of being continuously consumed by one’s own burning desires. “The Fire Sermon” refers to Buddha’s sermon on the purification of sexual desire’ (Davidson, 1994, p. 129). In truth, the Fire Sermon is by no means confined to sex; it is a terrifying, incantatory exhortation to purge oneself of all desires and attachments, in accordance with the Buddhist teaching that earthly existence is evil: one must pass through a series of reincarnations with the object of refining oneself out of existence, of

attaining Nirvana or Nothingness. It then follows, if one is seeking a configuration, a shape, for the work as a whole, that the next, and briefest, part of the poem, section IV, is a memento mori entitled 'Death by Water': a beautiful, lyrical evocation of a merchant, 'Phlebas the Phoenician', revisiting his life and surrendering his worldly concerns: "A current under sea / Picked his bones in whispers. As he rose and fell / He passed the stages of his age and youth / Entering the whirlpool.

The lines ironically hark back to the earlier account of Madame Sosostris and her ill-informed (unwitting) fortune-telling – "Here, said she, / Is your card, the drowned Phoenician sailor" – and likewise, "Fear death by water".

The base note of the whole poem is dread, which might be said to be relieved, but only equivocally, or ambiguously, in the final section, "What the Thunder Said", which undertakes a nightmare journey through a hallucinatory landscape – "agony in stony places", sterile rocks, hideous apparitions. It is in fact a veritable apocalypse; "I John saw these things and heard them" reads a cancelled line in the draft of the first section, "The Burial of the Dead", referring to the appalling and yet splendid Revelation of St John the Divine: the terrifying Apocalypse or End of the World News.

But perhaps most interestingly of all, the poem now moves decisively beyond "Eurocentrism", (Derrida: Radio Interview, BBC 1993) beyond the segment of the world dominated by the dispensation of Judaeo-Christianity, and clearly locates itself in the Himalayas, and by the River Ganges. Hinduism is invoked, and quoted, and Eliot cites a specific holy text, the "Brihadaranyaka Upanishad" – a fable, which has a moral design upon the auditor – in which the thunder booms 'DA', and again 'DA', and again 'DA', and is interpreted to be urging generosity, charity, order – Datta, Dayadhvam, Damyata – Give, Sympathize, Control (as Eliot renders the exhortations which are given in his sources as 'Be liberal, be clement, be restrained'). In this Upanishad, it is further interesting to know, the supplicant hears also the word of godhead, the logos, speaking out the mantra 'OM' and again 'OM' and again 'OM', the word of assent. But Eliot omits the 'OM', presumably with intent, since he had studied the Sanskrit (Kearns, 1987, pp. 228–9).

In place of a pacific conclusion, the poem explodes into fragments, a cacophony of juxtaposed voices, a babble, a Babel, or what Stephen Spender called a hysteria (Spender, 1975, p. 119) – citing here the figure of the Provençal poet Arnaut Daniel out of Dante's "Purgatorio XXVI" who wishes to be remembered as he plunges into the painfully refining fire of Purgatory (Sovegna vos a temps de ma dolor: 'Be mindful in due season of my pain'); here, 'O swallow swallow', a reference to the transmogrification of Procne in Ovid's version of the violation of Philomel; and here (to take just one further instance) a famous citation from "The Spanish Tragedy" by Thomas Kyd, 'Why then Ile fit you [oblige you]. Hieronymo's mad againe' (which

is not actually an authentic quotation from the play, since the latter phrase is in fact the subtitle of the play itself), referring to the hideous way in which Hieronymo, driven to dementia, avenges his murdered son. Hieronymo makes up a play out of a jumble of languages, and under cover of this riddling, distracting device he slaughters his enemies. Critics often take this allusion to Hieronymo and his multilingual play as Eliot's blackly comic piece of meta-poetry: Hieronymo's creation is a mélange of languages, and so is *The Waste Land* itself. Yet Eliot may have been ahead of such an intertextual game, with an ironic double bluff, since the following lines give the context in Kyd of Eliot's first terse phrase:

“Why then Ile fit you, say no more.
When I was yong I gave my minde,
And plide my selfe to fruitles poetrie:
Which though it profite the professor naught,
Yet it is passing pleasing to the world”. [IV, i. 67–72]

Despite these numerous obstacles, the possibility of salvation and the restoration of language finally arrive in form of divine intervention. God speaks from the outside in “Sanskrit” – a language that connotes unity in a pre-lapsarian state: “help comes in form of language”, a language authoritatively dominated by a decadent western culture. Eliot adapts a deliberate strategy to breach the communication gap through language itself. The key, then, lies not in what is said but in how it is said and how the said is arranged.

Many critics like to think too that the poem ends up with a quiescent or quasi-religious closure – as in citing the Sanskrit ‘Shantih shantih shantih’ – the ‘formal ending to an Upanishad’. But while Eliot was evidently deeply moved by the significance and the sound of the Sanskrit term ‘Shantih’ – in the first version of his notes he deferentially suggests that the Christian formulation ‘“The Peace which passeth understanding” is a feeble translation of the content of this word’ (Eliot, 1971, p. 149), and in so doing seems to exalt the ineffable wonder of the Sanskrit at the expense of the comfortable Christian locution – I still do not think it possible to suggest that *The Waste Land* concludes with an ascent to peace and well-wishing.

On the contrary, what happens in the final lines of the poem is that Eliot's splurge of allusions – citing violence, horror, murderous vengeance, purgatorial pain, self-mutilation and ultimate voicelessness – is left in open confrontation with the voice of order, self-control and peace as expressed in the Upanishad. ‘These fragments I have shored against my ruins’, runs the famous line 430, three lines from the end; but a fine variant occurs in the drafts, ‘These fragments I have spelt into my ruins’, which I happen to think is even better than the final version. ‘Spelt’ is such a reverberant word, with connotations not only of piecing together language and ideas but also of

conjuring magic, runes or spirits. At any rate, the end of the poem cannot be said to represent a solution or resolution; it is just ‘a formal ending’ (Eliot, 1971, p. 149).

William Empson wrote about *The Waste Land*: ‘The poem is inherently a mystery; I would never have believed that the Symbolist programme could be made to work at all, if it had not scored a few resounding triumphs, such as this. Many people, when the poem was new, felt greatly affected by it without understanding why; and even if you decide that the effect was an accident you cannot help wanting to know how it happened’ (Empson, 1984, p. 190). With specific reference to *The Waste Land*, Empson observed that Eliot “succeeds in conveying his meaning, in communicating his emotion, in spite of all his learned or mysterious allusions, and whether we understand them or not” (Empson, p. 194). In view of the fact that he then praises what he calls Eliot’s ‘trenchant rationalism’, his comments might well be taken as a kind of backhanded compliment. “*The Waste Land*” endures primarily because of its innovative internal dynamics; the arrangement of the fragments actually synchronizes in a new form of poetic expression that breaks away from the traditional schema of poetic analysis. Eliot, thus, pioneered the entire metabolism of deconstructive ideology and generated the modern poetic revolution of universal linguistic ideology.

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