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Analysing Graphological Deviations in T.S. Eliot's Poem *Ash-Wednesday*

Muhammad Saleem, M.Phil.

Abstract

This paper studies T.S. Eliot's artistic style with reference to the use of graphological deviations in his poem *Ash-Wednesday*. Eliot's modern poetry is both experimental and innovative in form and content. His poetry is full of modernistic thoughts plus various formal devices; concerning formal structures, the graphological deviations stick out in. The character of the discourse content defines the form. Therefore the frequent violations of graphology lead to the core of the objectives of the Eliotique art in the poem under investigation.

The study of discarding of the graphological norms of capitalization, eccentric use of parentheses and the omission of the punctuation marks, where normally they are expected to be present, provide an opportunity to the perceptive critic and analytical reader to observe the painful struggle of the narrator of the poem he faces while abandoning the material world to migrate to the targeted spiritual realm. The deviant use of the graphological material is a tool in the hands of the artist to foreground/defamiliarise the text and it works as an analytical strategy for the reader.

Key Words: Ash-Wednesday, Graphological Deviations, Literary Stylistics, T. S. Eliot, Foregrounding.

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1. Introduction

Twentieth century literature, under the influence of various powerful influences, grows mature and turns experimental, innovative and self-defining in character. The expansion of knowledge, nearly in all the disciplines of learning in this period, caused the intellectual minds of the literary writers like Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot make the sphere of literature elastic, open and flexible both in formal structure and themes. It was the need of the time to try new forms to suit the new artistic material. T. S. Eliot, under the influence of the above trend, also makes new experiments in his poetic discourse that is not only enviable but it also proved a source of inspiration for the various writers to come.

One of these artistic experiments is graphological deviation which stands for the violation of the system of writing: “discarding of capital letters and punctuation where conventions call for them, jumbling of words, eccentric use of parentheses, etc” (Leech, 1989, p.47). These deviations of graphology need to be analysed because they not only foreground the various parts of the discourse, they are also devised to shed light on the various important tensions and situations of life and personality of the persona of the poem under analysis. The narrator/persona faces a network of troubles and agonies while trying to get rid of the attractions of the worldly life and enter the spiritual realm.

For the theoretical framework of this study, Geoffrey N. Leech’s book *A Linguistic Guide to English Poetry* is accessed and tapped.

2. Analysis of Data

i. Implicational Character of Graphological Deviations

The following lines of *Ash-Wednesday* are graphologically deviant:

Because I do not hope to turn
Desiring this man’s gift and that man’s scope
I no longer strive to strive towards such things
(Why should the aged eagle stretch its wings?)
Why should I mourn (I: 3-7)

In the line ‘I no longer strive to strive towards such things’ the prepositional phrase ‘towards such things’ refers to the previous line’s phrases ‘this man’s gift’ and ‘that man’s scope’. But, in spite of this reference, the line, ‘I no longer strive to strive towards such things’ is complete in the communication of sense. It means this line works as a clause; there should be a semicolon before this clause. But the poet has, intentionally, omitted this punctuation mark. It is an example of deviation in graphology at semi colon level.

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The above mentioned graphological novelties are not a common practice in everyday language; these are abnormal audacities in graphology. The poet has introduced these abnormalities to foreground the relevant textual portion and to stir the intended impressions and sensations.

The speaker in *Ash-Wednesday* starts section (I) with the exertions of his rational self and the labours of rationality to move to “higher aimlessness” (Rajan, 1976, p.57) and never to ‘turn again’ to the world of “time” (Gish, 1981, p.68). The newly fixed goal of the mystic is very difficult; to achieve this, he will have to exercise the strenuous struggle. In the hot pursuit of the objective, the speaker utters his argumentation in one breath and in this way omits the conventional use of punctuation.

ii. Eccentric Use of Parentheses

The following line embodies “an eccentric use of parentheses” (Leech, 1989, p.47):

(Why should the aged eagle stretch its wings?) (1:6)

The lines that precede and succeed the above mentioned line are on the high level of formality; this particular expression, with parenthesis, is totally on an informal level. It is equal to the device of “aside” (Cuddy, 1990, p.94) in drama. The speaker, in this line with parentheses, becomes blunt, brief, straightforward, to the point, and more realistic with reference to his objective and argumentation. This aside serves to strike the roots of the rational self firmly to cut harmonies with the life of senses and establish relationship with the ‘higher dream’. This eccentric use of parenthesis is a deviation, in graphology, from the norms of common use of language.

The fourth verse–paragraph of Part (I) consists of 8 lines and there is no punctuation mark at the end of any of these lines; even the last line of the paragraph is without a full stop. The first four lines make a complete sentence but even then they are without a full stop at their end. The last line of the paragraph ‘May the judgment not be too heavy upon us’ is a complete linguistic unit, able to convey full sense of an idea in it, but is without a full stop at its end. These examples are the instances of graphological deviations at the level of punctuation marks.

iii. Pragmatics in Avoidance of Punctuation Marks

Eliot in *As-Wednesday* consciously avoids the use of punctuation marks. While commenting upon the graphological deviations at the punctuation level in *Ash-Wednesday*, Kenner (1979) writes:

(The speaker) moves as if through the phases of some liturgy, in an unpunctuated *still nuovo*, cadenced rather than counted, pre-

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Elizabethan, not medieval, a language never spoken any where, though never remote in its deliberate bare elegance from the constructions (if not the energies) of actual speech.

(p.229)

In *Ash-Wednesday* Eliot is habitual of discarding punctuation marks where the conventions of grammar call for them. In the poem under discussion Eliot is “eschewing punctuation or replacing it by verse division, introducing punctuation only where verse pauses do no suffice” (Williamson, 1988, p. 44).

Lady, three white leopards sat under a juniper-tree
In the cool of the day, having fed to satiety
On my legs my heart my liver and that which had been contained
In the hollow round of my skull. And God said
Shall these bones live? shall these
Bones live? (II: 42-46)

The adverbial phrase ‘in the cool of the day’ is separate from the preceding phrase ‘under a juniper-tree’, in sense, therefore there should be a comma before the second phrase but it is consciously omitted here. It is a deviation at the level of comma. It is an established rule that the comma is used to separate three or more expressions of the same part of speech. But this rule is violated in the expression ‘on my legs my heart my liver and that which has been contained / In the hollow round of my skull’. The use of comma is essential after the each expression of ‘legs’, ‘heart’ and ‘liver’. This is an uncommon practice in the every day use of language. This is an irregularity in graphology.

There is a discarding of colon in the expression, ‘And God said / Shall these bones live?’ The introducing words ‘And God said’ should be followed, according to the rules of punctuation, by a colon; because the next expression is the direct utterance of God, in the form of question. The convention that colon is used to introduce a question is deliberately ignored; it is a graphological deviation. In another expression ‘the bones (which were already dry) said chirping: Because of the good of this lady’ we spot the presence of colon, in spite of the fact that both the chunks are with the same grammatical character. Hence a proof of internal deviation in the use of colon.

iv. No Confusion Concerning Meanings

In *Ash-Wednesday* Eliot, on purpose, avoids the use of punctuation mark, but it does not mean that the meanings of his poetry become confused.

His suppression of ordinary connectives does not mean either something esoteric or confusion and disorder. The succession of words is not random, but connected or related-often in an

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obvious rather than a devious way. Organizing principles are there, often drawn from the commonest associational patterns.
(Williamson; 1987:21)

v. Adverbial Phrases and Punctuation

According to the rules of punctuation the adverbial phrases(s) in a sentence are separated by commas. According to this rule there should be a comma at the end of the expression ‘At the first turning of second stair’ in section (111) because it works as an adverbial phrase of the sentence ‘I turned and saw below / The same shape twisted’. But this comma is consciously omitted. Next are the three successive adverbial phrases: ‘on the banister’, ‘under the vapour’ and ‘in the fetid air’. These three adverbial phrases are explanatory phrases because they explain the character of the noun phrase ‘the same shape’.

According to the punctuation rules, the adverbial phrases coming together in the sentence or the explanatory adverbial phrases of a sentence should be separated from the body of the sentence as well as from each other by commas at their beginning and at their end. But Eliot ignoring this rule has separated neither the above said adverbial phrases from each other nor from the main sentence.

Then the participle clause ‘struggling with the devil of the stair’ should be separated, by the comma, from the preceding three adverbial phrases and the sentence. But Eliot has consciously avoided the use of comma here. All these above omissions and discarding of the commas are the graphological deviations.

The mystic while moving upward in his spiritual ascent, encounters ‘the same shape’ twisted below which is, in fact, his sensual self-struggle with the devil of the stairs. The devil of the stairs is the symbol of doubt which accompanies the spirit of belief with a mystic. The discarding of the conventional usages of the comma, in the above mentioned lines, symbolizes the atmosphere of a vision of a mystic where the orders of the life of senses are absent.

vi. Punctuation and Emphasis

The following lines are also important with reference to the deliberate avoidance of punctuation signs:

..... strength beyond hope and despair
Climbing the third stair.
Lord, I am not worthy
Lord, I am not worthy

but speak the word only. (II: 115-119)

The linguistic stretch ‘Climbing the third stair’ is a participle which according to the rules of punctuation, should be sliced, by comma, from the chunk ‘strength beyond hope and despair’. But Eliot has not done so; therefore it is a graphological deviation. The repetition of ‘Lord, I am not worthy’ is an emphasis, by the mystic, on his humility. The speaker is stressing the severe need of God’s help to him, in the face of thundering evils and temptations of different kind.

According to the rules of punctuation the comma is used to separate words, phrases and clauses repeated for emphasis. But Eliot did not comply with this rule as there is no comma at the end of the repeated clause ‘Lord, I am not worthy’. The above example is the instance of graphological deviation at the level of the comma.

The discarding of the comma in the above mentioned lines is for emphasis; they may symbolize the mystic’s failure to confront the powerful lusts of the worldly life, on his own; it also suggests that, the mystic believes, only the help from the Lord can help him to rid of the memories and snares of the “life in time” (Gish, 1981, p.68) and make a move forward on his way / journey to his spiritual goal.

vii. Deviation of Punctuation and Meaningful Syntactic Complexity

The lines below of the poem under study are also deviant graphologically:

Who then made strong the fountains and made fresh the springs
Made cool the dry rock and made firm the sand
In blue of larkspur, blue of Mary’s colour,
Sovegna vos (IV: 127-130)

The line “Who then made strong the fountains and made fresh the springs” is a complex sentence. A thought, in its complete sense, is conveyed. This sentence is the last sentence of the first verse-paragraph of Part (IV). There should be a full stop, according to the rules of punctuation, at the end of this sentence. But Eliot has on purpose, omitted this punctuation mark here.

The next line ‘Made cool the dry rock and made fresh the sand’ is also like the preceding sentence; here the subject ‘Who’ is understood to be present. Even here there is no full stop after the lexeme ‘sand’.

These two examples of omission of full stop, where conventions of punctuation call for them, are two instances of graphological deviations, at the level of full stop. Both the lines mentioned above deal with a vision, and a miracle which has no relation with common sense of humans.

The absence of full stop at two places represents the absence of commonplace practices of the life of senses and the presence of intuition which has its own colours and order and laws that are usually incomprehensible to the man of the world of “time” (Gish; 1981, p.68). Here, in the

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world of vision, the order which appears as a disorder to us (the people in the world of time) is also stressed through the strange syntax of ‘Made cool the dry rock’ and ‘made firm the sand’.

viii. Phonological Deviation and the Deviant Use of Graphology

Line 130 is another example of graphological deviation:

Sovegna vos (IV: 130)

This above mentioned expression is an instance of phonological and graphological deviation. These Italian graphics with their own phonemic sounds look strange in English graphics. This is an external deviation from the traditional norms of poetic discourse. “Be mindful. From the words of Arnaut Daniel to Dante, praying him to remember, when he returns to Earth, Daniel’s suffering for his lust” (Southam, 1977, p. 116). Here in the poem the words ‘be mindful’ become a prayer of the mystic to Mary, to help him in his spiritual ascent.

ix. Sentences with No Full Stop

The following lines are odd or deviant in graphological aspect:

The right time and the right place are not here
No place of grace for those who avoid the face
No time to rejoice for those who walk among noise and deny the voice
(V: 165-167)

The linguistic chunk ‘The right place and the right time are not here’ is a grammatical unit which conveys the full sense of a thought. The same is true with reference to the next line ‘No place of grace for those who avoid the face’. The next linguistic chunk ‘No time to rejoice for those who walk among noise and deny the voice’ is also a sentence.

These above mentioned three successive lines / structures are independent clauses / sentences. According to the grammaticality of punctuation, there should be the placement of full stop at the end of each of these three lines / structural units. Eliot has intentionally omitted this punctuation mark; persona’s indulgence, here, in graphological deviation is to stir some intended aesthetic effects. Eliot has projected and emphasized the theme of these lines, through the discarding of full stop also. Peace is necessary, in this world, to see ‘the face’ and hear ‘the voice’ of the Lord; but unfortunately there is noise and noise only in the world of time.

The same is true with reference to the absence of full stop at the end of the three above quoted lines. The presence of the punctuation mark, full stop, is necessary to realize an easy and full understanding of these lines, but the full stop is absent. While discussing Eliot’s method of composition of his poetry Williamson says that the poet is fond of the “method of indirection” (Williamson, 1988, p.68) which is accompanied with symbols and metaphors. “His punctuation, for example, is functional, not conventional...verse too is a kind of punctuation, as Eliot has

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remarked, and he comes to rely upon it more and more in this capacity” (Williamson, 1988, p. 69).

x. Absence of Interrogation Marker and Comma

The last verse-paragraph of Part (V) is also noticeable with reference to waiving of the graphological norms:

Will the veiled sister between the slender
Yew trees pray for those who offend her
And are terrified and cannot surrender
And affirm before the world and deny between the rocks
In the last desert between the last blue rocks
The desert in the garden the garden in the desert
Of drouth, spitting from the mouth the withered apple seed. (V: 177-183)

The adverbial phrase ‘between the slender / yew trees’ that qualifies ‘the veiled sister’ should have been separated from the main sentence by commas, one at the beginning and second at the finish of this phrase because normally adverbial phrases occurring in the body of a sentence are separated by the comma. But Eliot has avoided the use of comma with reference to this phrase; it is a graphological oddity.

This above mentioned verse-paragraph starts with an interrogative auxiliary; its first letter is questioning ‘W’ in ‘Will’. By way of punctuation, the sign of interrogation is essential at the end of a sentence / clause which is interrogative in character. Quite contrary to our expectations there is no note of interrogation any where, throughout the paragraph. This non-observance of the question mark is something unusual and strange with reference to English graphology.

Normally, we expect a question mark at the end of the line ‘And affirm before the world and deny between the rocks’, but Eliot has left this place of the question mark as blank. The next two successive adverbial phrases ‘In the last desert’ and ‘between the last blue rocks’ have a comma neither at their start nor at their finish. This is another oddity in the province of graphology. The absence of the comma after the chunk ‘The desert in the garden’ is also a deviation in graphology of normal use of English. All these above graphological oddities are functional and not conventional in character.

These oddities stress and define the theme of ambience of the present day Christians who ‘walk in darkness’; ‘they are terrified and can not surrender’; hence they affirm in the public and deny in the private. The visible absence of the comma and the question mark in the above quoted lines symbolizes the denial of the faith of the Christians in their private life; the care of the reader that there should have been the comma and the interrogative sign here symbolizes the affirmation of faith in public which in fact has no value.

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xi. Absence of the Required Capital Letters

Following lines are odd in their graphological aspect:

In the brief transit where the profit and the loss
The dreamcrossed twilight between birth and dying
(Bless me father) though I do not wish to wish these things
From the wide window towards the granite shore
The white sails still fly seaward, seaward flying
Unbroken wings (VI, p.190-194)

The expression '(Bless me father)' is graphologically odd in two ways; we know that here the lexeme 'father' stands, pragmatically, for 'Father' of the Christians. The discarding of the capital letter 'F' and adopting the small 'f' in 'father' is here a graphological deviation. Secondly, the use of parentheses is not common in the language of poetry; the presence of brackets, here, is an attempt of Eliot to make the concerned lines appear graphologically odd.

Eliot.... transforms the Christian 'Act of Contrition' – which begins, 'Bless me, Father, for I have sinned' – into a secular admission and appeal. He begins with the appropriate religious words, but places them in parentheses, almost as an aside. The confession to his father (not a capitalized 'Father') is that he is still drawn to the world though he does 'not wish' to be.

(Cuddy, 1990, p. 93-94)

The context and syntax of the very next expression 'though I do not wish to wish these things' expect a full stop after it; the absence of this punctuation mark creates a graphological oddity. Two consecutive linguistic structures, in the next line, 'From the wide window' and 'towards the granite shore' work as two adverbial phrases of place for the sentence 'The white sails still fly seawards; seaward flying/ Unbroken wings'. This is a sentence. This grammatical unit also occurs at the end of the verse-paragraph but there is no full stop at its finish. The two adverbial phrases are also not separated from one another and from the sentence, with the help of the comma. All this abnormal structuring belongs to graphological bizarreness. The absence of the needed punctuation marks, here, symbolizes the mystic's helplessness before the lure of the world of time.

xii. Abnormal English Composition

The following lines are graphologically abnormal:

Suffer us not to mock ourselves with falsehood
Teach us to care and no to care
Teach us to sit still (VI: 210-212)

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The above mentioned three lines are three sentences but there is no full stop at their finish; these three independent clauses belong to the same topic but they are not connected with two semi colons; these three linguistic structures form the three phases to the climax of the prayers but they are not connected with two commas. This is an extraordinary and abnormal linguistic composition which sidesteps the essential uses of the relevant punctuation marks. Eliot has indulged, here, in orthographic and graphological abnormalities, on purpose. This poet, whose punctuation is always functional, says: “genuine poetry can communicate before it is understood” (qtd. Williamson, 1988, p.21). The same is true with reference to the above cited three lines. The poet, whom ‘the wide window’ is struggling to engulf, is sweating to fortify himself with his devotional prayers. He is so swept by his intuitional fervor, so absorbed in his humble prayers and so lost in his devotional capacities / faculties that his utterances / prayers lose their apparent and common boundaries and turn into the indivisible parts of a single breath.

Conclusion

The conclusion of this study points to various findings.

First, the excessive use of the violations of graphology sheds sufficient light upon the willed struggle of the persona of the poem to rid of the worldliness of his instincts.

Second, these deviations of graphology also symbolize the helplessness of the narrator over the slippery ground of spirituality where the persona again and again falls as the gravitational pull of the secular life makes him fumble and fall repeatedly.

Third, the use of various deviations of graphology foregrounds the text; the attention of the reader is arrested irresistibly.

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