

May Seminar 2019
NIDA LACAN STUDY AND READING GROUP

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T. S. Eliot: The Poet as Theorist

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T. S. Eliot's poetry in general has three leitmotifs: insistence on the integration of poetry with the tradition of the earlier generations of poets, Dante, Shakespeare, Kipling, Valéry, and others. This integration takes place in poet's imagination in his full observance to the tenets of modernism. This fact turns his poetry as Barthes once postulated into a 'tissue of quotations'—a production of dense intertextuality. The second leitmotif is Eliot's endeavour for crystallization and encoding of theoretical thoughts in his verses. This goal is achieved by practicing intellectual and philosophical considerations. The third principle feature remains his never-ending pursuit of melancholic and despairing emotions and imagery. This paper will restrict itself to scrutinize the last two leitmotifs because they seem to offer a fertile ground for a Lacanian investigation of the poet and his thoughts. By way of illustration, I would examine the following verses from Eliot's early poetry, where the poet offers a lucid and rigorous experimental composition and complex imagery. I will also survey how poetic theorisation is exercised in Eliot's text.

"The Hollow Men"
"Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock"
"Preludes"

Eliot discards the concept of the self as an autonomous whole and self-consciously attempts to reinforce the theoretical paradigms of the twentieth-century intellectual movements such as surrealism, avant-garde, and psychoanalysis. Yet, what seizes his attention is myths and traditions which shapes the individual self. In his poetry, the self visibly evolves as mythical, unstable, and even undefinable. This belief and enthusiasm in its development are voiced out of a signifying practice of endless play between words, images, and tropes. The poet, in his text, invites readers to join in the play for a theoretical articulation.

*So I assumed a double part, and cried—
And heard another's voice cry, "What, are you here?"
Although we are not. I was still the same
Knowing myself yet being someone other.
(Fourth Quartet, II, 97-100)*

The above stretch celebrates the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan theory of the subject, the subject of the unconscious, which remains decentred, self-alienated, and fractured by language like a cluster of images in broken glass. In addition, the split subject in the poem reveals that the

subject who speaks overlaps with the subject spoken. In this setting, the verse unfolds the tension between the unconscious subject and the egotistic *I*. The perpetual duality of the self fails language to materialize what a subject wants? As a consequence of such precipitating conflict within the split-self and his speech, the words are slipping evasively from meaning while they refuse to ‘stay still’.

*Words strain
Crack and sometimes break
Under the tension, slip, slide, perish,
Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place,
Will not stay still
(Four Quartet, V, 13-17)*

Let us now turn to briefly examine the above three poems:

*We are the hollow men
We are the stuffed men
Leaning together
Headpiece filled with straw. Alas!
(and so on.)
(Eliot cited in *Écrits*, 234)*

Lacan quotes the first four lines of the most discussed poem, “The Hollow Men,” in his “The Function of Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis,” *Écrits*, and presents it as an example of *parole vide* (empty- speech) and *parole pleine* (full-speech), the most significant theoretical conceptions of his early works. The human communication and modern subjectivity for the construction of which, according to Lacan, psychoanalysis, played a role, are determined by full/empty speeches. The thread of this thought goes back to the Aristotelian theory of rhetoric and Heideggerian division of *rede* (discourse) and *gerede* (idle talk or chatter) in *Being and Time*. Lacan introduces the above two registers in human communication—two axes of the imaginary and the symbolic. The imaginary axis refers to the intersubjective dimension of language in which the ego talks to its counterpart (specular-image). The empty-speech is the speech of signification, but full-speech is the domain of the symbolic and the production of meaning. Likewise, this speech is set in predominantly imaginary register and everyday ‘noises’. But full-speech is capable of delivering the truth about the subject’s desire. The empty-speech, on the other hand, alienates the subject from desire. In other words, full-speech is performative, for it shows a symbolic articulation of language. On the contrary, empty-speech is locked up between the subject and what Lacan calls the wall of language. In our day-to-day discourse, we always try to defend ourselves from falling into the domain of empty-speech by guarding our tongue against chatter and ‘verbalism’, as Lacan states.

Here it is a wall of language that blocks speech, and the precautions against verbalism that are a theme of the discourse of “normal” men in our culture merely serve to increase its thickness. (Lacan, 2006, 233)

The meaning of discourse, according to Lacan, should be acquired when we differentiate the ego from the discourse’s *I* as Lacan specified. Lacan lays emphasis on the importance of a radical division of the subject.

It is therefore always in the relation between the subject’s ego and his discourse’s *I* that you must understand the meaning of the discourse if you are to unalienate the subject.

But you cannot possibly achieve this if you cleave to the idea that the subject's ego is identical to the presence that is speaking to you. (Ibid, 250)

“The Hollow Men” is composed of five parts. In the first part, Eliot unfolds what his specialists argue that Shakespeare's Jules Caesar, Dante's inferno Kipling, and Conrad's Heart of Darkness have influenced Eliot. This part of the poem portrays the position of the subject in Lacanian sense. The subject is plagued with a pathetic alienation and hopelessness. Also, the subject is caught up in the imaginary register of empty-speech full of the demands.

*Shape without form, shade without colour
Paralysed force, gesture without motion
(HM: 11-12)*

In addition, in this part, the ‘death's other Kingdom’ of the opening part, is tripled with two other kingdoms, namely the ‘death's dream kingdom’ and ‘twilight kingdom’. The dark vision of the first part is thickened, and the melancholic emotions are intensified. The ‘we’ of the ‘hollow’ and ‘stuffed’ are replaced by the first-person pronouns of ‘I’ and ‘me’. The silence and ‘frozen force’ of the first part are replaced with the *I* who tends to disguise. Thus, we are moving from the kingdom of death to the kingdom of the world, perhaps.

*Let me be no nearer
In death's dream kingdom
Let me also wear
Such deliberate disguises
....
Behaving as the wind behaves.
(HM: 29-35)*

The third part of the poem moves from the ‘cellar’ and ‘field’ of the first and second part to the ‘cactus land’. The *I* return as ‘we’, but the predicament of the hollow men does not seem any better. It appears that they are moving from this world to other and then come back. They are living with grief and mourning and are aware of the irretrievable loss.

*It is like this
In death's other kingdom
Walking alone
At the hour when we are
Trembling with tenderness
Lips that would kiss
From prayers to broken stone
(HM: 45-5)*

In the fourth part of the poem, the kingdoms end up as the “valley of dying stars”. The pronoun, ‘we’ again reappears speechless and eyeless. We are waiting at the bank of ‘tumid river’ that recalls Dante's inferno surrounded by a river.

The fifth and last part of the poem is turning attention to Platonic philosophical conceptions. ‘The prickly pear’ might be the phallus as it makes the extension of life possible. There is a wall of shadow between ‘idea’ and ‘reality,’ ‘motion’ and ‘act,’ ‘conception’ and ‘creation,’ ‘emotion’ and ‘response,’ and ‘desire,’ and ‘spasm’. Eliot felt the tension of the impossibility of expressing the unrepresentable in language. This shadow falls between the thing and its mental conception,

which evokes Lacanian bar between the signifier and the signified. Such an understanding of the (un)presentability elevates the rank of Eliot in modernist poetry.

*Between the desire
And the spasm
Between the potency
And existence
Between the essence
And descent
Falls the shadow
(HM: 83-89)*

The pronouns ‘we,’ ‘I’ and ‘me’ converted to ‘Thine,’ which denote that the human world is a circle that starts off with a loss and ends up in death. The poet is mourning on the meaningless, hopeless, and futility of the subject’s existence and its inability how to deal with the loss.

The poem, as elsewhere in Eliot’s poetry, bears evidence to extravagant imagery and crisis between words and meaning and words and conception. The poet finds himself at a loss in wrestling with words because they and their meaning set to work against each other just like “the idea’ and the reality”, ‘the conception’ and ‘creation’, the ‘spasm’ and ‘desire’ and so on.

*Between the idea
And the reality
Between the motion
And the act
Falls shadow

Between the conception
And creation
Between the motion
And the response
Falls the Shadow.
(HM: 72-81)*

The title of the next poem that we are analysing here, “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” reveals Eliot’s mockery of the love song sung by a ‘self-mocking’ and ‘little man,’ the comic figure, ‘Prufrock’. The poem begins with an exchange between the pronouns, ‘you’ and ‘I’—a staple pronouns in poetry that we portrayed them earlier in terms of Lacan’s empty-speech, or the discourse between the go and its counterpart—the specular-image. The journey takes place in a ‘half-deserted street’ that is leading to a room where women are talking about the great Italian sculptor and painter, Michelangelo—a contrast to Prufrock. The sad images later change with Biblical events.

*The yellow fog that rubs its back upon the window-panes,
The yellow smoke that rubs its muzzle on the window-panes,
Licked its tongue into the corners of the evening,
Lingered upon the pool that stand in drains,
Let fall upon its back the soot that falls from chimneys,
Slipped by terrace, made a sudden leap,
And seeing that it was soft October night,
Curled once about the house, and fell asleep.*

(The Love...15-22)

“The Love Song...” seems to be upfront in its semantic measurement. It occurs as meditation in the twilight on the self and its identification. It is a tale of the ego and the *I* of the subject’s discourse—an imaginary see-saw between the ‘you’ and ‘I’ in Lacanian terms. The person of Prufrock that Eliot wants to usher in the poem is not a prophet nor Prince Hamlet, who is advised by God through a ghost. Hamlet indulges himself in politics, and his language is high but also abusive at times. But he is finally ‘a fool’ and ‘ridiculous’ in his procrastination. Eliot’s use of brilliant romantic conceits in this poem conjures up Lacan’s idea about the poetry, which as a rule engages in a game of hiding—as soon as the process of hiding discontinues the poetry also ceases to exist. The yellow fog, as a metaphor for Prufrock is compared with a cat.

*The yellow fog that rubs its back upon the window-panes,
The yellow smoke that rubs its muzzle on the window-panes,
Licked its tongue into the corners of the evening,
Lingered upon the pools that stand in drains.*

(The Love...15-18)

Later this Prufrock is seen as Hamlet:

... ..
*No! I am not a Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be;
Am an attendant lord, one that will do
To swell a progress, start a scene or two,
Advise the Prince; no doubt, an easy tool,
Deferential, glad to be of use,
Politic, cautious, and meticulous;
Full of high sentence, but a bit abuse;
At times, indeed, almost ridiculous—
Almost, at times, the Fool.*

(The Love...115-123)

The poem ends with, 'Till human voices wake us, and we drown'. (134) The 'I' and 'you' of the beginning of the poem changes into 'we' in the midst of the sea. Perhaps here the 'I' and 'you' are reunited in dream and fantasy. The sea metaphorizes the endless preverbal enjoyment of the subject. As soon as the subject is awakened by ‘human voices’—a cacophony of the signifiers, which is the first death of the subject, as Lacan insists. For Lacan the subject is caught up between two deaths, the first occurs when the subject loses its oceanic oneness and the second is the natural death. The poem as a whole is a journey from a wakeful life in a room where all talks are about Michelangelo to a 'chambers of the sea' in a fantastic world of dreams. When this world of the preverbal imaginary is shattered, the subject experiences the loss and death.

*We have lingered in the chambers of the sea
By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown
Till human voices wake us, and we drown.*

(The love...1132-134)

The “Preludes” in its four stanzas is dedicated to the melancholy of the self or ‘soul’ in everyday life in a modern city. The opening and the second stanzas focuses on a mid-winter evening and morning.

The winter evening settles down

....
And now a gusty shower wraps
The grimy scraps
Of withered leaves about your feet
...
The morning comes to consciousness
(Preludes: 1-14)

The third stanza thickens the despairing fog of the poem. In the serene calm of the night, the self sees the images of his intrinsic split while fixing his eyes on the ceiling. The fragments of the self could be seen in “the thousand sordid images”. This is simply the crystallization of Lacanian theory of the subject and its self-alienation and fragmentation.

*You tossed a blanket from the bed,
You lay upon you back, and waited:
You dozed, and watched the night revealing
The thousand sordid images
Of which your soul was constituted;
They flickered against the ceiling.*
(Preludes: 24-29)

As it was hinted at the outset, what is striking about Eliot’s poetry is its melancholic nature. On the part of the poet, melancholy is the source of his enjoyment and creativity as Kristeva suggested. In his essay, “Mourning and Melancholia,” Freud distinguished melancholia as a deep-seated, painful and incurable unconscious despondency. Melancholy was a direct response by the human subject to the loss of the object and the loss of attachment to the primordial object of love. Psychosomatic symptoms always exist with a melancholic subject. Unlike mourning, in melancholia, the lost object is not specific. Furthermore, Freud linked melancholy with narcissistic and libidinal investment. This shows itself in the identification of the subject with the missing object, an object, which by means of transference, preoccupies the suffering subject’s ego. Self-destructive behaviour arises from this identification with the ego. Freud concludes his essay by identifying three preconditions for the surfacing of melancholia: “loss of the object, ambivalence, the regression of libido into the ego” (Ibid, 267).

The analysis of melancholia now shows that ego can kill itself only if, owing to the return of the object-cathexis [investment of emotional and libidinal energies in the object], it can treat itself as an object if it is able to direct against itself the hostility which relates to an object and which represents the ego’s original reaction to objects in the external world. (Freud, 1991, 261)

Freud insists that melancholia regenerates itself assiduously in the life of a subject like ‘an open wound’. This is the core characteristic of Eliot’s poetry. The connections between poetry and melancholy are made brighter in “Prelude” and “The Hollow Men”. In Eliot’s poetry, “images of sordid urban landscapes and aimless human flotsam serves only to increase the value of art,” (Milard, 1989, 77).

The conscience of a blackened street
Impatient to assume the world
(Preludes, 46-47)

This is the dead land
This is cactus land
Here the stone images
Are raised, here they receive
The supplication of a dead man's hand
Under the twinkle of a fading star.

(HM: 39-44)

It is important to note that Kristeva adds another dimension to the theory of melancholia, which enriches psychoanalytical insight for the investigating poetry. She links melancholy with a powerful narcissistic 'amorous passion' that brings about creativity and artistic production. The entrance of the subject in the language requires separation from the maternal body. This tragic loss for Kristeva comforts the subject in his words. Kristeva sees melancholy as a driving force in art and even in philosophy. This was known to Aristotle as she writes, "with Aristotle, melancholia, counterbalanced by genius, is coextensive with man's anxiety in Being," (Kristeva, 2002, 183). Nevertheless, at stake for Lacan in melancholia is *jouissance* of the melancholic subject. At the heart of Eliot's melancholy is his desire for dwelling in the existential enjoyment of melancholy.

In conclusion, Eliot in his poetry, valorises psychoanalytic theories in two ways. He produces first theoretical thought candidly, and then he endeavours to play on his reader's ability to recognize such theoretical crystallization. The joint activity of poetry and theoretical thinking in Eliot is more French than American. His powerful melancholic emotions find their pictures in his dark imagery. These qualities make Eliot's poetic text, at once, the site of the production of art and its hermeneutical estimation. His experience of melancholy precisely discloses and reaffirms the aesthetic sensitivity of modernist poetry. This critical and interpretative indulgence and a ceaseless robust intellectual performance in his text turn Eliot to a textbook literary theorist. Within Eliot's poetic universe, all these gestures call for psychoanalytic conceptualisation. This potentiality for provoking a critical consciousness belongs to the core of Eliot's poetics.

Notes

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Milard, Elaine, (1989), "Frames of References: The reception of, and Response to. Three Women Poets," *Literary Theory and Poetry: Extended the Canon*, edit. David Murray, B. T. Batsford Ltd., London.