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POLYMORPHOUS IMAGINATION OF T.S. ELIOT AND INTERTEXTUALITY

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ABSTRACT

In Eliot readers have a foretaste of intertextuality. It is held that all creative acts offer intertextual phenomena and consequently every succeeding writer creates his own precursors as per Bloomian formulation. Eliot's traditionalist position makes him one of the enactors of intertextuality in theory and practice. He rewrites the work of predecessors thereby inscribing himself in tradition and making public a loving gratitude to ancestors, as well as displaying an agonistic impulse to demarcate and proclaim his own creative space in the realm of literature (adopted and adapted from Worton and Judith still 12-13). In Eliot's poetic aesthetic of 'tradition' and 'impersonality' originality in poetic creativity can be acquired "by steeping ourselves in the work of those previous poets whom we find sympathetic" (Crawford 125).

Building upon his forebears Eliot develops a poetic method embedded in intertextuality that becomes an established pattern repeated almost throughout his poetry and elucidated in critical creed, and this is the matter on which the present paper focuses on.

Keywords: intertextuality, polymorphous, archival subconscious, mytho-allusive compositional technique, kleptomaniac, re-contextualize, Tradition and the Individual talent, subjectivity, self-expression, authorial originality, intratextual, Laforgue, poly-vocal, pluralistic reading, psychoanalytic context, sublimated essence, anxiety of influence, agonistic contest, *ephebes*, dialogism, heteroglossia, chronotopal Other, Indic sources, semantic profusion, textual carnival.

Eliot was one of the precursors of 'Intertextuality' before its gaining currency in theory and practice in the realm of literature in the post-modern era. Intertextuality in its wider framework acknowledges a range of linkages between a text and other texts found in diverse forms, inlaid or embedded as direct quotation, allusions, echoes, references, imitation, collage, parody, pastiche, literary conventions, and sources of all kinds (extended to real world as wider text) consciously exploited or unconsciously reflected in textual transposition or structuration in form or content or both. Julia Kristeva is the major theorist of intertextuality.

Eliot came many decades before Kristeva's appearance on the realm of literature and literary theory. Eliot did not use the term 'intertextuality' as such, yet his theory and practice manifested an inherent

leaning towards or orientation for intertextual mode of thinking and doing literary works and other critical writings in that frame of mind. Eliot, the poet and critic, was a voracious reader, poly-lingual scholar and had an imagination which was 'polymorphous' (Crawford's term) which fed his archival subconscious enhancing his capability to synthesize exciting ideas and images into startling combinations. He possessed a bent of mind in which "visual images and fragments of texts lingered long in his mind. So did snatches of songs and music" (Crawford 158)

In his essay on "Euripides and Professor Murray" Eliot opines that we "need an eye which can see the past in its place with its definite differences from the present, and yet so lively that it shall be as present to us as the present." He calls this "the creative eye" it helps us not to lose hold of tradition, otherwise by "losing tradition, we lose our hold on the present."

In *Lancelot Andrews* (1928) Eliot presented his self-definition as a "classicist in literature, royalist in politics, and Anglo-Catholic in literature." As a classicist Eliot upheld the role of tradition in all aspect of life and literature. In the essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1917) Eliot fore-grounded the dynamic tradition of literature which comprised pre-Christian (i.e. the Greek and Latin) and Hebraic-Christian inheritance of Western civilization, culture and literature. He viewed the end of criticism as establishing a tradition, a dynamic, cultural and literary tradition ensuring continuity between present literature and taste and the literature of the past. Greater reverence to tradition meant for him greater gains in literary creation and appreciation reinforced by one's awareness of cultural and literary heritage.

In his essay on "Tradition and the Individual Talent" Eliot disapproves romantic's insistence on subjectivity, self- expression and authorial originality as against the literary authority and established poetic tradition. Eliot argues that if we approach a poet without any prejudice "we shall often find that not only the best but the most individual parts of his work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously" (*The Sacred Wood*).

In the famous words of Wordsworth one has the romantic position vividly defined where he declares poetry as egotistical "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" ("Preface to Lyrical Ballads"). In the romantic theory the poet's personality is put at the top in poetic experience, considering poetry "a simple records of the response of a personality to an environment" (PLB). In reaction to the romantic position combined with the ultra- romantic vagaries of late nineteenth century critics, such as Pater, Swinburne and Symons, and the dominant school of the time, impressionism, Eliot sets forth his own poetics which is known as the 'Impersonal' theory of poetry. Rejecting the "emotions recollected in tranquility" as "an inexact formula" Eliot argues that the poet has not a personality to express, but a particular medium "in which impressions and experience combine in peculiar and unexpected ways." According to Eliot the poet's mind "is in fact a receptacle for seizing and storing up numberless feelings, phrases, images", and poetry is "a living whole of all the poetry that has been written" (TIT).

In Eliot's traditionalist perspective "the best part" of a poet's work may be "the tradition" involving a historical sense" of the living past. To quote Eliot:

Tradition is a matter of much wider significance. It cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labor. It involves . . . the historical sense . . . and the historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past ,but of its presence; the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order. (TIT)

Tradition is the determining factor both in the composition and communication of poetry. Consequently, poetry loses its characteristic power in proportion to the weakness of its enveloping tradition. In his later essay on "Blake" Eliot deplores "historical thinness" of Blake's mythology and foregrounds the superiority of Dante by saying that the "concentration resulting from a framework of mythology and philosophy is one of the reasons why Dante is a classic, and Blake only a poet of genius" (*The Sacred Wood*).

In the eye's of Eliot, "individual works of literary art have their significance" only as "organic wholes." He believes that "a common inheritance and a common cause unite artists consciously or unconsciously" and "between the true artists of any time there is . . . an unconscious community." In his later work, *After Strange Gods* (1933) one has further elucidation of the concepts of tradition where Eliot declares, "I hold. . . that a tradition is rather a way of feeling and acting which characterizes a group throughout generations"

Eliot acknowledges the contribution of the dead poets and artist in the making of dynamic whole of a literary heritage against which the merit of the individual poet in the present can be analyzed. To Eliot "[no] poet, no artist of any art, has its complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison among the dead" (TIT). Here poetry becomes a demanding calling and tradition a form of communion interlinking the living to the dead admitting a process of reciprocation.

Eliot aligns with Ben Jonson's remark that one of the requisites of the poet, or maker is "imitation', to be able to convert the substance, or riches of another poet to his own use" (cited in Elizabeth Drew 23). Eliot's mytho-allusive compositional technique has its sustenance on his "kleptomaniac ability to adopt and adapt lines and phrases from older writers to nourish his work" (Crawford 302). His poetical procedure is, thus, flexible enough to re-contextualize older materials so that without altering the original words, he let them be read in new ways (172).

Eliot does not hesitate to acknowledge the debt of his using intertexts within his textual contents and also incorporates intratextual references from his other writings. The epigraph of the poem "*The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*" (1911) is borrowed from Dante's Inferno section of the *Divine Comedy*, which refers to a character named Guido, who symbolize a lost soul having no possibility of come back to earth to make a confession (through repentance) of sins and there by opening up for himself the possibilities of consequent redemption. Dante implicates himself in a similar dilemma by making allusive reference to Guido. Eliot's *Prufrock* is built upon dramatic monologue, the poetic form perfected by Browning. The poem "presents a masculinity hampered by incisive self consciousness and inhibition (Crawford 160)." The poem anatomizes male sexual anxieties "ironically treated in Laforguin manner" (261).

The epigraph in Eliot's geriatric poem "*Gerontion*" comes from Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*. The epigraph strikes the key-note of death-in-life. The poem's speaker Gerontion has lost faith in and sap of life, which implies that the individuals who follow the similar pattern of life will become worthless and vain. Similarly, the title of the poem "*The Hollow Men*" (1955) shows an adaptation from two sources: William Morris' poem "*The Hollow Land*" and Kipling's "*The Broken Men*". The poem interfaces two epigraphs. The first epigraph "Mistah-Kurtz-he dead" is attributed to Conrad's novel *The Heart of Darkness*. The source of second epigraph is a citation "A Penny for the Old Guy", which by implication suggests the notorious Gun Powder Plot to blow up the Anglican Parliament by the Catholic extremists during the reign of King James 1.

Eliot's *Four Quartets* blends various intertexts, such as Christian Theological texts, allusions to Western Literature, allusions to Indic texts like the *Bhagvad Gita* and *Upanishads*, the works of Dante, and so on. Eliot's *Sweeney Agonistes* is an attempt to combine '*Sweeney with Agonistes*' and thereby interfacing Milton's *Samson Agonistes* with Sweeney's situation in modern times.

In the repertoire of Modernist poetry Eliot's *The Wasteland* (1922) occupies the central position. The poem is hailed as "a grand disorganization". It is composed in erudite terse and cryptic style with suggestive resonances. In the concluding section of the poem the reader encounters the line "these fragments I have shored against my ruin" (l. 430). In one mood, for Eliot the poem represented his outburst of personal "grumbling, which offered him "the relief of a personal and wholly insignificant grouse against life, but for this and this only the poem was not meant to be.

The poem was a consciously crafted work of art for posterity, so consciously or unconsciously, it encased in those fragments, beyond the personal or individual, an impersonalized or general poetic grouse against the fractured life of the Post – World War. It was Babel of voices against that desperation and ruins

“dramatizing the nervous breakdown of a poet and an age”, and yet it was “also an act of homage to the long tradition of Western Poetry”. Also that, it was composed in accordance with Pound’s formula : “ Be influenced by as many great artists as you can, but have the decency to acknowledge the debt outright, or try to conceal it” (cited in Bate 92).

Eliot usually acknowledges borrowings from a wide range of intertextual references and transforms them into new material, continuing or altering original significances. Eliot’s relocation and innovative re-writing on preceding texts make his text(s) prone to astounding interpretation. Such texts tend to activate the reader to make polyvocal or pluralistic reading, and to construct or deconstruct the distinct layers of significance that his texts embrace.

Eliot’s endeavour to take over and re-write fragments of world literatures brings to the attention of modern readers those writers and works that have been either forgotten or neglected by contemporary tastes, thereby taking the survival of the said works or writer a step further (Lefever cited in Birsanu 22). Eliot’s poetry broadly demonstrates what he postulates in his poetics, in which he underscores “the importance of the [intertextual] relation of the poem with other poems by other authors” and propounds “the conception of poetry as a living whole of all the poetry that has ever been written” (T I T). Eliot’s poetry, accordingly is a site for “various encounters: of the poet with his readers, of the readers with the text, of the poet with an entire tradition from which he extracts his inspiration” (Birsanu 22).

Viewed from psychoanalytic context, “artistic expression” in Eliot’s poems “is the sublimated essence of entire generations . . . in which representative items of world literature intermingle in an act of cultural interrelation and mutual reflection. Each piece depends upon the others and upon the context as a whole, and the overall poetic meaning is a blend of distinct [intertextual] references” (*ibid.*).

Again, viewed from Harold Bloom’s concept of ‘anxiety of influence’ Eliot’s poetry may be read as containing the traces of that agonistic contest for identity encountered by each generation of poets, who find them as late comers, *ephebes* in the field of literature. They find them under the ‘threat’ of the greatness of its strong predecessors/ precursors and, consciously or unconsciously, involved in an enactment of (love-hate) ‘psycho-drama’ of the type of Oedipal complex.

Making Bakhtin a point of reference and his insistence on ‘social context’ in content and the basic ‘dialogism’ and ‘heteroglossia’ of language that relate authors, literary works and the real world, one may see the presence of ‘a chronotopal Other’ remote both in ‘time’ and ‘space’ in Eliot’s poetry. Eliot frequently quotes from Virgil, Dante, Shakespeare and other major European figurers remote in time, and also borrows subject – matter from non-European, Indic sources (as in *Prajapati* myth and Buddha’s Fire Sermon), both remote in time and space.

Eliot’s texts resist any unitary reading because of its ‘semantic profusion’ and textual carnival of many different voices, locale and abrupt tonal shifts as is exemplified in *The Waste Land*. Viewed in the light of The Pleasure of the Text Eliot’s *The Waste Land* (1922) is seen as “akin to Roland Barthes’ ‘text of bliss’ as opposed to ‘the text of pleasure’.

The text of pleasure is linked to a comfortable practice of reading”, whereas, “the text of bliss ‘unsettles, the reader’s historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, brings to a crisis his relation with language” (Barthes cited in Manju Jain, 133).

One of the devices of intertextuality frequently used by Eliot in his poems is ‘untranslated quotations’ covering a wide range of languages from old Greek, Latin and Sanskrit to Italian, French and German. To some, such use of multiple languages offers multiple perspectives, and the very technique enables Eliot to telescope a variety of points of view. It opens up possibility for interpretation mediated through a variety of consciousness merged into Tiresias, the central persona, symbolizing human consciousness. The whole poem unfolds in his consciousness and expressed through his monologues.

Eliot usually borrows from multiple sources and is well able to convert that substance to his own intertextual use, thus, as per Williamson "the first rule in reading one of Eliot's poems is to consider the possibilities suggested by the title and epigraph" (cited in Manju Jain 57). For example, Eliot borrows from "the serious context of Dante's *Inferno*" and intertextually transposes it "to the lighter context of Prufrock's love song" and, thus, offers to its reader a curious "mixture of levity and seriousness". His epigraph apparently may appear as "not an essential part of the poem, it [never-the-less] conveys hints of the significance or even genesis of the poem", and hence according to Williamson: "Together with the title, it prepares the reader for the experience of the poem" (*ibid.* 57-58).

The poet who compelled Eliot's imagination the most is Dante, who "has

become a deeper influence as Eliot's own understanding has deepened – deeper and less obvious" (*ibid.* 87). Eliot in his two essays on "Dante" and "Blake" highly appreciates Dante's allegorical method, which he used as a scaffold on which he builds his poems using a framework of mythology, theology and philosophy (which are part of Dante's world just as it is part of life), and therefore Dante is a classic because of the power of concentration, whereas Blake is a genius (*The Sacred Wood*).

The overall picture of intertextuality in literary interpretation may be summed up as under :

Interpretation is shaped by a complex network of relationships between the text, the reader, reading, writing, printing, publishing, and history: the history that is inscribed in the language of the text and in the history that is carried in the reader's reading. Such a history has been given a name: intertextuality. (Jeanine Parisier Plottel and Hanna Kurz Charney, 1978 cited in Arindam Mukherjee 47)

Eliot wrote an article in *The Times Literary Supplement*(1920) in which he appreciates the Jacobian dramatist, Philip Massinger for his technique of borrowings and putting effectively to creative use of the material lifted from earlier poems/writings and incorporating it into his works, by slight modification, juxtaposition and new combination. To quote Eliot:

One of the surest tests of the superiority as inferiority of a poet is the way in which a poet borrows. Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal; bad poets deface what they take, and good poets make it into something better or at least something different. The good poet welds his theft into a whole of feeling which is unique, utterly different from that from which it was torn; the bad poet throws it into something which has no cohesion. A good poet will usually borrow from authors remote in time or alien in language or diverse in interest. (Eliot cited in Crawford 361)

In the light of the above discussion one may convincingly argue that Eliot's Poetic method being "the complex echoing of multiple sources" gives his diverse readers a foretaste of intertextuality. As a forerunner "Eliot himself produced his work through the practice of intertextual connections a few decades before intertextuality took its place as a discipline in the literary studies" (Zengin 305) . Crawford cites an unnamed reviewer in *Athenaeum* who comments on Eliot's procedure that the "poetry of the dead is in his bones and at the tips of his fingers: he has the rare gift of being able to weave, delicately and delightfully, an echo or even a line of his own poem" (308).

Bate views literary writing as "the rewriting of existing literature" (22), it is "a dialogue with the dead" (25). He visualizes the relation between literary 'tradition' and the 'individual talent' thus:

Writers nearly always become writers because they are passionate readers. The work of literature that they make their own help to shape the new works they create - usually through a mixture of conscious imitation, unconscious absorption, and active resistance or counter- reaction. (25)

Moreover, as "there is no copyright control over readily interiorization and interpretation" it is through "an act of thoughtful and imaginative reading" that the present writer establishes a dialogic relation with the writer in the past. In this way the "words of a dead man (Shakespeare, Yeats) are modified in the guts of the living(their posthumous readers)" (Bate 27). Psychoanalytically, this is a kind of *transference* whereby

poetry is supposed to live through and "its affect is re- enacted by its readers who are not familiar with the writer in person" (27). We may end this discussions with the telling remarks of Bate that in a broad sense writers tend to respond to and translate "a received body of works from the past in the light of their own present with the hope of being read in the future" (60).

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