

A Study of Consciousness in the Poetry of T. S. Eliot

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Abstract: Eliot wants his poetry to express the fragile psychological state of humanity in the twentieth century. The passing of Victorian ideals and the trauma of World War I challenged cultural notions of masculine identity, causing artists to question the romantic literary ideal of a visionary-poet capable of changing the world through verse. Modernist writers wanted to capture their transformed world, which they perceived as fractured, alienated, and denigrated. "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" demonstrates this sense of indecisive paralysis as the titular speaker wonders whether he should eat a piece of fruit, make a radical change, or if he has the fortitude to keep living. Humanity's collectively damaged psyche prevented people from communicating with one another, an idea that Eliot explored in many works. This study attempts to examine the role of consciousness in the poetry of T. S. Eliot.

Key words: T.S. Eliot, Consciousness, Poetry, Prufrock, Identity.

INTRODUCTION

Any philosophical appraisal of Eliot's poetry must begin with his thesis on F. H. Bradley, published in 1916. However, no critic has succeeded in eliminating the confusion inherent in this work. Moreover, Eliot's considered opinion of his own efforts was: "Indeed, I do not pretend to understand it." On the present occasion, therefore, I do not attempt to disentangle Eliot from Bradley and Bradley from Meinong and Husserl (1964). Eliot's debt to philosophy from Bergson to Merleau Ponty and via them to William James and modern existential phenomenology has been adequately explored and established (1988). My intention here is to begin at the point where these scholars leave off, by providing an expository account of the poems under consideration, using the commonly held assumptions of existentialism and phenomenology. Beginning with Prufrock, I propose that the problems Prufrock encounters and projects are specifically related to his search for stability. This, in turn, is tied up with his persistent, almost chronic addiction to intellectualizing every perception into a quasi-philosophical argument by way of enriching (or so he thinks), his understanding of self.

Consciousness in the Poetry of T. S. Eliot:

Though undertaken with the skill of a seasoned poet-critic, this project is neither bound with pain and conflict nor with the consequent cathartic emotions. When Prufrock, incapable of synthesizing disparate experience into purposeful knowledge ('Squeeze the Universe into a Ball'), decides to become crab-like or to sink quietly till he drowns, his reaction is precisely predictable. What Prufrock desires in effect, is to become thing-like, to attain to the permanence and stability of unconscious being. In Sartrean terms this is a "nostalgic desire" on the part of human being, a desire that cannot be fulfilled because being-for-itself or human consciousness is transitory, unstable and ephemeral, while being-in-itself (the material world of things) which it tries to imitate is characterized by its innate fixity:

The being of human reality is suffering because it rises in being as perpetually haunted by a totality which it is without being able to be it, precisely because it could not attain the in-itself without losing itself-for-itself. Human reality "is therefore by nature an unhappy consciousness with no possibility of surpassing its unhappy state. The physical and cultural landscape around Prufrock that is his material world, is certainly endowed with a life of its own and the man does experience its indeterminacy and its nausea, but is totally incapable of confronting it (1956).

That "Prufrock" is a portrait of failure has been often pointed out; that he is incapable of solving his problems is also obvious enough. However, the reasons as to why his problems arise and how they are sought to be solved are questions that also should have a part in this debate. The clue to Prufrock's problems is to be found in that "touch of conscious elegance" which is an indelible part of his being. He is also the presumptuous empiricist who declares; "I have known them all." The world is not worth looking at again as it is predictable enough - "I have known the mornings, evenings, afternoons, I have measured out my life in coffee spoons" - and the human agents, the women that is, who seem to be the most important for his well-being are also easily characterized and labeled (1963). The entire poem is, in fact, a sort of comment by Prufrock on the expediencies of social and cultural determinism. Even as he does this, he shuns the idea of himself becoming a victim of such expediency. Prufrock, when he is "pinned and wriggling on the wall," decides rather half-heartedly to contemplate the possibility of change and renewal. ..Thus, if Prufrock, existentially speaking, is a tragic figure, it becomes necessary to add that he has a long way to go before he can realize his tragic stature. Caught up in

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his philosophical day-dreaming, Prufrock does little to liberate himself from the petty fears and frustrations of every day life. Like the evening, the fog and the smoke, Prufrock has settled in to total inertia. Therefore, "it is impossible to say just what I mean" is a measure of his sophistication, not intensity like the "rich and modest necktie asserted by a simple pin," it is a trick, a stratagem, to cheat himself out of self-realization.

When Prufrock in the end asks, "then how should I begin/ to spit out the butt-end of my days and ways," he is to be told that "he should not presume" and that his intuitive perception of experience would be far more valuable than his attempts at "squeezing the world into a half," a gesture that means little. Giving a clue to the idea of an emerging consciousness, Eliot says that there is a kind of indeterminate feeling out of which self-consciousness or the awareness of a self develops. As he puts it, the specific problem related to this is that "... in time there are the two sides, subject and object, neither of which is really stable, independent, the measure of the other. In order to consider how the one came to be as it is, we are forced to attribute an artificial absoluteness to the other." This would imply, for instance, that it is almost impossible for a person (subject) to describe and understand the process of his own emerging consciousness. An observer would better understand the same process of change (1957).

Such a statement is a clear recognition of the fundamental existential dilemma associated with achieving a permanent identity or being. Corresponding with such a difficulty and echoing it is the obscurity with which the poetic consciousness wrestles while undergoing the process of creation. As Eliot would say: "He is oppressed by a burden which he must bring to birth in order to obtain relief. He is haunted by a demon, a demon against which he feels powerless, because in its first manifestation it has no face, no name, nothing ..." This account, so passionately expressed, is a powerful echo of the Sartrean description of being. It is a poet's intuitive endorsement of a purely philosophical idea (1972).

If the foregoing-discussion of Prufrock is to become a part of a larger critical framework, then we must move almost inevitably to the "Portrait of a lady" and seek in the young man there some further aspects of the poet's germinating consciousness. In terms of linear development, the young man of the "Portrait" shows greater maturity, sincerity and self-control in his ability to step in and out of the artificial world of the poem. He detects almost immediately the promptings of his own mind as "definite" warnings against the charade unfolding before him. Thus the poem which opens with "exquisite delicacy" invites a sort of suspension of belief; the young man who undertakes to do this, as he enters the world of the women, is sure that he has done so only temporarily. While the rhythms, the pauses, and the-verbal drama of "Prufrock" played havoc with the reader's perception of reality, there is conversely a genuine reversal of such effects in the "Portrait." Prufrock's "I am not Prince Hamlet" speech or the vision of his head brought in upon a platter has misled many readers into believing that Prufrock is undergoing intense mental conflict. Such an assessment is only superficial, being the stuff of a Laforguan "Conversation Galante." In contrast to Prufrock the young man of the "Portrait" uses language to communicate rather than to deviate"(1972).

The effect of a line, such as "Are these ideas right or wrong?" is surely intended to break the magic of the dull hypnotic music in the background of the poem.. While Prufrock eludes reality by complacently performing the social role allotted to him, the young man here asserts his freedom to the degree of totally depersonalizing the Other. His play with the Other unfolds itself in a brief yet significant moment in the poem when the third section of the poem precipitates such a crisis. Here language fails him though he manages to recover his self-possession on enough. It is true that the young man is just beginning to realize the conflicting dialectic that characterizes relationship with the Other. His awareness of the complexity of life is only just emerging, true, but with Prufrock this process does not start at all as he never tries to contest his freedom in concrete terms.

While moving from "Prufrock" and "Portrait" into the next two poems entitled "Preludes" and Rhapsody on a Windy Night", the transition taking place can best be articulated in the words of Anne Paolucci: "the kind of protagonist that emerges within this medium is forever threatening to turn into a voice, a mind, a consciousness, a strange creature without identity or personality" (1975).When such a phenomenon occurs in drama, for instance in the plays of Edward Albee-or Sam Shepard, it is an occasion for the dramatist to depict the anguish of characters trying to overcome the perpetual flux around them. It is also a theatrical device whereby the dramatist, as in Albee's Seascapes or in Shepard's Angel City, has his dramatic person as either turning in to beasts or confronting bestiality, so that he may trace, backwards perhaps, the evolution and origin of character. When these characters regain consciousness, we see all the stages of that emerging consciousness, as though on a screen. (1976).

A similar journey into the intricate contours of human consciousness seems to be a powerful motive-force in T. S. Eliot's poetry. Eliot's "Sweeney" poems constitute just such a probe and the "terrible beauty" of a poem like "Gerontion" also emerges from a similar search. What unfolds in "Gerontion" may be perceived as the drama of a shifting consciousness existing at many levels instead of at one. That Eliot understood this is clear when he says:

Consciousness is not an entity, but an aspect, and an inconsistent aspect of reality. Experience, we may assert, both begins and ends in something which is not conscious. Consciousness is reducible to relations between different states of consciousness; and neither point of view is more nearly ultimate than the other.

Though his terminology is different, here Eliot is trying to get at the idea of absolute being or complete self-consciousness, which is of course conceivable, but not perhaps possible. Existential phenomenologists like Sartre describe the complex dialectic that unfolds itself when an individual tries to analyze his own consciousness the same way as Gerontion is trying to do in the course of the poem (1933).

The old man in "Gerontion" achieves a remarkable unity of consciousness in which perception, language, memory, reflection and will exist with equal intensity, each associated with a different sphere of activity. His acute consciousness of time is conveyed through his regret at having the experience but not the desire. He is a sort of Tiresias who has "fore suffered all." Talking of war, love, religion or history, he demonstrates the intense range of his mind. He is aware of the contradictions and ironies of life that "multiply variety in a wilderness of mirrors." His compulsion to seek the value of every experience makes him reconstruct the more intense moments of his life. He attempts thereby to look into the genesis of knowledge and it is this that gives depth to the poem. The thoughts of a "dry basin" are not indeed dry. Witness for instance, the perceptive account of the relationship between conscious being and becoming. "History has many cunning passages" is another way of saying that the temporal world is in perpetual flux leading constantly from one passage to the next. As if this were not enough, the perception of such a world also leads to error. "The weak hands that perceive the confusions" are not trained enough to transcend towards knowledge of being and through this to knowledge of self. The experimental aspects of war, religion, sex, and economics are inextricably mixed up in the old man's mind. But each has its designated place in helping the old man to reconstruct his consciousness. There is no reason to believe that the poem speaks only of deconstruction and disintegration. The pattern of opposed forces here suggests a movement towards synthesis. The poem, in short, constitutes an old man's project for achieving a clarity of thought.

The open-endedness of "Gerontion" and the criticism that Eliot "fails to project it into a coherent poem" or the feeling that here the sheer intensity of feeling "failed to find a satisfactory correlative", are only ways of saying that human consciousness, or at any rate a poem about it, can never reach any conclusion. The essence of man is never constituted by distinct properties and chronological developments, but by possible ways of being (1964). That man's existence is fundamentally unpredictable and contingent is a statement upheld by the world of "Gerontion." The poem, in short, concerns itself not merely with the mind of a single man but with a comprehensive and representative human consciousness as a whole. "Think that at last I have not made this show purposelessly," says Gerontion; the poet himself seems to make this a sort of statement as the poem was originally intended as a kind of prelude to "The Waste land." In terms of an evolving consciousness, "Gerontion" reaches a high point, whereby a "transcendence of the individual self" is almost complete (1963). The whole movement of Eliot's poetry from "Prufrock" to "Gerontion" moves increasingly towards such a transcending awareness. After transcending self in "Gerontion" where does Eliot go? The answer would point to the cross-cultural consciousness of "The Waste Land."

While "The Waste Land" lies beyond the scope of this discussion, I would suggest that admirers of Eliot's poetry must exercise the greatest caution in analyzing the essentially Euro-centered consciousness of "The Waste Land" and its creator. To what extent did Eliot transcend his immediate cultural matrix towards a higher self? And to what degree could Eliot effect such a convergence between intellectual and emotional responses? In considering such questions it is useful to remember that, sociologically, Eliot's roots lay in Humanism and, anthropologically, in the Graeco-Roman civilization. To my mind the Christian cravings of "Gerontion" are therefore more authentic than the artificially arranged cadences of "Shantih, Shantih, Shantih" in "The Waste Land." A critical caution, therefore, should always guide our understanding of Eliot's consciousness. Indeed, the consciousness of Eliot remains narrowly.

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