

Why the Thunder hadn't spoken yet: T. S. Eliot's buried life of emotions in his Early poetry

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«/... and long we try in vain to speak and act / Our hidden self, and what we say and do / Is eloquent, is well-but 'tis not true!./» (M. Arnold, «The Buried Life», 1852, 64-66)

If, according to Eliot himself, literary criticism is «...an instinctive activity of the civilized mind...» (*To Criticize the Critic*: 19), my, say, reasonably civilized reading mind, when confronted with Eliot's Early poetry (1917-1922), instinctively yields to the impression that the author is deliberately trying to hold back a considerable range of emotional response which ultimately can be traced throughout the poems.

Of course I have come across other voices which support this initial impression. I quote at random: «...The power of Eliot's early verse comes from an almost unbearable tension between romantic yearning and intellectual detachment...» (BUSH: 1984: x), or, «...his (=Eliot's)... satiric observation of life which includes most of his Early poetry is less important than the feelings which support it... we shall be well advised to seek in this world of appearance the hidden reality that matters... he does not write of things about which he does not care or has not cared...» (WILLIAMSON: 77-79) or, more recently, «...The violence of feeling controlled by the perfection of his manners, appears in the early poetry...» (BUSH: 1991: 11). As a result I have been prompted to consider the following aspects concerning Eliot's Early verse: a) to try to find out a likely explanation of the aforementioned emotionally inhibited attitude on the poet's part; b) to analyse the stylistic consequences of this attitude; c) to ponder on Eliot's «delay» in disclosing his most intimate and passionate convictions.

The outcome of my reflections on these points will be the main concern of this paper.

I

We all know that Eliot was definitely not an extrovert character¹. Stephen Spender in an illuminating essay entitled «Remembering Eliot» (1967) tells us of an early anecdote concerning a certain lady «...who knew Eliot well from 1913 onwards...». According to Spender, what impressed her about «...the young Mr. Eliot was his inability to express himself conversationally, to enter into personal relationships...» (SPENDER: 209, my emphasis). We also know of Eliot's reticence concerning personal biographical data as well as of his early critical tendency towards «depersonalization», yet, I wonder, was he a born introvert or rather was he encouraged to be one?

In my view the family responsibility in this respect should be emphasized. Most of Eliot's still tentative biographers (SENCOURT: 1971; SPENDER: 1975; GORDON: 1977; ACKROYD: 1984; SIGG: 1989; SHARPE: 1991...) focus on the poet's rigid, emotionally cold atmosphere of his Unitarian upbringing: «...a rational and enlightened creed... devoid of religious mystery...» (SHARPE: 14), a creed ready to foster attitudes of emotional restraint in human relations, parents and children included. Unitarian parents used to keep their children at a distance with the consequent risk outlined by Eric Sigg: «...Left to an abstract standard of good and evil ...and offering no reward save dull virtue, a child may instead of a "conscience", develop a censorious, self-observing faculty that impedes enselment and encourages social isolation. Such severity purchases moral awareness at the price of emotional strength...» (SIGG: 25, my emphasis).

Neither can the social atmosphere, i.e. Eliot's *dull conspiracy* («Spleen», 1.10), of his early years be overlooked. It was still in part very similar to that described by Eliot's mentor at Harvard, the Spanish-born George Santayana in 1858, as the «good Boston society... clannish... and highly moralised...» though less «highly cultivated» than Santayana's and mainly a «commercial community», hostile to «artists» (i.e. parasites) (SANTAYANA: 353-54), occupied with bourgeois routines, a society which «...came close to stifling him (=Eliot) altogether... the fruit of emotional desiccation...» (ACKROYD: 38-39, my emphasis). A society, besides, pervaded by what Eliot himself called «the Boston doubt», as James Longenbach defines it, «...a scepticism which is difficult to explain to those who are not born to it...» (BUSH: 1991:48).

Still as a young man Eliot somehow reacted against both these family and social emotionally repressive influences (I am referring to his Harvard and Paris years). Yet, say, the harm was done, their imprint pervades his Early poems in a variety of ways, as we shall see, as well as the author's intellectual development as expressed in his early critical thought. Here his three famous seminal tenets postulate, as we all know, the suppression of the poet's personality (*S. Wood*: 52-53), the use of a more or less artistic «formula» to express emotion (*Ibid*: 100), and the importance of the association of intellect and sensitivity in the metaphorical process (*Selected E.*: 281-91).

1. Recent discoveries have shown that, in his mature years, Eliot was a much less reserved person when he felt at ease with people. See J. CHERNAIK, «T. S. Eliot as Tom Possum», *T.L.S.*, Nov. 1, 1991, 13-14; and P. ABAD, *Como leer a T. S. Eliot*, Madrid, Eds. Júcar, 1992, págs. 14-15.

As befits a figure of Eliot's import these tenets show a perfect technical and intellectual coherence with the individual poems, though much less so if we pay attention to the bulk of his Early poetic output. Hence my allusion in the title of this paper to Eliot's «buried life» understood as the Arnoldian «...passionate side of the human nature that we so often try to ignore or suppress...» (SOUTHAM: 45), or, «...the genuine sincere life of the emotions which exist beneath the social surface...» (JAIN: 60).

Briefly, Eliot's Early poems reveal a fairly wide range of authorial emotional restraint evident at different levels of human intercourse, expressed by means of similar stylistic resources and acknowledged by Eliot himself with regard, for instance, to his *Ara Vos Prec* volume of 1920, whose title, that urgently appeals to the reader's sympathy and even compassion, he admits was chosen because it was «unintelligible to most people...» (*Letters*: 338).

Now, I have established for consideration three Eliotian levels of emotional inhibition in the Early poetry: a) *social*, b) *affective* (family ties), c) *pseudo-amorous*, though, more often than not, these areas of experience may blend within a certain poem.

Eliot's basic attitude towards controlling his feelings in the poems concerned with polite drawing-room society (a) is, in my view, splendidly summarized in line 27 of his «Prufrock»: «...there will be time / to prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet...» as well as perfectly hinted at in the occasional «refrain», with the women coming and going (11. 13,14; 35,36), a poem which Eliot came to admit in 1962 as «...an expression of feeling of my own...» (JAIN: 35).

Other earlier and later poems reveal, and implicitly complain about, the same socially detached, hypocritical attitude such as «Spleen» (1910) with its «...satisfied procession \ of definite Sunday faces...» (11.1-2), the more subtle «Portrait of a Lady» (1910-11) where the hostess's sentimental insistence, «...For everybody said so, all our friends / They all were sure our feelings would relate...» (III, 11.19-20) clashes time and again with her visitor's polite, almost granitic imperturbability «...—Let us take the air... / Admire the monuments / Discuss the late events...» (I, 11.36-38), «...I smile of course / And go on drinking tea...» (II, 11.10-11), «...I take my hat... / You will see me any morning in the park...» (II, 11.29-31), «...Let us take the air, in a tobacco trance...» (III, 11.30); or, the satiric «Mr. Apollinax» (1916), a character absolutely cryptic for the guests at the pseudo-intellectual party (11.18-20) of which Eliot sarcastically only remembers «...a slice of lemon, and a bitten macaroon...» (1.22).

At the affective level (b), i.e., that in which I include a few poems concerned with some of the poet's mainly women relatives, Eliot's emotions are no less restrictively present.

These poems are part of the so-called group of the «Bostonian poems» and of course they also contain some latent social criticism of the kind just discussed. One of them, «The Boston Evening Transcript» (1915) shows an extremely harsh social critique (11.3-5) which ultimately exposes his «cousin Harriet's» unemotional character as well as the poet's lack of affection for her (1.9). Somewhat less aggressive is «Aunt Helen», a fairly respected woman while she lived (11.4-6), a poem which ironically develops into a consideration of social hypocrisy at class-level (between mistress and

servants, 11.11-13) as well as of the rich woman's uncaring attitude towards her kinsfolk: «...*The dogs were handsomely provided for...*» (1.8).

The poet seems to keep much better sentiments for his active and modern «Cousin Nancy» precisely because she runs against the tides of the times: «...*Miss Nancy Ellicott smoked / And danced all the modern dances...*» (11.7-8), yet fatally so, because «...*Matthew and Waldo...*» (1.12) the «guardians» of the literary and spiritual creeds held by the circumspect New England society, will provide for things to remain unaltered (1.13).

As to the third level mentioned: pseudo-amorous (c), Eliot's emotional attitude is eminently ANTI-romantic with one or two flashes of overt (and beautiful) romanticism in poems like «*La Figlia Che Piange*» and «*A Cooking Egg*» (11.25-26), the latter included in the *Ara Vos Prec* volume which has been significantly defined as «...a book about pain... Most of all it is a book about the pain of sexuality, the pain of Arnaut Daniel, whose sin was lust...» (BUSH: 1991: 41).

Eliot's ANTI-romantic attitude can be traced in two basic frameworks: i) a *sceptical* vision of unfulfilled love-affairs, which possibly has to do with the author's early love failures (Emily Hale and Vivienne Eliot); ii) a deeply *ironical* vision of erotic relations, possibly rooted in his exacting notions of «higher love» («Dante», 1929)² or «perfect love» («View and Reviews», 1935)³ a kind of spiritual love made up of absolute generosity and self-renouncement.

Eliot's treatment of the first aspect (sceptical) can be considered twofold. Firstly, from the point of view of a basically negative presentation of the feminine figure, which can be either pathetic as in «*Conversation Galante*» or in «*Portrait of a Lady*» (though here the «lady» offers a positive hue: she is the only character in the poem to have had a «buried life» (II, 1.13) and, consequently, Eliot finally has to admit her superiority over the unemotional, lifeless masculine character, III, 11.38,41); or hysterical, as in «*Nocturne*» or «*Hysteria*», and, *mutatis mutandis*, like Doris and the other women in «*Sweeney Erect*». Also, in a couple of poems of early youth woman appears as a sort of pitiless, inscrutable «*femme fatale*» («*Circe's Palace*»; «*On a Portrait*») which in some way heralds the future Grishkin of «*Whispers of Immortality*» (1917-18).

Secondly, from the perspective of a cold, detached, yet more or less pretended indifference on the masculine side as, for instance, in «*Nocturne*», «*Portrait of a Lady*», «*C. Galante*» and «*La Figlia Che Piange*».

Going back to my second basic framework (ironical), Eliot's irony⁴ in the treatment of sham love relations is abundant and effective, both as situational irony («*Lune de Miel*», «*Whispers of Immortality*», «*Burbank*», the two Sweeney poems...), and, especially, as verbal irony, though both types may appear together in some poems («*C. Galante*»).

2. «...The love of man and woman is only explained and made reasonable by the higher love or else is simply the coupling animals...», *Selected E.*: 234-35.

3. «...‘love’ in the sense in which ‘love’ is the opposite of what we ordinarily mean by ‘love’ (the desire to possess and to dominate or to be dominated by)...» BUSH: 1991: 16.

4. Understood as a «...hypersensitivity to a universe permanently out of joint and unfailingly grotesque...», MUECKE: 27.

Eliot's verbal or expressive irony is functional and contributes decisively to the detrimental characterization of the figures involved. Such is the case with the Prufrock and Sweeney characters («Sweeney Erect»; «Sweeney among the Nightingales») as well as with other, say, minor characters like Doris («S. Erect»), Rachel and «the lady in the cape» («S. among the N.», 11.23, 25, Grishkin (a name which I consider suggestive of «gray» (=gris)– «skin» relating to a woman whose skin has the pallor of death, a possibility that fits very well within the fatalistic context of the poem): a sex inciter, in «Whispers...», or Burbank (=«Antony»), Princess Volupine (=«Cleopatra»), and Bleistein in «Burbank with a Baedeker...» (1919).

II

Moving on to the *stylistic* consequences of Eliot's self-controlled emotional behaviour in his Early verse, these can be more ostensibly observed both in the poet's ambiguous manipulation of the poems' genre and in his use of imagery.

The fact that when confronted with poems such as «Portrait of a Lady», «Prufrock», «La Figlia Che Piange» or «Gerontion», we never feel sure whether they are either Dramatic Monologues or Interior Monologues or both, reveals Eliot's deliberately hiding (and paradoxically showing) his emotions.

In all these cases the speaker is a fictional character and, yet, as Eliot himself once theorised in his «Three Voices of Poetry» (1953, *On Poetry and Poets*: 89ff), the fictional lyric character is either the «second» voice of poetry, i.e. «...*the voice of the poet addressing an audience...*» if the presence of a silent auditor can be felt and, consequently, the poem approaches the Dramatic Monologue; or, the «first» voice of poetry, i.e., «...*the voice of the poet talking to himself – or to nobody...*» (*Ibid*: 89) and the poem becomes an Interior Monologue. Be this as it may, Eliot's Lyric speakers are, invariably, in line with his critical thought (*To C. the C.*: 33), the author's poetic *personae* as, by the way, befits *lyric* poetry.

On the other hand, Eliot's use of imagery in the poems under consideration has much to do with his generalised will of emotional restraint and offers two angles to be considered: a) the nature of the images involved; b) the type of vocabulary used to build up these images which blends lexical simplicity and economy of expression.

As to image typology acting directly on the poet's emotionally repressive poetic behaviour, I call your attention to the exceedingly abundant presence of tropes such as metonymy and synecdoque which evade the question of individual identity, or favour the process of depersonalization in a given poem. Consequently, the considerable effectiveness of the «Sunday faces» in «Spleen» (1.2), «the pair of ragged claws», the «voices», «eyes» and «arms» in «Prufrock» (11.73, 52, 55, 62), the «feet», «hands», «street», «eyes» and «worlds» in *Preludes* (II, 11.4,8; III, 11.10-11; IV, 11. 6,15), as well as that of «the silent man» or «the silent vertebrate», or «the man with heavy eyes» in «Sweeney among the Nightingales» (11. 17,21,27) as a metonymy for the ex-combatant survivor of the Great War; or, «the Jew» in «Gerontion» (1.8) as a paradigm of Eliot's contemporary iniquity.

Other tropes of the same kind are much more abstract and therefore reveal a greater tendency towards hiding emotion and provoking uneasiness: «Life» and «Absolute» in «Spleen» (11.11, 16) «youth» in «P. of a Lady» (II, 1.8); «absolute» again in «C. Galante» (1.14), or, «Abstract Entities» in «Whispers of Immortality» (1.29).

Similes are also frequent, especially in the earliest poems considered, and they are the type of image which better allows us to infer the poet's emotions. So, we can actually feel Eliot's juvenile apathy and existential disgust by means of several similes, for instance in «Prufrock» (11.2-3, 8, 57, 73, 51, 60); his fastidious boredom in «P. of a Lady» (II, L.16; III, 1.4), again his existential uneasiness in *Preludes* (I, 1.4; IV, 1.15); his scornful attitude towards Bostonian society in «The Boston Evening Transcript» (11.1-2); his espousing of the contemporary anti-semitic feeling in «Burbank» (11.13-18) or «Gerontion» (11.8-10); his anti-clerical indignation throughout «Mr. Eliot's Sunday Morning Service».

Less evident is the poet's use of metaphor and symbol in the poems involved, though these are at the same time no less emotionally significant. Metaphor is both rare and usually extended and when it occurs we can perceive the mixture of emotional concealment and expressiveness. In this sense I wish to highlight, for instance, the «yellow fog» in «Prufrock» (1.15) which embodies the degrading atmosphere that pervades the poem as well as Prufrock's both apathetic and passionate personality; «Juliet's tomb» (I, 1.6) and «buried life» (II, 13) in «P. of a Lady» with their respective echoes both of emotional aridity and wishful longing for a sincere life of the feelings; «the lion's wings» («Burbank...», 1.29) i.e. Eliot's irate and sorrowful exposure of war; or, «the infinitely suffering thing» in *Preludes* (IV, 1.13) redolent of human sympathy and Christian transcendence.

Private symbols are more abundant. Eliot makes a similar use of them as elements fit for both hiding and showing emotion and they offer two main realizations: a) imagistic: simple and domestic or urban; b) modernist: erudite or allusive. To name but a few, to the first type belong the «parrot»-poet of «On a Portrait» (1.13), also that emblem of lifelessness and routine that is the daily «Boston Evening Transcript», and Eliot's specific representations of modern urban man: young (Prufrock), adult (Sweeney) and old (Gerontion). In the second category we may include those monsters of cultivated and ethical orthodoxy «Matthew and Waldo» («Cousin Nancy», 1.12), the defiled «Nightingales» around Sweeney, or the «tiger» in «Gerontion» (1.48)⁵ whose tenor is an irate Christ in fight against a spiritually desiccated modern world, i.e. Eliot's foe par excellence.

Finally, sense imagery is extremely frequent in Eliot's Early poems and contributes no less than the tropes just mentioned to the author's hide and seek game with his own emotions.

Remember, for instance, the blending of sight, hearing and smell images in «Rhapsody on a Windy Night», used to suggest the speaker's reaction to different urban night scenes, or, a similar fusion in «S. Erect» which highlights the speaker's disgust with and

5. See: SOUTHAM: 75, 52-53; JAIN: 120, 90, 93.

loathing of Sweeney's base world; or, the beautiful sight and touch images in «La Figlia Che Piange»: «... / Weave, weave the sunlight in your hair.../ (1.3); «...Her hair over her arms and her arms full of flowers...» (1.20) which make us perceive Eliot's latent romantic vein despite the theatrical or apparently contrived atmosphere and voice of the poem.

III

Time has come to recapitulate. According to my exposé, Eliot is not wholly successful in his deliberate fight for emotional restraint in his Early poetry. To be more precise, in my view he even lets us perceive, albeit in small doses, some of his own non-autobiographical «buried life»: a) passionate, in a Juvenilia poem: «... / Whiter the flowers, Love you hold / Than the white mist of the sea / Have you no brighter tropic flowers / With scarlet life for me? \» («Song», 11.5-8); b) religious, in his allusion to «...some infinitely gentle / Infinitely suffering thing /» (*Preludes*, IV, 11.12-13); c) existential, throughout the overwhelming and apparently inexorable message in «Geron-tion».

The latter, with its deep roots in the earliest and one of the saddest historical events of our century i.e. the first World War⁶, is of course, as we all know, the antechamber to Eliot's *Waste Land* (1922), his earliest and fullest account of his, say, early «buried life». Yet, why did it take Eliot so long to disclose it?

In my view, to be able to answer this question one has to keep in mind some biographical facts, though these are not literally present in the poems. These facts include Eliot's early «exile» experience in Europe, a continent devastated by the first *modern* war and its dreadful spiritual aftermath (FUSSELL: 1977), a war that in 1916 had killed his bosom friend Jean Verdenal among too many others. We also have to remember his period of nervous breakdown previous to the outburst of *W. Land*, as well as his marital and financial problems. In other words, Eliot had to mellow, he had to undergo his own initiation process before being able, almost naturally, to let out his inner thoughts and feelings concerning his stance in the new post-war modern reality, part of which had been hinted at in a few Early poems as we have already seen.

Besides, this process of initiation also involved, as Eliot later acknowledged, his intellectual development, and we can behold Eliot in 1961 defining his aloof, seminal and critical concepts (see p. 68) as «...generalizations... (which)... may be accounted for as being conceptual symbols for emotional preferences...» (*To Criticize the Critic*: 19, my emphasis), words that explain earlier⁷ and later⁸ Eliotian manifestations concerning

6. In fact it was the Great War which prompted Eliot to express in 1915 one of his rare adverse comments on Great Britain: «...The War suffocates me, I do not think that I should ever come to like England—a people which is satisfied with such disgusting food is not civilised—...», *Letters*: 88.

7. «...Any poet, if he is to survive as a writer beyond his twenty-fifth year, must alter... he will have different emotions to express...», *To Criticize the Critic*: 177 («Erza Pound: His Metric and Poetry», 1917).

8. «...my poetry is a combination of things but in its sources, in its *emotional* springs, it comes from America...», *New York Times*, 26 Sept. 1958, CRAWFORD: 19.

his poetry as well as one of his occasional poems «A Note on War Poetry» (1942) where he synthesises his concept of poetry as « /...the abstract conception / *Of private experience at its greatest intensity / Becoming universal...*» (11. 22-24, my emphasis).

Consequently, I may conclude by expressing that, in my view, Eliot's basic emotions in his Early poetry may be summed up in both existential disgust and suffering, expressed thematically and stylistically, with very occasional hints at more hopeful insights (romantic and religious). However, as I have suggested, we have to wait until *The Waste Land*, with its emotional substance embodied in Tiresias who «...have foresuffered all...» (1.243); in order to witness Eliot's existential and emotional self-revelation i.e. his sour exposure of inveterately imperfect human relations in a spiritually barren modern world, and his comforting message (and warning) of generosity, spirituality and pacifism delivered by the compassionate «Thunder's Voice» (11.402, 412, 419), a voice not heard by the morally defective inhabitants of his Early verse, and a message (and a warning) still too meaningful, unfortunately, in our warlike times.

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