

FINDING THE WAY THROUGH T.S. ELIOT'S TOWER OF BABEL: THE FUNCTION OF MULTILINGUAL LINES IN THE WASTE LAND

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One of the most striking -and confusing- characteristics of T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, to which the poem undoubtedly owes much of its fame and reputation as a masterpiece of poetry in English, is Eliot's unique technique of providing his poem with a number of lines (23, out of the 434 lines that constitute the poem) in languages other than English.

As a brief introduction to this paper, it is necessary for us to attempt a classification of the foreign language lines we are dealing with, in order to draw a conclusion about the function of these lines. We can easily divide these foreign lines into lines that T.S. Eliot himself wrote in a language other than English, epigraphs and literal quotations from texts of foreign literatures.

Let us consider, to start with, the first group, the foreign language lines written by T.S. Eliot himself: the only line of this kind is the one containing the German words uttered by a Lithuanian woman who denies her Russian origin and claims to be a true German: "*Bin gar keine Russin, stamm' aus Litauen, echt deutsch*" (Eliot, 1989:63). This German line, which Eliot included in the poem as a remembrance of a conversation with countess Marie Larisch (Valerie Eliot, 1971:47), suggests not only the boring existence of a person who *reads much of the night and goes South in the winter*, but also the anxiety of an aristocrat who, in a moment of political conflict between Russia and Germany just before the outbreak of the First World War, tries to prove her Teutonic origin by saying, in German, that she is a true German, *echt deutsch*.

Still, the connotations of the other lines in foreign languages are not so easily paraphrasable, so, we had better concentrate upon the rest of these, but, before doing so, I think that our discussion of these lines should take into consideration T.S. Eliot's remarks on *Tradition and the Practice of Poetry*, as stated in a lecture that

he delivered in Dublin in 1936 and that has remained unpublished until very recently: *What I prefer to mean by Tradition is (...) something that includes the revolutionary as well as the submissive, the reactionary as well as the revolutionary (...) The perpetual task of poetry is to make old things new. Not necessarily to make new things (...) There are two ways in which a literature may be renewed (...) The two ways of cross-fertilization are by a contact with an older period of itself, or by contact with a foreign literature* (Eliot, 1988:13).

These two ways of renewal are present in *The Waste Land*: Eliot included within the poem epigraphs and literal quotations -either translated into English or in their original language- by English authors (Shakespeare, Webster, Milton, Spenser, Marvell, Day, Lyly, Kyd) and foreign -most of them classical- authors: Petronius, Dante, Ezekiel, Isaiah, Wagner, Baudelaire, Virgil, Ovid, St. Augustine and Nerval. This Tower of Babel is so complex that the average -or, even, the learned- reader finds it difficult to come to terms with it. It was T.S. Eliot (1988:13) himself who helped us to make a virtue out of necessity: *It is not important (...) that the literature exerting the influence should be perfectly understood. In any case, a perfect understanding of a foreign literature or of an earlier period of our own is an unattainable ideal: sometimes the way in which it is mis-understood is the important thing.*

The Latin and Greek epigraph at the beginning of the poem -the second group of my classification- has been studied in autobiographical terms, as has become more and more the practice with T.S. Eliot's poetry in recent years. Smith (1985:VIII), for example, quotes Virginia Woolf's diary entry for 23 June 1922: (the poem is) *Tom's autobiography, a melancholy one*. These critics point to the fact that the poem recapitulates Eliot's emotional life of the preceding ten years, from Munich (Summer, 1911) to the London of 1921. Eliot had chosen a passage of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* to use as an epigraph to sum up what he had written. The passage, spoken by Marlow, describes the dying moments of Mr. Kurtz: *Did he live his life again, in every detail of desire temptation and surrender during that supreme moment of complete knowledge? He cried in a whisper at some image, at some vision -he cried out twice, a cry that was no more than a breath: "The horror! The horror!"* Ezra Pound, who is alluded to as *il miglior fabbro*, i.e. the better craftsman, under the Latin and Greek epigraph at the beginning of the poem, resisted this epigraph and Eliot, in order to please him, chose a sentence from Petronius' *Satiricon*, a substitute which also performs an autobiographical function: *Nam Sibyllam quidem ego ipse oculis meis vidi in ampulla pendere, et cum illi pueri dicerent: respondebat illa: (With my own eyes now I myself saw the Sibyl at Cumae hanging in a little cage; and when the boys said to her: "Sibyl, what do you want?" she would answer: "I want to be dead".* Smith:1985:VIII). Nevertheless, and

despite the fact that T.S. Eliot -as Smith (1985:3) has pointed out- said in a lecture (*On Poetry and Poets*) that he had written the poem *simply to relieve his feelings*, I do not think that the autobiographical interpretation is sufficient to explain all the complexity of the poem; neither can it account for the function of all the foreign language lines in *The Waste Land*.

Let us consider, in the third place, the literal quotations from foreign literatures inserted in the body of the poem itself. In principle, the fact that these lines appear in the poem is to be accounted for as a clear case of intertextuality. According to Unger (1988:272), intertextuality is a mechanism for *expanding significance*, that is, a way of enriching the connotative value of a text by means of inserting references to other texts. These references, according to Unger (1988:274), can be of two kinds: specific reference, to a specific text, and generic reference, to a non-specific text or, even, to a genre. My concern here is with references to specific texts in languages other than English. In my opinion, the best way to test the function of these foreign lines is to compare an extract of *The Waste Land* in which such foreign language quotations appear with the same lines including the translation into English of the foreign patches. The final lines of the poem (Eliot, 1989:79) are the most dense with foreign language quotations:

*I sat upon the shore
Fishing, with the arid plain behind me
Shall I at least set my lands in order?
London Bridge is falling down falling down falling down
Poi s'ascose nel foco che gli affina
Quando fiam uti chelidon -O swallow swallow
Le Prince D'Aquitaine a la tour abolie
These fragments I have shored against my ruins
When then Ile fit you. Hieronimo's mad againe.
Datta. Dayadhvam. Damyata.
Shantih shantih shantih*

The English version, according in most cases to Eliot's (1989:86) own translation, reads as follows:

*"I sat upon the shore
Fishing, with the arid plain behind me
Shall I at least set my lands in order?
London Bridge is falling down falling down falling down
He hid himself in the fire which refines them
When shall I be as the swallow? -O swallow, swallow*

The Prince of Aquitaine in the ruined tower
 These fragments I have shored against my ruins
 Why then Ile fit you. Hieronimo's mad againe.
 Give. Sympathize. Control.
 The peace which passeth understanding
 The peace which passeth understanding
 The peace which passeth understanding"

Apart from the autobiographical interpretation mentioned above, a number of partial explanations, of which I shall only bring here a brief summary, for the function of these literal quotations in foreign languages have been proposed:

Firstly, as a number of critics have observed (such as Fowler, 1968:35), these lines are a charm, of a liturgical or magical character, the purpose of which is to break the spell of the Waste Land; in the same way as the hero of the Grail romances was supposed to ask referring to the Grail -Whom does it serve?- and by doing so to heal the Fisher King, who was suffering from extreme old age or loss of virility, this illness being the cause of the wasting of the land (Weston, 1983:18). Tiresias, as both hero and king utters an incantation designed to bring about the restoration of life in himself and his environment. *The potency of foreign or strange words in charms was considered to be great* (Fowler, 1968:35).

Secondly, it is quite obvious that these quotations have an aesthetic function: Eliot, who was classically educated at the best universities of Europe and North America and trained as a linguist, philosopher and logician, wrote a poetry for minorities, for readers with high literary training and a wide cultural background. In addition to this fact, *The Waste Land* is to be included within the Modernist experiment of Cubists and Surrealist painters and the cosmopolitan atmosphere of the 1920's.

Finally, many critics (such as Martin, 1968:73) have studied the mythical method of the poem and Smith (1985:52) has even remarked that *the substance of the poem constitutes a myth*. Eliot himself (1987:177) suggested that *It (myth) is simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history (...)* *Instead of narrative method we may now use the mythical method*. As our poet says above, myth becomes an ordering and integrating element of a fragmented ontological reality, the only possible universal of a world in which neither a dead God nor a relative science makes any sense. The foreign language quotations of the poem have often been considered as one more brick on the mythical wall, a device for marking a sharp contrast between the Golden Age and the dull present (Villoria, 1978:53) or with a satirical purpose, as moral devices (Smith, 1985:52).

The first interpretation, carried out in terms of a magical or liturgical function, could be properly applied to the last lines, those that have been taken from the *Upanishad*, or, even, to the Italian quotation from Dante's *Purgatorio*, but can hardly be applied to the Latin or French lines.

The second interpretation, according to which the foreign language lines are formal -aesthetic- devices, could be applied to the five foreign quotations of the lines mentioned above and indeed is also applicable to many other devices present in *The Waste Land*, from the very choice of words to the most sophisticated echoes and allusions to other literary works, with which the poem is suffused.

The third explanation, the mythical one, may only apply to the Latin words, which recollect the Tereus-Procne-Philomela myth, if we accept the restricted view of myth: that is, myth considered as a means of knowledge, as a unifying and ordering element. If, on the other hand, we consider, as Smith (1985:52) does, that the substance of the poem constitutes a myth, the mythical interpretation may be extended to all the foreign lines we are dealing with, but there remains the question of to what extent myth is, as Eliot himself said (1987:77), a means or knowing -or of *unknowing* - reality.

In short, each of these interpretations, either autobiographical, magical/liturgical, aesthetic or mythical, appears incapable of offering an overall explanation applicable to all the foreign language quotations in the poem. It seems, therefore, necessary to refocus the analysis of the foreign quotations from a different perspective, one derived from the only trait they share, that is, their parodic function.

Classical definitions of parody consider it as one more component of satire (Highet, 1972:5), whose basic function is that of ridiculing imitation (Highet, 1972:7). Opposed to this restricted concept of parody, I shall use a more extended one, according to which *parody* -in Hutcheon's (1985:35) words- *is one of the major forms of modern self-reflexivity (...) a form of inter-art discourse (...) consisting of repetition with difference: a critical distance is implied between the backgrounded text being parodied and the new incorporating work, a distance usually signaled by irony* (Hutcheon, 1985:32).

With Hutcheon definition in mind we can now proceed to make further terminological precisions: in the first place, the term *quotation* is general and needs further specification since it does not carry the parodic resonances of distance and difference that are present in the text we are dealing with; neither is pastiche, in the second place, applicable to the lines I have selected from *The Waste Land* because pastiche is just imitative and parody, on the other hand, is transformational (Hutcheon, 1985:35); and, in the third place, unless we limit the purpose of parody to mockery as, indeed, classical rhetoricians do (Highet, 1972:7), we must conclude

that it is parody and not satire that we find in *The Waste Land*. Satire, unlike parody, is both social and moral and -as Hutcheon (1985:43) remarks- has *an ameliorative intention: to hold up to ridicule the vices and follies of mankind with an eye on their correction*.

This is not to say that parody does not have ideological, or even social, implications: *The Waste Land* is full of this kind of resonance; whether we interpret the poem as the decline and fall of Western civilization or as the decay and renewal of Christian faith, it undoubtedly has clear implications of a social and moral kind. The abundance of moral and social echoes has probably led critics -such as Smith (1985:52)- to consider *morality*, meaning *satire* as one of the main focuses of the poem, thus mistaking for *satire* what is better defined as *parody*.

This terminological confusion is increased by the use of irony that T.S. Eliot makes in the poem. Before describing this use, we had better consider in detail what irony is. Irony, which has always to do with different levels of knowledge, which cause a critical distance, is defined by Hutcheon as *the trope of (the genre of) parody* (1985:55). Irony, then, implies -at a formal level- a semantic contrast between what is said and what is meant and -at a pragmatic level- an evaluation. Two levels of irony operate in *The Waste Land* :

Firstly, the parodic references in the poem, which have entered the poem by means of a process of ironic transcontextualization from the original texts, are set at a critical distance (irony) from the original texts. A point of considerable interest about this is that, instead of smiling ironically at the backgrounded texts, they are used with considerable respect, as a means of placing the contemporary -Eliot's- text under scrutiny.

This is precisely the starting point of the second level of irony: Eliot quotes the philosopher Bradley in his Notes to *The Waste Land* (Eliot, 1989:86) when he formulates his epistemological doubt: *my external sensations are not more private to myself than are my thoughts or my feelings. In either case my experience falls within my own circle, a circle closed to the outside; and, with all its elements alike, every sphere is opaque to the others which surround it (...) In brief, regarded as an existence which appears in the soul, the whole world for each is peculiar and private to that soul*. Bradley may not deny the possibility of knowledge in these lines but he does deny the possibility of any transmission of knowledge.

We have so far classified the foreign language lines in *The Waste Land* into epigraphs, literal quotations and lines that T.S. Eliot himself wrote in foreign languages. Then, we have discussed briefly the four main explanations for the function of the parodic references in *The Waste Land* given by the critics and we have drawn the conclusion that all of them are either too weak or partial. Afterwards,

we have explained how irony works at two levels in the poem and have reached the conclusion that it is parody and not satire that we are dealing with. Now, it is time for us to give an explanation for the function of the parodic references we selected; an explanation which should be consistent enough to account for all of them.

Quoting the greats has always been a means of lending their prestige and authority to one's text. Hutcheon (1985:4) gives us a clue to finding our way through T.S. Eliot's *Tower of Babel*: *the stress on craft and knowledge of the past has come back into focus today in order to demystify the sacrosanct name of the author and to desacralize the origin of the text*. This statement leads us to Harold Bloom's concept of *anxiety of influence*. Bloom, who defines the anxiety of influence as *each poet's fear that no proper work remains for him to perform* (1975:148), describes the history of intra-poetic relationships in Freudian terms (what Freud called *the Family Romance*). As a result, the life circle of the poet as poet becomes a modern hero's quest for psychological maturity or, to put it in Bloom's (1975:26) words, *a process from pastiche to style (...) towards self-realization*. Bloom even suggests an initiation ceremony (with the mythical pattern departure-initiation-return) when he introduces the terms *second birth* (1975:25) and *rebirth into poetic incarnation* (1975:71).

Any *strong poet*, and T.S. Eliot is a *strong poet* indeed, fears for his death as a poet: unless he is able to clear up imaginative space for himself, he will not enter tradition, neither will he become immortal as his poetic ancestors. According to Pearce (1988:47), Eliot is to be considered *one of the most perverse and obsessed (in a literary sense) of modern poets*. Eliot has faced the dilemma of every modern poet whether to write poetry worthy of immortalization without becoming a mere imitator of his predecessors or whether to be cut off from canonization by his precursors for poetic rebellion against them. Eliot said in the lecture mentioned above that *a tradition is not kept alive by each generation following the steps of its predecessor. And for this reason literary and wide reading becomes important. A poet cannot help be influenced, therefore he should subject himself to as many influences as possible, in order to escape from any one influence. He may have original talent; but originality has also to be cultivated; it takes time to mature, and mature consists largely of the taking in and digesting various influences* (1987:13).

Pearce (1988:49) has pointed out that the explanatory end notes and the numbered lines that were included within *The Waste Land* when it was first published offer clear evidence of the anxiety of influence: how to be both original and part of the tradition. Eliot has tried to produce a poem ready for immediate canonization and immortality: the numbered lines, which already appeared in the first edition of the poem, imply the worthiness of the poem for future reference and

study, while the notes suggest years of scholarship and criticism and serve as both an explanation and an apology for the originality of the poem. We should also quote here Kenner's opinion (1968:36) that the notes were added to the poem because books are printed in multiples of thirty-two pages and the poem was too long for thirty-two pages of decent-sized print and a good deal too short for sixty four. I do not think that these explanations exclude each other; on the contrary, they are complementary, so as to explain the presence of the *explanatory* Notes in the poem.

To sum up, the anxiety of influence -or how to get rid of the immense anxieties of indebtedness which self-appropriation involves- seems to me the basic function which can account for the presence of the foreign language parodic references we selected, and for the inclusion of the line numbers and the notes. Now, we can draw the conclusion that the differences between the original lines in different languages, Eliot's ones, and the second ones including the translation into English, is that the foreign language parodic references of the original text help T.S. Eliot to be original and, at the same time, to become part of the tradition.

Where, then, should we place the T.S. Eliot of *The Waste Land* in Bloom's hero's quest for poetic originality? I do not agree with Harold Bloom when he says (1975:142) that Eliot in *The Waste Land* became a master of reversing the *apophrades* (the final revisionary ratio in which the latter poet, in his own final phase, holds his poem so open again to the precursor's work that at first we might believe that the wheel -the hero's quest above mentioned- has come full circle: the inversion being that the achievement of the new poet makes it seem to us, not as if the precursor were writing it, but as though the later poet had written the precursor's characteristic work): The young poet of *The Waste Land* is still too far away from the mature T.S. Eliot of *Four Quartets*, who, according to Bloom (1975:140), must have been *questing for a final clarity, that seek to be definite statements, testaments to what is uniquely the strong poet's gift (or what he wishes us to remember as his unique gift)*; and who, after having crossed a long time before *through the unknown, remembered gate* (Eliot, 1989:222), must also have been aware of his return to his dead poetic ancestors when he wrote:

*We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time*

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