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## POETIC TECHNIQUES IN THE WASTELAND

That Eliot is the greatest poet in the English language of the first third of the present century is debatable. There are also W.B. Yeats, Ezra Pound, Wallace Stevens, and perhaps others, depending on scholarly opinion. But there is less doubt about his influence; he is generally considered the most influential and he remains the most controversial. Critics and other students of literature have written extensively to resolve controversial opinion and to unravel the complexities embodied in his poetry. That hundreds of volumes have been written demonstrates the complexity of his poetics both to professional scholars and, of course, to students who approach them for the first time. Even today, a simpler explanation is required. Therefore the purpose of this essay is to explain some of Eliot's most important techniques and to show how, in using them, he develops one of the themes that dominate much of his poetry: the spiritually negative character of the contemporary world and the spiritually positive character of the past tradition. *The Wasteland* is in my opinion the poem which best illustrates these techniques.

For the study I have tried to choose those techniques which give the poem its "chaotic" form. The most important device is the objective correlative, which Eliot himself defines: "The only way of expressing an emotion in the form of art is by finding an 'objective correlative'; in other words, a set of objects, a chain of events which shall be the formula for that particular emotion; such that when the external facts are given, the emotion is immediately evoked."<sup>(1)</sup> In other words, the poet does not come right out and moralize, or tell the reader how to feel or think; he uses a set of images, situations or characters to do the job.

Eliot's chief use of the objective correlative is in contrasting the grandeur of the past with the vulgar, meaningless present. In *The Wasteland*, for instance, we are first given a description of Cleopatra in her barge going to meet Anthony; the details are of gold, jewels, carved dolphins, and rich colors. Eliot follows this scene with one in which a neurotic modern woman begs her bored husband or lover to stay home with her. The details are "rats alley where dead men lost their bones" and "the wind under the door". Eliot furthers the contrast by the rhythm: The Cleopatra scene is done in something like blank verse with a noble tone such as Spenser or Shakespeare might have used; the modern scene has almost no rhythm at all. It is a series of broken questions and repetitions. Then, to reinforce his contrast, Eliot jazzes up Shakespeare: "He is so elegant, so intelligent". Thus without directly saying so, Eliot makes us feel the cheapness and vulgarity of modern "love".

Of course the objective correlative is not objective in the

scientific sense, Eliot is choosing the details and the manner in which they are presented, but it is objective in the sense that he does not tell the reader how to interpret the details.

Another of Eliot's techniques is the use of quotations from or allusions to other authors. He does this in *The Wasteland* to support his contrast of past and present. He gives us a quotation, an allusion, or a whole scene from the past and follows it with a scene from the vulgar present, a pub scene for instance. The allusions thus retain their original meaning but they are enriched with new meanings by their context within the poem. He also vulgarizes the meaning of a passage or a person, or some other detail from the past. Da Vinci's painting of the Virgin, for instance, becomes *bella donna*, a poison, and also the lady of situations in Madame Sosostris, who is herself a vulgarization of religion. This present vulgarization of past glory creates a great deal of irony throughout the poem (2).

Cleanth Brooks says that this type of irony, the contrast of past and present, is only superficial. There is a deeper irony, like that in Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*. In the example just given, for instance, Madame Sosostris is a fortune teller who uses a Tarot pack of cards. These cards were once used for a religious purpose, but Madame Sosostris has to hide her use of them. On the surface the irony comes from the contrast between the ancient religious use of the Tarot cards and the way Madame Sosostris uses them; the Sophoclean irony comes when Madame Sosostris' predictions about the one-eyed merchant and the crowds of people walking in a ring come true in a way which neither she nor the reader expected at the time. As the poem progresses the predictions take on universal applications: The one-eyed merchant and the people walking in a circle become symbolic of a whole blind, commercialized civilization (3). Eliot is probably hinting at this type of irony when he says Madame Sosostris is "the wisest woman in Europe with a wicked pack of cards".

These contrasts made *The Wasteland* appear chaotic when it was first published, but once the reader understands that they are part of one big contrast, the poem becomes very coherent. Eliot combines the contrasts by use of myths. He uses several myths: the Grail story, which has become mixed with vegetation myths; the dying and reviving gods from Frazer's *Golden Bough*; and the Christian Resurrection, which has itself become associated with vegetation and fertility myths. From these myths Eliot takes a set of basic universalized symbols: water-dryness, heat-coldness, the rooster, and so forth. He combines all the myths into one large myth which says that modern civilization is empty, dry and sterile; that everything which once spoke to man of the deepest realities and mysteries of his being, have been rationalized and vulgarized; that our sickness can be cured only when we have been regenerated, by coming selfless (4).

This is something like the basic idea, and all the myths and symbols are unified around it. His use of these myths and symbols is a technique which unifies, compresses, and universalizes *The Wasteland*. They allow him to explain a view of a whole civilization in just 433 lines. I.A. Richards has remarked that had Eliot not used

the allusions, myths, and symbols, *The Wasteland* would probably be as long as an epic, twelve books (5).

In arranging all these myths, allusions and characters Eliot uses a technique which can be called musical. The themes move in and out of each other; one theme dominates for a while then gives way to another. And while one theme dominates, the other are kept in the background by the allusions and symbols. Eliot introduces his symbols casually; they pick up new meanings as he repeats and varies them and mixes them with other symbols. By doing so, he creates a great deal of ambiguity which is unavoidable because of the complexity of the thought and feelings he is trying to express (6). The church, for instance, is alluded to at the beginning of the poem as a pile of broken images. Eliot mentions St. Mary Woolnoth, and Magnus Martyr. The church becomes associated with Buddhism in the Fire Sermon, and then with Hinduism at the end of the poem where it becomes Chapel Perilous (7).

As the themes melt into each other, so do the characters. Eliot says in one of his footnotes to *The Wasteland*, "Just as the one-eyed merchant melts into the Phoenician sailor, so all the women are one woman, and the two sexes meet in Tiresias. What Tiresias sees, in fact, is the substance of the poem." Tiresias gives the poem something of a stream-of-consciousness appearance. Everything in the poem is focused in his consciousness. There are a number of speakers in the poem, but they all melt into him; he sees and hears them all. He also unites all the events in time, for he sees past and present.

The preceding techniques are, I think, the main ones used in *The Wasteland*. When one understands Eliot's techniques the poem emerges as a highly unified and coherent poem, not the chaotic jumble that it seems upon the first reading.

NOTES

- (1) Quoted in F.O. Matthiessen, *The Achievement of T.S. Eliot* (London, 1947), p. 58.
- (2) Edmund Wilson, *Axel's Castle* (New York, 1953), p. 111.
- (3) Cleanth Brooks, *Modern Poetry and the Tradition*, Chapel Hill, 1930), pp. 167-169.
- (4) Elisabeth Drew, *T.S. Eliot: The Design of his Poetry* (New York, 1949), pp. 52-66.
- (5) Cited in Matthiessen, p. 40.
- (6) Grover Smith, *T.S. Eliot's Poetry and Plays: A Study in Sources and Meaning* (Chicago, 1970), pp. 72-74.
- (7) Drew, pp. 68-71.