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BEYOND WEST-LAND: A TRANS-CULTURAL READING OF T. S. ELIOT'S *THE WASTELAND*

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Abstract

T. S. Eliot's The Wasteland (1922) is extremely broad in scope ranging from an archaeology of the cultural evacuation of the West to a modernist reinstallation of the lost centre from the archives of non-western models of peace. It is a tragic anagnorisis of the cultural barrenness along with cathartic quest inspired by Indian philosophy. Such profusion of images in Eliot is neither accidental nor occidental in nature. Like his other poems, in The Wasteland we find Eliot brushing with not only world culture but also the native, especially occult and mystic traditions, myths and folklores of cultures which are otherwise considered conflicting — pagan and Christian, western and non-western.

Keywords: Eliot, angst, modernism, Upanishad, Buddhism

"The Noble Truth of the origin of suffering, O monks, is this: it is this thirst (craving) which produces re-existence and re-becoming, bound up with passionate greed. It finds fresh delight now here and now there, namely thirst for sense pleasures; thirst for existence and becoming; and thirst for non-existence (self-annihilation)."- Lord Buddha

"Neti neti" (meaning, "not this, not that")
- Upanishads

Eliot's *The Wasteland* and Ezra Pound's *The Cantos* have largely defined modernist poetry as the poetics of "non-representationalism"(Bradbury and McFarlane 1976, 25-6), "in pursuit of

deeper penetration of life" (ibid), to use a Bradburyan term, and creating a modernist template for poetic diegesis of twentieth-century Angst. *The Wasteland* is extremely broad in scope ranging from an archaeology of the cultural evacuation of the West to a modernist reinstallation of the lost centre from the archives of non-western models of peace. Hence, it is a tragic *anagnorisis* of the cultural barrenness along with cathartic quest inspired by Indian philosophy. Such profusion of images in Eliot is neither accidental nor occidental in nature.

Although Eliot claims himself, in his preface to 1928 volume of essays *For Lancelot Andrews: Essays on Style and Order*, a classicist in literature, royalist in politics, and Anglo-Catholic in religion, the oriental influences throughout his oeuvre cannot be ignored. "That Eliot" as Kearns opines, "did not 'become' a Buddhist, a devotee of Robert Graves's pagan goddess, a Hindu or even (like Ezra Pound, Irving Babbitt, and I. A. Richards) a Confucian, was due to the pragmatism and sophistication" that he developed because of his "Catholic cast of mind, a Calvinist heritage, and a Puritanical temperament"(1987, 209). But like his other poems, in *The Wasteland* we find Eliot brushing with not only world culture but also the native, especially occult and mystic traditions, myths and folklores of cultures which are otherwise considered conflicting — pagan and Christian, western and non-western.

His was not an "orientalist fallacy", as opined by Harish Trivedi in his *Colonial Transactions* but a mere 'objective correlative' of the existential and ontological condition of the modern man. His symptomatic reading of the western and non-western philosophical traditions is both 'impersonal' and objective in nature. He considers the influences of Brahminical and Buddhist beliefs on philosophers like Schopenhauer, Hartman and Deussen to be a "romantic misunderstanding" (Eliot 1933, 43-44). Eliot writes, "My only hope of really penetrating to the heart of that mystery would lie in forgetting how to think and feel as an American or a European: which, for *practical* as well as *sentimental* reasons, I did not wish to do" (my emphasis, ibid). Given that, his "state of enlightened mystification" (ibid) resulting from his two years rigorous study of Sanskrit under the tutelage of Charles Lanman and a year of Patanjali's metaphysics under James Woods should be denied at its own peril. He himself claims that the Indian philosophers and "their subtleties make most of the great European philosophers look like schoolboys" (ibid).

Eliot's notion of "tradition" and his concomitant appropriation of inter-texuality are related. The twentieth-century post-World War I Europe posits ontological and spiritual predicament for human situation. This predicament of human situation is a 'text' which poses a question which can be answered only through multiple texts or inter-texuality. Eliot's *The Wasteland* is also a tissue of quotations drawn from several of cultures— both Oriental and Occidental. It is a 'bricolage' of Judaic-Christian, Buddhist and Upanishadic/Vedantic philosophy— almost like enchanting prayers for fertility on the land of sterility. So, influences of varied nature and potentially diverse in implications, work into Eliot's

literalisation of human civilization as a text under hermeneutics. As Cleo McNelly Kearns rightly points out, even in his The Clark Lectures of 1926 Eliot "make[s] several allusions the similarities and differences between western ways of illumination and those advanced by Patanjali, author of Yoga-sutras. Eliot was later to mention both the studies of Abbé Brémond and those of the eccentric but interesting French practitioner of Zen, Hubert Benoit, as of particular interest". The Indian influences, "subtle and almost subliminal juxtaposition[s]" become one of the threads that weave the fabric that we know as, *The Wasteland*.

The title 'The Fire Sermon', entitling the third section of the poem refers to the Fire Sermon preached by Lord Buddha for the purgation of the fires of lust, hatred, infatuation, and passion. The desire (*tanhā* or *trsnā*) which binds us to the worldly objects is the root cause of any suffering and ignorance (*avidyā*). In this section we find a young man suffering from the same, and after seeking the opportunity of having sex jumps upon a woman who to him seemed "bored and tired": "*Flushed and decided, he assaults at once; / Exploring hands encounter no defense; / His vanity requires no response, / And makes a welcome of indifference*"(239-42). While pointing at the scene Thomas Michael LeCarner in his 'T. S. Eliot, Dharma Bum: Buddhist Lessons in *The Wasteland*' posits, "This scene powerfully demonstrates why most people are entrenched in Samsāra. *Samsāra* is a result of craving, desire, and lust, and this scene shows that even if our desires are satiated momentarily, the result is mere apathy or "indifference," which will only perpetuate the cycle". The culmination of this "indifference" can be found in the line when, after having sex the woman says, "'*Well now that's done: and I'm glad it's over*' (252)". The overwhelming image in Buddha's sermon is fire. It is used in almost every sentence. Taking a clue from 'the four noble truths' in Buddhist philosophy, we can infer that the symbolism of fire in this section not only stands for the truth that there is suffering and a cause of suffering but also, the truth of cessation (*nirodha*) of suffering and the path (*mārga*) of cessation of suffering or liberation (*nirvāna*). The fire in Eliot's poem hence, embodies 'the four noble truths' or *catvāri ārya-satyani* predominant in Buddhist meditations. It not only refers to the raging and uncontrolled fire of passion, the desire that binds us to the wheel of *samsāra* but also to the willed and controlled fire of purification. The fire is used to indicate the instability and unreliability of any knowledge received through our senses and through the mind. Eliot must have read Henry Clarke Warren's *Buddhism in Translation* and this must have influenced him for these oft quoted Buddhist references. "Buddhism" as Kearns posits, "attracted Eliot for its profound recognition of the pain inevitably associated with human desire, and its insistence that all merely personal self-identity is constructed upon lack, and has no essential subsistence except as a provisional, sometimes enabling, though often blinding illusion", much evident in teachings of Nāgārjuna and *Mahāyahā* doctrine of *sunyatā* and *samsāra*.

The fire is also a major allusion to Augustine's *Confessions*: "*You touched me, and I am set on fire to attain the peace which is yours*"(10.27.38). Eliot admits that this collocation of the two representatives of Eastern and Western aestheticism as the culmination of this part of the poem is not accidental. In fact, both Buddha and Augustine and, the powerful text they bring to this part of the poem are central to most interpretations of *The Wasteland*. This part is the dramatization of lust and that makes the symbolism of fire so relevant.

In a letter written to Bertrand Russell, Eliot claimed 'What the Thunder Said' as, "not only the best part, but the only part that justifies the whole, at all". Here, Eliot walks across traditions to inter-texualize Upanishadic philosophy and hence, we move into the Fable of the Thunder in the *Brihadarankya Upanishad* (V, 2). Prajapati, the thunder God speaks through thunder and utters '*Da*', '*Da*', '*Da*' to three order of beings— Gods, men, and devils. Each group interpreted this utterance differently. The Gods interpreted it as '*Damayata*' ('control yourself'); the men it as '*Datta*' ('give') and demons as '*Dayadhvam*' ('be compassionate'). But, here Eliot following the Anglican- Christian tradition alters the sequence to '*Datta*' (give), '*Dayadhvam*' (sympathise) and '*Damayata*' (control). He also moves back and forth in time and space— unifying the chromos of contemporary and mythic details and, unifying the topos of the East and the West. The oriental topography of '*Ganga*' and '*Himavant*' becomes a kind of spiritual resort, an escape from the scorching land of Europe, already turned to a war ravaged wasteland:

> "*Ganga was sunken, and the limp leaves*
> *Waited for rain, while the black clouds*
> *Gathered far distant, over Himavant"*(396-98)

If the critical aspect of *The Wasteland* is on the 'aesthetics of ugliness' as the mirror of the modern times with a scrappy study of the Western resources, the resolution or the creative aspect stems from the eventual reliance on Upanishadic utterances, especially *Brihadaranyaka*. If dilemma and anxiety are the central motifs which led even Frank Kermode to hold that the poem resists an order, the remedial enoncé comes from the thundering bolts of Prajapati. The triple derivatives of 'Da' are used for suggesting an antidote of moral and spiritual degradation of the inmates of the wasteland. This reference makes Tiresius— a Janus, "throbbing between two lives", between redeeming wisdoms of St. Augustine and Lord Buddha— whose coalescence can pull out the wasteland out of its infernality:

"To Carthage then I came

Burning burning burning burning

O Lord Thou pluckest me out,
O Lord, Thou pluckest
Burning" (307-11)

The above lines are not only an allusion to earthly pleasures as conceived in Buddhist theosophy but also to Augustine. In Book-III of *Confessions* Augustine writes, "*I went to Carthage, where I found myself in the midst of a hissing cauldron of lust*" (III.1.1). The fire for him like Buddha here stands for lust, envy and passion for earthly things abundant in the city of Carthage.

'*Datta*' can be read as Levinas' 'hospitality' instead of "jug, jug, jug" of mere sexual give and take. '*Dayadhavam*' comes from Bradburyan thesis of one finite private circle of mind sympathizing with the other. The vivid image of the boat self-poised on the surface of the sea might be an allusion to the boat of self-control that Lord Krishna advices of Arjuna in *Bhagvad Gita* (XI; 67-8) or the boat of the Fisherking or even the proleptic precursor of Pericles' boat in 'Marina'. The last epithet '*Damayata*' implies inner restraint, the repression of evil, the masterful controlling of this boat through and out of this wasteland, without being mad like Hieronymo:

"The boat responded
Gaily, to the hand expert with sail and oar
The sea was calm, your heart would've responded
Gaily, when invited, beating obedient
To controlling hands." (419-23)

Not only has the poet diagnosed "these fragments I have shored against my ruins"—the fragmentation, disjuncture, alienation, sterility and lack of communication that characterizes the modernist angst, but also tried to fuse those heterogeneous micro-ensembles, "the heap of broken image" into a kind of synthetic whole and a new vision of centre in the form of "Shantih". This Upanishadic end of the poem: "Datta. Dayadhvam. Damyata./ *Shantih shantih shantih*" (433-34) brings us close to the concept of One, that is presence of a transcendental Brahma. Such concept of the world is purely non-dual (*advaita*) and monist in nature: *sarvam khalu idam Brahma* ('All is God'). This amalgamation of men and women, gods and demons, animate and inanimate objects into One could only bring respite to the inhabitants of the wasteland, transforming their lives of Ignorance (*avidyā*) to one that of Bliss (*ānanda*) and infinite consciousness (*jñāna*). Again, though the victim of lost-in-translation, "*Shantih! Shantih! Shantih!*"(434) is here pronounced as a sacramental utterance at the end of the prayer as an intension making a valency between the self and non-self [*yojna* less than *yojana*= integrity]. Hence, "*Shantih*" is not a matter of practical

realization in the Hegelian negative anti-thesis to the 'wasteland' but, the most profound synonym to St. Paul's definition: "And the Peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Jesus Christ" as a redemption from the hollowness of the cactus land, the wasteland before man's existence shrinks to the level of Sibyl: "*I have seen with my own eyes the Sibyl hanging in a jar, and when the boys asked her "What do you want?" She answered, "I want to die*" (the English translation of the epigraph; Eliot, 1922).

Hence, "[h]is use of Sanskrit and India", a critic points out "as we have seen is to provide a polysemous echo and a polyphonic understanding of reality, which places him squarely as the precursor of postmodernism that has directed the postmodern theory, rather than the shackling past of the formalist/structuralist and Chicago School that the contemporary critical practice should be training their guns at. His "willful Christianity", also, is not a social opportunism as some critics would have us believe but a quest for spiritual sanctity that he has sought and found in Christianity in the face of areligiosity. His Chistianity is faith in the face of faithlessness, because he knew no other and, not, a self righteous superiority suppressing other creed" (Misra, 2002). The poetics of T. S. Eliot is a poetics of modern predicament— the angst, the suffering and the morbidity, and the understanding of the oriental philosophy made him diagnose the problem better: "*nothing lasts but the wheel turns*" (Eliot, 1935, 54). The only tragic prognosis that remains then is to "*sew him up and let him die in peace*" (Eliot, 1920, 423).

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