

THE CYCLE OF TIME: REGENERATION AND 'TRADITION' IN THE WASTE LAND

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Our modern culture is not a living thing it is not a real culture at all but only a kind of knowledge of culture... [The Greeks] during the period of their greatest strength kept a tenacious hold on their unhistorical sense, [whereas] we moderns have nothing whatever of our own; only by replenishing and cramming ourselves with the ages, customs, arts, philosophies, religions, discoveries of others do we become anything worthy of notice, that is to say, walking encyclopedias.

Fredrich Nietzsche, "On the Use and Disadvantages of History for Life", in *Untimely Mediations* (Cambridge: 1993), 101.

Nietzsche's charge against "modern culture" implies *inter alia* that the canon of 'modern' literature is simply a spiritless collection of fragments from the past a medley of inherited vestiges from a bygone, culturally vibrant epoch. On imminent reflection, such a critique seems pertinently problematic to T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*. That is, there is a sense in which Eliot's poem transverses a zig-zag of allusion to compile a lifeless 'encyclopedia' of quotes from scores of authors and four languages, which in itself, serves as much to conceal as reveal. Nietzsche would suggest that Eliot is too seated in a defunct modernism to expose the impressions stamped on his own soul by the journey through the Waste Land, and is compelled to employ the slides made by others. It is in the context of such a critique that I will examine the twin issues of the circularity of time, and the conception of 'tradition' in Eliot's poem. Does *The Waste land* constitute a terrifying interrogation of the authority of history, and language, or does Eliot conceive the act of composition as the voice of tradition itself? In particular, how does Mircea Eliade's image of the 'eternal return' serve as a basis for understanding Eliot's notion of the (a) historicity of time and the burden that the past inveighs upon the present?

Mircea Eliade in *The Myth of the Eternal Return* argues that 'primitive' cultures exhibit common motifs that are the continuous repetition of an archetypical gesture ("the exemplary event") the cyclical recurrence and regeneration of events, actions and states of affairs. That is, Eliade shows that rituals and customary practices in certain cultures serves to reinforce, imitate and 'relive' archetypical gestures from a mythical (and often divine) past. Although Eliade locates his analysis in the anthropological spectrum of so-called 'primitive' cultures; his conceptualization seem equally applicable to the 'modern man' of Eliot's poetry (especially since *The Waste Land* borrows countless vignettes from the cultural heritage of modernity).

Moreover, Eliade elaborates that the myths of 'primitive' people constantly project images from an idealized, archetypical past onto a tarnished and imperfect present: "[e]verything that we know about mythical memories of 'paradise' confronts us with the image of an idealized humanity enjoying a beatitude and spiritual plenitude forever unrealizable in the present state of 'fallen man'" (Eliade 1954: 33). The perfection of the paradigmatic instance from a very distant past is juxtaposed alongside the imperfections and banality of current circumstance. The theme of the irony of juxtaposition (between an idealized image from the past and a flawed present) is a recurrent one in *The Waste Land*; for instance, the scene in 'A Game of Chess':

Above the antique mantel was displayed
As though a window gave upon the sylvan scene
The change of Philomel, by the barbarous king
So rudely forced; yet there the nightingale
Filled all the desert with inviolable voice
And still she cried, and still the world pursues,
'Jug, Jug' to dirty ears.
And other withered stumps of time
Were told upon the walls; staring forms
Leaned out, leaning, hushing the room enclosed.
(96-106)

The room is suffocated by objects and their smoke. These objects (like the synthetic woman herself) are intolerable substitutes for the (mythical) perfect from the archetypical past. The mythical depiction above the "antique mantel", and the "other withered stumps of time" are crude and utterly spiritless imitations of historical and cultural precedents. The stifling and inanimate conditions of the room (the air that 'freshens' from the window actually serves to fatten and prolong the candle flames, so that they fling smoke through the perfume-laden air) and the objects are a parody of the archetypical form that they are supposed to represent. The woman with her artificially assisted beauty is a pathetic caricature who cannot sustain the comparison to the alluded archetypes-Philomel and Cleopatra ("that Shakespeherian Rag") who command the refined aestheticism of epic and drama.

Eliade goes on to argue that the ontology of the "eternal return", by conferring a cyclical direction upon time, annuls any sense of historical significance or meaning:

The past is but a prefiguration of the future. No event is irreversible and no transformation is final. In a certain sense, it is even possible to say that nothing new happens in the world, for everything is but the repetition of the same primordial archetypes; this repetition, by actualizing the mythical moment when the archetypal gesture was revealed, constantly maintains the world in the same auroral instant of the beginnings. (Eliade 1954: 89-90)

Time is simply an empty vacuum that makes possible the appearance and existence of things. It has, however, no final influence upon their existence, since it is itself constantly regenerated. Man's cosmic, biological, historical and cultural universe maintains its status quo. Eliade argues that time is never "irreversible" since everything begins over again at its commencement every instant. A ritual sacrifice, for instance, not only reproduces the initial sacrifice from an archetypal one, but also takes place at the same "primordial mythical moment"; every sacrifice repeats the initial sacrifice and coincides with it (Eliade 1954:35). Thus, for certain 'primitive' societies, an act (or an object) acquires a certain reality through the repetition of certain paradigmatic gestures, and there is an implicit abolition of 'real' (or sacral, profane) time, of duration, of "history"; the reproduction of the exemplary gesture transports society back into the ideal of the mythical epoch. What is implicit here is that rituals that reproduce paradigmatic images somehow attempt to subvert the natural process of *decay* that all communities and human beings experience. But for Eliot all that inhabits the Waste Land is a perpetual decay, and all that the cycle of regeneration does is to prolong this decay and the pain, the terror: "He who is living is now dead/We who are living are now dying/With a little patience" (328-30).

The notion of the cyclical nature of time is frequently invoked during the lingering course of *The Waste Land*. For instance in "The Burial of the Dead", Eliot writes: "That corpse you planted last year in your garden/Has it begun to sprout? Will it bloom this year?" (71-2). A corpse that "sprouts" is one that, by discharging itself outward back into the scheme of generation, reenters life, which in turn wheels once again towards death. The image of a sprouting corpse—a corpse "planted: in a garden—recalls to mind the image evoked by the epithet "the hyacinth girl"; both consign the human being to the natural cycle of regeneration (in his notes, Eliot warns us to be prepared to recognize references to certain vegetation ceremonies). A corpse is moreover an implosion of the phenomenon of the crowd within a single body. Like the corpse itself, death has "undone" the collectivity of the crowd, and the motion of the corpse in rising, sinking, and rising again is mimicked as the crowd flows up the hill and down again, in an endless and unremitting cycle (Madame Sosostris had predicted the futility of such waves: "I see crowds of people/walking around in a ring").

Eliot's imagery of the seasons motions to a cyclical and repetitive sense of time. It is often the case that the poetic imagination considers the various seasons of the year as distinct but complementary elements that mirror the cycle of life; thus spring is associated with birth/youth, summer with middle age, autumn with fleeting old age and winter with death. Eliot attempts to subvert such cozy

associations. For instance, the place of winter within the seasonal-cycle does not amount to the analogous conclusion that death serves in the life-cycle but is instead a "feeding a little life" (6-7). April, on the other hand, "is the cruelest month, breeding/Lilacs out of the dead land" (1). The seasons blend into one another, blurring the conventional distinctions between them. Eliot's evocation of the notion of repetitive cycles seems to betray a sense of bitter irony. The first part of the poem is almost mockingly entitled "The Burial of the Dead"; but death is never presented as an ultimate finality and does not attain the sense of final closure implied by "burial". Moreover, Eliade's conception of the cycle of constant repetition is for Eliot viewed as being profitless and meaningless: why is the crowd pointlessly revolving up and down the streets? The wheel of regeneration is neither a comforting nor benign thought: "A current under sea/Picked his bones in whispers. As he rose and fell/He passed the stages of his age and youth/Entering the whirlpool" (315-9). The cycle of time is a relentless force that overwhelms and engulfs the lives it touches, pursuing them as if in a frenzied whirlwind.

Regeneration is more a shackling constraint that places a stranglehold on those who populate the poem, and the natural cycle become a vicious one condemning people to endure recurrent hardship and suffering (the speaker, in his address to Stetson, that overfamiliar fellow man has the abrupt ring of accusation and anxiety: You! Who werewith me at Mylae! You who actually planted a corpse!). The repetitive cycle of time is a jail that captures humans forcing them to endure still more agonies: "I have heard the key/Turn in the door once and once only/We think of the key, each in his prison/Thinking of the Key, each confirms a prison" (412-5).

Eliot's recourse to the cyclical nature of time and the relevance of fragments from the past in our lives, probably stems from the very philosophic tradition in which he was educated (see Casey 1992). It is the common doctrine of idealism that the possibilities of thought determine the possibilities of experience. "Facts" array interpretations of experience from particular "points of view". Hence it will be natural for an idealist philosopher to hold that the coherence and objectivity of the world as human beings construct and interpret it will be guaranteed only by the cooperative endeavor of a human community which unties "all points of view" into a comprehensive whole. Another characteristic idealist doctrine that truth is a matter of "coherence" among propositions rather than "correspondence" between particular proposition and states of affairs will go with this. The completest truth will be the completest coherence, the largest comprehensiveness of points of view. This comprehensiveness will seek to relate the present to the past. The human cooperative endeavor to produce a coherent world, and to relate past to present, might result in a "tradition" (Casey 1992:94). The idea of tradition a live and practical sense of the relation of our lives to those of our ancestors, will become pivotal to our understanding of human knowledge.

In the essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent", Eliot sets out an ideal of order and comprehensiveness expressed in extravagant terms:

No poet, nor artist of any sort, has his complete meaning alone... The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new... work of art among them... the whole existing order must, if ever so slightly, be altered. (Eliot 1958)

Eliot is here expressing quite an unconservative, and indeed a subversive, ideal of tradition. The whole existing order is altered by the really new work of art. The present alters the past just as the past influences the present. Eliot's idea of tradition is wholly anti-historical. We create the past from a sense of what can be done in the present. Eliot wishes to see the whole of European literature as part of a timeless present. Eliot's claim for tradition is that it enables a critic to have a "perception of relation that involves an organized view of the whole course of European poetry from Homer". Moreover, a direct relation between Eliot's poetry and the ideal of "comprehensiveness" implied by the idealist tradition would be an instance of reading *The Waste Land* as expressing a search for "an absolute degree of comprehensiveness" (Casey 1992:99).

However, the trouble with looking for such a direct relation is that it leads one to read the poem as simply ironical: what we are shown is a gap between the actual experience of modern man and a postulated ideal of comprehensiveness. Thus, for example, helpless individuals helplessly reliving their personal memories (And when we were children, staying at the arch duke's/My cousin's, he took me out on a sled/And I was frightened") rub alongside the allusion to Chaucer's *Prologue* in the beginning of the poem which enacts an awareness of "the mind of Europe and of our own country (Casey 1992:96).

But the contrast between fragmentary modern experience and a postulated ideal unity does not produce simply a painful irony. The contrast between horrible and painful scenes in the present- the

synthetic Cleopatra, the seduced typist and eloquent versions of them from Shakespeare or Sappho *dramatizes* the present and gives it an intense vitality. Eliot is finding the greatest possible intensity in the imagery of modern life.

In conclusion, it seems that Nietzsche's critique seems more pertinent to a particular vein of philosophical inquiry than to the poetic imagination as exemplified by Eliot's *The Waste Land*. The gap between the fragmentary and the comprehensive in the *poetry* has quite a different character, is more complex than an analogous gap between incomplete and complete experience as this is understood in philosophy. That it is to say, poetry can be ambivalent about such a disparity, whereas idealist philosophy is governed by a much simpler notion of "comprehensiveness" or "a kind of knowledge of culture". In philosophy the fully comprehensive is the fully real; in *The Waste Land* the vitality of the fragmentary is itself fully real.

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Ambitionist

I should like to see
Better become best;
I should like to see the savage
Wear both shirt and vest.

I should like to see
The Daily Press
Taking its cues
From the weekly reviews.

Gavin Ewart