

A POETIC PERSPECTIVE ON SUBJECTIVITY

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ABSTRACT: The claim of this paper is that the poetic word enables a creative and insightful perspective on philosophical issues through a mode of expression which is less curtailed by the academic and traditional conventions more commonly assumed in philosophical works. The poetic perspective is potentially more daring, more courageous, more challenging and ultimately more honest than that afforded by 'pure' philosophy. This paper, through an examination of Eliot's poetry, asserts this claim, with particular reference to an understanding of human subjectivity. Eliot's portrayal of the modern subject as essentially fragmented, and often split between private and public realities, provides an exploration of the complex issue of subjectivity, as concepts such as identity and recognition, time and memory, loss and change, vulnerability and fragmentation are creatively explored in poetic form.

Keywords: Subjectivity; Ambiguity; Vulnerability; Fragmentation

The poetry of T.S. Eliot grapples with the apparent absence of meaning in modern life; it exposes the personal and social fragmentation and disenchantment often masked by assumed conventions in behaviour, communication, and relationships; and it explores the diverse impediments to authenticity and integrity in the private and public expression of experience. In form and content, Eliot's poetry launched a uniquely original and unfamiliar interpretation and portrayal of modern reality. The personal voice, the Wordsworthian 'I' of romantic poetry, was replaced by a diversity of voices and personas, reflecting the absence of a unified, harmonious self; the beauty of the pastoral landscape was foreshadowed by the drab, disparate, sprawling sterility of urban development, and the pleasurable sound effects of familiar rhythm and

structural constancy gave way to an unpredictable multiplicity of contrasting styles and a reversal of traditional associations of sequence and destination.¹

The urgent necessity of initiating a new poetic tradition is the logical supplement to the realization that the old conventions and assumptions no longer serve to express and embrace a new world devoid of prescriptive rules and values: 'We cannot revive old factions / We cannot restore old policies / Or follow an antique drum' (Eliot, 2004: 196). Eliot's use of language to accommodate the new realities in poetic form results in a radically different achievement, an achievement that reverberates through linguistic explorations, in philosophy and in literature, to the present day. Eliot espoused an 'Impersonal theory of poetry' which questioned the relation of the poem to its author, stating that 'Honest criticism and sensitive appreciation is directed not upon the poet but upon the poetry' (Eliot, 1975: 40), and he disputed Wordsworth's poetic formula of 'emotion recollected in tranquility': 'For although every poet starts from his own emotions, his struggle must be to transmute his personal and private agonies into something rich and strange, something universal and impersonal' (Eliot, 1975: 17). However, Eliot acknowledged the revolutionary poetic vision of the romantic poet, and he concurred with Wordsworth's insistence on the use of language reflecting common speech:

While poetry attempts to convey something beyond what can be conveyed in prose rhythms, it remains, all the same, one person talking to another...the immediacy of poetry to conversation is not a matter on which we can lay down exact laws. Every revolution in poetry is apt to be, and sometimes to announce itself to be a return to common speech. That is the revolution which Wordsworth announced in his prefaces, and he was right (Eliot, 1975: 111).

However, as Eliot points out, 'meanwhile the spoken language goes on changing' (Eliot, 1975: 112) and this change is often a reflection of alterations in every sphere of human living. In his essay "Eliot as Philosopher", Richard Shusterman points to Eliot's attempted fusion of tradition and interpretation, comparing it with the hermeneutical philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer, and states that 'as Eliot recognized with Wittgenstein, since language depends on social use, its meaning changes over history through the changing situations and applications which it must address' (Shusterman, 2006: 41). Thus, in the perceived unfamiliarity of a new age, a new poetic form is deemed essential. According to Helen Gardner, one of the earliest commentators on Eliot's work, the poet has 'effected a modification and an enrichment of the whole English poetic tradition' (Gardner, 1972: 2). Poems such as

¹ This is not to deny that modern poetry also built upon the Romantic tradition. The influence of the Romantic inheritance on modern poetry is explored by Cleanth Brooks in *Modern Poetry & the Tradition*.

“The Waste Land”, “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”, “Four Quarters”, and “The Hollow Men”, wrestle with the uncharted territory of social and individual disenchantment and dissolution, the eclipse of personal and collective meaning and purpose, and the alienation of the subject from previously assumed sources of direction and support.

Sterility, meaninglessness, bleakness and brokenness, are the recurring images pervading Eliot’s modernist vision.² Unity and coherence are confined to the poetic structure, while disintegration and dissonance ground the thematic backdrop. The vision of life, in the physical, psychological, and spiritual spheres that are explored and interpreted in Eliot’s work, may be described as a world reflecting the absence of meaning and connection; this absence is palpable in the feigned attempts at communication between human beings, in the ceaseless longing for security and permanence, and particularly in the self-disgust which is only fleetingly averted through momentary immersion in social niceties and pseudo-communication: ‘We grope together / And avoid speech’ (Eliot, 2004: 85). A reading of Eliot’s poetry therefore enables an investigation of the personal and collective malaise characteristic of the modernist period, while simultaneously addressing psychological questions and experiences made universally pertinent through the insights and techniques emerging from the development of psychoanalysis as instigated by its founder Sigmund Freud. The link between the two thinkers is aptly portrayed in their respective but similar views of the human condition. Eliot understands that ‘human nature / Cannot bear very much reality’ (Eliot, 2004: 172), while Freud poignantly reflects that ‘life, as we find it, is too hard for us; it brings us too many pains, disappointments and impossible tasks’ (Freud, 1995: 728). The assertions of Freudian psychoanalysis centred on an acknowledgement of the indeterminacy of knowledge, especially self-knowledge, an awareness of unconscious forces motivating and directing human behaviour, and an attempt to understand and alleviate human distress through an innovative approach to language and interpretation: ‘Psychoanalysis...defines what is mental as processes such as feeling, thinking and willing, and it is obliged to maintain that there is unconscious thinking and unapprehended willing’ (Freud, 1991: 46). The reality of the unconscious, and its role in psychic life, demands a recognition of what the individual tries to hide from himself or herself. Repressed in the unconscious are the hidden,

² The sense of meaningless, despair and bleakness which is characteristic of much modernist literature is reflective of ‘a world threatened by disintegration’: this is the description of Albert Camus in his Nobel speech, and as a representative of a later generation of modernists, he offers the following understanding of the disillusionment of the age: ‘I think that we should understand – without ceasing to fight it – the error of those who in an excess of despair have asserted their right to dishonour and have rushed into the nihilism of the era’ (Camus, 1957: etext).

unacknowledged conflicts of the individual, disguised truths and buried memories that strive to be revealed. The poetry of Eliot also grapples with these conflicts, albeit in a uniquely creative manner.

Fragmentation

These fragments I have shored against my ruins (Eliot, 2004: 75).

The sense of fragmentation reflected in the social and personal reality of the early twentieth century is captured in its essence in the words of a near contemporary of Eliot, W.B. Yeats: 'Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold' (Yeats, 1967: 99). The collapse of the 'centre', the systems and structures hitherto credited with authority and management in the political, social, economic and personal realms of human existence, expressed itself in undeniable terms of material destruction and financial ruin which characterized the early twentieth century, 'an age which advances progressively backwards' (Eliot, 2004: 161). The urban hell of London city epitomized for Eliot the post-war reality of devastation and failure, and the city is the canvas upon which he portrays the human face of this alienating environment. It is representative of the 'Unreal City' and the corresponding unreality of the human experience within its confines: 'I was neither living nor dead' (Eliot, 2004: 62). In an essay titled "The Poetry of the City", G.M. Hyde argues that 'the Modernist literature was born in the city and with Baudelaire – especially with his discovery that crowds mean loneliness and that the terms 'multitude' and 'solitude' are inter-changeable for a poet with an active and fertile imagination' (Hyde, 1991: 337). The words of Friedrich Nietzsche point to the experience of loneliness amid the pseudo-camaraderie to which one does not really belong: 'to be thus in company is truly more lonely than to be alone' (Nietzsche, 2003a: 177). Loneliness, anonymity, and isolation characterize the modernist world; Eliot paints the death-in-life landscape of 'half-deserted streets' and 'sawdust restaurants with oyster-shells' (Eliot, 2004: 13), and discerns behind the stagnating concealment of 'fog' and smoke' another landscape of disunity, conflict and confusion. This is the intensely self-conscious alienation of personal psychic fragmentation, the split self of public compliance and civility and private turmoil and rebellion; Peter Childs links this modernist depiction of the fragmented self to the unavoidable influence of Freud's insights: 'With the publication of Freud's work, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, 1899, it became clear to many writers that there wasn't a unitary narrative self to which each of us might conform...the self was not fixed and stable, but evolving, fluid, discontinuous and fragmented' (Childs, 2000: 51). It is in this psychological, emotional and mental breakdown of purpose and direction that

Eliot situates the collapse of the centre, and his poetry explores the alternating efforts and impasses which characterize the hidden experience of that inner desolation.

In a poem which encapsulates the inner torment of the modern subject, “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”, Eliot posits in the title the dilemma of human desire and social demand. In Freudian terms, it is suggestive of the conflict between the pleasure principle and the reality principle: ‘It is a conflict, then, between what the drive demands and what reality forbids’ (Freud, 2006: 64). The poem is titled ‘love’ song, suggestive of the significance of love in the maintenance of life, but the emotions and thoughts expressed through the poem’s persona highlight the obstacles and rationalizations which silence the henceforth repressed desire and fundamental need to love and to be loved underlying the psychic conflict of the split self, the ‘you and I’ of Prufrock’s monological ruminations. The poem therefore undertakes to articulate the unsayable, and to symbolize the unconscious flow of conflicting thoughts and emotions. The impossibility of comprehensive articulation, the ceaseless conflict between desire and fear, and the apparently futile attempts to reconcile personal integrity with public image, are explored by Eliot in this early poem, and these themes are consistently developed throughout his poetic career. The resulting malaise pervading the individual and his environment is symptomatic of un-lived life, and this is ‘a central, recurring theme of Eliot’s poetry’ according to Craig Raine: ‘Prufrock’s failure to seize the day, his resolve to remain repressed, avoiding the element of risk that is part of truly living, is something Eliot was to return to’ (Raine, 2006: 2).

The persona of the poem exudes a fearful timidity portrayed in a repressed yearning to connect and to communicate, to speak and to be heard, to reveal and to be affirmed. These desires, suggestive of innate human needs, are couched in persistent self-questioning and procrastination: ‘Do I dare?’ and ‘Do I dare?’ (Eliot, 2004: 14). The risk being questioned is that of vulnerability in the awareness that one cannot predict or control the reaction of another; but Prufrock projects his own self-depreciation and self-loathing onto any encountered other and imagines the expected rejection by the other as a repetition of his own self-criticism: ‘I should have been a pair of ragged claws / Scuttling across the floors of silent seas’ (Eliot, 2004: 15). Here the voice of the internal superego is berating and dismissive, resulting in a paralysis which makes action impossible. Freud’s description of the ‘ego ideal’³ as an agency

³ Ambiguity pertains to the notion of the ‘ego-ideal’, as Freud’s reference here suggests strong links with a berating super-ego. However, Jacques Lacan, an esteemed interpreter of Freudian theory, sees the development of the ‘ego-ideal’ as contingent on maturation and self-striving, and he links its acknowledgement with the desire and the possibility of love. On one level, the ‘ego ideal’ is at a distance from the reality of the self, and therefore may be suggestive of a false or a public image which disguises the perceived fallibility and flawed nature of the self; there is thus a gap between the desired presentation

corresponding to 'what we call our 'conscience', suggests a self-consciousness which is sometimes experienced in 'delusions of being ...watched', judged, and evaluated: 'A power of this kind, watching, discovering and criticizing all our intentions, does really exist. Indeed, it exists in every one of us in normal life' (Freud, 1995: 559). This perceived awareness of a watchful gaze, judging our actions and our inter-actions, is commonly denied and projected onto a safer and less personal forum such as that depicted in 'reality' television programs like 'Big Brother'.

Eliot's portrayal of the self is that of a battleground between desire and social constraint, or as Freud described it, between the id and the superego. Prufrock's self-image, which he attempts to conceal even from himself, is that of a worthless coward living his life in carefully rehearsed performances, patterned responses, and adherence to empty rituals of trivial routines: 'I have measured out my life with coffee spoons' (Eliot, 2004: 14). The image of the 'coffee spoons' is an example of Eliot's formulation of the "objective correlative" whereby emotion is expressed through 'a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must end in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked' (Eliot, 1975: 48). The ironic juxtaposition of the trivial action and the measurement of a life evokes the regret and despair of a humdrum existence and a wasted lifetime. The rigorous shielding of the self in habitualisation, of behaviour, speech, appearance and image, defensively blocks an opening of the self to the other, and therefore poses an obstacle to the experience of relationship and contact.

Prufrock's fear of vulnerability and failure to embrace risk is coupled with an obsessive concern with outward appearance, public image, and the conformity to expected behaviours: 'Shall I wear my hair behind? Do I dare to eat a peach?' (Eliot, 2004: 16). Are these the concerns of a narcissist neurotic or are they ironically representative of social anxieties more universally experienced? The ambiguity and fluidity of personal identity is exposed in these lines as a conflict between perceived public image and personal reality.

The repression of Prufrock's innate needs is reflected in the prudery suggested by the symbolization of his name, and Prufrock baulks at the exposure of his 'all too human' reality. Freud's concept of repression and its resultant neuroses is here manifested in poetic form; the conflict between the desire to connect and the fear of ridicule and rejection confines Prufrock to an endless internal monologue which defies

of the subject and the privately-held images of the self. On another level, the 'ego-ideal' is a goal that is striven towards, a goal that is never permanently reached, as the nature of the organism insists that it continually seeks to expand and to grow. Nietzsche's doctrine of the will to power and Lacan's reflections on 'desire' are evoked here.

decision and resolution, 'a hundred visions and revisions' (Eliot, 2004: 14), and which subtly erodes any hope of reconciliation between these warring psychic forces. Exposure of his real self is perceived as a potential assault on his conventional image; he does not dare 'disturb the universe' (Eliot, 2004: 14), because he is aware of the fixed identity which has been imposed on him through habit and routine:

And I have known the eyes already, known them all –
The eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase,
And when I am formulated, sprawling on a pin,
When I am pinned and wriggling on the wall,
Then how should I begin
To spit out all the butt-ends of my days and ways?
And how should I presume? (Eliot, 2004: 15).

The inner torment of his self-conscious sense of inadequacy and his conviction that he is trapped in the critical and disapproving gaze of others is poignantly captured in the imagery of the above lines: the alliteration, assonance and cacophony in words such as 'fix', 'formulated', 'pinned', 'sprawling', and 'wriggling' convey the tortured psychic incarceration which defines Prufrock's fragmented existence. The maintenance of this identity, although restrictive, painful, and unflattering, appears preferable to the risk of annihilation which its withdrawal would entail. Prufrock's fixed identity is impervious to the change, growth and transformation involved in an openness to the unpredictability of life and relationship. It negates and suppresses the desire for the experience of love and connection. Prufrock stays locked within the familiarity and security of his fixed image rather than risking the uncertain danger of discovering who he really is. His inner life remains hidden, not just from others, but also from himself.⁴

The conflicting nature of Prufrock's meditations comes to an ironic conclusion with an unfavourable comparison to the heroic stature of another procrastinator, another character whose sensitivity and self-doubt silences his expression of love;

⁴ The mask of conformity to public image implies the existence of a 'real' self behind the false façade. The dichotomy between the false and the real self is explored in diverse areas of thought, literature and art. It is particularly central to the work of the psychoanalyst, Donald Winnicott. However, the acceptance of ambivalence in relation to any understanding of the human subject is embraced by many thinkers, resulting in a rejection of easy oppositions; Nietzsche expresses his admiration for the construction of masks, and indeed argues for its necessity; the contemporary theorist, Slavoj Žižek suggests that the initially adopted mask gradually merges with the real self so that it is not possible to separate them. The most noted modernist writer who explores the concept of the mask is W.B. Yeats. His theory or doctrine of the mask explores the opposition, conflict and tension between the mask and the inner self, and rather than rejecting the mask or the anti-self, Yeats advocates an embrace and integration of this struggle and antithesis as an essential condition of self-discovery and wholeness.

Hamlet allows the obstacles of jealousy and betrayal to repress his love for Ophelia, and Prufrock never delivers his love-song. His desire for love is thwarted by his fear of rejection, his fear that he might be misunderstood. Yet the desire for love is the repressed motivation of the entire monologue; this is the primary human need/demand that Freud saw as pervading the psychoanalytic encounter, and which seeks its fulfillment as essential to personal healing and happiness. Prufrock turns aside from a full confrontation with his unconscious wishes, he contradicts any new interpretation of his dilemma, and he recoils from an integration of his conflicting and disparate selves. While he momentarily confronts the realities of his failure and the sterility of a loveless future, he recoils from the frightening possibilities of a different way of living, and thus settles for a life which he knows is empty and meaningless, where love only exists in the safety and isolation of his private fantasy. Therefore, he maintains an anti-heroic persona, a fawning politeness, and a ridiculous figure, and he continues to view the possibility of love as a song which he cannot sing or hear: 'I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each. / I do not think that they will sing to me' (Eliot, 2004: 16).

Failure of Communication

Words, after speech, reach into the silence (Eliot, 2004: 175).

The emptiness and barrenness of a fragmented psychic experience portrayed through the persona of a particular protagonist in "Prufrock" is explored and universalized through the multitude of anonymous voices which inhabit the world of "The Waste Land". Through a diverse array of human voices selected across conventional divides of time and space, myth and history, gender and age, this poem abides by Eliot's theory of impersonality whereby poetic utterance is given voice to a range of experience beyond that of the individual poet. This is the impersonality of 'the poet who, out of intense and personal experience, is able to express a general truth; retaining all the particularity of his experience, to make of it a general symbol' (Eliot, 1975: 251).

The symbol of "The Waste Land" evokes the sense of alienation, fragmentation, and isolation which Eliot perceives in the particularities of a post-war Europe, but it simultaneously attempts to give expression to emotional experiences which are universally identifiable even if not easily acknowledged. The multiplicity of voices clamoring through this barren landscape conveys the fractured variety of the modernist self, and these disparate personalities, in their isolating differences and subtle similarities, merge to express the multi-layered enigma of the modern consciousness. A major feature of this symbolized consciousness is the failure of

communication, both within and between individuals: 'I can connect / Nothing with nothing' (Eliot, 2004: 70). This resounds with the frustration of failed articulation and the failure of language to translate the deepest introspective experience which confines Prufrock to a meaningless existence: 'It is impossible to say just what I mean!' (Eliot, 2004: 16). The 'personages' of the waste land share with Prufrock the isolation and passivity of an existence where communication fails.

The obstacles to connection, with the self and with the other, is closely related to the limitations of language in attempts to give expression to human experience; these limitations hinge on the ambiguous nature of language as the imperfect vehicle of communication and the source of concealment and misinterpretation. Eliot acknowledges the incapacity of language to communicate the complexity of human being, especially the innermost depths of emotional experience: 'The expression of one's feelings calls for resources which language cannot supply', but he is not deterred from the pursuit of this expression, and he sees in poetry the possibility of this ideal: 'While language constitutes a barrier, poetry gives us a reason for trying to overcome the barrier' (Eliot, 1948: etext).

The images of death, sterility, and isolation suggested in the symbolized waste land evoke a spiritual and emotional disintegration as the inhabitants of the poem wrestle with a life devoid of meaning, a longing for escape from a numbed existence, and a fear of the risks which this escape necessitates. Risk entails the possibility of pain and failure, and it demands an awakening to the full spectrum of lived experience in contrast to the comforting darkness of a dulled and limited engagement with reality. Eliot suggests the reluctance of the subject to grapple with these difficulties by overturning the traditional poetic associations of Spring; in a startling reversal of conventional expectation, the poet claims that 'April is the cruellest month' (Eliot, 2004: 61), because it demands a surrender of the illusory comforts of darkness and denial, and a confrontation with personal realities: 'mixing / Memory and desire, stirring / Dull roots with spring rain' (Eliot, 2004: 61). It is cruel in that it forces a confrontation with experiences and memories which have been repressed and denied. The apparent neglect of 'roots' or origins is characteristic of modernism, as the past was increasingly seen as a phenomenon which failed to provide answers. However, without the integration, on a personal level, of past and present, memory and desire, root and branch, there is only 'A heap of broken images' (Eliot, 2004: 61), a disintegrated personality incapable of connection with self and others.

The failure of communication, with the disparate complexities of the inner self, and with the feared and desired reality of the other, results in a frustrating isolation which precludes the expression of thought and feeling: 'I never know what you are

thinking' (Eliot, 2004: 65). Feigned attempts at relationship, a woman 'hardly aware of her departed lover' (Eliot, 2004: 69), do not diminish the pain of isolation and the unconscious awareness that life in its fullness is blocked and evaded: 'each in his prison / Thinking of the key, each confirms a prison / Only at nightfall' (Eliot, 2004: 74). The universality of this predicament, the barriers to love, of self, of other, and of life, is seen by Helen Gardner as the subject of the poem:

Although "The Waste Land" may begin with the 'dilemma of the modern mind', it discovers that the modern dilemma is the historic dilemma...its true subject is ageless...that beneath both beauty and ugliness there lurk in all classes and in all ages boredom and terror; all wars are the same war, all love-makings the same love-making, all homecomings the same homecoming (Gardner, 1968: 88-89).

The boredom, the alienation, and the despair of an unlived life is but one side of this 'modern dilemma', as the withdrawal from a fully experiential encounter with reality is perceived as the antidote to the terror which such an encounter evokes. A commitment to avoidance, of self and of others, precludes a living engagement with reality: 'I could not / Speak, and my eyes failed, / I was neither / Living nor dead, and I knew nothing' (Eliot, 2004: 62). An openness to life in all its complexity is rejected in favour of a shallow grasping at survival and a gaze averted from life's possibilities: 'Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled, / And each man fixed his eyes before his feet' (Eliot, 2004: 62). The inability to express anything reflects the inability to feel anything, and this is the deadness of inner desolation depicted in the poem. Passion, love, lust, and all the full expressions of being human are merely mimicked in a parody of encounter and relationship: 'His vanity requires no response, / And makes a welcome of indifference' (Eliot, 2004: 68), and the sexual act is followed by relief that another failed attempt at connection has been endured: 'Well now that's done: and I'm glad it's over' (Eliot, 2004: 69).

'The partial anaesthesia of suffering without feeling' (Eliot, 2004: 294) is the condition of a life where feeling has been stifled and numbed. In this silencing of the inner world there is nothing real or meaningful to communicate: 'And so the conversation slips / Among velleities and carefully caught regrets' (Eliot, 2004: 18). The 'slippage' of language is a subject which Eliot consistently revisits, and it is stated pessimistically in "Four Quartets": 'Words strain, / Crack and sometimes break, under the burden, / Under the tension, slip, slide, perish, / Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place, / Will not stay still' (Eliot, 2004: 175). In the absence of expression, of thought and feeling, the reality of the self is diminished, distorted and denied, and a masquerade of subjectivity engages in a pseudo-dialogue with other masks and pretences. Communication fails in the tyranny of fear; fear of rejection,

fear of being misunderstood, and fear of confronting the mystery and strangeness of the self. The failure of communication is symptomatic of a rejection of reality, and a negation of complexity and difference, within self and others. The denial of essential aspects of the self involves a repression of certain feelings and desires, and in this selective and incomprehensive interpretation of the human subject the potentialities of life, its passion, desire, and experience, are thwarted and side-stepped.

The Lost Self

Where is the Life we have lost in living?

Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge? (Eliot, 2004: 147).

The failure to attempt an integration of the fragmented nature of the self and the related failure to communicate the reality of one's being, result from a combination of self-deception or the repression of one's personal truth, conformity to image as a provider of security and identity, and fear of risk and vulnerability inherent in exposure of the inner self. A false self-sufficiency, constructed in fearful caution and withdrawal, precludes an open and accepting approach to the fluidity and unfamiliarity of self and others, and this erects a blocking obstacle to the realization of life. The reality of the self is rejected, disowned, and buried beneath an accumulated mound of masks and disguises: 'Inside my brain a dull tom-tom begins / Absurdly hammering a prelude of its own, / Capricious monotone / That is at least one definite 'false note'' (Eliot, 2004: 19).

The stagnation and paralysis pertaining to the un-lived life involves a rejection of life's possibilities. Eliot describes such a retreat and avoidance in the poem "Animula", where life is restricted to meaningless trivialities, 'Content with playing cards and kings and queens', an insatiable need for security, 'Eager to be reassured', and a repudiation of love and passion, 'Unable to fare forward or retreat, / Fearing the warm reality, the offered good, / Denying the importunity of the blood' (Eliot, 2004: 107). The anonymity of the subject of the poem, 'the little soul', is suggestive of a life un-lived: Life is un-lived because there is no self to engage with life; the self has been buried beneath 'deliberate disguises' (Eliot, 2004: 85), and has been replaced by a 'shadow of its own shadows, spectre in its own gloom' (Eliot, 2004: 107).

Eliot's poetry appears to portray a world of failure; failure to live, failure to love, and failure to express being. Desperation and unease, despair and disguise, alienation and anxiety, and an array of emotional negativity seems to usher from the poetic word. Paradoxically, the entire *oeuvre* is expression, searching, learning and unlearning, an unceasing attempt 'to construct something / Upon which to rejoice'

(Eliot, 2004: 89). The desire for expression is unquenchable. The human instinct to survive, to create, and to find reasons to rejoice, propels the desire to find meaning, purpose and direction, even in the confrontation with meaninglessness, emptiness and confusion: 'But perhaps neither gain nor loss. / For us, there is only the trying. The rest is not our business' (Eliot, 2004: 182).⁵ Failure does not preclude a new start, apparent impossibility does not obliterate possibility, and despair does not permanently disable hope. The embrace of this ambiguity at the root of the human condition is one the 'uses of poetry' according to Eliot: 'Poetry...makes us...a little more aware of the deeper, unnamed feelings which form the substratum of our being, to which we rarely penetrate; for our lives are mostly a constant evasion of ourselves, and an evasion of the visible and sensible world' (Eliot, 1975: 96).

The 'unnamed feelings', the unconscious desires and fears, and the strength and fragility of the psyche, are aspects of the human condition explored consistently in psychoanalysis where the conflictual and ambiguous nature of the human being is both the source and the direction of the search for understanding. 'Poetry attempts to convey something beyond what can be conveyed in prose rhythms' (Eliot, 2004: 111), and according to Eliot, there are moments and experiences in the writing of poetry, when habitual barriers to understanding are capable of being removed. Eliot describes such moments:

Though we do not know until the shell breaks what kind of egg we have been sitting on. To me it seems that at these moments, which are characterized by the sudden lifting of the burden of anxiety and fear which presses upon our daily life so steadily that we are unaware of it, what happens is something *negative*: that is to say, not 'inspiration' as we commonly think of it, but the breaking down of strong habitual barriers – which tend to re-form very quickly. Some obstruction is momentarily whisked away. The accompanying feeling is less like what we know as positive pleasure, than a sudden relief from an intolerable burden (Eliot, 1975: 89-90).

While Eliot's poetry strips away comforting illusions and traditional conceptions of life and the human subject, to lay bare the realities of desolation, suffering and loneliness, it nevertheless attempts, in the penetration of these experiences, to discover a power which endures and surpasses pain, and which states against all the odds that 'All shall be well and / All manner of things shall be well' (Eliot, 2004: 198). This is a power which can integrate the failures and losses, the errors and disappointments, and the despair and deceptions of "Prufrock" and "The Waste Land", with 'The moments of

⁵ There is a strong echo of the sentiments of these words in Brendan Kennelly's poem, "Begin": 'And something that will not acknowledge conclusion/insists that we forever begin' (Kennelly, 2004: 478).

happiness', 'the sudden illumination' (Eliot, 2004: 186), and the possibility of 'love beyond desire' (Eliot, 2004: 195). The enigmatic reference to 'love beyond desire' allows for an ambiguity in its interpretation; perhaps the experience of love is more potent than what could be wished for/desired, or it is complete in itself, without desire's unceasing need and demand for more.

The necessity of integration, of past and present, of fear and courage, of melancholy and hope, 'compelled [Eliot] to contemplate another vision' according to Gardner: 'After "The Waste Land" Mr Eliot's poetry becomes the attempt to find meaning in the whole of his experience, to include all that he has known. To do this, he enters into himself, finding within himself his own music and his own language' (Gardner, 1968: 185). The entry into the depths of the self is the voyage of recovery, it enables the excavation of all that has been camouflaged, repressed and buried, and it involves the use of memory to elucidate 'the passage which we did not take / Towards the door we never opened' (Eliot, 2004: 171). This suggests the ongoing creation of identity and selfhood, which is open to changing interpretations of oneself and one's relationships with others. Unlike Prufrock's fixed identity, fluidity and transformation enable the experience of life in its fullness, the possibility of oneself as evolving and responding to changing insights, perspectives and horizons, and the embrace of others in acknowledgement of their indefinable and ungraspable alterity. Eliot's biographer, Lyndall Gordon sees this as the task undertaken in "The Four Quartets": 'Eliot took up the challenge of his autobiography: to make sense of one's life...to fuse past and future into a single pattern' (Gordon, 2000: 358). In this quest, the past is revisited with the hope of a more comprehensive interpretation, fantasies are traversed, and the familiar vision of the self and the world it inhabits is broadened and unfixed; re-interpretation offers the possibility of a different meaning to experience: 'And approach to the meaning restores the experience / In a different form' (Eliot, 2004: 186). In Eliot's words, 'A people without history / Is not redeemed from time', and the poet elaborates on the necessary direction which integration calls for:

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.
Through the unknown, remembered gate
When the last of earth left to discover
Is that which was the beginning (Eliot, 2004: 197).

Eliot accepts the difficulty of the endeavour because it means that 'every moment is a new and shocking / Valuation of all we have been' (Eliot, 2004: 179), and it entails a

mode of conception which differs from the more linear pattern of experience: 'And the way up is the way down, the way forward is the way back. / You cannot face it steadily' (Eliot, 2004: 187).

The poet acknowledges the pain which inevitably accompanies this honest appraisal of one's life as it confronts one with shame and guilt:

And last, the rending pain of re-enactment
Of all that you have done and been; the shame
Of motives late revealed, and the awareness
Of things ill done and done to others' harm
Which once you took for exercise of virtue.
Then fools' approval stings, and honour stains (Eliot, 2004: 194-195).

Eliot uses the image of the river, moving, changing, flowing, yet containing in its essence all that it has been and will be, to suggest the fluidity of personal integration within the changing circumstances of life: 'The river is within us, the sea is all about us' (Eliot, 2004: 184), and this process is an ongoing accommodation of loss and change and growth: 'the time of death is every moment' and so 'You are not the same people who left that station / Or who will arrive at any terminus' (Eliot, 2004: 188).

The recovery of the self, in an acceptance of its vulnerability, fallibility, and fluidity, enables a compassionate love of self and a corresponding openness to the mystery and the shared humanity of the other. This acceptance of mystery, of self and other, is grounded in humility, an acknowledgement of the limits of knowledge: 'The only wisdom we can hope to acquire / Is the wisdom of humility: humility is endless' (Eliot, 2004: 179), and this spirit of unknowing and uncertainty allows for a loving approach to the other: 'We appreciate this better / In the agony of others, nearly experienced, / Involving ourselves, than in our own' (Eliot, 2004: 187). Eliot understands the human condition as fallible and inscrutable, and he humbly asserts that the ideal of love, 'a lifetime's death in love, / Ardour and selflessness and self-surrender' is perhaps only achievable 'for the saint'; but an ordinary life, flawed and imperfect, can attain at least moments of such love, 'hints and guesses,' and this is enough to maintain the quest for those 'Who are only undefeated / Because we have gone on trying' (Eliot, 2004: 190). In these moments, there is an inter-mingling of self-relationship, 'Knowing myself yet being someone other', and a loving response to the other as 'Both intimate and unidentifiable' (Eliot, 2004: 193). Here intimacy and distance, sameness and difference, are embraced as characteristics of oneself and the other-than self, and these experiences, transitory and fleeting, enable at least glimpses of meaning and joy within the reality of human living. Integral to Eliot's vision of life

is his claim that in spite of all the obstacles, ‘The broken standards, the broken lives, / The broken faith in one place or another’, there exists the possibility of hope and love, because ‘nothing is impossible, nothing’ (Eliot, 2004: 163).

A reading of Eliot’s work enables a unique reflection on the philosophy of subjectivity. Eliot’s exploration of the concept is grounded in an acceptance of the ambiguity and complexity pertaining to any understanding of the self; it transcends idealistic, academic and theoretical discourses which are often alien to the reality of human experience; it provides a more relevant and a more easily recognizable account of human experience than may be encountered in strictly ‘philosophical’ discussions. Eliot’s poetry is a creative and significant philosophical perspective.

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