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| Title | Being and the Other : A Study of T. S. Eliot's Poetry |
| Author(s) | Kawano, Atsuko |
| Citation | Osaka Literary Review. 1991, 30, p. 71-82 |
| Version Type | VoR |
| URL | https://doi.org/10.18910/25469 |
| rights | |
| Note | |

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Being and the Other: A Study of T. S. Eliot's Poetry

Atsuko Kawano

I

[T]he life of a soul does not consist in the contemplation of one consistent world but in the painful task of unifying . . . jarring and incompatible ones, and passing, when possible, from two or more discordant viewpoints to a higher which shall somehow include and transmute them.¹⁾

In his doctoral dissertation, "Knowledge and Experience in the philosophy of F. H. Bradley", Eliot begins his thesis by presenting Bradley's cognitive theory. Bradley divided cognition into three stages; immediate, relational, transcendent levels. On the basis of this ideas, Eliot develops his poetic epistemology:

When a poet's mind is perfectly equipped for its work, it is constantly amalgamating disparate experience; the ordinary man's experience is chaotic, irregular, fragmentary. The latter falls in love, or reads Spinoza, and these two experiences have nothing to do with each other, or with the noise of the typewriter or the smell of cooking; in the mind of the poet these experiences are always forming new wholes.²⁾

Eliot refers to the first experience as feeling, the second as thought. The first experience is immediate, sensuous, without any meditation through mind. It exists before intellectual analysis, before the shattering into subject and object. The second experience is relational, intellectual, already sharply dualistic. The third experience is transcendent, the unification of the two experiences, which is possible only in the poet's mind. Only the poet can enfold these two disparate experiences into a unity. In the mind of the poet, feeling and thought are no longer compartmentalized; they are transcended and resolved into totality. Im-

mediate world dissolves almost as it arises, only after it is melted into relational world, it can be known through language. There is no such thing as knowledge, as the knower and the known. It is already lost like infancy, but still can be felt as unity. As Bradley says, immediate world

is not a stage which shows itself at the beginning and then disappears, but it remains at the bottom throughout as fundamental. And further, remaining, it contains in itself every development which in a sense transcends it.³⁾

The relational world is the usual human situation, the dualistic, intellectual realm after fall from unity. The movement from immediate world into relational world corresponds to the shift from primitive to contemporary, from infancy to adulthood. It is accompanied by the rise of language and objects. There is strict distinction between subject and object, the knower and the known. The knower can receive only the limited knowledge because he is imprisoned in his single perspective and his experiences are filtered through language. He is trapped within the dualism and suffers from the shadow which falls between incompatible two. He must endure the painful task of unifying the two and make effort to achieve unity. The transcendent world comes occasionally as a gift or as the reward of special effort to overcome the relational world. There is an all-comprehensive whole without the fragmentation. Feeling and thought are no longer divided. To reach this world involves a return to the unity of the immediate world on a higher level. By reflecting on immediate world, "we are led to the conception of an all-inclusive experience outside of which nothing shall fall."⁴⁾

Eliot's reflection on these three world is quite important. Eliot holds the concept that all-inclusive world begins in unity, falls apart, and returns to unity. To realize this concept is his "higher dream".⁵⁾ For him, the relational world is a trap to get out.

As mentioned above, the movement from immediate world into relational world is accompanied with the intrusion of language. In language, the identity of sign is meaningful only in the relation to other signs. The sign out of relations is nothing in itself, or rather, the inde-

pendence from relations is impossible. There can be no sense of identity before there is difference to define that identity. To enter into relational world means to be involved in such the network of relations of difference. Now we notice the analogy between relational world and Lacan's *le symbolique*, and between immediate world and *l'imaginaire*. In *l'imaginaire*, the infant has no self identity nor any sense of the difference of the mother from itself. The notion of a self is possible only when the infant feels the absence of the mother. The sense of self is always defined by the absent other. Self is, like word, a lack of wholeness. To try to hide or evade the lack, to recover the self-wholeness, is the primordial desire of the man. It is this desire that defines our existence. Such desire is still chaotic in *l'imaginaire*. When the infant passes through *le stade du miroir*,⁶⁾ he experiences the terror that the destruction of the Other means the loss of self. It is because self is only given at the same time as the Other is given. Loss of relation means loss of self. Either word or self is defined by the absence of the Other. The initial loss, the recognition that self is not self-sufficient, autonomous, independent entity rises in the moment of immersion in linguistic world, relational world, *le symbolique*.

To enter into such world means to accept the impossibility of peaceful unity, totality. The integral, coherent self is now barred and divided. The fragmentation of self occurs at the moment of entering relational world. After that moment, self is parasited by the Other and always awares his lack, his absence. Self is haunted by the shadow of the Other. Eliot describes this shadow in "Hollow Men": "Between the idea / And the reality / . . . / Falls the Shadow / . . . / Between the potency / And the existence / . . . / Falls the Shadow" (V 5-23). The shadow prevents the dream of "the substantial unity of the Soul."⁷⁾

The Other, which never be caught, never be domesticated, always already passed by and hidden beyond the horizon. It is unrecognizable and presents itself only in the form of absence. It is the abject which cannot be digested and leaves behind the nausea. This nausea is the shadow, the breach, only by which self can feel the alterity of the Other. Suffering from this shadow, Eliot senses the compulsive need to transcend

relational world, to return to nonrelational, immediate world.

Eliot's poetry is the internalized quest for unity. The confusing journey of the quester in his poetry is just the activity of being-in-the-world.⁸⁾ Figures in Eliot's poems have a wish to return to nonrelational, static world and to gain peaceful unity. In the process of seeking, the quester confronts the shadow of the Other, which is spurned as the quester's lack and yearned for as his correlative. The quester fears of this shadow because it tells the impossibility of his dream, "No Grail". But at the same time he longs for it because it may fill his lack and bring him complete être or complete néant, both of which mean release from fragmentation. With the ambivalence towards the Other, suspended between fear and desire, the quester struggles his way through the waste land.

In this study, I focus on the agony of the quester in relational world. He suffers from the irresolvable dualism of subject and object, man and woman. The never-crossed shadow, the never-reduced Otherness always defeats the quester. His agony is the constant acknowledgement of the triumph of relational mentality, his failure of transcendence.

II.

In relational world, no element can evade the network of relations. No element can be self-sufficient. One element is always already marked by the other elements. It can exist only in the movement of division, differentiation. Self is also involved in this movement. As Kierkegaard said, "The self is a relation which relates itself to its own self."⁹⁾ Self is not a static entity but a dynamic movement. Self itself is a relation of difference, not static difference between two entities but dynamic one which makes difference in itself. To enter in this relational world is to accept the impossibility of selfsameness, self-sufficiency.

Prufrock in *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, the first quester, or the wanderer, has already known that self cannot be stable entity. It consists of many moving fragments difficult to synthesize. So when he decides to go forward, he must gather the fragments; "Let us go then,

you and I" (1). But he awares 'you' is beyond his control. For Prufrock, one fragmentary self is felt as the Other. He is afraid of being patrolled each moment by "lidless eyes"¹⁰), never blinded eyes of the Other: "And I have known the eyes already, known them all-/ The eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase . . ." (55-6). He is a victim of the shadow which throws him into anxiety. His love song repeats the phrases full of anxiety: 'how should I presume?', 'Do I dare?' Prufrock "really hears two voices raising different questions: 'Do I dare?' and 'Do I dare?' "¹¹) Each time he speaks, he must identify himself: "Here I am".¹²)

What Prufrock dreads is the shadow of future self. Not knowing clearly what it is, he is afraid of the wavering shadow: "Oh, do not ask, 'What is it?' " (11). He is 'eherised' by the shadow and murmurs: "There will be time, there will be time" (26). His endless "visions and revisions" (33) prevent any positive act. He does not dare to cross the shadow. He mutters, "There will be time to murder and create" (28). Whether the Other murders or creates his house is suspended without being questioned, let alone answered. The Other keeps silence. Future self forces Prufrock to endure its silence.

This love song may address future self, who stirs Prufrock's desire for conquest. But the lover never presents itself in front of Prufrock. Beyond the horizon it conceals itself, always patrols Prufrock and suppresses his desire to kill it. All he can do is to dream a double suicide: "and we drown" (131). For Prufrock, complete extinction equals complete existence in that both of them release him from anxiety. Both are nonrelational whole and are "annihilation and utter night."¹³) But even his vision of *Liebested* is interrupted by "human voices" (131) which tell him the impossibility of entire néant. Prufrock must exist with *maladie de être*. Even if he thrown himself into the sea, he must exist as "a pair of ragged claws/ Scuttling across the floors of silent seas" (73-4). Prufrock's dream of unity disintegrates into "the butt-ends" (60) of impossible totality.

His love song is now fading out. Prufrock hears enviable voices of mermaids singing joy of unity. Unlike Prufrock, the fragmentary man, the exile from the Eden, the sea-girls are one with their world. Merrily

singing, effortlessly riding the waves is their natural act, their *raison d'être*, the expression of their love for sealord. They are never entrapped by anxiety. They exist as self-wholeness, self-sufficiency. Hearing their singing voices, Prufrock says, "I do not think that they will sing to me" (125). Prufrock feels alienated from their paradise. In this vision of mermaids, Prufrock sees what he has lost, and sees that he is lost.

In *The Waste Land*, "Eliot is writing about human relations in approximately the same way that he had thought about philosophical concepts of relation."¹⁴) Behind pained figures, we can find Eliot who experienced the catastrophe of human relations. The shadow of the Other now falls between self and another person. All questers in the waste land try to transcend barren relationship with easy, effortless way; but they are no longer permitted to wander nor sleep like Prufrock and Gerontion. Though the invulnerable shadow constantly defeats the quester, he must directly meet it and fight with it.

Differed from the quester imprisoned in relational world, the Sibyl of Cumae, the mythic seer, had special ability to enjoy both transcendent and relational mode of knowing and being. Like an ideal poet Eliot defines in his essay, she could feel her thought as immediately as the odour of a rose. Sibyl, however, has been deprived of her power and is imprisoned in a jar. Now she is entrapped in the dualism of relational knowledge. This entrapment, the knowledge of the finitude of her knowledge is the reason she wants to die. She now shares existential agony with all figures in the waste land. For Marie, April is cruel in that it stirs up declining desire for unity and leads her the endless desire/despair cycle. When she was a child, she was in harmony with the four seasons; she accepted the winter without escaping to the south. Marie lived in non-dualistic world in which she was not tormented by relations. She could accept contradictions because she did not perceive them as such. She was completely soaked in immediate experiences: "And I was frightened. He said Marie, Marie hold on tight. And down we went." She went down to relational world. As an adult, she was taken out of peaceful immediate world. In relational world, she is forced to know, think and speak; she knows the distinction of the four seasons, thinks she was happy

in her childhood, and speaks, "April is the cruellest month". After the fall from Eden, she must know, think, speak only to realize her sin, her lack. In relational world, April is forever cruel for Marie.

"A Game of Chess" features two women suffer from the failure of sexual love. Unlike the hyacinth girl, they cannot experience even the downward transcendence. Two women, the first in a boudoir, the second in a pub, are betrayed or violated by men. In a boudoir of the first lady, only her environment is described in detail. The woman is presented as an absence. The only description of the woman is that of her hair: "Under the firelight, under the brush, her hair / Spread out in fiery points / Glowed into words. . ." (108-10). The woman turns into Medusa; "her hair, that is, her sexuality, alternately glows threateningly or pleads in dependency and frustration."¹⁵) She is a prey of the irresolvable dualism of man and woman. Her isolation is expressed in the conversation with her husband which actually the crossing of two monologues. Being imprisoned in their own desires, they cannot communicate with each other. The man is the Other for the woman, and vice versa. Like Prufrock or Gerontion, the man is confined in his *cogito*, his game of chess, the woman, shut out of his sanctuary, showers him with insistent questions out of spite. Communion is impossible for them physically, intellectually, spiritually. The "lidless eyes" (138) forever reflect the alterity, never-extinct Otherness.

While the first woman is mentally distressed and physically infertile, Lil, the second woman, is tormented by ill health from the effects of the abortion. She is also a victim of an unfruitful sexual relationship. She fears that Albert, her husband, will leave her. For her, Albert is the Other who is absent, beyond her control, but defines her existence and leaves a scar in her body and soul.

"Stay with me./ Speak to me" is a cry of all questers including these two women. They demand the obedience of the Other to reduce the Otherness into nothing. But this demand is always turned down. "HURRY UP PLEASE ITS TIME" (141, 152, 168-9); it is time for the quester to accept the alterity. "Goodnight . . . Good night . . . good night" (170-2); he must say farewell both to the interference of Stetson's friend

and to the indifference of the husbands. In relational world, a game of chess must be played with another person.

In "Fire Sermon", the questers fall into mental paralysis. The random montages of the unreal city reveal their *aboulie*, no physical passion, no spiritual desire. The apathetic lovers, unlike two women in "A Game of Chess", feel nothing, expect nothing, distress nothing. They have no painful sense of lost chance for transcendence. The typist and the clerk, the abulialic lovers are described by Tiresias, the mythic prophet with transcendent viewpoint. The typist is an automation and the clerk is an animal: "His vanity requires no response / And makes a welcome of indifference" (241-2). They do not care about the experience of unity because they fell no thirst for it. The self-sufficient automaton and animal never recognize their lack, let alone suffer from the shadow of the Other. The life of such lovers is not a quest, a battle, but an automatic cycle of "Birth, and copulation, and death."¹⁶ Sweeney's agony that "I've been born, and once is enough" is unintelligible for the lovers who would say, 'Any times will do' like a mechanical music of gramophone. The cycle of relational world never bothers them. Only suffered quester can hear the fire sermon that instructs emptying self by fire: "Burning burning burning burning" (308).

In "Death by Water", the quester is forbidden his easy death-wish. Like Prufrock, he wishes death by water for "a dissolving of the burden of existence in the comfort of ceasing to suffer."¹⁷ But "the whirlpool" (318) in which Phlebas "rose and fell" (316) suggests the impossibility of release from the cycle of relational world. "O you who turn the wheel and look to windward" (320) means that he is fated to cope with the Otherness. Even after death by water, Phlebas remains involved in the movement of relations, in the constant battle with the alterity. The quester sympathizes with his friend Phlebas for their common existential agony. While Stetson's friend cries aloud, "You! hypocrite lecteur! — mon semblable, — mon frère!", Phlebas's friend says to himself, "Consider Phlebas" (321).

The final trial in "What the Thunder said" is a crisis of belief in transcendence. The quester is identified with Christ's disciples after

Good Friday, who recognize Christ as a dead man and cannot believe Christ's transcendence: "He who was living is now dead" (328). Going up the long and winding road, the quester gets afraid of the shadow of the Other. The quester strives to recognize the third body, the Other. His effort to reconstitute the face of the Other changes his eyes. The shift from "Beside" to "on the other side" is significant in that the quester gets "the ability to see beyond the flat two dimensionality of the world of appearances and enter, through the third dimension, into a world of depth, the reality manifest to the eye of faith".¹⁸⁾ His new-born eyes see pained people "swarming" (368) who are "stumbling in cracked earth / Ringed by the flat horizon only" (369-70). His faith in transcendence arises. The "empty chapel" (388) telling the absence of Grail is not a despair to him because it is also Christ's tomb tells, 'He is risen and gone before you.'

The rain comes. This rain, coming with the thunder of spring, is not the April shower Marie dreads. It is the rain of purgation in which the quester "humped in silence" (398). What the thunder said is mere 'DA' in which the quester hears his own voice. In 'DA, DA, DA', he hears, 'Give, Sympathize, Control'. To the first DA, *Datta*, he responds the surrender to love for another person. This love is not of "The awful daring of a moment's surrender" as the hyacinth lovers experienced. This love requires the acceptance of the alterity, the suppression of lust for conquest. To the second DA, *Dayadhvam*, he responds the sympathy with another person. We are entrapped in the prison of solipsism because of "our impudent crimes"¹⁹⁾, our desire to violate another person, our intolerance to the absence of another person. The sympathy for common sin, common absence at the center of human being, may turn the key of prison once again. To the third DA, *Damyata*, he responds the control of his desire for conquest. But the subjunctive mode, "your heart would have responded" emphasizes a failure to exercise the self-control in human relationship. To control the self-destructive desire is still difficult for the quester.

The thunder has faded away. Now the quester sits on the shore "with the arid plain behind" (424) him. He rejects the quest by turning

his back to the waste land. "Shall I at least set my lands in order?" (425) shows the failure to transcend by what the thunder said. He senses that while he is "Thinking of the key", it is impossible to get out of his prison. It is the activity of thinking through language that imprisons the quester in dualism. The transcendent world is not reachable through this activity. Then what is a key to transcendence? "Shantih shantih shantih" (433) is the quester's prayer which suggests that "Transcendence to the Absolute is the only answer, and that answer cannot be accepted without a leap beyond philosophy into faith."²⁰)

III

Now the quester comes to the exit of the waste land. All experiences in relational world are the products of the fall from unity. They are all the "metonymy of desire"²¹). All activities in relational linguistic world originate in the desire to escape the absence at the center of the quester. Through these activities, the quester has concealed his sorrow for the exile, his decayed house, his ruins. Three claps of thunder brought these matters to his notice and urged him to the reflection on his precedent attitude. In the process of the quest, he has always tried to take an easy way out of his waste land, his existential agony. But he has learned that he is destined to choose either the painful efforts for transcendence or the continual acceptance of the Otherness. There is no other way but to choose one of these two. If he cannot put up with the pain of 'passion', if he cannot follow in the footsteps of Christ, who accepted sufferings for the love toward the Other, he must at least be patient with the Other and must strive to repress his desire, the desire to violate the Other for his self-totality. But even after such knowledge, he resists against the choice and struggles to find some secret passage leads to his mind's content. To search for forgiveness, to satisfy the thirst for release, he is still struggling in the waste land. The exit of the waste land is the entrance of another battleground. This point is also haunted by the shadow of the Other. In *Ash-Wednesday* the shadow falls between the quester and the Absolute, God. His new-born eyes of faith makes haste to be melted

into God. However, not merging into God but getting towards God is required of the quester. He must face up with God and keep a distance from God and try to reconstitute the face of God. He is asked to accept the painful task of living in the relational world where the self and even God fail to cohere. The quester enacts the existential agony, a loss of self-sameness which is also a discovery of the insufficiency of the self and the absence of the Other in the self. With a wish to return to a non-relational world, the quester struggles with the shadow of the Other through the waste land. The shadow of the Other is shunned as a symbol of the insufficiency of the self and yearned for as completing or annihilating the self. At the bottom of such ambivalence towards the Other, the fervent desire for perfection, the desire to evade the absence is swirling. The quester surrenders himself to his humane desire and fails to transcend the relational world. But the quester has a key of his prison of the desire in his hand now. It is the acceptance of the absence of the Other in the self. The shadow of the Other cannot be dispelled, but the quester must always try to dispell it. He is asked to accept the inevitability of enduring jarring and incompatible worlds and attempting to unify them through constant prayer. The process from "Let us go then you and I" to "And let my cry come unto Thee" is the never-ending quest of the man who has the undying nostalgia for the unity of the soul.

NOTES

- 1) T. S. Eliot, *Knowledge and Experience in the Philosophy of F. H. Bradley* (London: Faber & Faber, 1964), 147-8.
- 2) Eliot, "The Metaphysical Poets," in *Selected Essays* (New York: Harcourt Brace & World, 1960), 247.
- 3) Eliot, *Knowledge and Experience*, 16.
- 4) *Ibid.*, 31.
- 5) Eliot, "Ash-Wednesday" in *Collected Poems* (London: Faber & Faber, 1963), IV 20.

- 6) Jacques Lacan, *Écrit* (Paris: Seuil, 1966), 94.
- 7) Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," in *Selected Essays*, 9.
- 8) This is the key term of Martin Heidegger. It means that the only being is the being in the network of the relations, that is, the being in the world.
- 9) Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death*, trans. Walter Lowrie (Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday, 1954), 146.
- 10) Eliot, "The Waste Land", 138.
- 11) John T. Mayer, *T. S. Eliot's Silent Voices* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 122.
- 12) Eliot, "Gerontion", 1.
- 13) Eliot, *Knowledge and Experience*, 31.
- 14) Jewel Spears Brooker and Joseph Bently, *Reading The Waste Land: modernism and the limits of interpretation* (Massachusetts: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1990), 139.
- 15) Mayer, 264.
- 16) Eliot, "Sweeny Agonistes"
- 17) A. D. Moody, *Thomas Sterns Eliot: Poet* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 107.
- 18) Mayer, 284.
- 19) Eliot, "Gerontion", 46.
- 20) Brooker, 199.
- 21) Harriet Davidson, *T. S. Eliot and Hermeneutics: Absence and Interpretation in "The Waste Land."* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1985), 103.