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Dramatic Aspects of Eliot's Poetry

Keiko Harada

If we employ the word 'dramatic' to indicate an immediacy which makes us feel what we are reading or contemplating is happening here and now, Eliot's earlier poetry is often more dramatic than his plays. It is a drama of words behind which is 'the drama of action, the timbre of voice and voice, the uplifted hand or tense muscle, and the particular emotion,' forming an amalgamation of 'concrete visual actuality' and 'specific emotional actuality.'¹ The 'objective correlatives' consisting of characteristic human attitudes, actions and situations in pertinent arrangements give us a vivid impression of reality.

It is often pointed out that Eliot's poetry is an 'anthology of the high points of a drama.'² His peculiar dramatic propensity for taking only the 'characteristic detail out of life,'³ paying attention to a particular situation where we see ourselves 'in a dramatic light,'⁴ helps him externalize such 'genuine and substantial human emotions' as only 'observation can confirm.'⁵

By the use of 'objective correlatives,' Eliot skillfully lays bare modern people's spiritual condition. Not only situations but individual words or voices heard in his poetry constitute a complex structure implying something behind the actuality. In particular, his poetry is dramatic in its use of various voices as objective correlatives. The earlier poetry is full of ironical voices. In *The Waste Land*, we can hear the orchestration of varied voices. In the later poetry, a meditative voice is heard which has another dramatic effects. I shall examine the transition of these voices in what follows.

I. Earlier Poetry

One of the characteristic features of Eliot is that he is essentially a poet

of fragments. His poems are composed of mosaics, of seemingly chaotic 'unrelated vignettes,'⁶ of the 'losses' of our past tossed up to the shore of the present by the tide of Time.⁷ What relates them with each other is the consciousness of 'here and now,' the eye of the speaker.

This eye of the speaker gives us an immediate impression which is 'pictorial and dramatic,'⁸ impressionistic and histrionic. His earlier poems are all created out of such an eye's keen observation. "Preludes," for example, describes a sordid winter evening in the images of things quite homely and domestic, but often neglected, such as the 'grimy scraps of withered leaves' wrapped about our feet by a 'gusty shower,' the 'showers' beating on 'broken blinds and chimney-pots,' and a 'lonely cab-horse' steaming and stamping at the 'corner of the street.' "Morning at the Window" is a vivid, pictorial sketch of the 'damp souls of housemaids' whose faces are 'twisted' and whose 'aimless smile' 'hovers in the air and vanishes along the level of the roofs.' Mr. Apollinax laughs like an 'irresponsible foetus,' and his laughter 'tinkles among the teacups.'

The angle of the speaker's view is that of an observer with a bitter ironical voice which overlays everything like a 'vanish spread over a wide area of a painting with a very broad brush.'⁹ Every description is superficially coated with twisted and distorted ironical embellishments.

In this connection, let me compare Eliot with his contemporary Robert Frost, who, emphasizing the 'voice posture' and 'voice gesture,' created a dramatic setting to 'make such tones obvious.'¹⁰ "The Fear," for instance, begins with a glimpse of a simple, rural atmosphere:

A lantern-light from deeper in the barn
 Shone on a man and woman in the door
 And threw their lurching shadows on a house
 Nearby, all dark in every glossy window.
 A horse's hoof pawed once the hollow floor,
 And the back of the gig they stood beside
 Moved in a little (11. 1-7)

The scene described here is natural and unemphatic, although full of ominous forebodings. Eliot's setting, on the contrary, is always connected with the psychology of the protagonist. Every scene is full of 'sympto-

matic'¹¹ images. The 'evening' spread out 'against the sky / Like a patient etherised upon a table' is a symbol of boredom or the benumbed, inactive dullness of the modern city and its inhabitants. The 'yellow fog' that 'rubs its back upon the window-panes' is the oppressed sexual desire of Prufrock.

In Frost's poetry, nature is always described as the wide and unconquerable, sometimes very cruel and destructive. He portrays men's life held in the bosom of the wide, powerful nature without distorting anything. In "Snow," for example, the opening lines show a vivid picture of three men enfolded in the terrifying, roaring sound of snowstorm, which is described naked and undisguised as it is:

The three stood listening to a fresh access
Of wind that caught against the house a moment,
Gulped snow, and then blew free again – the Coles,
Dressed, but disheveled from some hours of sleep;
Meserve, belittled in the great skin coat he wore. (11. 1-5)

"Portrait of a Lady," on the other hand, begins with this elaborate scene:

Among the smoke and fog of a December afternoon
You have the scene arrange itself – as it will seem to do –
With 'I have saved this afternoon for you';
And four wax candles in the darkened room,
Four rings of light upon the ceiling overhead,
An atmosphere of Juliet's tomb
Prepared for all the things to be said, or left unsaid. (11. 1-7)

Here is portrayed a claustrophobic obsession, in which everything seems to be reflected phantasmagorically in an uneaven looking-glass.

Not only the setting, but the communication of characters is elaborate and disguised in Eliot's poetry, whereas Frost's is full of direct, natural conversations:

'Can't a man speak of his own child he's lost?'

'Not you! – Oh, where's my hat? Oh, I don't need it!
I must get out of here. I must get air.'

I don't know rightly whether any man can.'

'Amy! Don't go to someone else this time.
Listen to me. . . .' ("Home Burial," 11. 35-40)

Here the dramatic tension is supported by the exchanges of the neurotic voice of a woman and the appeasing voice of her husband. But Eliot's poetry lacks conversation. In "Portrait of a Lady" the most ironical point is the comical juxtaposition of the 'Boston hostess reciting the language of "The Buried Life"' in her appealing voice and the visitor 'studiously' refusing to 'respond' with cool, 'conventional politeness.'¹² The visitor's muffled voice sounds emotionless, mechanical. It is a stage direction if we replace 'I' and 'my' with 'he' and 'his' in the following imaginary dialogues:

[Woman]: And youth is cruel, and has no more remorse
And smiles at situations which it cannot see.

[Man]: I smile, of course,
And go on drinking tea. (II. 8-11)

Or,

[Woman]: . . . But what have I, but what have I, my friend,
To give you, what can you receive from me?
Only the friendship and the sympathy
Of one about to reach her journey's end.

I shall sit here, serving tea to friends. . . .

[Man]: I take my hat: . . . (II. 24-29)

Or,

[Woman]: You hardly know when you are coming back,
You will find so much to learn.

[Man]: My smile falls heavily among the bric-à-brac. (III. 7-9)

As it is shown above, Eliot's persona is both an observer and an actor who is observed. He looks at himself as a third person, 'he,' to make a laughing-stock of himself.

The bitter, ironical voice addresses not only the actor in the poem but

the reader. "Prufrock," "Portrait of a Lady," "Preludes," and "La Figlia Che Piange" end with sharp bitter ironical questions cast toward the reader who has been looking at the drama as a detached outsider with a critical eye like the speaker's:

Wipe your hand across your mouth and laugh:
The worlds revolve like ancient women
Gathering fuel in vacant lots. ("Preludes," IV. 14-16)

These lines contain such a bitter irony that we are driven to the core of a disgusting reality in a paradoxical way. The observer, though detached, is psychologically inseparably involved. Under the ironical voice looms the stark naked reality which has been skillfully camouflaged by a deceiving gesture or pose.

Thus, the more ironical the voice, the more immediate the fear we feel. But there are some passages where the detached observer and the actor are intertwined into one, and with the mask of irony dropped, the deeper ventriloquist voice of the speaker's suffering self addresses us. Some conspicuous examples of this are:

I should have been a pair of ragged claws
Scuttling across the floors of silent seas.
("The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," 11. 73-74)

Or,

I grow old . . . I grow old . . .
I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled. (*Ibid.*, 11. 120-121)

This kind of inner voice, deeper than those ironical, neurotic voices, constitutes the core of "Gerontion," and *The Waste Land*.

II. *The Waste Land*

Eliot's earlier poetry, especially those called the 'Harvard poems,' are poems of the past 'reverie.'¹³ But in "Gerontion" is employed a pattern to interpret the present chaotic situation in the light of Myth. The most significant pattern of Myth is 'death and resurrection,' which Eliot

transforms into a universal drama in modern terms. What matters is form and style. Eliot makes his poem comprehensive but particular by the use of varied voices of modern people of the Waste Land, whose archetypal pattern is Tiresias.

The Waste Land, originally titled “He Do [*sic*] the police in Different Voices,”¹⁴ is often said to be a symphony of various voices juxtaposed without connectives. Sudden changes in the ‘instruments’ produce not only musical but dramatic effects. Let me put this complex poem into a simplified chart of layers of voices for the sake of examining its musical pattern.

There are various modes of poetic utterance. Eliot classifies them into three voices. The first is the ‘voice of the poet talking to himself – or nobody.’ The second is the ‘voice of the poet addressing an audience.’ The third is the ‘voice of the poet when he attempts to create a dramatic character speaking in verse.’¹⁵ There is no poem of drama but consists of at least a single voice. I shall begin with the third voice.

[i] *The Third Voice*: This is the voice employed by the character on the stage and it was not before 1938 that Eliot fully awakened to its importance.¹⁶ This voice provides the poem with dramatic characters. It is flexibly modified depending upon protagonist and situation. It appears fragmentarily in the poem, and its suddenness produces an unexpected effect in our mind.

A woman’s voice is heard in the “Hofgarten,” talking about her past childhood:

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. He said, Marie,
Marie, hold on tight. And down we went.

(“The Burial of the Dead,” 11. 13-16)

A romantic girl’s voice, fragile and reminiscent, is heard in:

‘You gave me hyacinths first a year ago;
‘They called me the hyacinth girl’. (*Ibid.*, 11. 35-36)

The neurotic voice of a lady of situations complains, accusing her faithless lover:

'My nerves are bad tonight. Yes, bad. Stay with me.
 Speak to me. Why do you never speak. Speak.
 What are you thinking of? What thinking? What?
 I never know what you are thinking. Think.'

("A Game of Chess," 11. 111-114)¹⁷

The uneducated speech of a gossip-monger is heard in a suffocating, sterile, sawdust pub, crowded with workers:

When Lil's husband got demobbed, I said –
 I didn't mince my words, I said to her myself,

 Now Albert's coming back, make yourself a bit smart.
 He'll want to know what you done with that money he gave you
 To get yourself some teeth. He did, I was there.
 You have them all out, Lil, and get a nice set,
 He said, I swear, I can't bear to look at you.
 And no more can't I, I said, and think of poor Albert,
 He's been the army four years, he wants a good time,
 And if you don't give it him, there's others will, I said.
 Oh is there, she said. Something o'that, I said.
 Then I'll know who to thank, she said, and give me a straight look.

(*Ibid.*, 11. 139-151)

Here we hear a vulgar way of orchestration of various voices, which is effective enough to dramatize the manner of Lil's sterile life. As the speaker goes on talking, the sawdust pub and the smoky atmosphere disappear and we find ourselves involved in the speaker's utterances. Then suddenly the detached, mechanical voice of a barman intrudes, bringing us back to the present. The voice is mingled with other voices constituting the rhythmic 'splendid last lines,'¹⁸ a mixture of superb colloquialism and a classical allusion:

HURRY UP PLEASE ITS TIME

HURRY UP PLEASE ITS TIME

Goodnight Bill. Goodnight Lou. Goodnight May. Goodnight.

Ta ta, Goodnight. Goodnight.

Good night, ladies, good night, sweet ladies, good night, good night.

(*Ibid.*, 11. 168-172)

Several critics have often quoted these examples in discussing Eliot's marvelous technique for setting forth a pertinent situation or atmosphere, his keen sensibility and the rhythmic pattern of spoken words which are more dramatic than in his drama because of their particular intensity evoking a concrete, animated, clear vision in our mind.

[ii] *The Second Voice*: Underneath the layer of fragmentary voice lies the voice of the poet speaking through a persona to the reader, like that of Homer's epic, *The Divine Comedy* and *Paradise Lost*. This deeper, mythological voice integrates the fragmentary, superficial voices into a drama of the contemporary world on the psychic level. Tiresias, for example, 'although a mere spectator and not indeed a character,' is ambiguously 'the most important personage in the poem, uniting all the rest.'¹⁹ Through him Eliot speaks about the corrupted civilization. The Fisher King, shoring 'fragments' against the 'ruins,' speaks for Eliot about setting the wasteland 'in order.'²⁰

[iii] *The First Voice*: Grover Smith, regarding the poem as an autobiography of Tiresias, fails to notice the first voice lying under the layers of the third and second voices. Spender points out the voice as the 'voice of the poet in the poem, who suffers.'²¹ In "The Fire Sermon," for instance, we hear Eliot's voice arising from the depth of the suffering self:

By the waters of Leman I sat down and wept . . .
 Sweet Thames, run softly till I end my song,
 Sweet Thames, run softly, for I speak not loud or long.
 But at my back in a cold blast I hear
 The rattle of the bones, and chuckle spread from ear to ear.

(11. 182-186)

While Eliot was engaged in *The Waste Land*, he was suffering from nervous prostration due to 'aboulie and emotional derangement which has been a life long affliction.'²² For the treatment of it, he moved from Margate, a port town at the mouth of the Thames to Lausanne on the beach of Lake Leman.

On returning to London, Eliot wrote to Richard Aldington: 'that [*The Waste Land*] is a thing of the past so far as I am concerned and I am now feeling towards a new form and style.'²³ This insatiate quest for 'form and style' with an appropriate voice free from external cacophonous impediments culminates in *Ash-Wednesday* and *Four Quartets*.

III. Later Poetry

As I've mentioned, Eliot's dramatic quality owes much to his skillful use of various voices as objective correlatives. After *The Waste Land*, however, those dramatic voices seem to disappear and a meditative, incantatory voice supersedes them. But if we can use the word 'dramatic' to indicate something culminated or ultimate, his later poetry may also be called 'dramatic.' For death and rebirth is the most dramatic moment in our life, which is the main theme of his later works.

After *The Waster Land*, Eliot seems to have traced two courses, feeling his way downwards to the horror of despair and upwards to heavenly light and felicity. The former produces the 'primitive terror'²⁴ of *The Hollow Men*, and the latter the blissful state of the 'Rose Garden,' both of which are well expressed in *Four Quartets*. Spender, comparing Eliot's poetry to a musical instrument, says, 'his poetry with all its wonderful qualities is an instrument which has very strong and deep low notes and very beautiful and transcendental high ones,' manifesting a 'vision of Hell' and a 'vision of Heaven.'²⁵

The ultimate fearful note is heard in *The Hollow Men*:

We are the hollow men
 We are the stuffed men
 Leaning together
 Headpiece filled with straw. Alas!
 Our dried voices, when
 We whisper together
 Are quiet and meaningless
 As wind in dry grass
 Or rats' feet over broken glass
 In our dry cellar

(11. 1-10)

The conception of 'redemption,' represented in a more abstract, sophisticated way, is repeated in a state of immediacy towards the end of the poem:

At the source of the longest river
 The voice of the hidden waterfall
 And the children in the apple-tree
 Not known, because not looked for
 But heard, half-heard, in the stillness
 Between two waves of the sea.
 Quick now, here, now always —

("Little Gidding," V. *CPP*, pp. 197-198)

In the stillness of the turning world, Eliot hears the culminating voice of his suffering as a poet, as a man. The major problem for him to pursue thereafter was the problem of communication to ordinary people of the most extreme state of mental agony in a dramatic form, to which he had set his hand in *Murder in the Cathedral*. It had taken him almost twenty years, however, before he achieved his own ideal verse drama.

Notes

1. T.S. Eliot, "Seneca in Elizabethan Translation," *Selected Essays* (London: Faber & Faber, 1932) (Hereafter *SE*), p. 68.
2. F. O. Matthiessen, *The Achievement of T. S. Eliot: An Essay on the Nature of Poetry* (London: Oxford University Press, 1947), p. 177.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 69.
4. T. S. Eliot, "'Rhetoric' and Poetic Drama," *SE*, p. 39.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 41.
6. A. C. Partridge, *The Language of Modern Poetry: Yeats, Eliot, Auden* (London: Andre Deutsche, 1976), p. 141.
7. Cf. "The Dry Salvages," I, *Four Quartets, The Complete Poems and Plays of T. S. Eliot* (London: Faber & Faber, 1969) (Hereafter *CPP*), p. 184.
8. F. O. Matthiessen, *op. cit.*, p. 69.
9. Stephen Spender, *Eliot* (Modern Masters Series) (Fontana, Glasgow: Collins, 1975), p. 42.
10. Elaine Barry, *Robert Frost* (New York: Frederick Unger Publishing Co., 1973), p. 62.
11. Stephen Spender, *op. cit.*, p. 41.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 45.
13. Hugh Kenner, *T. S. Eliot: The Invisible Poet* (London: Allen, 1960), p. 79.

14. "Editorial Notes," Valerie Eliot (ed.), *T.S. Eliot, The Waste Land: A Facsimile and Transcript of the Original Drafts Including the Annotation of Ezra Pound* (London: Faber & Faber, 1972), p. 125.
15. T. S. Eliot, "The Three Voices of Poetry," *On Poetry and Poets* (London: Faber & Faber, 1957), p. 89.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 92.
17. Ezra Pound comments on these lines as "photography," 'too realistic a reproduction of an actual conversation.'
"Editorial Notes," Valerie Eliot (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 126.
18. Ezra Pound's Comment, cf., *ibid.*, p. 15.
19. "Notes on the Waste Land," *CPP*, p. 78.
20. Cf. "What the Thunder said," *The Waste Land*, V. *CPP*, pp. 74-75.
21. Stephen Spender, *op. cit.*, p. 96.
22. To Richard Aldington, 6 November 1921, in Valerie Eliot (ed.), *T. S. Eliot, The Waste Land*, *op. cit.*, p. xxii.
23. To Richard Aldington, 15 November 1922, in Valerie Eliot (ed.), *The Waste Land*, *ibid.*, p. xxv.
24. "The Dry Salvages," II, *Four Quartets*, *CPP*, p. 187.
25. Stephen Spender, *op. cit.*, p. 223.