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The Revisionist Voice of T. S. Eliot in the “Notes” Toward *The Waste Land*

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In 1956, more than fifty years after the first publication of *The Waste Land*, T. S. Eliot gave a lecture on the current condition of literary criticism and spoke somewhat apologetically on the “Notes” he had attached to the poem, perhaps because he was a little bewildered by its consequence:

Here I must admit that I am, on one conspicuous occasion, not guiltless of having let critics into temptation. The notes to *The Waste Land!* I had at first intended only to put down all the references for my quotations, with a view to spiking the guns of critics of my earlier poems who had accused me of plagiarism.¹⁾

And yet, whether to avoid the censure of plagiarism or to add “a few more pages of printed matter” to his poem which had been too short to make a book by itself, once Eliot had published his “Notes” together with *The Waste Land*, the critics rushed to it looking for some clues to decipher the meaning of this difficult poem.²⁾ Eliot continues in the lecture: “It was just, no doubt, that I should pay my tribute to the work of Miss Jessie Weston; but I regret having sent so many inquirers off on a wild goose chase after Tarot cards and the Holy Grail.”³⁾ Then, is Eliot’s “Notes” only a set of surplus information to the poem, or just a slipshod piece of writing which was added merely to fill the extra pages of his book?

In 1923, a year after *The Waste Land*, Eliot wrote the following in an essay titled “Ulysses, Order and Myth” about a method of composition he had found in James Joyce’s *Ulysses*:

In using the myth, in manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity, Mr Joyce is pursuing a method which others must pursue after him.... Psychology (such as it is, and whether our reaction to it be comic or serious), ethnology, and *The Golden Bough* have concurred to make possible what was impossible even a few

years ago. Instead of narrative method, we may now use the mythical method.⁴⁾

Here in this passage as elsewhere, Eliot seems to be talking about his own composition rather than about Joyce's work, for the latter is far more complex a story than a simple parallel between Homer's *Odyssey* and a day of the Dubliner. What Eliot advocates in his essay is "the mythical method", a method of juxtaposing the myth from the past with a story of the modern world in such a way that the past gives an order and a meaning to "the immense panorama of futility and anarchy" in the present.⁵⁾ In his "Notes" toward *The Waste Land*, it is mostly according to this "mythical method" that Eliot explicates his poem, amplifying the content of the poem with his many references to the works of past literature and mythology.

However, *The Waste Land* did not have any notes attached when it first appeared in the little magazines, in *The Criterion* and *The Dial* successively. A. Walton Litz reports the existence of some original "Notes" used by the poet at the time of his composition, and its circulation in the type-script form among the poet's coterie, which was finally included when the poem became a book.⁶⁾ Although it seems outrageous for a poem to have such a commentary as this "Notes", it is possible the poet's friends asked for it so that they could at least identify some of the allusions or the meanings of those Sanscrit words in this difficult poem. Still, putting aside the question of whether the "Notes" is really necessary in understanding *The Waste Land*, it appears that the poet in his "Notes" is doing something more to the poem than simply identifying its allusions.

What we see here is an instance of a more general, but peculiarly Modernist phenomenon, the writer's constant need of commentary on his own work: Remember, for instance, James Joyce generously providing materials to Stuart Gilbert for his book on *Ulysses*, Marianne Moore's "Notes", or Wallace Stevens' incessant, yet somehow off-the-point remarks on his poems.⁷⁾ Perhaps, there has not been any literature that has needed so much commentary and explication as Modernist literature. It is as if those writers felt that, once away from their hands, their works became too extraneous for them to go back to except as objectified texts to be

scrutinized and made comments on, while at the same time feeling also these works needed their constant commentary and re-statement. But if so, why does a certain kind of criticism, engendered out of this same period and from the same consciousness, seem to fall short of or miss something in interpreting the very Modernist literature? With his publication of the "Notes" toward *The Waste Land*, Eliot inspired many critics to follow him in their criticism on *The Waste Land*: they close-examined the text of the poem, identified more allusions in it, then tried to interpret the poem by giving it an order and unity form the sources they had discovered outside the poem.

In this essay, however, provided that the "Notes" is Eliot's after-thought to *The Waste Land*, we shall regard it as a separate entity from the poem itself, so that we may recognize what Eliot does and undoes to the poem by attaching the "Notes", what aspect of the poem he emphasizes and what other aspect he represses or covers up. After all, the poem's difficulty does not lie in its heavily allusive passages but in its organization; but Eliot's commentary in his "Notes" tries to dissimulate rather than solve the difficulty, by pointing toward a fixed interpretation of his poem.

There are seemingly diverse things done in the "Notes". In its prefatorial paragraph, the two contemporary studies in anthropolopyg, Jessie Weston's *From Ritual to Romance* and George Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, are mentioned. In the main body of the "Notes", allusions in the poem are identified to the number of lines and alluded passages are often quoted in thier original languages. Besides, there are commentary notes to the passages or sections of the poem – but, some of them may devastate even a most devoted scholar of Eliot. For instance, in spite of his almost superhuman erudition in the works of the Western literary tradition, the author confesses he cannot remember the source of a bawdy ballad he has used in the Section III of his poem, because it was "reported to me from Sidney, Australia."⁸⁾ Or he suddenly drops his formal objectivity expected from a commentator and lapses into personal reminiscences on "a dead sound"⁹⁾ of the bell of the Saint Mary Woolnoth, or on the "interior of St. Magnus Martyr",¹⁰⁾ either of which has nothing to do with the appreciation of his poem. Consequently, the reader of the "Notes" does not know

what to do when he comes to this, after such an emotionally demanding poem like *The Waste Land*: "This is *Turdus aonalaeschkae pallasi*, the hermit-thrush which I have heard in Quebec Province. Chapman says (*Handbook of Birds of Eastern North America*) 'it is most at home in secluded woodland and thickery retreats. . . .'"¹¹⁾ The information is irrelevant to the passage of the poem, and the reader wonders whether he shall take it to be the poet's flaunt of his knowledge or his jibe at this egregious act of writing a commentary to his own poem.

In fact, what the reader hears in Eliot's "Notes", behind its seemingly objective, factual lines of citations, is the same flippant, mocking tone of irony found in the text of the poem. Only, this time, the voice is not of a character's dramatic monologue or of the impersonal narrator in the poem; clearly, it is the more personal voice of Eliot himself, the voice of the author of *The Waste Land*. The "Notes" begins like this:

Not only the title, but the plan and a good deal of the incidental symbolism of the poem were suggested by Miss Jessie L. Weston's book on the Grail legend: *From Ritual to Romance* (Cambridge). Indeed, so deeply I am indebted, Miss Weston's book will elucidate the difficulties of the poem much better than my notes can do...¹²⁾

Whether Eliot's poem is really so deeply indebted to Weston's book or not, one cannot help wincing a little at such a candid confession of the poet's indebtedness. For, if the content of the poem can be "elucidated" so thoroughly by Weston's book, why should there be Eliot's own "Notes" in the first place, or even his poem for that matter? Such a constant undertone of irony in the "Notes" works in two ways: Not only does it play with the authenticity of the "Notes" itself, but also it disrupts the emotional impact the poem has left on its reader. The ironic voice in the "Notes" is Eliot's technique of distancing the reader away from his poem, in order to make him approach it again through his commentary as if it were a finished thing, a definitive text to be "elucidated".

Thus, when we hear in the "Notes" for the first time the voice of the author entering into our reading of the poem, we notice his voice as it tries to reconstruct his own poem from a certain perspective of its own. The following is from the note on the Tarot cards:

The Hanged Man, a member of the traditional pack, fits my purpose in two ways: because he is associated in my mind with the Hunged God of Frazer, and because I associate him with the hooded figure in the passage of the disciples to Emmaus in Part V. The Phoenician Sailor and the Merchant appear later; also the 'crowds of people', and Death by Water is executed in Part IV. The Man with Three Staves (an authentic member of the Tarot pack) I associate, quite arbitrarily, with the Fisher King himself.¹³⁾

Through this note, each of the figures appeared in Madam Sosostoris's cards are linked with the characters and events which appear later in the poem. As the Hanged Man is associated with the hooded apparitional figure who walks besides the two in "What the Thunder Said", the Phoenician Sailor with the drowned Phlebas in "Death by Water", the Merchant with Mr. Eugenides in "The Fire Sermon", the uncanny, enigmatic images from the Tarot pack in Madame Sosostris' soothsaying are brought back again and amplified by those characters; as a result, the dubious words of the fortune-teller are understood as the true prophesy of the later sections of the poem, those pictures in the Tarot cards prefiguring the characters.

Such kind of association is made possible by the technique of repetition in *The Waste Land*. There, one image, incident or even word recurs again and again throughout the poem yet given a fresh and even antinomous meaning by the poem's changing tone and context. In the end, every image is built on and sustained by other images, each image multiplying and amplifying the connotations of another. But Eliot goes even further in his "Notes" when he comes to the figure of Tiresius in "The Fire Sermon":

Tiresius, although a mere spectator and not indeed, 'character', is yet the most important personage in the poem, uniting all the rest. Just as the one-eyed merchant seller of currants, melts into the Phoenician Sailor, and the latter is not wholly distinct from Ferdinand Prince of Naples, so all the women are one woman, and the two sexes meet in Tiresius. What Tiresius sees, in fact is the substance of the poem.¹⁴⁾

Just as the images are sustained almost solely by the other images in the poem, those characters who speak and act in the poem are more like transparent consciousnesses deprived of physical bodies, distinguishable only through the situations they find themselves in. Taken out of his or her

context in the poem, one character is, as Eliot says, “not wholly distinct from” another. The figure of Tiresius, a character who is not indeed a character within a given situation but a “spectator”, can grow out of the context to absorb all other characters into his inclusive consciousness. Moreover, he does not remain as a mere voice and character in the poem; now he is taking over the role of the narrator of the entire poem by seeing all of its substance.

R. P. Blackmur, conceding to Eliot’s commentary, even goes so far as to identify Tiresius with Eliot as the sensibility of *The Waste Land*.¹⁵⁾ However, even though important as a character, Tiresius is not likely to become the sole seer and narrator of Eliot’s poem. What Eliot is trying to do in the above note is to make the figure of Tiresius larger than the actual, and to present his sensibility as the unifying principle of the poem’s organization; nevertheless, Tiresius, the “old man with wrinkled female breasts” (III, 219) whose eyes are bound to see only the tiresome and the quotidian, is unable to bring out the sense of fear and the nightmare that are found in other passages of the poem. In the context of *The Wast Land*, the most authentic passage which can be called Tiresius’s, begins in the Section III just after the passage on Mr. Eugenides and continues until the song of the three Thames daughters:

At the violet hour, when the eyes and back
Turn upward from the desk, when the human engine waits
Like a taxi throbbing waiting,
I Tiresius, though blind, throbbing between two lives,
Old man with wrinkled female breasts, can see
At the violet hour, the evening hour that strives
Homeward, and brings the sailor home from sea,
.....

O City city, I can sometimes hear
Beside a public bar in Lower Thames Street,
The pleasant whining of a mandoline
And a clatter and a chatter from within
Where fishermen lounge at noon: where the walls
Of Magus Martyr hold
Inexplicable splendour of Ionian white and gold.

(III, 215–21, 259–65)

The voice of Tiresius, that of the modern Tiresius in London, begins in a smooth, rhythmical sing-song tone describing "the violet hour" of an evening, recounts the affair of the typist with the clerk, and comes back to the view of the city again toward the end, continuing in the same monotonous sing-song tone as though nothing has happened. It is because, for Tiresius who has "foresuffered all" (III, 243), there is nothing that can disturb his benumbed consciousness watching the monotonous sterility of the world. Even his description of the city is tiresome and sterile, with the stale metaphor of the evening as "the violet hour" which is used twice, with the repetition of the same syntax in the first two lines, or with the sentimental images of the sailor coming home or fishermen lounging in a pub. In fact, the tone of Tiresius's voice is not different from that of the ditty, which must be sung in the "public bar" with the "pleasant whining of a mandoline". Tiresius's sensibility, so close to the sluggish insensitivity of the typist in his tale, would be unable to hear the more dramatic, intenser conversation between the two women in another pub recorded in "A Game of Chess".

If we turn our attention from the former passage to the beginning passage of the same Section, we hear something completely different:

The Nymphs are departed.

And their friends, the loitering heirs of City directors;
 Departed, have left no addresses.
 By the waters of Leman I sat down and wept...
 Sweet Thames, run softly till I end my song,
 Sweet Thames, 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.

(III, 179-86)

Although the above lines are all told in the first person "I", the sudden change from the Greek imagery of the "nymphs" flirting with the "heirs" in the first three lines to the Biblical allusion in the fourth line with its images of another river and the ruined city, and then, still another change from the lines of a gentle lullaby to the apparitional sneer of a skeleton, continually subvert the tones of the preceding voices. It is such a tech-

nique of disjunctive juxtaposition that creates the sense of dislocation and scariness in the poem. Eliot works out this effect by the use of shifting narrative voices, each of which threatens and disrupts the tone of the preceding voice. At the same time, the poet also finds out that the same technique is causing a serious problem in the poem's unity and organization; subsequently, even after the famous passage on "Give, sympathize, control",¹⁶⁾ *The Waste Land* still asks the same question it has asked in the beginning: "I sat upon the shore / Fishing, with the arid plain behind me / Shall I at least set my lands in order?" (V, 432-25). It is at this point Eliot's own voice comes in as a commentator in his "Notes", and takes up the job of setting *The Waste Land* in order.

F. R. Leavis, in the *New Bearings in English Poetry*, seems to be aware of this problem when he talks about the organization of *The Waste Land*:

Such an undertaking offers a difficult problem of organization, a distinguishing character of the mode of consciousness...being a lack of organizing principle, the absence of any inherent direction....It is here that *From Ritual to Romance* comes in.¹⁷⁾

while ambiguous toward the validity of anthropolopy as a learning, Leavis finally conforms to Eliot's directions in his "Notes" for the interpretation of his poem. Besides linking the characters in the poem together and presenting Tiresius as a uniting consciousness and perspective to all the events in the poem, the other thing the "Notes" is doing is to emphasize the role of anthropolopy as another organizing principle of *The Waste Land*. In the note on the Tarot cards quoted earlier, each of the figures of The Hanged Man and The Man with Three Staves is associated with a god of the fertility myths in Frazer's and Weston's books respectively. In his essay, Leavis suspects Eliot's method of composition, that of juxtaposing disjunctive voices and images, threatens the poem's organization; but also, Leavis is aware that Eliot's "mythical method", the one the poet uses and emphasizes in his "Notes", with its related concepts of tradition and order cannot stand by itself without the help and aid of anthropolopy, one of the modernest of the learnings in Eliot's time.

Therefore, it is curious to observe how far an anthropolopological thinking is affecting Eliot's idea of the myth as a meaningful heritage from the past.

Eliot himself is explicit about his debt to anthropology in several passages quoted before. Especially, if we interpret according to the poet's suggestion in his “Notes”, Jessie L. Weston's *From Ritual to Romance*, which is a study on the legend of the Holy Grail based on Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, can provide a framework for *The Waste Land* in two ways.¹⁸⁾ First, since Weston's book is an attempt at exploring the root of the Christian legend of the Holy Grail in some vegetation ritual far back in the Indian mythology, it makes the whole network of Indo-European culture of the past and the present available for the poet as a mythical structure of his poem. Because of this structure, the allusive method of the poem ceases to be a mere feat of the poet's erudition and becomes a means of placing his poem against the huge background of the Western culture much larger than a mere European tradition. Secondly, as the Grail legend is connected with the vegetation ritual and explicated as a story of the regeneration of the Fisher King and of the recovery of water and fertility to the waste land, the legend comes to serve as a linkage with all the other myths and images used in Eliot's poem. In spite of the discontinuity in its linear structure, the poem is now given a unity and a meaning by this mythological framework; it becomes “a constant ceremony of life and death, a ‘vegetation ritual’ of the soul in an agony of consciousness.”¹⁹⁾

In his “Notes” attached to *The Waste Land*, Eliot thus reconstructs the poem's disjunctive structure with two kinds of connectives: One is the association made among his characters, all of whom are finally merged into the consciousness of the one character, Tiresius. The other is an idea of the myth as an anthropological concept, which gives the central theme of the regeneration of the waste land to his poem. Both of these connectives are not wholly extraneous to the actual text of *The Waste Land*. Nevertheless, when Eliot emphasizes these two aspects of the poem too much in his “Notes”, he does so at the expense of another. It is argued before that there are two different kinds of techniques developed in Eliot's poem, the technique of repetition and that of disjunctive juxtaposition. In the context of the poem, while the repetition provides a sense of unity, the effect of the juxtaposed passages is that of discontinuity and dislocation from the preceding voice and tone. And it is this dislocated, discontinuous

lines of narrative in constant tension with the poem's unity which defines the mood of *The Waste Land*, producing the sense of fear and uncertainty against the poet's hope. On the contrary, as long as the critical discourse follows Eliot's commentary in his "Notes" and focuses its attention on the organic unity of the poem, it will ignore the poem's linear structure and dismiss its ultimate effect of fear and uncertainty on the mind of its readers. Moreover, since every image in the poem must be read as a compound of meanings defined by its context as well as by its association with other images, its meaning cannot be restricted by a single, arbitrary framework from Jessie Weston's book. That is, the hooded figure in "What the Thunder Said" can be understood both as a figure of the Death and as the Hanged God of Frazer, a symbol of rebirth in the waste land. Eliot in his commentary is closing such a movement of the poem by suggesting a single reading of the text. The meaning of *The Waste Land*, with its counter-movement against unity in the narrative, is actually more ambiguous than hopeful without the supplementary text of Eliot's "Notes".

NOTES

- 1) "The Frontiers of Criticism", *On Poetry and Poetics* (London: Faber and Faber, 1957), p. 109.
- 2) "Frontiers", p. 109.
- 3) "Frontiers", p. 110.
- 4) "Ulysses, Order and Myth", *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*, ed. Frank Kermode (London: Faber and Faber, 1975), pp. 117-18.
- 5) "Ulysses", p. 117.
- 6) "The Waste Land Fifty Years After", *Eliot in His Time: Essays on the Occasion of the Fiftieth Anniversary of The Waste Land*, ed. A. Walton Litz (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1973), p. 9.
- 7) See Stuart Gilbert, *James Joyce's Ulysses* (New York: Random House, 1930, 1952); Marianne Moore, *The Complete Poems of Marianne Moore* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1956); Wallace Stevens, *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, ed. Holly Stevens (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977).
- 8) "Notes", *Collected Poems: 1909-1962* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), p. 82.
- 9) "The Waste Land", *Collected Poems*, I, 68. Hereafter the quotations from the poem are from the same book and edition, the sections and lines identified and in parentheses within the text of this essay.
- 10) "Notes", p. 83.
- 11) "Notes", p. 85.

- 12) "Notes", p. 80.
- 13) "Notes", pp. 81-82.
- 14) "Notes", p. 82.
- 15) "T. S. Eliot", *Hound & Horn*, 1, No. 2(1927), p. 192.
- 16) "Notes", p. 85.
- 17) *New Bearings in English Poetry: A Study of the Contemporary Situation* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1959), p. 95.
- 18) *From Ritual to Romance* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1920).
- 19) "T.S. Eliot", p. 192.