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# Eliot's early poems from a viewpoint of suicide research

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There is something pessimistic in Eliot's early poems. This pessimistic tone has something to do with his unstable spiritual condition.

In other words, his early poems are charged with a sense of despair and disillusionment towards contemporary society. What is the main factor making his early poems so pessimistic, even though he was still in his twenties? The very pessimistic tone that penetrates through the poems can be explained by his early maturing as a human. However, what insight for his contemporary society did Eliot have in his twenties about which periods symbolize the energetic aspect of human life?

Many students of English literature have interpreted the pessimistic tone of Eliot's early poems in terms of the poet's faith and social malaise at large. This article is going to examine more particularly why such a pessimistic tone should pervade his early poems which were produced in his twenties. The key for answering the question lies in the poet's idea of life and death in human existence. The following passage typically illustrates the poet's view of life and death:

I grow old . . . I grow old . . .  
I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled.

Shall I part my hair behind? Do I dare eat a peach?  
I shall wear white flannel trousers, and walk upon the beach.  
I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each.

I do not think that they will sing to me.  
I have seen them riding seaward on the waves  
Combing the white hair of the waves blown back  
When the wind blows the water white and black.

Was such a passage really written by a graduate student of Harvard? The quoted lines are only a part of "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." Readers can only have a sense of the poet's despair and disillusionment towards human life at large. One might say that unstable feelings deriving from Eliot's sense of dismay as a poet pervade the whole passage quoted above. The following passage articulates the impersonal agony of Eliot's contemporaries who were alienated in a highly mechanized society:

We have lingered in the chambers of the sea.  
By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown  
Till human voices wake us, and we drown.

Some critics read this as implying that contemporary people can no longer share a common set of beliefs because they become spoiled in an excessively man-oriented society. In other words, contemporary men are living out their lives without any definite purpose. However, it seems a little farfetched to associate Eliot's pessimistic tone with social malaise in general or with an estrangement from Christian faith. It is hard to believe that the poet in his twenties could articulate the desolate feelings of the silent majority. Readers should rather analyse

whether Eliot is not revealing his own personal agony directly or indirectly through the passage. It is plausible to argue that the young poet was suffering from some worries and troubles in his own life. One example of his troubles is that his father, Henry Ware Eliot, had died without seeing very much at all of Thomas's poetic talent. Peter Ackroyd says:

Now his father was dead. He had died without seeing any evidence of his son's capacity except for a few strange poems in slim volume. For a young man who had been trying so hard to win his father's approval, the loss was extraordinary great: not least because Henry Ware Eliot represented the American aspiration towards success, thrift and practicality which exerted so powerful an influence throughout Eliot's life. He always had a strong sense of familial pride . . . Eliot kept a corner of family photographs and silhouettes; he also wore an Eliot family ring. Such things reminded him of the people whom he had left behind, and, in the loss of his father, he also lost part of himself.<sup>1</sup>

One might argue that Eliot's father's death in 1919 was a crucial turning point for Eliot's career. It is not hard to imagine that Eliot was mentally shocked by his father's death but in addition the failure of his poems to win his father's favor also seems to have had a great influence on his state of mind. Is it too much to say that the following passage of "Gerontion" reflects Eliot's depression at this period?

Here I am an old man in a dry month,  
Being read to by a boy, waiting for rain.

I was neither at the hot gates  
Nor fought in the warm rain  
Nor knee deep in the salt marsh, heaving a cutlass,  
Bitten by flies, fought.

.....  
Tenants of the  
house,  
Thoughts of a dry brain in a dry season.

It is almost safe to say that there is no room for the old man to be saved in the poem. Such a pessimistic atmosphere is succeeded by what is generally called Eliot's poem of despair, *The Waste Land* in 1922.

The following passage might be seen as pointing to Eliot's neurosis through the voice of a female character. Sociological studies indicate that people confronted with harsh experiences of life often suffer nervous breakdown.

'My nerves are bad to-night. 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.'

.....  
'What shall I do now? What shall I do?  
I shall rush out as I am, and walk the street  
With my hair down, so. What shall we do tomorrow?  
What shall we ever do?'

The above-quoted passage shows a woman who has lost her self-control and purpose in life answering her own questions. Would it be going too far to say that the woman symbolizes Eliot's contemporaries at large, who suffer from neuroses in the inhumanly industrialized conditions of modern Europe? It is an agreed fact that people suffering from hallucinations and a sense of despair have a greater tendency to take their own lives after losing their purpose in life.

Toyomasa Fusé, Professor Emeritus of York University, discusses some points of relation between urbanization in European cities and the numbers of suicides:

Richard Burton, an Englishman, already spoke of suicide in terms of depression in his *Anatomy of Melancholia* published in 1621. George Cheyne, another Englishman, published his treatise on what he considered the English malady of "nervous distemper" in 1733, arguing that the consumption of rich foods, physical inactivity and general conditions in large cities like London contributed to the increase in "nervous distemper" (e.g., depression, hypochondria, etc.) as well as to the rise in suicide rates.<sup>2</sup>

One might object that the more gradual urbanization of London in the 17th or 18th century can not be comparable to the metropolitan conditions in Eliot's days. However, it can still be said that the numbers of suicides increased together with the general rises in material and industrial prosperity. The following passage from *The Waste Land* is suggestive of the sufferings of Eliot's contemporaries from "nervous distemper."

Unreal city,  
Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,  
A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,  
I had not thought death had undone so many.  
Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled,  
And each man fixed his eyes before his feet.

Is it too bold to suggest that Eliot tries to articulate the desperate feelings of metropolis dwellers after having experienced the relationship between the urbanizing cityscape of London and the number of suicides? It is generally agreed that people in such conditions tend to

split into units seeking their own interests without maintaining values in common.

Eliot's contemporaries had once been united by a common belief or faith, which was no longer apparent to Eliot in London. However, the number of suicides in Britain seems to have been the lowest among European countries, even if the data cited in Emile Durkheim's *Suicide* are rather older:

. . . of all great Protestant countries, England is the one where suicide is least frequent. In fact, only about 80 suicides per million inhabitants are found there, whereas the reformed districts of Germany have from 140 to 400; and yet the general level of intellectual and commercial activity seems no less high there than elsewhere. Now, it happens at the same time that the Anglican church is far more powerfully integrated than other Protestant churches. To be sure, England has been customarily regarded as the classic land of individual freedom; but actually many facts indicate that the number of common, obligatory beliefs and practices which are thus withdrawn from free inquiry by individuals, is greater than in Germany.<sup>3</sup>

It would be tempting to reason that Eliot as a Christian poet was attracted to the Anglican church because of the integrated atmosphere of the church. Fusé refers to Durkheim's idea that Protestants are more likely to commit suicide than Roman Catholics because Protestantism is far less integrated than Catholicism.<sup>4</sup> Anglicanism lies between Protestantism and Catholicism dogmatically. However, it seems safe to conclude that the dogma of collective conscience in the Anglican church has much influence on Eliot. Durkheim's following argument is very persuasive regarding the likely factors behind Eliot's conversion to Anglicanism:

If religion protects man against the desire for self-destruction, it is not that it preaches respect for his own person to him with arguments *sui generis*; but because it is a society. What constitutes this society is the existence of a certain number of beliefs and practices common to all the faithful, traditional and thus obligatory. The more numerous and strong these collective states of mind are, the stronger the integration of the religious community, and also the greater its preservative value. The details of dogmas and rites are secondary. The essential thing is that they be capable of supporting a sufficiently intense collective life. And because the Protestant church has less consistency than the others it has less moderating effect upon suicide.<sup>5</sup>

It should be pointed out that Eliot, as a Christian poet with strong religious feelings, was not possessed by any suicidal instinct throughout his life. In fact, as a representative of his contemporary society, he never ceased to give moral support to those who were suffering from the social malaise of the age. The following passage gives an indication of how Eliot tries to save his contemporaries from the abyss of social ills:

Suffer us not to mock ourselves with falsehood  
Teach us to care and not to care  
Teach us to sit still  
Even among these rocks,  
Our peace is His will  
And even among these rocks  
Sister, my mother  
And spirit of the river, spirit of the sea,  
Suffer us not to be separated  
And let my cry come unto Thee.

There is no discernible pessimistic tone in this passage. This is because the poet has attained a stable stage after his conversion into Anglicanism. Readers ought to realize that Eliot's poems and the role



of religion in them can not be separated from each other when it comes to an assessment of his career as a poet.

## Notes

1. Peter Ackroyd, *T.S.Eliot* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1984), p.91.
2. Toyomasa Fusé, *Suicide, Individual and Society* (Toronto: Canadian Scholar's Press Inc, 1997), p.24.
3. Emile Durkheim, *Suicide* (New York: The Free Press, 1951), pp.160-161.
4. Fusé, op.cit., p.83.
5. Durkheim, op.cit., p.170.