

## T. S. Eliot's poems from the French context

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A change of languages sometimes releases people from an inner dried up state. Those who know any foreign languages besides their mother tongue can look at things in life from various viewpoints. When they can not express their feelings or thoughts in their mother tongue in the precise way they want to, they have a chance to articulate what they feel in the other languages. One might say that foreign languages can have a role of shaking off melancholy. T. S. Eliot as a poet was very depressed when he was writing *Prufrock and Other Observations* (1917). Many readers of “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” share the impression that the poem is despite appearances the product of a young poet. The following passage is often quoted to account for such a feeling:

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.

The readers can hardly help wondering how Eliot in his thirties could write this pessimistic poem from the viewpoint of a middle-aged man; the poem seems to represent a midlife crisis. It can also be pointed out that Eliot at this time was struggling to express his inner feelings. In a phrase like this, his proficiency in a foreign language might have afforded him an opportunity for easing his tensed feelings in daily life as well as his writing.

Denis Donoghue discusses this side of the matter:

Eliot wrote a few poems in French at a time when he was writer-blocked in English. The foreign language released him from the oppression of his own. Few readers have wanted to take the French poems seriously, though Eliot held them in enough esteem to include them in his *Collected Poems*.<sup>1</sup>

It is certainly a fact that few readers pay much attention to the several French poems in Eliot's *Collected Poems* (1920). However, it is not hard to see how Eliot might have been releasing pent-up dissatisfactions in the following lines:

En Amérique, professeur;  
En Angleterre, journaliste;  
C'est à grands pas et un sueur

Que vous suivrez à peine ma piste.  
En Yorkshire, conférencier;  
A Londres, un peu banquier,  
Vous me paierez bien la tête.  
C'est à Paris que je me coiffe  
Casque noir de jemenfoutiste.

The poet depicts his own wandering existence here. The poet's alter ego's habit of wanderlust is indicated by the line “J’erre toujours de-ci de-là” later in the poem, and then in the culminating self-description: “Mélange adultère de Tout.”

In his study of the genetic typology of Eliot's works, Jean-Paul Rosaye explains how Eliot, from the opening of Prufrock on, is inviting his readers to enter with him into his poetic world in the form of a journey.

T. S. Eliot se présente sous la forme d'une énigme qui invite au voyage. Mais du Missouri à la Nouvelle-Angleterre, de l'Amérique à l'Europe, suivre les traces de T. S. Eliot n'est pas une tâche aisée . . . Pour saisir la nature de ce voyage, Eliot enjoint le lecteur d'entrer dans sa poésie (« Let us go then, you and I / When the evening is spread out against the sky . . . »), et lui propose, au bout du voyage, l'ironie d'un retour au point de départ . . .<sup>2</sup>

The above-quoted passage is interesting as a French-speaking critic's commentary. Rosaye further discusses the quality of impenetrability in Eliot's poetry by citing Hugh Kenner's remark:

Hugh Kenner disait d'Eliot qu'il était une sorte d'archétype d'impenétabilité poétique et que son œuvre, réputée difficile, n'en était pas moins influente. Le contraste entre sa célébrité et la difficulté de son oeuvre appelle une approche qui tienne compte non seulement de la vie et de l'œuvre, mais aussi des raisons sous-jacentes à un accueil si favorable. . . . Son univers, placé sous le signe du voyage, de la diversité géographique et culturelle, est composé de fragments empruntés aux mondes visités et aux traditions étudiées. . . . l'histoire d'un poète ne peut être restreinte à un enchaînement raisonné de névroses, à un contexte socio-économique ou bien encore à quelques anecdotes.<sup>3</sup>

It can be said that we have to study not only about a poet and his poems but also some essential matters hidden behind them. We might be able to examine the relation between his fame and the difficulty of his poems through the process of such a study.

Some English speakers state that French humor sometimes turns to a satire, which makes a phrase more harsh to the ears of others. It is questionable that Eliot hardened his sense of humor in French speaking society. However, the readers could catch a glimpse of his sarcasm in “Lune de Miel.”

Ils ont vu les Pay-Bas, ils rentrent à Terre Haute;  
Mais une nuit d'été, les voici, à Ravenne,

A l'aise entre deux draps, chez deux centaines de punaises;  
 La sueur aestivale, et une forte odeur de chienne.  
 Ils restent sur le dos écartent les genoux  
 De quatre jambes molles tout gonflées de morsures.  
 On relève le drap pour mieux égratigner.

The passage depicts a honeymoon of a married couple at a hotel. In Eliot's English poetry, too, sarcastic humor is apparent.

For example, in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," a series of aberrant behaviors of his alter ego are symbolized in the movements of a cat. While the depiction of a cat in "Prufrock" looks gently humorous, however, the symbolism of the cat in the French "Lune de Miel" seems more scathingly sarcastic or even rather cruel.

The contrast between "les Pays-Bas" and "Terre Haute" seems crudely sarcastic. One might say that the word play directly alludes to the atmosphere of a honeymooning couple's creaturely pleasures in a hotel room.

Donoghue explains what is behind the scenes of the poem:

Normally, "Lune de Miel" is interpreted as a relatively crude satire on the triviality of modern tourism and modern sex. At first sight, and perhaps later, this interpretation seems reasonable. The poem and the quatrain poems to which it points have something of the power of caricature that Eliot ascribed to Jonson, and even more of the tragic farce that he found in the last act of Marlowe's *Jew of Malta*.

Eliot's honeymooners are lodging for the night in a bug-ridden hotel in Ravenna before setting off for Padua, Milan, Switzerland, and France. Eliot's procedure appears to be what Kenneth Burke called "perspective by incongruity," a silent form of judgment by which incompatible images are brought to bear upon each other: the result is a judgment that includes them both. So we have the ironic relation between "Les Pays-Bas" and "Terre Haute"; between the Last Supper in Milan and the cheap restaurant - "Où se trouvent la Cène, et un restaurant pas cher." We have, brought together in one line, "la sueur aestivale" and (rhyming with "Ravenna") "une forte odeur de chienne." The couple are reduced, dismembered, to backs and knees and "quatre jambes molles tout gonflées de morsures."<sup>4</sup>

After this wild bedroom scene, the poet introduces the sacral image of a church, which is not so far distant from the hotel where the couple are staying.

Moins d'une lieue d'ici est Saint Apollinaire  
 En Classe, basilique connue des amateurs  
 De chapitaux d'acanthé que tournoie le vent.

Bringing in the basilica presents the reader with a sharp, and indeed indecent, between the secular and the sacred. Donoghue discusses what is behind the passage above-quoted:

... the relation of the honeymooners to those lovers of acanthus capitals turned by the wind is a matter for interpretation: it needs not operate entirely in favor of art historians

and aesthetes. William Arrowsmith has noted that Eliot is alluding to a passage in *The Stones of Venice* where Ruskin writes by Byzantine sculptures and of “leaves drifted, as it were, by a whirlwind round the capital by which they rise.” But Eliot’s allusion is complex: he recognizes Ruskin’s splendor but also the dismal sense in which he represents Christianity diminished to its aesthetic quality. He thinks of Ruskin as cousin to Arnold, who assumed that he could retain of Christianity only its beauty, and yet be saved.<sup>5</sup>

One way of interpreting this is certainly to admit that Eliot seems to be enjoying a word play in order to forget about the hardships in his private life, in other words, that he is going on and on but not saying anything essential about culture and religion in Europe. Eliot continues to depict the shabbier sides of daily life in the same way in “Dans le Restaurant”:

Le garçon délabré qui n'a rien à faire  
Que de se gratter les doigts et se pencher sur mon épaule:  
‘Dans mon pays il fera temps pluvieux,  
Du vent, du grand soleil, et de la pluie;  
C'est ce qu'on appelle le jour de lessive des gueux.’

Some readers may not be able to believe that this passage is really a product of the same poet who gave birth to *Four Quartets* (1942). The passage quoted does not go beyond the superficial matters of daily life and in that sense implies no religious or cultural meanings behind.

Can't we say that writing these poems in French actually helped Eliot to purify his poetic language during his depressive years? Undeniably, Eliot's tone of diction in *Ash-Wednesday* (1930) becomes translucent, compared with the tone in his early poems. It may not be such an overstatement to say that French served as a temporary remedy to help Eliot overcome the problems besetting his life and art.

A reader keeping this in mind can afford to be tolerant of the sarcastic tone of the concluding parts of “Lune de Miel.”

Et Saint Apollinaire, rapide et ascétique,  
Vieille usine désaffectée de Dieu, tient encore  
Dans ses pierres écroulantes la forme précise de Byzance.

Introducing “Saint Apollinaire” here again in a stark contrast to the earlier windswept description may at first seem redundant. But Donoghue's commentary about this second stanza is instructive in suggesting what lies behind the poem.

The force of feeling, accrued from the earlier invocation to the church in *Classe*, is restrained in “rapide et ascétique” and the parenthetical “Vieille usine désaffectée de Dieu,” then asserts itself at the end of the line with “tient encore,” is held back again by “Dans ses pierres écroulantes,” only to take command with “la forme précise de Byzance,” rhyming authoritatively with “France.” The perspective of judgment is enforced by such incongruities that a reading of the poem as satire appears to be

irresistible: satire, caricature, farce, the readiest means by which escape from human emotions may be effected.

But Arrowsmith's interpretation of the poem must be reckoned with. Tender toward the honeymooners, he takes them as pilgrims, unconsciously turning toward the light of spiritual being.<sup>6</sup>

Donoghue further explains the juxtaposition of high and low in the depiction of the poem, which is equally salient in Eliot's other early poems. However, his later incongruities such as “«Garlic and sapphires in the mud / Clot the bedded axle-tree»” begin to sound much more sophisticated as poetic language. Donoghue discusses this:

... The bedbugs that bite them are brought into the same poetic field as the bites in Dante's “Paradiso” — “Tutti quei morsi” — that “have power to make the heart turn to God.” Instead of reading the juxtaposed details as enforcing “perspective by incongruity,” Arrowsmith takes them as intersecting and therefore as making possible the striving of the Many toward the One: “Thus in Eliot a *restaurant pas cher* is the worldly counterpart of the Last Supper; an ordinary cocktail party becomes a shadow play of the communion . . . . Reality for [ the honeymooners ] is just this misery of sensual repetition; the ideality to which it unknowingly aspires is represented by the saint's hard, conceptual rigor. But, however diminished, that ideality - that unsatisfied craving for a completeness beyond themselves — *inheres* in them just as the form of the basilica still *holds (tient)* in the crumbling stones.” The point here, according to Arrowsmith, “isn't merely the desperate opposition of lovers and saint, but the fusion implied by their opposition.”<sup>7</sup>

Donoghue directs our attention to Eliot's thesis *Knowledge and Experience in the Philosophy of F. H. Bradley* (1964):

... as Eliot says: “In describing immediate experience we must use terms which offer a surreptitious suggestion of subject or object. If we say presentation, we think of a subject to which the presentation is present as an object. . . . It may accordingly be said that the real situation is an experience which can never be wholly enjoyed as a feeling, but in which any of the observed constituents may take on the one or the other aspect.” Perhaps this is enough to suggest what Eliot means when he speaks of the “continuous transition by which feeling becomes object and object becomes feeling.”<sup>8</sup>

It would be possible to imagine Eliot trying his hard with experimental rather than perfect poems while “struggling with words” in his early poems. This is a pure speculation, but his depressive mentality at the time might also have had some influence on his composition. Writing several poems only in French may have been a reflex instance of Eliot's depressive state. This can be supported from the following passage in Donoghue:

In Eliot's early poems an American is trying to make himself a Frenchman, perfecting himself in the creation of Jules Laforgue; an enterprise capable of producing, in the long run, the magisterial achievement of making himself a European. The space around the

words is necessary for an isolated consciousness, and it puts at risk the continuity of relations, as between one person and another.<sup>9</sup>

The same sort of emotional wavering can also be observed in *The Waste Land* (1922).

There I saw one I knew, and stopped him, crying: 'Stetson!  
'You who were with me in the ships of Mylae !  
'That corpse you planted last year in your garden,  
.....  
'O keep the Dog far hence, that's a friend to men,  
'O with his nails he'll dig it up again !  
'You ! hypocrite lecteur ! -mon semblable,-mon frère !'

The last line here is quoted verbatim, apart from the "You !", from *Les Fleurs du Mal* (1857) by Charles-Pierre Baudelaire (1821~1867) whose chief theme was contemporary man's anguish and loneliness. One might think that the concluding line in French reflects Eliot's wavering between an Anglo-American and a French mentality, before he eventually finds his way to a matured stage as a Christian poet in *Four Quartets*.

Eliot does not display any tentative tones in these poems, because he had fully confirmed his religious faith by the 1940s. Eliot had also strengthened his Englishness since his conversion from Unitarianism to Anglo-Catholicism. This can be illustrated by the following statement in Cooper.

By 1940 he was comfortably settled in the very heart of British society, enjoying all the privileges which the obedient servant of power—the mandarin—can enjoy in a stable, well-policed, class-divided society. *Four Quartets* reflects in its manner the comfort, even serenity, of not only the man who has been there for a while. So, the poem can provide some aesthetic space for the skeptical even though its professions of faith and belief have only deepened and been extended since the time of *Ash-Wednesday*.<sup>10</sup>

As Cooper goes on to mention, the readers can more particularly read Eliot's strengthened Englishness in the following lines:

... A people without history  
Is not redeemed from time, for history is a pattern  
Of timeless moments. So, while the light fails  
On a winter's afternoon, in a secluded chapel  
History is now and England.

It can be said that Eliot's complex mentality as an American, an Englishman and a European has become one integral whole in his place of ancestry. This might also be one reason why Eliot hardly used any foreign language expressions in *Four Quartets* to add to the poem's maturity in its content and form. It is significant that his poems are impenetrable even to

the English, and yet pose an irresistible challenge to seek out the truth hidden behind the poetry.

#### Notes

1. Denis Donoghue, *Words Alone The Poet T. S. Eliot* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000), pp.20-21.
2. Jean-Paul Rosaye, *T. S. Eliot, poète-philosophe essai de typologie génétique* (Valenciennes et du Hainaut-Cambresis: Les Presses Universitaires du Septentrion, 2000), p.19.
3. *Ibid.*, p.20.
4. Donoghue, p.21.
5. *Ibid.*, pp.21-22.
6. *Ibid.*, pp.22-23
7. *Ibid.*, p.23.
8. *Ibid.*, p.122.
9. *Ibid.*, p.115.
10. John Xiros Cooper, *T. S. Eliot and the Ideology of Four Quartets* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p.23.