

TRADITION, HETEROGLOSSIA AND T.S. ELIOT'S  
*THE WASTE LAND*

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A reconsideration of T.S. Eliot's essay «Tradition and the Individual Talent» in the light of Mikhail Bakhtin's remarks about heteroglossia allows us to appreciate a change in attitude toward poetic composition with the advent of modernism. A distinct shift away from an expression of the poet's voice to a heteroglot presentation of a variety of voices and discourses marks a new course for poetry which relies upon the simultaneous representation of discourses from past and present in order to express the way in which the text itself can constitute our understanding of the significant relation between them. *The Waste Land* is the finest example of how this new awareness affects the nature of modernist poetry.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century certain significant changes in English poetry anticipate a movement towards modernism. Even the shift towards a preference for the dramatic monologue in the latter half of the nineteenth century, when it had been previously the exception rather than the rule, indicates a change in direction which coincides with a kind of *novelisation* in English literature. This suggests a general sense of renewal but also implies that a number of features typical of the novel begin to appear in other genres too. In poetry, for example, there is a movement away from the direct revelation of the character or feelings of the poet, which coincides with an increasing absence of objectively verifiable meaning; we find the disappearance of the authorial or poet's voice and an appreciable distance between the poet and the speaker in the poem; there is also a new emphasis on psychology or character and the presentation of a particular perspective or perspectives. These features are typical of the modernist novel but by this time have ceased to be exclusive to it as there is already a blurring of generic distinctions which some critics now attribute to postmodernism. Apart from that, we also begin to find a tendency towards indirect presentation, a preoccupation with the presentness of the past, a different attitude towards time and history involving a break with and nostalgia for the past, all of which result from a common need to come to terms with the conditions of modernity.

These features are typical of T.S. Eliot's poetry and are the product of his own reaction to modernity. One of his preoccupations is time itself as, by the turn of the century, the idea of collective time, as «it is differentiated and measured only by the events of collective life» disappears to be replaced by a sense of the independence but isolation of the individual (in Stevenson 1992: 144). Related to this there is also:

the general loss of the historical sense or the sense of the tradition of Western Culture, that great repository of texts that each era has selected in order to give itself a foundation of predecessors. Tradition has in the West been a matter of actively seeking an intertextual relation with a past text or texts: Dante's to Virgil, Racine's to Euripides, Eliot's to Donne. (Thiher 1984: 189)

Now, while some contemporary writers doubt the value of this view of tradition, it might equally be argued that Eliot's use of intertextuality is the result of a similar kind of

doubt. The underlying question is whether we can believe «that our collective identity has a dimension that transcends the immediate present» (189) and, for this reason,

writers have ... sought to make redefinitions of history that are assaults on older ways of viewing the relations between literature and history ... that vision of history bequeathed by the romantic and modernist writers and underwritten by metaphysical causality or necessity and for which Hegel is the emblematic thinker. (Thiher 1984: 190)

However, it strikes me that a poem like *The Waste Land* is precisely an attempt to come to terms with this same kind of awareness and overcome the absence of a necessary link with the past by imposing a sense of order and significance in the face of fragmentation. This will be made possible by considering history «as a shifting locus in a space made up of multiple forms of writing» (Thiher 1984: 190). Moreover, the growing tendency in literature towards intertextuality (beginning even before Eliot) «is simply a de facto recognition that we live in a world constituted by multiple kinds of discourses that both interfere and obliterate each other as well as compliment and complete each other» (191). Nowadays we have a view of history and even knowledge as text, or a series of discourses, which coincides with a tendency in literature towards shifting perspectives and voices and the multiplicity of discourses that Bakhtin considers typical of the novel. However, this is also a feature of modernist poetry, and perhaps of modernism in general, as we can easily argue that it is this attitude that is reflected in the work of Joyce, Woolf and others, including Eliot himself.

Many modernist writers suggest that there has been some kind of rupture with the past and their work attempts to reestablish a link with it in the belief that this can overcome the sense of loss in contemporary society. Paradoxically, this leads to the necessary artistic creation of meaning in attempts to rediscover the past in the multiple forms of representation that make up contemporary culture. As Claude Simon states, «History must be capable of endowing our daily environment with meaning» (in Thiher 1984: 216), and for this reason both history and literature tend to look for significant similarities and differences in order to provide it, even though writers like Eliot and Joyce go a step further and make use of a mythic dimension which allows their new order to exist in an atemporal dimension that escapes history. But even then, it is *writing* that provides significance and as Simon puts it, «We inhabit a world in which the statement that there was a battle at Pharsalus defines what is meant by the historical represented world» (in Thiher 1984: 219). Modernists like Eliot, then, begin to reflect this awareness that the world is text and that significance is the result of the necessary representation of the links between the discourses of past and present.

So, it is not only in fiction but also in modernist poetry that we find a dependence on the intermingling of systems of language and hybridisation. The «diversity of social speech types (sometimes even diversity of languages) and a diversity of individual voices, artistically organised» (Bakhtin 1981: 262) also becomes a feature of poems like *The Waste Land* which recovers meaning by reviving that lost memory of our culture through the heteroglossia of the poem. There, we also find a system of languages that mutually and ideologically interanimate each other; a polyglossic system where more than one language or form of language interfuse (Bakhtin 1981: 262).

*The Waste Land* is, in a sense, a poem about whether we can make contemporary reality meaningful and how to do so; about if man can resist the death of space and time, living in an ongoing meaningless present. The poem returns to the past although this is not simple nostalgia, but shows that the only possibility to recover meaning is through writing, as the past itself, as it is embodied in literature and history, is text. A modernist po-

em like this one is a reworking or reconstruction of that text or part of it. It typifies the spirit of modernist poetry but anticipates a method of composition which is adopted in other genres within modernism, as well as exerting a lasting influence on the poetry that comes after it. It is about the decay of culture in modern Western society when many consider present experience as chaotic, fragmentary, sterile and meaningless; but once this state of affairs is understood in terms of the heteroglot nature of language, literature and culture, then the artist is able to provide the text which can reestablish the links with the past and restore its significance.

Now Eliot is clearly open to a number of influences and he sees himself and his work as forming part of a tradition. In his essay «Ulysses, Order and Myth,» he states:

Mr. Joyce is pursuing a method which others must pursue after him ... It is simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history ... It is, I sincerely believe, a step toward making the world possible for art ... (270)

This is precisely the method that Eliot himself pursues in *The Waste Land*. Like *Ulysses*, it uses other sources to provide a framework within which to work (mythology, the grail legend, the cycles of seasons and so on). But just as Joyce looks upon Homer's epic «in the light of an archetype,» Eliot also uses mythology and other sources as «a symbolic expression of certain patterns of human experience of universal and almost mystical significance» (Kettle 1967: 123). The idea is that in our knowledge of the world as text, mythology and literary allusions parallel or correspond to contemporary experience and can also give them significance. Once a relation is established, the past can inform and give significance to the present and, in this regard, the notion of depth psychology, which was common at that time, is influential. This denies the individual's independence from the past and past actions, although in *The Waste Land* rather than the individual memory we can think more in terms of a collective memory which holds everything together. There is a cultural heritage that we have in common that can overcome fragmentation and isolation if our memory of it can be restored which is just what Eliot has in mind.

Eliot's poetry can also be related to his criticism, in particular to his influential essay «Tradition and the Individual Talent.» In a sense, *The Waste Land* is Eliot's attempt to write that great new work he mentions which must incorporate all the major aspects of the whole European tradition and whose symbolism must be totally incorporative. He writes:

[Tradition] involves, in the first place, the historical sense ... [which] involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence; the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that ... the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order. This historical sense, which is a sense of the timelessness as well as of the temporal and the timeless and the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional. (1960: 49)

*The Waste Land* gives the impression that tradition exists simultaneously and gives order and significance to our experience; that through the fragments we are aware of another order or orders, similarities and differences which constitute our appreciation of meaning. In a broad sense, language or discourse is seen as being the source of significance, but that language has now become a multiplicity of discourses or heteroglossia.

The way in which myth, legend and literary allusions continually show through the fabric of the poem also suggests the simultaneity of the past; but while the past underlies the present, it also forms part of the fabric of the poem itself, even of time and experience.

Eliot suggests that «[the poet] is not likely to know what is to be done unless he lives not merely in the present, but the present moment of the past, unless he is conscious, not of what is dead, but of what is already living» (49). Hence the present is seen as forming part of the past and vice versa, and the poem makes us aware of this by providing the kind of heteroglossia that implies a dialogue between the past and present discourses that make up our culture and identity.

Another significant feature is what Eliot considers to be the need for depersonalization in poetry because the «poet has not a personality to express but a particular medium» (59). Now part of that medium are tradition and convention themselves, and while impersonality leads to a tendency to adopt a mask or persona as well as adopting the mode of the dramatic monologue, the persona that is adopted is really that of tradition: the voice that we hear is not the poet's but the voice of his cultural heritage. The voices in the poem are in fact a present expression of tradition, or we could say that the poem gives utterance to those voices that belong to tradition, which is really just another form of heteroglossia.

So the poem presents a series of voices; the personality is a composite, a construct made up of a variety of selves; not one consciousness, but a series of consciousnesses, even male and female, and just as the poem is fragmented, so too is the consciousness that is presented. While this shows that everything has fallen to bits in the poem, it is a positive response to the situation: the poem reconstructs the present by rewriting the past both of which are encompassed within its fragmented heteroglossia. We also see that aspects of narrative like providing a variety of perspectives, even different voices, and a tendency towards parody or even the mingling of different modes, including the vulgar juxtaposed with the canonical, begin to appear in poetry too: poetry also begins to deal with flux and fragmentation, although the contemporary nature of this kind of writing still admits a relation with the past. In this sense the imagination of Eliot's poetry is dialogic, a feature which Bakhtin only attributes to the novel, as there is always a relation or dialogue between the contemporary text and its predecessors, the past, and literary tradition. The poem also reflects a series of accents or voices, a complex web of discourses, which can be called heteroglossia. Of this Bakhtin writes:

At any given moment of its historical existence, language is heteroglot from top to bottom: it represents the co-existence of socio-ideological contradictions between the present and the past, between differing epochs of the past, between different socio-ideological groups in the present ... and so forth, all given a bodily form. These «languages» of heteroglossia intersect each other in a variety of ways, forming new socially typifying «languages» ... Therefore languages do not exclude each other but rather intersect with each other in different ways. (1981: 291)

And, as we hear from René Wellek, «A work of Art is not simply a member of a series, a link in a chain. It may stand in relation to anything in the past ... It is a totality of values which do not adhere to the structure but constitute its very nature» (1963: 51-2). Eliot's poem reflects this changing awareness regarding the nature of the individual and the relation between past and present, as the individual talent undertakes a rewriting or reconstruction of the heteroglossia that goes to make up not only his culture but even his own personal identity. However, while the relation between the individual work and tradition seems to change at this time, this should not be considered as innovative in itself but as a renewed appreciation of what has always been the case, although it does lead to a different attitude towards composition in literature.

*The Waste Land* is an example of heteroglossia where a variety of languages intersect, but not only contemporary voices (the bored aristocratic woman, the women in the bar, the

typist); we also find fragments from literary tradition. It shows that in spite of fragmentation or perhaps because of it, our present consciousness is made up of heteroglossia, which is what makes the present meaningful and gives it form. Moreover, we can relate Eliot's concept of tradition not only to Bakhtin's idea of heteroglossia, but can see how he anticipates a number of contemporary attitudes. For example, Foucault suggests that the individual subject is a vacuum which is formed by those discourses that are put into it, and Lacan observes that we acquire individuality as we acquire language. Eliot's view of tradition also implies that our concept of the world and of individuality are dependent on the discourses that constitute them and that essentially the world, time present and time past, resolve themselves into discourses or text. To overcome the consequences of modernity, we have to recover an awareness of what makes up our peculiar nature, which is to express anew the heteroglossia of our culture and *The Waste Land* does just that.

*The Waste Land* might also be considered in the light of Derrida's idea of *différance* as meaning here is always delayed and is dependent on traces of other texts. Eliot's poem signifies in terms of intertextuality; it discovers significance through the relation between contemporary experience, myth and already existing texts, as perhaps the present text can only signify in these terms. This also ties in with what we said about heteroglossia: if what constitutes present knowledge is language and if language is heteroglot, then a meaningful present is necessarily dependent on a form of reconstruction which will show how these heteroglossia interact with one another.

Other ways of understanding the poem are also possible. For example, it can be viewed as a kind of archaeological reconstruction, which is favoured by the line «These fragments I have shored against my ruins»: so that the poem simply reworks the text which is our culture, literature and history: the ruins are built up again, the old construction is built onto or added to, and the past forms part of it. Present experience is a construct partly built upon an awareness and understanding of the past and, in the construction of the text, or in the revelation of the plural nature and different aspects of consciousness, different layers come to the surface and are revealed. Thus, because of the idea of correspondence, the awareness of similarity and difference, and even of the archetypal nature of experience, the poem is able to suggest the significance of the fragmentary present.

With the advent of modernism, the distinctions that Bakhtin draws between narrative and poetry become much more tenuous. When he speaks of the existence of different types of discourse in the novel, it is curious to note that these also correspond to different aspects of poetic discourse: «Direct authorial literary-artistic narration (in all its diverse variants)» is perhaps what we might call the voice of the poet or his single persona; the «stylization of the various forms of oral everyday narration (skaz)» would correspond to the modernist tendency towards the introduction of everyday speech and rhythms and even characters who speak in this way; the «stylization of the various forms of semi-literary (written) everyday narration (the letter, the diary, etc)» would correspond to adopting particular forms in poetry that are not necessarily poetical, which we begin to find much more notably from the poetry of Browning onwards; «[v]arious forms of literary but extra-artistic authorial speech (moral, philosophical or scientific statements, oratory, ethnographic descriptions, memoranda and so forth)» might possibly take us into another realm of intertextuality which Bakhtin does not expressly mention, but which forms part of *The Waste Land* in its continual references to other sources; the «stylistically individualized speech of characters (other voices)» could correspond to the dramatized personae of the dramatic monologue, the characters we find in *The Waste Land*, as well as to intertextuality. (Bakhtin 1981: 262).

He goes on to say that «[t]hese heterogeneous stylistic unities, upon entering the novel, combine to form a structured artistic system, and are subordinated to a higher stylis-

tic unity of the work as a whole, a unity that cannot be identified with any single one of the unities subordinated to it.» and that the uniqueness of the novel depends on «the combination of these subordinated yet still relatively autonomous unities (even at times comprised of different languages) into the higher unity of the work as a whole» (262). However, this is also a feature of modernist poetry and is also found in *The Waste Land*. While the novel is foregrounded as dialogic and heteroglot in Bakhtin's criticism, we can now say that some poetry can also be defined «as a diversity of social speech types (sometimes even diversity of languages) and a diversity of individual voices, artistically organized» (262). In fact what he says about poetry does not really work when we consider a poem like *The Waste Land* at all.

For example, he considers that a condition for poetry is a unity of style, suggesting that the individual voice of the poet precludes heteroglossia, when we have seen that in Eliot's poem this is not the case. He also believes that

in the majority of poetic genres, the unity of the language system and the unity (and uniqueness) of the poet's individuality as reflected in his language and speech, which is directly realized in this unity, are indispensable prerequisites of poetic style. The novel, however, does not require these conditions but (as we have said) even makes of the internal stratification of language, of its social heteroglossia and the variety of individual voices in it, the prerequisite for authentic novelistic prose. (264)

Once again it has to be made clear that a prerequisite for *The Waste Land* is to highlight «the internal stratification of language» and the variety of voices and discourses that make up the present, something which is a more generalised feature of modernism and which exerts a considerable influence on contemporary poetry. Bakhtin also considered that poetry promotes the creation of a unitary language of culture and of truth in the midst of heteroglossia, although in *The Waste Land* this gives way to a clear suggestion of the contrary, that language and literature, including poetry do not attempt to avoid but in fact rely on foregrounding the heteroglot nature of our language and culture. So, it would seem that Bakhtin is probably referring to more traditional poetic forms from the nineteenth century and before as he fails to consider the changes in attitude marked by Modernism, particularly when he says this:

The language of the poet is *his* language, he is utterly immersed in it, inseparable from it, he makes use of each form, each word, each expression according to its unmediated power to assign meaning (as it were 'without quotation marks'), that is, as a pure and direct expression of his own intention. (285)

However, there is no unmediated expression, no direct method, so that not even the poet can avoid heteroglossia. As we saw, what Eliot has to express is not his personality at all, but a poetic medium which is composed of a variety of conventions and traditions and the heteroglossia that convey them to us. His poetry involves itself in a dialogue with the discourses of both past and present which is what is required to overcome the sense of fragmentation we mentioned, although ironically it is the fragments themselves which make up the whole. An awareness of the heteroglot nature of our culture and even of ourselves allows us to rediscover just what makes up our peculiar nature. Now, in order to illustrate this we should look briefly at the poem and see just in what way it is heteroglot.

The opening of *The Waste Land* essentially alludes to what is underlying the present moment, although at the outset we are not yet able to understand its significance. In a sense, the opening lines are a metaphor for the poem itself:

April is the cruellest month, breeding  
 Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing  
 Memory and desire, stirring  
 Dull roots with spring rain.  
 Winter kept us warm, covering  
 Earth in forgetful snow, feeding  
 A little life with dried tubers.

This opening clearly ties in with its title, «The Burial of the Dead,» which comes from the Anglican burial service. It alludes to the aridity of the land, to death and earth but inverts the usual values attributed to Spring and Winter to suggest that there is no possibility of regeneration. However, it also represents the depthlessness and meaninglessness of an ongoing present time separated from the past («Winter kept us warm» is an obvious paradox here). It draws attention to the way in which mankind has lost its memory; the natural cycle has become inverted, and the coming of rain stirs «dull roots» in a dead land. The image is one of sterility and a desire to forget, but implicit in this opening is the idea that what can bring regeneration still remains, underlying the apparently meaningless present.

Although unpleasant, the process of the poem is precisely to feed life into the dead land (contemporary culture) with dried tubers (forgotten links with our past); precisely it mixes memory with desire (or intertextual allusions with the decadent lust of the present). It wakens us out of our comfortable forgetfulness. The text implies how modern civilisation has cut itself off from the past but draws attention, just as Eliot's criticism does, to the fact that the present can be made significant by dramatising the presentness of the past. It shows how individual personality and our culture are heteroglot through a literature which foregrounds this feature of language, culture and the individual. Spring which should bring regeneration does just the opposite; it seems that to hide from the past is better; that after the war it is better to reject out of date values, although the poem and perhaps modernist literature in general shows the need to recover that past to make the present meaningful. In this regard the desire to forget is related to the decadence suggested by the description of meaningless activities associated with pre-war Europe. However, the poem makes us realise that without an awareness of roots there is no meaning possible either for the past or the future. The poem itself remembers, it imposes its own cycle of regeneration, forcing the reader to remember and tentatively suggesting that regeneration is possible. By being heteroglot itself it shows that this is an essential part of our culture.

While the themes of rebirth and regeneration are foremost, the poem is representative of the fragmentary and heteroglot character of culture, and a consideration of language, literature and culture as heteroglossia gives a new significance to its closing section where we find the famous line, «These fragments I have shored against my ruins.» Eliot's poem demonstrates not only the importance of the past in the present, but the existence of the past in the present, and by recovering those fragments of an apparently forgotten culture, the reader may regain sight of the fact that this is indeed what makes up our present and makes it meaningful. In fact, we can suggest that the act of creation is made possible by the act of remembering.

As we suggested earlier, in the construction of the text (using one image) or in the revelation of the plural nature or different aspects of consciousness, different layers come to the surface. In this way the poem foregrounds the idea of correspondence as well as our awareness of the archetypes which it alludes to, and it is this process of implying significance on the part of the poet, and identifying it on the part of the reader which give form and thereby significance to the work. As we said earlier, it is the recognition of correspondence, relations of similarity and difference which allow us to construct significance. As a further example let us look briefly at the beginning of «The Fire Sermon»:

The river's tent is broken; the last fingers of leaf  
 Clutch and sink into the wet bank. The wind  
 Crosses the brown land, unheard. The nymphs are departed  
 Sweet Thames run softly till I end my song.  
 The river bears no empty bottles, sandwich papers,  
 Silk handkerchiefs, cardboard boxes, cigarette ends  
 Or other testimony of summer nights. 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, run softly, for I speak not loud or long.  
 But at my back in a cold blast I hear  
 The rattle of bones, and chuckle spread from ear to ear.

This is pure heteroglossia where we again find a variety of voices, a mingling of the past and the present, the presentation of a consciousness made up of fragments, with ironic references to and distortions of famous literary passages from the past. In this particular case a noble past is contrasted with a decadent and obscene present.

«Sweet Thames run softly . . . » is from the marriage song of Spenser's *Prothalamion*, set by a very different unlettered Thames, which has nothing to do with the degraded sexuality of the present but provides a point of reference or a new context in which we can better understand the situation. «By the waters of Leman I sat down and wept . . . » comes from Psalm CXXX vii, where decadence is related to the allusion to Geneva; and then Marvell's «To his Coy Mistress» which reads «And at my back I always hear/Time's wingèd chariot hurrying near.» The discourse of the fragmented consciousness is like that of a distorted and fragmented culture. The river, the archetypal source of life is now littered, bringing images of drowning and death. But our life is also littered with these fragments from the past which still form part of our present. Then, later in this section we read:

But at my back from time to time I hear  
 The sounds of horns and motors which shall bring  
 Sweeny to Mrs Porter in the spring.  
 O the moon shines bright of Mrs Porter  
 And on her daughter  
 They wash their feet in soda water  
 Et O ces voix d'enfants, chantant dans la coupole  
 Twit twit twit  
 Jug jug jug jug jug jug  
 So rudely forc'd  
 Tereu.

Here, the variety of sources for the intertextual references foregrounds the heteroglot nature of the poem and clearly suggests the correspondence between the literary past and our present. We find passages from Day's *A Parliament of Bees* («A noise of Horns and hunting which shall bring Actaeon to Diana in the spring»), where Actaeon is changed into a stag and hunted to death for having seen Diana naked; from Verlaine's *Parsifal* where the questing knight resists temptation, and this is juxtaposed with the nightingale's song, reminding us of Philomela's rape, which is also reminiscent of the rape which takes place in «A Game of Chess» and anticipates the meeting between the «carbuncular young man» and the secretary. We then find the bawdy ballad of Mrs Porter and her daughter,



and through all this we see the correspondence between the past and the present, fragments from culture, fragmentary voices which show how each fragment itself can be representative and perhaps meaningful but that our understanding is enriched by our awareness of heteroglossia. Our language, our literature and our culture are part of all this.

*The Waste Land* is a landmark in English literature as it emphasises the nature of knowledge as language, and that our culture and our own personal identity are linked to and constituted by a series of discourses which overlap and underlie each other. The poem relies on and is an expression of the heteroglot nature of language and literature and that our knowledge and understanding of experience, if we are to make them meaningful, must always manifest themselves as text. It also shows how attitudes change with regard to what the poet expresses, which is no longer himself but the voices of the heteroglot culture of which he is a part. This is related to the blurring of the boundaries between genres at this time and, in the poem, there are multiple discourses, voices, and sources of intertextuality which foreground the way in which Eliot's attitude towards tradition is actually an expression of that heteroglossia. While the meaning of the poem relies on a belief in the existence of correspondence, the curious thing is that these relations between past and present, which provide significance, are actually imposed or put there by the author, although the suggestion is that they are real correspondences.

In the end, this need to write with all our literary tradition in our bones, which is an expression of heteroglossia, leads to a heightened understanding of human nature and just in what ways we create, attribute and discover significance as, with *The Waste Land*, the act of creation becomes an act of remembering.

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