

THE MYTHIC METHOD AND INTERTEXTUALITY IN T.S. ELIOT'S POETRY

Manjola Nasi, M.A.

University of Tirana, Albania

Abstract

The concept of intertextuality emerges in literary theory several decades after T.S. Eliot had written some of the most influential poems and pieces of criticism of the twentieth century, but the notion is nevertheless applied both theoretically and in practice to Eliot's work. This paper sheds light on Eliot's mythic method and its conceptual similarities to intertextuality and related theories, as well as focuses on instances of the application of the former in his poems, depicting the role of this mechanism in the poet's literary works. Closely related to Eliot's perception of tradition, it also supports his use of techniques of collage and kaleidoscopic presentation of sources, archetype and images.

Keywords: Mythic method, T.S. Eliot, intertextuality, Modernism, allusions, quotations, epigraph, Ulysses, intertextual relations.

1. Eliot and Joyce

The year 1922 saw the culmination of Modernism through the publication of some of the greatest Modernist works, two of the most renowned of which were of course James Joyce's *Ulysses* and T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*.

A year after that, in 1923, Eliot published his review "Ulysses, Order, and Myth", in which he introduced his "mythic method":

"In manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity, Mr. Joyce is pursuing a method which others must pursue after him. They will not be imitators, any more than the scientist who uses the discoveries of an Einstein in pursuing his own, independent, further investigations. It is simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving shape and significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history. It is a method already adumbrated by Mr. Yeats, and of the need for which I believe that Mr. Yeats to have been first contemporary to be conscious. 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 *mythic method*. It is, I seriously believe, a step toward making the modern world possible for art.”¹

Earlier in the same essay, Eliot called drew attention on *the parallel to the Odyssey, and the use of appropriate styles and symbols to each division* [of Joyce’s work], explaining that it was not, as many had seen it, “*an amusing dodge, or scaffolding erected by the author for the purpose of disposing his realistic tale, of no interest in the completed structure*”.

Thus, to Eliot, the parallel use of the Homeric Odyssey was not an embellishment to the structure of the new Ulysses, but rather an underneath semi-transparent multi-layered stratum on a painting where the two would be present. The old Odyssey introduces the new Ulysses to myth, history, human feelings and deeds. This *past* the Odyssey provides is as complex and intricate as human activity itself, but on the other hand, it brings depth, memory and meaning to an otherwise isolated bubble-like artificial creation. The forging of the old into the new is to Eliot an act of alchemy, if we were to use the type of chemical symbolism he employs in his “Tradition and the individual talent”, speaking of the role of the artist in the process of artistic creation. The transtemporal and transhistorical product of this reaction calls as much to consciousness as it does to unconsciousness. The use of its varied elements produces a multifaceted entity that cannot be fully explored by rational thought, but can be grasped more as an experience rather than as meaning. In his essay, Eliot mentions psychology, ethnology and *The Golden Bough* (an anthropological work) as the fields of human achievement that would shed light on this complexity.

It is quite obvious that Eliot identified Joyce’s method as similar to his own². In addition to the temporal depth, one of the important functions of this method was *to provide order*, a way of organizing the various elements of the literary work without employing the rigid rules of fixed and/or closed structures, the verbose elaborations of the narrative method and all its connective restrictions. The mythic method provided no need for explanations. Instead of isolated symbols, the mythic method introduced the mechanism of *symbol*

¹Eliot, T.S. "Ulysses, Order, and Myth." in *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*. Ed. Frank Kermode. New York: Harcourt, 1975, 178.

²Segall, Jeffrey. *Joyce in America: Cultural Politics and the Trials of Ulysses*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993, 143.

networks, which were significantly more powerful and contributed as much to meaning as they did to structure – a combination addressing one of Eliot’s major concerns, that of unity.³

The other major characteristic of the mythic method was that it provided a *basis for comparison*, serving to the ironic dimension of the new work. Almost cynical irony was the most frequent attitude of the great authors of the Modernist period towards their subject-matter, employed mainly with the intention of avoiding the authorial teary sympathy of realist nineteenth century literature. In Joyce’s modern day London, Leopold Bloom walks his own odyssey, but his life is neither heroic, nor means to be such. Mythological monsters are replaced by a lot less powerful challenges and the Homeric *Odyssey*’s central theme, that of the journey home (the Nostos), with home representing among other things a place of warmth, love, comfort, safety, as well as hope for regeneration and continuity of life, becomes just another day in the city. The past and present represented in the Homeric *Odyssey* by Laertes and Telemachus are both hopelessly lost in *Ulysses*, with Bloom’s father and son being dead. The tragedy of this loss is severe and it becomes more acute by the parallelism with the Homeric respective characters, who choose to resist in an active manner to the situations with which they are faced. The unambiguous objectives and strategies of all the Homeric characters show their strength and their sharp orientation, as opposed to their modern-day counterparts, leading (or opting out of) their confused lives.

In a very similar manner, we can investigate the mythological elements in *The Waste Land*. In his very first note to the poem, Eliot explicitly speaks of how much he is indebted to Jessie Weston’s *From Ritual to Romance*, saying:

“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*”.⁴

Further adding that another major influence was that of Frazer’s *The Golden Bough*. Other notes bring more and more sources into play, of many different origins and each affecting the meaning and structure by adding to the complexity of the destination poem and at the same time preserving a relative independence that makes surface fragmentation more obvious but also that helps bring the whole array together. If Joyce’s *Ulysses* demonstrates consistency and relatively smooth transition from one element of the Homeric story to

³Eliot, T.S. “The Metaphysical Poets”. in *T.S. Eliot’s Selected Essays 1917-1932*. London: Faber & Faber, 1933, 269.

⁴Eliot, T. S., and Michael North. *The Waste Land: Authoritative Text, Contexts, Criticism*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2001, 21.

another, and an attentive reader can feel each of the two texts separately *and* the third one that comes as a marriage of them, in Eliot's poem fragmentation obscures the whole picture and the initial text emerges sporadically only to disappear again. Before reaching into the layers that separate the archetypal myths of Frasier's or Weston's account from modern life after the Great War, the reader needs to travel through many other layers standing in between, or even further in time and/or space, as it is the case with Upanishadic elements. Eliot's myths interact with the poem's present as much as they do between themselves, but they perform the same important functions as Joyce's Odyssean elements. The radical effect of Eliot's complexity is the feeling of confusion, which is, in fact, one of the central emotions depicted in *The Waste Land*.

If Joyce chooses to describe the human condition by illustrating it with well-defined characters, Eliot's characters are more fragmented, circumstantial and instrumental. The other major difference is that in Joyce's case the parallelism is rendered through allusion, while in more than one instance, Eliot employs mythical characters directly, along with contexts from the original sources. The central mythical quest is not very far from Joyce's odyssey, with the radical distinction of its even more encompassing nature. The quest itself speaks of a general plague, selflessness and the fate of the community, through which the fate of the individual can be imagined, while Joycean journey is seen as the personal quest of a small number of individuals, through which the fate of civilization is implied.

2. Eliot and intertextuality

In his essay, Eliot saw the mythic method as manifested through the use of *styles and symbols*, also noting its importance on form and structure. Yet, his definition of the radical innovation which the mythic method was to him remains vague and somehow elusive. The parallelism between *Ulysses* and *The Waste Land* serves as an important indication, since it provides yet another case study as to the practical application of the mythic method. And although myths are crucial, if we consider the name Eliot gave to the method but also the influence of James G. Frazer, which is mentioned in the "Ulysses" essay and the first note to *The Waste Land*, Eliot's own use of this novelty was highly more complex and involved a wide array of different techniques and mechanisms.

All these elements can be classified very inclusively under Kristeva's term "intertextuality", which can roughly be described as a tangible relationship between two or more texts. Not wanting to address the origin of this concept and the possible relations

between it or Bakhtin's heteroglossia and dialogism (which has been compared by critics to Eliot's concept of tradition⁵ and which is Kristeva's starting point of the history of the idea of intertextuality) to Eliot's theoretical ideas, I will only discuss here very briefly why intertextuality is the best umbrella term that would include the echoing of a text into another. Although many opponents of intertextuality see it as a new name for "old tricks", such as allusion and influence⁶, the novelty of intertextuality is that it is not limited to either. And in just the same way, it is broader than Eliot's coining of the term "mythic", which points at myths as an exclusive choice, although its literary application offers a much wider variety of devices. To illustrate this, it is sufficient to see Eliot's use of other sources in his works, mainly in *The Waste Land*.

One of the most original ways in which Eliot chose to integrate fragments of existing texts into his own poems is through *quotation*. M. H. Abrams' *A Glossary of Literary Terms* defines allusion as following: "[...] a passing reference, without explicit identification, to a literary or historical person, place, or event, or to another literary work or passage."⁷ It is thus clear that the direct citation of lines or fragments of literary works can not be seen as an allusion, although its referential function remains. Eliot used allusion extensively, and in his poems quotation can be seen as a functionally similar but formally different device. It is interesting to focus on one type of quotation in *The Waste Land*, where in more than one instance, such as is the case of lines 31-34, 42, 76 (including slight adaptation), 202, 427, 428, etc. Eliot's quotations are not in English, but respectively in German, French, Italian and Latin. It seems as if Eliot prefers quotations over the double "transfer" that an allusion would require on the above lines, first being the translation and second - the contextual modification. But instead, it is also relevant to take into consideration the thematic aspect of *The Waste Land*, which aims to represent the temporal and spatial dimensions of human pain and confusion, thus disregarding the limitations of living and dead languages, or simply put, universalizing the poem. Allusion would be probably just as able to contribute in the meaning of the respective sections, as it does in a considerable number of contexts in *The Waste Land*. But the added function of quotation is that it plays a role on the structural level of the poem, emphasizing fragmentation and at the same time *estranging* each instance of quoted lines

⁵Harris, Wendell V. "Bakhtinian double voicing in Dickens and Eliot", *ELH*, Vol. 57, No. 2 (Summer, 1990), 445-458.

⁶Haberer, Adolphe. "Intertextuality in theory and practice", *Literatura*, Vol. 47, No. 5, 2007, 59.

⁷Abrams, M. H. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. Boston, MA: Heinle & Heinle, 1999, 9.

from the present context and narrowing the distance between the text in *The Waste Land* and other previous texts.

The power of quotations is fully explored in Eliot's poetry. One of the significant experiments involves combination of the technique discussed above with another crucial device that is used throughout the different stages of his maturity as a poet, from "Prufrock" to *Four Quartets* - i.e. *epigraphs*. The known function of an epigraph is to contribute in the mood and meaning of a work, which it achieves by widening or quite the opposite, by narrowing the scope of the remainder of the composing elements. In Eliot's poems epigraphs are frequent and they have an indisputably important role that affects the poem on all the different levels. Given the fragmented structure of most of Eliot's poetic works, the epigraph becomes less isolated from the other lines as compared to instances of use by most authors, and quotations in other parts of the poem can be seen as devices performing a parallel function that follows a highly similar logic. In this respect and as seen above, it is interesting to highlight that Eliot's epigraphs, like many of his quotations, preserve their independence while at the same time merging with the rest of the composing units. Thus, we may observe that in most instances, the linguistic *estrangement* holds true for his epigraphs as well. In "Prufrock", the epigraph is a citation from Dante's *Inferno*, and it is in Italian. In "La figlia che piange" the epigraph is quoted from Virgil's *Aeneid* and it is in Latin. In *The Waste Land*, it is a quotation from Petronius Arbiter's *Satyricon*, and it is in Latin, but within it is included an Ancient Greek citation of the words of the Sybil of Cumae. In *Four Quartets* the two epigraphs are borrowed from Heraclitus and they are in Ancient Greek.

Of course, not all the epigraphs in Eliot's poems are in foreign languages, but the linguistic distance can be perceived even in some of those that are in English, which manifest some form of deviation from the standard of the day⁸. This particularity emphasizes the intertextual nature of the epigraphs and enriches the temporal and spatial aspect of each poem, which in turn contributes among other things to the universal dimension of human experience in the course of time and regardless of differences in setting.

The epigraphs have many traits, principally functional traits, in common with the myths and mythical characters evoked by Eliot in his poems and alluded to in his definition of the mythic method. As far as characters are concerned, their reechoing is not exclusive to

⁸Such is the case of the epigraph to "Gerontion", "Though has nor youth, nor age [...]" echoing Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*, in which we notice the use of "hast", the regular form of Shakespeare's use, as well as one of the epigraphs to "The hollow men", which is a quotation from Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* reading "Mistah Kurtz – he dead", echoing the speech of Kurtz's African slave.

mythical characters, which is yet another manner Eliot pursues to draw parallels between his works and other contexts, creating a network of intertextual links. In addition to historical persons and literary characters from other works and authors that are invoked through allusions, Eliot chooses to employ them directly in more than one instance. Such is the case of Hamlet in “Prufrock”, although its function beyond the sphere of meaning is limited, or the well-known case of Tiresias in *The Waste Land*, which is a crucial device in terms of content and form, as admitted in the notes to the poem, and the list can continue. Another less recognized example is again found in *The Waste Land*, and I would like to address it briefly to illustrate the intertextual impact it has on all levels of the target context: Line 43 introduces the reader to Madame Sosostris, the famous clairvoyante (Eliot’s spelling), who is acknowledged to have originated from Aldous Huxley’s *Chrome Yellow*. In Huxley’s novel, the fake sorceress appearing as Sesostris, which is the name of Egyptian kings, is in fact a man, Mr. Scogan. It is interesting to point out how this character is related to Tiresias, the unconventional narrator of *The Waste Land*: first through the attribute of the double gender, constituting among other things an element of structural cohesion. Secondly, the word clairvoyant, which comes from French and means roughly “the one who sees clearly” is yet another allusion to Tiresias, who was blind, and to other references to eyes in Eliot’s poem, such as the eyes of the drowned Phoenician sailor or the single eye of the one-eyed merchant.

Finally, but of primary importance is the prophetic aspect, the ability to see beyond what is visible: according to the legend, after the blinding of Tiresias by goddess Hera, Zeus gave him prophetic powers in compensation. In note 218 to *The Waste Land*, Eliot admits: “What Tiresias sees, in fact, is the subject of the poem”. If Tiresias’ prophetic powers are seen in a positive light, the case of Madame Sosostris is not the same. Although she is considered as ‘the wisest woman in Europe’, her pack of cards are “wicked” and her conversations contain the ‘street wisdom’ that usually characterizes impostors. Although elements of her vision are presented as truths later in the poem, the choice of her name is another indication of the negative insinuations which point to her as the wrong destination of great powers in a world where the natural order of things is disrupted. Thus, the intertextual powers of this seemingly unimportant name choice for a character offer an immensely potent device that provides a crucial contribution to all the different levels of the poem.

3. Conclusion

The variety of Eliot's intertextual devices is significant and it includes a large number of instances of use. His concept of the mythic method presented in his essay on Joyce's *Ulysses* covers only a portion of the elements applied to his own literary work. Nevertheless, we may conclude beyond any doubt that Eliot's method was not implemented spontaneously and without a prior project. A clear indication of the existence of conscious planning can be observed in the notes attached to *The Waste Land* and in other instances in his critical writings. All these practical devices are fully supported in Eliot's theoretical concepts about literature functioning as a system, which is presented very early in his essays. The degree in which intertextual elements are present in Eliot's poems is definitely one of the difficulties a layman reader encounters in fully understanding Eliot's work, which in turn is not a criterion for appreciating and enjoying it. On the other hand, the mythic method, or its fuller version - intertextuality, provide a rich background for the literary work, adding to its temporal aspect and universal traits in a manner that no isolated piece of literature can achieve.

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