

The Influence of the French Symbolists on the Poetry and literary Criticism of T.S. Eliot

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ABSTRACT

T.S Eliot's poetry and literary criticism was impacted by the poetic tradition of the French Symbolists and this paper will explore some of the ways in which this tradition is formative on his poetry and his literary criticism. It will argue that T.S Eliot found his own poetic voice through utilising the poetic methods of the French Symbolists, in the use of evocative symbols and imagery, his attitude to meaning in poetry, and the association of poetry with music.

Keywords: Poetry, literary criticism, symbolism

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Introduction

This paper will explore the influence of the French Symbolists on the poetry and literary criticism of Thomas Stearns Eliot (26 .9.1888- 4.1.1965). He is considered to be one of the greatest poets in the early twentieth century and a representative of Late Symbolism¹. Eliot's poetry is fascinating because of its evocative imagery, which is full of symbolic meanings, in which lies the resonance and influence of the French Symbolists. Eliot had been introduced to the poetry of Charles Baudelaire, Jules Laforgue, Tristan Corbiere, Arthur Rimbaud and Stephen Mallarmé while an undergraduate at Harvard and this reading influenced his year studying in Paris in 1910². Arthur Symon's (1899, 1999) *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* played a pivotal role in encouraging Eliot to read nineteenth century poetry³. Eliot read this text in 1908 and his poems registered its impact immediately. The poetic voice he wanted to discover could only be found in 'le grand' places of Paris, and resembling the poetic diction in French form.⁴ Eliot stated in his last Turnball Lecture that without the French Symbolists he would not have been able to write poetry at all, connecting him with an inspiring tradition that gave him something new and relevant to say.⁵

The prime quality of symbolism is its rich suggestiveness; the Symbolists represent ideas and emotions by indirect suggestion.⁶ For Stéphane Mallarmé, the language of symbolism is suggestive, indirect and evocative, exemplified in this excerpt: peindre non la chose, mais l'effet qu'elle produit', 'to paint not the thing, but the effect it produces' (Letter to Henri Cazalis 30

¹ Peter Ackroyd, *T.S Eliot* (London: Penguin, 1993)

² Nancy Duvall Hargrove, *T.S.Eliot's Parisian Year* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2009), pp.2—3.

³ Arthur Symon, *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (London: Carcanet, 2014)

⁴ Junichi Saito, "T.S Eliot and Paris" *Kanagawa University International Management Review* '49 (2015), 99-107 (100-101).

⁵ Thomas Stearns Eliot, *The Varieties of Metaphysical Poetry*, edited by Ronald Schuchard, (London: Faber and Faber. 1993), p.287

⁶ Nidhi Tiwari, *Imagery and Symbolism in T.S Eliot's Poetry* (New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers, 2001)

October 1864)⁷. There are innumerable examples of archetypal imagery and symbols in T.S. Eliot's poetry, such as 'the dark dove with the flickering tongue'. Symbolist poetry is difficult, because it tries to elicit affect, incorporating the broad range of feelings people experience, including both emotions and mood. Gillespie states "... Its symbols communicates affects to be experienced by the reader but never specifies what the 'affects' are"⁸. In *Tradition and the Individual Talent*, Eliot outlines the poetic process wherein the mature poet is "...a more finely perfected medium in which special, or very varied, feelings are at liberty to enter into new combinations." In that essay, Eliot argues that the genuine originality of poetic creation stems from having absorbed a tradition so deeply that one is enabled to work from it and add to it, to enable language to open up new vistas.⁹

It is the attitude to meaning in poetry that is Eliot's contribution to developing the concepts of the symbolists, as Wourm asserts, "Eliot extended the Symbolist idea that language in poetry is more than a referential tool"¹⁰. Meaning is embodied rather than explained. Eliot's essay on the Metaphysical poets refers to the "dissociation of sensibility"-the moment in history when thought and feeling became separated, occurring in the mid- seventeenth century. Eliot opined: 'they do not feel their thought as immediately as the odour of a rose', expressing a desire for a recapitulation of sensibility.¹¹

To express emotions, Eliot voices his notion of imagery through poetic theories, such as Objective Correlative Theory. This involves the means of showing rather than describing feelings in poems, defined by Eliot as: "a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked"¹². The emotion cannot be communicated directly but by finding an object suggestive of it can the emotion be evoked in the readers. Often, is a combination of words, phrases or set of objects that create emotion. In this way, a poem is a set of conceptual symbols or correlatives which endeavour to express the emotions of the poet. For example, in Eliot's *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*: "Of restless nights in one-night cheap hotels/ And sawdust restaurants with oyster-shells:" Eliot is here signifying the loneliness and desolation of modern urban life¹³. Eliot believed poetry should suggest more than it can state directly to the mind. The Poet is seeking to arouse particular sensations in the reader. Baudelaire's ability of transmuting ideas and feelings into sensations has the same aim as Eliot's doctrine of objective correlative.

Alghanem asserts that this doctrine allows Eliot to hide or mask his personality in his poetry; the inner voice of the poet is not self-evident through his work¹⁴. For Eliot poems ought to be detached from the poet's personality, exemplified in Barthes' injunction of the Death of the Author, only language subsists and not the author. Eliot asserts that "...the only legitimate meaning of a poem is the meaning it has for any reader, not a meaning which it has primarily for the author." (Letter to Claude Collier Abbott, 13 October 1927). Thus, interpretation of meaning is allocated to the reader. There is a suspicion of interpreting authorial intention, although Eliot provides commentary of his own work and its potential sources, in his notes on *The Waste Land*. Ultimately, the purpose of this poem is to allow the reader to experience sensations and unification of sensibility of thought and feeling.¹⁵

It is in the treatment of identical themes and similarity of poetic methods, that we see the most influence of the French Symbolists in Eliot's corpus. In *The Waste Land* Eliot refers three times to Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal* "Unreal City, Under the brown fog of a winter dawn.." compares with the "Fourmillante cité of the "Les Sept Vieillards." Here, crowds of people flow through the streets and strange encounters take place. evoking walking the streets of Paris. Baudelaire's line is appropriated in Eliot's repeated "O City, City". Baudelaire provides the imagery for the boredom and the horror in Eliot's long poem¹⁶. A similarity exists between Eliot's and Baudelaire's conception of the realm of poetry. There is a recognition in Eliot's literary criticism of Baudelaire as "the greatest exemplar in modern poetry" because of his use of imagery of quotidian life, including the sordid life of the great metropolis and elevating the intensity of the imagery- presenting it as it is, and making it represent something more than itself.¹⁷ Baudelaire has

⁷Stéphane Mallarmé, *Correspondance complète 1862–1871. Lettres sur la poésie 1872–1898 avec des lettres inédites*, ed. B. Marchal, preface by Y. Bonnefoy, (Paris: Gallimard, 1995) (Folio classique), p.206

⁸ Robert Gillespie, 'Baudelaire and Moréas's Symbolisme in T.S.Eliot's *The Waste Land*', *Journal of the T.S. Eliot Society*, (2020), .1-27 (p.8)

⁹ Thomas Stearns Eliot, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' in *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism*. (London: Methuen, 1950) pp.27-34 (p28)

¹⁰Nathalie Wourm, 'Dylan Thomas and the French Symbolists', *Welsh Writing in English: A Yearbook of Critical Essays*, V, (1999), 27-41 (p.38)

¹¹ Thomas Stearns Eliot, 'The Metaphysical Poets' in *Selected Essays* (3rd edn., London: Faber and Faber, 1951) p288-289

¹² Thomas Stearns Eliot, 'Hamlet and His Problems' in *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism* (London: Faber and Faber, 1920), p.73

¹³ Hareshwar Roy, *The Concept of Objective Correlative* (2017) <<https://www.englitmail.com/2017/06/the-concept-of-objective-correlative.html>> [accessed 15 February 2021]

¹⁴ Alanoud Abdulaziz Alghanem, 'Depersonalization: Deconstructing Eliot's Notion in *The Waste Land*', *International Journal of Linguistics, Literature and Translation*, 3:6 (2020), 224-234.

¹⁵ Gillespie, p.15

¹⁶ R. Galand 'T.S Eliot and the Impact of Baudelaire' *Yale French Studies*, 6 *France and World Literature*, (1950), 27-34 (p.27-28).

¹⁷ T. S. Eliot, "Baudelaire," *Selected Essays* (London: Faber, 1951) p.426

the ability to make the ridiculous or trivial great. Similarly, Eliot uses elements of language and nature as symbols to create special effects, by juxtaposing the grotesque and the normal, as seen in these lines from *The Hollow Men*:

“The eyes are not here
There are no eyes here
In this valley of dying stars
In this hollow valley.
This broken jaw of our lost kingdom.”

There is an imitation of sound in these verses, a babbling and repetition of sounds as if someone is talking in an incomprehensible way. The grotesque of the broken jaw is juxtaposed with normal poetic expression.¹⁸

The Symbolist movement was a revolution in form, experimenting with verse that is not bound by strict poetic rules, such as liberation from traditional metre but not a complete relinquishment of regular verse¹⁹. Vers libéré was a breaking free from restrictions and reaching a middle ground in Eliot's terms; ‘a revolt against dead form;’ not ‘free verse’ but where poetry is still bound by form. As Eliot states: “It is the arrangement of words in the right order” that generates “their connotations, their music,”²⁰. Technique is a subject proper to poetry. Through a technique of musical patterning and repetition of words, in the light of the *symbolistes français*, Eliot ensures that the meaning and association of words are tied up with the ‘music of verse’²¹. In the following passage from section V of *Burnt Norton* the recurrence of ‘only’ and ‘words’ creates a lulling effect of meditative stillness:

Words move, music moves
Only in time; but that which is only living
Can only die. Words, after speech, reach
Into the silence. Only by the form, the pattern,
Can words or music reach
The stillness, as a Chinese jar still
Moves perpetually in its stillness.²²

As we read one section of *The Four Quartets* we hear echoes of other sections, as words in one part evoke other parts of the poem. *The Four Quartets* makes great use of musical analogies and influence Eliot's use of rhythm. There is allusion in the *Quartets* to a particular form of musical performance. This is poetry that is performative rather than communicative; showing the reader through form rather than telling through a statement. Helen Gardner first suggested the musicality in relation to this poem with its affinity to string quartets.²³ The structure of this sequence of poems is particularly similar, taking each of the five sections of the poems as ‘movements’, continuing the musical theme. The musical influence of the French Symbolists pervades *The Four Quartets* through the use of repetitive devices²⁴. The symbol of the tolling bell to evoke a sense of spirituality was used by Eliot, Baudelaire and Mallarmé in *The Dry Salvages*, *The Cracked Bell* and *The Bell Ringer* respectively. Eliot used literary devices such as alliteration and assonance. Alliteration can be seen in the use of ‘f’ sound in the following line, found at the end of movement two in *East Coker*: ‘Their fear of fear and frenzy, their fear of possession’ and the use of assonance created with the ‘o’ sound: ‘Of belonging to another, or to others, or to God’²⁵

The use of synesthetic imagery is a poetic technique adopted from the French symbolists, which makes an appeal to the senses and where imagery is used figuratively. Synesthesia in poetry utilises figurative language that includes a mixing of senses. In this opening passage from *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* Eliot beautifully combines the tactile and the visual when depicting the motion of fog.

The yellow fog that rubs its back upon the window panes,

¹⁸ S. Mishra, *Unit 22 T.S Eliot* (2018) <<http://www.egyankosh.ac.in/bitstream/123456789/47703/1/Unit-22.pdf>> [accessed 15 February 2021] (p.3-35).

¹⁹ Jeremy Charles Rupert Diaper ‘Four Quartets, Vers Libéré, Musicality and Belief’ (Masters of Philosophy, University of Birmingham, 2011) p.9-10

²⁰ T.S Eliot, *On Poetry and Poets* (London: Faber and Faber, 1957) p. 37, p.97-8

²¹ Diaper, p.23-24

²² Diaper, p.24

²³ Helen Gardner ‘The Music of Four Quartets’, in T. S. Eliot:

Four Quartets, edited by Bernard Bergonzi (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1949), 119-37, p.119

²⁴ David Hillery, *Music and Poetry in France from Baudelaire to Mallarmé: an Essay on Poetic Theory and Practice*, (Berne: Lang, 1980) p.80

²⁵ Thomas Stearns Eliot, *The Complete Poems and Plays of T.S. Eliot* 1969, p.179

The yellow smoke that rubs its muzzle on the window-panes,
Licked its tongue into the corners of the evening...

In a few lines from "Rhapsody on a Windy Day" Eliot moves beyond the purely visual and creates a synaesthetic visual-aural transference:

Every street lamp that I pass
Beats like a fatalistic drum

As Burrows argues, these lights serve as beacons in the enveloping darkness of night and are seen with such vivid intensity. It is the suggestion of the beating drums, which makes this phrase so foreboding and gives it poetic resonance.²⁶ Burrows witnesses this synaesthetic potentiality echoed in Eliot's other works. In *Preludes* the showers "beat on the broken blinds and chimney pots". Eliot writes in *The Waste Land* about the place "where the sun beats/And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief/ And the dry stone no sound of water". The sense of hearing is linked with visual and emotional experience. This synaesthetic metaphor of the beating sun is often overlooked, but involves multiple sensory perceptions of experiencing heat and light. These rhythmic qualities are connected to the beating of the human heart but also to the idea of rhythm in music. Eliot stated in the *Music of Poetry* that "the properties in which music concerns the poet most nearly are the sense of rhythm and the sense of structure"²⁷. There are parallels with *The Music of Poetry* and "Crise de vers," an 1896 essay by Mallarmé, evident in the musical metaphors and comparisons while dealing with the condition of poetry.²⁸

Genesis Jones²⁹, maintains that the French Symbolists "were concerned with exploiting possibilities of connotation", through the use of symbols and images as an attempt to capture the evasiveness and evocativeness of music. As Mallarmé proclaimed, "the perfect poem we dream of can be suggested by Music itself" (102-3)³⁰ He aspired for poetry to attain the fluidity of music. The symbolists are influenced by music, because "the meaning behind music is ambiguous, which ensures there is a variety of possible interpretations"³¹ and "what music expresses is eternal, infinite and ideal"³² emphasising the desire to achieve a spiritual aspect to their poetry. Eliot wanted his poetry to explore the "frontiers of the spirit" through exploiting a series of possible interpretations.

Eliot talks about poetic ambiguity in relation to music, where words have associations and connotations, and the poet is attempting to capture something beyond ordinary speech. It reflects the instability or arbitrary relationship between the signifier and the signified. This poem is open to different interpretations because of this ambiguity, which forms part of the music of poetry.

Conclusion

The French Symbolists' aesthetic, ideas and theories in relation to poetry resonated with Eliot's poetic sensibility. It was their tradition he absorbed and from which he developed his own poetic voice. He translated some of their musical ideas into his own music of poetry and in emphasising the importance of rhythm. The musicality is seen in his use of imagery and symbolism. Eliot shared their poetic techniques such as assonance, alliteration and rhyme and became a consummate poet and critic.

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²⁶ Fiona Elizabeth Burrows, 'Words of Shape and Shade: Synaesthesia in the Poetry and Poetic of the Early Twentieth Century,' (PhD Thesis, University of Western Australia, 2012) Chapter 5, pp. 130ff

²⁷ T.S. Eliot, *On Poetry and Poets* (London: Faber and Faber, 1957) p. 38

²⁸ Alicja Piechucka, 'From the Music of Poetry to the Music of the Spheres: The Musical-Logocentric Vision in T. S. Eliot and Stéphane Mallarmé', *Polish Journal for American Studies*, 1, 2004, 109-120, p. 109

²⁹ Genesis Jones, *Approach to the Purpose: A Study of the Poetry of T. S. Eliot* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1964), p. 33.

³⁰ Stéphane Mallarmé, *Mallarmé: Selected Prose Poems, Essays, and Letters*, translated by Bradford Cook (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1956) p. 102-3

³¹ Diaper 2020 p. 114

³² Susanne K. Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key: A Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite and Art*, (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1942) p. 222

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