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Abby Ang, 2013

Rene Fortin Essay Contest 2012

“Romanticism in T.S. Eliot’s Early Poetry: Music and Words”

Originally written for Literary Criticism and Theory

Fall 2011

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10 December 2011

Romanticism in T.S. Eliot's Early Poetry: Music and Words

English Romantic poet William Wordsworth, in his "Preface to Lyrical Ballads" (1800), defined all good poetry as the "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings." In the same way, Romanticism (1830-1900) in music was characterized by composers who favored emotional and picturesque expression more than formal or structural considerations. However, around the 1840s or the 1850s, there was a stylistic shift away from Romanticism, one that would reach its peak during the 20th century. Similar to the way that T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound would vigorously denounce the romantic project and its Victorian inheritors, composers began a shift from the lyricism of composers such as Franz Liszt and Frederic Chopin to something far less lyrical. Representative composers like Claude Debussy and Ivor Stravinsky experimented with the idea of tonality and the ways it could be subverted. The premiere of Stravinsky's *Le Sacre du Printemps* in 1913, was the most controversial example. Listeners accustomed to the idea of tonal music with a main pulse or meter that would carry throughout were thrown off by the sudden measure-to-measure switches in meter, music that had no tonal center (or too many tonal centers), and a seemingly lack of form. This could easily be compared to the fragmentation prevalent in Eliot's work. Not only that, composers like Stravinsky were no longer interested in using music to represent their own personal effusion of powerful emotion. In fact, it would be hard to pinpoint exactly what this music represented, with its jarring dissonances and polyrhythms. Eliot's poetry written before the *Waste Land* brilliantly demonstrates this parallel shift from the Romantic tradition into a new concept of music and literature, post-tonality in the former, and modernism in the latter. His undergraduate poetry represents an initial play on Romantic musical genres. Poems with titles like "Nocturne" are used in an ironic fashion, as the content of these poems are nothing like the genres they supposedly represent. Eliot's "Preludes"

and “Rhapsody on a Windy Night” also reflect Romantic musical genres, yet the contents are cynical and ironic rather than Romantic and idealistic. The “Rhapsody,” while imitative of the genre’s form, uses romantic literary images, like the night, the flowers, and the moon; yet much like the subversion of tonality, twists these into disfiguration. His poem “Portrait of a Lady,” as probably his most advanced use of musical representation, exposes Romantic clichés and a kind of bloated Romanticism. Yet he sets this against another type of music unnamed, the broken, raw, disjunct music that beats in his head at certain intervals.

The very early poems of Eliot’s, published in the *Harvard Advocate* between 1907 and 1910 while he was an undergraduate, can be read as earlier experiments in weaving not only musical ideas into poetry, but also a distancing of himself from Romanticism. The title of the first poem, “Nocturne,” refers to a short-form musical genre for piano that came into fore during the Romantic era with Chopin’s Nocturnes. These pieces were typically slow and dreamy, and sometimes were inspired by the night as the term *nocturne* is French for *nocturnal*. Yet Eliot does something different in his translation of a musical genre into poetry. One would think, given the reference to the Romantic period, that a poem entitled “Nocturne” would be quiet, dreamy, and sensual. However, Eliot’s poem is none of these things; in fact, he seems to be mocking the “formula” of love. First, the poem is a sonnet, one of the most famous forms for love poetry. He gives the reader the night setting, with Romeo importuning Juliet “beneath a bored but courteous moon” (“Nocturne,” 4). The moon, personified here, is not taking part in what would be a romantic scene, but is merely polite but bored. Romeo and Juliet, characters which themselves have become clichéd symbols of love, are not quite hitting the mark, either. Love is described as the “usual debate,” implying something that has been talked about so much that it is no longer a “conversation” or “banter” but perhaps something rehashed beyond

exhaustion. Music, interestingly enough, is used to fill the silence when the conversation fails (5). Eliot then has the servant stab Romeo, and the lady then sinks into a swoon (8). However, he, setting the stage, doesn't have a deep meaning for the stabbing, beyond saying that the "blood looks effective on the moonlit ground" (9). The death is meaningless, and it is just there for dramatic effect. The hero "rolls toward the moon a frenzied eye profound," and one can sense in the hero's exaggerated actions Eliot's distaste for the overwrought emotions so prevalent in the Romantic period (11). The Romeo and Juliet love, while attractive to the "female readers" drowned in tears, has ceased to mean anything to the author (13). In the same way, the nocturne can be seen as the quintessential Romantic musical genre that, like Romeo and Juliet, has become so clichéd as a romantic formula that it ceases to affect the same way it once did. Ultimately what we have is a poem that is anything but romantic.

The "Preludes" (1917), written some time after the "Nocturne," similarly evokes a Romantic musical genre while describing scenes that are anything but Romantic. Comparing the poem to "The Prelude" by William Wordsworth, one notices that Eliot is not making a rapturous overflow of "powerful feeling." While the narrator in Wordsworth's poem makes an ecstatic speech about the "vales" and "harbours" and the "blessing in this gentle breeze," Eliot has chosen to focus on dank pictures of disillusioned city life (Wordsworth, 1). John Xiros Cooper, in "Thinking with your Ears," compares Eliot's "Preludes" to Chopin's preludes, the most famous set of preludes written by any Romantic composer (101). The "Preludes," he writes, "is the antitype, the negative transparency in which the healthy fleshiness of the photograph is rendered skeletal and monochrome." This idea of "antitype" can be seen in Eliot's pastiche of images. The first section presents a winter evening with "burnt-out ends of smoky days" and "grimy scraps / Of withered leaves" and newspapers scattered everywhere. Already the smog of

the city is contrasted against nature's "azure sky" (Wordsworth, 4). Eliot also focuses on the seedy side of town, with its "broken blinds and chimney pots" (10). In the second section, the morning is filled with "faint stale smells of beer" (15). The image of "all the hands / That are raising dingy shades / In a thousand furnished rooms" brings to mind all the people in the city preparing for the day (21-23). The care taken to furnish the rooms is contrasted with the dingy shades. The anti-Romantic themes continue in the third section with the insomnia of the individual. "You tossed a blanket from the bed, / You lay upon your back, and waited" (24-25). Contrasting with Wordsworth's "unbroken cheerfulness serene" at night, the person sees "the thousand sordid images / Of which your soul was constituted" (27-28). The last image in this section presents the person getting out of bed, clasping "the yellow soles of feet / In the palms of both soiled hands" (37-38). This person is not energized or renewed. Even the "blackened street" seems curiously downtrodden in the last section. "His soul [is] stretched tight across the skies," or "trampled by insistent feet" not once but three times, "at four and five and six o'clock" (39-42). Yet there is a strange shift. "I am moved by fancies that are curled / Around these images, and cling: / The notion of some infinitely gentle / Infinitely suffering thing" (48-51). It is unclear who the "I" is, but even more unclear what this "infinitely gentle suffering thing" is. It suggests that even with all the unattractiveness of the city, the speaker still sees something else present in these images, something gentle and suffering. Yet despite the suffering and the gentleness, this being, this "thing" is powerless to fix anything. The last image in the poem compares the universe to people, as the "worlds revolve like ancient women / Gathering fuel in vacant lots" (53-54). The old women gathering fuel to keep themselves warm, or essentially the attempt to survive through the winter is juxtaposed with a vision of the world turning around the sun. Something as seemingly insignificant as people trying to survive in the big city is placed against

the magnitude of the turning universe. This kind of description is what J.C.C. Mays in “The Early Poems” calls “sentiment [that] accumulates by means of repetition, from which the speaker then recoils” (Mays, 112).

The “Preludes” can also be read as a play against the short-form Romantic genre for piano in terms of tonality. In the 19th century, the prelude as a self-contained form was famously developed by Romantic composers, the most famous collection being Chopin’s 24 Preludes (1836-1839). According to Aaron Copland, “The prelude is a very loose term for a large variety of pieces... as a title, it may mean almost anything from a quiet, melancholy piece to a long and showy, virtuoso piece... Prelude is a generic name for any piece of not too specific formal structure” (Cooper, 99). Chopin’s preludes were linked specifically to tonal areas, moving in a circle of fifths pattern (the first prelude in C major, second prelude in its relative minor, A minor, third prelude in G major, a fifth up on the scale from C, and fourth in E minor, or G major’s relative minor, and so on). In contrast to this idea of tonality in Chopin’s pieces, Cooper relates the “Preludes” to Arnold Schoenberg’s ideas of composition without a key center. “The lyric subjectivity that might give the text the poetic analog of a key center is dispersed among the pronouns and the indefinite points of view” (Cooper, 100). In other words, a single defined speaker can be compared to the tonal center in a musical work. As listeners, our ears naturally gravitate to the tonal center of a piece, and we use that to make sense of what we hear. Without a tonal center “defining” the piece, as in post-tonal music, listeners have to find another way to get bearings. Unlike the dramatic monologue of Prufrock or “Portrait of a Lady,” this poem doesn’t present a clearly defined speaker. The first stanza suggests that there must be a speaker addressing someone, describing the “grimy scraps / Of withered leaves about your feet” (6-7). In the third section, the “narrator” also addresses an individual: “You tossed a blanket from the bed,

/ You lay upon your back, and waited” yet it is unclear exactly who this person is, either. One can assume that it is someone who lives in this city, but not much else. The “you,” wiping its mouth and laughing, reenters in the last verse paragraph in the fourth section (52). The only hint of a presiding observer or narrator is the “I” in the last section. The fact that the “I” only appears this one time is confusing enough in itself. Much like quick shifts in tonality would be, figuring out the subtle suggestions of narrator/observer and “audience” can be disorienting. Not only that, Eliot has chosen not to flesh out the city-dwellers. His descriptions present body parts distant from their consciousness. In the second section, “muddy feet” go to coffee-stands, and “hands” raise dingy shades, and in the fourth section, “short square fingers” stuff pipes and “eyes” are assured of certain certainties (17, 41, 43-44). There is no real mention of the people or minds behind these acts. As a result, the reader feels as if these city-dwellers are mechanized. One cannot help but think of the London crowd in the *Waste Land*, with each person fixing their eyes before their feet (“The Waste Land,” 64-65). Instead, Eliot has chosen to personify certain things. The morning “comes to consciousness” and the blackened street is described as “impatient to assume the world” (15, 47). The effect of ascribing consciousness to these inanimate things rather than people is jarring (Cooper, 100).

“Rhapsody on a Windy Night” (1920), like the “Preludes,” brings the reader again to the sordidness of life in the city rather than idyllic scenes of nature. One could focus on the blatant un-Romanticism of the scenes depicted throughout. Three central images or themes are twisted into this poem: the lamp, the moon, and memory. The lamp provides observations, the moon is personified in the second to last stanza (and appears elsewhere), and memory and the lack of it is used throughout to evoke certain ideas. The lamp is introduced in the first stanza, as the narrator feels as if the street lamps beat “like a fatalistic drum” (9). The moon likewise appears in the

same stanza in relation to memory, with its “whispering lunar incantations / Dissolv[ing] the floors of memory” (5). At night, memory is not what it seems, with its “clear relations / Its divisions and precisions” dissolved. The lamp, in the second verse-paragraph, points out to the viewer a prostitute: “And you see the corner of her eye / Twists like a crooked pin” (21-22). The narrator’s memory conjures “a broken spring in a factory yard” covered in rust and ready to snap, a disturbing image. At half-past two, the cat devouring a “morsel of rancid butter” likewise brings to the viewer’s mind in an act of remembrance the “automatic” hand of a child that slips out and pockets a toy. Disconcerted, he recalls, “I could see nothing behind that child’s eye” (40). The memory of the child brings him to another memory, an old crab which “gripped the end of a stick which I held him,” a rude attempt at a connection that is in contrast to the disconnection between the child’s eye and the child’s mind (45). At half-past three, the lamp tells the speaker to look at the moon, personified as a woman. “The moon has lost her memory. / A washed-out smallpox cracks her face” (55-56). The smallpox of her face, a strange and disturbing description of the craters in the “real” moon, might bring to mind the prostitute in the second stanza, with an eye like a twisted pin. Though it is said that the moon has lost her memory, the moon does have a disturbing memory of “sunless dry geraniums / And dust in crevices.” In the last stanza, the speaker returns home, and the lamp tells him, “Put your shoes at the door, sleep, prepare for life” (77). Yet the lamp also invokes memory, telling him that he has the key. Does the juxtaposition of memory and the key mean that the key is the key to the door, or is memory the key itself? Yet anything positive brought out by the speaker’s attempt to “prepare for life” is cut short by the last line: “The last twist of the knife” (78).

In “Rhapsody on a Windy Night,” Eliot uses the form of the rhapsody as yet another independent Romantic genre without having the content reflect Romanticism. The term

“rhapsody” derived from a literary term that later came to stand for musical works that expressed an “effusion of sentiment or feeling” (Grove Music Online). As a form, instrumental rhapsodies were pieces in one movement marked by an improvisatory spirit (Oxford Companion to Music). “Rhapsody on a Windy Night” can thus be said to be a subversion of Romantic idealism by using the improvisatory form of the rhapsody, through some kind of free-association, while the content does not reflect the mood: Eliot uses the disconnection of life in the poem to counter the connection within the form. The idea of the lamp and memory is improvisatory; one notices that after the lamp observes something, our observer sees the thing, and then remembers something else. Cooper writes, “The rhapsody as a free form of self-expression, as an occasion for the display of personality, spreads a sympathetic coloring across ... the bleakness of a fallen world” (Cooper, 95). The first main observation is about twisted or broken things. The woman’s eye that “twists like a crooked pin” brings to the observer’s mind a “crowd of twisted things” (22, 24). First he thinks of the “twisted branch upon the beach” “as if the world gave up / The secret of its skeleton, / Stiff and white” (27-29). From the beach he returns to the city, and the “broken spring in a factory yard” (30). The “twistedness” he sees is universal, occurring both on the beach, the broken woman, and the factory yard, and could be symbolic of a brokenness in nature, individual people’s lives, and the industrialization and increasing mechanistic city life. The next main observation could be about isolation and disconnection. The lamp observes a cat that “slips out its tongue / And devours a morsel of rancid butter” (36-37). The cat trying to survive makes the narrator think about the “hand of a child, automatic,” pocketing a toy. The child and the “nothing” behind its eye makes the narrator think of “eyes in the street / Trying to peer through lighted shutters” and then the old crab which “gripped the end of a stick” which the narrator held out. All these images have something in common, a thread of isolation. The cat is a stray,

otherwise it would not be eating “rancid butter” (37). The child has “nothing” behind its eyes, and thus fails to make a connection with the narrator (40). The eyes on the street, “outside,” seem to be attempting to make a connection with the people behind the “lighted shutters” of someone else’s home, or “inside” (42). The old crab can be read as also desperately trying to make a connection to the human. The moon herself, in the next large image, is likewise “alone” in her remembrances (59). In fact, the connection between all these images is in sharp contrast to the disconnection between lives.

The poem can be a subversion of Romantic themes through the images themselves. Here the idea of “twisted” or “broken” things carries out in Eliot’s use of imagery, what Cooper calls a “dissonance” that the poem makes audible or apparent, an observation of the disturbing in modern life (Cooper, 96). Similar to Eliot’s “Nocturne,” the idea of night as a romantic time is subverted. The moon in the poem is personified not as either the romantic moon that inspired the nocturne, or even the “bored but courteous moon” in Eliot’s “Nocturne” (4). Instead, Eliot turns what was often a highly idealized object into a broken woman: “A washed-out smallpox cracks her face, / Her hand twists a paper rose, / That smells of dust and old Cologne” (56-58). The other woman in the poem’s dress is “torn and stained with sand,” and her eye “twists like a crooked pin” (20-22). Eliot has chosen to emphasize the negative appearances of both women, another subversion of the idealization of women in Romanticism. The images of nature too are decidedly unromantic. The first stanza compares midnight to a “madman” shaking a “dead geranium” (11-12). Insanity is clearly not a very romantic picture. The “twisted branch upon the beach” is compared to the world giving up the “secret of its skeleton” (25-28). It looks like a bone from a dead body, “stiff and white” (29). The crab in its pool is juxtaposed against the emptiness behind a child’s eyes. The moon’s memories are about “sunless dry geraniums / And

dust in crevices” (63-64). The dry geraniums are a sterile image, hearkening back to the madman’s dead geranium. The paper rose she twists “smells of dust and old Cologne,” possibly signifying something from the past the moon is clinging too even after she has lost her memory (37-38). The “twisting” could be a nervous motion of the hands, but it could also be reflective of what Eliot has done with the Romantic metaphors. The paper rose, as a meaningless mockery of a real rose, is a twisted metaphor just as the entire poem is a twisted use of the rhapsody. The action of twisting a seemingly meaningless paper rose is evocative of Eliot’s own twisting of the Romantic metaphor, both literary and musical, to serve his purposes, to show that such metaphors have become hollow.

Eliot’s “Portrait of a Lady” (1915), published a little earlier before both “Rhapsody” or “Preludes,” is nevertheless considered one of his most advanced poems in terms of an exposure of a “bloated” Romanticism as well as brilliant musical symbolism (Nicolosi, 195). In the poem, a young man has “befriended” an older, higher-class woman. The relationship unfolds over a certain time period through conversations, visits, and a carefully selected set of musical metaphors (Mays, 112). Throughout, the woman talks about the importance of friendship, “you do not know how much they mean to me, my friends,” especially to her, with her “life composed so much, so much of odds and ends” (19, 21). Whether this friendship works out is a different story. In the first meeting, they talk about a recent visit to see a concert. Here with this first scene one can see Eliot’s expression of Romanticism as a “failure” to satisfy. Eliot’s scorn may be understood when one takes into account the performance practice of the time, especially in regard to these pieces. In the first section, the man and the woman “have been, let us say, to hear the latest Pole / Transmit the Preludes, through his hair and finger-tips” (“Portrait,” 8-9). Already the tone is slightly mocking – how can a pianist transmit music through his hair? Another thing

that came to the fore during the Romantic era was highly stylized performance practice. One cannot help thinking of Franz Liszt, the foremost example of the Romantic age. His pieces, with their virtuosic runs, and technical difficulty, were clearly designed to impress the audience, and in fact many of his critics complained that his music was only that – an impressive and expressive work that was all style but no substance. F.E. Kirby, musicologist, says “... In these pieces we can see a curious duality in Liszt’s makeup: on the one hand, the high-minded purpose, the lofty objectives, and on the other, the intrusion of elements aimed at popular acclaim, exploiting the grandiloquent gesture” (214). The way Liszt performed was reflective of his musical ideology, and critics would scornfully draw caricatures of Liszt’s performances, and it would seem from these that all Liszt did was smash notes on the piano during dramatic moments and then scrunch up his face during particularly poignant moments, all the while issuing passionate sighs (Kirby, 220-221). Much like the concert pianist in Eliot’s poem, Liszt seemed to be “transmitting the Preludes through his hair and finger-tips” (“Portrait,” 9). Similarly, the pianist is so preoccupied with an overdramatic representation of the music that even his hair shows it. This music is a deliberate reference to Polish composer Frederic Chopin’s preludes, through the conversation that follows the performance: “So intimate, this Chopin, that I think his soul / Should be resurrected only among friends” (10-11). Chopin’s 24 Preludes were short-form, independent pieces, and Franz Liszt, in true Lisztian fashion, described the preludes as “poetic preludes, analogous to those of a great contemporary poet, who cradles the soul in golden dreams, and elevates it to the regions of the ideal” (“Chopin’s Preludes”). This grandiose exaltation nevertheless gives the reader an accurate sense of how Chopin’s Preludes were perceived. At the same time, there is something to be said about the perceived theatricality of the performance – something does not quite ring true for the speaker.

To counter the theatricality, the speaker's own mind presents another kind of music that stands for the disconnection that Eliot has referred to in the "Rhapsody on a Windy Night," and which also stands for a departure from Romanticism. Every time the music occurs, it is at specific intervals in the conversation. This different kind of music occurs for the first time after the Chopin concert. "The conversation slips / Among velleities and carefully caught regrets / Through attenuated tones of violins / Mingled with remote cornets" (14-17). The "thinness" and "remoteness" of the music is reflective of the distant politeness of the conversation. The music reappears, subverted as the conversation progresses: "How much it means that I say this to you -- / Without these friendships—life, what cauchemar!¹" (27-28). The violins and cornets now are not merely "remote" or "thin," but "winding" and "cracked." Why does this occur specifically when the woman talks about the "nightmare" life would be without these friendships? About the instrumentation itself, Robert J. Nicolosi writes in "T.S. Eliot and Music," "Eliot's very choice of instruments in these lines – violins, cornets, and tom-tom – does not suggest the lushness of late nineteenth century orchestration, but a more modern, astringent sonority" (195). Meanwhile, in the speaker's brain, "a dull tom-tom begins / Absurdly hammering a prelude of its own, / Capricious monotone / That is one definite "false note." (32-35). The "false note," seems to signify that something the woman is saying does not ring true for the speaker. Indeed, in contrast to the soulfulness of Chopin's preludes, the speaker's prelude is a "capricious monotone" (34). The speaker quickly switches to little social niceties. "Let us take the air, in a tobacco trance, / Admire the monuments..." (36-37). In section II, the speaker and the woman meet again for tea, and she tells him, "Yet with these April sunsets... I feel immeasurably at peace, and find the world / To be wonderful and youthful, after all." The things she is saying are nice, yet the

¹ Nightmare

speaker compares her voice to the “insistent out-of-tune / Of a broken violin on an August afternoon” (56-57). The woman continues, saying, “I am always sure that you understand / My feelings, always sure that you feel, Sure that across the gulf you reach your hand.” Her attempt at speaking of human connections doesn’t quite touch him, and one notices that the cornets have already dropped out of the orchestration. The speaker remains self-possessed in the face of the world’s tragedies and lack of connection until he hears a “street piano, mechanical and tired” reiterating some common song (80). For some reason the street piano with its popular song affects him in a way that Chopin doesn’t. Before the speaker leaves to travel, the lady realizes that they have failed to connect. “I have been wondering frequently of late ... / Why we have not developed into friends” (96, 98). However, she has not lost all hope for a reconnection: “You will write, at any rate. / Perhaps it is not too late” (106-107). In the last stanza, the man wonders, “What if she should die?” His pen is still poised over the paper as if he has been attempting to start a letter. With her death, all potential for human connection is lost. As she dies, the music too “is successful with a ‘dying fall’” (122). The instrumental breakdown has progressed the same way the conversation has, ending with death.

In these poems, Eliot shows a shift from Romanticism to Modernism in music and literature. As an apprentice poet, Eliot seems to mock Romanticism with poems like the “Nocturne,” in which the love scene is overdramatic: the writer has Romeo die just because blood looks “effective” on the moonlit ground, and readers burst into tears at the beauty of it all, not realizing how meaningless it really is. In this Romantically-titled poem, Eliot seems simply to be turning Romantic ideals up on their heads by using these Romantic titles and sensibilities in a mocking manner. Written in the years before the war, the poems, “Preludes” and “Rhapsody on a Windy Night,” are a bit more complex than merely bloated Romanticism. Both poems have

content reflecting discordance (“Preludes” with the lack of tonal center, and “Rhapsody” with its haunting image of the eyes on the street trying to peer inside shuttered houses), and describe scenes that are decidedly unromantic in every sense of the word. Yet in the latter, Eliot relies on Romantic form, where the idea of free-association and improvisation is used to lead from one idea to the next (perhaps a hint also of what was to come next in music, where composers would use dissonance and new harmonic languages within old forms). “Portrait of a Lady” is Eliot’s most complex use of music. Though it is unlike the others in its lack of a musical genre-inspired title, it offers a very specific example of bloated Romanticism in the concert hall with the pianist performing Chopin’s Preludes, and also offers a different kind of music (the broken music in the speaker’s brain) that both serves as a counter to the theatricality of the performance and as an example of the isolation and disconnection Eliot so loves to write about. Interestingly enough, a musical breakdown is a metaphor for a relational breakdown. As the relationship progresses to the realization that they have failed to make a connection, the music goes from simply distant to broken, with various instruments dropping out until the music passes with a “dying fall.” Once one exposes and rejects Romanticism as something that fails to satisfy, where does one go from here? Eliot in these poems shows his distaste for the overblown idealism of Romanticism through Romantic musical forms becoming the framework for themes of isolation, fragmentation, and disillusionment. One cannot remain at isolation, fragmentation, and disillusionment, though. However, he has not yet turned to what can be done *better* in either music or literature. As brilliant as Eliot’s utilization of musical form and metaphor is in these few examples, he has not yet shown a better way to do things.

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