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Narrated for the sake of it: Narration and its Modernist
Consonance in T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*

Abstract

T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* has received critical acclaim as an anthem of the postwar generation, helping to shape the reception of modernist culture (Gillies & Mahood 2007). Only few critics take a look at its transgeneric character but none has so far looked at how the poem's narrations pervade modernist tendencies and ideologies of its time. In fact, dubbing it as a variegated or collage poem blatantly dismisses any attempt to include it in the nascent field of narrative poetry. However, on the grounds that it is a typically modernist alternative to continuous narrative and quasi-narrative sequences (McHale 2007) and as a number of its parts are narrated, this essay approaches it from a narratological perspective. The analysis aims to show that those narrations are consonant with and epitomize modernist tendencies and ideologies, including the cyclical view of life and cultural pessimism, the epistemological dominant, skepticism about what we know and how we know it, as well as gender and sexuality issues such as women's objectification and procreation as the main and most important role of a woman.

Key Words: Narrative sequences, collage poem, Narratology, *The Waste Land*

1. Introduction

T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (henceforth *TWL*) has received critical acclaim as an anthem of the postwar generation, helping to shape the reception of modernist culture (Gillies & Mahood 2007). It evokes, more acutely than any other literary text from the period, a prevalent mood of despair (Gasiorek 2015), which spoke to the time before World War I, speaks to our time or (post)modern time and will probably speak to indefinite future time, because it not only continues to give the time's most accurate data but also because many of the large problems with which it concerns itself remain live issues (Chinitz 2006). A quite formal criticism calls it "a mighty

collage of quotations, allusions, fractured phrases, spectral figures and listless snatches of memory” (Eagleton 2007: 95). McHale (2009 and 2007), a critic of narrative poetry simply dubs it a variegated, long collage-poem based on the non-narrative accumulation of small lyrical building-blocks. Other similar impressionistic judgments about it, calling it a mixture of genres, can be found in poetry primers and handbooks. Only few critics take a look at the transgeneric character emerging from such a form, but not many, if any, has looked at how the poem’s narrations pervade modernist tendencies and ideologies of its time. It is no surprise, however, since dubbing it as a variegated or collage poem blatantly dismisses any attempt to include it in the nascent field of narrative poetry. McHale (2007) considered it as a typically modernist alternative to continuous narrative and quasi-narrative sequences, and da Silva (2008) observed that a very good number of its parts are narrated. Notwithstanding this, McHale (2009) eschews the poem in the corpus of his “Beginning to Think about Narrative in Poetry” essay. This paper argues that *The Waste Land* as a narrative poem given the narrations, descriptions and dialogues abounding in it; this opinion is corroborated by Bal (1997)’s wise warning that a narrative text is any text in which a story is related (‘told), in any medium and that it is impossible and undesirable to specify a given corpus for narrative analysis. The narrations in *TWL* account for the possibility of using narrative theories in its analysis and, as the analysis shows, they are consonant with and epitomize tendencies and ideologies of modernist literature.

Modernist literature gloried in experiments with literary forms which reflected the social conditions that shaped it, as part of a richly varied pattern of literary reactions to one of the least stable periods of the history of humanity. It attacked, among others, the distribution of social privilege on many levels, from the sexual, racial, and religious to the international, and class and economics (Mahaffey 2007). For that end, literary modernism broke away from established rules, traditions and conventions, and revealed fresh ways of looking at man’s position and function in the universe, through both style and content (Gillies & Mahood 2007). *TWL* in this con-

nection depicts a physically, culturally and spiritually sterile and deceased world with little hope of rebirth or salvation, where debauchery, greed, war, abuse and oppression are fuelled by widespread indifference, all this through an exemplary formal experimentation. It is often seen as patchy, featuring a disjunctive structure with rapid and unmarked transitions between scenes and character voices; and making numerous uncited references to a wide array of cultural materials, from high culture to low culture, often presenting them in their original language; and featuring a syncopated rhythm borrowed from jazz (da Silva 2008 and Brooke et al. 2015).

2. Storying and historicizing the patches of The Waste Land

This subtitle may seem unjustifiable as Coyle (2009) has said, and others are likely to say, that there is no “story” in this poem because it sustains no one locational or temporal logic, there is no consistent speaker for it and where narratives appear, we tend to get only parts of them, or to part from them unsatisfied. But expecting unity of narrative plot from a modernist artwork is seeking the right thing at a wrong place. Modernist prose fiction is characterized as a more or less radical reaction against the conventions of realist narrative, ranging from the partial dismissal of certain devices to the complete rejection of the exciting, entertaining plot, the interesting character, the recognizable environment, solidly rooted in time and space, and the understandable language (Gemzøe 2008). Modernist prose fiction writers used literary tactics and devices such as

the radical disruption of linear flow of narrative; the frustration of conventional expectations concerning unity and coherence of plot and character and the cause and effect development thereof; the deployment of ironic and ambiguous juxtapositions to call into question the moral and philosophical meaning of literary action; the adoption of a tone of epistemological self-mockery aimed at naive pretensions of bourgeois rationality; the opposition of inward consciousness to rational, public, objective discourse; and an incli-

nation to subjective distortion to point up the evanescence of the social world of the nineteenth-century bourgeoisie (Barth 1984:68).

Coyle acknowledges that the anti-narrative design of *The Waste Land* renders more difficult readers' efforts to see stories as being "about" something other than their own lives, to defer any closure that does not involve conscious awareness of one's own interpretive activity. The lack of a simple or straightforward plot and other modernist complexities this poem showcases are, I argue, the key features bringing it closer to high modernist narratives.

On these grounds, this essay will consider the blatantly called patches of the poem as stories, (storying) and set them in the context of the ideas, conventions and attitudes of the poem's period of production (historicizing). My view thus supports Wood's (2007:223) reading: "the broken images of *The Waste Land* as a smoothly written novella; not fragments shored against ruin but complete sentences connected by an invisible but quite unproblematic grammar".

Regular narrative traits abound in *TWL* throughout its five parts, with several narrative techniques, ranging from traditional narrative structures such as descriptive introductions and dialogue markers, to entirely associative lists of words lacking phrasal syntax, which present readers with gaps to be filled in before any meaning can be inferred (da Silva 2008). The narrations in *TWL* are rendered by different voices and this has been the grounding for the scanty research on the poem's different and clustering voices, a further narrative trait (see Brooke et al. 2013 & 2015, for example). The notion of voice underlies the concept of perspective or point of view, a well-researched concept in narratology. Perspective is the way the representation of the story is influenced by the position, personality and values of the narrator, the characters and, possibly, other, more hypothetical entities in the storyworld. Telling a story from a given character's point of view means presenting its events as they are perceived, felt, interpreted and evaluated by the character at a particular moment (Niederhoff 2009). It

transpires that “a new point of view need not correspond to a new referent of the first person and hence to a new text” (Schaeffer 2009: 107).

What emerges from the diversity of voices in *TWL* is cubism (intertextually alluded to in the first line of “A Game of Chess”) and multiplicity of the perspectives or points of view. This multiplicity confirms the poem’s classification as a high modernist literary text, in Mahaffey (2007)’s terms, deeply engaged with questions of how we categorize, define, identify, and interpret the multiplicity of the world around us... This essay will discuss the salient points of view in the first two parts of the poem and show how they fit in its historical modernist tendencies and ideologies.

The characters from whose points of view the readers get the narrations in *TWL* include Marie, the hyacinth girl, Stetson’s friend, Madame Sosostris, the nervous woman, Tiresias, and the Thames daughters, as well as the nonhuman voices of the nightingale, the cock and the thunder. In spite of this multiplicity of voices, the poem still preserves some unity, given that all the voices in it emerge into a single personality, the voice of modernist consciousness. Its first part “The Burial of the Dead”, has varying voices and points of view. Chinitz (2006), for example, says that the speaker who says “Summer surprised us” is not the one who said “Winter kept us warm”, in other words, there is a shift of voice somewhere in between the beginning and the section where Marie’s name is mentioned. But the scholar shies away from commenting on what modernist feature this style creates. The present essay on the other hand argues that these cacophonous and ambiguous perspectives bring *TWL*’s style closer to Free Speech Presentation, a narrative style characterizing modernist fiction. In Free Speech Presentation, voice switches are not explicitly marked, neither by quotation marks nor the “said” quotative; nor even by a major textual boundary for narrator switches. Free Speech Presentation often results in irresponsibility of the speech, for example, leading to misappropriation of any scandal, treason, blasphemy, or revolution in the words (Toolan 2007). Linguistically, it can be argued, however, that the deictic “we” and its corresponding objective case “us” are used throughout the section to refer to a

group including Marie, the intradiegetic narrator. Levenson (1984) also acknowledged that the sequence of first-person pronouns -- an “us” that becomes a “we,” a “me” and “I,” and then “Marie” -- would encourage us to read these lines as marking the steady emergence of an individual human subject. But he adds that shift from general reflection to personal reminiscence, from landscape to cityscape, from participial connectives to conjunctions, the disappearance of the noun-adjective pattern, the use of German rules out any assumption that Marie has been the speaker throughout. I argue, however, that from the beginning up to the end of the first section of “The Burial of the Dead” there remains a single point of view and these shifts are but another modernist tendency bringing *TWL* closer to modernist fiction.

The narration in the first section of “The Burial of the Dead” epitomizes a cyclical view of life and cultural pessimism, an ideology that pervaded the modernist culture in all its aspects. The narration starts with the cyclical movement of seasons and their effects upon beings, highlighting what Chinitz (2006), quoting Spengler, writes about civilizations which have organic life cycles. They are born, they grow and flourish, and eventually die, although death does not mark the end of the cycle, but leads to a restart. The lines “And down we went. In the mountains, there you feel free. I read, much of the night, and go south in the winter”, ending the section, also build on another modernist idea of getting out of the confinement of the house (viewed as a metaphor for the traditional single and limiting narrative perspective) for a fuller perception of life realities, underlying the multiplicity of perspectives in modernist fiction. As Mahaffey (2007: 5) argues:

In order to experience modernist art, we must either watch the action from several different windows in succession, or else leave the window altogether to enter the human *mêlée* on the street, observing what we find there on the same level as everyone else.

The second section of “The Burial of the Dead” is a shift to a new voice and point of view, although it still draws on the cyclical view of life and on the little hope for rebirth that characterize humans when they are bewil-

dered by death's power upon beings. Da Silva (2008) considers this section as not narrative, but rather argumentative as the anonymous speaker tells no story in the traditional way, but makes his point on the fact that nothing grows out of the stony rubbish of his deceased land. Narrative, however, does not exist solely in the diegetic mode; this is an embedded narration, by an anonymous voice, which brings the poem closer to modernist fiction, characterized by the epistemological dominant. As McHale (1987: 8) argued:

[M]odernist fiction deploys strategies which engage and foreground questions such as ... "How can I interpret this world of which I am a part? And what am I in it?" Other typical modernist questions might be added: What is there to be known?; Who knows it?; How do they know it, and with what degree of certainty?; How is knowledge transmitted from one knower to another, and with what degree of reliability?; How does the object of knowledge change as it passes from knower to knower?; What are the limits of the knowable? And so on.

Chinitz (2006) states that the crisis of epistemology was one of those at the centre of the poem. He acknowledges Eliot to have been an extreme skeptic who saw all truth as provisional, all what we perceive as reality only from the perspective of the social consensus or community of meaning validating it, and which we participate in. It is true that Eliot believed that there is no truth, no reality, and that each human is utterly isolated from all others, imprisoned in their own consciousness, underlying the idea of epistemological doubt and skepticism.

What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow
Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,
You cannot say, or guess, for you know only
A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,
And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,
And the dry stone no sound of water. Only
There is shadow under this red rock,
(Come in under the shadow of this red rock),

And I will show you something different from either
Your shadow at morning striding behind you
Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you;
I will show you fear in a handful of dust

The last section of this first part, the unreal city, is a narration from a new point of view of a walker in the city of London, swarming “with a crowd of office workers on their way into London’s banking district ” (Coyle 2009:159). This section alludes to war, with reference to death and corpses without hope for rebirth, “I had not thought death had undone so many”, “That corpse you planted last year in your garden. ‘Has it begun to sprout? Will it bloom this year?’”

The second part of *TWL*, “A Game of Chess” starts with what David Lodge calls a description in *see* (1977) and gives the reader the illusion of watching what is described. This follows a fundamental modernist cinematographic principle “of the construction of imaginary space through the direction of the gaze” (Wood 2007: 222). Great detail is provided to portray the rich and expensive ornate background or setting of the story with precise listing of colors and materials such as colored glass, marble, ivory and satin in the confection of exquisite jewels, perfume bottles, decorated walls and carved ceilings. The passage avoids describing the woman and rather focuses on her dressing table, chamber, directs the reader’s eye around the chair she is sitting in, and shortly speaks about her only at the end of the passage. This portrayal, in conjunction with the contrast expressed in the line “And still she cried”, translates a masculinist reaction against women’s dissatisfaction with material things.

The following part is a short mimetic narrative epitomizing a modernist tendency related to a gender and sex issue in communication. In an exchange between a husband and his neurotic upper-middle class wife, the woman demands her partner repeatedly to stay with her and speak to her, but the latter remains silent or simply refuses to speak. The husband’s silence leads to a passive aggressive hostility and the woman threatens to rush out and walk the street. This perspective is what makes the poem act

as the backdrop to a crippled social world populated by subjugated individuals struggling to find their voice. Eliot portrays the female voice as the struggle against the ruined communication that characterizes the modern world. Contemporary and mythical characters converge in the poem, revealing the ineffectiveness of communication in a world where power barriers exist between the sexes. (Warwood 2013: i).

The next section is a narration in its proper sense, featuring another modernist ideology, the tone of urgency, “*Hurry up please it’s time*”, pervasive and italicized throughout for such effect, but still with the gender and sexuality issue and women’s objectification in the background. According to Mahaffey (2007), this tone of urgency may imply that living modernly is living quickly; one needs to know what they want and to be ready to pay for it.

When Lil’s husband got demobbed, I said —
I didn’t mince my words, I said to her myself,
Hurry up please it’s time

One would expect that the tone of urgency attacks, as modernist literature aimed to in general, the sexual privilege and related issues. But Eliot juxtaposes the tone of urgency to the sexual privilege in order to highlight the objectification of women, which prevailed. This is further emphasized as the narration between Lil and her unnamed counterpart unfolds. From the perspective of Lil’s counterpart, women are men’s objects of desire and the material things, provided to them by men or obtained in other ways, should be used for women’s beautification with the purpose to please and therefore deserve men.

Now Albert’s coming back, make yourself a bit smart.
He’ll want to know what you done with that money he gave you
To get yourself some teeth. He did, I was there.
You have them all out, Lil, and get a nice set,
He said, I swear, I can’t bear to look at you.
And no more can’t I, I said, and think of poor Albert,

He's been in the army four years, he wants a good time,
And if you don't give it him, there's others will, I said.

A further and last modernist idea epitomized at the end of this part is sexuality, a topic which is expounded in the next section.

Sexuality as portrayed here is what the very first modernist feminists fought against. The term first appeared in the early nineteenth century in works of both science and literature and its use suggested a cultural awareness or anxiety about sexuality that emerged in conjunction with other developing fields of knowledge. The concept came about linguistically while Margaret Sanger was advocating legal birth control, a term she coined to replace euphemisms including "family limitation" and "voluntary motherhood" (Olson 2006). From the modernist tone of urgency, "Hurry up please it's time", at the beginning and at the end, this section moves to women's sexuality and reinforces patriarchal ideology, reducing femininity to procreation. It is also suggested here that women have no choice but to get on with their objectification, beautifying themselves for their husband. From the perspective of the unnamed narrator, women have to conform to women's roles in the procreation because, the narrator says, there is nothing women get married for if they do not want children.

Hurry up please it's time

If you don't like it you can get on with it, I said.

Others can pick and choose if you can't.

But if Albert makes off, it won't be for lack of telling.

You ought to be ashamed, I said, to look so antique.

(And her only thirty-one.)

I can't help it, she said, pulling a long face,

It's them pills I took, to bring it off, she said.

(She's had five already, and nearly died of young George.)

The chemist said it would be alright, but I've never been the same.

You are a proper fool, I said.

Well, if Albert won't leave you alone, there it is, I said,

What you get married for if you don't want children?

Hurry up please it's time

It transpires that this poem portrays women from a patriarchal perspective and thus confirms Zavrl's (2005) argument that some of the themes binding together the sections and fragments of *The Waste Land* are very closely associated with the notions of gender and sexuality, and in particular with the expression and repression of desire. A further point Zavrl makes is that Eliot has often been described as an archetypal white male elitist conservative literary icon and that literary Modernism is seen as solidly founded on interminable sexual warfare.

3. Conclusion

This essay has looked at *The Waste Land* as a narrative and considered the diverse perspectives that some critics take as grounding for what they call non-narrative character of the poem, as the very strategy that brings it closer to high modernist narrative. The analysis has focused on how the different narrations, from diverse perspectives, pervade modernist ideologies and tendencies. These include the cyclical view of life and cultural pessimism, the epistemological dominant, skepticism about what we know and how we know it, as well as some gender and sexuality issues such as women's objectification and procreation as the main and most important role of a woman. This analysis contributes to the understanding of how the narrations in *The Waste Land* communicate ideas and ideologies that fertilized the period during which the poem was produced.

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