T. S. Eliot’s Raids on the Inarticulate

I. Lost Words

FACE ET FAC: T. S. Eliot used poetry to explore several problems of silence and action, as if in obedience to the tough imperatives of his family’s motto, “Be silent and act.”

At one extreme, marked by J. Alfred Prufrock’s pathetic exclamation—“It is impossible to say just what I mean!”—silence suggests a loss of articulate speech and an inability to do anything, in words or actions, effectively. In time, Eliot’s poetry was to arrive at the other extreme, at which silence suggests such tranquility that language and poetry do not matter; but, before reaching this point of stillness, the poet had to carry out a thorough examination of the negative aspects of speechlessness.

Eliot’s seven “quatrain” poems, which offer the clearest case of such loss of speech, present an extremely varied range of mysterious activities: we hear of whispers, loud cries, inflections hoarse and odd, sinister intimations, and offstage conversations with someone indistinct. But nowhere in almost 250 lines of verse does any character actually say anything. It is as if the tissue of discourse, stretched in the soul of some complex but unidentified perceiver, were remote from a universe in which communication could take place. The point of these poems seems to be that now, at the end of the world, there is not even talk, let alone the Word that may have been in the beginning (CP, p. 47). With their “dried voices . . . quiet and meaningless,” Eliot’s Hollow Men either whisper together or avoid speech. And when, after the empty wind’s whispering and singing, their world ends, it is not with a conclusive bang but only with an inarticulate whimper.

Although The Waste Land (CP, pp. 51–76) presents dozens of “speeches,” many of them address and even enact a loss of speech, as in “The Burial of the Dead”:

I could not
Speak, and my eyes failed, I was neither

The nervous lady in “A Game of Chess,” whose very hair glows “into words” that operate on a listener by a kind of electrical acupuncture of voiceless consonants and abrupt monosyllabic imperatives, speaks: “Speak to me. Why do you never speak. Speak.” The noisiest section of the poem is “The Fire Sermon,” but most of what is heard there comprises the rattle of bones, the cacophony of horns and motors, assorted non-human cries, and a general “clatter” and “chatter.” In contrast, “Death by Water” is naturally very quiet. Nobody speaks: the bones of Phlebas, who has forgotten the cry of gulls and other such sounds, are picked “in whispers.” “What the Thunder Said” presents a formidable collection of voices, but most of them belong to sources other than human speech. Pieces are sung by the cicada, the dry grass, the hermit thrush, and the cock: a murmur is heard high in the air; a woman fiddles “whisper music” on her own hair while bats whistle and bells toll; and dry sterile thunder delivers itself of one richly plurisignant syllable. But human speech is reduced to fragments of wreckage converted into makeshift shoring timbers.

The fragments of Sweeney Agonistes (CP, pp. 111–24), dominated by mindlessly emphatic chatter, include Sweeney’s explanation (which explains little), “I’ve gotta use words when I talk to you,” and end with an Aristophanic cascade of brutish syllables:

HOO ha ha
HOO ha ha
HOO
HOO
HOO
KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK
KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK
KNOCK
KNOCK
KNOCK

Living nor dead, and I knew nothing.
Looking into the heart of light, the silence.

(ll. 38–41)
Such rhetoric of pathetic speechlessness, the abundant and eloquent idiom of the inarticulate, can serve as well the purposes of penitential confession in *Ash-Wednesday*, where the bones (or "that which had been contained / In the bones") can sing a motet of paradoxes, including

Speech without word and
Word of no speech  (*CP*, p. 88)

—an enigma deepened and complicated in the fifth section:

If the lost word is lost, if the spent word is spent
If the unheard, unspoken
Word is unspoken, unheard;
Still is the unspoken word, the Word unheard,
The Word without a word, the Word within
The world and for the world;
And the light shone in darkness and
Against the Word the unstilled world still whirled
About the centre of the silent Word.  (*CP*, p. 92)

The theme of articulate inarticulateness continues, modulated and diminished somewhat, in the poems after *Ash-Wednesday*. True, "A Song for Simeon" refers to "the still unspeaking and unspoken Word" that becomes one of Eliot's dominant motifs; and, true, the Periclean speaker of "Marina" wants to "resign... [his] speech for that unspoken"; but the speakers remain in command of their idiom (*CP*, pp. 101, 106). The potency and confidence resemble the collective assurance in one of the Choruses from *The Rock*:

Out of the sea of sound the life of music,
Out of the slimy mud of words, out of the sleet and hail of verbal imprecisions,
Approximate thoughts and feelings, words that have taken the place of thoughts and feelings,
There spring the perfect order of speech, and the beauty of incantation.  (*CP*, p. 168)

Similarly, one of the preoccupations of *Four Quartets* is an explicit concern for speech. Both "Burnt Norton" and "East Coker" contain explorations of the weakness of language:

Words strain,
Crack and sometimes break, under the burden,
Under the tension, slip, slide, perish,
Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place.
Will not stay still. Shrieking voices
Scolding, mocking, or merely chattering,
Always assail them. The Word in the desert
Is most attacked by voices of temptation.

The crying shadow in the funeral dance,
The loud lament of the disconsolate chimera.  (*CP*, p. 180)

The second movement of "East Coker" makes a touching admission:

That was a way of putting it—not very satisfactory:
A periphrastic study in a worn-out poetical fashion,
Leaving one still with the intolerable wrestle
With words and meanings. The poetry does not matter.  (*CP*, p. 184)

And the fifth movement extends the lament to a desperate pitch:

For the thing one no longer has to say, or the way in which
One is no longer disposed to say it. And so each venture
Is a new beginning, a raid on the inarticulate
With shabby equipment always deteriorating
In the general mess of imprecision of feeling,
Undisciplined squads of emotion.  (*CP*, pp. 188-89)

"The Dry Salvages" is so dominated by "different voices"—the sea's, the bells', the newspapers', Lord Krishna's—that little room remains for the almost obligatory lament over the weakness of speech; but the theme returns strongly in "Little Gidding." In its second movement, the paradoxical "familiar compound ghost" speaks in elaborate periods that often involve references to speech:

Since our concern was speech, and speech impelled us
To purify the dialect of the tribe
And urge the mind to after sight and foresight,
Let me disclose the gifts reserved for age
To set a crown upon your lifetime’s effort.  (*CP*, p. 204)

The last movement of "Little Gidding" attempts a resolution of the problem of the word:

And every phrase
And sentence that is right (where every word is at home,
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Taking its place to support the others,
The word neither diffident nor ostentatious,
An easy commerce of the old and new.
The common word exact without vulgarity,
The formal word precise but not pedantic,
The complete consort dancing together.

Every phrase and every sentence is an end and a
beginning.
Every poem an epitaph. (CP, pp. 207–08)

It is as if the old struggle with words, going back
half a lifetime to the inarticulateness of Prufrock,
has been lost again, even though the prevailing
voice of the poet may sound like a winner’s.

II. Corollary: The Speech of Nonhuman Agents

To read in the first movement of “East Coker”
that “the deep lane insists on the direction / Into
the village” is to be reminded of Prufrock’s

Streets that follow like a tedious argument
Of insidious intent (CP, p. 3)

—which lead the way to further generalizations
about a recurrent pattern. As Eliot’s human
speakers lose verbal potency, speech is shifted to
another kind of agent.

It is an unpromising subject for poetry. Given
an isolated character who addresses fragments to
some unknown interlocutor, one may expect
nothing more than a meager poem that says not
much because not much can be said. Or one may
expect to encounter a fascinating but incoherent
work, “certainly an artistic failure” because the
central figure “is dominated by an emotion which
is inexpressible, because it is in excess of the facts
as they appear.” One may even conclude that the
character’s “bafflement at the absence of objective
equivalent to his feelings is a prolongation of the bafflement of his creator in the face of his
artistic problem” and that, finally, “under compul-
sion of what experience he attempted to ex-
press the inexpressibly horrible, we cannot ever
know.” Eliot’s essay, “Hamlet and His Prob-
lems”? (which furnishes these quotations), was
written in 1919, when Eliot himself was laboring
most strenuously in the wrestle with words to
express the inexpressible.

The insistent lane and the argumentative
streets mentioned above suggest one kind of
personification, which provides at least the illu-
sion of human or pseudohuman agency. At the
end of “Prufrock,” in fact, the simple presence of
“human voices,” in contrast to the siren song of
mermaids, is enough to wake a man and drown
him in reality. The speaker of “Portrait of a
Lady” can mimic another’s voice, but the lady
speaks in such sad platitudes that her words make
up in the end a ridiculous travesty. The speaker,
in his turn, becomes a literary critic and realizes
his own need for something external. objective,
and, indeed, alien “to find expression.” In this
passage the poem echoes a peculiar rhythm from
Browning’s “An Epistle”—“Blown like a bubble,
kneeded like a paste”8—to achieve at once a
metaphor and a parody of mimesis:

And I must borrow every changing shape
To find expression . . . dance, dance
Like a dancing bear,
Cry like a parrot, chatter like an ape. (CP, p. 12)

The rhythm apes Browning’s in much the same
way that the animals execute gestures not their
own but grotesque imitations of human actions,
so that a man who must borrow these borrowed
shapes must seem to himself doubly ridiculous.

Eliot offers a chrestomathy of such “borrowed
shapes” and voices in “Rhapsody on a Windy
Night.” There is a sort of voice in the fourth
line—“Whispering lunar incantations”—but it
takes a few seconds to realize the grammatical
function of “whispering,” which may be a ger-
und, or a participle modifying some earlier word
(“reaches,” “street,” “synthesis”), or a participle
modifying “incantations.” (The last interpreta-
tion turns out to be technically correct, but the
other two endure as parts of the “lunar synthe-
sis.”) As the floors and contours of memory are
dissolved, the sections of the poem alternate be-
tween past and present until a verbless fragment—
“The last twist of the knife”—unites both spheres
in a dismal timelessness. Throughout the poem,
speeches are delivered by a succession of street-
lamps. Here, to an isolated urban pedestrian on
a four-hour nocturnal peregrination, the gas-
lights sputter, hum, and say things with their own
mysterious clarity and precision. Finally, we have
one light talking about another:

The lamp said,
“Four o’clock.
Here is the number on the door.
Memory!
You have the key.
The little lamp spreads a ring on the stair . . . .”
(CP, p. 18)
Uncommonly modest and homely for a poem by Eliot, “Rhapsody on a Windy Night” does not rely on his usual line-up of other voices in epigraphs, quotations, allusions, and echoes. Only the lamps speak, and the isolated figure remembers.

The culmination of these ventriloquial techniques comes in The Waste Land, which is punctuated in several places by odd cries and syllables that lie below articulate language. These animal utterances represent a loss of tongue or speech brought about by timidity, mutilation, ignorance, or some other cause of reversion to an infantile or animal level. Philomel has suffered such a reduction of her “inviolable voice” that the nightingale’s song comes out as “Jug Jug,” much in the way that literary classics can be diminished to the hollow “o o o o” of the “Shakespeherian Rag.” A similar process erodes “Good night” to “Goonight” and even to the imbecility of “Ta ta.” Against the “voix d’enfants” singing in a religious setting, the poet sets a series of secular birdcalls:

Twit twit twit
Jug jug jug jug jug
So rudely forc’d.
Tereu (CP, p. 61)

—which, in their turn, are echoed by the lamentations of the Thames daughters:

Weialala leia
Wallala leialala (CP, p. 63)

and, finally, nothing but “la la.” Then, in “What the Thunder Said,” this water music modulates into the “Drip drop drip drop drop drop drop” of a hermit thrush.

Thus far, then, nonverbal utterances or verbal utterances by nonhuman agents usually betoken loss. It can be a horrifying thing, this impoverishment of speech to an ambiguous vacuity. But none of these animalizing processes can quite account for the vexatious syllable “DA.” It provides the title of “What the Thunder Said,” the concluding section of The Waste Land. Since its imagined offspring—datta, dayadhvam, and damyata—are almost the last words in the poem, it promises to offer a key to the meaning of a difficult work. But what does “DA” express?

Unaided, we may be in the position of that clever critic and syllable riddler, Samuel Beckett’s Molloy. “And da,” he says, “in my part of the world, means father.” Unaided by anything other than Eliot’s section title and brief note, we may be misled. In the first place, his reference is to the wrong subdivision of the Brihadaranyaka-Upanishad. But that is the least of our problems. Once we recognize that he must be talking about the Second Brähamaṇa of Chapter v (and not the First), we can look up his source: tad caad evaśī dāivī vāg anuvadati stanayithūḥ—da, da, da itī, dāmyata, datta, dayadhvam itī. tad etat trayāṃ śikṣet, damam, dānam, dayam itī. Describing this work (not altogether accurately) as “the fable of the meaning of the Thunder,” Eliot’s note charitably directs the reader to a German translation by Paul Deussen, whose conception of Oriental thought Eliot was later to characterize as a manifestation of “romantic misunderstanding.”

Adding that “shantih” three times does not always operate as the “formal ending” of an Upanishad, I complete here my justification of the term “vexatious” and go back to the question: What does “DA,” a most important word in a most important poem, say?

The “fable” itself, told in just over a hundred Sanskrit words, represents something like a final oral examination in which Praja-pati, a superior divine principle, instructs his three categories of children: gods, men, demons. As each group requests instruction, he says, “Da.” He then asks, “Have you understood?” and each of the groups answers in the affirmative but with a different interpretation of “Da.” To the gods it is dāmyata, “control yourselves”; to the men, datta, “give”; and to the demons, dayadhvam, “be compassionate.” The fable then concludes, “This very thing the heavenly voice of thunder repeats da, da, da, that is, control yourselves, give, be compassionate. One should practice this same triad, self-control, giving and compassion.”

It is inadequate to call this “the fable of the meaning of the Thunder,” because the thunder figures only as an incidental supporting metaphor. Thunder represents the whole message of the whole booming, buzzing universe, uttering a nonsense syllable, “DA,” which attains sense only when interpretation extends it from ambiguous objective vacancy to an unambiguous subjective imperative. In The Waste Land, the thunder syllable is granted typographical parity with an earlier capitalized imperative, the publican’s “HURRY UP PLEASE IT’S TIME” in “A Game of
Chess.” A few such superlatives and imperatives occur in the poem, but they are rare. The prevailing conditions of mourning and muddle conduce rather to an idiom of the un-superlative and un-imperative. By the time we reach the fifth part of the poem, it is as though we are ready, even desperate, for a voice of authority of some sort.

In the place of dāmyyata (for gods), datta (for men), and daayadhean (for demons), Eliot arranges the sayings as datta, daayadhean, dāmyyata and applies all three to men, who seem challenged to interpret them as a questing knight is challenged by the symbols in the Chapel Perilous. Eliot’s rearrangement produces a crescendo of men’s duty (to give), demons’ duty (to sympathize), and gods’ duty (to control themselves) up a scale of increasing difficulty. To the question, “What have we given?” the answer seems to be “Nothing” except “the awful daring of a moment’s surrender,” which is less a giving than a giving in. (The root of “daring” is linguistically unrelated to datta, but the der in “surrender” does come from the same family as datta.) Beneficence here belongs only to the spider, going about its business of draping the memories, which, four hundred lines earlier, have been unbeficently mixed with desire by a cruel April. The possibility of sympathy is annihilated by the solipsism that dooms each to the windowless prison of his own perceptions and syntheses. With generosity and sympathy so thwarted, there would seem to be small chance for self-control or submission to control from without. But, perhaps as part of the crescendo, the twenty-nine words that answer the Damnyyata give more promise of fulfillment than the more extended glosses on Datta and Dayadhvam. The image of a boat responding “gaily” to expert handling suggests a kind of control in which the dynamic play of grace is more important than austere discipline. But the possibility remains modal (“your heart would have responded”) and the passage breaks off with a half line that only leads back to the waste. The thunder that brings no rain delivers an enigmatic message that cannot be well construed beyond the repetition of archaic Sanskrit commands.12

III. Modes of Unutterability

The operation of the thunder utterance “DA” offers a model for the process of language in general. Because it is a “heavenly voice,” it expresses something prior to itself, some unutterable and unuttering principle that, inscrutably, has no name and no qualities. By a succession of debasements, one aspect of the unutterable is reduced to the raw racket of thunder: that, in turn, can be grossly simplified into a syllable, “da,” capable of refraction and decoding into moral commandments, which may finally be carried out in action. But a great deal is lost in these translations, and the deep truth—to take a phrase from Shelley’s Demogorgon—remains imageless.13 That side of the problem may be called the Exoteric Inarticulate, and it is what we ordinarily mean when we speak of the unutterable, incomunicable, ineffable, inexpressible, or inarticulate.

On many occasions, though, Eliot addressed himself to the Exoteric Inarticulate. We normally assume that, although the ineffable lies beyond our powers, our language does work well enough for the particulars of mundane life. I may, for example, admit to inarticulateness in speaking of the idea of a bird, some Bird of Birds, but I can talk about some hermit thrush by means of a highly specialized name, Turdus aonalaschkae pallasii; and I can go on adding refinements until I have circumscribed that particular hermit thrush as he is at a given instant.

But can I really do that? By the time I have gone through all of the attributes that exhaust the quantitative and qualitative manifolds occupied by the bird, I shall have described a creature that no longer exists. Talk as I will about the suchness of the bird, I shall never catch up with its immediate thisness, which turns out to be just as elusive and inarticulate as those Overwhelming Questions and Abstract Entities that give us so much trouble. I can make an exhaustive list of attributes, “but,” as Eliot wrote in a very early essay, “the ‘this’ cannot be composed of universals, because no number of ‘suches’ will constitute a ‘this,’ and on the other hand it cannot be composed of other substances.” Arguing that, for both Plato and Aristotle, “whatever was merely individual was perishable and incapable of being a subject of knowledge,” the young philosopher pursues the mystery to no conclusion: “In An. post. 100a (Chap. xix) we are told how the knowledge of the universals arises through experience of particulars. ‘First principles’ are arrived at by induction. What is not made clear is
the status of particulars after scientific knowledge is established."  

A year later, in 1917, Eliot continued this inquiry in a two-part prose piece, "Eeldrop and Appleplex." The funny names belong to two gentlemen who discuss the succinctness and thinness of a certain Spaniard they have encountered at dinner. Eeldrop despairs of finding anything definite to say about the man: "For any vital truth is incapable of being applied to another case: the essential is unique. Perhaps that is why it is so neglected: because it is useless. What we learned about that Spaniard is incapable of being applied to any other Spaniard, or even recalled in words."  

Then Appleplex, who resembles Ezra Pound, says a few words about humankind and the bearing of reality, employing an apt fiscal figure that may foreshadow economic preoccupations yet to come: "We aim at experience in the particular centres in which alone it is evil. We avoid classification. We do not deny it. But when a man is classified something is lost. The majority of mankind live on paper currency: they use terms which are merely good for so much reality, they never see actual coinage." And Eeldrop: "The majority of men not only have no language to express anything save generalized man; they are for the most part unaware of themselves as anything but generalized men" ("Eeldrop and Appleplex," p. 10).  

Almost twenty years after "Eeldrop and Appleplex," Eliot retained these general terms and attacked the ineffable with greater dramatic and poetic richness. In The Family Reunion, Harry's performance in front of his relatives sounds like a critic explicating "Burnt Norton":

The partial anaesthesia of suffering without feeling  
And partial observation of one's own automatism  
While the slow stain sinks deeper through the skin  
Tainting the flesh and discolouring the bone—  
That is what matters, but it is untranslatable.  
Untranslatable: I talk in general terms  
Because the particular has no language."  

That is the dilemma. The universal is imageless and the particular has no language. The latter preclusion applies especially, for a poet's purposes, to the particular experiences of particular persons.  

That this problem dominates virtually all of Eliot's work may be established by a look at the first and last poems in Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats. In the opening poem, epistemology fails in its assault on the quintessential Cat's deepest secret:

His ineffable effable  
Effanineffable  
Deep and inscrutable singular Name.

But by the time we get to "The Ad-dressing of Cats," not only is the name capable of being known, it may also be used:

in time you reach your aim,  
And finally call him by his NAME."  

This "NAME" may differ from the essential "Name" of "The Naming of Cats," but it remains nonetheless a happy culmination—still a makeshift, but serviceable—of the ontological enigma of "the name no human research can discover," which so frustrates a number of Eliot's characters (including Prufrock, Eeldrop, Harry, and even the somewhat artificial "T. Stearns Eliot" of The Monist in 1916).  

The attempt to locate the proper zone of language—a mid-region, and misty indeed—seems to lead modern writers in two divergent directions at once. Approaching the traditional Esoteric Inarticulate, they behave as though the achievement of any language whatever is such a miracle that religious or quasi-religious terms like Epiphany, Word, Image, and Icon are needed to describe the process. To approximate the noumenal seems doomed to distort language, as in the strange evolution of "Jehovah," which represents the fanciful tactic of inserting the vowel points of "Adonai" among the consonants of one variant of the Tetragrammaton. "Jehovah" constitutes a kind of NAME, but the ineffable Name of God remains unknown. The discovery of a workable language, able to live in its own "general" region between the inarticulate particular and the inarticulate universal, moves toward the esoteric and stresses (for Eliot's criticism) the objective, the complex, the dramatic, and the visual. These qualities constitute the classic center for Eliot, and his typical praise for his favorites is likely to be stated in those terms, which suggest a predilection for the public, theatrical display of a realized state of mind. (But Four Quartets, a most subjective and auditory work, is "dramatic" only in patches, and we may decide that Eliot's passage was through the exoteric back to the esoteric "one."
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from the title page to the last word, a reader encounters no real characters and very few real objects: there is no story and nothing much to look at; but, advancing from the initial “Four” to the terminal “one,” the reader finds out a good deal about the experience of the inarticulate.)

One vivid figure at the heart of these problems is the Verbum infans. Presumably, some church father, expert in paradox, described the Incarnation as a sudden implosion, a miraculously abrupt collapse of the Logos, the Thunder, the Measureless into a baby dumb, mewling, diminutive. The text—with Verbum caro factum est glossed ut Verbum infans, ut tonans vagiens, ut immensus parvulus—endured for some centuries and then surfaced, over and over, in the celebrated Nativity sermons of Lancelot Andrewes. Then, for three centuries more, these formulas for the instantaneous transmutation of the most esoteric into the most exoteric went unnoticed. But the mystery of the Verbum infans endured and finally emerged, over and over, in Eliot’s poems that probe the meanings of word and Word.

The Latin noun fās means “something spoken,” and the related verb fari means “to utter.” The stock yields words that evolve into our “fable,” “fate,” “fame,” and “fane,” all connected to the virtually divine power of utterance. “Infamy” and “profanity” rank among offenses against language. And the distinguishing characteristic of a newborn baby is that he is an infant: infans, unspeaking, unable to speak. (Greek-derived relatives in the same family include “blasphemy,” “euphemism,” and—a word linguistically very close to “infancy”—“aphasia.”)

The bishop celebrated in Eliot’s “Lancelot Andrews” (1926) shares many qualities with the “familiar compound ghost” of “Little Gidding.” Eliot likens Andrewes to “some dead master,” some “great Hellenist expounding a text of the Posterior Analytics . . . purifying a disturbed or cryptic lecture-note into lucid profundity.” And, as Eliot’s essay reveals, the Nativity sermons of Andrewes provide material for two very different poems, “Gerontion” (1920) and “Journey of the Magi” (1927), in both of which worldly old men dictate their thoughts about the coming of Christ. In one extract quoted by Eliot, Andrewes assumes a rhetorical “double part” to solve the paradoxical conjunction of Word and speechlessness: “I add yet farther: what flesh? The flesh of an infant. What, Verbum infans, the Word an Infant? The Word, and not to be able to speak a word? How evil agree this!”

Eliot’s prolonged concentration on the Johannine Verbum can be clearly traced over a twenty-five-year progression, from “Mr. Eliot’s Sunday Morning Service” through “A Song for Simon” to “East Coker,” where it reaches a condition resembling finality. The Word, which makes a smeary but conventional rhyme with “Lord” in “Mr. Eliot’s Sunday Morning Service,” is represented as a superfetation of the (grammatically neuter) One. That is to say, it is a second impregnation on top of an original “fetation,” a process which is just the opposite of parthenogenesis, or virgin birth. (Both sorts of generation occur in the animal kingdom, as among honeybees born from unfertilized eggs for several generations. Again, our critic Molloy is apposite: “Personally I just liked plants in all innocence and simplicity. I even saw in them at times a superfetatory proof of the existence of God,” Beckett, p. 99.)

With superfetation there are two beginnings, much in the way that Moses and St. John offer two versions of what was “in the beginning.” By a grotesque development, the Word, a second fetus conceived on top of the original fetus of the One, produces in turn “ennervate Origen,” whose name ironically includes the gen that studs the poem with images of genesis and generation. (“Enervate” can mean “effeminate,” and in the terminology of Latin and Greek “epicene” means possessing one grammatical gender for both biological sexes.) The Word here is at once polyphiloprogenitive and sterile; it loves to produce many children but its period eventuates in a self-emasculated presbyter.

Gerontion, who conflates and distorts several excerpts from Andrewes, perverts the proper paradox, “Word without a word,” into a mere puzzle, “word within a word.” Words are commonly found within words: “silver” is within “Silvero.” That much is idle play, as in a speculation over the peculiar divergence of concrete “within” and abstract “without” so that they are no longer opposites in quite the same sense as “in” and “out” are opposites. But the play disappears with Gerontion’s “unable to speak a word” (which registers as a delayed rhyme with the “merds” six lines before). The speechless child’s being infans resembles his own inarticulate state, and both figures—the little old man and the little newborn baby—
are “swaddled with darkness.” The impoverishment syncopates “juvenescence” to “juvescence,” a word missing a syllable, an eccentric corruption of youth forced to chime with the “Jew” before and the “Judas” to follow. So Gerontion, who has lost his name, loses speech. Like Browning’s Caliban, who also ponders theology, he swaddles his “I” in darkness, as though to protect his Ego from retribution; and finally his syntax is desiccated until it lacks predication and he can utter, or think, only in fragments.

Such patterns of fragmentation endure through Ash-Wednesday, as we have noted above; but in that poem they serve a radically different purpose. In the presence of a silent “Lady of silences,” Gerontion’s dry mockery and sterile wonderment yield to patience and obedient attention. “Speech without word” resembles the heavenly voice of Thunder, a transformable speechlike utterance capable of being decoded into permanent commandments; and “Word of no speech” resembles the Verbum infans, the cosmogenic Logos voluntarily incarnated in a dumb animal. Andrews’ text, rescued from Gerontion’s perversions and reversals, asserts itself in its original shape as

The Word without a word, the Word within
The world and for the world: (CP, p. 92)

One point made here—and possibly addressed to the little old man who played with variations on “within” and “without”—is that literally, letter for letter, “word” is within “world.” “Silent Word” (CP, p. 92) translates Verbum infans into a positive condition where peace is represented by not speaking. At the end of Ash-Wednesday, two versions of speechlessness are joined: “And let my cry come unto Thee.” No words, as such, are addressed to the silent Word; the utterance is a cry, like the inarticulate vagitus of an infans baby.

That crying whirls voice and word beyond the terminal circuits and returns an old man to the condition of infancy. Nearly twenty-five years after the beginning Word in “Mr. Eliot’s Sunday Morning Service,” an end word is arrived at in the “silent motto” of “East Coker.” As before, “silent” translates infans. And “motto,” borrowed from the Italian equivalent of le mot, may translate Verbum. And several mottoes, in spite of the silence, murmur for attention. The first, of course, is the reversible equation that begins and ends the poem: “In my beginning is my end” and “In my end is my beginning.” But other echoes are heard in the complete passage. “The tattered arras woven with a silent motto” (CP, p. 182) calls up the end of Ezra Pound’s Canto III:

Drear waste, the pigment flakes from the stone,
Or plaster flakes, Mantegna painted the wall.
Silk tatters, “Nec Spe Nec Metu.”

Out of this tissue of silent mottoes rises yet another, which I have mentioned already: the Eliot family motto, Tace et Fac, “Be Silent and Act.” Recalling here the dedication of The Sacred Wood (1920) to Eliot’s father, who had died not long before (“For H. W. E. / ‘Tacuit et fecit’ “), we can recognize the resonance of personal memories throughout “East Coker.” To a paternal “quiet-voiced” elder who did his work and kept his mouth shut, the poet explains his own dissatisfaction with poetry.

These mottoes, involving beginnings and ends, hopes and fears, speech and silence, suggest that much of the poem is addressed by Eliot to his own silent father, a manufacturer of bricks. East Coker provides the logical setting for a meditation on the fate of all the Elyots and Eliots, a family reunited to hear the confession of one of its children. Lost words haunt the churchyard and turn epitaphs into silent mottoes, “old stones that cannot be deciphered,” as in “Little Gidding,” where any action may lead “to an illegible stone.” The next words—“and that is where we start”—return to “East Coker”: “Home is where one starts from.” The building materials become memorials, and their words are silent.

From “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” to Four Quartets, then, the progress of Eliot’s poetry is from one kind of silence to another. Prufrock’s raid on the inarticulate displays futility, frustration, and humiliation. But the solution of the problem comes not from the triumphant discovery and exploitation of articulateness but from the acceptance of silence and stillness, as in “Burnt Norton”:

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. (CP, p. 180)

It would never be possible for Prufrock, Geron-
tion, Sweeney, or any of Eliot’s speakers to say just what they mean, because no one can ever say what he means. Even when speech achieves the sublimity of poetry and passes into wordless music, there is no genuine relief from the time-bound activity. But when the articulated words and mu-

T. S. Eliot’sRaids on the Inarticulate

Notes


3 Line 262 of The Waste Land—“And a clatter and a chatter from within”—resembles a passage in Ch. i of Wuthering Heights in which Lockwood says, “I distinguished a chatter of tongues, and a clatter of culinary utensils, deep within.”

4 These noises link the ending of The Waste Land (“shantih” thrice) with the obsessive endings of “Virginia” (“river” thrice) and “Difficulties of a Statesman” (“RESIGN” thrice)(CP, pp. 69, 139, 129). In the last poem, indeed, the repeated motif—“Cry what shall I cry?”—could belong to most of Eliot’s earlier speakers.

5 Eliot’s widow has commented on the earlier title of The Waste Land: “He Do the Police in Different Voices.” She suggests a connection with the “many voices” of the sea in Tennyson’s “Ulysses” (and later in “The Dry Salvages”) as well as the immediate derivation from Ch. xvi of Our Mutual Friend (where, in fact, the talented reader, a boy named Sloppy, has next to nothing to say). See Valerie Eliot, ed., The Waste Land: A Facsimile and Transcription of the Original Drafts, including the Annotations of Ezra Pound (London: Faber, 1971), p. 5.

6 A recent anthology annotates “Prufrock” in such a way as to dismiss any possibility of its being an interior monologue: “Some readers have understood the epigraph to mean that Prufrock is speaking not to another person but to himself as after ego, but Eliot specifically denied this interpretation. He said that the ‘you’ of the poem was an ‘unidentified male companion.’” Richard Ellmann and Robert O’Clair, eds., The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry (New York: Norton, 1973), p. 449. Presumably, the basis for this unconditional dismissal is a condition-ridicled letter from Eliot quoted by Kristian Smidt in his Poetry and Belief in the Work of T. S. Eliot (London: Routledge, 1961), p. 85: “As for the LOVE SONG OF J. ALFRED PRUFROCK anything I say now must be somewhat conjectural, as it was written so long ago that my memory may deceive me: but I am prepared to assert that the ‘you’ in THE LOVE SONG is merely some friend or companion, presumably of the male sex, whom the speaker is at the moment addressing, and that it has no emotional content whatever.” There are so many teasing hinges there that we need not accept the assertion without skepticism. I continue to think it improbable that Prufrock has anyone to talk to so freely and candidly: the only person he could talk to senza tema d’infanzia is himself or some aspect of himself.

8 Browning’s poem—in full, “An Epistle containing the Strange Medical Experience of Karshish, the Arab Physician”—explores the nature of humanity and divinity. It bears oblique relationships with “Prufrock” (because of Lazarus, although in Browning’s version he does not exactly “tell all”) and The Waste Land (as when “‘through the thunder comes a human voice’”)


11 Certain editions—e.g., Swami Nikhilananda, J. Upanishads, abridged ed. (New York: Harper, 1964)—follow the practice of ending each Upanishad with “shantih”; but several, including Deussen’s, do not.

12 The 3 “da” injunctions could correspond directly to the 3 evils explicit in the Fire Sermon and implicit in the triple “shantih.” Without any reference to Eliot, S. Radakrishnan suggests the first part of this collocation: “In one passage [i.e., in the Brihadaranyak-Upanishad] all the virtues are brought together under the three da’s which are heard in the voice of the thunder, namely, dama, or self-restraint, dānā or self-sacrifice, and dāya or compassion. Prajā-pati conveys it to the three classes of his creation, gods (deva), men (manusya) and demons (asura). [The commentator] Śaṅkara makes out that gods have desires (kāma), men suffer from greed (lobha), and demons from anger (krodha). By the practice of the three injunctions we free ourselves from the sway of craving, greed and anger. When the Buddha asks us to put out in our hearts the monstrous fires of infatuation, greed and resentment, he is emphasising the three virtues enjoined by the Upanisads.” The Principal Upanisads (New York: Harper, 1953), pp. 108–09. For the second part of my collocation, I invoke a standard lexicon, which interprets a triple “shantih” as meaning specifically “May the three kinds of pain be averted!”—that is, the pains caused by lust, greed, and wrath. Sir Monier Monier-Williams, A Sanskrit-English Dictionary, new ed. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1899), p. 1064. s.v. śānti. (See also p. 467, s.v. dākātras, for an onomatopoeic representation of thunder.) “Shantih,” as Eliot says in his note (p. 76), means peace or tranquillity (and a good many other things as well); but I can find no confirmation for his claim that “repeated as here” it has to be “a formal ending to an Upanishad.” It is found at the end of the Invocations of several Upanishads (e.g., Aitareya,
called Selected Essays. All texts of Andrews's Nativity Sermon xi contain the wording, "Verbum infans, the Word without a word; the eternal Word not able to speak a word."

Every printing of Eliot's "Lancelot Andrews," in a passage arguing that the Bishop's language is memorable, misquotes these words as "The Word within a word, unable to speak a word." As the phrase appears in "Gerontion," the misquotation—and particularly the change from "without" to "within"—operates as a mocking perversion, later to be restored to its proper form in Ash-Wednesday. But in the essay itself, the new wording is simply an odd misquotation. The inversion is brilliant in the poem; in the essay, which followed the poem by some 6 years, it seems only dull.


2 Some years later, in his introduction to a translation of Paul Valéry's The Art of Poetry, Eliot added something further to this condition of stillness. His comment on some analogies among architecture, music, and poetry goes far beyond the topic required by the occasion. "Between these analogies," he says, "there is no contradiction, unless we are misled by the famous phrase of Walter Pater. For Music itself may be conceived as striving towards an unattainable timelessness; and if the other arts may be thought of as yearning for duration, so Music may be thought of as yearning for the stillness of painting or sculpture." The Art of Poetry, trans. Denise Folliot (New York: Pantheon, 1958), pp. 42–43.

In a letter of 28 March 1931, Eliot spoke of Beethoven's Late Quartets: "I have the A minor Quartet on the gramophone, and find it quite inexhaustible to study. There is a sort of heavenly or at least more than human gaiety about some of his later things which one imagines might come to oneself as the fruit of reconciliation and relief after immense suffering; I should like to get something of that into verse before I die." Stephen Spender, "Remembering Eliot," in Allen Tate, ed., T. S. Eliot: The Man and His Work (New York: Delacorte, 1966), p. 54. In a lecture delivered in 1933 but never published, Eliot commented on an argument in favor of "stark directness" put forward in one of D. H. Lawrence's letters. "This," Eliot said, "speaks to me of that at which I have long aimed, in writing poetry; to write poetry which should be essentially poetry, with nothing poetic about it, poetry standing naked in its bare bones, or poetry so transparent that we should not see the poetry, but that which we are meant to see through the poetry, poetry so transparent that in reading it we are intent on what the poem points at, and not on the poetry, this seems to me the thing to try for. To get beyond poetry, as Beethoven, in his later works, strove to get beyond music. We never succeed, perhaps, but Lawrence's words mean this to me, that they express to me what I think that the forty or fifty original lines that I have written strive towards." Quoted in F. O. Matthiessen, The Achievement of T. S. Eliot: An Essay on the Nature of Poetry, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1959), pp. 89–90, 96.