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Quest for values in T. S. Eliot's *The Hollow Men* and *Ash Wednesday*

The aim of this article is to present the importance of and search for values in T. S. Eliot's poetry. The author of the article is going to analyse the two poems of the Anglo-American poet, *The Hollow Men* (1925) and *Ash Wednesday* (1930), written before and after the artist's conversion into Catholicism. The article is going to examine the two works which reflect two different yet to some extent parallel visions of humanity, particularly Western society after World War I, the world's chaos, mental decadence and an individual's search for spiritual and social values when facing a personal crisis and moral dilemmas.

Searching for values has been a recurrent motif in literature, art and philosophy since the antiquity till the contemporary era. Various critics and artists frequently stressed the significance of human and spiritual ideals, morals, especially when confronted with the invasion of modern consumer lifestyle, hedonistic culture and mass-media world. In Anglo-American literature, in particular in the 20th century poetry, prose and drama many a time authors present a contemporary world saturated with advertising, commercials, media and information technology, all of them promoting "ideal" physical outlook, violence, aggressive behaviour, the cult of youth culture and materialism. British and American poets and writers, such as T. S. Eliot, Earnest Hemingway, James Joyce, William Faulkner or J. K. Ballard, to name but a few, often depict a dismal, disheartening life reality devoid of enduring spiritual and social values in the interwar period and after World War II. Quest for humanitarian ideals, cultural integration and social harmony is repeatedly/time after time the motto of their works.

T. S. Eliot (1888-1965), whose poetry is going to be scrutinized in this article, in particular *The Hollow Men* and *Ash Wednesday*, won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1948 and was one of the great literary critics of the 20th century. The American poet who took British citizenship in 1927 and was received into the Church of England often presented in his works the deterioration of modern civilization and expressed the need for spiritual rebirth (Spurr 3). In his most notable poems, such as *The Love Song of Alfred Prufrock*, (1911), *Gerontion* (1919), *The Waste Land* (1922) or *The Hollow Men* (1925) the author struggles to

impose order on the more intractable elements of its own nature, to create some coherent entirety out of manifold fragments of social and cultural reality. Needless to say, the poet's reiterated statements of purpose or destination are frequently countered by images of special disorder, meaningless repetition, fragmentation, isolation and mental distraction (Spurr 4). Eliot creates such a stylistic and structural contrast in order to show his effort to rebuild and recreate peace, harmony and stability in the modern world, to restore order and traditional human values in the new reality. Hence, the apparent disorder, meaningless repetition, fragmentation, alienation and desolation of the modern world are counterbalanced by the author's yearning for goal and spiritual harbour.

The Hollow Men (1925) and *Ash Wednesday* (1930), Eliot's two great poems, constitute a thematic and stylistic contrast. In the former the author emphasizes spiritual emptiness, entropy, despair and hopelessness whilst in the latter the poet searches for religious awakening, asserts the dire need for Grace and confirms the presence of the highest love. Nevertheless, both the works highlight the agony of men, their difficulty of turning to God and of finding enduring human values in modern world. As one may notice, *The Hollow Men* and *Ash Wednesday*, written after the Great War, reflect the artist's grave concern with the post-war reality, mostly in Western Europe, marked by a/the deterioration of social values, moral debasement, lack of communication and the rise of consumerism. It is the war, claimed the poet, which changed people into mindless, callous machines, devoid of personality, sensitivity, energy and vitality. It becomes particularly visible in the first of the afore-mentioned poems which is frequently regarded as the most pessimistic of all Eliot's oeuvre and which represents the culmination of the author's most bleak, depressing literary phase. *Ash Wednesday* inaugurates a new, more optimistic yet very reflexive period in Eliot's literary output mirroring the author's mulling over/pondering on faith, men's ceaseless struggle between good and evil, human agony and spiritual regeneration.

In *The Hollow Men* T. S. Eliot showed a mental derangement, spiritual void of modern world and men without any vision and purpose in life, society who lack depth and faith, pursue material things and pray blasphemous prayers:

I
We are the hollow men
We are the stuffed men
Leaning together
Headpiece filled with straw. Alas!

Our dried voices, when
We whisper together
Are quiet and meaningless
As wind in dry grass
Or rats' feet over broken glass
In our dry cellar

Shape without form, shade without colour,
Paralysed force, gesture without motion;
(quoted in Helsztyński 430)

The first two stanzas embody a crucial idea for the poem and the figures of speech here are employed to reflect the futility and uselessness of 'hollow men'. It basically reveals/indicates that the eponymous hollow men half-exist just like shape cannot exist without a form neither can be a gesture without motion. It is also worth remarking that the initial verses of the poem indicate an astonishing contradiction. Literary speaking, hollow means "having a cavity within, a hole inside" (Quirk 778), implying the notion of 'emptiness', 'vacuity' or 'blankness'. In a figurative sense it denotes 'the lack of genuine value or significance'. On the other hand, stuffed stands for "filled by packing things in to the point of overflowing, completely full" (Quirk 1651), therefore it refers to 'abundance'. In this regard we witness a juxtaposition between the ideas of lack and exuberance/plentiffulness. By making such a contradiction, visible especially at line 4 ("Headpiece filled with straw") the author highlights this part of the body as the one 'stuffed', and considering the headpiece as the representation of the mind we may assume that the hollow men are symbolically fulfilled with absurd, non-sense ideas, thoughts, making them void, futile and worthless. A similar juxtaposition is made in line 12 where power is contrasted with powerlessness and incapacity ("paralysed force") and movement with immobility ("gesture without motion"). Analogously to line 4, here the artist depicts a paradox and inconsistency of modern life – on the one hand the world is driven by some unnamed force, yet people are unable to act, afraid of any advance, they come to a standstill.

The inconsistent and contradictory features of a modern man as well as the paradox of life in the post-war reality are frequently depicted via abstract terms. In this way Eliot strives to create an emotional barrier, distance between the speaker, the audience and the lyrical subject. Moreover, by constantly referring to space, sky objects as well as to life after death and to some

unidentified extraterrestrial realm, the artist highlights an unreal, dream-like vision of the world and society:

II

Eyes I dare not meet in dreams
In death's dream kingdom
These do not appear:
There, the eyes are
Sunlight on a broken column
There, is a tree swinging
And voices are
In the wind's singing
More distant and more solemn
Than a fading star.

(Quoted in Helsztyński 430)

In the above fragment the poet depicts the inhabitants of modern world as invisible and inaudible, half alive, partly humans and partly extraterrestrial beings, alienated and estranged. Furthermore, the artist presents them as demons, earthly nightmares who haunt him in his dreams. Hence, the images of outer space and cosmic reality are linked to those of earthly inferno.

Death and earthly hell are the leading motifs in Eliot's poem. The author creates a dystopian vision of the world which gradually falls down and in which human beings become buried alive, spiritually annihilated and alienated. As was previously mentioned, in the post-war modern society men are devoid of empathy, sensitivity, they fail to communicate with each other and are only capable of uttering meaningless, incomprehensible prayers addressed to some material semi-gods, yet they receive no answers:

III

This is the dead land
This is cactus land
Here the stone images
Are raised, here they receive
The supplication of a dead man's hand
Under the twinkle of a fading star.

Is it like this
In death's other kingdom
Waking alone
At the hour when we are
Trembling with tenderness

Lips that would kiss
Form prayers to broken stone.
(quoted in Helsztynski 431)

In the above fragment of part 3 of the poem Eliot presents an image of men as the inhabitants of the “dead land” who, for all their hollowness and emptiness are “Trembling with tenderness”, they search for love and affection, endeavouring to kiss and embrace other people, yet all their efforts end up in failure. The persona of *The Hollow Men* appears torn between nostalgia for some sort of ecstatic union and the cold-eyed vision of nothingness that can only lead him to “Death’s other kingdom (Spurr 54-55). The poet points out that order, harmony and possibility lie outside the dream kingdom of human experience, in a state of being defined as “other”, alien, and represented in terms of a traditional iconography: eyes, perpetual star, multifoliate rose (“sightless, unless/ The eyes reappear/ as the perpetual star/ multifoliate rose/ Of death’s twilight kingdom”) (quoted in Helsztynski 431). This latter order is the hope of empty men, those who, unlike the *hollow* men, have purified/freed themselves from of all disguises to face the nothingness and void of their own being (Spurr 54).

It is worth remarking that similarly to the hollow men who grope together, form prayers to broken stone, and whisper meaninglessly and inarticulately, the poem itself gropes toward a conclusion only to end in hollow, unavailing abstraction and the insignificant, meaningless circularity of a child’s rhyme:

V
Here we go round the prickly pear
Prickly pear prickly pear
Here we go round a prickly pear
At five o’clock in the morning.

...
This is the way the world ends
This is the way the world ends
This is the way the world ends
Not with a bang but a whimper.
(quoted in Helsztyński 432)

As one may observe, formal aspects of the poem imitate the characteristics of the hollow men it portrays, mainly through the technique of constant repetition and negation: “The eyes are not here/ There are no eyes here” (quoted in Helsztynski 432) Taking into account the above-cited final lines of the poem (“This is the way the world ends...”) a regular repetition of the words describing the world’s apocalypse enhances the atmosphere of dread, gloominess, sense of

spiritual ruin and moral degradation. Furthermore, the repetition of the children's song ("*Here we go round the prickly pear*") may imply that the future of the world, particularly its Christian character, lies in the hands of children. However, a "fading star" (of Bethlehem) suggests a failed hope, unbelief in human salvation.

Doubt is another recurrent theme which pervades *The Hollow Men* and which is especially noticeable in the final part of the poem. Here, it may stand for the hollow men's disbelief and skepticism concerning faith and Christianity. Presumably, the men are inclined to believe in God, yet a shadow of doubt comes between them and Lord which makes it difficult, all the more impossible to fill the gap between dream and reality. Paradoxically enough, the line: "*For Thine is the Kingdom*", reflecting the end of the Lords' prayer implies that the closing of the poem parallels the end of Christianity:

V
 Between the conception
 And the creation
 Between the emotion
 And the response
 Falls the shadow
Life is very long
 ...
 Between the potency
 And the existence
 Between the essence
 And the descent
 Falls the Shadow
For Thine is the Kingdom
 For Thine is
 Lie is
 For Thine is the
 This is the way the world ends
 (quoted in Helsztyński 432)

It is worth emphasizing that *The Hollow Men* expresses the depths of T. S. Eliot's despair, yet one may notice that paradoxically the poet chooses despair, anguish and resignation as the only acceptable alternatives to the inauthentic, unreal existence of the unthinking, thoughtless inhabitants of the modern waste land (Spurr 51). Interestingly enough, the author perceived this kind of anguish more in intellectual than emotional terms. Furthermore, principles of intellectual order control the anguish of *The Hollow Men*, in the way the poem consciously

assesses experience in abstract terms, makes the distinction between antithetical states of being, and establishes, both formally and thematically, the archetype of the Negative Way as an alternative to chaos and disharmony as well as to the illusory order of visionary experience (Spurr 51-52). It is thanks to the use of abstract notions and the intellectual perception of despair that Eliot managed to distance himself from his personal emotional crisis as well as from the problem of moral debasement, deterioration of values in post-war Western society.

When set beside deep pessimism pervading *The Hollow Men*, *Ash Wednesday* written after Eliot's conversion into Catholicism inaugurates a new, more mystical and meditative phase in the artist's literary output. The bleak negativisms of the earlier poem have yielded to a speculatively/ hesitantly hopeful humility (Raffel 113). The title refers to the forty days of Lent, which is a time for self-reflection, sacrifice, repentance and atonement. The poem, divided into six parts, deals with the speaker's aspiration to move from a sense of spiritual anguish and agony to Christian salvation. Hence, contrary to the static thematic dimension of *The Hollow Men*, *Ash Wednesday* stands out by its dynamism, change of the speaker's perception of the world and society.

The initial lines of the poem ("Because I do not hope to turn again/ because I do not hope/ Because I do not hope to turn") (Eliot 1963) bears much resemblance to the final part of the former work both in terms of its thematic context (premonition of the apocalypse, hopelessness, lack of faith) and technique (a regular word pattern repetition). In this section the speaker, though is prepared to renounce all worldly matters, acts of despair. He 'rejoices' only because he rejects the beauty in a 'blessed face' and 'voice', in the sensuality of the world. His belief is that the world as he knows it is all that exists, yet his faith and the anguish it brings is what prepares him for salvation, since only from his weakness and powerlessness, can his 'wings (that) are no longer wings to fly' create the whole; and only from his spiritual decease will appear hope thanks to which he may regain joy and felicity:

I
 I rejoice that things are as they are and
 I renounce the blessed face
 And renounce the voice
 Because I cannot hope to turn again
 Consequently I rejoice, having to construct something
 Upon which to rejoice
 ...
 Because these wings are no longer wings to fly
 But merely vans to beat the air

The air which is now thoroughly small and dry
Smaller and dryer than the will
Teach us to care and not to care
Teach us to sit still.

Pray for us sinners now and at the our of our death
Pray for us now and at the our of our death.

(Eliot 1963)

In this part of the poem as well as in its remaining sections one could see the constant presence of God, his redeeming power, visible particularly at the moments of the speaker's spiritual despair and his feeling of being mentally torn apart. It is God who approaches the speaker when he gives his love to the desert of loss in order to forget the world's darkness and He tells him to prophesy to the empty wind of his spiritual bareness, evoking the knowledge and conviction that, ironically, his spiritual inheritance is in this dessert realm of death and re-birth:

II

...

...And God said
Prophesy to the wind, to the wind only for only
The wind will listen...

...

Under a juniper-tree the bones sang, scattered and shining
We are glad to be scattered, we did little good to each other,
Under a tree in the cool of the day, with the blessing of sand,
Forgetting themselves and each other, united
In the quiet of the desert. This is the land which ye
Shall divide by lot. And neither division nor unity
Matters. This is the land. We have our inheritance.

(Eliot 1963)

As was previously remarked, the entire poem is filled with the speaker's sense of loss, anguish and his feeling of being incessantly torn apart. In section three we may observe his endeavour to gain salvation by climbing towards heaven but on the other hand he repeatedly looks back on his self-deceit, despair and lust and while struggling with his doubt and desire he in fact longs to return to the world of darkness, fear and solitude. It is the vision of the Lady, presumably the Virgin Mary, appearing in part four, who 'enlightens' the speaker, making him realize his imperfect humanness, spiritual weakness and sinning and yet who makes him understand the possibility of his salvation and redemption. Nevertheless, the Lady is a very ambiguous figure. Being veiled and

silent among the dews, she may as well represent death, sorrow and church. In view of that the speaker starts to realize that salvation becomes ephemeral, frequently hidden in distress and torment. The presence of birds, creatures of song which fly joyfully towards 'the higher dream', supposedly towards transcendence, seems to remind the speaker that one ought to 'redeem the time' one has in the world:

IV

...

The silent sister veiled in white and blue
Between the yews, behind the garden god,
Whose flute is breathless, bent her head and signed but spoke no word
But the fountain sprang up and the bird sang down
Redeem the time, redeem the dream
The token of the word unheard, unspoken

Till the wind shake a thousand whispers from the yew

And after this our exile.

(Eliot 1963)

Similarly to the above sections, parts five and six of *Ash Wednesday* are saturated with the speaker's intense battle between his yearning to stay in the world of darkness, anguish, desolation as well as moral depravation and the desire to surrender himself to God. Evidently enough, the speaker's life and consciousness is torn between good and evil, doubt and faith, emotional powerlessness and spiritual belief in the redemptive, purifying might of the Lord and the Virgin Mary. The closing lines of the poem apparently bring some hope since in the final confrontation with the world's evil and his own human helplessness the speaker decides to yield himself to God. In his surrender to the Lord he sees not solely his own salvation but the deliverance and redemption of humanity as well:

V

Blessed sister, holy mother, spirit of the fountain, spirit of the garden,
Suffer us not to mock ourselves with falsehood
Teach us to care and not to care
Teach us to sit still
Even among these rocks,
Our peace in His will
And even among these rocks
Sister, mother
And spirit of the river, spirit of the sea,

Suffer me not to be separated

And let my cry come onto Thee.

(Eliot 1963)

Having scrutinized the above poem, its meditative, reflexive, religious tone, one may notice its marked departure from an extremely pessimistic and nihilistic mood of *The Hollow Men*. Furthermore, when set beside a more anonymous character of Eliot's previous work, his depiction of humankind in more abstract and intellectual terms, *Ash Wednesday* is more personal, emotional, despite the author's frequent use of abstract terms, allusions to philosophy and religion. What undoubtedly unites both the works is the poet's concern for the humankind, their future, his depiction of a ceaseless struggle between good and evil, doubt and faith, human powerlessness and God's redemptive power.

All told, the examination of *The Hollow Men* and *Ash Wednesday*, the works written before and after Eliot's conversion into Catholicism, reflects two different yet to some extent parallel visions of humanity, particularly Western society after World War I, the world's chaos and an individual's search for spiritual and social values when facing a personal crisis and carrying on a titanic internal struggle between god and evil.

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