

Chapter Five

‘Connect Nothing with Nothing’

in

T. S. Eliot’s *The Wasteland*

the sickness that must *grow* worse in order to find healing

-Eliot, ‘East Coker’

“The physician and the poet”, as A. H. Jones points out “can both be healers. They share a common goal in efforts to maintain light and order against the chaos of darkness and disease, and to create or restore the beauty and harmony of health: in this quest, medicine serves the body, poetry the spirit”¹. T. S. Eliot played the role of a physician in *The Wasteland* masquerading himself in the guise of a poet. And, as a physician, his job was to diagnose the root cause of modernist anxiety and prescribe a prognosis in the form of a new vision of centre. He, in a way, performs one of those Galenic ‘radical’ surgeries, dissecting the corpse of modern existence only to find out the vacuity that lies underneath

¹ See Jones 275

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the skin. The poem was dedicated to Ezra Pound— “*il miglior fabbro*”, the ‘better craftsman’ or what I call the ‘better surgeon’. This dedication gives us an image of Pound performing a surgery upon a poem lying on the table of a dark chamber crying and groaning in agony:

If you must needs enquire

Know diligent Reader

That an inch Occasion

Ezra performed the Caesarian Operation.²

Such an image of ‘a patient etherized upon a table’ lurks everywhere in the modern period signifying a sudden somatic turn that the early twentieth-century took. This conflation of the *aesthetic* and the *an-aesthetic* can also be viewed as a reversal of Cartesian dualism. The poem diagnoses, as well, an overabundant emphasis on corporeal body and lack of spirituality wherein all the major characters are found to be reduced to their material and decaying body. The Cartesian “I think therefore, I am” in the poem paves the way for “I have a body therefore, I am”. Such a reductionist view curtails all other facets of human existence in favour of a process of dehumanization and technologization— characteristic of the modern biopolitical arrangement in which not only is spirituality denied but even bodies are rendered numb and etherized. The modern predicament of *reality* as being reduced to *corporeality* is something that Eliot is staunchly aware of and can be seen in his portrayal of different bodies in the poem. The

²This is the third stanza of a poem titled ‘Homme Sage’ written by Ezra Pound and included in a letter to Eliot in the late December, 1921 where the former is identifying himself as the poem’s “midwife”.

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modern body and certainly Eliotic numbed body “is stung into sharp, percipient, erotic self-realization by the metropolis, world war, and technology”³. Such numbness and *anaesthetic* condition of the modern subject/patient can be traced in the following lines:

Do

You know nothing? Do you see nothing? Do you remember
Nothing? (121-23)

And again,

Are you alive, or not? Is there nothing in your head?

The modern subjecthood was no different from the patienthood. Both were enjoying the same subject-position and were getting the same kind of *treatment* from the twentieth-century technocratic political and medical establishments both without any voice, agency and autonomy of their own.

The rise of metropolis on one hand and wars on the other reduced the human existence almost to its corporeal existence (*körper*). The gaze which was hitherto *from* the body and *through* the body was now turned upon itself. The body was now its own object and this objectification ultimately led to its alienation and materiality in the modern urban space. In Eliot we see inhospitable bodies existing in an inhospitable space. The Eliotic space is not a body-friendly space and the pathological bodies in the poem find immense difficulty in inhabiting such a hostile environment. Gadamer likens

³ Laity 15

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the state of illness to the German word *Gegenstand*⁴ as illness— as opposed to health. The former ‘objectifies’ itself and “confronts us as something opposed to us and which forces itself upon us”⁵. Their being is not with-the-world but rather against-the-world. The wasteland is not inhabited by healthy, porous lived-bodies that are in harmony with the world and which can be “passed-over-in-silence”⁶; the *topos* is inhabited by corporeal, opaque and diseased bodies which “can only connect nothing with nothing”. The diseased bodies in the poem are not *ek-statically* involved with the urban space; they are victims of gross mechanization. ‘The apparition of these faces in the crowd’ and their suffering become quite evident as they somehow drag themselves along the city streets sighing over their condition and living a life of anonymity:

Unreal City,
Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,
A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,
I had not thought death had undone so many.
Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled,
And each man fixed his eyes before his feet. (60-65)

The urbanity calls for mechanization and, in the poem, we see a machinic portrayal of human existence where on the one hand, machines and tools become prostheses and phantom body parts and, on the other, bodies are portrayed as somnambulistic motors. The dynamic and organic bodies are nowhere to be found in the wasteland. Such

⁴ Gadamer 105. Gadamer writes, “*Gegenstand* is a highly significant word. It means that which offers resistance (*Widerstand*), that which withstands our natural impulses and which cannot simply incorporate into the order of our lives.

⁵ Ibid 107

⁶ For detailed discussion on the subject, see Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* (London: Routledge, 1958)

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conflation of the human and the machine is symptomatic of the process of dehumanization witnessed by the modern era— the body was conceived as a machine just like any other machine, be it a part of a modern metropolis or a modern battleground. Eliot writes,

At the violet hour, when the eyes and back
Turn upward from the desk, when the *human engine* waits
Like a *taxi throbbing* waiting [...] (215-17)

At such a violet hour of modern times we find subjects *patient*-ly waiting and sighing over their dehumanized existence.

The impaired characters in the poem challenges F. H. Bradley’s notion of the “felt continuity between the object and oneself”. Bradley in his thesis talks about a common world and a coherent consciousness in harmony with that world. The kind of intersubjectivity and with-the-other existence that he argues for cannot be traced in the wasteland. The Bloomsbury idea of ‘only connect’ is replaced in the poem by “connect nothing with nothing” (300-301). The latter stands as the condition of illness in which the ‘connection’ between the being and the world is disrupted. In illness the bridge which was hitherto maintaining the coherent relationship in being-in-the-world and being-with-the-world starts to fall down [“London Bridge is falling down falling down falling down” (427)] leading to insanity [“Hieronymo’s mad againe” (432)] and disorder [“Shall I at least set my lands in order?” (432)]. When ill, one can no longer be at ease. The dis-ease that a disease leads to transforms the coherent subject and alienates him/her from the a-

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priori of the life-world. And T. S. Eliot’s *The Wasteland* is populated with such characters and situations.

In health, the body remains absent and in illness, this absence comes to the foreground and non-volitionally tries to presence itself. Drew Leder prefers the phrase ‘absence of absence’ rather than *presence* as the latter brings with it the idea of metaphysics of presence. The disappearing body and that is because of the “body’s own tendency toward self-concealment”⁷ and its organic involvement with the world is threatened during illness and any such breakdowns. Leder observes that at “moments of breakdown I experience *to* my body, not simply *from* it. My body demands a direct and focal thematization. In contrast to the ‘disappearances’ that characterize ordinary functioning [in health], I will term this the principle of *dys-appearance*. That is, the body *appears* as thematic focus, but precisely as in a *dys* state— *dys* is from the Greek prefix signifying ‘bad’, ‘hard’, or ‘ill’, and is found in English words such as ‘dysfunctional’”⁸. The dys-appearing bodies of major Eliotic characters like the Cumean Sibyl, Mrs. Equitone, Belladonna and her lover, Lil, the typist, Phlebas, Fisher King and most obviously the blind-seer Tiresias forbid them to establish any ‘meaningful’ connection with the world. They suffer, and their suffering is because of their bodies’ dys-appearing. They can now only ‘connect nothing with nothing’. It is because of their illnesses (of various forms) that their connection with the spatiotemporality and especially, the space around is now severed and what remains at the end of the day is:

⁷ See Leder 69

⁸ Ibid 83-4

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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. (22-24)

The above lines are the objective correlatives of pathological condition wherein the sufferer feels not-being-at-home and wherein both the body and the world around cease to remain familiar and become uncanny. It not only leads to a breakdown between the being and the surrounding (in which ‘being-there’ is replaced by ‘being-here’) but also a breakdown in the continuum of time— no past, no future but momentary ‘here-now’. Both, lived-space and lived-time are constricted and one’s condition is pinned down to the level of a “handful of dust” i.e. fear of death:

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. (27-30)

Here the “I” of the narrator points towards a paranoid pathological condition wherein one is cut-off from both “shadow at morning striding behind you” (i.e. past) and “shadow at evening rising to meet you” (i.e. future) and is reduced as a prisoner of the present without either a discreet “memory” or “desire”.

As a matter of fact in late 1921 Eliot was himself undergoing treatment for his “nervous breakdown” at a sanatorium near Lake Lemman in Lausanne, Switzerland.

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Matthew K. Gold reads the poem insightfully vis-a-vis Dr. Roger Vittoz’ *The Treatment of Neurasthenia By Means of Brain Control* and compares the latter to an “anesthesiologist on call during the delivery, guiding Eliot through the birthing process and slipping him an epidural when the pain became too great. Vittoz’ therapeutic programme re-educated Eliot’s broken will and enabled him to complete his work. *The Wasteland* stands as a record of Eliot’s sickness and his cure”. The references to that mountainous retreat can be traced in lines such as “In the mountains, there you feel free/ I read, much of the night, and go south in winter” (18) and “By the waters of Lemman I sat down and wept” (182). Gold lays bare the confluence between poetics and pathology—of how the pathological condition of the creator shapes the poetic feelings and utterances in a work and, also, opens up the possibility of a New Historicist reading of a literary text with the help of a medical treatise. He writes:

If the “main consciousness” of *The Wasteland* is himself ill, then the reading experience itself becomes an exercise in illumination: we may be able to see *The Wasteland* as a *sick body* that Eliot presents to the reader, in the hope that the sickness would prove revelatory. In other words, if modern society is presented with an image of itself as a *body riddled with sickness*, then its potential recognition of its ills could prove redemptive. In this view, *The Wasteland* performs a function that is quite similar to the function of Vittoz’ book: it educates its readers about their diseased condition and gives them the means to pull themselves out of that condition.⁹

Like Dr. Vittoz, Eliot first tries to diagnose the problem, opening up the cadaver of modern body etherized upon a table and then like any healer looks frantically for the

⁹ Gold 527

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remedy. His restlessness— an antidote to the listlessness of modern human condition— is quite evident in the poem.

The placebos prescribed in the poem are found either in the form of Dr. Vittoz’s therapy or F. H. Bradley’s ethics or the Buddhist and Upanishadic spiritualism. The loss of wholeness is one of the salient characteristics of illness which he compensates with the ‘wholeness’ that the above therapeutic, ethical and spiritualist philosophies are to provide. Health, as I have mentioned earlier in my thesis, is often associated with balance and wholeness and it is illness that leads to the breakdown of this holistic structure. It creates rupture between the being and the world, the being and the other, mind and body, *körper* and *leib*. And hence, illness on several occasions is deemed a lost wholeness, something that can be traced in Hegel’s definition of illness:

...the system or organ establishes itself in isolation, and by persisting in its particular activity in opposition to activity of the *whole*, obstructs the fluidity of this activity, as well as the process by which it pervades all moments of the *whole*.¹⁰

Eliot’s notion of *Shantih*— “the peace which passeth understanding”— is very close to the kind of wholeness I am referring. I am also tempted to see this in the light of Gadamer’s notion of ‘balance/health’; not only this provides a new vision of existential centre to the fragmentation and disjuncture of modern socio-political condition but also a new vision of health. The latter can act as placebo and provide some respite to the citizens of the wasteland. The sense of incompleteness and uncanniness that illness brings

¹⁰ Hegel, G. W. F. *Hegel’s Philosophy of Nature*. Vol.3. Trans. Michael John Perry. New York: Humanities Press, 1970. Print. (quoted from Leder 88)

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with it can only be remedied with the help of this new sense of wholeness. “Health”, Hans-Georg Gadamer writes, “is a rhythm of life, a continuous process in which balance always stabilizes”¹¹. It is this stability, which Eliot frantically looks for throughout the poem.

The Upanishadic utterances *Datta* (give), *Dayadhvam* (sympathise) and *Damayata* (control) also become Eliotic remedies to counter ‘the aggressive pathological non-self’: and, for that matter, do not advocate a counter attack in the form of a violent opaque self but rather a hospitable and porous entity in harmony with-the-other. *Datta*, *Dayadhvam* and *Damayata* do not call for a complete annihilation of self but spaces forth hospitality towards the other. They talk about a shared space, a Bradleyan “common world”— or rather a therapeutic dialogue which Gadamer prescribes with the help of which the disorder and disease can be brought back to the state of balance, harmony and integrality. Taking a cue from Eastern philosophies, Eliot suggests a hospitable and open space where both the sufferer and the healer can come together and be a part of the healing process. This can very well provide a solution for the kind of alienation a patient feels in a modern medical regime. An empathetic and careful understanding can keep at bay the *etherized* condition of the modern patient/subject. A patient hearing of the patient’s voice can make the healing process more dialogic and “in consonant with the health needs of individuals and collectives”. In the poem then Prajapati’s voice becomes a catalyst in the process of reclaiming the *voice* of a sufferer.

¹¹ *The Enigma of Health*

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In such case, “I cannot” of illness becomes “I can” and “*have* body” changes into “*am* body”. The dis-abled conditions of “...I could not/ Speak, and my eyes failed, I was neither/ Living nor dead, and I knew nothing,/ Looking into the heart of the light, the silence” (38-41) are transcended. And here, illness itself plays the role of a catalyst. Because of its “telic demand” illness not only binds us to the immediate time and space but also generates an overpowering desire to be free from it. This burning desire cannibalizes all other desires and can be compared to the “fire” of ‘The Fire Sermon’. In this section of the poem, Eliot draws heavily from the Fire Sermon preached by Lord Buddha. Leder’s understanding of the “telic demand” can be compared to the Buddhist *trsn*. The symbolism of fire in this section not only stands for the truth that there is suffering and a cause of suffering but also, the truth of cessation (*nirrodha*) of suffering and the path (*m rga*) of cessation of suffering or liberation (*nirv na*). The fire in Eliot’s poem, hence, embodies the four noble truths or *catv ri rya-satyani* predominant in Buddhist meditations. It not only refers to the raging and uncontrolled fire of passion, the desire that binds us to the wheel of *sams ra* but also to the willed and controlled fire of purification. Following on this argument, we can infer that pain and illness apart from the suffering that they lead to, also give us the opportunity of questioning the ‘ignorance is bliss’ ideology of a healthy being. Pain and illness initiate a dialogue not only with our own body but also with the world around. This phenomenological distance gives us the room to reflect upon ourselves and also the other. For that moment, they free us from the wheel of *sams ra*. Leder point towards Jean-Paul Sartre and his idea of pain consciousness: “[it] is a project toward a further consciousness which would be empty of

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all pain; that is, to a consciousness whose contexture, whose being-there would be not painful” and how it can lead to a *hermeneutic* and *pragmatic* moment. This Sartrean “empty of all pain” can be compared to Eliotic ‘*Shantih*’ and the scriptural ‘peace that passeth understanding’.

Now if we go back and re-read the poem, we will see how the images of numb and debilitating effects of disease: “Do/ You know nothing? Do you see nothing? Do you remember/ Nothing?” (121-23) and “Are you alive, or not? Is there nothing in your head?” (126) seem more like phenomenological enquiries. The questions raised are more existential and ontological in nature rather than arbitrary monologues and in all this, illness plays the role of a catalyst. The questions are also very symptomatic of Heideggerian “concern” (*sorge*) — the kind of questions that a healer may start with in order to start a dialogue with the sufferer, highlighting the fact that *care* is primary to *cure*. As Gadamer points out, “The role of the doctor is to ‘treat’ or ‘handle’ the patient with care in a certain manner. The German word treating a patient is *behandeln*, equivalent to the Latin *palpare*. It means, with the hand (*palpus*), carefully and responsively feeling the patient’s body so as to confirm or correct the patient’s own subjective localization, that is, the patient’s experience of pain”¹². The healer-sufferer relationship (“beating obedient/ to controlling hands”) and the responsibility that they should have for each other are epitomized in the following lines wherein Eliot suggests a shared space, a dialogic process that will enable healing humanely— ‘reviving for a moment even a broken’ boat (read, body):

¹² The Enigma of Health 108

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The Boat responded

Gaily, to the hand expert with sail and oar

The sea was calm, your heart would have responded

Gaily, when invited, beating obedient

To controlling hands. (419-23)

The Eliotic diseased bodies are not only incomplete bodies living in a debilitating condition but also ever-unfinished, ambiguous bodies always challenging the notion of the ideal— bodies “that defies clear definitions and borders and that occupies the middle ground between life and death, between subject and object, between one and many”. Eliot himself points out that the condition is “neither living nor dead”; the epitome of which is Tiresias, phenomenologically *empathetic* “throbbing between two lives” and *concerned* with a painful knowledge equivalent to “ha[ving] foresuffered all”. The *dis-* prefix of the word dis-ease stands for “apart” and “away” or in a way distance. This distance (often phenomenological) is what that makes it a philosophical tool through which we can enquire various facets of our existence; somewhat like Eliot’s theory of objective criticism. This aspect of illness as a mode of illumination is something of which even he was aware of, as he writes in ‘The Pensées of Pascal’:

[I]t is a commonplace that some forms of illness are extremely favourable, not only to religious illumination, but to artistic and literary composition. A piece of

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writing meditated, apparently without progress, for months or years, may suddenly take shape and word; and in this state long passages may be produced which require little or no retouch.¹³

¹³ *Selected Prose* 237 (Quoted in Gold 527)

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