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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### Encounters with Reality: T.S. Eliot's Use of Demonstratives in Ash Wednesday

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#### Abstract

T.S. Eliot's poetry reveals a persistent anxiety with the frontiers of effective communication and the validity of the logos as an adequate medium. There is a concomitant anxiety about the nature of reality that the logos registers and gives shape to in a communicative act. Can words truly capture and convey the perceptual manifold at the primary threshold? Does the perceptual manifold constitute the reality or merely indicates the existence of a metaphysical level of reality that the verbal medium touches peripherally? Do the sensuous, the emotional and the intuitive constitute the variegated universe of cognition? If so, then can one really perceive, register, contemplate, intuit and express reality of the world in a discourse? The very nature of cognition then becomes the crux of a disturbing disquiet. Is cognition itself verbal? Can one think and perceive reality through verbal modules? Does the word determine the exact form of expression that appropriates reality? Do the words truly capture and convey reality, or do they constitute an obstructing veil by polemical pyroclastics, that must be removed in order to intuit reality? The problem apparently remains unresolved, but the experimental use of words like the demonstrative "this" in Ash Wednesday reveal challenging insights.

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From the unreal lead me to the real.  
From darkness lead me to light  
From death lead me to immortality

Brihdaranyaka Upanishad

Its form is not present to the sight –  
No-one sees it with the eye.  
The wise one, adept in mind, sees it in his heart.

Katha Upanishad

The truth is a poetically elaborated 'mobile army of metaphors, and metonymies, and anthropomorphisms' that subsequently gel into knowledge, 'illusions whose illusory nature has been forgotten, coins whose image has been worn away and are taken into consideration only as metal; so we become accustomed to lying according to convention, in a style that is binding for everyone, placing our actions under the control of abstractions and having reduced the metaphors to schemata and concepts.

Umberto Eco

The concern with the validity of the logos as a medium of effective communication carries with it a concomitant anxiety about the nature of reality that the logos registers and gives shape to in a communicative act. Can logos truly capture and convey the perceptual manifold at the primary threshold? Does the perceptual manifold constitute the reality or merely indicates the existence of a metaphysical level of reality that the verbal medium touches peripherally? Do the sensuous, the emotional and the intuitive constitute the variegated universe of cognition? If so, then can one really perceive, register, contemplate, intuit and express reality of the world in a discourse? The very nature of cognition then becomes the crux of a disturbing disquiet. Is cognition itself verbal? Can one think and perceive reality through verbal modules? Do the words determine the exact form of expression that appropriates reality? Do the words truly capture and

convey reality, or do they constitute an obstructing veil by polemical pyroclastics, that must be removed in order to intuit reality? The *Isha Upanishad* identifies the bewildering variety of tones, forms, cadences and hues of the physical world as a glittering and obscuring lid that must be removed for an intuition and projection of a vision of the transcendental reality:

The face of truth is concealed  
By a vessel made of gold.  
Reveal it, Pusan, to my sight  
Which has truth as its dharma

How far the words remain operative as elements constituting the obscuring veil, how far they are capable of penetrating the glittering surface, and how far they pass down through the ages as both the messenger and the message of salvation, unifying the immanent and the transcendental in a coherent whole comprising a greater reality, remains a point of perplexity.

The word “demonstrative” comes from Latin “monstrare” which means to point or show, and Wittgenstein’s word “muster” derived from “monstrare” indicates a classic self-revelation of an object, signifying the essence of an absolute Reality that lies beneath the multiplicity of forms, but shows itself through the structural plurality of the material universe. *The Upanishads* also project the subtle distinction between what is amenable to an express articulation and what can be indicated only through a manifestation in the sensuous manifold. Svetaketu’s father explains in the *Chhandogyoa Upanishad*, that it is the bewildering multiplicity of surface forms through which the ultimate reality manifests itself. ‘Vikara’ or apparent variations of shape sheathes the underlying ‘satyam’ or reality:

By which the unheard becomes heard, the unthought thought,  
and the unknown known ?

...  
Good lad, just as through one lump of clay  
everything made of  
clay is known, so difference of shape is just name,  
dependent  
on speech: “clay” is the reality.  
Good lad, just as through one copper ornament  
everything made  
of copper is known, so difference of shape is just  
name, dependent  
on speech: “copper” is the reality.(p.200)

The apparent diminution of the importance of the multiplicity of forms actually operates as a prelude to an acknowledgement of their significance as an embodiment of the greater transcendental reality. Svetaketu’s father says:

Thinking, “I must make each one of them three-fold—each one threefold, the deity entered the three deities with the life, with the self, and created differences of name and form. He made each of them for threefold...The red form of fire is the form of heat; the white is that of water; the black is that of food. The “fire-ness” of fire has disappeared. Difference of shape is just name, dependent on speech: the three forms are the reality. The red form of the sun is the form of heat the white is that of water; the black is that of food. The “sun-ness” of the sun has disappeared. Difference of shape is just name...the three forms are the reality.(pp.201-202)

The distinction between the transcendental divine and the temporal self that perceives and gets deluded by the variegated sensuous forms ceases to be a definitive divide. The self can do little and assumes the role of a detached witness or the “sakshin”. Caught between the reality and the shadow, Eliot muses in *The Confidential Clerk*, “a world where the form is the reality,/Of which the substantial is only a shadow.” *The Mundaka Upanishad* depicts two birds, one busy with worldly trivialities and the other watching it with equanimity. The part of the human heart that is blinded by the surface play of material forms is quietly watched over by the detached inner self, illuminated by the transcendental. The deluded perceiving mind and the illuminated inner self are threaded together, in a manner reminiscent of the Christian confluence of the finite and the transcendental in the concept of the glorious inner Word or the Logos. However, the illuminating Logos must be found through self-realization attained by an arduous journey across the load of a clutter of forced significations of surface reality that grows increasingly suffocating. Baudrillard, in *The Ecstasy of Communication*, finds the blinding excess of forced significations obscene:

Obscenity begins when...everything becomes immediately transparent, visible, exposed in the raw and inexorable light of information and communication. We no longer partake of the drama of alienation, but are in the ecstasy of communication. And this ecstasy is obscene...Obscenity is...a pornography of functions and objects in their legibility, availability, regulation, forced signification, capacity to perform, connection, polyvalence. (pp.21-22)

The quester must proceed in his poetic adventure with his armour of volatile verbal modules, seduced by the distant glimmer of the certitude of some signifiatory absolute. He tries to capture the elusive prospect with a sharp arrow of demonstratives. How far he succeeds is unknown and he must move on to unknown depths of an eternal exile.

In *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein evokes a primal scene in which the act of naming the objects that constitute our immediate reality appears as an occult phenomenon. Through this characterization of identification or naming as “occult”, he seems to suggest a domain which is beyond linguistic registration, but amenable to be realised all the same:

Naming appears as a queer connexion of a word with an object...

And you really get such a queer connexion when the philosopher tries to bring out the relation between name and thing by staring at an object in front of him and repeating a name or even the word

‘this’ innumerable times...and here we may indeed fancy naming to be some remarkable act of mind, as if it were a baptism of an object.(p.19)

The frustrated reiteration of the demonstrative ‘this’ brings out the awareness of such realms of reality that may be sensed and indicated, but perhaps not articulated with perfect clarity and precision. The subtle sense of compulsion inherent in the demonstrative ‘this’ projects wide ranges of paradoxes and possibilities. It is spoken invariably in the presence of an object, but does not get entangled in the restrictive mesh of particular names. It is as though, through this particular word that indicates the undeniable presence of the object, the verbal medium transcends its frustrating separation from objects and makes contact with them. Wittgenstein had earlier observed that the word “this” is perhaps the only genuine name and all other names are essentially inappropriate approximations of reality. The use of this demonstrative provides an unimpeachable model of the relation between language and reality.

What is interesting is the operation of the demonstrative in the universe created by the words. The reality of the universe presented through the words is bewitching and paradoxical and the world of the words in tandem with their syntactical variations has a reality of its own that is equally paradoxical. The use of the demonstrative pronoun ‘this’ grants a certain materiality to the words - the spatial and temporal entities, real in their own existence, trying

to register a greater reality of the human world. The profusion of appearances created by the words in the world of the text cannot simply be effaced as subservient agencies of a particular meaning resulting from a particular intention, but they operate as a perennial source of new analogies and new possibilities.

Interpreting Wittgenstein’s oeuvre as revelatory of a deconstructive syntax, Henry Staten shows that the illusions that may emerge in the clutter of such surface appearances, both in the human world and in the world of the words, may be dispelled by a transit through the sheer material force of the words, a force generated by the citation and the demonstrative pronoun ‘this’. This presents different levels of realities in the world of the words. These must be traversed even as an exiled individual who crosses the bewildering mazes of unfamiliar territories, full of potency and possibilities, destined never to return to the point of beginning. However it is through this initiation, through the contingent world of appearances that reality may be touched. *The Confidential Clerk* asserts:

It begins as a kind of make-believe  
And the make-believing makes it real.

During the apparently endless forays through the mesmerizing mazes of surface realities, there emerges moments when one stands face to face with his own inner self, experiencing what may be termed more real than the prosaic clutter of objective reality. When Sir Claude is alone with his clay artefacts or Colby plays his piano to himself and not for an audience, each experiences a different world that is his own realm of reality, pure and transcendental:

Sir Claude  
To be among such things  
If it is an escape, is escape into living,  
Escape from a sordid world to a pure one.

.....  
And when you are alone at your piano, in the evening,  
I believe you will go through the private door  
Into the real world

Reality appears to be a matter of individual point of view and thus entirely subjective. The emotional experience of each individual transports one to a realm of metalinguistic communion. What mars Massinger’s works, according to Eliot, is simply “the disappearance of all the personal and real emotions” that constitute the real metal while the conventions serve as mere alloys for working of the metal itself.

How far an amalgamation of these varying emotions or varying “finite centres” as he calls them in his *Leibniz’ Monadism and Bradley’s Finite Centres*, is achieved in the creative consciousness, remains a matter of speculation.

Eliot’s poetic journey in quest of the perfect mode of expression, assumes new dimension when reassessed in this light. The harnessing of the demonstrative pronoun “this” in a poem, by itself, suggests a strenuous cognitive progression through the maze of appearances in quest of the perfect word. The halting deliberations and variegated perceptual profiles presented in the ‘Ash Wednesday’ reach the final line – “And after *this\** our exile”. The strategic positioning of the word “this” converges the entire backdrop made up of myriad aberrant forms of sterile silences and visionary variables culminating in a dramatic gushing forth of fountains and thousand whispers rushing from shaken yew trees. All this with their various levels of signification is condensed and yet rendered with amazing poignancy in the demonstrative “this” of the final line. The journey etched by the words of the poem begins with an admission of the fact that there is no hope of turning back and no hope of attaining particularities of signification in the form of ‘this’ man’s gift or ‘that’ man’s scope. The journey will begin and progress through contingencies and accidents with the ‘usual reign’ of signifiatory definitiveness weakened. The protagonist will never know the certitude of any powerful signifiatory association because he will not think. He rejoices “that things are as they are”, words and images that he treats only externally and presents, but cannot penetrate. The quester constructs by rearranging and altering the surface projections, and not by penetrating the apparent opacity of the words; “The words will answer themselves.” The image that he encounters in section II is silent. Only elemental sounds like the ones produced by the naked bones resound. The dry bones are lifeless, opaque. The words project a picture of haunting opacity of signification, the “dissembled” self denotative of a feigned surface appearance or unnoticed appearance, both signifying failure to register what is real. At this point comes the forceful use of the demonstrative pronoun “this”:

It is *this\** which recovers  
My guts the strings of my eyes and the indigestible portions  
Which the leopards reject.

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\* my italics

The strategic positioning of the demonstrative pronoun brings out the intensity of the force that may penetrate the opacity of the material words to be allowed a glimpse of a higher reality. The preceding lines suggesting opacity and inexactitude of signification open up to an abrupt and almost violent moment of recovery, a vision of a greater reality through the act of love depicted in the immediately preceding line. The opacity of the verbal medium is dispelled in a sudden forceful contact with an almost palpable existence, a tangible reality caught perfectly in the sense of immediacy and exactitude inherent in the word “this”. An approximation of “Conclusion of all that/Is inconclusible”, and a reconciliation of the “Speech without word and Word of no speech” may be discerned in an almost epiphanic moment. The material bones were scattered, shining like autonomous and opaque words that powerfully construct illusions and surface realities. In a moment of sudden forceful revelation they are united. Again, one discerns the compelling interpellation of the word “this”, signifying a sudden vision of an inner spiritual terrain where all apparent divisions and unities become irrelevant, cohering in contact with an all encompassing transcendental reality. The use of the demonstrative “this” to shatter the opaque appearances and the glitter of dry lifeless bones, bringing out the full significance of the reality of the inner Word is impressive:

*This* is the land which ye  
Shall divide by lot. And neither division nor unity  
Matters. *This\** is the land. We have our inheritance.

The word “This” in a way establishes a close contact with the immediate reality of the glory of the Word, laden with the complete signifiatory inheritances.

Section III of Ash Wednesday presents another instance of surface illusions with familiar shapes twisted into grotesque forms and the opaque words assuming devilish stature of deceiving entities, playing with the emotive and cognitive forces. They twist and turn, baffling human cognition and an opaque darkness obscures the vision. Even an occasional glimpse of a beautiful figure playing a flute fades into oblivion and the music stops, while the vision remains “unread” even in a “higher dream” of spiritual allegory. The “sister veiled in white and blue...Whose flute is breathless”, speaks no audible word and the luminosity of her face is hidden from

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\* my italics

the vision as she bends her head. The inarticulate Word however manifests itself in the sudden gushing of fountains and the piercing melody of the birds, with an intensification of an urge to break through the unreal dreamlike state of surface appearances. Finally comes “a thousand whispers from the yew”, the “whispers” suggesting faintly audible words that must be heard carefully and analyzed as messages of redemption. The analysis is apparently an endless process and the interpellation of the demonstrative “This” with considerable finality and force in the concluding line, brings out the full play of the signifiatory manifold that the audible, comprehensible whispers will unravel to the listener initiated into an interpretive journey of no return. The revelation of reality beyond the surface clutter leads to an eternal venture into the depths of signification, far away from the quotidian world of illusions:

Till the wind shakes a thousand whispers from the yew  
And after this our exile.

What is interesting is the suggestion of inconclusiveness in the interpretive process. One must experience an “exile” in realizing the greater matrix of Reality; here is a suggestion that reality in itself is a perennial procedural phenomenon, essentially contingent and defiant of any fixity or close-ended signification. Any tranquil phase of certitude is but a veil overlying a sense of utter vacuity. Yossarin in the concluding part of *Catch 22* simply jumps – “he took off”. The story ends here. The hero seems to simply disappear directly into the white spatial vacuum of the page, beyond the last line of the text. Interestingly enough, this final jump and the following blank whiteness of the page reveals the nature of the word in the discursive space - elusive, opaque, polysemous, nonreferential and essentially indeterminate. The vacuity and reader-directed open-endedness create a challenge, an urge to plunge into an uncertainty to ferret out the dynamics of the combinatory multiplicity of the words in a text. The exile is thus inevitable after “this”- the converged signifiatory manifold. The white nothingness of the empty page after the word “exile” like the vacuum after “he took off” in *Catch 22*, remains an open invitation to the infinite possibilities, an eternal quest of the true nature of reality that continually evolves, entices and deludes. The exile after the demonstrative “this” intriguingly suggests the poetic dilemma, the absolute indefiniteness of the demonstrative. The mind is denied the confidence of certainty. In the colourful comments on the original *Facsimilie and*

*Transcript of The Original Drafts of The Waste Land* V, Pound wrote,

make up  
your mind  
you Tiresias  
if you know  
know damn well  
or  
else you don't.(p.47)

Slow to make up his mind, continually assaulted by the demons of dilemma gathering around, Eliot remains enwrapped in the polemics of the tentative and the propositional. Fully aware of it all, under cover of a tone of self-mockery, he wrote in ‘Five Finger Exercises’,

How unpleasant to meet Mr. Eliot!  
...  
And his mouth so prim  
And his conversation, so nicely  
Restricted to What Precisely  
And If and Perhaps and But.

The hesitations persist; the deepest of his anxieties remain unresolved as the definiteness of the demonstrative “this” slides into a perennial exile. In the very irresolution and the irreconcilability lie the seduction and the challenge.

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