The Abject in T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*

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Abstract: T. S. Eliot's monumental poem, *The Waste Land*, discusses hopelessness and desolation and shuns them at every turn. The speakers spurn it and despair at the desolate state of humankind and society. This paper aims to read T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* in light of Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection and Jacques Lacan's notion of *jouissance*. The main claim is that despite the apparent horror of desolation, the more the poem tries to repel desolation, the more it cannot help but repeatedly allude to it, as if unwillingly drawn to it, so that death and desolation are not the subject, nor are they the object, but rather the abject of the poem. The sections of the poem I feel are most relevant for such an analysis are "The Burial of the Dead" (lines 1-30) and "What the Thunder Said" (lines 322-375).

Key Words: Abjection, T. S. Eliot, Julia Kristeva, Death, Jouissance

I- Introduction

T. S. Eliot's seminal poem, *The Waste Land*, called "the poem of the century" (Brooker and Bentley 3), is home of a confusing array of voices (Reeves 36), and themes. Certainly, Ralph Ellison's claim that he "was intrigued by its power to move [him] while eluding [his] understanding" (203) is reasonable. One theme that especially stands out is that of death and desolation, "the prevalent condition[...] of mourning" in the poem (Harmon 454). The theme continues throughout the work, the warning against desolation ripe, the poem spurning misery, despairing at the desolate state of humankind. This paper aims to read T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* in light of Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection, with the main claim that, despite the apparent horror of, the apparent aversion to desolation, the more the poem tries to repel desolation, the more it cannot help but allude to it in perverse fascination, over and over again, as if unwillingly drawn to it, so that death and desolation are not the subject, nor are they the object of the poem, but rather the abject.

Kristeva takes both Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan as the initiating point of her theory. This paper elucidates upon a part of Lacan's contribution to the theory of abjection,

namely the notion of *jouissance*, or ‘enjoyment’,¹ that ignores the Freudian pleasure principle’s calculations of gains and losses (Freud 223) and instead causes pain by engaging in a pleasure that leads to dissatisfaction (Johnston 234). Kristeva adapts Lacan’s concept, defining the state of abjection as “a vortex of summons and repulsion” (Kristeva 1) and the object as that which “sicken[s]” (1) but also “fascinates” (1) at the same time.

I begin with an explication of Kristeva’s theory of abjection and Lacan’s use of *jouissance*, and the relation between them. Then both concepts will be applied to parts of “The Burial of the Dead” (lines 1-30) and “What the Thunder Said” (lines 322-375) from *The Waste Land*, assessing the allusions to despair and death, and concluding with a discussion of how such a reading alters the very idea of loss and despair in the poem.

II-The Object and *Jouissance*

An in-depth analysis of Kristeva’s borrowings and adaptations from Lacan and Freud is beyond the scope of this paper, thus, I briefly comment that, all three, theorized about identity formation (Becker-Leckrone 25). For Freud, the self is the unconscious mind; for Lacan, the mirror stage, i.e., the early cognitive stage of life, is where identity forms (26-27), while for Kristeva, it forms at birth, by the violent tearing of the baby from the mother’s body (32). In the following subsections, I elucidate upon Lacan’s notion of *jouissance*, Kristeva’s theory of abjection, and how Kristeva embeds *jouissance* in abject theory.

1- *Jouissance*

Lacan’s use of the term of *jouissance* gained recognition in the 1960s (Homer 89). The concept is infinitely more difficult to define than to “experience” (90), “its highly subjective nature [...] preclud[ing] any easy translatability” (Maccannell 157). The potential translation of the term as ‘enjoyment’ is lacking due to the simple fact, that it fails to include the “combination of pleasure and pain, or [...] pleasure *in* pain” (Homer 89; emphasis in original) of *jouissance*. *Jouissance* stems from the Freudian pleasure principle which analyzes whether a particular action generates enough and/or long-lasting satisfaction to be performed (Freud 223). However, despite originating from the pleasure principle, *jouissance* “goes beyond it” (Lacan, *Book XVII* 80), “beyond the limits imposed [...] on the usual tensions of life” (82-83). That is because, as the translator of Lacan’s *Écrits: A Selection* explains it, “‘pleasure’ obeys the law of homeostasis [while] ‘*jouissance*’ transgresses this law” (Translator’s Note, n.p.). “Without [...] transgression there is no access to *jouissance*” (Lacan, *Book VII* 177). Said “transgression” leads to a *jouissance* “that is excessive, leading to a sense of being overwhelmed or disgusted, yet simultaneously providing a source of fascination” (Fink xii). “*Jouissance* [then] presents itself as buried at the center of a field and has the characteristics of inaccessibility, obscurity and opacity” (Lacan, *Book VII* 209).

¹ The translator of Lacan’s *Écrits: A Selection* remarks that “there is no adequate translation in English of this word. ‘Enjoyment’ conveys the sense, contained in *jouissance*, of enjoyment of rights, of property, etc. Unfortunately, in modern English, the word has lost the sexual connotations it still retains in French. (*Jouir* is slang for ‘to come’)” (Translator’s Note, n.p.). Variants of this explanation have been provided in other translated seminars of Lacan as well. I personally prefer Johnston’s translation of the term. He calls it an “insistent enjoyment” (234), thereby capturing the tension that is privy to the concept of *jouissance*.

Lacan further differentiates between “*jouissance* expected” and “*jouissance* obtained” (Book XX 111). As the names suggests, the subject only ever attains the “*jouissance* obtained”, and that too with a cry of ““that’s not it”” (Lacan, Book XX 111). Thus, there exists a gap between the two, resulting in a constant recurrence (Johnston 239), a “repetition [...] founded on a return of enjoyment [*jouissance*]” (Lacan, Book XVII 13). As Lacan articulates:

If enjoyment is remarkable, and if it is ratified by having the sanction [...] of repetition, [...] it can only originate from a very slight gap in the meaning of enjoyment. [...] It is not a matter of a transgression, of an irruption into a forbidden field by a wearing away of vital regulatory systems. In fact it is only in this effect of entropy, in this wastage, that enjoyment takes on its status, that it makes itself known. [...] It is glimpsed in the dimension of loss [...], [it] has created enjoyment, and an enjoyment to be repeated (Book XVII 84-85).

This concurs with the notion that *jouissance* is not desire but rather, “opposed to desire” (Homer 94); it is “displeasure” (Lacan, Book X 125; cf. Lacan, Book XVII 112), that is, “the dissatisfaction that we experience with the failure of our desire” (Homer 94). Hence, it follows, that this very discrepancy between the desired and the obtained is necessary for *jouissance* to exist: “*jouissance* [...] must, of necessity, always remain *à venir*” (Johnston xxxiv), for “full satisfaction” is rather anti-climactic (239). And herein lies the paradox of *jouissance*: it “is an enjoyment that is enjoyable only insofar as it doesn’t get what it is ostensibly after” (239). In this sense, *jouissance* represents a utopia that can never be achieved and that which, if perchance achieved, ceases to be the object of *jouissance*.

2- The Object

Coming to the concept of abjection, in an interview, Kristeva defined it as

something that disgusts you, for example, you see something rotting and you want to vomit—it is an extremely strong feeling [...], which is above all a revolt against an external menace from which one wants to distance oneself, but of which one has the impression that it may menace us from the inside (Baruch 118).

However, this “menace” is not “an object facing me, which I name or imagine. Nor is it an object, an otherness ceaselessly fleeing in a systematic quest of desire” (Kristeva 2). It “has only one quality of the object—that of being opposed to I” (2). Thus, the object is “not me. Not that. But not nothing, either” (2) and abjection is “the state of rejecting or abjecting what is other to oneself” (McAfee 45). Moreover, it is horrifying, because it is “not a thing but a potentiality, a gravitational field that summons the subject from its proper place to a no-man’s land where the subject is not only ‘beside himself’ but also almost ceases to be” (Becker-Leckrone 33). This “summon[ing]” occurs within a maelstrom of elation and loathing (33). The object “is immoral, sinister, scheming, and shady: a terror that disassembles, a hatred that smiles, a passion that uses the body for barter instead of inflaming it, a debtor who sells you up, a friend who stabs you” (Kristeva 4).

What belongs in the realm of abjection? Kristeva shuns “the improper [and the] unclean” (2), “everything that is filthy or disorderly or uncivilized is in the same ‘place’ [...], in the realm of the object” (Covino 21). Death is also included in the object. Not that which signifies death, but that which “*show[s] me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to live” (Kristeva 3; emphasis in original) is the object. It is important to note, that the “filthy” and the “unclean” are not the object by virtue of their uncleanness, but because they belong to that which “disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the

ambiguous, the composite” (4). Abjection “involves a crisis of place” (Becker-Leckrone 32), it “draws the subject to the limits of its own defining boundaries” (32), bringing forth an identity crisis: “What is that? Is that me? What am I?” (32).

3-*Jouissance* in the Abject

The ambiguity of the abject puts it in close proximity to *jouissance* and the state of abjection is “a vortex of summons and repulsion” (Kristeva 1). “The abject [in essence] is something repulsive that both attracts and repels. It holds you there in spite of your disgust. It fascinates” (Oliver 55). Therefore, “it follows that *jouissance* alone causes the abject to exist as such. One does not know it, one does not desire it, one joys in it [*on enjouit*]. Violently and painfully. A passion” (Kristeva 9). Kristeva’s use of *jouissance* resembles the definition provided by Fink for this complex concept: “a pleasure that is excessive, leading to a sense of being overwhelmed or *disgusted*, yet simultaneously providing a source of *fascination*” (xii; emphasis mine).

Kristeva further comments:

We may call it a border; abjection is above all ambiguity. Because, while releasing a hold, it does not radically cut off the subject from what threatens [sic] it—on the contrary, abjection acknowledges it to be in perpetual danger. But also because abjection itself is a composite of judgment and affect, of condemnation and yearning, of signs and drives. (Kristeva 9-10).

Thus, the abject is held in place by *jouissance*: not desire, not conscious lust, but an unwilling attraction to the abject, a “condemnation and yearning”. Hence, *jouissance* is vital for the abject to affect the subject. It functions as the fuel which drives the subject towards the abject in a fitful passion of hate, repulsion, disgust, fascination, awe, wonder.

III-The Abject in *The Waste Land*

I begin with evidence of the presence of desolation in *The Waste Land*; then I will explore the interplay between hope and despair that strings the poem along, ultimately establishing death and desolation as the abject of the poem. The interplay between hope and despair also toys with the idea of *jouissance* and ambiguity in abjection, borderline scenarios, and the blurring of the lines.

1-The Presence of Desolation

Death is the prevalent condition of *The Waste Land*. The poem begins with the “cruelest” (TWL 1) of months, in a “land” that is “dead” (2), with entities which are “neither/ living nor dead” (39-40) and the “death [that] ha[s] undone so many” (63). Lines 20-24 depict acute desolation:

Son of man,
You cannot say, or guess, for you know only
A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,
And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,
And the dry stone no sound of water.

This passage illustrates what the title of the poem guarantees: a waste land (Brooker and Bentley 65). The speaker admonishes “son of man”, who had asked a moment before what could possibly “grow/ out of this stony rubbish?” (TWL 19-20). “Son of man” is further

informed that his vision is restricted due to the extreme aridness of the surrounding desert. The stillness of the scenario, the scorching heat are almost tangible enough to touch. The next line mentions “the dead tree [which] gives no shelter” (TWL 23), signifying old age (Booth 47-48), turning “the dead tree” into a guide towards, and the foreshadow of human being’s last home.

Parts from “What the Thunder Said” connect to “The Burial of the Dead”. The “agony” in “after the agony in stony places” (TWL 324) is also found in lines 19-24 (Leavis 97-98). Brooker and Bentley suggest the same and add that the “‘frosty silence,’ and ‘gardens’ of various kinds” also allude to the earlier passages (175). Moreover, the “fear in a handful of dust” (TWL 30) reappears in several other places and garbs, including the hooded figure of “What the Thunder Said” (Leavis 109). It “is partly the fear of death, but still more a nameless, ultimate fear, a horror of the complete negative” (109), a horror that evades explanation. And yet, death is also drawn in, called to, whispered to in a rush of contrasting emotions. Death is almost revered in the poem, the voices almost in unwilling awe of it, despite the repeated warnings against it. The horror is juxtaposed with an almost desirous acceptance of death. The voice intoning the invitation to “come in under the shadow of this red rock” (TWL 26) is almost siren-like, presenting the prospect of “fear in a handful of dust” (30) like a precious gift to be esteemed, lulling the readers’ senses and luring them into the awaiting fear and death.

Furthermore, the poem’s encounters with death increase as the poem nears the end. Where Part I mentions only the “Unreal City” (TWL 60) of London and its corpse-like inhabitants; towards the end, “Jerusalem Athens Alexandria/ Vienna” (376-375) join its ranks as well (Booth 205). Lines 322-330 indicate that the speaker finds themselves in the midst of a “catastrophe” (Brooker and Bentley 173). Hope has abandoned the speaker, indicated by the “were” in “we who were living” (TWL 329), giving way to the speaker’s anguished “wait[] for death” (Brooker and Bentley 174). Misery rules the Earth, razing through “endless plains, stumbling in cracked earth” (TWL 369), with “falling towers” (373), and the “murmur of maternal lamentation” (367), “the desert land and city streets of the first section [...] changed into apocalyptic visions” (Gish 95). Booth concurs that this disastrous scenario “suggest[s] thunderclaps, political upheaval, and bombs. The street-level, intimate view of London as an Unreal City has given way to an apocalyptic vista of Unreality that begins in the middle east and stretches west all the way back to London” (205). Leavis calls the transition to this passage “ominous[...]”, metamorphizing “into hallucinated vision and then into nightmare” (100): “the city splits apart, reforms, and explodes” (Brooker and Bentley 181). Thus, agony, despair, and bleakness dictate the poem and this very domination binds the passages together, so that the poem takes on a kind of unity in disunity, a fixedness in dissolution.

2-The Interplay between Hope and Despair

John Bishop, upon first reading *The Waste Land* called it “immense. Magnificent. Terrible” (Rainey 103). He read the poem almost compulsively several times a day, trying to decipher it (103). Such a reaction is akin to the poem’s own confrontation with desolation, the compulsive, repetitive, turning back to the same idea, all the while unable to come to terms with the immensity, the terrifying reality of death. This is especially evident in the recurrent interplay between hope and despair, as if the poem is trying again and again to reach the grassy knolls of hopefulness but the arid plains (“there is no water” [TWL 358]) of despair keep pulling it back into its bleakness and to the “sneer[ing] snarl[ing] faces” (344). The poem hovers in the space between “living” and “dying”, in the chasm “between hopefulness and hopelessness” (Reeves 85). Booth’s analysis of *The Waste Land* contemplates a similar idea: the poem is “not only

[...] a place of death and depression, which it undoubtedly is, but also [...] a place containing elements that might transform death and depression into their opposites” (46).

The poem’s initial-most lines exemplify this interplay quite aptly: the cruelty of April is life-giving to “lilacs” that sprout from a “dead land”, yet the “roots” are “dull”, although “the spring rain” seems promising (*TWL* 1-4). Uncannily, Spring gives way to “Winter”, albeit a “warm” one, providing sustenance, meagre and “dried” as it was, to “a little life” (5-7). Even the line breaks in lines 1-7 accompany the hope-death symphony through the constant “stopping and starting, a repeated anticipation of the next line” that is caused by the “-ing” endings (Reeves 34; cf. Gish 47).²

Lines 23-29 offer another example of this juxtaposition: “And the dry stone no sound of water. Only/ There is shadow under this red rock,/ (Come in under the shadow of this red rock)”. The “only” before the revelation of the “shadow under this red rock” serves as a moment of relief. It “sounds as though it is about to offer the ‘shelter’ and ‘relief’ denied by the ‘dead tree’, ‘cricket’ and ‘dry stone’” (Reeves 40). But only a moment of relief it is, for the “shadow” soon turns ominous: it seems not to belong to the category of shadows forevermore imprisoned to material entities (*TWL* 28-29), but seems to have a life of its own, capable to turning “a handful of dust” into fear. Thus, hope quickly morphs into desolation.

The same tug-of-war is represented in lines 331-358. The section tries its best to look for water and succeeds in conjuring it through “the poetry’s sounding, drip-dropping with refreshing cadence” (Reeves 88). The auditory water negates the “absence” (88) of it, if only “for a lyrical moment” (88). Brooker and Bentley posit that “the hermit-thrush” (*TWL* 356) song is a “desire for [even] the sound of water” (177) and Gish theorizes that it holds “images of moisture” (94). I opine that the “desire” and “images” also counter the lack of water, just like the “drip-dropping” of the verse. The poem soon realizes, however, that all effort is futile: “there is no water” to be had (Reeves 88; cf. Gish 94).

Similarly, the thunder in “What the Thunder Said”, posits Booth, “implies rain, and rain is what the voices in the poem have been wishing for: rain, fertility, rebirth, springtime” (197). However, “there is no sense of relief here. Instead, there is anxiety, obsessive reiteration, and a lack of narrative thread”³ (197). The whole section is filled with a nervous tension, “surrealistic, nightmarish” (Gish 91), “a chorus of anxious voices” (Booth 201). The hope represented in the title is quickly snuffed out and “the verse loses all buoyancy, and takes on a dragging, persistent movement as of hopeless exhaustion” (Leavis 98-99).

These lines and others corroborate the juxtaposition of hope with the ever-looming presence of death, resulting in a constant push-and-pull between the two. This dualism is deceptive in the sense that it “deceitfully signals the presence of the other” (Reeves 40), thereby calling forth “the ambiguous union of possibility and loss” (Gish 47). The poem, thus, contains a potentiality, a duality. However, said potentiality is static, unmoving, in the sense that it is maintained throughout, the tension between hope and despair is resolutely upheld, neither giving way to the other.

² Reeves, however, imagines the push-and-pull here to be between “wanting to forget and having to remember”, rather than between hope and despair and he further equates the “syntax” and “line-breaks” to be representative of this tug-of-war (34).

³ Unlike Booth, Gish opines that this section does, indeed, have a “narrative structure” (91).

3-Despair and Death as the Abject

The interplay between death and hope positions the abject as a central part of the poem, for the abject does not respect borders; abjection itself “is above all ambiguity” (Kristeva 9), the “borderline condition” (Naughton 173) that is death in the poem. The easy transferability of the living and the dead (“He who was living is now dead/ We who are living are now dying” [TWL 328-329]) catches the disintegration of borders, bringing the poem face-to-face with death. Said easy transferability occurs throughout the poem, so that *The Waste Land* contends with desolation throughout the poem, throughout its ‘self’. “As abjection, this violence signals a dynamic that shapes the subject not just in the beginning, but always” (Becker-Leckrone 32). The poem is unable to escape it, for it lurks in the corners, in dark alleyways, in the “crowd” that “flowed over London Bridge” (TWL 62) and it “disturbs identity, system, order” (Kristeva 4). Desolation, hence, with its ever-rearing head, disrupts the poem over and over again.

Rainey follows the voices in the poem, from their initial commanding start to “that final, perplexed, and plaintive ‘I’” (107-108). This change in tone is key to understanding death as the abject of the poem: from the once in-command, imposing speaker, to the voice towards the end, sounding fearful like that of a child in the night, who is scared of the shadow of the tree outside its window. Facing the abject is essentially facing one’s worst horrors, one’s worst nightmares, made doubly horrifying by the dawning realization that the opponent is not an object but an alter-ego, a part of one’s own self. It is only natural, then, for the command in the voice to turn to fear, the power in it to turn to gasping horror.

“Who is the third who walks always beside you?” (TWL 359), asks a voice, scared and doubting of its vision. “When I count”, it goes on, “there are only you and I together” (360). But a look ahead shows “another one walking beside you” (362). The voice continues, sounding increasingly alarmed, “—But who is that on the other side of you?” (365).⁴ The dash at the beginning signifies acute distress, causing the harried question to hang in the air between those walking together. “Eliot’s gliding hooded being”, comments Booth, “harks back to the many *Waste Land* figures who hover between life and death” (203) and represents a “presence one longs to acknowledge but cannot” (Gish 94). Much like the hooded figure,

Drought [in ‘What the Thunder Said’] becomes a metaphor for spiritual drought, despair, doubt, need for spiritual certainty; and throughout the poem the protagonist continues to suffer his unallayed thirst, though it is in the final section, [...] the fiction of thirst is brought to a climax. The thirst becomes unbearable, the doubt and despair intense” (Miller 444; cf. Leavis 98).

The drought of various situations and contexts plagues *The Waste Land* and the poem’s relationship with this desolation of the soul and surroundings depicts desire. Ultimately, both, the hooded figure and the drought, embody *jouissance*: the verses are unwillingly drawn to them, in equal parts fascinated and sickened.

Through its incessant dealings with the abject, the poem finds itself at the edge of meaning, for the abject “does not respect borders, positions, rules” (Kristeva 4). The close juxtaposition of the poem with desolation has brought the poem to “the fragile border” (207) where its identity is “altered, abject” (207). It brings forth an existential crisis, so to speak: “where am I?” (8), “what is that? Is that me? What am I?” (Becker-Leckrone 32). The poem, in

⁴ Brooker and Bentley (178) think that line 365 alludes to another figure who walks as well, different than the first ghostly figure.

its effort to keep the abjection of death at bay, invites it to the threshold of objectivism over and over again, yet that threshold is never crossed, is doomed never to be crossed.

IV-Conclusion

Critics of *The Waste Land* are divided at the concept of unity: some claim that the poem possesses unity (Richards 274; Leavis 103), others reflect the opposite (Aiken 196; Ellison 203). “There were its discontinuities, its changes of pace and its hidden system of organization which escaped me” (Ellison 203). The poem, thus, affected Ellison’s sensibilities while eluding his sense. One way to overcome this astute nonunderstanding and, subsequently, to join the supporters crying unity, is a reading of the poem purported in this paper. If death is understood to be the abject, then the “discontinuities”, the “changes of pace”, as well as “the hidden system of organization” remold themselves into a coherent whole, appealing simultaneously to intelligence and emotions. The separate fragments constituting the poem are bound together by abjection, causing them to exist together within a vortex of yearning and shunning.

Mitchell remarks that “Spring [in the poem] is *memento mori*” (25). The analysis that I undertook in this paper reveals that, in fact, the entire poem is a reminder of death. Not, however, only the morbid reminder that the poem intends to be, depicting “acute anguish in the face of one’s deepest fears about death, loss, and betrayal” (Gish 8), but simultaneously a fascinated, fervent one, that cannot help but long for death, despite knowing better. Just as *The Waste Land* had “seized [Ellison’s] mind” (203), one could conjecture after analyzing the poem for the abject, that death had the poem, its “people” (Mitchell 23-24), and its landscape in its grip.

Hence, the complaint that “the thunder brings no rain to revive the Waste Land, and the poem ends where it began” (Leavis 103; cf. Reeves 95) is a moot one. For to expect the disappearance of desolation is a fool’s hope, as such a resolution would damage the *jouissance* of the situation, the eternal discrepancy between the desired and the obtained (Lacan, *Book XX* 111). For *jouissance* and the abject to be maintained, the situation has to be constant, unchanging arid thirst for something that is simultaneously abhorred. The poem needs to be in a constant loop of play and repeat.

Booth contends that *The Waste Land* reconfigures itself with every reading, depending on the details in focus (How to Use this Book, n.p.). Reading the poem in the light of abject theory also leads to a reconfiguration, one that can be pivotal to understanding one of the underlying meanings of the work and situating said meaning in the modern context, not only in terms of “loss and desire” (Gish 7), but also the repressed that hides behind them and that which does not—cannot—remain hidden for long. In understanding desolation to be the abject, one could transfer said abjection to the real world and perhaps interpret anew the bleakness that has become our reality.

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