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Spring 2013

**THE 'ONTOLOGY OF READING'. BEYOND  
'REALISM' AND THE PROBLEM OF  
REFERENCE VIA ELIOT AND SWINBURNE**

Pier Giuseppe Monateri, *University of Turin*



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*MAURO BALESTRIERI*

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1. ELIOT'S SWINBURNE : A REAPPRAISAL OF THE PROBLEM OF REFERENCE VIA LITERARY CRITICISM

Eliot defines his poetics via his criticism, and the way he criticizes Swinburne is of peculiar importance for his main critical concept : the objective correlative

As a matter of fact the essay which Eliot has dedicated to 'Swinburne as a poet' ends with a statement which sounds crucial to the poetical project of Eliot, being centered, as it is, upon the relation between (the) language and its objects.

*"The bad poet dwells partly in a world of objects and partly in a world of words, and he never can get them to fit. Only a man of genius could dwell so exclusively and consistently among words as Swinburne".*

Though this statement is one of admiration for Swinburne's genius, it can hardly be interpreted as an appreciation of his work. Indeed, as Eliot clarifies<sup>1</sup> :

*"Language in a healthy state presents the object, is so close to the object that the two are identified ... [But] They are identified in the verse of Swinburne solely because the object has ceased to exist, because the meaning is merely the hallucination of meaning, because language, uprooted, has adapted itself to an independent life of atmospheric nourishment. In Swinburne, for example, we see the word "weary" flourishing in this way independent of the particular and actual weariness of flesh or spirit."*

Eliot's criticism is that the language of Swinburne copes with objects, making them disappear, and in this way his meanings become "hallucinations". Swinburne brings (the) language to an independent life "dwelling exclusively among words". But for Eliot this is not only a defect of

expression, but of thought. Indeed in the other essay dedicated to Swinburne, where he is analyzed as a critic,<sup>ii</sup> Eliot states: "Swinburne stops thinking just at the moment when we are most zealous to go on." In both cases we have a man of genius, but who is so fascinated by words to 'stop thinking' and to devoid language of meaning. Swinburne is able to produce effective statements, only because they appear to be tremendous as those we make in our dreams.

It is quite evident, then, that the most crucial point for Eliot's poetic project, the use of objectives correlative to express precise emotions, finds in Swinburne a real counterpart, because in his poems meanings are mere 'hallucinations' and language is devoid of its own reference, in order to produce pure music, and these poems are effective only insofar as they evoke tremendous dreams.

Now it becomes intriguing for the contemporary reader to reappraise this criticism after the controversy about the linguistic abyss of postmodernity, and the new sprung of a 'Reality Hunger'.<sup>iii</sup> After all Eliot is invoking a referential nature of poetry against its conception as pure verbal music, without any precise reference, except for vague emotions and an atmosphere of nourishment.

The question of the objective correlative could be renewed precisely in relation to this actual debate. What is at stake for Eliot here does not seem to be 'reality' or truth, but 'meaning' *in relation to objects*; I understand that for most of the people today the relation between a word and an object is perceived only in terms of 'reference' and reference is appraised only in terms of truth. But I maintain that this is a very limited way to cope with words and objects and their reciprocal relations. The matter here, I think, is rather a question of how a text

produces its meaning independently of its truth, and so beyond the mere problem of reference.

I think that what Eliot is stating is that a poet like Swinburne produces meaning through the music of words. This is not the way meaning comes out, for instance, from Prufrock. Even if in this poem there is a distinct musicality, it conveys a meaning to audience through 'objects' : sawdust restaurants, oyster shells, one night cheap hotels, skirts that trail along the floor, cups, marmalade and tea... and so forth. Maybe never as in Prufrock the 'I' has been such a 'state of the objects'.

From this standpoint Swinburne is the perfect antagonist of the Tuscan poets Eliot admired so much. (The) Provence, for instance, to take an 'object' comparable to the Tuscans' imagery, is depicted by Swinburne - according to Eliot - in the following terms:

*“Swinburne defines the place by the most general word, which has for him its own value. “Gold,” “ruin,” “dolorous”: it is not merely the sound that he wants, but the vague associations of idea that the words give him. He has not his eye on a particular place, as [Dante’s] Li ruscelletti che dei verdi colli / Del Casentin discendon giuso in Arno...”*

It is, in fact, the word that gives (to) Swinburne a thrill, not the object. And what he wants is even worst, for Eliot, than mere music : it is precisely those 'vague associations of idea' that are always the target of his critical judgement.

I think we must remember that the matter here is purely esthetic. Swinburne's poems produce meaning via the music of words, and they aim just at evoking vague associations of idea, trying to provoke a reaction in the reader, which is effective when it becomes 'tremendous'.



This is patently the opposite of the esthetics of modernism in its reappraisal of tuscan poetry against the victorians. All this has nothing to do with (the) 'reference' even if it has a lot to do with the content of words, and the relation between language and the world, in 'aesthetic' terms.

Prufrock, or *The Waste Land*, are certainly not less fictitious than any of Swinburne's poems, but fiction here is reached through objectives correlative to attain its scope, in a time when for Eliot the 'only' way to evoke precise emotions was to evoke them by means of their objective correlative, that's to say by 'objects'.

Therefore I argue that we can really appreciate Eliot's critique of Swinburne's poetry only developing further the ontology intrinsic to this critical concept, and the way it can help us to reframe our received ideas about language in its relation to facts.

## 2. WORDS AS SOUNDS AND WORDS AS VIEWS

I presume that the most durable part of Eliot's contribution to a theory of language and literariness can be seen in the sharp opposition between the music aspect of words and the visual nature of them, as it is envisaged in this essay on Swinburne.

We are all used to conceive words as sounds, especially after that the theory of language has been reframed in modern terms by De Saussure. His main point was, indeed, that since words are sounds, there is but an arbitrary connection between language and the world. It is quite apparent that, for instance, '*brot*' and '*pain*' are very different sounds and therefore that the way a language designates (the) 'bread' is totally arbitrary. Besides if words are sounds we can try to follow the music nature of language moulding verses after it and so starting to dwell in a world of pure words. This is actually what Tolkien amused to do inventing elfin poems which naturally are but a collection of sounds giving the atmosphere of what we presume to be 'elfin'.

Of course there is much truth in this approach: languages do possess a their own distinct intonation and musicality, and when we listen to a foreigner speaking his own blend (of what?) we are captured by how different are his sounds from ours. But what is at stake in the theory of objective correlative, taken as a theory of (the) literary language, is the 'visual' aspects of phrases, I mean the possibility for words and phrases to 'depict' in literary terms an object, a fact, or a chain of events. In this way we 'see' facts and objects in phrases if they are precise enough, as we do when we read Dante, or Cavalcanti. In the measure in which they may be seen as 'ideas' they are visual constructs, as the greek term

undeniably suggests, and a visually precise linguistic construct is also a thought, and not a vague association.

From this standpoint, and if we look for the inner links making 'modernism' something real, and not a mere gathering of different authors under a comfortable, or for the most of time dis-comfortable label, the interest of Pound for Chinese script is certainly not bizarre.

Western scripts, moulded as they are on phonetic signs point to the sound-nature of words, and try to reproduce it. A Chinese Character may have phonetic elements in itself but is essentially an 'image' rendering the visual nature of words apparent. The 'sign' for *Wang*, King, is a vertical line connecting three horizontal lines, earth, man and heaven. Here we 'see' the king in its ritual role to connect the universe into his 'kingship'. There is hardly something arbitrary in this visual-sign, and it has nothing to do with the actual sound of the word.

What is important is that in this way the 'word', seen as a character, captures and communicates the essence of the 'political' idea behind this theory of 'kingship' as it becomes embedded in language as its own visual representation.

Now the matter is : what is the word, the vision, the sound or the sign ?

In Western scripts (script è sceneggiatura, writing?) the word is undoubtedly the sound, and the signs are just chosen to represent it. But also in Western blends words are much more than their sounds and transcript. Let's take the latin term for *Wang*, which is *Rex*. It is undeniable that also the 'sound' *Rex* actually represents an 'image'; it is a visual word. Indeed *Rex* is formed by a reference to *Rectum*, that's to say:

‘Straight’, *di-rectum*, *diritto*, which in medieval latin, and in to-day italian, designates also the Law, and therefore there is a visual connection between the King, and the Law, and what is Straight. It is not only a conceptual link, but a visual one, since the sound evokes the image of the straight line: this line, dividing right and wrong, is the ‘objective’ correlative of the sound, being also a precise political idea of (the) Kingship.

These kinds of visual links are normally framed as etymologies, but, if we take the theory of objective correlative seriously, they are more visual than merely etymological. Once again we ‘see’ a particular political theory of kingship in the word for King, and we ‘see’ a very different political theology in the Chinese character for ‘Wang’. Under this respect the ‘sound’ of the word is quite immaterial.

What is the more striking here is how much the visual theory of language, that I presume to be at the root of Eliot’s critical work on Swinburne, is important for the theory of *translation*, especially of poems.

When we translate a poem we certainly cannot render the original music or sound of it, but we can translate a ‘conceit’ made by John Donne rendering it quite perfectly in a foreign language, just because it is a vision, and as such it is a thought. Fun as it can be, if we conceive the language more as visual than as music, we can understand translation better. What is at stake behind a word is a view, and maybe the word itself is a view-device, which has an arbitrary sound.

It is very important here to understand how vision is different from reference. Vision is representation, and as such it is always a going beyond reference by its very essence; it is always, by definition, to

supersede the mere reference. The matter is not that Wang and Rex refer(s) to the King, but that these terms represent the King in different ways, and that, at this point the question if they have or not the same referent is a matter of debate, even if it is true that in a novel, but maybe not in a book of comparative law, we will translate both of them by the English term King.

It is quite clear, for me, that if a word is a view, it is meaningless to ask for the 'objectivity' of a word, especially when it designates with precision an object. The most precise the word is, the most it embeds a view, which, as such, can never be neutral or simply objective.

The phrase 'a word is a view' means that the 'object' is captured into the word by a certain representation of it, which is used to bring it to others in a certain way. This entails, so long as we have to do with physical objects, that languages do represent the world in different terms but not arbitrarily. Especially when we deal with 'social' or 'political' objects, it is true that a King, a Wang and a Rex are not really 'the same thing', and *this is effectively true*: they have never been the same political institution, and this 'fact' is perfectly caught by the words used to denote this institution. The difficulty of translation does not arise from the nature of language, but represents the differences of political arrangements and conceptions.

In this way - I think - we can try to appreciate how far Eliot is developing, in his essays on Swinburne, a 'modernist' theory of (the) literary language, which *has nothing to do* with the structuralist paradigm imposed on linguistics by the De Saussure's, and his followers', interpretation of the nature of words in term of signs and sounds.



### 3. OBJECTIVES CORRELATIVE AS ONTOLOGICAL DEVICES

If words are not simply arbitrary sounds with a conventional reference, but complex devices of thought, capturing reality and 'governing' the excess of meaning of objects in visual terms, the theory of objective correlative becomes an ontological theory about language and reality, shaping their relation in an unexpected and unusual way.

This idea is connected by Eliot to his theory of Allegory. This is not a mere rhetorical device but the product of a mind educated to have visions. An allegorical poem, like Dante's *Commedia*, is to be thought as the precise report made by the poet of his actual visions; of his thoughts as they can be expressed by a mind educated to have and refine visions. We have no more visions, but only thoughts, since we are no longer educated to have them. But in a world like Dante's, a poet was thinking through images, and his (script) (*qui non va, writing?*) was a way to translate views into words to further develop a concept. Under such a theory the 'correlative objective' is the modernist formula for Allegory, and since allegory must refer to objects and facts, living exclusively among words, as Swinburne does, is abandoning thoughts in favor of hallucinations; and we all know how much for Eliot poetry had to be an 'intellectual' enterprise, since to express a precise emotion we need the same amount of intelligence needed to express a precise idea . (Attenzione al fatto che allegory da De Man è vista in senso derridiano come differimento, non come conceit. Ma già, poi rispondi sotto).

It is of intriguing importance to notice that Northrop Frye considered the 'conceit' of the metaphysical poets, the *symbolisme* and the objective correlative as a kind of anti-allegorical imagery<sup>iv</sup>. But his theory is based on a distinction between implicit and explicit which

does not capture the nature of the relationship between allegory and correlative objective. He distinguishes between an imagery which is explicit in its reference as "... the continuous allegories, like *The Pilgrim's Progress* and *The Faerie Quenne*" and the imagery which is becoming "...the most elusive, anti-explicit and anti-allegorical". From this standpoint it is certainly true that the baroque 'conceit' and the correlative objective are less explicit than the *Pilgrim's Progress*, but I do not think that here Frye has reached the bulk of the matter. The problem is not being elusive or explicit in these terms. A correlative objective is anti-elusive in its reference to a precise object, even if the meaning, let's say of the Waste Land, is produced by its deferment and its fragmentation. Prufrock keeps elusive being constructed by pure correlative objectives that are, all, very clear images. By contrast the meaning of the *Faerie Quenne* remains highly elusive on many points, even if the allegorical device employed is perfectly patent.

The question is not then reference and meaning as such but the very possibility of an 'ontological reading' of Eliot's theory about language, words and objects.

I do not want to plunge into the details of the birth of the concept of 'correlative objective', but there is an often bypassed reference which is important here to remind, especially because it lies outside (of) the literary field, as it is to be found in the work of a German jurist Adolf Reinach<sup>v</sup> who has been a pupil of Husserl. (Alcunisostengo che l'abbia trato da Husserl) In his theory of legal promises he distinguishes the 'state of mind' of the promisor from his 'correlative objectives', for instance the written instrument embodying in words his promise. This point is of great importance since it was on Reinach's work that John



Austin (ha anche scritto *Sense and Sensibilia*, alludendo alla sua omonima, che se non sbaglio deriva da Russell) built his famous work on '*How to do things with words*',<sup>vi</sup> which in turn began the basis of the actual social ontology developed by John Searle<sup>vii</sup>. In Reinach, Austin and Searle there are 'social objects', like contracts, marriages and so on, having an ontological status different from purely physical objects, like mountains, and from pure state of minds. Here words do assume a legal and social character as they have 'correlative objectives'. Now the parallel with Eliot, and his criticism of Swinburne, shows once again the necessity to back to the metaphysical standpoint of his early dissertation on Bradley. It is in this work that we find the same problem of the relation between states of mind and objects wonderfully stated by Eliot in the following terms:

*"I" am a state of my objects*"<sup>viii</sup>

What we can envisage in this thought, in relation to the critique of 'dwelling exclusively among words', is the possibility for Eliot of an 'ontological reading' of words, imagery, and states of mind. After all if the only way to express a precise emotion is to produce its correlative objectives, this is so *because* an emotion *has* correlative objectives; there really *is* an ontological link between states of mind and objects.

I suggest to use 'ontological' because this term is, in this context, stronger and more precise than 'metaphysical'. It is not a matter of 'entities' lying somewhere at the root of things, but a matter of how objects, physical, social, and so forth, embody thoughts and feelings. In an allegory, as in a correlative objective, the objects become devices which locate subjects and emotions, and a poem, in these terms, is a rendering of these devices.

#### 4. THE ONTOLOGY OF READING

The analysis of Eliot's criticism to Swinburne as a poet discloses, I think, from my standpoint, the very possibility for an 'ontological reading' of texts as implicit in Eliot literary theory. Texts are objects, containing social objects, words, pointing at other physical and social objects, as chains of events. Words, especially, have a visual nature, constitute(s) (build? Create?) (themselves) an imagery, by which we can capture precise thoughts and emotions, since both are linked as it was known by the Elizabethans and the Tuscans before the great dissociation<sup>ix</sup> of XVII and XVIII century, which brought the world of ideas far from that of feelings. The great effort of modernism, as interpreted by Eliot, can be framed in terms of restoring the way of thinking which preceded this dissociation in relation to the new landscape of objects of the modern urban town. In order to do this we must abandon the victorians, and especially that kind of romanticism which decayed in the brilliant but void associations of words and music trying to evoke vague emotions where meanings become hallucinations.

What relevance can such poetical project have for us to-day?

I think that the most promising path lies in its reappraisal for a different reconstruction of the problem of 'reference'.

If a word is more a vision than a sound, and it is a device, a social object working as a device, the real matter is not that of reference in terms of the word X corresponding to the external referent y, nor if there is or not a y corresponding to it. The matter becomes how thoughts and emotions are located and redirected by these visual devices which are our words, which - being visions - must necessarily include objects as constituent parts of our thoughts and emotions.

In a way Eliot, precisely as he defines himself at the opposite of Swinburne, can be a guide toward an extension of the 'Visual Turn' even into the proper realm of language.

## ENDNOTES

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- <sup>i</sup> T.S.Eliot, Swinburne as a poet, in Id., *The Sacred Wood*, New York, Barnes & Nobles, 1928.
- <sup>ii</sup> T.S.Eliot, Swinburne as a critic, *ivi*.
- On the T.S. Eliot and Swinburne relationship see Cassandra Laity, *T.S. Eliot and A.C. Swinburne : Decadent Bodies, Modern Visualities, and Changing Modes*, in 'Modernism/modernity, 11, n.3 (2004): 425-448.
- <sup>iii</sup> David Shields, *Reality Hinger : a manifesto*, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 2010.
- <sup>iv</sup> Northop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1957, p. 91
- <sup>v</sup> Adolf Reinach, *Die apriorischen Grundlagen des buergerlichen Rechtes*, Halle, Max Niemeyer, 1913.
- <sup>vi</sup> J.L. Austin, *How to do Things with Words*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1962.
- <sup>vii</sup> John R. Searle, *Speech Acts: an Essay in the Philosophy of Language*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1969.
- <sup>viii</sup> T.S. Eliot, *Experience and the Objects of Knowledge*, in the *Philosophy of F.H.Bradley*. pp.23-24, cited by Eric Thompson, *T.S. Eliot . The Metaphysical Perspective*, Carbondale, Southern Illinois University Press, 1963, 2nd Printing, 1865, p. 45.
- <sup>ix</sup> Cairns Craig, *Yeats, Eliot, Pound and the Politics of Poetry*, Pittsburgh, The University of Pittsburgh Press, 1982, p. 205.