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# T.S. Eliot and the Language of Hysteria

> The search for a sureness of identity relies on the disturbance of the woman to give it form.
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> —Jacqueline Rose

IN LATE DECEMBER 1925, Conrad Aiken underwent several painful operations to correct a rectal fistula. Recovering in hospital, still "drugged profoundly with morphine," Aiken wrote to his friend and former Harvard classmate, T.S. Eliot, thanking him for his new book, *Poems 1909–1925*. Aiken's letter is full of envious praise for the collection's homogeneity and his friend's assured sense of literary identity: "How the devil did you manage to discover your identity so early? One imagines that you might have sat, 'hat in hand, on the doorstep of the Absolute,' at the age of five—your mind and manners already distinct and distinguished. While the rest of us spend our lives trying to find out who we are." Eliot obviously thought the fullness of Aiken's praise rather too fulsome, somewhat excessive, for he replied, after a few days with

> a page torn out of the Midwives Gazette: instructions to those about to take exams for nurseing [sic] certificates. At the top, T.S.E. had underlined the words *Model Answers*. Under this was a column descriptive of various forms of vaginal discharge, normal and abnormal. Here the words *blood*, *mucous*, and *shreds of mucous* had been underlined with a pen, and lower down also the phrase *purulent offensive discharge*. Otherwise no comment.

Pained and mortified, Aiken replied the next day:

> Have you tried Kotex for it? Manufactured by the Dupont Powder Co. Absorbent, Deodorant, Antiseptic .... A boon to women the world over .... KOTEX. Used with success by Blue-eyed Claude the Cabin Boy!

The reference to Blue-eyed Claude is glossed by Aiken thus:

> Blue-eyed Claude the cabin boy,
> the clever little nipper
> who filled his ass with broken glass
> and circumcised the skipper.

Aiken reports that three days later Eliot called: "a little flustered and embarrassed, a little at a disadvantage, but excessively friendly. There was no reference to his communication to me, and only a passing reference by me to my suggestion of Kotex, a suggestion for which he thanked me."[1]

What are we to make of this strange and unseemly correspondence between two male writers which draws its imagery from the gynaecological discourse of female discharges and sanitary napkins? An answer, I will suggest, can be found precisely in the very impropriety and excessiveness of the epistolary exchange, an excessiveness which draws our attention to the overdetermined figure, used by both Eliot and Aiken, of the female body and its reproductive functions as analogues or images of linguistic offenses and disorder.

Interpreted either as a direct rebuke of Aiken's excessive verbal outpouring which is likened to "offensive" female discharge or as a disavowal of the distinction of his own work now likened to female pollution, Eliot's bizarre response relies on a metaphorical construction that finds support in contemporary physiological and medical discourses in which woman's reproductive system is linked to her emotionality, her susceptibility to hysterical outbursts.

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[1] The details of this exchange between Aiken and Eliot are given in Aiken's letter to Robert N. Linscott, dated 4 Jan.1926, in *Selected Letters of Conrad Aiken*, ed. Joseph Killorin (New Haven: Yale UP, 1978) 109–10.

The historian Carroll Smith-Rosenberg describes, for example, how "the first question routinely asked hysterical women was 'Are your courses regular?'" and how medical practitioners, like a certain Thomas Laycock, saw hysteria as "the natural state" in a female and only "a morbid state" in the male.[2]

Returning to the scene of epistolary exchange, we learn that in his reply to Eliot's outburst, Aiken takes up the same medical discourse of hysteria's sexual etiology to remind Eliot that his criticism of Aiken's gushy letter is itself excessive, hysterical, uncontrolled and in need of prophylaxis. Moreover, in recommending Kotex and in referring to male discharges as well, Aiken follows Eliot in hinting that hysteria, though a female malady, may also infect men. Eliot's sheepish thanks to Aiken's suggestion reveals that he understood Aiken's point about his (Eliot's) own hysterical language, his "offensive" verbal discharge and of the need for some kind of discipline or order for which Kotex becomes the unlikely symbol in this highly hysterical exchange between two Harvard-educated poets. Hysteria, for these two men, though marked as feminine, clearly remains a threat, a morbid condition that they must control and master lest it infect their writing and result in another similar round of discharges.

It may appear that I am making too much of this strange episode in the long, generally amicable and unhysterical relationship between Aiken and Eliot. A case of hysterical reading perhaps. But if, as Hélène Cixous has remarked, hysteria is "an element that disturbs arrangements,"[3] then a hysterical reading is needed to disturb those critical protocols and habits which have either ignored or suppressed the complex relation between linguistic control and hysteria that exists in Eliot's early work: a somewhat strident insistence on poetic form and order attests to the threat of feminine hysteria and the repeated calls for poetic discipline confess and, one suspects, confirm the poet's fear of catching the female malady. What we see in Eliot's early criticism and poetry is therefore the valorization of a poetics of order which, to

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[2] See Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America* (New York: Knopf, 1985) 206.

[3] Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clement, *The Newly Born Woman*, trans. Betsy Wing (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1986) 156.

paraphrase Jacqueline Rose's concise description of the masculine construction of female hysteria, requires the disturbance of the woman to give it legitimacy.[4]

A central concern of Eliot's work has been the preservation of a proper regime of cultural and linguistic representation, what in Lacanian theory is called the symbolic order, the structure that underwrites "the social and cultural order in which we live our lives as conscious, gendered subjects."[5] We know that in Lacan's theory of the psycho-sexual development of the subject, the symbolic order occurs after the resolution of the Oedipal crisis in which the Father's "No," the incest taboo, intervenes and separates the child from its dyadic relationship with the Mother and installs it as a socialized or acculturated subject aware of its sexual identity, its place in a familial and kinship network, and its enunciative position in the system of language. Moreover, the Father's "No" (*non*) is also the Father's "Name" (*nom*), the phallus, the primary or master signifier that guarantees not only sexual difference but also the very possibility of human communication and language. In short, the symbolic order in which we live as communicating social and cultural beings is patriarchal, phallocentric, and dependent on the repression of the subject's unmediated relation to the Mother (or woman as such) and on the withholding of the phallus or master signifier from her.[6]

I adopt a Lacanian terminology here not because I agree with its universalistic logic of psycho-sexual development but because its phallocentric structure is both reproduced in Eliot's family and culture and clearly inscribed in the anxieties that run through his work. Eliot grew up in a family whose patriarchal nature he was never allowed to forget, not least by his mother who had thoroughly internalized the paternal law and had published, when Eliot was sixteen, a memoir of his grandfather, William Greenleaf Eliot, dedicating it to her children "Lest They Forget."[7] Years later,

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[4] See Jacqueline Rose, "George Eliot and the Spectacle of Woman," *Sexuality in the Field of Vision* (London: Verso, 1986) 119.

[5] Chris Weedon, *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987) 52.

[6] See Anika Lemaire, *Jacques Lacan*, trans. David Macey (London: Routledge, 1977) esp. 78–92.

[7] See Lyndall Gordon, *Eliot's Early Years* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1977) 8.

Eliot was to recall his grandfather as one who "rules his sons and his sons' sons from the grave."[8] "The standard of conduct," Eliot remembered, "was that which my grandfather had set; our moral judgements, our decisions between duty and self-indulgence, were taken as if, like Moses, he had brought down the table of the Law, any deviation from which would be sinful."[9] His character formed by the strictly patriarchal order of his family, it is little wonder that Eliot's writing respects the phallocentric structure of sexual difference, gender hierarchy and stable, post-Oedipal identity and demonstrates an anxious desire to protect and preserve the symbolic order of language and culture made possible by those phallocentric distinctions.

With troubling frequency, women appear in Eliot's early work as figures who threaten precisely to unhinge and dismantle the symbolic order of cultural, sexual and linguistic representation. Whenever disorder threatens standards of poetic creation or criticism the figure of woman is not far away. In "Reflections on Vers Libre" (1917), Eliot's defence of the discipline of poetic metre is occasioned by the skittish dilettantism of "a lady renowned in her small circle for the accuracy of her stop-press information of literature."[10] Against the lady's unthinking celebration of metrical liberation, Eliot raises the necessities of limitation and form in the following formulation: "the ghost of some simple metre should lurk behind the arras in even the 'freest' verse; to advance menacingly as we doze, and withdraw as we rouse" (187). The ghost of metre, which should no doubt alert us to the ghost of Hamlet's father, advances a law, a paternal interdiction against renegades both poetic and feminine.

In another early essay, "Hamlet and His Problems" (1919), the problems really amount to one, namely, Gertrude. The play is a problem and a failure, according to Eliot, because Shakespeare could neither find a way to externalize Hamlet's feelings nor come up with objective correlatives for his hero's emotions. And what

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[8] Eliot, in an interview with V.S. Pritchett in *The New York Times*, 21 Sept. 1958; cited in Peter Ackroyd, *T.S. Eliot* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1984) 16.

[9] Eliot, "American Literature and the American Language," *To Criticize the Critic and Other Writings* (London: Faber, 1965) 44.

[10] *To Criticize the Critic* 183.

prevents Hamlet (and thus, by extension, his creator) from conveying his feelings objectively in the symbolic order of language is his mother, who occasions an excess of emotion but is unable, argues Eliot, to provide "an adequate equivalent for it." In the patriarchal world of Shakespeare's play, Gertrude's name is frailty; less than her male counterparts, she is, as Eliot puts it, "negative and insignificant." But, at the same time, she is a figure of excess arousing "in Hamlet the feeling which she is incapable of representing."[11] The problem of Gertrude is thus the problem of the play, *Hamlet*; the dissociation of her character, both excessive and inadequate, is written across the body of the play, which is itself split into feelings that remain inexpressible and expressions that can only inadequately represent emotions. What we have in Eliot's analysis of Hamlet's dissociation is nothing less than a description of hysteria which in its most rudimentary form has been characterized by Freud and Breuer as "the splitting of consciousness."[12] Woman, dissociation, hysteria--these terms are interchangeable in Eliot's writing and together they issue a warning clearly sounded in his reading of *Hamlet*: the problem of femininity, its hysterical dissociation of feeling from meaning, is contagious and responsible for Hamlet's hysteria as well as that of the play itself.

If hysteria is a disturbance of the symbolic order of meaningful language, then in Eliot's only published prose-poem, the aptly named "Hysteria," we see an aggressive defence mounted precisely against such a threat.[13] We are told that the woman's laughter not only threatens to involve the narrator in hysteria but also to engulf and devour him. The threat of castration, that is, the dismemberment of identity and rational speech, is felt acutely in this work. But, as Tony Pinkney has pointed out, the text's anxiety is mastered by a brittle intellectual wit:

> The ego's terror of dispersal is here held precariously in check ... by the desperate virtuosity of its imagery: "until

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[11] Eliot, "Hamlet and His Problems," *The Sacred Wood* (London: Methuen, 1920) 101.

[12] See Sigmund Freud and Joseph Breuer, *Studies in Hysteria*, trans. James and Alix Strachey (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974) 62–63.

[13] Eliot, "Hysteria," *The Complete Poems and Plays of T.S. Eliot* (London: Faber, 1969) 32.

> her teeth were only accidental stars with a talent for squad-drill." The potential destructiveness of the teeth goes mercifully out of focus as the text parades its own stylistic brio, and the image achieves on a small scale what "Hysteria" aspires to overall by bringing the scattering energies of its accidental stars back into the centripetal discipline of the parade ground.[14]

The male writer's best defence against female hysteria lies therefore in the very order and style of language, that is, of Lacan's symbolic order itself.

A similar mobilization of linguistic resources to fend off hysterical involvement is also evident in "Portrait of a Lady."[15] The narrator of the poem seeks, like Henry James's Basil Ransom, to escape from a "feminine,... nervous, hysterical, chattering, canting age."[16] Neurotically precious, visibly nervous ("slowly twisting the lilac stalks") and verbally discomposed (her speech is obsessively circular and repetitive), the lady of the poem attempts to win the friendship and confidence of the narrator only to end up, unknown to her, objectified as a portrait and one, moreover, that is "cruel," as Marianne Moore justly observed.[17] Fearful of becoming a part of the lady's feminine and nervous world, the narrator uses the subject position opened up by the world of language (a position guaranteed, we will recall, by the Name of the Father or phallus) to turn her into a subordinate third person, an object, an other for his active appropriation. "Sitting pen in hand," a writing subject to her portrayed object, he can utilize irony to unveil her "velleities" and simile to expose the hysterical quality of her longings: "The voice returns like the insistent out-of-tune / Of a broken violin on an August afternoon." Like "Hysteria," "Portrait of a Lady" seeks to master the disturbance of the woman by literally immobilizing her and containing what is perceived as her hysterical energy. If the

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[14] Tony Pinkney, *Women in the Poetry of T.S. Eliot: A Psychoanalytic Approach* (London: Macmillan, 1984) 19.

[15] Eliot, "Portrait of a Lady," *The Complete Poems* 18–21.

[16] Henry James, *The Bostonians* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966) 290.

[17] See Marianne Moore, "A Note on T.S. Eliot's Book," *Poetry* 12 (1918): 36–37; reprinted in *T.S. Eliot: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Michael Grant (London: Routledge, 1982) 1: 90.

narrator of "Hysteria" concentrates his efforts towards stopping "the shaking of [the hysterical woman's] breasts," the young man of "Portrait" allows some of the misogynistic violence of the poem's Marlovian epigraph to surface by fantasizing the lady's death, pausing only to worry about its timing.

Eliot's response to hysteria, like ours, is inevitably political. Stephen Heath, for instance, has outlined the political choice of perspective at stake: "hysteria is a disorder which proves the law of sexual identity, the given order; hysteria is a protest against the oppression of that law of sexual identity, that given order, painfully envisaging in its disorder and economy, a quite different representation of men and women and the sexual."[18] Our reading so far of Eliot's early criticism and poetry appears to suggest that Eliot saw feminine hysteria as a disorder that calls for a poetic *rappel à l'ordre*, thus supporting not only Stephen Heath's claim that contempt and hatred of women reached a height in Eliot's early poetry but also Jacqueline Rose's conclusion that Eliot's critical writing constitutes a politically and sexually repressive view of "the proper ordering of literary form."[19]

But Eliot's early work also reveals an intimation, admittedly still half-repressed, of weaknesses in the symbolic order and, correspondingly, of the poetic challenge and promise of hysteria. Eliot's intimation has been explicitly theorized by Julia Kristeva in her statement that every hysterical woman is "a symptom of symbolic weakness in relation to the overflowing instinctual drive, index of a poorly controlled phallus, and drama of the word/body separation whose flash-spasm the poet alone can hear."[20] As *other* to the phallocentric symbolic order, feminine hysteria expresses itself in what Kristeva calls the "semiotic" modality, the maternally inflected current of libidinal drives and corporeal rhythms anterior to the signifying language system of the post-Oedipal, socialized and gendered subject. This heterogeneous, semiotic modality which is repressed and turned into the unconscious with the resolution of

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[18] Stephen Heath, *The Sexual Fix* (London: Macmillan, 1982) 47–48.

[19] See Stephen Heath, "Male Feminism," in *Men in Feminism*, ed. Alice Jardine and Paul Smith (New York: Methuen, 1987) 17, and Jacqueline Rose, "Hamlet—the 'Mona Lisa' of Literature," *Sexuality in the Field of Vision* 129.

[20] Julia Kristeva, "The Novel as Polylogue," *Desire in Language*, trans. Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine and Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia UP, 1980) 196.

the Oedipal crisis can only manifest itself in the signifying chains of the symbolic as deviations or disturbances in the orderly function of linguistic communication. These disturbances as listed by Kristeva include drive-governed sound production such as rhythmic and alliterative effects, intonations, and compulsive repetition; the overdetermination of words by multiple meanings as disclosed by puns, verbal slips, and the polysemic dispersion of figurative speech; syntactic irregularities such as ellipses; and so forth.[21]

When we turn again to Eliot's "Hysteria" and "Portrait of a Lady" with our ears attuned to semiotic disruptions, we will detect their hysterical presence in the very discourse that attempts to master them and uphold the symbolic order. Thus, in "Hysteria," the image constructed to contain the castrating, semiotic threat of the woman's laughter loses some of its figurative control when, on closer examination, we discover it to be a faulty metaphor, an example of catachresis. Moreover, despite Tony Pinkney's reading of the "squad-drill" as the reassertion of symbolic discipline, we discern only a partial containment of semiotic energies in the image since the squad's potentially lethal mobility can still be linked to the lady's own threatening lability. Even the deliberate adoption of prose to assert syntactic control is jeopardized when we notice that the syntactic solidity of the poem's last sentence is traversed and shaken by the drive-governed phonic impulses we call alliteration.

A similar "semiotization of the symbolic"[22] occurs in "Portrait of a Lady." Though the young man of the poem cavalierly dismisses the lady's hysterically emotional demands by contrasting them to the no-nonsense social routines of the male world, his criticism of the lady is punctuated in fact by the return of the dismissed. His critique of the lady's emotional response to music and sensations rebounds on him as he himself is irrationally pierced to the quick by a common song played on a piano and the scent of hyacinths from a garden. Clearly, we might say, a case of the semiotic bursting through the young man's symbolic cover. Even his

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[21] See Julia Kristeva's "The Speaking Subject," in *On Signs*, ed. Marshall Blonsky (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1985) 217 n7.

[22] Josette Feral's phrase. See her "Antigone or the Irony of the Tribe," *Diacritics* 8 (1978): 10.

attempt to distance himself verbally from the lady's tortured repetitions and tautologies fails, as his own speech begins to resemble hers. Thus when he finally asks, "Would she not have the advantage after all?" we must, I think, answer in the affirmative. By writing about the lady, he had hoped to distance himself from her deficiencies and position himself solidly in the symbolic order, the male world of public action and significance. But instead of securing such an advantage, his writing, shaken by bursts of instinctual drives, slips into the lady's near hysterical speech rhythms and intonations. As the poem develops, the lady's portrait begins uncannily to resemble the young man's.

Reflecting on the failure of his own writing, the young man wearily remarks: "This music is successful with a 'dying fall'." The bitter-sweet pathos of his remark can, however, be turned around. For it can be argued that "Hysteria" and "Portrait of a Lady" succeed as literary texts precisely because they fail to stem the hystericization of writing, the semiotization of the symbolic. Eliot himself, especially in his later criticism, seems to have understood that what is condemned as the disorder of hysteria may in fact be "a form of making the unconscious conscious."[23] Thus Eliot admits that poetic writing sometimes occurs with "the breaking down of strong habitual barriers"[24] and that "the pressure of some rude unknown *psychic material*"[25] can direct a poet's composition. These remarks by Eliot use the metaphor of a force breaking through a barrier and can be recast in Kristevan terms as the breakthrough of the semiotic into the symbolic.[26] Moreover, Eliot's affirmation of

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[23]Dianne Hunter, "Hysteria, Psychoanalysis, and Feminism: The Case of Anna O.," *Feminist Studies* 9 (1983): 485.

[24] Eliot, *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (London: Faber, 1933) 145.

[25] Eliot, "The Three Voices of Poetry," *On Poetry and Poets* (London: Faber, 1957) 101.

[26] Eliot's hysterical first wife, Vivienne, certainly understood the power of semiotic irruption in writing. Talking about how her material came from some "very overgrown and hidden inner spirit," she goes on to say: "When this begins to spurt, it is intolerable to choke it up, & will lead to my going mad. It is agony either way, of course, but I think at first, until one has got the spout of this long disused fountain clear, it is better to let the water burst out when it will & so *force* away the accumulation of decayed vegetation, moss, slime & dead fish which are thick upon and around it." Cited in Lyndall Gordon, *Eliot's New Life* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1988) 58. It is interesting to compare Vivienne Eliot's remark to Hélène Cixous's

the poet's "auditory imagination," a "feeling for syllable and rhythm, penetrating far below the conscious levels of thought and feeling"[27] resembles Kristeva's description of the pre-Oedipal, pre-symbolic articulation of sounds and rhythms that constitute the semiotic.

Despite these intimations of hysteria as the irruption of creative semiotic protest, Eliot persisted in advocating a poetics of order that dismissed whatever was not within the bounds of the symbolic as deviant, disruptive, hysterical in the bad sense. Part of the reason for this insistence on order might be due to Eliot's anxiety over his position in the phallocentric scheme of gender, an anxiety that manifested itself as misogyny. Brought up in a household of women who nurtured and comforted him, yet made to be aware of the Law of the Father, Eliot as a young man must have had to struggle to repress the feminine and the poetic in him and aspire to those roles of civic leader, educator or responsible businessman assigned to all the Eliot men. Under these circumstances, the pre-Oedipal modality of the semiotic with its lack of gender distinctions must have been disturbing to the young poet. The hysterical irruption of the semiotic can therefore only stimulate an aggressive, misogynistic reaction whose violence, as we have seen, cannot, however, completely conceal the traces of its own repressed femininity. The cost of this repression can be felt, I think, in Eliot's disavowal of the accomplishment of his early poems in response to Aiken's praise for their distinction. But where Eliot sees their instability, their feminine hysteria as a cause for concern and criticism, we might see in their verbal slippages and phonic drives the creative triumph of the repressed. The loss involved in Eliot's repression of his own femininity can be best measured, however, in the last letter Eliot's oldest sister Ada wrote to him before her death. Favourably commenting on a remark of Eliot's in "The Music of Poetry" (1942) that a poem "may tend to realize itself first as a particular rhythm before it reaches expression in words,"[28] she

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valorization of the eruptive force of *écriture feminine* in *The Newly Born Woman*, especially on 88 and 91. For an analysis of Vivienne Eliot's published writings, see Victor Li, " 'And still she cried': Vivienne Eliot's Pseudonymous Prose Contributions to *The Criterion*," *Prose Studies* 10 (1987): 72–84.

[27] Eliot, *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* 118–19

[28] Eliot, "The Music Of Poetry," *On Poetry and Poets* 38.

recalls, in an almost maternal way, a scene of pre-Oedipal harmony and semiotic reciprocity Eliot had lost in becoming the Pope of Russell Square—a scene he was perhaps trying to recapture when he wrote "The Music of Poetry":

> When you were a tiny boy, learning to talk, you used to sound the rhythm of sentences without shaping words—the ups and downs of the thing you were trying to say. I used to answer you in kind, saying nothing yet conversing with you as we sat side by side on the stairs at 2635 Locust Street. And now you think the rhythm before the words in a new poem!... Such a dear little boy![29]

[29] Ada Eliot Sheffield to T.S. Eliot, 13 April 1943, in *The Letters of T.S. Eliot 1898–1922*, ed. Valerie Eliot (London: Faber, 1988) 1: xxxi.