

Toward a Footnoting Grammar: Eliot's *The Waste Land* and Tolson's *Libretto for the Republic of Liberia*

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ABSTRACT: from the reading of *The Waste Land*, by T. S. Eliot, and *Libretto for the Republic of Liberia*, by Melvin B. Tolson, this essay intends to discuss the poetic strategies underlying the explicative footnotes the poets added to their poems. After bringing together the work of Eliot and Tolson, the text proposes, then, some initial comments concerning the implicit role played by the “explicative notes,” and their complicating function within an apparently closed literary system.

Keywords: Eliot; Tolson; footnotes.

RESUMO: a partir da leitura de *The Waste Land*, de T. S. Eliot, e *Libretto for the Republic of Liberia*, de Melvin B. Tolson's, este ensaio se propõe a discutir algumas questões relacionadas às notas explicativas que os poetas adicionaram aos poemas. Após a aproximação do trabalho de Eliot e Tolson, o ensaio lança, então, alguns apontamentos teóricos sobre a função desestabilizadora desempenhada pelas notas de rodapé dentro de um sistema literário aparentemente fechado.

Palavras-chave: Eliot; Tolson; notas.

Whenever critics discuss Melvin B. Tolson's *Libretto for the Republic of Liberia* (1953), the name of Anglo-American writer T. S. Eliot is immediately taken into consideration, especially in relation to his five-part poem *The Waste Land* (1922). First of all, as Tolson himself repeatedly mentions, he was deeply influenced by the works of the so-called Moderns, whose poetic strategies he carefully investigated throughout his life:

[...] at the end of that time I had read and absorbed the techniques of Eliot, Pound, Yeats, Baudelaire, Pasternak and, I believe, all the great Moderns. God only knows how many ‘little magazines’ I studied, and how much textual analysis of the New Critics (in GIBSON: 1973, p. 89).

In fact, what we have here is Tolson's explicit intention of bringing together his poetry and that of the Moderns. Besides that, critics such as Joy Flasch usually emphasize the role

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played by Tolson's reading of *The Waste Land* on the writing of the *Libretto* itself: "A few years later, however, when Tolson picked up a copy of Eliot's *The Waste Land*, in a New York bookstore, he knew that his course lay ahead rather than in the past" (1972, p. 74). Finally, as another example, we could recall the very fact that, after concluding his poem, Tolson asked Allen Tate to write the preface for the book, probably as an attempt to establish a formal connection between him and the *New Criticism*, a school under direct influence of Eliot's writings.

In any case, apart from "external" or even political links, the lines of Tolson's *Libretto for the Republic of Liberia* can be clearly associated with Eliot's project in *The Waste Land*. As Edward Brunner mentions, "[...] passages were apt to shift, Pound-like, without warning from English to French or Spanish or German, as well as into transcriptions from Japanese or Arabic or Russian or African dialects" (2001, p. 144). As any reading of Eliot's epic can promptly show, the five sections vary from English to German, French, Italian and Sanskrit, that is to say, the poem creates an environment that gathers different literary traditions, an experiment that certainly precedes Tolson in his own linguistic aggregation. In addition to that, in terms of length, the *Libretto* once again seems to be affiliated to Eliot's and Pound's epical inclinations: essentially fragmentary, the book is divided into 8 sections, following the sequence of a musical scale (DO, RE, MI, FA, SOL, LA, TI, DO). Of course, last but not least, the *Libretto* displays a complex network of literary and non-literary allusions, as if recalling Eliot's lessons in his critical essays – if no writer can be seriously read when disconnected from his greater tradition/institution, nothing works better than an intertextual system to reconnect this tradition to the poet's individuality.

Still, one point that may demand special attention is the fact that Tolson's *Libretto* somehow "repeats" Eliot's footnoting technique made famous in his 1922 book. In other words, after finishing the revision of *The Waste Land* (some specialists argue that it was a requirement of the publisher), Eliot added to his lines a series of explicative footnotes, with the possible purpose of clarifying the implicit – or even explicit - references present from the first to the last section of the poem. However, as George Williamson points out, "[...] more important than the explicatory aspects of the notes is their inconclusive nature" (1998, p. 120), that is to say, the poet may be somehow "distracting" the reader from the truly significant

issues underlying what is being said in the sections. Be it as it may, what interests us here is the information that Tolson's *Libretto* immediately refers to Eliot's footnoting: according to Brunner, the notes are an essential part of the entire poem, and like Eliot's, "[...] they represent a further extension of the forms available to the poet of the symphonic epic" (2001, p. 148). One thing is for sure: it is from the understanding of what Eliot's and Tolson's notes do not explicitly mention that the reader can better benefit from their function in the poems. In this sense, approaching this footnoting procedure may help us grasp Eliot's and Tolson's literary strategies.

Liberia?
No micro-footnote in a bunioned book
Homed by a pedant
With a gelded look.
Tolson, *Libretto*

The first two lines of Eliot's *The Waste Land* go like this: "April is the cruellest month, breeding / Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing." As many readers instantly recollect, the image of the "lilacs" is really central here: if the poem can be read as a mixture of "proper" and "improper" desires, as suggested by Harriet Davidson (in MOODY: 1994b, p. 126), the lilacs are precisely among the elements that cause tension, confusing the limits between life and death, for instance. According to Harold Bloom (and many others), "[...] the mention of 'lilacs', as well as several other important details in the poem, echoes Walt Whitman's elegy for Lincoln, "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd" (1999: p. 41). It is essential to paraphrase this point: one of the most imperative passages in Eliot's *The Waste Land*, the opening lines, is said to echo the imagery present in Whitman's poetry. As B. C. Southam (1996, 140) mentions in his systematic analysis entitled *A Guide to the Selected Poems of T. S. Eliot*, the allusion to Whitman is close to being obvious, even though it might be read as if referring to other poets as well. Curiously enough, Eliot's notes on *The Waste Land*, supposed to make explicit the poet's sources, never mention Whitman's name.

Naturally, the question from which we cannot escape is the following: why is it that Eliot's footnoting device simply does not reveal the reference being made in the beginning of the first section? To put it another way, are the notes reliable enough, or should we look

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exactly for the kind of hidden game that, precisely for not being given, these notes can certainly reveal? The answer concerning Whitman in particular – of course, not an ultimate one – perhaps could be found in Eliot's essays on poetry and criticism. In “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1922), Eliot defends that any serious poet must undergo “[...] a continual surrender of himself as he is at the moment to something which is more valuable. The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality” (2002, p. 103). Needless to say, in Eliot's account Whitman is the very expression of personality, that is, a symbol of confessional poetry, totally indifferent toward the tradition that precedes him. As a result, to quote Whitman would be, at the same time, to somehow “contradict” what is being stated in his critical essays. The reason why Eliot refers to Whitman in spite of his imposing romantic “I” would be an interesting topic for another discussion, but it clearly has to do still with the very concept of tradition itself.

Undoubtedly, the notes on *The Waste Land* send the reader frequently back to the poem, since Eliot's comments seem to be vague and quite dismissive. In the first remark, for example, the poet sustains that any reader interested in the incidental symbolism (as he calls it) of the poem should investigate Jessie L. Weston's *From Ritual to Romance* rather than the notes, for the book on the Grail legend “[...] will elucidate the difficulties of the poem much better than my notes can do” (2002, p. 51). First of all, Eliot frees himself from the responsibility of explaining to his readers the eventual meanings of the lines, in a movement that shows again his tendency toward impersonality rather than eccentricity – one may reach the conclusion that *The Waste Land* is not a poem written by T. S. Eliot, but a literary happening that is not totally clear even to the name that signs it. Moreover, this discretion of his can be seen even in the revision carried out by Pound, which ended up cutting the poem to its half. As we know, Eliot not only accepted all suggestions, but also dedicated the poem to Ezra Pound, *il miglior fabbro*. In any case, Eliot continually welcomes some eventual “intruders,” and his notes, intended at first to clarify, actually seem to mystify the position occupied by the poet himself.

Another note that has obtained singular attention from the critics is the one regarding the presence of the Theban seer Tiresias in the poem. In Eliot's own words, “Tiresias, although a mere spectator and not indeed a 'character', is yet the most important personage in

the poem, uniting all the rest. [...] What Tiresias sees, in fact, is the substance of the poem” (2002, p. 53). On the whole, *The Waste Land* is famous for its fragmentary aspect, which makes it even difficult for us to identify who is the "protagonist" in the poem, assuming that there is one. Still, although we cannot plainly articulate who is who in the poem, Eliot emphasizes that there is a congregating element, a “personage/spectator” who is said to “unite all the rest.” To reinforce Eliot’s observation on the centrality of Tiresias in *The Waste Land*, critics like Williamson indicate that “[...] ‘I Tiresias’ is the only explicit identification of the speaker in the poem, and there is a reason for it” (1998, p. 142). In other words, Tiresias is the only figure capable of saying “I,” of affirming his own identity: I Tiresias, old man with wrinkled dugs / Perceived the scene, and foretold the rest — / I too awaited the expected guest (lines 228 – 230). Tiresias’ privileged position in the poem would result, then, from the personal identification which allows him to perceive the scene and foretell the rest.

Critics usually diverge in their reading of Eliot’s note on the Theban clairvoyant. On the one hand, there are those who completely support the poet's reading of Tiresias’ vital role in *The Waste Land* – as Southam points out, “[...] some go as far as to identify Tiresias’ vision with that of the poet himself” (1996, p. 172). In David Moody’s reasoning, “Tiresias means death. His seeing without love, passion or pathos, is the dead heart of *The Waste Land*: what the poet must pass beyond or perish” (1994a, p. 92), that is to say, the other characters meet in Tiresias due to his objectivation of everything he sees. On the other hand, some readings show a certain disbelief in relation to this note (or the notes in general): Hugh Kenner, for example, right after quoting Eliot's note on Tiresias, declares that “[...] in fact we should do well to discard the notes as much as possible; they have bedeviled discussion for decades (1960, p. 129) – for Kenner, the notes are simply dismissive, and they were added “[...] as a consequence of the technological fact that books are printed in multiples of thirty-two pages” (p. 129). Whatever the case may be, the discussion is usually held in these terms, that is, whether Eliot's note is reliable or not.

What critics sometimes miss, once again, is the implicit and subtle game that Eliot operates in this note, which should not (and actually does not) rely on our acceptance or denial of its validity. Surely, before judging the note – before agreeing or disagreeing with it – it is relevant to recall who Tiresias really is according to the mythology. In brief, Eliot's

comment directs our attention to a prophet that is a man but also a woman, an old man with wrinkled female breasts (line 219). Equally important, Tiresias is a blind man who can “see,” someone that, although throbbing between two lives (line 218), can recognize what is to come for the inhabitants of the “waste land.” A blind man/woman who can see: indeed, what could this prophet possibly unify being himself some sort of complex fusion? And yet, due to this complexity, what character would not find in Tiresias some kind of connection? Indeed, Tiresias can create a sense of whole because he is anybody/everybody, whereas this union, in its turn, cannot be more than a fragmentary one. As Graham Hough explains, “[...] Tiresias is not a single human consciousness, but a mythological catch-all, and a unifying factor of no effect whatever” (in BLOOM: 1999, p. 49) – and still, this is exactly why he unites all the rest.

As we can see, Eliot’s notes on *The Waste Land* form a group of carefully chosen and ambiguous words, not intended to clarify (as we can at first assume), but rather to imprison the reader in a complex set of literary references. This is the very point when Tolson’s footnoting apparatus can be put together with that of Eliot’s: contrasting with the number of annotations added by the latter, Tolson seems to transform the technique into some sort of “machine of inclusiveness.” Similarly to Eliot, Brunner reports that “[...] the prim demeanor of these notes is usually misleading, especially when one follows the trail of their allusion” (2001, p. 145). Nevertheless, this deceptive nature of Tolson’s footnotes must not be confused with any incapacity of manipulating his references; on the contrary, it is the very ability of dealing with the materials that makes the notes both confusing and significant. Quoting again Edward Brunner, who so cautiously interpreted Tolson’s footnoting system, the notes “[...] are packed with dynamite information, and they unfold upon and within one another, developing their brief but devastating scenario” (p. 150). Naturally, this dynamite only offers risk - the risk we indeed want to take – if the reader is skilled enough to activate it.

From the beginning, Tolson’s *Libretto for the Republic of Liberia* shows an inclination toward the mixing of boundaries between what is traditionally taken as more relevant and what is not. In other words, most preconceived arrangements are strongly questioned, and the oppositions we may take for granted (such as big/small, strong/weak) are immediately included in a movement of revision. Right in the initial lines of the poem, for instance, when

defining what Liberia “is,” Tolson announces that the country is not a micro-footnote in a bunioned book (line 2); Liberia is, instead, the quicksilver sparrow that slips / The eagle’s claw! (lines 7 – 8). Later on, other passages reiterate this early sensation regarding the altering of conventional roles: ‘Africa is a rubber ball; / the harder you dash it to the ground, / the higher it will rise’ (lines 173 – 175); or even ‘The mouse / as artist paints a mouse that chases / a cat’ (lines 202 – 204). As a matter of fact, lines like these abound throughout the *Libretto*, and in general they express some kind of dependency between the elements involved: ‘Where would the rich cream be / without skim milk? The eye can cross / the river in a flood’ (lines 209 – 211). Again, in a way the “opposites” are seen as part of the same structure of thought.

If the poem inverts – or at least puzzles – what we could initially understand as more or less important, this means that the location of the lines themselves must be read with distrusting eyes. To illustrate this movement of inversion, we may quote moments in the poem that question Liberia's peripheral position in relation to a given center (most of the times represented by Europe): *Liberia?* / No side-show barker’s bio-accident” (lines 9 – 10); “*Liberia?* / No pimple on the chin of Africa (lines 33 – 34); finally, No lamb to tame a lion with a baa (line 36). In this sense, what is being said is that one cannot take for granted long-established functions; as the lines of the SOL section mention, The rich man’s weights are not the poor man’s scales. To each his coole – that is, every place has its own meaning, which should be read not in terms of comparison, but of singularity. This idea is particularly true for Tolson’s footnotes: it is possible to conclude that the notes for the *Libretto* might be read as being the poem itself, whereas the poem is sometimes transformed into a micro-note to the footnoting apparatus. In Brunner’s words, “Tolson is processing information through the footnotes, taking advantage of their ‘secondary’ role to import disturbing material that has been kept out of the record” (2001, p. 150).

Thus, since the notes maintain a certain autonomy in respect to their most immediate referent, it is clear that their function will not be that of a complete subservience; just the opposite, as a proof of their “self-sufficiency,” the notes reveal notions relatively hidden in the sections, as if betraying their “unofficial” status. As has been noted before, Tolson might be taking advantage of the general idea that the footnoting scheme is secondary, and this is why the notes turn out to be the spot through which the poet can “digress.” In brief, the notes

express more “open” comments, “personal” remarks that offer interesting insights even on the references being made – the footnotes seem to be the space of evaluation *par excellence*. In the note for line 367, for example, while explaining the origin and the meaning of the word “*pəsiq*” (“divided”) in the poem, Tolson says that it seems to me that this linguistic symbol gives us a concrete example of the teleological – perhaps the only one. [...] Of course the protagonist of the poem uses them (“*paseq*” or “*pasiq*”) for his own purpose on another level. We can reach two vital conclusions from this note: first, as we can easily notice, “it seems” expresses a highly personal analysis of the line, as if in agreement with the common “lightness” of footnotes in general; second, this same “I” (Tolson’s?) infers that there is a protagonist for the poem, opening a discussion that may bring us closer to Eliot’s reading of Tiresias as being the unifying element of *The Waste Land*. In any case, the footnote is not neutral, and its impression has consequences on the understanding of the *Libretto*.

On the whole, the notes added to the *Libretto* form a chaotic group, which not only mixes an incredible set of different languages (as noted earlier, varying from English and French to African dialects), but also combines literary traditions taken so far as irreconcilable. If Eliot refers the reader most of the times to the so-called “high tradition” (Ovid, Dante, Shakespeare etc), Tolson, on the other hand, combines this very tradition with popular sayings and “micro” texts, as if celebrating the contamination that Eliot tried so hard to escape from in his notes. In short, by putting everything together in his literary network, Tolson is problematizing the nature of history itself, and not only imitating the famous Modern (Eliot’s, Pound’s, etc.) technique of footnoting the text. In his preface to the *Libretto*, Allen Tate points out that doubtless, Mr. Tolson does not expect his *Libretto* to have a musical setting; or if he does, one wonders what an audience would make of it (in TOLSON: 1970, p. 09). This is an interesting point: a song that cannot be sung, that is to say, the only song capable of questioning the legitimating role played by history. In this way, if Tolson’s notes are not reliable – and they are certainly not – this is because they do not wish to be so; in truth, these notes want to absorb anything, for the exposition is a never-ending one.

It has been suggested so far that readers of both Eliot's *The Waste Land* and Tolson's *Libretto for the Republic of Liberia* should not rely so much on the apparent neutrality of the footnotes; instead, the notes must be taken as a strategic system which, under the mask of a "secondary" role, reveals interesting questions related to the poems. Just like Eliot's placing of Tiresias as a central "personage" in the poem is not an occasional act, Tolson's inclusive movement cannot be seen only in terms of an attempt to show his erudition, an inclination directed to the following of "modern" literary codes. As Robert M. Farnsworth points out, "*Libretto* opens with a question, 'Liberia?' The answer is that it is more than a place or a nation. It is an aspiration toward freedom, a means of embodying the vision of a man who saw himself speaking [...] ultimately for all the people of the world" (1984, p. 164). In the same way, the notes are chaotic because their movement is that of inclusion, not of control, that of freedom, not of mere academicism.

As a matter of fact, both Eliot and Tolson somehow "lose" control over their footnotes, but this very point results from two different paths the poets take in relation to their intertextual grammar. On the one hand, in order to systematize certain privileged tradition, Eliot veils some of his references – as in the case of Whitman's "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd" – to better emphasize others. Indeed, an interesting exercise would be, for example, to think of Whitman's disappearance in comparison to the exposition of Tiresias as a grounding element. In any case, on the other hand, instead of hiding, Tolson tries to cover and recover references from diverse literary traditions, as if embracing the so far "impossible" reconciliation of items. It is important to mention again that Tolson's notes are not just repeating a common practice among Modern poets: as Flasch says, "[...] he had mastered traditional form, and he now used it as a basis for his experiments with a new form, even perhaps a new language" (1972, p. 80). The technique may be basically the same, footnoting the text, but the purpose is obviously a distinct one.

Generally speaking, the analysis of footnoting strategies is essential for different reasons. First of all, as it was observed before, footnotes reveal aspects that the work itself may leave implicit for obvious motives, as is the case with both Eliot's *The Waste Land* and Tolson's *Libretto*. Second, the notes most of the time are located in a bordering site; in the lines of a poem, for instance, what position does the note represent? Is the note part of the

poem itself? Is it something that should be understood as marginal or intrusive? Who is speaking in the note? Is it the author? Is it the protagonist? Of course, these questions have no particular answer, but they certainly have to do with the function of the author in a text, or even with the nature of a text itself. Finally, on some occasions, the purpose of the footnotes may be that of blurring the very stability of the work, and in order to understand this articulation between text and “subtext,” the reader needs to pay particular attention to the position the notes occupy. Not an easy task.

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