THE CENTRIPETAL AND CENTRIFUGAL VIBRATIONS IN T. S. ELIOT’S THE WASTE LAND

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ABSTRACT

The history of metaphysics is the history of centres, declare Derridean philosophical notions. Through the ages, one centre had ever been replaced by the other, limiting the ‘free play’ of the structures. The twentieth century socio-cultural ambience is poised and balanced by the action and reaction of centripetal and centrifugal forces. Derived from Latin words centripetus (centre seeking) and centrifuges (centre fleeing), the centripetal forces stand synonymous with inharmonious harmony and the centrifugal ones with absolute disharmony. The article envisages how and why the centripetal and the centrifugal forces catapulting though the age, inflict themselves upon the cultural texture and how The Waste Land, by T. S. Eliot, reaching the acme of perfection possible to modern literature, fluctuates between the antipodal extremities and polarities of these centre seeking and centre fleeing forces.

KEYWORDS: Centripetal forces and centrifugal forces, Signifier, Signified, Post Structuralism, Intertextuality.

INTRODUCTION

Centripetal and centrifugal forces, an overview.

Trends or ‘isms’, have ever been rising and subsiding with the surge of times…the currents may engulf themselves yielding place to new, leaving their reliques in the shores of history. The trajectory of trends keep on fluctuating, move backward and forward, impose and superimpose, diffuse and disintegrate, sometimes even the laws of change seem to change as it is with the zeitgeist of twentieth century. The cultural and intellectual arena of the current times is acted upon by the centripetal and centrifugal forces of fragmentation and disintegration. Seeking centre, the centripetal forces exert both destruction and construction to the structure and fleeing the centre, the centrifugal ones necessitate absolute and irrevocable collapse and falling down. When the centripetal forces traverse through the structures, “things fall apart”, still they fall together without defying the centre. When centrifugal forces are at work, “things fall apart” in a multidimensional gravity-free universe,
where, as Yeats puts in *The Second Coming* “centre cannot hold”; and “mere anarchy is loosed upon the world”.

Twentieth century contemporaneity is hall marked with the action and reactions of centre seeking and centre fleeing forces. Still, as with any other ‘isms’ or trends, it’s quite improbable a task, to find out where exactly their epicentre of origin lies and how exactly they whirl through the times.

**The dissonance of the times, a cultural analysis.**

Nothing of the times, may it be architecture, science, arts, fashion or literature, is impervious to the permeation of these forces. No cultural or intellectual arena is completely spared of. In Physics, Einstein published his ‘Special Theory of Relativity’ in 1905, where he dispenses with the concept of physical reference points, whereas Derridian philosophical assumptions remove the intellectual reference points. For Derrida, a word is capable of ideological explosion and Einstein’s $E = mc^2$ was proved upon ground by the explosion of atom. As atom is capable of explosion, a word too is ingrained with the power for abstract and disembodied explosion, envisaging another big bang and possible multidimensional universe. Being in congruence with Derrida, Bakhtin, the formalist cites a word as the place for ideological warfare.

Theories of disintegration and partition reign the twentieth century Scientific field. In 1895 Roentgen discovered X-rays, which was followed by the radioactive properties of Uranium and Radium; both were the theories of disintegration and degeneration. The atom was considered to be indivisible till the beginning of twentieth century, in 1911, Rutherford introduced the revolutionary model of atom arranging its particles. And during 1897-99 J.J Thomson detected electrons intruding into the structure of atom and exploring its fragmentary nature. Sigmund Freud’s tri partition of human psyche, during these times, is a landmark in the history of Psychology. Major discoveries of the century are in tune with the disintegrating and diffusing nature of the times. In art, Picasso’s cubism and Kandinsky’s abstract art, deviating from the traditional art forms, summon an era of fragmentary representation. The nature of centripetal forces show affinities with modernism, avant garde and the centrifugal forces infuse post modern or post structural view of looking at the world.

Centripetal forces gain impetus from the Victorian philosophies founded on Comte’s Positivism. Reason was its absolute and indisputable agency. Herbert Spenser’s *Synthetic Philosophy* bears ample testimony to Victorian rationale. Again, the philosophers like Buckle
and Taine shared deep distrust of any form of introspective study of human mind, and for them, the only form of reliable source was reason. Centripetal forces, though scattering the structure, finally encapsulates them within the rationale of harmony and coherence.

Existential philosophies of Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Kierkegaard, phenomenology of Edmund Husserl, Lacan’s psychoanalysis and the linguistic philosophies of Ludwig Wittgenstein and other philosophies of the twentieth century condensed into the tumultuous turbulence of centrifugal forces. In *The Routledge Companion to Postmodernism* edited by Stuart Sim, what is stated about postmodern subject is the world view of the decentered universe of centrifugal forces,

For postmodern, the subject is a fragmented being who has no essential core of identity, and is to be regarded as a process in a continual state of dissolution rather than a fixed identity or self that endures unchanged over times. (Sim, 366-67).

In Derridian terms, the centrifugal forces just scatter the transcendental signifier, the centre. In post structuralist notions, the centrifugal forces lead one signifier to an endless array of signifiers with its probable meaninglessness and indefinite scope for the ephemeral and slippery fusion of signifier and innumerable multitudes of signifieds.

In psycho analytical approach, the centripetal and centrifugal forces are just the offshoots of the war torn realities and their gruesome and far reaching repercussions in human mind. After single world war, the mind is fragmented, still it clings back to what is left, and longs for a gluing and unifying hope, so is the nature of centripetal forces that grope for a centre even in the midst of distortions and fragmentations. And after one more world war the mind is fractured, disjointed and scattered beyond the hope for any unification, from this disappointment, despair and excruciating feel of ennui, sprout the centrifugal forces. None dares to brood over “the bad habits of expectancy” as Philip Larkin puts it in “Next Please”.

**The centrifugal forces at work**

A long track shot in *Gone with the Wind*, the camera shuttles slowly across the battlefield, picking up here and there different items in the catalogues of war –a charred bivouac, a huddle of corpses, an overturned cart. The spectator’s eyes take in these images and interpret through them the meaning of war, of disaster, of bloodshed…without the intellectual content of the picture being explicit. It betrays intellectual organization, a factor which stamps it as a product of late twentieth century. (Raymond Faderman, 67)
The Waste Land echoes war-torn realities as is in Gone with the Wind. The camera spans through the fragmented imageries and motifs of the poem, where “the centre cannot hold, and mere anarchy is loosed upon the world”. The shots pick up dishevelled pictures from here and there, one Marie in the mountainous valley, another Cleopatra in her burnished throne or one more Lil hurrying up towards the lusty lover. Quotations and allusions heaps upon one another, defying and betraying intellectual coherence and organization, allowing the centrifugal forces to act upon and leaving the reader a victim of intellectual leg pull.

The text itself is a montage of allusions and quotations from different sources of different times and ages. As Julia Kristeva puts it, the intertextual elements intruding into the poetic matrix add to the fleeing of centre and the equilibrium is violated furiously by the action of centrifugal forces. No sooner one alien element intrudes and settles with its ideological denotative and connotative meanings than the other one from another language or from another continent infiltrates, making the poem “a heap of broken images”, where the “falcon cannot hear the falconer” and no “son of man” is born to set it right.

The traditional definitions of poetry, the best words in best order, and the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings- are all impatiently suspended. Poetry becomes an ever ongoing wrestle with words and meanings, an ultimate hunt for coherence and unity that is fast fading into cacophony and dissonance. Each word triggers a world beyond the contours of the poem, and four thirty lines with its multitudes of words and its triggered worlds beyond, behind and above the poetic matrix challenge human intellectual organization, and which makes the text “an irreducibly plural, endless play of signifiers which can never be finally fixed on a single centre essence or meaning” (Derrida). Fixed intellectual reference points are permanently removed. The universe that Eliot offers is decentered and an inherently relativistic one.

All we have is a ‘free play’ of signifiers. In Structure Sign and Play, Derrida embraces this decentered universe of ‘free play’ as liberation, just as Barthes in The Death of the Author celebrates the death of the as the dawn of the new era of joyous freedom. J.A Cuddon, in his Dictionary of Literary Terms asserts,

…a text can be read as saying quite different from what it appears to be saying…it may be read as carrying a plurality of significances or as saying many different things which are fundamentally at variance with, contradictory to and subversive of what may be seen by criticism as a single stable meaning. The text betrays itself. (J.A. Cuddon, 45)
Multitudes of voices, embedded in the poem add to the rupture and the thrust towards the periphery which make it an ever vibrating and ever fluctuating piece of energy. This distortion gives way to celebration of energy, of randomness and dissonance, as seen in the poetry of Beats, the Projective poets and in the Pop art. Critic Fielder puts it as de-Eliotisation within the Eliotian masterpiece. Different voices from times and ages, from different classes and cultures find their voices uttered here.

Even the Dantesque elegance is juxtaposed with cockney dialect and this yoking together makes the text a dialogic than a monologic one. The other is given a voice in Eliotian universe. In modern texts like, *The Heart of Darkness, The Passage to India*, the other is always presented from outside. But here, as in *Waiting for Godot* the other is given a voice, the fringe elements are no more marginal and the centre is no more the centre anymore.

The lines like,

Frisch weht der Wind  
Der Heimat Zu  
Mein Irisch Kind,

Wo weilest du? (*The Waste Land*, 31-34),

from the classic opera *Tristan and Isolde*, Tristan’s soulful search for his beloved, “The wind blows fresh from the home-land/ My Irish child where are you lingering?” ,is beaded together in *The Waste Land* with mere meaningless utterances like,

Twit twit twit  

The clairvoyante, Madame Sosostris goes hand in hand with the Shakespearean hero here, and Baudelaire, Donne, Spencer or Marlowe are on the par with the Hyacinth girl, Lil and Albert. No hierarchies are built up; the voices all are heard with equal intensity and decibels.

*The Waste Land* is a medley of voices, from the twentieth century war world, Hitler voices as “Bib gar keine Russian, stamm’ aus Litauen, echt deutsch”(I am not Russian at all: I come from Lithuania :I am a real German), and from the Hyacinth garden there reverberates the voice of the hyacinth girl as “They called me the hyacinth girl”. Adding to the cacophonous hauling and crying, someone implores Marie to “hold on tight”. Again Baudelaire in thundering voice points out his accusing fingers and shouts “You hypocrite lecteur-mon semblade-mon frère” (my fellowman my brother) and,
“…the nightingale
Filled all the desert with inviolable voice” (The Waste Land, 100-101)
Eliot himself as if the author of some reader friendly post modern fiction, addresses the reader, staring straight into his eyes,
My nerves are bad to-night. Yes bad. Stay with me.
Speak to me. Why do you never speak? Speak.
What are you thinking of? What thinking? What?
I never know what you are thinking. Think.
I think we are in rats’ alley
Where the dead men lost their bones. (The Waste Land, 111-116)
Reminiscent of the betrayal and crucifixion, the cock crows “Co co rico co co rico” and the lines “nothing, nothing, nothing” fills the Eliotian universe with the absurdity and absolute meaninglessness of human existence.
Lawrence Durrell in A key to Modern British Poetry scripts The Waste Land as a radio play arranging the poem for a number of voices,
(A woman’s voice against fading music)
April is the cruelest month, breeding
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing...
A little life with dried tubers
(A younger voice eagerly)
Summer surprised us, coming over the Sternbergesee
With a shower of rain; we stopped in the colonnade.
(She sighs)
And went on in sunlight into the Hofgarten…
The Waste Land is indeed written for a number of voices. Since the centre has disintegrated, and no fixed centre or frame of reference orient, balance and organize the structure, the centrifugal forces act more on the poetic matrix offering a rupture to the structure.

The centripetal forces at work
Tiresias is the cameraman…he can move about in history and in time; he can become modern city man, a medieval or an ancient Greek at will. The Waste Land is his spiritual
autobiography, his search through the junk heap of modern culture for an integrating principle. (Lawrence Durrell, 146)

This gives the poem its arcane and anomalous appearance. The camera shuttles through the ages and Tiresias, the camera man, the Sybil –like eternal figure, through the insight of his blindness cohere the entire fragmented and the fringe elements of *The Waste Land* together. Acting to the centre, the Tiresian vision, merging with the legends, beliefs and symbols affix unity to the multidimensional, ever fluctuating poetic boundaries.

I Tiresias, though blind throbbing between two lives

Old man with wrinkled female breasts can see at the violet hour. (*The Waste Land*, 218-220)

Though blind, Tiresias can see the violet hour, the twilight zone of cultures where day and night melt into each other losing their separate identities. The blind seer, amalgamates both blindness and insight, in him there merge both man and woman, he juggles with life and death, the present day generation is one with the one who was there with him in the ship at Mylae. The shuffling crowd on London bridge for him, is mere augmentation of the dead ones, and death has not undone many…he himself is the Clairvoyante, and the hanged man or other characters in her wicked pack of cards. He himself is Philomel, the typist, the hyacinth girl, the son of man, the Phoenician Sailor, Belladona, Albert, Lil, Cleopatra or the dead ones from Dante’s Unreal city and the ones who utter the fire sermon and the santih mantras to the futurities. Tiresias is like a mirror, he himself and the world entire is mirrored in the unfathomable depths of his oceanic insight.

Eliot’s own comment in the Notes to *The Waste Land*,

Tiresias although a mere spectator, and not indeed a character, is yet the most important personage in the poem, uniting all the rest. Just as the one eyed merchant, seller of currants, melts into the Phoenician sailor, and the latter is not wholly distinct from Ferdinand, the Prince of Naples, so all the women are one woman and two sexes meet in Tiresias. What Tiresias sees, in fact, is the stuff of the poem. (T.S. Eliot, 2)

In the midst of fragmentation, mythopoetic unity is churned out through the centripetal forces acting to the centre of the poem. As Eliot wrote in *Ulysses, Order and Myth* (1923), the short essay on Joyce’s *Ulysses*, mythical method, here, is used to provide structural background and harmony to the entire poetic monument.
Conclusion

Eliotian universe in *The Waste Land* is oriented and balanced by the action and reaction of the centripetal and centrifugal forces. While the one is directed towards the centre, offering coherence and unity to the entire poetic matrix, the other diverges, adding to the rupture and envisaging another big bang and the creation of a multidimensional universe. The hidden laws governing the landscape of Eliotian universe are illuminated by Newton’s theoretical concepts, by the “equal and opposite” (third law of Newton) action and reaction of centripetal and centrifugal forces. These baffling terms defy any proper definition or boundary. To crystallize the nature of centripetal and centrifugal forces acting, is a task beyond the scope of words. How the waves of ‘isms’ struck the historical shores and why and when they withdrew from the shores, any attempt to capture and pinpoint the answers to these queries within a bunch of words will yield only eely and elusive kind of conclusions. Crystal clear terms fail to entangle the triggering reasons behind the genesis of centripetal and centrifugal forces.

When acted upon by the centrifugal forces, *The Waste Land* defies intellectual organization, and it foreshadows a decentered universe. The poem may express things that the author hadn’t intended or convey multitudes of impressions or betray one’s ignorance, callousness or confusion. Negating the Eliotian vision, *The Waste Land* declares radical textual independence. Still, using mythical method Eliot strives for a universal order in the poetic classic. *The Waste Land* is an Eliotian pilgrimage, a pilgrimage through literary eras, encapsulating the tradition behind and merging it with “individual talent”, and offering ‘santih’ mantras as the way of salvation. The Fisher King in *The Waste Land* is out to set his land in order and Tiresias heaps the fragments against the ruins. The blind seer can amalgamate blindness with insight.

The value of two thousand years of civilization all seems to have shipwrecked upon the shores of twentieth century wasteland. Eliotian vision, converging with Tiresian view, offers a way out of the puzzling and perplexing maze within which the modern man is entrapped. From the haphazardness and dishevellment, a mythical purity is churned out by the centripetal forces in the poem.

*The Waste Land* engulfs vast structure of broken images and fragments…still coherence as a pivotal force has been established in this classic monument as an upshot of the action and reaction of centripetal and centrifugal vibrations and compulsions.
References