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The dialectic of fragmentation and renewal: Eliot’s postwar poetics from a Bakhtinian perspective

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Abstract:

This paper examines the dialectic of fragmentation and renewal in TS Eliot’s The Waste Land (1922) and “The Hollow Men” (1925) through the lens of three pivotal Bakhtinian concepts, namely dialogism, the carnivalesque, and the grotesque. It reveals how Eliot’s postwar poetics combine fragmented expressions as well as moments that suggest potential regeneration and transformation. Eliot’s polyphonic, dialogic forms respond to cultural collapse by rejecting

closure and welcoming multiple voices. His carnivalesque reversals challenge hierarchies, creating a liminal space where destruction and renewal meet, while his grotesque bodies embody the modern struggle between decay and transformation. Through this multi-layered Bakhtinian reading, the paper contributes to the ongoing scholarly endeavours on Eliot's modernist poetics by offering a powerful lens which helps in understanding the innovative complexity of Eliot's poetic vision. Ultimately, the paper shows that the ambivalence and dialectic nature of Eliot's poetics leave readers suspended between decay and the hope of restoration without seeking final synthesis, thus underscoring Eliot's portrayal of modern life as a continual effort to piece together meaning from fragments.

Introduction

The early 20th century witnessed unprecedented upheavals: two world wars, rapid industrialization, and the collapse of long-standing social and moral certainties. Artists recognized that traditional aesthetic frameworks no longer sufficed in a world marked by secularization and cultural dislocation. Hence, modernism emerged as an artistic response to these complexities, leading artists to experiment with new strategies and forms to convey the fractured realities of modern life. In this context, TS Eliot established himself as a leading figure of literary modernism, pioneering innovative poetic language and form in response to a historical crisis. Eliot's poetry stands as a testament to this turbulent historical moment, portraying the spiritual desolation and fractured consciousness that characterized the postwar era. *The Waste Land* (1922) and "The Hollow Men" (1925) reflect the trauma of the Great War and the broader disillusionment with Western civilization. *The Waste Land* in particular became emblematic of this era's fractured condition. Drawing on a vast array of literary, religious, and cultural allusions, Eliot's poem both mourned and questioned the spiritual barrenness of contemporary life. "The Hollow Men", a shorter but equally influential work, continued this exploration of cultural desolation, emphasizing themes of paralysis, fragmentation, and spiritual voidness.

Many scholars have studied Eliot's poetry, highlighting Eliot's significant influence in shaping modernist literature. Across critical studies, Eliot emerges as a complex and evolving figure, whose poetry captures the fragmentation and spiritual fatigue in the aftermath of World War I as well as the reconstruction of meaning in a rapidly changing world. Early critical responses, such as FR Leavis (1932, p. 75) in his book *New Bearings in English Poetry*, praise Eliot's innovative formal techniques and his disillusioned worldview. Later critics, including Hugh Kenner (1959, pp. 145-152) in *The Invisible Poet: T.S. Eliot*, explore Eliot's employment of myth, fragmentation, and allusion, particularly in *The Waste Land*, as strategies for navigating cultural decay. More recent scholarship has shifted to examining Eliot's engagement

with religious and philosophical themes, while feminist and postcolonial critics have also studied the sociopolitical implications of his work.

Jewel Spears Brooker's *T. S. Eliot's Dialectical Imagination* (2018) offers a valuable contribution to the scholarship on Eliot by exploring the tension between fragmentation and the yearning for unity and "wholeness", particularly through a dialectical perspective (Brooker, 2008, p.1). While our study acknowledges and draws from this approach, it departs from it by proposing a different theoretical framework. In particular, our contribution lies in navigating Eliot's poetry through the lens of Mikhail Bakhtin. By applying Bakhtin's concepts of dialogism, the carnivalesque, and the grotesque, we argue that Eliot's work enacts a dialectic not merely between fragmentation and wholeness but also between disintegration and the potential for renewal, without seeking final synthesis, thus leaving readers suspended between two opposing forces.

Writing in the intellectual context of early Soviet Russia, which was marked by political upheavals and debates over the social function of art, Bakhtin developed theories that questioned the nature of language, literature, and culture. Although his context differs from Eliot's post-World War I West, placing their ideas in productive dialogue sheds light on Eliot's engagement with questions of tradition, meaning, and the role of art. Bakhtin's concepts of dialogism, the carnivalesque, and the grotesque resonate powerfully with Eliot's poetic strategies, suggesting new avenues for understanding his engagement with modernity's crises. This paper begins by analysing Eliot's departure from a singular poetic voice to a polyphonic form, where multiple discourses from diverse temporal, spatial, and cultural origins interact dialogically, reflecting not only the fractured condition of modernity but also enabling a cultural dialogue that gives voice to the marginalized. Moreover, the paper examines how the carnivalistic elements in the two poems (such as ambivalence, subversion of hierarchy, and humour) reveal an underlying tension between destruction and renewal by destabilizing hierarchies and entertaining the possibility of transformation. Finally, the paper shows that the grotesque in Eliot's work represents unsettling ambiguity, highlighting both decay and the possibility of change. Together, these Bakhtinian elements expose the complex dynamics of fragmentation and reconstruction in Eliot's modernist poetics, portraying a cultural crisis not as an end but as a site of resistance and reconstruction of meaning. At the heart of this inquiry is a desire to see Eliot not just as a figure of modernist fragmentation, but as a poet deeply engaged in the process of resistance and cultural renewal. Moreover, the paper's employment of Bakhtin's theory highlights the modernist tensions between tradition and innovation, thereby deepening our appreciation of Eliot's poetic innovation.

Dialogism: Marginalized perspectives and cultural dialogue

Bakhtin's concept of dialogism emphasizes that meaning emerges from the interaction of multiple voices, perspectives, and social languages. It challenges the notion of fixed or singular meaning, proposing that language exists in a state of ongoing dialogue with other utterances. As Bakhtin contends in *The Dialogic Imagination*, "[t]he word in language is half someone else's. It becomes 'one's own' only when the speaker populates it with his own intention" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 293). Eliot's *The Waste Land* and "The Hollow Men" enact this principle by rejecting a unified, authoritative lyric voice in favour of fragmented, polyphonic structures that mirror the disorientation of the post-war world. Brien Crews, in his essay "Tradition, Heteroglossia and T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*," refers to this effect as "*novelisation*" (Crews, 1998, p. 17, italics in original), a process by which features typical of the novel, such as heteroglossia and dialogism, begin to appear in other literary genres. This insight highlights how Eliot's poetry expands the possibilities of poetic form by incorporating multiple, often conflicting voices, thus challenging lyric monologism and enriching modernist aesthetics.

Eliot's shift to polyphony¹ and dialogism is most evident in *The Waste Land*, in which polyphony replaces the "monologic" convention and becomes a metaphor for the era's disjointed consciousness. Similar to the heteroglot novel, the poem becomes "a design for discourse; a great dialogue of interacting voices, a polyphony" (Morris, 1994, p. 89). Voices drawn from classical myth to contemporary London and from Eastern scripture to Western canon interact without merging into a unified narrative. *The Waste Land* is a space where these voices coexist and interact on equal terms. Despite Eliot's authorial control over the selection and arrangement of voices, which shape the dialogic interplay, subjects speak autonomously and have independent consciousnesses rather than serving as the poet's "mouthpiece" (Morris, 1994, p. 89-90). The central voice in *The Waste Land*, Tiresias, is itself multifaceted (male and female, living and dead), not only representing polyphony but also illustrating Bakhtin's "unfinalizability",² the idea that identities remain fluid and open to dialogue.

Polyphony in the poem is not restricted to the multiplicity of speakers in *The Waste Land*. The polyphonic nature of the poem is manifested at different levels. In "T.S. Eliot and Rilke: Polyphony and Dialogism in *The Waste Land* and the *Duineser Elegien*", Manfred Engel argues that

Obviously, there are various levels of polyphony in Eliot's *The Waste Land*: (1) *Polyphony and heteroglossia of voices, ideologies, sociolects and dialects*:

Instead of the traditional poetic self or narrator, we encounter a multitude of different persons and voices, belonging to different social groups, different nations and cultures and to different times. (2) *Polyglossia of national languages*: There are, for instance, passages in French, German, Italian and even Sanskrit. (3) *Polyphony of texts and genres*: Some of the poem's voices are obviously quotations or allude to other texts and genres. (Engel, 2007, pp. 106-107, italics in original)

As far as dialogism is concerned, this linguistic diversity is essential. Bakhtin highlights the importance of “the diversity of social speech types (sometimes even diversity of languages) and a diversity of individual voices, [that are] artistically organized” (qtd in Crews, 1998, p. 18). Eliot foregrounds this diversity throughout. *The Waste Land* opens with an epigraph and dedication in four languages; “The Burial of the Dead” repeatedly shifts voice; “A Game of Chess” contrasts upper-class and working-class dialogue, underscoring Bakhtin’s “stratification”³ of social discourse; “Death by Water” directly addresses “you”, engaging readers into the exchange; “What the Thunder Said” evokes the Tower of Babel, where competing tongues shatter any hope of a single narrative.

The incorporation of intertextuality generates a richer dialogic space, allowing for multiple, coexisting voices. Eliot’s collage of myths, operas, and literary fragments acknowledges “a world constituted by multiple kinds of discourses that both interfere and obliterate each other as well as complement and complete each other” (qtd. in Crews, 1998, p. 18). Moreover, voices of the past and the present are deliberately juxtaposed, an opposition Engel considers central to the poem’s dialogism (Engel, 2007, p. 107). This return to the past is, as Crews notes, “not simple nostalgia” but a “possibility to recover meaning” (Crews, 1998, p. 18) for a lost generation shattered by World War I. Hence, Eliot turns to myth not only to reconnect the present with a cultural past but also to establish and circulate specific cultural values and notions of greatness. *The Waste Land* is replete with interruptions, allusions, and references to various voices and languages, presented without clear demarcation or translation. This fragmentation is manifested not only thematically but also structurally, as the poem embodies “a heap of broken images” through its five sections, each further fractured by abrupt shifts in speaker, setting, and language. Such inconclusiveness is at the very heart of Bakhtinian dialogue; each utterance is cut short, interrupted, or contradicted by another.

Likewise, “The Hollow Men” adopts a voice that is both individual and collective, portraying figures as spiritual spectres suspended between life and death. The dramatic-monologue speaker, who is desperate and “hollow” due to the atrocities of war, insists that he belongs to a community of equally empty souls. Their “dried voices” are barely audible and

void of anything meaningful “as wind in dry grass or rats’ feet over broken glass.” Moreover, while the speaker’s voice’s separation from the authorial voice reflects the Bakhtinian autonomy of each utterance, the refrains create the effect of a communal lament and a wider cultural paralysis.

Dialogism in “The Hollow Men” also manifests itself in intertextual framing. The first epigraph, “Mistah Kurtz—he dead,” borrowed from Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, links Eliot’s hollow men to Kurtz, an ivory trader whose moral decline and spiritual voidness turn him into a “hollow” god-figure, foreshadowing Europe’s spiritual decline. The second epigraph quotes a children’s rhyme chanted on Guy Fawkes Day (5 November), when effigies of Fawkes, a failed Catholic conspirator, are stuffed with straw and burned. These straw “Guys” anticipate Eliot’s own “stuffed” men, representing inhuman figures likewise doomed to the fire. The two epigraphs position the poem’s emptiness in broader cultural narratives and reinforce its dialogic interplay of voices, histories, and moral warnings.

The Waste Land and “The Hollow Men” exemplify what Bakhtin calls *raznorečie* (разноречие),⁴ rendered as “heteroglossia”⁵ in Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist’s translation of *The Dialogic Imagination*, referring to the coexistence of diverse speech types, ideologies, and social languages within a single text. While dialogism (*dialogičnost’*, диалогичность)⁶ describes the relational principle through which meaning emerges in interaction, heteroglossia names the concrete plurality of voices that makes such interaction possible. Eliot does not offer a unified, authoritative voice; instead, he moves fluidly between languages, tones, and cultural references, enacting a dialogic interplay where no single discourse holds authority, and meaning remains open and contested. This polyglossic texture destabilizes conventional poetic unity and reflects the fractured nature of postwar modernity. However, through this very fragmentation, Eliot’s dialogism becomes a site of potential cultural dialogue and renewal. The fragmented yet determined voices in the poems form a collective expression of resilience and a unified cry of endurance and resistance. By engaging multiple marginalized perspectives and invoking a shared, though disjointed, cultural past, Eliot’s poetic form anticipates a spiritual and imaginative regeneration, affirming that meaning can still arise from cultural dissonance and despair. Most importantly, the multiplicity of voices and languages functions carnivalesquely, contributing to undermine any singular cultural authority.

The carnivalesque: Subversion, liminality, and possibility

One of Bakhtin’s most influential concepts in this context is the carnivalesque, which offers a critical framework for understanding the subversive and transformative elements in Eliot’s

poetry. *The Waste Land* and “The Hollow Men” incorporate carnivalesque elements that disrupt the bleakness of fragmentation, viewing destruction and renewal as intertwined processes. In other words, both poems challenge the dominant postwar status in Europe, using disruption and fragmentation to create a space for renewal.

The carnival, in Bakhtin’s analysis, temporarily suspends hierarchical norms, inverts social roles, and celebrates ambivalence. It is a celebration that involves all social strata, where people wear masks and hierarchies are reversed (the inferior becomes superior, and the superior becomes inferior). Simon Dentith, in *Bakhtinian Thought: An Introductory Reader*, discusses this reversal as an attitude “in which the high, the elevated, the official, even the sacred, is degraded and debased, but as a condition of popular renewal and regeneration” (Dentith, 2003, p. 66). This inversion allows the marginalized to move to the centre and can act as “an anti-authoritarian force that can be mobilized against the official culture” (Dentith, 2003, p. 71). The carnival disrupts the social fabric through reversing power relations; it can be seen as a chance of rebirth and new beginnings. Moreover, as Bakhtin states in *Rabelais and His World*, the carnival is based on freedom: “During carnival time, life is subject only to its laws, that is, the laws of its own freedom” (Bakhtin, 1984a, p. 7).

In *The Waste Land*, elements of carnivalistic inversion are clearly present. For instance, in “A Game of Chess”, Philomela reclaims agency through weaving her story after being raped and silenced by her sister’s husband, King Tereus. Her transformation into a singing nightingale and the degradation of the once-powerful king symbolize a reversal of power. In another instance, “What the Thunder Said” revisits characters introduced earlier in the poem, such as the abandoned typist and the outcast Roman leader (Coriolanus), reaffirming the centrality of the marginalized and the motif of carnivalistic reversal.

Bakhtin’s *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* identifies the Menippean satire as a carnivalistic element which has become “one of the main carriers and channels for the carnival sense of the world” (Bakhtin, 1984b, p. 113). One of its main characteristics is the intermixture of language, as David Musgrave (2014, p. 121) notes in *Grotesque Anatomies: Menippean Satire Since the Renaissance*. This is evident in the epigraph of *The Waste Land*, where Sibyl speaks in Greek (Menippean satire’s original language) followed by Italian (Dante) and English (Eliot). Another defining element of menippea is laughter, which, according to Lachmann et al, in “Bakhtin and Carnival: Culture as Counter-Culture,” represents “a ‘second revelation’ and proclaims a ‘second truth’” (Lachmann et al, 1988, p. 124). In the epigraph, laughter targets society, where meaning has deteriorated, as seen in Trimalchio’s grotesque boast of seeing Sibyl in a bottle.

Bakhtin also highlights oxymoronic combinations among the characteristics of Menippean satire. He explains this characteristic by pointing out that the menippea loves to play with shifts and unexpected comings of distant and disunited things (Bakhtin, 1984b, p. 118). Tzvetan Todorov echoes this in *Mikhail Bakhtin: The Dialogical Principle*, stating that “the essence of carnival lies in change, in death-rebirth, in destructive creative time; carnivalesque images are basically ambivalent” (Todorov, 1984, p. 69). This ambivalence pervades *The Waste Land*, as seen in the ironic paradox of “April is the cruellest month,” which subverts spring’s association with rebirth, linking lilacs with the dead. The story of the hyacinth girl also embodies this theme. In Greek mythology, the hyacinth is a flower that was believed to have sprung from the blood of Ajax, the son of Telamon. Taking into consideration that blood connotes war and death, the hyacinth ties beauty to death. Moreover, Madame Sosostri’s prophecy of death by water similarly transforms water, a symbol of life, into one of death. In “Death by Water”, Madame Sosostri’s prophecy is fulfilled. The drowning of Phlebas the Phoenician demonstrates an oxymoronic inversion: water, a symbol of life, brings death. However, Phlebas’s death offers freedom from worldly burdens, as he “forgot the cry of gulls, and the deep sea swell” and thus disrupts worldly hierarchies.

Scandal scenes and the *nekyia* are also typical of menippea according to Bakhtin in *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*. The *nekyia* is a Menippean motif which means, as Musgrave states, a journey to the land of the dead and a threshold dialogue that plays on the collapse of boundaries between the realm of the dead and that of the living (Musgrave, 2014, p. 133). This is evident in “The Burial of the Dead”, where the narrator “recognizes a wartime friend among the crowd and has a dialogue with him. On the other hand, scandal scenes destroy the tragic wholeness of the world and “make a breach in the stable, normal (“seemly”) course of human affairs and events” (Bakhtin, 1984b, p. 117). In “The Fire Sermon”, Eliot critiques moral decay through scenes of lust such as the sexual encounter between Mr Sweeney and Mrs Porter and the assault of the female typist by the “carbuncular” man, witnessed by Tiresias. These scenes portray postwar decadence and occasionally feature the intermixture of languages. The title of the section itself recalls Buddha’s Fire Sermon, in which Buddha warns against physical desires which lead people to commit sinful acts akin to those of animals, hindering spiritual growth.

The Waste Land represents a kind of modern carnival, a space of upheaval where transformation becomes possible and death gives way to rebirth. Though the barren landscape and the impotent Fisher King evoke images of sterility and despair, the arrival of rain in the poem’s final section offers a symbol of renewal and potential redemption. The poem closes with fragmentation with the line “London Bridge is falling down”, a children’s rhyme made

ominous, suggesting both cultural collapse and the possibility of rebuilding. Even as the poem ends in pieces, with disjointed languages and references, the final word, “Shantih shantih shantih”, evokes a moment of stillness and spiritual relief. This paradoxical ending leaves readers suspended between ruin and restoration, underscoring Eliot’s vision of modern life as one where meaning must be continually sought amid the fragments.

“The Hollow Men”, like *The Waste Land*, is structured in five sections and critiques postwar Europe. In the first section, the men describe themselves as simultaneously “hollow” and “stuffed”, an oxymoronic combination that suggests a sense of internal contradiction or ambivalence, which may be read as reflecting aspects of postwar identity. Their “dried voices” and the “dry grass” around them reflect the meaningless and lifeless world they live in. The hollow men exist in ambivalence, being physically alive but internally dead. The identity split experienced by the hollow men reflects a key feature of Menippean satire, namely moral-psychological experimentation. As Bakhtin (1984b, p. 116) notes in *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, a fragmentation of the self leads to the failure of achieving personal wholeness.

The speaker’s dream-like *nekylia* embodies Menippean themes of fragmented identity. In the second section, the speaker dreams of a *nekylia*, a journey among the dead, but avoids confrontation, preferring a “rat’s coat” or “crow’s skin” to conceal himself. His disguise suggests both his inferiority and his desire to transcend it. That is, even though he is in a traditionally transformative journey (the *nekylia*), the speaker’s avoids confrontation with the dead (or with truth, suffering, or revelation). In “Eliot’s Menippean Waste Land: Enthymemic Irony and the Nekylia,” Musgrave explains that the *nekylia* is “a vehicle for the revelation of ‘truth.’ The seer is consulted and the future is revealed” (Musgrave, 2008, p. 48). In the poem’s general context, the future foreseen here is the cultural and spiritual decline of Western civilization. However, Bakhtin also underscores the significance of dreams in menippea, viewing them as a space where “the possibilities of another person and another life” emerge (Bakhtin, 1984b, pp. 116–117), suggesting that even amid fragmentation and uncertainty, transformation remains possible.

Eliot’s “The Hollow Men” uses Menippean satire to portray spiritual collapse while still hinting at the possibility of redemption. The hollow men’s loss of faith is stressed in sections three and four, where they pray to broken statues and are described as “sightless”, symbolizing their spiritual blindness and inner fragmentation. Yet, the line “unless the eyes reappear” represents a glimpse of hope, as eyes function as symbols of vision, truth, and redemption, akin to a guiding star or a blooming rose that endures in a barren landscape. In the last section, the allusion “Thine is the kingdom” (a saying of Christ) signals divine authority. The hollow men,

however, cannot echo this, having lost their connection with God. This tension between despair and hope aligns with moral-psychological experimentation (a key feature of Menippean satire mentioned earlier) where the collapse of identity opens up possibilities for transformation. In other words, Eliot critiques spiritual blindness but also suggests that redemption remains possible, if only the “eyes” return.

Eliot’s use of irony and dark humour in “The Hollow Men” resonates with the ambivalent carnival spirit, reimagining despair as a stage in cultural and spiritual regeneration. In Bakhtin’s theory, carnival laughter is ambivalent, as it mocks but also affirms life, even amid destruction. The poem’s concluding lines, “This is the way the world ends / Not with a bang but a whimper”, capture the ambivalent temporality of carnival, where endings are also beginnings, and silence is as powerful as noise. The hollow men’s paralysis reflects the suspension of agency, a liminal state that holds the potential of transformation.

Elements drawn from the carnivalesque tradition help highlight the ambivalence and in-between state, emphasizing how disorder can coexist with recreation and renewal. By creating a space of subversion and liminality in both *The Waste Land* and “The Hollow Men”, Eliot blends fragmentation with the possibility of renewal. That is, whereas the poems reflect the fractured postwar psyche and the instability of the modern condition, they simultaneously represent a threshold or liminal zone where transformation is possible. This hope for transformation emerges from the subversion of established hierarchies which, albeit temporary in the context of the carnival, facilitates the creation of new meanings and new opportunities for rebirth. Eliot’s carnivalesque spirit finds a darker parallel in Eliot’s use of the grotesque, where distorted imagery and fragmented bodies reflect the disintegration of modern identity and the tension between decay and transformation.

The grotesque: Bodily distortion, decay, and transformation

In his book *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin (1984, p. 304) introduces the theory of the grotesque, originally formulated by the German scholar G Schneegans in his *Geschichte der Grotresken Satyre* or *The History of Grotesque Satire*. Although Bakhtin credits Schneegans with the main concepts of the grotesque, he critiques several of Schneegans’s approaches and interpretations, offering his own refinements. In Schneegans’s original classification, the grotesque is one of three comic types; the others are the clownish and the burlesque (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 304). Schneegans characterizes the grotesque primarily as a caricature that has reached fantastic dimensions (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 306). Bakhtin suggests that, in Schneegans’s view, the grotesque is basically an exaggeration of the inappropriate to monstrous dimensions.

Consequently, “the grotesque is always satire. Where there is no satirical orientation there is no grotesque” (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 306). Bakhtin diverges from this interpretation by asserting that the grotesque is not solely negative or satirical; it can also be positive and productive. He contends that satire alone “would not suffice to explain even the positive pathos of the quantitative exaggeration, not to speak of the qualitative wealth” (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 308). Therefore, he criticizes Schneegans for failing to grasp the potential of the grotesque image to unite both positive and negative elements (Bakhtin 1984, p. 308).

According to Bakhtin, the main attributes of the grotesque style are exaggeration, hyperbolism, and excessiveness (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 303). Bakhtin’s grotesque body emphasizes physicality, transformation, and the fusion of opposites (e.g. life and death, creation and destruction, degradation and renewal). Moreover, for Bakhtin, degradation is the “essential principle of grotesque realm . . . the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract; [the] transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity” (qtd. in Bloom, 2009, p. 147). Degradation does not undermine the body; rather, it facilitates a rebirth of meaning (Bloom, 2009, p. 147-148). The grotesque body is never static or complete; it is a body under construction, and sometimes it generates other bodies. As Bakhtin argues in *Rabelais and His World*, the grotesque body “swallows the world and is itself swallowed by the world” (Bakhtin, 1984a, p. 317). Hence, Bakhtin believes that “the artistic logic of the grotesque image ignores the closed, smooth, and impenetrable surface of the body and retains only its excrescences (sprouts, buds) and orifices, only that which leads beyond the body’s limited space or into the body’s depths” (Bakhtin, 1984a, p. 318). Most importantly, Bakhtin identifies the essence of the grotesque as “precisely to present a contradictory and double-faced fullness of life,” where destruction and death are inseparable phases from the birth of new and better things (Bakhtin, 1984a, p. 62). The very contradiction and fusion of the positive and negative that define the grotesque, as Bakhtin perceives it, are reflected in Eliot’s postwar poetry, where the grotesque emerges through images of bodily distortion and decay.

Eliot’s use of seasonal imagery in *The Waste Land* reflects Bakhtin’s concept of the grotesque as a space where opposites (life and death, nourishment and decay) are fused through exaggerated and transformative bodily acts. In the first two lines of *The Waste Land*: “April is the cruellest month, breeding / Lilacs out of the dead land,” Eliot presents the grotesque act of “breeding” life from death, which aligns with Bakhtin’s notion that “the beginning and end of life are closely linked and interwoven” (Bakhtin, 1984a, p. 317). Spring, symbolized by April, generates new life, whereas winter is “feeding / A little life with dried tubers.” The grotesque act of feeding here is degraded, as life is “little”, and it relies on “dried tubers” that grow

underground, similar to being buried and dead. Later, summer brings the act of drinking: “And drank coffee, and talked for an hour”. The mouth is central to grotesque imagery, as Bakhtin believes that “the most important of all human features for the grotesque is the mouth. It dominates all else” (Bakhtin, 1984a, p. 316). This instance of drinking evokes a more positive image than the previously mentioned act of feeding. The duality of negativity and positivity with the change of seasons mirrors Bakhtin’s critique of Schneegans’s one-sided interpretation of the grotesque.

Eliot’s portrayal of death and decay in *The Waste Land* exemplifies the grotesque’s capacity to hold contradiction. For instance, the drowned Phlebas, representing death as a return to elemental origins, is portrayed as both unpleasant and purifying. Images of decay (such as dry bones, sterile landscapes, and barren trees) highlight the physical reality of cultural decline, yet at the same time they indicate regeneration, as bodily dissolution becomes part of a natural cycle where decay inevitably leads to renewal.

Elements of the grotesque through distorted and symbolic bodies capture the tension between decay and continuity in Eliot’s *The Waste Land*. Bakhtin asserts that “[s]pecial attention is given to the shoots and branches, to all that prolongs the body and links it to other bodies or to the world outside” (Bakhtin, 1984a, p. 316). In *The Waste Land*, grotesque imagery appears in the surreal planting of a corpse, with the hope of sprouting or blooming: “That corpse you planted last year in your garden, / Has it begun to sprout? Will it bloom this year?” This idea also resonates with Eliot’s lines “What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow / Out of this stony rubbish?” which suggest life’s continuation after the war’s devastation. Moreover, Madame Sosostris’s card figures introduce further grotesque bodies, namely the man with three staves and the one-eyed merchant. The former recalls the Fisher King legend, symbolizing a spiritually desolate civilization, while the one-eyed merchant’s partial vision may suggest a post-war society’s fragmented perception and loss of faith. He carries a mysterious burden unseen even by Madame Sosostris, which could evoke the weight of collective human suffering. Bakhtin notes that the grotesque body “contains the signs of the zodiac” and “reflects the cosmic hierarchy” (Bakhtin, 1984a, p. 318), qualities echoed in Madame Sosostris’s declaration to Mrs Equitone: “Tell her I bring the horoscope myself: / One must be so careful these days.”

Eliot’s use of isolated and exaggerated eye imagery in *The Waste Land* underscores themes of despair, detachment, and anxiety in the aftermath of war. Bakhtin observes that grotesque imagery often emphasizes “protruding eyes” (Bakhtin, 1984a, p. 316), indicating that eyes must be visually isolated from the body to achieve grotesqueness. In *The Waste Land*, the crowds on London Bridge are described as: “And each man fixed his eyes before his feet.”

These war survivors, whom the speaker had not expected death to “have undone so many”, exhibit despair in their downward gaze. Their mechanical motion and avoidance of eye contact suggest an unwillingness to confront surrounding chaos. In another instance, Eliot quotes Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*: “(Those are pearls that were his eyes. Look!),” a line which implies that the transformation of eyes into pearls may reflect a materialistic worldview. Later, in “A Game of Chess”, Eliot draws from Middleton’s *Women Beware Women*, appealing to the grotesque with “Pressing lidless eyes and waiting for a knock upon the door.” The hyperbolic image of lidless eyes may signify sleeplessness and the absence of peace.

Eliot’s use of bodily fragmentation and hybrid forms in *The Waste Land* reflects Bakhtin’s concept of the grotesque as a means to explore transformation, decay, and the breaking of traditional boundaries. An important grotesque trope is “the transformation of the human element into an animal one; the combination of human and animal traits [which] is, as we know, one of the most ancient grotesque forms” (Bakhtin, 1984a, p. 316). This form of grotesque can be found in the metamorphosis of Philomel into a nightingale. Another animal-related grotesque appears in “The Fire Sermon”, where rats walk over bones and bodies of those who are dead or homeless: “White bodies naked on the low damp ground / And bones cast in a little low dry garret, / Rattled by the rat’s foot only.” Tiresias, an “old man with wrinkled female dug”, represents perhaps the most extreme grotesque body; an aged male figure with female breasts. Tiresias’ body is what Bakhtin calls “double-body” (Bakhtin, 1984a, p. 318), for it encompasses both male and female qualities.

Much like the grotesque figures in *The Waste Land*, the “hollow” and “stuffed” men of *The Hollow Men* embody Bakhtin’s notion of the grotesque, as their physical and psychological contradictions reveal tensions and instabilities that unfold through the poem’s language and imagery. In “The Hollow Men,” the grotesque imagery of “hollow” and “stuffed” men underscores the spiritual emptiness at the heart of the poem. The hollow men are simultaneously present and absent, corporeal and spectral, thus embodying the paradoxes of modern existence. Their disjointed voices and fragmented identities exemplify Bakhtin’s notion of the grotesque, highlighting boundary-blurring tendencies and instability that emerge within the poem itself. Eliot’s portrayal of the “stuffed” men in “The Hollow Men” vividly illustrates Bakhtin’s idea that grotesque imagery merges the outer and inner aspects of the body to reveal profound spiritual emptiness. The very essence of Eliot’s “The Hollow Men” is grotesque since the men in the poem are “stuffed” men who are filled with straw rather than organs. Bakhtin states, “the grotesque image displays not only the outward but also the inner features of the body: blood, bowels, heart and other organs. The outward and inward features are often merged into one”

(Bakhtin, 1984a, p. 318). In Eliot's poem, the "Headpiece filled with straw" suggests mental emptiness and intellectual paralysis.

Eliot's focus on disembodied eyes and other symbolic body parts in "The Hollow Men" emphasizes themes of spiritual voidness amid a world marked by decay and loss. The speaker refers to the eyes of those who have passed into "death's other Kingdom" as if they were autonomous entities. In the second section, the speaker confesses: "Eyes I dare not meet in dreams / In death's dream kingdom / These do not appear: / There, the eyes are / Sunlight on a broken column". These eyes may represent the faithful in a time of spiritual collapse. Other grotesque body parts, whether human or animal, appear throughout the poem. The "supplication of a dead man's hand" represents religious longing amidst spiritual death. The speaker also yearns to wear "Rat's coat, crowskin, crossed staves", which are symbolic of death and decay in the postwar world.

In Eliot's poetry, the grotesque serves as a powerful symbol of both decay and potential transformation. Figures such as the fragmented bodies in *The Waste Land* or the "hollow men" reflect a world declining physically, spiritually, and culturally. Nevertheless, as Bakhtin's theory of the grotesque body suggests, these distorted and disfigured forms are not merely images of degeneration; they are also transitional and open to renewal. The grotesque resists closure and finality, representing a body and a world in constant flux.

Conclusion

By applying Bakhtin's concepts of dialogism, the carnivalesque, and the grotesque to Eliot's *The Waste Land* and "The Hollow Men," this paper has uncovered a rich dialectic of fragmentation and renewal operating within Eliot's postwar poetics. Eliot's shift toward polyphonic and dialogic structures reflects a modernist response to cultural disintegration that resists closure and embraces multiplicity and dialogic interaction. The carnivalesque undermines established hierarchies and introduces a liminal space for a disrupting carnival where destruction and regeneration coexist, while the grotesque body embodies the tensions of decay and transformation that characterize the modern condition.

Bakhtin's concepts illuminate the dynamic interplay between fragmentation and renewal in Eliot's poetry. By emphasizing subversion, liminality, and transformation, Bakhtin provides a framework for understanding how Eliot's fractured structure and ambiguous imagery reflect both cultural breakdown and the potential for regeneration. Far from simply depicting despair, Eliot's poems engage in a complex negotiation with the crises of modernity, suggesting that the fragmentation of culture and self is not an end but a necessary stage in the process of

rebirth, renewal, and reconstruction of meaning. This dialectic captures the tension between despair and hope, suggesting that in the collapse of modernity, new forms of meaning and identity can still emerge. Moreover, the ambivalence and paradoxical nature of Eliot's poetics leave readers suspended between decay and the hope of restoration and renewal, underscoring Eliot's portrayal of modern life as a continual effort to piece together meaning from fragments.

Endnotes

¹ Polyphony, literally meaning many voices, refers to a narrative style in which distinct consciousnesses interact on equal terms rather than being filtered through a single authorial voice. As Bakhtin writes in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, Polyphony suggests "a plurality of consciousnesses, with equal rights and each with its own world" (Bakhtin, 1984b, p. 6, italics in original).

² Bakhtin explores his concept of "unfinalizability" most clearly in his book *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1984), where it plays a central role in his theory of polyphony and dialogic interaction. For Bakhtin, "unfinalizability" refers to the idea that human beings and their consciousnesses are never fully knowable or complete; they are always open to change, reinterpretation, and dialogue. He writes: "A man never coincides with himself. One cannot apply to him the formula of identity $A = A$. [...] The genuine life of the personality is made available only through a dialogic penetration of that personality, during which it freely and reciprocally reveals itself" (Bakhtin, 1984b, p. 59).

³ Bakhtin uses the term "stratification" in *The Dialogic Imagination* to describe how language within a single society is layered into diverse social dialects, professional jargons, generational speech, and class-based vernaculars, each carrying distinct worldviews and values, which together form the heteroglossic richness of the novel (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 262-263). The concept can also be applied to Eliot's poetry, where multiple voices and discourses similarly coexist.

⁴ MM Bakhtin, *Voprosy literatury i estetiki [Problems of Literature and Aesthetics]* (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaya literatura, 1975), p. 94. Translated as *raznorečie* ("heteroglossia") in MM Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), p. 263.

⁵ Heteroglossia refers to the presence of multiple forms of speech and worldviews within a single language or text, reflecting the social, cultural, and historical diversity embedded in any act of communication. As Bakhtin notes in *The Dialogic Imagination*, "language, for the individual consciousness, lies on the borderline between oneself and the other" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 293).

⁶ Bakhtin, *Voprosy literatury i estetiki*, p. 94; see also *The Dialogic Imagination*, p. 426 for the translators' rendering of *dialogičnost* ("dialogism").

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