

Where Waters Meet and Dreams Cross: T.S.Eliot and the Logos

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ABSTRACT: *This paper attempts a study of the concept of the logos coming down from the Judeo-Christian and Greco-Roman origin to the recent times, tracing echoes and anticipations in the Eliotian discourse. This over-view aims at discerning a backdrop against which the chiaroscuro of doubt and faith in the validity of the logos is seen operating in the works of T.S. Eliot. The sheer variety and profundity of the implications of the term “logos” that grows in multiple directions over the ages provide a background for tracing Eliot’s deep and pervasive sense of disquiet.*

Keywords—Logos, Word, inner word, articulation, poetry]

How incomplete is speech, how weak, when set against my thought! And this, to what I saw is such – to call it little is too much. Eternal Light, You only dwell within Yourself, and only You know You; Self-knowing, Self-known, You love and smile upon Yourself!

Dante

he is in bondage to a sign who uses, or pays homage to, any significant object without knowing what it signifies: he, on the other hand, who either uses or honours a useful sign divinely appointed, whose force and significance he understands, does not honour the sign which is seen and temporal, but that to which all such signs refer...such a man is free even at the time of his bondage

Saint Augustine

Eliot’s concern with the word and its communicative efficacy grows out of a long debate laden with intellectual and spiritual perplexities. The Hebrew tradition sees The Word as equivalent to the breath of God or the Holy Scripture, while to the early Christians the Word signified the very person of Christ and the profession of the faithful, the Gospels and the Sacrament of the Eucharist. The Greek and Roman theologians had conceived of the Word as the quintessential pattern of the universe, the underlying reason of matter and, in a way, the fulfilment of humanity. The accrued layers of significations that granted a figural elasticity and enormous potency to the Word, culminated in St. John’s predication – “And the Word was God”. A greater part of the faith, or flickers of assurance as to the credibility of the word that Eliot’s works show, is obviously deeply rooted in such exaltation of the Word.

Tradition invests the word with the power of creative action: “By the Word of the Lord were the heavens made...” (Psalms.33:6). Speech is granted a privileged status as the Genesis in the Old Testament shows the omnipotent God uttering names of elements like light, water, land and the elements being created instantaneously, names evoking and bringing into existence the material objects. In the Judaic tradition, the words assume the stature of an entity that sustains, preserves and gives meaning. The word transcends its restricted role of a mere vehicle for information, and is invested with humanity in the concept of the covenant. The promise inherent in the idea of the covenant carries the onus of a human commitment, entailing an implicit responsibility. This very sense of responsibility, carved by the words of the covenant, sustains human faith and solidarity in the face of perceptual changes, contingency of experiences, fragility of will and ravages of time. The word is the ultimate.

The confluence of Judaeo-Christian and Greco-Hellenistic cultures, brought about by the Macedonian Conquest of Asia Minor, Palestine, Phoenicia and Egypt in the fourth century BC, had shaped the conception of the Son in the New Testament as “Logos”. The Son, in John and Paul, remains both a progeny and declamation in the same predicative construction: “No man hath seen God at any time: the only begotten Son who is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared him” (John 1:18). Christ as the Logos or the “utterance” represents history itself as an animating force, combining personal and communal destiny with the Greek sense of the logos as an order that permeates the universe. The Greek notion of the Word as manifestation of the divine is absorbed and transformed in the Christian theology of incarnation. Pelikan quotes Irenaeus in *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*:

As the Son and the Logos of God, Christ was the revelation of the nature of God...the Father is that which is invisible about the son, the son is that which is visible about the Father.(p.229)

Tensile forces come into play with Saint Cyril, Augustine and Aquinas pointing out a seminal difference between the formation of human words and the Word or the Logos that is Christ begotten as Word subsisting and living, unlike the human speech where the uttered word is dispersed through the air and lost. Saint Cyril, Augustine or Aquinas's concerns reveal a wavering of absolute faith in the assuring revelatory function of the logos. This legacy runs through the entire Eliotian discourse, all along haunted by the Word-word duality. 'Burnt Norton' (section V) observes with trepidation,

The Word in the desert
Is most attacked by voices of temptation,
The crying shadow in the funeral dance,
The loud lament of the disconsolate chimera.

Again in 'Ash Wednesday' –

If the spent word is spent
Word is unspoken, unheard;
Still is the unspoken word, the Word unheard,
The Word without a word.

The word for the Greeks and Hermeneutic philosophers exists beyond the personal will of the speaker, operative as an interface between the speaker's mind and the world. The idea of logos as an interface, a process, and not an absolute theologically sanctioned supreme entity, grows and extends over time, and in a way forms the substratum of the persistent anxiety in a quintessentially modernist mind like T. S. Eliot's.

The Stoic conception of logos conceived of a dynamic tension that is quite akin to the productive tension of a stringed musical instrument, generating coherence out of an interaction that entails an inherent balance of the opposite movements in nature. The Stoic conception perceives human beings caught in the middle of the tensive motion as human perception itself is a communication interface where all the apparently opposite tensive forces meet and gain a form, combining the fulsome generativity of language and the order of human reason. Logos, thus, came to embody a reciprocal interaction between physical nature and human reason. Zeno of Citium refers to the right reason that pervades all things and is identical with the supreme divine identity, while Alexander of Aphrodisias points out that the divine pervades matter, thereby structuring and shaping it into the tangible world. This reason is pervasive and operates from the divine will, gradually ordering the cosmos and ordering human life by reason. Logos is granted an immense power of bridging the universal order and the recesses of the human mind. Epictetus, as cited by Oates in *The Stoic and Epicurean Philosophers*, argues that the human soul both mirrors and participates in the godhead; the human intellect has access to the divine by inner reflection:

Strato rejected the possibility of an external prime-moving power that animates the cosmos, in favour of a self-development potential in nature itself. Seneca echoes the thought later. Divinity is perceived in human reason. The 'logos' assumes the stature of an active interface, permeating both the physical world and the human mind. Logos acts as an interface between not only mind and matters, but also between the variegated levels of material and transcendental existence that the human mind endeavours to grasp and express. One is reminded of Eliot's 'Choruses from *The Rock*' (IX):

For Man is joined spirit and body
And therefore, must serve as spirit and body.
Visible and invisible, two worlds meet in Man;
Visible and invisible, must meet in His Temple

Innate human instincts form motile schematisms in course of individual experiences, and the perceptions take forms, ready for articulation. Such judgements, or forms fit for articulation are termed 'Lekta' that signifies neither any particular object nor a word, but a nexus between the external world and ourselves, the logos making us articulating reality for ourselves, that is, the way we have perceived the world. The physical exteriorization of speech is an effort to communicate, an effort to articulate an underlying, an effort to give shape to an anticipation in form of a perception, a part of the process of the development of the logos that permeates the cosmos, and grants meaningful existence to the reality perceived and shaped by reason. This relation between the logos and the human intellect, between the patterns of thought continually shaped in the course of experience and their linguistic embodiment in the speech-activity, along with their parasitic relationship to experience, projects a linguistic understanding of the 'logos' as a phenomenon far above the simplistic adequation of signs.

An idea immanent in the ancient concept of logos was elaborated by Chrysippus who distinguished between ‘logos endiathetos’ and ‘logos porphorikos’, that is the word conceived in the mind and the word articulated. The apparently simplistic distinction actually formulates an ambiguous nexus between the two and the nature of the relation between language and truth. Sextus refers to the complex operation of human reason that through the processing in the reflective mind, tend to construe perceptual profiles from transitive and constructive impressions. Through a retentive sense of sequence, man remembers what he has observed and tends to form a logical whole and new perceptual profiles by association with his previous experiences. The ‘logos porphorikos’ or the uttered word is seen as an outward expression of the inner process of human reasoning.

With the Macedonian conquest of Asia Minor, Palestine, Phoenicia and Egypt in the fourth century BC, Alexander had established bases for the extension of empire, unified not by allegiance to a centralized political authority, but by language and a certain idea of civic membership. Two monumental and vastly different traditions of the Logos converge at this hour in the Hellenistic Judaic compositions. Philo’s conception of the logos embodies this historic convergence. Plato’s *Timaeus* had depicted creations as the designs of a divine omnipotent artificer who framed the universe according to a pattern, which, according to the proposition in *Timaeus* could be the likeness of the artificer himself or the likeness of a creature that perceives all things intelligible.

The Word of God often serves as an instrument of the Divine Will, as explicated by God’s use of the Word to divide the formless universal being into distinct forms with distinct qualities during Genesis. In this mode of direct personal agency, Logos often serves as God’s messenger. Logos, thus assumes the stature of both a cosmic totality as a pattern, and a mechanism of divine articulation. Human intellect provides the right reason and correctness of education directs speech. Just like water from the spring, human intellect generates an overflowing reason, which like the water soaking the earth and feeding the spring again, produces right speech that extends the horizon of human cognition, creating newer perceptual profile and hence new thoughts. The spring gushes forth after protracted silence in Eliot’s ‘Ash Wednesday’, and in the ‘Choruses from *The Rock*’, the “perfect order of speech” emerges in the form of incantation – the beauty of right reason realising the Word in complete surrender:

Let us mourn in a private chamber, learning the way of penitence,
And then let us learn the joyful communion of saints.

The soul of man must quicken to creation.

Out of the formless stone, when the artist unites himself with the stone,
Spring always new forms of life, from the soul of man that is joined to
The soul of stone;

Plotinus (203-270 AD) takes the concept of the logos further to signify an agent of conferring order and beauty upon the world. The ‘logos’ carries into the material world, the order and beauty of the intelligible realm. The Supreme One, according to Plotinus, remains silent and it is the radiant energy emanating from the Supreme One that diffuses through nature. This radiant emission is the expression of the mind. Logos is the product of the mind. Plotinus, then, grants logos the status of a product, but it is interesting to note that he appropriates this concept while implicitly acknowledging the presence of the inner word or the Stoic ‘logos endiathetos’. The articulated ‘logos’ or the product of the mind is an appropriation of the Stoic notion of ‘logos porphorikos’. The apparent distinction, however, is resolved by Plotinus by an adversion of the metaphor of procreation. He compares the articulated product to a son, who is begotten imperfect in comparison to the father, but is gradually brought to maturity by the father himself. In Plotinus, is noticed a faith in the unity of thought and speech. He acknowledges the concept of moments of vision when the human mind, he feels, inclines towards the Supreme One, which bestows speech, mind and sensation, all of which commutatively interprets the relation of the cosmos to the One. The One itself provides the impulse to speak. There is an inherent need to express and speech is man’s way of expression. Anything imagined in the mind is not simply clothed in words. We conceive of something in the mind and then as we find words for articulating the same, we simultaneously work out the meaning of the initial feeling. It may so happen that many ideas defy a complete comprehension in the process of finding words for expression, and then one returns again and again to the exercise to do justice to the idea. Plotinus, quoted by Schroeder in *Form and Transformation: A Study in the Philosophy of Plotinus*, argues that in many cases, it is through apt articulation that the full potential of the logos is realised:

For it [the soul] is not full, but has something wanting in relation to what comes before it; yet it itself also sees quietly what it utters. For it does not go on uttering what it has uttered already, but what it utters, it utters because of its deficiency, with a view to examining it, trying to learn thoroughly what it possesses.(p.20)

There is a moment of achievement at the end of the discursive process when the mind experiences that it has fully comprehended what was dimly felt through apt clothing in appropriate words. This, according to Plotinus, is a moment of “quiet”, a silence of contentment. Echoes of such quietude and assuring cessation of the confusing noise of articulated words recur in the works of T. S. Eliot reverberating with distant rumblings in the charged non-vocality of the darkness and silence that pervades before the illuminating light lifts the soul to the level of communion:

I said to my soul, be still, and let the dark come upon you
Which shall be the darkness of God. As in a theatre
The lights are extinguished, for the scene to be changed...

Harry in *The Family Reunion* intuits a similar element of hope in the sudden pervasive quietude:

Why is it so quiet?
Do you feel a kind of stirring underneath the air?
Do you? don't you? a communication, a scent
Direct to the brain...

Eliot's journey, however, is a chequered one. The certitude of the silent prelude to a true communion is often pierced with debilitating doubts and a sense of terrible helplessness in the face of choices; the cessation of audible discourse fades into a silence that is often oppressive rather than pacifying. The excruciating agony at an apprehension of a profound mental emptiness or an absolute void that pervades the hordes of 'Hollow Men' and brings no indication of emancipation often makes the silence suffocating:

when an underground train, in the tube, stops too long between stations
And the conversation rises and slowly fades away onto silence
And you see behind every face the mental emptiness deepen..

The helpless silence in the face of difficult choices is even more agonizing. As Dante points out in 'Paradiso', Canto IV, of *The Divine Comedy*, torn apart by equally powerful choices, one stands eternally perplexed, inactive and helplessly silent:

Before a man bit into one of two
foods equally removed and tempting, he
would die of hunger if his choice were free;
so would a lamb stand motionless between
the cravings of two savage wolves, in fear
of both; so would a dog between two deer;...
when both my doubts compelled me equally:
what kept me silent was necessity.

There are intense moments of indecision and confusion in Eliot, when the words fade into a silence of bewilderment, fear and inaction. The voice in *The Rock* laments –

I have given you the power of choice, and you only alternate
Between futile speculation and unconsidered action.

Again, speech is not only a form of human articulation of being, but a mode of communication of the One to the cosmos. The soul pursues the Supreme One and the One stirs the intellect to produce the logos that fortifies human aspiration to commune with the One. Echoes of this concept, though faint, can be traced in Augustine's notion of divine communication. The logos, here is perceived as possessing a double function – of human articulation of being and of the divine calling to the human nature. Eliot's 'Choruses from the *Rock*' reiterate -

The LORD who created must wish us to create
And employ our creation again in His service
'Which is already His service in creating.
For Man is joined spirit and body,
And therefore must serve as spirit and body.
Visible and invisible, two worlds meet in Man;
Visible and invisible must meet in His Temple;

Over centuries the Western thoughts grew aware of the paradoxes of the limits and possibilities of language as a tool of expression. With Protestant pioneers like Luther, the logos acquires a whole new range of meanings – synonymous with the gospel, articles of faith, a covenant with mankind, Christian fellowship and

the numerous acts of encompassing the diffusion of God's creation and redemptive intervention in human history. The logos also assumes the stature of the word that the humans use to utter, promise, confess, judge, testify or to teach. Luther's "word" gives logos a much wider and more prosaic tenor in *A Commentary on the Psalms*:

But amongst all the gifts of God, the gift of the holy word is the most excellent, and if we take away the word, what do we else but take away the sun out of the world? ...For what can all these do without the word? which alone bringeth life and comfort to the soul, peace and quietness to the conscience...Albeit therefore there be many and wonderful gifts of God in the world, given for the use of man, yet the only gift which containeth and preserveth all the others, is the word of God, which pronounceth and witnesseth to our consciences, that God is our merciful father; which also promiseth unto us remission of sins and life everlasting.(p.172)

The logos or Luther's 'word' draws man out of his restrictive subjectivity, since the word's origin is traced to Christ Himself. The logos or the word towers over self-understanding. The words call man out of his subjectivity into community as personal illusions are discounted in favour of the word that guides. Luther distinguishes between the inner and the outer word, quite like the Stoic 'logos endiathetos' and 'logos porphorikos'. An echo of Augustine is also discerned. He compares the outer or articulated word to a piece of burning coal in our mouth, which can never be kept in, but compels one to open his mouth. However, he shows a link between the two. The inner word, equivalent to the word of God, will warn man against his illusions that the outer word produce, but on failing to convince or correct, the inner word will take the form of a prayer that must be couched in the outer words to combat the pervasive illusions and for complete redemption:

'Little Gidding' points out,
You are not here to verify,
Instruct yourself, or inform curiosity
Or carry report. You are here to kneel
Where prayer has been valid. And prayer is more
an order of words, the conscious occupation
Of the praying mind, or the sound of the voice praying.

One is reminded of the desperation and yearning in the final prayer in 'Ash Wednesday':
Suffer me not to be separated
And let my cry come unto Thee.

The multicultural anticipation of the logos as the inner word assumes a far more complicated status with the concept of the Trinity. The second person of the Trinity, the Son, is identified with the Word that would usher the salvation of mankind. This generates a productive tension between transcendence and immanence since the Son, in the form a human being of blood and flesh implies subjective consciousness, and yet is identified as the Logos that is an indication of the transcendental. The position of the Logos in the Trinity-model expresses both the relation of the Son to the Father in their transcendent being and the relation of the Son or the Logos to the human world as both transcendent and immanent. Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria and the chief spokesperson for the church at the Council of Nicaea in 325 justified this model and the unique position of the Son or the Logos in 'Epistle of Athanasius Concerning the Arian Bi-partite Council Held at Arimium & at Seleucia', when he equated the presence of the divine Father in the Son with the traces of thought in the word:

For the Son is in the Father, ... because the whole Being of the Son is proper to the Father's substance, as radiance from the light, and stream from the fountain; ...because from the Father, is therefore in the Father...as in the radiance the sun, and in the word the thought, and in the stream the fountain.(pp.50-51)

Athanasius who represented the bishop of Nicaea endorsed the inextricable relation referring to the consubstantiality of Father and Son:

A son they said, is an offspring, but, in order to be such, he must spring from that of which he is the offspring; ... Thus, to be the Son of God, if He is God's offspring or true Son, is to be "of" or "one with" God's substance,- that is, to be "consubstantial" with Him.(p.360)

Thus anything that is derived from a source, must be necessarily original to it; the word must relate to the Word. There will be a relation and a difference, but that would imply that it is the same as the origin. The question of difference however whetted considerable intellectual debate. A resolution was attempted through an absolutely linguistic possibility. Three Cappadocian monks, Basil (329-379 AD), Gregory of Nazianzus (325-390 AD) and Gregory of Nyssa located that the Greek had two words for substance – 'ousia' meaning generic nature, and 'hypostatis' signifying any special or characteristic nature. The Trinity was thus explained as the union of three hypostates in one 'ousia'. The Roman church incorporated this concept into their system as the

Trinity that was the expression of one substance or the ‘substantia’ in three entities. The Logos, had hitherto served as a medium of thought, but now the Logos being simultaneously homoousios with the Father and mankind, posed a challenge to human intellect as an entity that continually transcends the frontiers of human understanding. What previously was an interface, now became a part of the divine, the Word rendered in flesh in the Trinitarian model.

The problematic of the Son-Father duality weaves its way over centuries and reverberates through the most recent speculations, albeit in different contexts and in different modules. When Foucault discusses the ‘profundity’ of a text, in *Essential Works II*, he discounts mere interpretive ventures that attempt a pursuit of the signified, an inner meaning, in favour of a meaning that is made possible by the outer environment. The words then form a network in which each word is distinct from the other. They exist in a relationship, but in a space that preserves their identity:

language escapes from the mode of being of discourse – that is, from the dynasty of representation – and the literary word develops out of itself, forming a network, whose every point, distinct from the others, distant even from its closest neighbours, is situated in relationship to all the others in a space which both locates and separates them.(pp.272-273)

Though Foucault is suggesting that language must not be analysed for any inner meaning, but from it may be interpellated a space that furnishes its deeper foundations almost in an archaeological fashion. The reference to the difference that actually preserves and fosters a unity or interconnectivity of a whole is reminiscent of the age old enigma of the inherent difference and homoousia of the Trinity. Eliot’s “shadow” that separates conception and creation, and yet touches both, lying between them and connecting them in to a whole, recalls this notion in ‘The Hollow Men’:

Between the idea the reality Between the motion And the act Falls the shadow

For Thine is the Kingdom

Between the conception And the creation Between the emotion And the response Falls the shadow

Logos assumes the stature of a dynamic entity that passes through history as an active power.

Even when totally divested of any theological context, the autonomy of the logos as the word permeates through centuries, enthraling human intellect. This old comparison springs to the mind when Barthes marvels at the supreme autonomy of words. “Words”, he points out in *Writing Degree Zero*, “adorned with all the violence of their eruption”, act like Pandora’s Box – a source of infinite possibilities. The effect, he notes, is - a discourse full of gaps and full of lights, filled with absences and over nourishing signs, without foresight or stability of intention and ...merely to have a recourse to a discontinuous speech is to open the door to all that stands above nature.(p.48)

Again when Foucault, in a very different context , analyses the nature of discourse and points out that all things unfold their individual secrets to form a discourse, that with a strange autonomy, operates to embody a natural unfolding of meaning, distant echoes of the autonomy of the word disturbs the mind: this logos is only another discourse already in operation, or rather, it is things and events themselves which insensibly becomes discourse in the unfolding of their essential secrets. Discourse is no longer much more than the shimmering of a truth about to be born in its own eyes; and when all things come eventually to take the form of discourse, when everything may be said and when anything becomes an excuse for pronouncing a discourse, it will be because all things having manifested and exchanged meanings, they will then all be able to return to the silent interiority of self-consciousness. (p.228)

An acute awareness of the silent existence of the Word within the deepest core of the human heart resonates through Eliot’s poetry. With an overt acknowledgement of the presence of the resplendent Logos in the heart, remains an awareness of the swaddling darkness and hopelessness that obscure the vision. This opacity is attributed to a wilful denial of the resonance of the Logos or the Word in the heart. In this life, the “brief transit where dreams cross”, Eliot muses in ‘Ash Wednesday’,

Word is unspoken, unheard;

Still is the unspoken word, the Word unheard,

The Word without a word, the Word within ...

No place of grace for those who avoid the face

No time to rejoice for those who walk among noise and deny the voice

Will the veiled sister pray for

Those who walk in darkness, who chose thee and oppose thee , ...
children at the gate

Who will not go away and cannot pray:

Pray for those who chose and oppose

One is reminded of the Dantesque vision of the Purgatory where the suffering penitents recover the reality and essence of their existence through self-knowledge; they actively choose to be where they are, and it is they themselves and not some divine adjudicator, who decide when their penance has been sufficient. The suffering is a wilful choice:

Tremors strike here when my soul feels pure
and rises, newly cleansed, to start its climb.
And that cry follows as the soul ascends.
The will alone gives proof of purity
when, wholly free to change its sacred place,
it aids and sweeps the soul up, willing well.

The use of the word “chose” in ‘Ash Wednesday’ adds a fresh edge to the human inability to realise the glory of the indwelling Logos. The logos is a powerful autonomous entity whose existence is not dependent on any one individual subjective consciousness or will, but throbs with its own vitality and potency; individuals of different times and generations get entangled in it, get absorbed in the vitality of the logos, and use it to realize and proceed towards communion, unfolding and developing themselves in the process. One may infer that if one encounters frustrating phases of sterility and darkness where lack of appropriate words numb his effort at effective communication, there must be some obstacle, personal, socio-cultural or otherwise that hinders him in participating in the pulsating life force of the logos operative in the world and, once liberated by individual will, he may be absorbed in the eternal flow of logos. The individual effort is significant. The faint but reassuring suggestion that the denial of the Word is wilful, almost like the wilful suffering of the penitential souls of Dante’s purgatory, proffers a hope; the awareness of the transcendental Logos is not permanently obscured. With the hope comes the assailing anxiety: Will the wilful denial that burns the suffering heart, finally reach the luminescence of the Logos? Eliot’s fascinating poetic journey continues thus: “We must be still and still moving/Into another intensity/For a further union, a deeper communion...”

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