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The Play of Gaze in T.S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"

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Abstract

Eliot's strong ties with visual arts and his undeniable affiliation with many avant-garde artistic movements of the twentieth century are exemplified and illustrated in his poetic canon. Given such deep affiliation with visual arts and modern artistic movement, it appears seemly to attempt to analyse his poems from the theoretical perspective of Gaze theory. Dwelling on the varied offshoots of Gaze theory, this paper proposes to analyse Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" from the insights derived from them. This paper would attempt to substantiate how the split in Prufrock into subject and object is effectively conveyed through and buttressed by the play of gaze. This paper would also claim to establish how this poem subverts and dismantles the popular notion of "male gaze" proposed by Laura Mulvey and chiselled by patriarchal social structures, and illustrates the play of "female gaze" proposed by Eva-Maria Jacobsson.

Keywords: Eliot, visual, art, gaze, "male gaze", "female gaze", Prufrock

"The hero smiles; in my best mode oblique
Rolls toward the moon a frenzied eye profound,
T.S. Eliot ("Nocturne")

"This charm of vacant lots!
This helpless fields that lie
Sinister, sterile, and blind –
Entreat the eye and rack the mind,"
T.S. Eliot ("Second Caprice in North Cambridge")

Researching on a poetic maestro as T.S. Eliot in 2022 is indubitably a daunting task simply because of the wide ken of research attempted

on him, exhausting and embracing almost all the possible territories as cultural, aesthetic, and theoretical criticism. In fact, so much has been said of Eliot that finding an untapped territory for exploration seems difficult. Yet, it will be my humble attempt to look into one of the widely read and most popular poems of Eliot, “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”, from a perspective hitherto unexplored. In this rather short essay, I propose to offer some preliminary ideas on gaze theory, and try to illustrate how Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” may be read from the insights derived from those theoretical perspectives. My further claim in this essay is to substantiate how the split of Prufrock’s self into subject and object is buttressed by and conveyed through the play of gaze. My final claim in this essay is to illustrate that Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” dismantles and subverts Laura Mulvey’s concept of “male gaze”, and illustrates the exercise of “female gaze” enunciated by Eva-Maria Jacobsson.

Eliot’s attachment to art and artists is a well-known fact. Eliot would frequent the Vorticists and artists affiliated to the Bloomsbury group. Eliot also had a deep and genuine appreciation for artists like Pablo Picasso, Edward Wadsworth, Wyndham Lewis, Jacob Epstein, Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, among others. And yet, rather than make direct references to these artists in his poems, his poetic canon bristled with the illustration and application of avant-garde art movements of the twentieth century in terms of textual-visual explorations. He had a life-long penchant for Cubism, and also frequented the tea-parties of cubist artists. Eliot studies History of Ancient Art, among other subjects, during his Harvard years. Eliot’s affiliation with visual arts accentuated since 1920s when Faber and Faber issued six of his poems¹ with illustrations. Eliot’s paintings made by a few famous painters also reinforce his affiliation with visual arts: Wyndham Lewis was supposed to have painted him twice, in 1938 and 1948; Eliot was painted by Patrick Heron in 1949 and by Cecil Beaton in 1956. Finally, *The Waste Land* is supposed to have impacted upon many contemporary artists, including the famous R.B. Kitaj. The two major canvases made by Kitaj – *Tarot Variations* (1958) and *If Not, Not* (1975-76) – were products of the influence of *The Waste Land* on him. Given such deep affiliations with visual arts and artistic movements, it is only seemly that one may

venture to illustrate his poems with the insights derived from Gaze theory which broadly explores the visual and the scopic. This paper would, however, focus on one seminal representative poem of Eliot's early phase, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock", which is highly amenable to such a theoretical discussion never attempted hitherto.

II

Although there is no such distinct theoretical school as "Gaze theory", theorists of Film Studies in particular have explored the subtle nuances of gaze along with its varied ramifications to probe into human psyche. Before one proceeds to examine some of the major offshoots of gaze, one must be aware of the distinction between look and gaze. While "look" is a purely biological act, enacted through the act of visualising someone or something through an essentially sensory and physical participation, gaze is a look endowed with some intention, purpose or meaning. Thus, a baby's looking at the moon is just an instance of "look", while the suspicious look of a detective agent or the angry glare of a person is a particular kind of action related to the purview of Gaze. In other words, while "look" operates mainly at the sensory level, "gaze" is a sensory action steeped in certain pre-existing, preconceived mental impressions. And these mental impressions are conditioned by personal, social and cultural parameters. Thus, the notion of gaze is caught up in the tangle of socio-cultural, personal and psychological network.

In his book *Ways of Seeing* (1972) John Berger points out that our looks are largely actuated by our pre-existing notions and our likes and dislikes about certain things or persons. Berger categorically projects men as the surveyor of women who thus assume the passive roles of being surveyed. As Berger puts it:

Men survey women before treating them. Consequently how a woman appears to a man can determine how she will be treated. (46)

Berger categorically hints at the role of passivity to which women have been consigned by being objects of male gaze:

[M]en act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed

female. Thus she turns out to be an object – and most particularly an object of vision: a sight. (47)

It was Laura Mulvey whose seminal essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”, published three years after Berger’s *Ways of Seeing*, subscribes to the same notion of women being treated as objects of ‘male gaze’ in a strictly patriarchal social structure. Mulvey argues that the patriarchal society has maintained a sort of “sexual imbalance” in which “pleasure in looking has been split between active/ male and passive/female” (19). Mulvey follows in the toes of Berger to reinforce the suggestion of women being projected as passive objects rather than the active subjects in this exchange of gaze:

The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously to be looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*. (19)

In fact, it was E. Ann Kaplan who in her *Looking for the Other: Feminism, Film, and the Imperial Gaze* (1997) offers a distinction between ‘look’ and ‘gaze’ by arguing that the term ‘look’ suggests “a process, a relation”, while the term ‘gaze’ suggests “a one-way subjective vision” (xvi). For Kaplan “the subject bearing the gaze is not interested in the object per se, but consumed with his(*sic*) own anxieties, which are inevitably intermixed with desire” (xviii, Kaplan’s interpolation), and as such, gaze is primarily preconditioned by one’s subjective intentions and notions. Kaplan tries to relate the centrality of power inherent in ‘imperial gaze’ to that prevailing in ‘male gaze’, arguing that the imperial gaze “reflects the assumption that the white western subject is central as much as the male gaze assumes the centrality of the male subject” (78).

Taking his cue from David Levin’s *The Opening of Vision: Nihilism and the Postmodern Situation* (1988), Martin Jay in his excellent research *The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought*(1993) makes a distinction between what he calls ‘assertoric gaze’ and ‘aletheic gaze’:

The former is abstracted, monocular, inflexible, unmoving, rigid, ego-logical and exclusionary; the latter is multiple, aware of its context, inclusionary, horizontal, and caring (275).

In *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* Lacan argues that "[t]he eye and the gaze – this is for us the split in which the drive is manifested at the level of the scopicfield" (72). The gaze, for Lacan, was just a symbolic projection of our inner experience projected outward. Lacan repudiates the concept of a pre-existing gaze put forward by Merleau-Ponty, and brushes aside the latter's claim of a transcendental subject amenable to the power and privilege of all-visibility. Rather than an examination of the world by a conscious subject, we are consigned to the position of objects or "beings that are looked at" (1979: 74-75).

The pleasure of looking at someone has led to two significant offshoots of gaze: voyeurism and scopophilia. Significantly, while both voyeurism and scopophilia lead to sexual stimulation in the beholder, there is a fundamental difference between the two. Voyeurism is essentially a clandestine act, and the role played by peeping Toms. The person looked at by the voyeur remains unaware of the voyeur's presence. A host of popular voyeurs may be adduced from literature: Roger Chillingworth in Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, Miles Coverdale in Hawthorne's *The Blithedale Romance*, Dr. Tertius Lydgate in George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, Gabriel Oak in Hardy's *Far From the Madding Crowd*, Roger Lambert in Updike's *Roger's Version*, among others. Scopophilia, on the other hand, is an overt act in which the person looked at becomes fully aware of the subject who looks at him/her. In the words of Richard Allen², "Scopophilia describes a pleasure derived from looking. Voyeurism can be distinguished from scopophilia on the grounds that pleasure of the voyeur is derived from looking at a person who is unaware of the voyeur's presence...." (130). For example, in Updike's *Roger's Version* when Roger Lambert delights in the deliciousness of looking at Verna in her bathrobe, she becomes fully aware of his presence, and his act of scopophilic relish.

Another variant of gaze is the concept of "hate stare" proposed by Michael Argyle and Mark Cook in *Gaze and Mutual Gaze*. Argyle and Cook suggest that the intrinsic prejudice of the white Americans towards the black Americans results in this kind of "hate stare" which is conditioned by such racial and political factors. Another significant insight of gaze was provided by Foucault in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Taking his cue from Bentham's concept of "panopticon", Foucault warns us of the presence of invisible

panopticons in our society. Broadly speaking, the panopticon is an apparatus of exercising power through the very act of surveillance. The basic purpose of panopticon was, Foucault argues, to “induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assumes the automatic functioning of power” (201).

Recent interesting research on gaze may be found in Eva-Maria Jacobsson’s concept of “female gaze”. Taking her cue from Mulvey’s concept of “male gaze”, Jacobsson interrogates Mulvey’s concept by asking whether it is still fair to treat women as objects of “male gaze”. Jacobsson turns the tables on Mulvey, and argues in favour of having a “female gaze” in which the woman becomes the active onlooker, and the man becomes the object of “female gaze”. As Jacobsson puts it:

Can the male gaze be reversed, i.e., is there a female gaze? Is it possible to argue for a female gaze in contemporary movies, where the woman would be objectifying the man to a subject of their desires and pleasures of looking? (8)

Reflecting on the encounter between Dan and Alex in the movie *Fatal Attraction*, Jacobsson observes how

Alex is watching him intensely, with desire in her look. She is adopting the masculine traits and the masculine position as a bearer of the gaze. The gaze could be said as being feminine in this scene. The object of desire is not a female character, rather a male, Dan. (13)

Thus, Jacobsson claims, “Alex could be said as defining this female gaze through her actions and the movies presentation and package in the initial part” (16).

III

Composed during 1910-1911, Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” offers a brilliant critique of a man’s self-analysis through psychic unravelling. The dual influences of Jules Laforgue and Henri Bergson are writ large in Eliot’s treatment of Prufrock. Eliot was supposed to have derived the idea of unravelling Prufrock’s inner self from Bergson’s *An Introduction to Metaphysics* (1913), translated by T.E. Hulme. As one finds in Bergson:

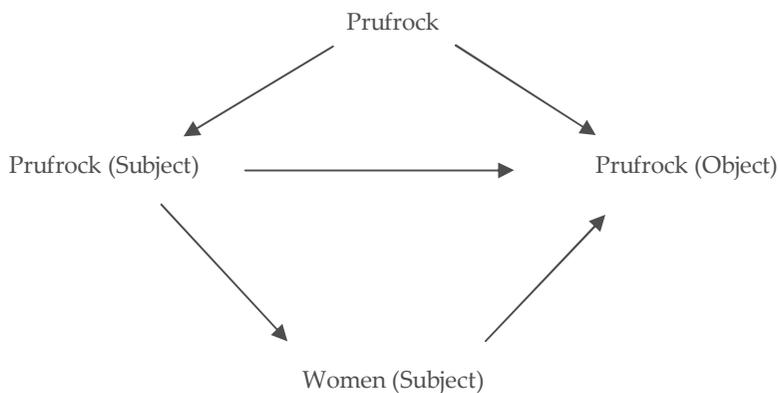
The inner life may be compared to the unravelling of a coil, for there is no living being who does not feel himself coming gradually to the end of his role; and to live is to grow old. (qtd. in Southam 46)

Eliot's commentators³ have referred to the fact that Eliot was influenced by Jules Laforgue's *dedoublement* of personality which believes in the split of the same person into subject and object. Prufrock is both the subject and the object, both the surveyor and the surveyed, both the actor and the spectator. If on the one hand his eyes keep on rolling on the women in the restaurant; on the other the women also size him up with their scrutinising gaze. As a subject Prufrock casts his wary looks on "the evening spread out against the sky/Like a patient etherised upon a table", on the "sawdust restaurants with oyster shells", on the "Streets that follow like a tedious argument/Of insidious intent", of the slow movement of yellow smoke and fog, and of almost everything around him that come under his ken (Ricks & McCue 5-9). Like the blind man who "sits delaying in the vacant square" in Eliot's "First Debate Between the Body and the Soul" (240), Prufrock sits lazily at the restaurant gazing at the women and toying with the "overwhelming question" of proposing a particular woman. And unlike that old man's "blind inconscient stare", Prufrock's is a conscious and curious gaze suffused with his scopophilic desires. Interestingly, and paradoxically, from the same subject position Prufrock examines himself as an object, and offers us a punctilious detail of his looks, his preoccupations, his thought-process, his intention, and the static quality of his thought and action. But while these commentators have rightly pointed out how this split in Prufrock into the outer Prufrock and inner Prufrock led to his choice of interior monologue, what none of them has pointed out is how this split manifests the wonderful and complex play of gaze. While Prufrock's objective inner self is the passive listener of his outpourings, his inner self acquiesces in the gaze of the outer subject self, and contemplates on the series of daily chores that constitute his small cosmos. As Robert Langbaum puts it: "Prufrock's other self-figures as the auditor who *watches* Prufrock's performance at the tea party and to whom Prufrock tells what he learns through the performance about his life" (190) (Emphasis added).

Furthermore, Prufrock, the subject, in a way, tries to control the gaze of the women – or what Eva-Maria Jacobsson has termed "female gaze" – through which he has been projected as an object. When Prufrock dwells on his own physical features, his emerging

signs of physical decrepitude, and his concomitant anxiety induced by it, his daily routine of measuring out his life “in coffee spoons” and his whereabouts, he examines Prufrock, the object, from his subject position. But when Prufrock imagines himself to be objectified and displayed by the women, it clearly illustrates the play of “female gaze”. Even the female gaze and its concomitant responses are suited to Prufrock’s escapist strategy of tarrying and parrying, of dilly-dallying and shilly-shallying the “overwhelming question”. By deliberately situating himself as the passive object of “female gaze” rather than the active subject of “male gaze” proposed by Mulvey, Prufrock wants to buttress and reinforce his delaying tactics and dodging strategies. His very propensity for delaying the act and evading it altogether, makes him shift from this active subject position and to the passive object position, through a simultaneous shifting of the play of male gaze to female gaze. And this shift from activity to passivity perfectly dovetails into the mental inertia prevailing in Prufrock, and so wonderfully evoked through the image of the patient anaesthetised with ether at the very beginning of the poem.

The following diagram will help understand how the entire poem illustrates a brilliant shuttle and scuttle of gaze, of the same Prufrock who assumes the dual roles of subject and object, and how the same women initially looked at by Prufrock as objects assume the role of another subject position to cast their female gaze to relegate him to an object position.



Prufrock's curious gaze follows the movement of the women in the restaurant:

In the room women come and go
Talking of Michelangelo. (5)

One may be reminded of "pacing to and fro" from James Thomson's "In the Room", a poem which was so favourite to Eliot. One may also be reminded of the lines from Eliot's poem "Afternoon", depicting a similar situation of assumed cultural elitism:

The ladies who are interested in Assyrian art
Gather in the hall of the British Museum.
The faint perfume of last year's tailor suits
And the steam from dying rubber overshoes
And the green and purple feathers on their hats
Vanish in the sombre Sunday afternoon
As they fade beyond the Roman statuary
Like amateur comedians across a lawn
Towards the unconscious, the ineffable, the absolute. (267-268)

In both "Prufrock" and "Afternoon" there is a discrepancy between the assumed pretentiousness of the ladies and their actual knowledge of art. Suffice it to say, in both the cases Eliot pricks the bubble of their presumptuousness and lays bare their inner hollowness. Seen from the angle of the spectator's gaze, as in a cinema, the spectator gets deluded by the assumed identity presented through the deliberate choice of the ladies.

If gaze explores the scopic drive, the preponderance of the scopic characterises much of this poem. The detailed movement of the yellow smoke and fog, presented so wonderfully in scopic terms, synchronises with Prufrock's gaze which, like a videographer, takes a faithful cinematographic recording of it. Eliot's finesse lies in his presenting the entire scene in the present tense which conduces to the cinematographic effect among the readers who assume the role, as it were, of the spectators.

Prufrock's alibi that "there will be time/To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet" exploits the scopic in general, and theatrical metaphor of preparing one's face before acting in particular (6). And it is this scopic drive that opens up the horizon in which the gaze of Prufrock and others strike each other. The very notion of preparing one's face or masking the real intention under a veneer of suavity and

respectability presupposes the assumption of a pseudo-gaze – synchronising with the assumed disguise – to mask his inner self, and by so doing, to read the inner self of others. One may be reminded of travellers moving towards “early coffee-stands/With other masquerades” in “Preludes”, and of the hollow men’s desire to wear “deliberate disguises” in “The Hollow Men” (15, 82).

Even the idea of mooting a question to drop it later has been conceived of in scopical terms:

That lift and drop a question on your plate; (6)

Any perceptive reader may notice how the gaze moves vertically, and as such, is a slight variation of Martin Jay’s concept of “aletheic gaze”. Jay’s distinction between “assertoric gaze” and “aletheic gaze” actually borders on the distinction between fixed gaze in the case of the former, and mobile gaze in case of the latter. Seen from this angle, when the ladies in the restaurant project their female gaze to fix Prufrock within the straitjacket of “a formulated phrase”, it may also be interpreted as “assertoric gaze”; but when Prufrock’s gaze shuttles across the women’s coming into and going away from the restaurant, or when his gaze follows the motion of the yellow smoke and fog, or when it follows the putative motion of the lifting and dropping of a question, in each of these cases it illustrates the play of “aletheic gaze”.

Keenly conscious of his nascent old age and evanescent youthfulness, the emerging signs of his old age are offered to him, not so much in a direct way as through lens of the female gaze of the women who, he thinks, mock at and sadistically relish at his bald head, his thin hair, and his thin arms and legs. One may be reminded of the lines from Eliot’s “Spleen”:

And Life, a little bald and gray,
Languid, fastidious, and bland,
Waits, hats and gloves in hand,
Punctilios of tie and suit (239)

Prufrock, the hitherto subject, gazing at the women prompted by his scopophilic desires, is relegated to the level of Prufrock, the object, by the female gaze of the same women who are now elevated to the subject position. One does not fail to notice how the play of

gaze also conduces to the continual shifting and see-sawing of positions, from subject/centre to object/periphery, and *vice versa*.

Prufrock's curious gaze which thoroughly surveys his other self as a pathetic victim of emerging old age – a fact deterrent to his putative desire of proposal – frantically tries to find out means to stave off the staleness of decrepitude, and assume a polished, snappy, snazzy appearance:

My morning coat, my collar mounting firmly to the chin,
My necktie rich and modest, but asserted by a simple pin – (6)

Ironically enough, the “firm” collar and necktie “asserted” by a pin are the external concomitants of a man who is intrinsically infirm and who lacks assertion. One also does not fail to notice how “Prufrock” illustrates Prufrock's continual attempts at role-playing: from active spectator to passive actor, from the subject to the object, from the real clumsy self to the assumed polished appearance. “The compulsive role-player”, John T. Mayer argues, “risks psychic division, splitting the self among its roles or into public masks and private selves” (117). This conscious role-playing affords Prufrock with greater facility to exercise his gaze as a conscious subject to pander to his scopophilic desires. And yet, his inner self does not fail to notice the futility of such an attempt, inasmuch as the same women whom Prufrock gazes from a subject position subvert the entire dynamics of gaze, as it were, and consign him to the marginal object status through the proactive play of their “female gaze”.

Perhaps the most powerful exercise of female gaze occurs when Prufrock feels that the gaze of the ladies fixes him “in a formulated phrase” and project him as an object of public display. Prufrock feels himself to be as miserable as a helpless creature “sprawling on a pin” and wriggling on the wall” under the public gaze (7). If Prufrock is fixed by the female gaze, the hollow men are equally fixed by those eyes they are scared of meeting even in dreams. Similarly the objectification of Prufrock's subjective mental pattern – “But as if a magic lantern threw the nerves in patterns on a screen” – is enacted through the scrutinizing female gaze of the women(8).As Prufrock rotates the lens of his scopophilic gaze on each part of the women's anatomy, and as he zooms in his gaze on the braceleted, white, bare arms of the women, his gaze does not fail to notice how the “light

brown hair” on them undercuts the romantic sensuous expectation of his scopophilic end (7).

The love-song Prufrock attempts to compose is couched in scopic terms, as he imagines himself having “gone at dusk through narrow streets/And watched the smoke that rises from the pipes”, and directs his gaze on visual contemplation (7). Unable to sustain this visual contemplation to a successful end, his mental gaze contemplates on the possibility of being transformed into a crab “[s]cuttling across the floors of silent seas” (7). The sudden reduction of his fatal attraction towards the women – from an appealing sensation to an appalling anxiety – leads him to choose “the floors of silent seas” rather than the busy restaurant where he might be under the powerful gaze of those women. One does not fail to notice how Prufrock’s evasive strategy corresponds to his avoidance of gaze throughout the poem. From the very beginning Prufrock’s one half seeks to concoct devices to avoid the gaze of the same women his other half, spurred by his scopophilic drive, wishes to feast on with his eyes. Images of turning back and descending the stair, and a woman’s “turning toward the window” (8) before her final rejection of Prufrock are symptomatic of this evasion of gaze.

Conclusion

Finally, one may note that the psychology that precipitates Prufrock’s fear is sexual. Richard Allen argues that according to psychoanalysis “the female body evokes castration threatening the authority of the voyeuristic gaze” (137). Although Prufrock’s gaze is indisputably scopophilic, rather than voyeuristic, inasmuch as the women are very much aware of his presence, he nonetheless is haunted by a fear of sexual insecurity, if not that of castration. As John T. Mayer puts it so wonderfully:

Prufrock fails to act as a lover or speak as a prophet because of a fear that is fundamentally sexual: if he plays John the Baptist to “disturb” his world, the women play Salome and will behead him (castrate him). To avoid this fate, Prufrock denies himself a sexual existence and the prophet’s role, and withdraws to the half-life represented by his “prepared face”. (34)

To offset this fear Prufrock resorts to continual role-playings and compromises – from the surveyor of women to the object survey by

women, from human being to a crab, and from a clumsy middle-aged guy to an assumed snappy stylish younger self, and finally, by whisking off from the world of reality to that of fantasy in which he replaces the busy restaurant by the lonely sea-beach, and meets the same women transfigured as mermaids. This psychic fear and precariousness of Prufrock is also affected through his inability to maintain a steady position (either subject or object) and its corresponding gaze (either casting his active male gaze or being the constant object of female gaze). The oscillation of Prufrock's mind synchronizes with corresponding flitting of gaze in and around his cosmos. Interestingly, enough, a poem whose title and epigraph primarily presuppose the play of the auditory trope, actually turns out to be a wonderful text where the visual trope predominates over the auditory to create a discourse on gaze. Long before the advent of gaze theory, Eliot anticipated, as it were, some of its offshoots in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock", as also in a host of other poems, creating a discourse in which that varied forms of gaze clash, interchange, interact and coalesce with varied semantic implications.

NB

All the quotations from Eliot's poems in this essay are from Ricks, Christopher and Jim McCue, eds. *The Poems of T.S. Eliot*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015.

Notes

1. Four "The Journey of the Magi", "A Song of Simeon", "Marina", and "Triumphal March" were published with illustrations by Edward McKnight Kauffer, while "Animula" was issued with wood engravings by the famous Gertrude Hermes. Much later, David Jones made the illustrations for "The Cultivation of Christmas Trees".
2. See Richard Allen, "Psychoanalytic Film Theory", in Toby Miller and Robert Stam, eds. *A Companion to Film Theory*. (Blackwell, 1999), 123-145.
3. Mention may be made of George Williamson, *A Reader's Guide to T.S. Eliot* (Syracuse University Press, 1953); John T. Mayer, *T.S. Eliot: Silent Voices* (Oxford University Press, 1989); Christopher Ricks and Jim McCue, eds. *The Poems of T.S. Eliot* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015); Manju Jain, *T.S. Eliot: Selected Poems* (Oxford University Press, 1992); and B.C. Southam, *A Student's Guide to the Selected Poems of T.S. Eliot* (Faber & Faber, 1974).

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