

# Eliot's 'Circus Animals': Modernity and the Zoic Primitivism in Eliot's Poetry

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## Abstract

It is a paradox that T.S. Eliot, one of the chief architects of modernism, was interested in primitivism. Primitivism to Eliot was not a matter of the past but a timeless guiding principle that goes hand in hand with modernism. A believer in Pound's jargon 'make it new' Eliot was ever tantalized by the past and significantly contextualized myths in his poetry. The exposition of the primitive through his poetry is essentially tied to the zoic primitivism -the animal existence of the modern man. Eliot has ever remained a literary monument to the literary scholars and a source of eternal enigma. Millions of literary papers were written on Eliot though there is hardly any discussion on this area of his poetry. In this paper my primary focus is to show how Eliot uses the zoic primitivism as a significant trope to capture the loopholes of civilization and modernism in his poetry.

[**Keywords:** Primitivism. Zoic, Primordial, Zolaesque]

Primitive art and poetry help our understanding of civilized art and poetry. For the artist is, in an impersonal sense, the most conscious of men; he is therefore the most and least civilized and civilizable; he is the most competent to understand both civilized and primitive.

T. S. Eliot, "The Indians of North America"

Emile Zola's definition of the human beast in the Preface to the Second Edition of *Therese Raquin* (1867) chiefly rests on the fact that human beings often become 'human animals' for the 'compulsion of their instincts': 'Therese and Laurent are human animals, nothing more. I have endeavored to follow these animals through the devious working of their passions, the compulsion of their instincts, and the mental unbalance resulting from a nervous crisis. . .' (Zola 2). The naturalist stance of Zola endorses a discussion of man as a primitive and primordial animal, in the sense that he is subject to the 'devious working of their passions.' Sigmund Freud has also argued that animal instincts often surpass the human instincts resulting in human bestiality. That man is basically an animal was firmly established by Freud<sup>[1]</sup>. The romantic stance of glorifying man as the paragon of Creation fell flat in the late nineteenth and the early twentieth when theorists like Immanuel Kant, Karl Marx, Soren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche proposed new perspectives on the nature of man and human existence. Gina M. Rossetti in "The Primitive as Primordial Beast" has significantly referred to some novels and plays, such as *Norris's Vandover and the Brute* (written in 1895 though published 1945), London's *The Call of the Wild* (1903) and *The Sea-Wolf* (1904). These novels were written either in the late nineteenth or early twentieth century America in which the fear of the primitive is seen to threaten the

characters in the novels: ‘The fear of the primitive thus takes special precedence in American literary naturalism’ (Rossetti 35). Both naturalism and realism focus on external factors for the constitution of human identity. Modernism deviates from this naturalist stance and instead of examining the circumstances focused on the individual as the centre of epistemological understanding. Yvor Winters’s *Primitivism and Decadence* (1937) ‘examines the primitive as modernist artist’ (Rossetti 118) and at the same time referred to the limitation of primitivism ‘that manifested themselves in the new era’s experimental poets’ (Rossetti 118). But primitivism, as Rossetti suggests, cannot be totally forsaken as an outdated area of interest in the context of modernism since it shares nothing with the modernist call ‘make it new’ (Pound), because modernism encapsulates a search for a ‘preindustrial moment’ that might help the individuals to evade the stultifying ills of modernism itself. The emergence of social Darwinism in the early twentieth century marks a distinct break from the individualist doctrine of modernism. Elazar Barkan and Ronald Bush underline that the modern era ‘re-imagined a ‘primitive’ world, a long-standing trope, with its overtones of lasciviousness, became a highly charged signal of otherness—one that came to signify modernity’ (Barkan and Bush 3). In *The Civilization and Its Discontents* Freud argues that even the civilized individuals may coexist with their earlier primal selves. He foregrounds the mind as the seat of the primitive which ‘is so commonly preserved alongside of the transformed version which has arisen from it’ (Freud 44). As a matter of fact civilization is a kind of superstructure built on the base of the primitive and is in no way alienated from it. Modernism endorses a cry for making it new though it is, at the same time, critical of the flux of ennui that coiled modernist life in a suffocating way.

### **Definition of ‘Primitive’ and ‘Primitivism’**

The term ‘primitive’ does not mean “inferior,” but is derived from the Latin *primitivus*, meaning “*Of or belonging to the first age, period, or stage.*” The term refers to characteristics that are original, fundamental, and simple untainted by ‘civilization.’ It is the literary area of cultural anthropology to deal with primitivism and to explain ‘the variety of behaviors, customs and beliefs among people of the world, their forms of social organization, the manifold connections between various aspects of human life, and the shared ways of doing, thinking and making things (Cohan i). In the postcolonial discourse the term ‘primitivism’ was critiqued since it was used as a colonial tool for justifying the enterprise of colonization by calling the colonized ‘primitive’ or uncivilized. The second form of primitivism informs a nostalgia for the past that every human being desires to re-live: ‘It must be recognized at the outset, then, that the term primitivism properly refers to a dauntingly ancient and universal human characteristic with a correspondingly wide range of manifestations’ (Bell 1). Therefore, primitivism claims that the desire to move back or to re-live the primitive is found in every civilization. Modernity is not an exception.

Primitivism (in the second sense) is intimately related with the zoic primitivism. The primary difference between man and animal is grounded upon the fact that the

animals unlike their human 'masters' did not care to get civilized. Therefore, every animal is primitive in the sense that it has remained in its original fundamental state. Derrida in "The animal That Therefore I Am" has interestingly pointed out that the lack of consciousness of nakedness in the animal does not make it naked. But man is very much conscious of his nakedness and therefore even when he is clothed he is naked: "They wouldn't be naked because they are naked. In principle, with the exception of man, no animal has ever thought to dress himself. Clothing would be proper to man, one of the "properties" of man' (Derrida 373). As a matter of fact, the primitive and the zoic come very close to each other in the sense that both of them possess an undiluted primordial form of existence.

### **Modernism and the Primitive**

To trace the connection of primitivism and modernity we must go back to Sigmund Freud. Freud, in his seminal text *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1929) (also referred to by Rossetti), argues that the 'current unrest ... unhappiness, and ... mood of anxiety' (Freud 44) of the civilized men are due to their consciousness of the fact that 'civilization is built upon a renunciation of instinct' (Freud 44). As a matter of fact modernity, therefore, is not only the victory of civilization over instinct but a regretful way of looking back into the primordial ways of life for the mindless suppression of instinct: "civilization obtains mastery over the individual's dangerous desire for aggression by weakening and disarming it and by setting up an agency within him to watch over it, like a garrison in a conquered city" (Freud 71). Rossetti significantly points out that civilization always involves a certain amount of guilt, (originally Freud's proposition) that individuals 'pay for becoming civilized' (Rossetti 122). The literary attempts to 'move beyond the guilt' (122) may be traced in modernist texts. William Carlos Williams' *In the American Grain* (1925), "Red Wheelbarrow," and Willa Cather's novel *The Professor's House* (1925) deal with primitivism at large. In his excellent book *Primitivism and Modern Art* Colin Rhodes traces primitivism in the heart of the most influential development of modern art. Gauguin's paintings such as *The Spirit of the Dead Keeps Watch* (1892), *Parau na te Varua ino* (1892), *Anna the Javanerin* (1893), *Te Tamari No Atua* (1896), and *Cruel Tales* (1902) reflects the search for a desire for more sexual freedom. Cezanne's *Les Grandes Baigneuses* or *The Bathers* portrays a group of bathers in their nudity.

### **The Zoic Primitivism in Eliot**

T.S.Eliot who was reluctant to label 'Tradition' as a frozen monument, something over there. Interestingly, in Eliot's poetry we find a despairing mood that reminds us of what we have lost- the childhood, the romanticism of life, the tranquility of love and in their stead what we get- the evening like a patient etherized upon a table, dry rocks and scarecrow existence. Eliot believed that in the primitive society man was capable of a state of mind that his present modernist situation did not allow (Bush 33-34). In *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* Eliot that "the pre-logical mentality persists in civilized

man, but becomes available only to or through the poet” (Eliot 34). Rossetti significantly comments: ‘In his theorizing about the primitive figure, Eliot seemingly draws no evolutionary distinctions or separations between this figure and the modern individual. In a gesture reminiscent of Freud’s theories, Eliot suggests that the modern artist experiences an unmediated contact with the primitive figure who provides the artist with a rejuvenating aesthetic for modern literature’ (Rossetti124).

In Eliot’s poetry one may easily trace the abundant use of animal images. A critical reading of such images may show that Eliot’s anti-heroism was a mere façade under which his desire for moving back into the primordial is latent. Traditionally, those images were interpreted as fitting objective co-relatives of the modern dehumanized existence of man. For example, the feline image in “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” has always been interpreted in relation to Prufrock’s torpor and ennui struck anti-heroism. Another example may be cited:

The yellow fog that rubs its back upon the Window-panes,  
The yellow smoke that rubs its muzzle on the window-panes,  
Licked its tongue into the corners of the evening,  
Lingered upon the pools that stand in drains,  
Let fall upon its back the soot that falls from chimneys,  
Slipped by the terrace, made a sudden leap,  
And seeing that it was a soft October night,  
Curled once about the house, and fell asleep (Lines 15-22)

Traditional reading of “The Love Song” foregrounds Prufrock’s psychological journey as an exploration of modernist culture. But the journey may also be underlined as an escape from failed modernity and culture. Thus his desire to get transformed into a pair of rugged claws is an escapist longing. But such orthodox interpretations can hardly encompass Eliot’s vision of modernity. Jewel Spears Brooker in *Mastery and Escape: T.S. Eliot and the Dialectic of Modernism* has offered an insight into Eliot’s study of the primitivism in poetry: ‘In assessing the values associated with classic modernism, for example, they (Gilbert and Guber) find a "nature / culture" opposition, and in reading Eliot's early poems, they place him firmly on the side of culture. (This overlooks an enormous body of evidence associating modernists such as Eliot, Picasso, and Stravinsky with primitivism; and indeed, the evidence of poems such as "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" is that Eliot was sick of culture) (225). Eliot personally believed in the unusual sensibility of an artist to be primitive and modern at the same time: ‘His experience is deeper than civilization, and he only uses the phenomena of civilization in expressing it’ (Eliot 34). Prufrock is caught between the pulls of nature and culture. Therefore, Prufrock’s longing for postponing his so-called ‘romantic’ sojourn to the hotel room where the ‘women come and go’ may not be a result of modern anti-heroism but a meticulous decision to discard the plastic romanticism for the women ‘Talking of Michelangelo’ (Line 14). Besides, his failed desire for transforming himself into a pair of rugged claws may well be seen as a longing for the primordial identity that has been championed by his civilized self as evident in the following sarcastic excerpt from the poem: ‘My morning coat, my collar mounting firmly to the chin,/ My necktie rich and

modest, but asserted by a simple pin'(Lines 42-3). The 'Epigraph' from Dante successfully testifies to Dante's journey back into the past- into the world of death where he met Guido. In "The Love Song" Guido is an epitome of guilt- the guilt that remains at the heart of civilization for the renunciation of the natural, the original, and the primitive.

Another interesting example of the defeat of the primordial, of the zoic primitivism for the sake of civilization may be traced in "Rhapsody on a Windy Night:"

Half-past two,  
 The street-lamp said,  
 'Remark the cat which flattens itself in the gutter,  
 Slips out its tongue  
 And devours a morsel of rancid butter:  
 So the hand of the child, automatic,  
 Slipped out and pocketed a toy that was running along the quay.  
 I could see nothing behind that child's eye.  
 I have seen eyes in the street  
 Trying to peer through lighted shutters,  
 And a crab one afternoon in a pool,  
 An old crab with barnacles on his back,  
 Gripped the end of a stick which I held him. (Lines 33-45)

The quoted lines effectively conjure up Eliot's vision of civilization. Undoubtedly, the expanding loneliness in the lives of the modern men is telescoped into the celestial loneliness of the moon: "That smells of dust and eau de Cologne,/ She is alone/ With all the old nocturnal smells/ That cross and cross across her brain' (Lines 59-62). That the zoic does not exclusively figure a metonymy for modern man is further evidenced in "Whispers of Immortality" in which Eliot deliberately shows the comparative superiority of the animal world to the hollow civilization of the modern waste land:

The sleek Brazilian jaguar  
 Does not in its aboreal gloom  
 Distil so rank a feline smell  
 As Grishkin in a drawing-room. (Lines 25-8)

Evidently, Eliot is critical of civilization as a process of annihilating the primitive-the real.

In "Lines to a Yorkshire Terrier" Eliot is found to listen to the 'natural forces:' 'In a black sky, from a green cloud/ Natural forces shriek'd aloud,/ Screamed, rattled, muttered endlessly'(Lines3-5). Sweeney may be interpreted as an embodiment of simian characteristics in "Sweeney among the Nightingales:" 'Apeneck Sweeney spreads his knees/ Letting his arms hang down to laugh,/ The zebra stripes along his jaw/ Swelling to maculate giraffe' (Lines 1-4). In "Sweeney Erect," Eliot uses 'more telling simian imagery to characterize Sweeney as an orangutan' (Rossetti 125).

In his poetic magnum opus *The Waste Land* (1922) Eliot is at his best to use primitivism as a trope antithetical to the modernist condition. The reference to the Cumean Sybil in the Epigraph of *The Waste Land* (1922) traces his interest in the

primitive. Incidentally, the Cumaean Sybil stands for the pre-woman not in the sense that she has been alive since time immemorial but for the fact that her aging immortality brings her into her primordial self. In another instance Eliot alludes to a primitive ritual of burying an effigy of the fertility god made from crops: 'That corpse you planted last year in your garden, / 'Has It begun to sprout?' (Lines 71-2). With the burial of the dead past civilization sprouts though the dead past is never dead. It follows civilization as a shadow, as a nightmare. Thus Madam Sosostriis, Mrs. Equitone, Lil are among those representatives of modernism who suffer from a sense of guilt for defying their instinct under the façade of their 'civilized' self. On the contrary the Fisher King is a sort of primitive god who is castrated. The castration of the Fisher King symbolizes the castration of man's primitive self: 'she has attempted to explain the Fisher King as a primitive vegetable god—one of those creatures who, like Attis and Adonis, is identified with Nature herself and in the temporary loss of whose virility the drouth or inclemency of the season is symbolized; and whose mock burial is a sort of earnest of his coming to life again' (Wilson 83). In the final section "What the Thunder Said" Eliot is found to bank heavily on Indian mysticism and comparative religion, as Bush explains, "Eliot's ethnographic writing overlapped with studies of Western mysticism, Indian thought, and comparative religion" (Bush 33). The mystical reference to Christ's Resurrection in 'Who is the third who walks always beside you?' is also significant in defining Eliot's sense of the primitive. The 'third' may be interpreted as the primitive self of man that follows the modern wastelanders to increase their sense of guilt and at the same time to expedite their redemption. Eliot is found to scoff at mindless prudence and artificial reason: 'The awful daring of a moment's surrender/ Which an age of prudence can never retract' (404-5).

Eliot comments in *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* that "the pre-logical mentality persists in civilized man, but becomes available only to or through the poet" (124). The concerns of the modernists for continuous 'newness becomes a key method by which the primitive is invoked in aesthetic terms. Eliot therefore shouldered the task of unveiling the primitive in modern men through his poetry. To be at the beginning of the culture's troubles is to literally escape from the early twentieth century's fears and concerns' (Rossetti 142). In many of Eliot's poems we can trace the dichotomous conflicts between primitivism and civilization and failed longings for escaping from the fears of modernity. But Eliot's primitivism was not simply savagism. To him primitivism was the other another facet of modernism. To conclude let me quote Robert Crawford: "If elements of primitivism were entering Eliot's poetry "it should not be assumed that he was simply a would-be savage. Eliot was sensitive about his interests in the primitive" (78).

## Note

[i] See Freud's definition of id as an unorganized part of man's personality that comprises his basic instincts; The Penguin Freud Reader, NY. 2006.

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