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Eliot's Insomniacs

Victor H. Strandberg

Ernest Hemingway was not very kindly disposed toward T. S. Eliot. He accused Eliot of plagiarizing his ideology from Joseph Conrad (e.g., "Mistah Kurtz—he dead" in *The Hollow Men*); he mocked Ezra Pound's efforts to solicit money "to get Major Eliot out of the bank"; and he very likely had his eminent fellow exile in mind in his short story, "Mr. and Mrs. Elliot," in which one Hubert Elliot, a snobbish and pedantic poet, Boston-bred and Harvard-educated, is so sexually inadequate as to make his wife a lesbian during their honeymoon in France. Partly, no doubt, this disdain was the natural result of the contrast between the two men: the man of action versus the ascetic scholar; the great outdoorsman versus the London bank clerk; pith helmet and boxing gloves as against tea and crumpets; the champion of simple prose versus the poet of involuted density. But yet it is clear that these contrasts are largely superficial; in their existential *angst*, their unpardonable knowledge of *nada*, the two were profoundly similar. Hollow men battling off despair populated Hemingway's waste lands no less than Eliot's, providing some curious parallel studies in morbid psychology.

The parallel study I wish to present in this brief paper is the use of the insomniac as a metaphysical theme. According to Leslie Fiedler's *Love and Death in the American Novel*, Hemingway's sleepless men, hag-ridden through the night by fear of *nada*, were his greatest achievement in literature, as opposed to his phoney he-man posturings with booze, sex, sports, and the like. If true, this assessment makes Hemingway's disdain for Eliot rather ironic,

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and it makes his charge that Eliot's work was Conrad's warmed over particularly inappropriate, for Hemingway's own master symbol, the sleepless man confronting *nada*, was well established in Eliot's poetry long before the day the callow youth from Oak Park presented himself for ambulance duty with the Italian army. Deeply immersed in the best writers of the past—Dante, Donne, Shakespeare, Baudelaire—Eliot did not require the psychic shock of warfare to steep his consciousness in *nada*; his insomniacs brooded grimly into the wee hours while the creator of "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place" was yet enjoying the sound, refreshing slumber of unthinking innocence.

Among the earliest of Eliot's poems of nocturnal torment are "Preludes" and "Rhapsody on a Windy Night," in which a sleepless persona suffers through a naturalistic mental purgatory. In "Preludes" (Section III), the insomniac lies fitful and helpless until slowly comes the dawn:

You lay upon your back, and waited;
 You dozed, and watched the night revealing
 The thousand sordid images
 Of which your soul was constituted;
 They flickered against the ceiling . . .
 [Until] the light crept up between the shutters
 And you heard the sparrows in the gutters.

In "Rhapsody on a Windy Night," the sleepless one does not lie passive like this, but rather wanders compulsively through the streets of the city, deserted now (except for a chance prostitute "who hesitates towards you in the light of the door") in the wee hours. Despite the romantic moonlight, the toils of *nada* are not so simply eluded: "Every street lamp that I pass / Beats like a fatalistic drum" says the first stanza, whose time setting is midnight, and the mood darkens with the passing hours. At half-past one, "the memory throws up high and dry / A crowd of twisted things," such as a skeletal branch on the beach, "eaten smooth, and polished," and such naturalistic junk as a broken spring rusting in a factory yard. At half-past two, a cat squatting in the gutter "slips out its tongue / And devours a morsel of rancid butter," and by half-past three it becomes evident that this insomniac in his moonlit walk is no better off than his prostrate counterpart lying abed in

"Preludes." So at 4 A.M. he turns in: "The bed is open; the toothbrush hangs on the wall, / Put your shoes at the door, sleep, prepare for life."

This poem, Eliot's most explicit study in insomnia, evokes comparison with one of Hemingway's best stories on this subject, "The Gambler, the Nun, and the Radio," in which a sleepless hospital patient in Hailey, Montana, staves off *nada* by means of a carefully tuned radio: "all night it worked beautifully and when one station stopped you could go farther west and pick up another. The last one that you could get was Seattle, Washington, and due to the difference in time, when they signed off at four o'clock in the morning . . . you could get the morning revellers in Minneapolis." Being hospitalized, this figure could not, like Eliot's persona, arise to walk off his malaise through the night, but then, Eliot's nightwalker encountered the opposite disadvantage: The radio had not been invented as yet, so he could not fall back on that soporific antidote to thought.

Another minor poem, "The Wind Sprang Up at Four O'Clock," is, as its title implies, a poem that emanates from an insomniac's oversensitized nervous system. Whereas Hemingway's insomniac in "Now I Lay Me" (Not to Sleep!) was kept awake by the sound of silkworms munching mulberry leaves outdoors, Eliot's insomniacs seem particularly afflicted by the noise of windy nights. The wind that this sufferer notes at 4 A.M., in any case, brings him "the waking echo of confusing strife," and with it, a new element that distinguishes Eliot's insomniacs from Hemingway's—a vague, pervading sense of guilt: "Is it a dream or something else / When the surface of the blackened river / Is a face that sweats with tears?" In addition to the *nada* out yonder making this world "death's dream kingdom," Eliot feared interior pollution to an extent that Hemingway would have scorned, as presumably he did scorn the Puritan consciousness that sorrowed over the compulsive fornications of *The Waste Land*. "By the waters of Leman I sat down and wept," says Eliot concerning the same human carnality which Hemingway recalled with the fondest memories: "she [the Indian girl Trudy] did first what no one has ever done better . . . [with] plump brown legs, flat belly, hard little breasts, well holding arms, quick searching tongue," and so forth ("Fathers and Sons"). The addi-

tion of guilt to despair distinguishes Eliot's sleepless personae from Hemingway's, but the distinction between them is less important than their similarities.

To turn to the major poems, poor old Gerontion is an insomniac too, for who else but an insomniac would note, in the deep nocturnal hush in which sounds are magnified, how "The goat coughs at night in the field overhead." Gerontion's nightly unease has mainly a metaphysical causation, for he is well acquainted with *nada* ("Neither fear nor courage saves us"), but he may also be moved by some sense of guilt too, in his attitude toward Christianity. In his naturalistic nihilism, Gerontion seems both to scorn and to envy the Christians who, in the middle stanzas, take communion, the eucharist "To be eaten, to be divided, to be drunk / Among whispers." Included in the international Christian community Gerontion thinks of—"Hakagawa . . . Madame De Tornquist . . . Fraulein von Kulp"—is one character of special interest to our theme: "Mr. Silvero . . . / Who walked all night in the next room." Gerontion of course was awake all night too, listening as to a goat cough, but unlike Mr. Silvero, he was not pacing the room in any mystic devotion; quite the contrary, Gerontion was mediating the bad news of the Gospel, the power of God—or of "Christ the tiger"—unto damnation. As an atheist ("I have no ghosts"), Gerontion saw his damnation particularly as the passing of time, which to an old man makes death immediately and absurdly imminent: "The tiger springs in the new year. Us he devours. Think at last / We have not reached conclusion, when I / Stiffen in a rented house." Like the old man in Hemingway's "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place," Gerontion is tortured above all by thoughts of "nothing," thoughts of how people who were once real are now reduced to inanimate molecules: "De Bailhache, Fresca, Mrs. Cammel, whirled / Beyond the circuit of the shuddering Bear / In fractured atoms." It is enough to make anyone lie awake at night.

Hemingway's "Now I Lay Me" is, I think, the closest of his stories to "Gerontion" in that it too suggests envy of Christians. Not only is its title the beginning of a prayer, its substance is also distinguished by the prayers of an unbeliever: "But some nights I could not fish [in the imagination], and on those nights I was

cold-awake and said my prayers over and over and tried to pray for all the people I had ever known. . . . If you prayed for all of them, saying a Hail Mary and Our Father for each one, it took a long time and finally it would be light, and then you could go to sleep, if you were in a place where you could sleep in the daylight." These prayers have more sincerity than at first appears; said by an unbeliever, they have at base a reverence and desire that runs through most of Hemingway's fiction. Thus, Frederick Henry did not bait the priest in *A Farewell to Arms*, but wished seriously he could have gone to the priest's "high cold country" rather than to the brothel in Milan. And Jake Barnes in *The Sun Also Rises* also offers the prayers of an unbeliever—"I knelt and started to pray and prayed for everybody I thought of, Brett and Mike and Bill and Robert Cohn and myself"—until disbelief asserted its authority: "I regretted that I was such a rotten Catholic, but realized there was nothing I could do about it, at least for a while, and maybe never"

Eliot's recurrent insomniac puts in a fleeting appearance in *The Waste Land* in the character who says, "I read, much of the night, and go south in the winter" ("The Burial of the Dead," line 18), though implicitly insomnia might quite reasonably afflict other characters as well, such as the pessimistic husband who answers his wife's "What are you thinking of? . . . I never know what you are thinking" with the silent meditation, "I think we are in rats' alley / Where the dead men lost their bones." Both man and wife, like Eliot's earlier insomniacs, are especially sensitive to wind movements:

"What is that noise?"

The wind under the door.

"What is that noise now? What is the wind doing?"

Nothing again nothing.

The speaker in "The Hollow Men" is quite clearly an insomniac, fearful of "Eyes I dare not meet in dreams" but tortured by staying awake too in "this valley of dying stars." "Waking alone / At the hour when we are / Trembling with tenderness," this speaker provides a striking resemblance to Hemingway's reverent unbelievers, he also being divided between his despair and his desire to worship, between his knowledge of *nada* and his "Lips that would kiss /

Form prayers to broken stone." Both writers saw fit to equip their atheist insomniacs with an appropriate revision of Christianity's most famous prayer, Hemingway giving his sleepless waiter in "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place" the prayer's beginning, "Our nada which art in nada, nada be thy name," and Eliot using the Protestant ending, "For Thine is the kingdom," in his celebrated whimper. (One wonders if Hemingway's real concern was with Eliot's raids on Conrad's work or with the curious relationship between Eliot's art and his own.) "The Hollow Men" ends with further evidence of sleeplessness, the nagging fantasies of an insomniac being manifested in the imaginary round dance of the concluding section: "Here we go round the prickly pear / At five o'clock in the morning." In the light of Eliot's earlier evidence of sleeplessness, it is reasonable to assume, I think, that a troubled insomnia imposes this time setting.

Surprisingly, even poor apelike Sweeney develops insomnia, together with his rise to tragic stature, in *Sweeney Agonistes*. Having become aware, like Eliot's more sophisticated thinkers, that "Life is Death" and that "Birth, and copulation, and death. / That's all, that's all, that's all, that's all," Sweeney is doomed like the others to the nightly ordeal of wrestling with the fear of *nada*: "When you're alone in the middle of the night and you wake in a sweat and a hell of a fight . . . / And you wait for a knock and the turning of a lock for you know the hangman's waiting for you. / And perhaps you're alive and perhaps you're dead/Hoo ha ha . . . Hoo / Hoo / Hoo / KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK . . ."

Our final insomniac is the political leader in *Coriolan*, who has more reason than most to lie awake at night, considering the mess the world is in, but his malaise too has more than a political causation. The insufferable acuteness of the senses that makes him hear "The small creatures chirp thinly through the dust, through the night" is of philosophical origin, as the poem's central biblical allusion makes clear. Important as they are, the problems of a statesman fade into absurdity beside the ultimate issue of *nada*: "Cry what shall I cry? / All flesh is grass: comprehending / The Companions of the Bath, the Knights of the British Empire, the Cavaliers. . . ." The grass comprehends figures of lesser social emi-

nence too, like the following pathetic creatures, and Eliot is not so cheerful as Whitman about it:

Arthur Edward Cyril Parker is appointed telephone operator
At a salary of one pound ten a week rising by annual increments
of five shillings. . . .

A committee has been appointed to nominate a commission of
engineers

To consider the Water Supply.

The rest is the familiar Eliotic irony, more mournful than bitter in the later poems, and needing no further comment here. Suffice it to add one more to Eliot's collection of insomniacs unsuccessfully battling "nothing" through long hours in the dark.

As everyone knows, Eliot finally found his God and became an Anglo-Catholic. Following his conversion to Christianity, not only was T. S. Eliot plucked from the burning, but as a consequence, for the first time his characters could look forward to a good night's sleep. Except for his brief reference in "The Dry Salvages" to "anxious worried women / Lying awake, calculating the future, . . . / Between midnight and dawn," the only pernoctation detectable in Eliot's later poetry is the scene in "Little Gidding" where Eliot speaks of "the uncertain hour before the morning / Near the ending of interminable night"; it is an hour when (reminding us of the insomniac's overly acute sense of hearing) "the dead leaves still rattled on like tin / Over the asphalt where no other sound was." But it is not fear of *nada* that is thus keeping this speaker up through the night; his nocturnal sleeplessness arises rather from Eliot's duties as an air raid warden.

So the issue of Eliot's insomniacs fades out at last, dissolving into the blessed repose of the true believer's slumber. But while it lasted, Eliot's insomnia was in its own way as noteworthy as Hemingway's—was just as anguished, as recurrent, as symptomatic of a desperate ideological impasse. In view of Hemingway's disdain for this master poet, perhaps it is time the record were set straight on this point.