

# Mind versus body: contrasting metaphysical and modern poetry in eliot's "whispers..."

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T. S. Eliot's "Whispers of Immortality" is a close examination of life and death. Penned during the war-torn years between 1915 and 1918, Eliot's quatrain poem cites the writers John Donne and John Webster as examples of metaphysical poets whose work depicts an understanding of mortality and spirituality. Juxtaposed against the work of Donne and Webster is the portrait of Grishkin, a seductive Russian temptress who exists purely in a world of momentary pleasure. In "Whispers of Immortality," Eliot contrasts the macabre interests of these seventeenth century writers with present-day sensual imagery to illustrate how metaphysical poetry's intellect upsets modern poetry's hedonistic ends. Eliot's piece is divided into two sections, each split into four quatrains with the last word in the second line assonant with the last word in the fourth line of each stanza. The first four stanzas are penned in the past tense and focus on describing themes within Donne and Webster's individual work and thought processes. He begins: "Webster was much possessed by death / And saw the skull beneath the skin; / And breastless creatures under ground / leaned backward with a lipless grin" (L1-L4). Webster's described fascination with death and the occult ("possessed by death") is emblematic of his genre's interest in the morbid and spiritual worlds. In seeing "the skull beneath the skin," the poet is shown as a clairvoyant who perceives a certain reality underneath the human form, a depiction that is furthered when Eliot writes that "He knew that thought clings round dead limbs / Tightening its lusts and luxuries" (L7-L8). The "lusts and luxuries" of the mind ("thought") are merely fleeting and are negated by the onset of death, and the bones remain even after the flesh has long disintegrated. In his 1921 essay, "The Metaphysical Poets," Eliot

notes that the seventeenth century authors “...feel their thought as immediately as the odour of a rose. A thought to Donne was an experience; it modified his sensibility.” In the poem, he corroborates this assertion (“ Donne, I suppose, was such another / Who found no substitute for sense; / To seize and clutch and penetrate, / Expert beyond experience,” L9-L12) with a description of Donne’s intellectual curiosity and philosophical study. In the same essay, he writes: “ A philosophical theory which has entered into poetry is established, for its truth or falsity in one sense ceases to matter, and its truth in another sense is proved.” Donne is considered by many to be the exemplification of the metaphysical poetic aesthetic, and shares Webster’s interest in the seemingly impenetrable concepts of life and death (“ who found no substitute for sense”). The overtly sexual description, “ To seize and clutch and penetrate / Expert beyond experience,” portrays the mind versus body tension that Donne and his contemporaries sought to explain through poetic exploration. The writer rejects fleeting carnal pleasures in favor of the contemplation of mortality and human decay (“ anguish of the marrow / The ague of the skeleton;” L13-L14). The second section of “ Whispers of Immortality” is told in the present tense and marks a shift not only from formal to colloquial tone, but also from times of antiquity to the modern day. The poem’s subsequent half opens: “ Grishkin is nice: her Russian eye / is underlined for emphasis; / Uncorseted, her friendly bust / Gives promise of pneumatic bliss.” (L17-L20). Eliot’s purposeful use of “ nice” drips of sarcasm, and leads into a description of a woman whose existence is defined in terms of her fleshy and exaggerated body. In contrast to Webster’s sexless, “ breastless creatures,” and Donne’s feverish “

skeleton," Grishkin's "friendly bust" invites the human touch with the ephemeral "promise of pneumatic bliss," a sexual tryst. The Russian woman masks and glorifies her true appearance, her eyes "underlined for emphasis;" manufactured to seduce, she represents the "dissociation of sensibility...from which we have never recovered," the post-seventeenth century crudeness described in "The physical Poets" that Eliot blames for the disorientation of modern poetry. Eliot equates the seductress to a predatory feline enticing a hapless primate with her pheromone-saturated scent ("The couched Brazilian jaguar / Compels the scampering marmoset / With subtle effluence of cat; / Grishkin has a maisonette;" (L21-L24). Even when lying "couched" in her apartment ("maisonette"), Grishkin's gratuitous sensuality incites a visceral response from her unwitting prey. The poet elaborates, stating that even his metaphor of the cat and monkey pales in comparison to the supposed influence of the temptress ("The sleek Brazilian jaguar / Does not in its arboreal gloom / Distil so rank a feline smell / As Grishkin in a drawing room," L25-L28). The metaphysical poets, as the name suggests, were captivated with theories and ideas that existed outside of the palpable realm; in contrast, and even in metaphor, the jezebel occupies a purely physical space fraught with primal desires. The poem's final stanza concludes: "And even the Abstract Entities / Circumambulate her charm; / But our lot crawls between dry ribs / To keep our metaphysics warm." (L29-3L2). Grishkin's unconcealed sexuality lends her a certain magnetic desirability, even to deeper-thinking souls ("Abstract Entities"). Those drawn into her deceptive web "circumambulate her charm," orbiting helplessly around her gravitational pull. However, the poem's unnamed

narrator is immune to the vamp's "promise of pneumatic bliss," instead seeking refuge amongst "dry ribs / To keep our metaphysics warm" with other like-minded souls ("our lot") who eschew the lure of sensualist pastimes. These long-dead ("dry") bones, Donne and Webster's symbolic skeletal remains, are a rejection of Grishkin's sensual physicality in favor of intellectual satisfaction. Webster and Donne delighted in the contemplation of the seemingly inconceivable and generated meditative and expository poetic works that sought to make sense of the irrational world. In his prose, Eliot writes that, in metaphysical poetry, "...there is a direct sensuous apprehension of thought." This "sensuous apprehension" is the alchemy of ideas into palpable cerebral pleasure, the "skull beneath the skin" and the expertise "beyond experience" that characterizes these poetic works. In "Whispers of Immortality," death is everlasting and is related to the mind, while sex is ephemeral and purely confined to the body. Through comparing metaphysical and modern poetry, Eliot asserts that the ecstasy derived from Donne and Webster's texts lies in the coalescence of intangible ideas and emotions into a digestible whole. In contrast, the self-pleasuring nature of modern poetry lacks the substance with which to relate intellectually outside of the physical self. Eliot, T. S. "The Metaphysical Poets." Centenary College, 2007. Web. 10 Mar. 2013. <<http://personal.centenary.edu/~dhavird/TSEMetaPoets.html>> Lancashire, Ian. "Whispers of Immortality." Representative Poetry Online. General Editor: Ian Lancashire. 1998. Web. 9 Mar. 2013. <<http://rpo.library.utoronto.ca/poems/whispers-immortality>>