

# Sleet and Hail of Verbal Imprecision: T.S. Eliot's Anxiety with the Limits of Logos

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**ABSTRACT:** *Whether the words of any literary creation constitute a medium, a representational strategy for grasping the actuality or whether the entire world that can inhere in words is a textual finality, an artificial construct by the words themselves, remains a dilemma unresolved over centuries of debate. Any flicker of faith in the representational or signficatory stability of the words can perhaps never suffice and the intellect is bound to face the force of the whirlwinds that blow through any discourse. Eliot's concern with the word and its communicative efficacy grows out of a long debate laden with intellectual and spiritual perplexities – a debate that arches over the Judeao-Christian and Hellenistic cultures to Aquinas, saint Augustine, Gadamer's hermeneutics and the modernist speculations. The concept of the logos evolves over centuries passing through spiritual and secular significations and the identity of the word changes with it. T.S. Eliot's anxiety with the word as a means of poetic communication reveals a chequered journey through a labyrinthine maze of doubt and certitude, laden with the tradition of this age old debate. Whether Eliot reaches the ultimate zone where the transcendental Logos shines out with a luminosity that dispels all doubt, cannot be asserted with exactitude; and pursuing that line of investigation is not part of the present study. The continual unfolding of signficatory multiplicities, the inherent tensions and seductions, the intermittent bewilderment and perceptual clarity, that create a brilliant discursive design, are what constitute the essence of his compositions and the thematic crux of this article.*

**Keywords:** word, logos, doubt, anxiety, certitude, enquiry.

*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

*If I succeed in mentally constructing a fortress from which it is  
impossible to escape, this imagined fortress either will be the  
same as the real one – and in this case it is certain we shall  
never escape from here, but at least we will achieve the serenity  
of knowing we are here, because we could be nowhere else – or  
it will be a fortress from which escape is even more impossible  
than from here – which would be a sign that here an opportunity  
of escape exists: we have only to identify the point where the  
imagined fortress does not coincide with the real one and then  
find it.*

Italo Calvino 't zero'

The word and the world are no longer coeval. The modern world, near anarchic and totally absurd, emerges like a formidable fortress with complex labyrinths. The poet, the manipulator of words, struggles with the words themselves in quest of a possible exit. The verbal artifice erects a distinct world - confusing, abstract, and volatile; the entrapped intellect reacts in a desperate attack. What is mockingly refracted in Joseph Heller's *Catch 22* operates as a dominant concern in the modernist discourse. The words are strange forces, which continually create and predetermine, instead of recreating and presupposing the immediate world. Yossarian, the hero of *Catch 22*, invents a game of deleting words or letters at will and his apparently frenzied talk frequently hovers on the verge of a strange alien microcosm, engineered by the words. The projected world is incoherent, intimidating, and almost meaningless with a piercing jab of a mocking tone, continually asking "What difference would it make?" The readers are sucked into a whirlpool of randomness where the margins of the familiar and the absurd created by the words continually overlap. The mind gets trapped in a conceptual matrix and the connections between words, human

perception and the immediate world are rendered essentially elusive, oblique and transient. The grotesque, scary strangeness deepens with an apparently playful mood implied in the utter carelessness of - "What difference does it make? Yossarian goes on deleting sections of personal letters and residential addresses whimsically:

Death to all modifiers, he declared one day, and out of every letter that passed through his hands went every adverb and every adjective. The next day he made war on articles. [...] That erected more dynamic intralinear tensions, he felt... Soon he was proscribing parts of salutations and signatures and leaving the text untouched...

When he had exhausted all possibilities in the letters, he began attacking the names and addresses on the envelopes, obliterating whole homes and streets, annihilating, entire metropolises with careless flicks of his wrist as though he were God (Heller 8).

The humorous verbal devastations that recur throughout the discourse either turn to frustrated speechlessness or a deep-seated dilemma. Whether the words of any literary creation constitute a medium, a representational strategy for grasping the actuality or whether the entire world that can inhere in words is a textual finality, an artificial construct by the words themselves, remains a dilemma unresolved. Any flicker of faith in the representational or signficatory stability of the words can perhaps never suffice and the intellect is bound to face the force of the whirlwinds that blow through any discourse. Calvino in 'Cybernetics and Ghosts' attributes any tendency of clinging to a sense of finality as a defence mechanism that is deployed by the author against the baffling autonomy and almost demonic creative potential of the words:

Faced with the vertigo of what is countless, unclassifiable, in a state of flux, I feel reassured by what is finite, "discrete", and reduced to a system. Why is this? Does my attitude contain a hidden element of fear of the unknown, of the wish to set limits to my world and crawl back into my shell? (*The Literature Machine* 17).

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. 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 (1974) cites Irenaeus as elaborating on this dichotomy:

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 (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. There had been a concomitant diminution of the importance of logos as an ontological principle. 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. Section Five of *Complete Poems and Plays of T. S. Eliot* entitled as 'Burnt Norton' 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 (175).

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 (*Complete Poems* 96).

The cultural transition of the implication of the logos posits several intriguing questions. In his Commentary of the Gospel of Saint John, Aquinas questions John's decision to use Word in place of Son in the prologue. He points out that the word 'Logos' implies both notion and the spoken word, in Greek. John's conscious selection of Word to denote the Son in lieu of notion indicates profound concerns. Aquinas attempts to justify John by asserting that notion of 'ratio' refers to a conception of the mind that precisely is a completely internal phenomenon that may or may not be expressed extrinsically. Word, on the other hand, refers to both internal and external phenomenon. Even a word conceived at the depth of the human heart, refers to the extrinsic entities. In Aquinas's

scheme, man is dependent on God and God has a relation to man, as well, but while the former's dependency entails a sense of urgency, the latter's relation to man is merely conceptual. Aquinas advocates that a relation of dependency and urgency is a real relation, while a kind of independent relation like that of God with man is a matter of concepts. Why this observation is interesting is that it implies that the logos constituting knowledge is dependent on the outer world of objects, which in their turn, are independent members in this relationship. The world is the Father's creation, and the Son or the Word shares a dependent relation with the world, by perfectly appropriating the Father in what is intrinsic to Him. The word bears an intrinsic relation to what it names. This Thomist vision, again, reflects the Trinitarian model. The dependent relation between the logos and the world is given life by the person who utters it. Just like the Son is related to both the Father and the world, the world is related to both the utterer and to that which is uttered by the word. The thing which is uttered by the word may be essentially independent, according to the Thomist vision, but it can be said to possess a character of being uttered and it is this character that relates it to the utterance. This bond is an ontological one. The original Greek vision is thus further enhanced and enriched. The manifestation is shown to be inseparable from the truth itself. As Eliot's 'Ash Wednesday' registers, "the unstilled world still whirled/ About the centre of the silent Word" (*Complete Poems* 174).

The word for the Hermeneutic philosophers and the evolving Christianity exists beyond the personal will of the speaker, operative as an interface between the speaker's mind and the world. Jaroslav Pelikan in *Credo* shows that the idea of logos as an interface, a process, and not an absolute theologically sanctioned supreme entity, grows and extends over time. In a way it forms the substratum of the persistent anxiety in a quintessentially modernist mind like T. S. Eliot's. The debate continues with the Incarnation of Christ not seen as a singular miraculous event, but a continual process as each human soul is converted and renewed in the body of Christ. Logos as human thought or utterance, and logos as divinity are conceptually united into one by the logic that whatever the Son of God taught through words is not only significant for their historical value, but their impact even today. Incarnation becomes a part of human history through the power of the words. The words of the historical narratives and the sacraments of the church cumulatively present the moment of divine intervention in human history. Death, deception and affliction in human life bare the contingency of the

humans led astray who need to realize the divine intervention for salvation. God needs to reach out to the inconstant suffering human souls for the incarnation to happen. He thus sends symbols, recorded both in the Scriptures and the Word made flesh. Incarnation happens through the words that the Son utters, Himself being a symbol sent by God. Communication prepares the ground for communion, Saint Augustine affirms:

First we had to be persuaded how much God loves us, in case out of sheer despair we lacked the courage to reach unto him. Also we had to be shown what sort of people we are that he loves, in case we should take pride in our own worth, and so bounce even further away from him and sink even more under our own strength. So he dealt with us in such a way that we could progress rather in his strength; he arranged it so that the power of charity would be brought to perfection in the weakness of humility (Augustine 430).

On one hand what the Son preached, acted as a communication needed for communion, and on the other hand, the Son or the Logos, itself a symbol, by its humility and mortal suffering despite its essential divinity, acted as a communication of the generosity of God, persuading us to look above the confusing clutter around, look deep inside the heart, to feel the overwhelming silent presence of the Logos.

Eliot's poems are fraught with such phases of silence, as if trying to delve deep into the heart to listen to the hermeneutic inner word or to feel the communion. Even the hopeless figures of the 'Hollow Men', who grope blindly in sterile landscapes, hearing and seeing nothing that may redeem their lot, seem to embody something that is traced back to the Augustinian notion of a desperate need for a point of contact. Signs were not enough and the fallen human beings 'grobe' in barren plateaus in quest of that passageway between imperfection and perfection. Augustine argues the Fall had been an express act of human willfulness, but by nature and instinct, men are divine, as they were in the pre-Fall state, and thus men, instinctively, unknowingly crave for what they originally were. Hence the trepidation, the excruciating agony, the roots of which they fail to recognize. They are impeded in a state that by an act of impulsive willfulness they have entered, but they feel hollow and suffer, since their inner instinct yearns for their original status. The hollow men, Eliot feels, have an awareness of what serves as their only hope. The opacity is not impenetrable:

In this last of meeting places  
 We grope together  
 And avoid speech  
 Gathered on this beach of the tumid river

Sightless, unless  
 The eyes reappear  
 As the perpetual star  
 Multifoliate rose  
 [...]
   
 The hope only  
 Of empty men (The Hollow Men 85).

The Stoic conception of logos conceived of a dynamic tension that is quite akin to the productive tension of a stringed musical instrument, generating a 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. Virgil's *Aeneid* echoes this Stoic strain with considerable clarity:

First of all the heaven and the earth and the expanses of  
 the sea and the shining globe of the moon and the Titan  
 stars are nourished by a spirit from within, and Mind,  
 penetrating every limb, moves the whole mass and is  
 mingled with the vast body. From this comes the race of  
 humans (724).

The aforementioned reason is pervasive and operates from the divine will, gradually ordering the cosmos and ordering human life by reason. The Wisdom literature in the Judaic tradition echoes an analogous view that endorses that a divine order is encrypted in the nature of all things and that pervasive order is amenable to be grasped and assimilated through human search and reflection. This all-pervasive nature of the



logos discounts proliferating dualisms like mind and the world, nature and reason. Logos is granted an immense power of bridging the universal order and the recesses of the human mind. P. E. Matheson, quotes Epictetus as arguing that the human soul both mirrors and participates in the godhead; the human intellect has access to the divine by inner reflection:

And if our minds are so bound up with God and in such close touch with Him as being part and portion of His very being, does not God perceive their every movement as closely akin to Him ? [...] Of course no one tells you that in faculty you are equals to Zeus. Nevertheless He has set by each man his genius to guard him [...] Therefore, when you close our doors and make darkness within, remember never to say that you are alone: you are not alone, God is within, and your genius [is within] (225).

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. Human reason has the tendency towards order and pattern, which by creating a dynamic organization of the natural elements, proceeds towards a syncretic unity. The tension, inherently conceived as a movement of opposites, supposedly creates a fine balance. This movement is essentially double in nature, but the inward and outward pulls are cumulatively conceived as a single force, the opposing tendencies simply accounting for distinctions of multiplicity and unity. This tension, analysed in terms of human reasoning capacity, explains the intellect's capacity of negotiating both the material and metaphysical sides of the universe. Logos is granted a more complex status, one of 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 immediately 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 (164).

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. The Stoic examination of the actual nature of a sign, what is signified by words and propositions, and the essential nature of truth and falsity, proffers a gamut of intriguing queries regarding the nature of the reality that the words endeavour to capture and convey. Sextus refers to the complex operation of human reason that through the processive activities of 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.

Eliot’s phases of hermeneutic faith in the word as manifestation of the transcendental Logos, that often impinge his perennial anxiety, probably record a perplexed mind’s natural inclination to seek refuge in certitude. An acute awareness of the near opaque darkness in actuality remains and, contrary to what Calvino asserts in ‘Cybernetics and Ghosts’, the transient phases of retraction fizzle out into a renewed fortitude of confrontation. The very labyrinthine mazes of the strange fortress created by the autonomous words pose a challenge, and any challenge entails a sense of hope – a hope of victory through confrontation.

The challenge is to penetrate the surrounding opacity, to construct a perception that is way more complex than the baffling complexity of the immediate reality, in order to muster the efficiency of seeing through the deceiving mazes. The nature of the wrangle gets strangely complicated with the realization that that the ammunition is none other than the words – the same autonomous entities that are continually contriving an ever renewing web of relationships that herald the triumph of discontinuity, divisibility and combination over all that is flux.

Moments of conviction in the emergence of a handful of relatively stable and pure resources of language guaranteeing an artistic transcendence of falsity, chaos and opacity, the emergence of that “one true sentence” that

Hemingway mentions in *A Moveable Feast*, and Eliot anticipates in the form of the Word manifested in the voice of love, appear to be what Hugh Kenner calls a cloak of evasion in *A Homemade World* (151). Such a tranquil phase of certitude is but a veil overlying a sense of utter vacuity. Yossarin in the concluding part of *Catch 22* simply jumps – “he took off”. The story ends here. The hero seems to simply disappear directly into the white spatial vacuum of the page, beyond the last line of the text. Interestingly enough, this final jump and the following blank whiteness of the page reveals the nature of the word in the discursive space - elusive, opaque, polysemous, nonreferential and essentially indeterminate. The vacuity and reader-directed open-endedness create a challenge, an urge to plunge into uncertainty to ferret out the dynamics of the combinatory multiplicity of the words in a text.

An apprehension of this spirit pervades Eliot's works. Even in overtly religious poems like ‘Ash Wednesday’, the last line declares a journey into the unknown– “And after this our exile” (95). What one discovers in the process is a bewildering plurality of levels. The end is not perceptible, more significant perhaps is the sheer adventure of the progress. What is projected through the kaleidoscopic radiance of the glittering crystals of words, is not a chimerical illusion, but layers of reality that must be transcended in quest of the Word.

The article is a humble attempt at following and participating in this adventure - an experience that delights in discovering the Eliotian discourse continuing in an undaunted spirit, piercing veils and crossing vacuous zones into ever renewing levels of reality with perennially evolving significatory layers. Eliot proceeds undaunted through the seductive layers of ever renewing combinations against the backdrop of an essentially motile and elusive discursive space, intensifying his poetic vision with prayer, fortitude, endurance, courage and a deep urge of going forth. On being asked about his destination, Harry in *The Family Reunion* answers;

That is still unsettled.  
I have not yet had the precise directions.  
Where does one go from a world of insanity?  
Somewhere on the other side of despair.  
To the worship in the desert, the thirst and deprivation,  
A stony sanctuary and a primitive altar,  
The heat of the sun and the icy vigil,  
[...]

It is love and terror  
Of what waits and waits me (393).

Whether Eliot reaches the ultimate zone where the transcendental Logos shines out with a luminosity that dispels all doubt, cannot be asserted with exactitude; and pursuing that line of investigation is not part of the present study. The continual unfolding of signifiatory multiplicities, the inherent tensions and seductions, the intermittent bewilderment and perceptual clarity, the detachment and passionate desires that create a brilliant discursive design, are what constitute the essence of his compositions; that is the palpable reality of his works. As Calvino Italo aptly points out in his general discussion on literature;

The path we have followed – the levels of reality evoked by literature, the whole gamut of veils and shields – may perhaps stray off into infinity, may perhaps encounter nothingness...Perhaps it is in the field of tension between one vacuum and another that literature multiplies in depths of a reality that is inexhaustible in forms and meanings...literature does not recognize Reality as such, but only levels. Whether there is such a thing as Reality, of which various levels are only partial aspects, or whether there are only the levels, is something that literature cannot decide. Literature recognizes the reality of levels, and this is a reality (or “Reality”) that it knows all the better, perhaps, for not having come to understand it by other cognitive processes. And that is already a great deal (120-21).

In the course of this journey, phases of silence glitter like silent yet blinding crystals suspended in a smoky near opaque maze, luminescent with the potential of more intense communication. The hyacinth girl stands silent and the tiny water drops sparkle in her hair, the slightly parted lips quiver in inaudible intensity in ‘Marina’, the pristine whiteness of silent bare bones dazzle with intimidating nakedness – all making the reader realize levels of messages otherwise beyond the reaches of human cognition. Analysing Dante’s epic in ‘Language in Paradise’, Umberto Eco points out that the highest level of communication is perhaps nonverbal:

language will play a lesser role in Dante's travels. Even though he still talks with Saint Peter, Beatrice, or Saint Bernard, he is coming closer and closer to the site of the highest angelical hierarchies, and, as everybody knows, angels do not speak because they understand each other through a sort of instantaneous mental reading, and they know everything they are allowed to know (according to their rank) not by any linguistic intercourse but by watching the Divine Mind. At this point, as Dante says in the final canto of the *Divine Comedy*, language is unable to express what he sees (Eco 29).

Silence and confusion, luminescence and darkness, void and apparent fullness – the Eliotian discourse remains a chronicle of an exploration, the explorer, led on by the intuited grace of the Logos and continually energized by the ever renewing challenges of the meandering vistas:

We shall not cease from exploration  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we  
Started. And know the place for  
The first time ('Little Gidding' 197).

A little less than half a century after the end of his mortal quest, the present enquiry finds, the Eliotean adventure continues through the innovative words of the writers of the most recent times. Eliot, in 'American Literature and Language', comparing Poe and Whitman as two representatives of American literature, notes that the importance of an author is largely determined by his influence on posterity. How far a poet has succeeded partly depends on how much he passes on to the next generation. In 'What Dante Means to Me' Eliot observes;

To pass on to posterity one's own language, more highly developed, more refined and more precise than it was before one wrote it, that is the highest possible achievement of the poet as poet. Of course, a really supreme poet makes poetry also more difficult for his successors ('To Criticize the Critic' 193).

To articulate with sharper accent the basic anxieties of one's own time is a precondition of the purification of the dialect of the tribe. Passing on to posterity a language developed, refined and wrought to precision is a composite assignment encompassing subtler sensibility, finer intellection at one level and shaping better crafted, more nuanced modes of verbosity on the other. How much Eliot passed on to us in terms of language is not the immediate concern of the present project. How much of the growing concern of his own time regarding the frontiers of verbal communication he had brought to cutting edge urgency and transmitted to the later phases, certainly is one of the less extensively explored denominators of Eliot's own standing as a shaping force in his century. An enquiry into this area opens up newer avenues of re-reading Eliot. The present study is a modest attempt along the line. The humble deposition is that Eliot's quest anticipates, with startling vibrancy, some of the most radical concerns in recent times – concerns that predictably persist as unresolved anxiety.

To F. H. Bradley's system of philosophy Eliot had attributed the "permanence of all imperfect things." In his own idiom Eliot here paid the greatest tribute to Bradley and his questioning of the first premise. Adapting the tone one might note that Eliot is a definitive presence in his own time; his own time, a Tiresias stopping at too many "perap sez" (Pound 31) as Ezra Pound realised. In the colourful comments on the original Facsimilie and Transcript of The Original Drafts of The Waste Land V, Pound wrote,

make up  
your mind  
you Tiresias  
if you know  
know damn well  
or  
else you don't (*The Waste Land* 47).

Slow to make up his mind, continually assaulted by the demons of dilemma gathering around, Eliot remains enwrapped in the polemics of the tentative and the propositional. Fully aware of it all, under cover of a tone of self-mockery, he wrote,

How unpleasant to meet Mr. Eliot!  
[...]  
And his mouth so prim

And his conversation, so nicely  
Restricted to What Precisely  
And If and Perhaps and But ('Five-Finger Exercises' 136-7).

The hesitations persist; the deepest of his anxieties remain unresolved. In the irresolution and the irreconcilability lies the seduction and the challenge.

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