T.S. Eliot and The Jazz Aesthetic

T.S. Eliot did not grow up immersed in the emergence of the Jazz Movement in America. However, his technical use of acoustic vernacular as an instrument in creating jazz-like prose certainly hints at the contrary. Within Eliot’s canon of literary contributions lies a plethora of references to the increasingly popular Jazz aesthetic. Modernist writers such as Eliot had no trouble infusing the musical characteristics of a predominantly African American genre into their writing. In fact, relating to the jazz musicians of the African American culture was unavoidably easy.

In the early 1900’s, slavery had long been an issue of the past, but racism and discrimination had not yet begun to dissipate throughout society. Rejected by White America, urban Blacks began to long for a sense of identification within their rural roots and African homeland (Keogh). The result of this collective nostalgia was jazz, a musical medium used to properly express such intense cultural disdain. The overall somber mood of jazz translated feelings of nihilist, a nothingness that Eliot himself was experiencing in the post-World War I twentieth century. Writers were beginning to express their current state of destitution, and experimenting with jazz poetics allowed Eliot to separate himself from literary mediocrity (Keogh). Eliot used jazz to not only express himself, but to finally separate race from writing. Using techniques such as linguistic mimicry and racial masquerade made the language new and absent of racial connotation, thus resisting institutional forces of standardization, such as racism, and eliminating any preconceived standards expected from writers belonging to multicultural ethnicities (Patterson 673-4).

Eliot’s writing immaculately depicts the cultural landscape of post-World War I America. Wasting no time whatsoever, Eliot speaks out of contempt for the month of April in his opening lines of the introductory chapter in The Waste Land: “April is the cruellest month, breeding/Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing/Memory and desire, stirring/Dull roots with spring rain” (l. 1-4). The bleak scenery and desolate outlook is described often throughout his works and directly parallels the expressionistic values of jazz. Channeling jazz’s nurturing qualities, Eliot offers his readers shelter from the dry, callous land:

(Come in under the shadow of this red rock),
And I will show you something different from either
Your shadow at morning striding behind you
Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you;
I will show you fear in a handful of dust (l. 26-31).

His offer of shelter from the cruel post-war environment is an offer that African Americans sought desperately for in their darkest hour, an always allusive and unattainable invite often referenced by Black jazz musicians.

Another technique common of both jazz and Eliot’s prose is the use of incantation. Traditional jazz features repetition in the first two lines of any stanza, and Eliot makes use of the hypnotizing, almost melancholy procedure to echo the emptiness of the current landscape (Keogh). His use of incantation in lines 120-122 of The Waste Land, “Nothing again nothing. /’Do/’You know nothing? Do you see nothing? Do you remember/’Nothing?’”, is a quality example of incantation’s effectiveness.
Comparatively, Langston Hughes’ *The Negro Speaks of Rivers* uses the same jazz-like repetition: “I’ve known rivers:/I’ve known rivers ancient as the world and older than the/flow of human blood in human veins” (l. 1-3). In *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, Eliot again uses incantation: “The yellow fog that rubs its back upon the window-panes,/The yellow smoke that rubs its muzzle on the window panes” (l. 15-16). Here, Eliot conveys the notion that Prufrock is locked into a sober mood, much like the mood of jazz musicians. Prufrock is given even more jazz-like traits, as he sings to himself with harmonic progression throughout *The Love Song*, just as jazz musicians would (Keogh).

Along with incantation, suggestions of jazz-like qualities can be found in the party atmosphere of Eliot’s *Sweeney Agonistes* (Chinitz 244). While Eliot does not outwardly mention jazz in this work, his recreation of velocity and syncopation typical of jazz induces nostalgia for Eliot’s musical counterpart. Eliot writes with rhythm and rhyme in *Agonistes*, leaving the reader with sing-song dialect between characters, made possible by Eliot’s use of variable syllables and intervals of time:

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SWEENEY: Yes I’d eat you!
In a nice little, whittle little, soft little, tender little,
Juicy little, right little, missionary stew.
You see this egg
You see this egg
Well that’s life on a crocodile isle.
There’s no telephones
There’s no gramophones
There’s no motor cars
No two-seaters, no six-seaters,
No Citroen, no Rolls-Royce.
Nothing to eat but the fruit as it grows.
Nothing to see but the palm-trees one way
And the sea the other way,
Nothing to hear but the sound of the surf.
Nothing at all but three things.
DORIS: What things?
SWEENEY: Birth, and copulation, and death.
That’s all, that’s all, that’s all,
Birth, and copulation, and death (148).
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According to Eliot, this conveyance of mood, along with magical verse and rich melody, is what made Edgar Allan Poe such a success (Keogh). J. G. Keogh also states that the effect of incantation stirs the feelings at a deep and almost primitive level because of its crude nature. This reasoning lends insight into Eliot’s writing style, as he juxtaposes memory and desire, much like the creators of contemporary rock, in order to provoke the strongest of feelings in his readers by echoing the struggles of his generation (Keogh).

This style is the element that enables us to parallel the works of African-American poets such as Langston Hughes with the works of T.S. Eliot. Eliot’s verse echoed the conditions of modern life that he believed had altered our perception of rhythm, birthing a new form devised out of colloquial speech (Eliot 143). This colloquial speech, shared
by Eliot and his African-American counterparts, was the dialect and vernacular with which African-American poets communicated through, a language melodic in nature, teeming with the insatiable desire for identification within their heritage.

Eliot’s jazz-like flow, particularly in *Sweeney Agonistes*, was intentional: “I had intended the whole play to be accompanied by light drum taps to accentuate the beats (esp. the chorus, which ought to have a noise like a street drill)” (144). His juxtaposition of incantation, repetition, melody, rhythm, and angst in his writing leaves readers with a cerebral sing-a-long mentality and with the ability to follow exactly the tapping of drums playing harmoniously.

Langston Hughes frequently wrote with the intent of creating an almost audible musicality within his prose. Some of his poetry makes overt mention of musical instruments for the reader, i.e. *Danse Africain*, *Song for a Banjo Dance*, and *When Sue Wears Red*. Others made no mention of tangible musical instruments. Hughes, in his writing, created such an enormous musical reverberation that hearing it was simple, i.e. *Aunt Sue’s Stories*, *A Black Pierrot*, and *Our Land*.

From my examination of Eliot’s work, it is increasingly clear to me how unsettled the post-World War I generation was, as well as how uncanny the comparison of musical qualities between Eliot and Hughes is. The comparative stylistic elements of Eliot’s writing and jazz music are almost carbon copies of each other, of course, if literature and music maintained no boundaries. Eliot’s proficiency in jazz-era reference is so abundant that any literature reminiscent of jazz is now commonly referred to as Eliotic, or “like Eliot” (Chinitz 245). While jazz as a genre was almost entirely an African American movement, we would be remiss in neglecting Eliot due credit for the role he played in jazz’s emergence, his breakthrough efforts in literary racial masquerade, as well as the role jazz music played in his writing career.
Works Cited


Keogh, J. G. "Mr. Prufrock's Big City Blues." Literature Resource Center. Infotrac. Ramapo College of New Jersey, Mahwah, NJ. 75-79.