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## Eliot's Objective Correlative Revisited: an Appraisal of Three Poems by Robert Frost

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إعادة نظر في البديل الموضوعي عند تي. أس. إيليوت: تقييم لثلاث قصائد لروبرت فروست

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### Abstract

Eliot's objective correlative is investigated in this paper in relation to three poems by Robert Frost, which are "The Road Not Taken", "In Hardwood Groves" and "Into My Own". The study explores how far the key metaphors as objective correlatives in the three poems by Frost are successful in communicating emotions that the poet intends his readers to experience. Therefore, this paper argues that Robert Frost carves objective correlatives to generate mixed and occasionally opposite emotions in the reader, forcing the latter to wonder and speculate on behalf of not only the poet, but also the natural phenomena of the world around. Robert Frost pushes the boundaries of his physical references so that they gain autonomy and freedom, and allows them to affect the reader's perception. Eventually, Frost's objective correlatives do not fail to provoke arguments of very profound and pensive nature. They do justice to the revelations that the poems embrace and take readers on a journey into the depths of human heart and mind.

Key words: T.S. Eliot, Robert Frost, Objective Correlative, "The Road Not Taken", "In Hardwood Groves", "Into My Own"

يستقصي هذا البحث استخدام إيليوت للبديل الموضوعي في ثلاث قصائد لروبرت فروست وهي "الطريق الذي لم يُسلك" و "في بساتين هاردوود" و "في ما يعود لي". تستكشف الدراسة مدى نجاح الاستعارات الرئيسية، باعتبارها بدائل موضوعية في قصائد فروست الثلاث، في نقل العواطف التي يريد الشاعر إيصالها إلى القارئ. ولذلك تُظهرُ الدراسة أن روبرت فروست يصنع بدائل موضوعية ليخلق عواطف مختلطة، ومتعارضة في بعض الأحيان، عند القارئ ما يجبره على الاندهاش والتأمل ليس في الشاعر فحسب وإنما في الظواهر الطبيعية فيما حوله. يقوم روبرت فروست بدفع حدود إشارات المادية بحيث تُصبح مستقلة وحرّة مما يجعلها تؤثر في فهم وإدراك القارئ. وأخيراً فإن نجحت بدائل فروست

الموضوعية في نقل المشاعر المقصودة بدقة إلى القارئ أم لم تتجح، فهي لا تقش في إثارة جدل عميق ومؤثر، وهي تتجح في إظهار هواجس القصيدة ورؤاها، وتأخذ القارئ في رحلة إلى أعماق عقل وقلب الإنسان. الكلمات المفتاحية: تي. أس. إليوت، روبرت فروست، البديل الموضوعي، "الطريق الذي لم يسلك" و "في بساتين هاردود" و "في ما يعود لي"

## Introduction

In his essay "Hamlet and his Problems", T.S. Eliot speculates on why he and some other critics tend to opine that Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is a failure. Eliot pits *Hamlet* against other Shakespearean tragedies such as *Macbeth* as well as *The Spanish Tragedy* by Shakespeare's predecessor Thomas Kyd only to conclude that *Hamlet* is "an insoluble puzzle" (Eliot 1957, 102). One reason why Eliot demerits *Hamlet* is because of its lack of what he calls an "objective correlative" or more accurately a set of objective correlatives to help Hamlet transform his feelings from the realm of abstraction to that of sensory experience. Rephrasing Eliot's arguments, Dominic Griffiths goes as far as accusing Shakespeare of failing to supply his play with sufficient "content" to help the audience feel "the horror ... that Hamlet, the character, experiences in himself" (2018, 643). Even though Griffiths's "content" comes across as rather vague, it may fairly well translate into Eliot's proposition that Hamlet's emotions is not assisted by a physical reference or an "objective equivalent" in the sensory world, leaving "Hamlet (the man)" combating inexpressible emotions (Eliot 1957, 102). In other words, the raging emotions remain trapped inside Hamlet, the character, inaccessible to readers and spectators alike. Such rationale leads Eliot to argue that "finding an objective correlative" is the "only way" to express "emotion in the form of art". This objective correlative can take on the form of "a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked" (Eliot 1957, 100). Eliot's conception of the objective correlative leans towards objectifying or substantiating *emotion* by finding its equivalent in the materialistic world or objective reality. And in consequence, the emotion is given a shape so that it would be contextualized in the sensory experience. As a result, the emotion is relocated to the material world or externalized and is no longer locked in its cognitive dimension.

In this paper, we argue that Robert Frost builds his poetical motifs on objective correlatives which he fashions to substantiate emotions. In the three poems under study, references to natural phenomena in the physical world establish correlations with thoughts and emotions. Frost's rationales are contingent on balancing abstractions on concrete imagery where pictorial allusions are cited not merely to illustrate, but more significantly to deepen the contemplation and eventuate feelings.

## 1. Objective Correlative and Poetry

The term "objective correlative" is not Eliot's coinage even though he at the start thought it was his. The notion was briefly mentioned by Washington Allston within his "Coleridgean vocabulary" he employed to describe underdeveloped ideas (Duffy 1969, 109). Originally, Coleridge, discussing Milton, identified simplicity, sensuousness and passion which are three conditions specific to Milton's poetry. The second, that is, sensuousness, warrants "that framework of objectivity, that definiteness and articulation of imagery, and that modification of the images themselves, without which poetry becomes flattened into mere didactics of practice or evaporated into a hazy, unthoughtful day-dreaming" (cited in Pasquale 1986, 489). Coleridge's "framework of objectivity" metamorphosed to "objective correlative" whose lack, according to Eliot, doomed Hamlet to his inexpressiveness. However, the sources of the term are a subject of debate among scholars who claimed that the term originally belonged to such various names as "Pound, Whitman, Baudelaire, Washington Allston, Santayana, Husserl, Nietzsche, Newman, Walter Pater, Coleridge, Russell, Bradley, Bergson, Bosanquet, Schopenhauer and Arnold" (Griffiths 2018, 642). Notwithstanding the controversy over the origin of the infamous term, the objective correlative continues to garner attention, not the least because it keeps afloat Eliot's embarrassing and callow essay on Hamlet to cite Eliot himself (Greenburg 2007, 215).

Bradley Greenberg proposes that Eliot's arguments in "Hamlet and his Problems" promote the idea that *Hamlet* "can have a pernicious effect upon the writing of poetry itself". Poetry is in some hyperbolic danger when the emotion is dissociated from the object that best expresses it on account of the "subject" being "trapped in repetitious rumination, unable to do anything other than think about thinking rather than act upon knowledge and experience" (Greenberg 2007, 216). By proposing that the objective correlative is

the only way to express emotion, Leonard Diepeveen argues that Eliot's theory is his attempt to convert emotion to "an object of knowledge for another person." Eliot aspires to forge a "casual", but a precise link between the emotion and object and therefore his "version is stamped with his idiosyncrasies" ( Diepeveen 2009, 399). May be, this is why Frances Dickey opines that Eliot's theory is basically a byproduct of "the symbolist technique that he first encountered in Laforgue and tried out in 'Prufrock'" (2009, 190). Eliot's masterful use of this technique is exemplified in "the impassive conduct of the typist" in *The Waste Land* who plays "a record on the gramophone" as the objective correlative to indicate the detachment that follows the end of her sexual encounter (Chinitz 2009, 127).

Citing Allston, an artist and a friend of Coleridge and one of the main sources of the term, John J. Duffy affirms that the objective correlative demands "the presence of some outward object" that corresponds to "the existing idea". Once the poet lands on the needed external object, the idea would then properly evolve into "the pleasurable emotion" which is the poet's target in the first place. While the object itself is "simply the occasion, or condition" to which the emotion is attached, it is "not, per se, the cause" of that emotion ( Allston as cited in Duffy 1969, 109). Therefore, the objective correlative can be an image as well as a symbol, a matter that cements the symbolist-imagist contextualization of the term and sheds light on the significance of concreteness as opposed to abstraction to Eliot at the time. Rebecca Beasley even goes as far as claiming that the objective correlative is Eliot's "own version of the symbolists' symbol" and that it was inspired by the discussions of Imagism as perceived by T.E. Hulme and Ezra Pound (2007, 33). It is no wonder then that the later, mature Eliot was reported to have expressed his embarrassment of the term and indeed his essay on *Hamlet* in its entirety.

On another note, John Duffy expands on the psychological dimension to the objective correlative as perceived by Ralph Waldo Emerson. For the latter, the objective correlative is a process in which the object acts on the observer and then "observer-turned-poet". In so formulating his take on the notion, Emerson's aim was to "get beneath the surface of the material world" in order to find "the divine behind the material object." Even though Emerson defines himself as a "poet of the imagination", he went beyond the "sterile material world", making of the imagination an instrument to organize the external world and "find resemblances and correspondences" (Duffy 1969, 110). The reference to the word *correspondences* reminds the reader of Baudelaire's "Correspondences" which is often cited as a prototype of symbolism. It also exposes Eliot's particular interest in "the relationship between subject and object, thought and sensation" (Wright 1970, 590). This relationship swings from the physical to the psychological or even neurological worlds and as a result, the emotion is best communicated by means that belong to both ends of the pendulum.

## 2. Objective Correlative in Robert Frost's Poetry

Robert Frost (1874-1963) sculpts strong and concrete imagery which brings life and energy to his poetry. His poems which are often written in a conversational language that captures the subtle nuances of country life and country folks are read here in search for the objective correlatives or the physical references whether in the form of metaphors, events or situations. This is why, the pursuit of the objective correlative is intended to see whether or not its presence enhances the perception of the meanings packed in a certain physical reference. It also attempts to see whether or not its lack stands in the way of unraveling the mysteries a poem hosts. The analysis aspires to arrive at solid conclusions on how a poem is impacted by the objective correlatives the poet models to relay themes and motifs. In order to achieve all the above, a reading of three poems by Frost is attempted here from an objective correlative perspective.

The first, "The Road Not Taken" is an iconic piece that has attracted plenty of attention and investigations ever since its publication in 1926. The poem is basically about the conundrum of choice and how human beings have to pick certain things at the expense of several others. When the options are equally enticing, risky or mysterious, the choice one makes is more like the roll of the dice. It is a psychologically taxing process and the fear that one may make bad choices looms large. Hence, people talk anxiously about regretting making, not making, or making the wrong choices. Frost goes against the grain in his poem and explores the complacency, if not indeed the epiphany, that his speaker experiences after making a hard choice that proves to be intuitively sagacious. But he is also interested in capturing that conflicting feelings, the eye-opening wonderment and the tantalizing speculation that come along with choice. To drive these notions home, Frost lands on a perfect objective correlative which is a combination of an image and event that shows a traveller arriving at two divergent roads in the middle of a forest. Emerson in his "Nature" observes that "the greatest delight which the fields and woods minister, is the suggestion of an occult relation

between man and the vegetable” (2015, 37). As a huge admirer of Emerson, Frost admitted in 1959 that “some of my first thinking about my own language was certainly Emersonian” (cited in Thomas and Richardson 2014, 14). Frost fashions his imagery to reflect this “occult” liaison between a traveller and a woods. While the traveller is one of the classical personae that reverberate in literature (one can think of “The Listeners” by Frost’s contemporary Walter De la Mare (1873-1956) as an instance), the image of the road splitting into two is reinvented and therefore, Frost casts the crossroads, which is itself a classical metaphor in a new light. In other words, while a crossroads may symbolize meeting, departure as well as choice, the image of two diverging roads does without the first two and narrows down the third. Frost also prefers “road” to “path” and hence, he dismisses the notion of pre-destiny and the illustrious, adventurous and/or romantic connotation of the word “path” as in *pathfinder*, *bridle path*, *primrose path*, *glide path*, or even *beat a path*. A road is more casual, quotidian and pedestrian than a path and therefore, it is more neutral and by its being so, it amplifies the feeling of lack of certainty.

So, Frost’s traveller arrives at two diverging roads which do not necessarily go in opposite directions. The speaker has no clue where each leads, a situation that redounds to the enigmatic ambience inherent in the notion of choice itself. While he can tell that they differ, the difference is rather slight in that one is beaten and the other “wanted wear” even though it is not entirely untrodden as he reminds himself. As the traveller makes a hard choice and picks the latter, he is aware that he is not not necessarily a member of a minority of travellers who make bold choices. It is almost certain that the majority of travellers would pick the beaten road, rather than venture into the other. Being unlike the majority, Frost’s traveller takes the other way, but to put his curiosity about the other way to rest, he promises himself that he saves the other road for another day and another adventure. Of course, latent is also the awareness that he will not be able to go back spatially and temporally to make a different choice and explore the road he had shunned before. That is, even after he chooses his road, the traveller is in two minds about the aptness of his choice, probably comforted by the idea that his road is not entirely deserted. Had the road been completely untrodden, it would have assuaged the difficulty of choice or even aggravated it. He would have been daunted by the forsaken and desolate aspect of one road and could have then picked probably regrettably the familiar, peopled road. Alternatively, the forsaken aspect of one road would have enticed him even further and whetted his appetite for adventure. As it is, Frost reinforces the difficulty of choice by making the two different by a fraction. The two roads have more in common and their similarity is quite tricky because one is apt to wonder if they both lead to the same destination after all. If they do, why would the speaker walk the one less beaten and leave the one more worn to another day? This is precisely why the two-road fork at the heart of a woods is a perfect objective correlative to make the readers experience the feelings of wonder and awe that come along with making a choice based on instinct and conjecture, something human beings have to do all the time whether on a smaller or larger scale. The metaphorical two-road juncture is to some individuals a daily encounter, which leaves them with conflicted feelings, regret and even a sense of loss that vary in proportion to the size and seriousness of the situation. After all, it is an occult experience that can not translate into physical or tangible terms. It remains bound within its own mystical coordinates, locked inside the futuristic walls of fate and destiny.

Interestingly, the traveller talks in the past tense and he is looking back in retrospect to his being presented with a difficult choice early in his life journey. Because the poem is not an instance of in-the-moment narrative, the analepsis at its heart visualizes the traveller in the now-then-future relating his past experience in the form of a flashback. However, even so removed from the time of the encounter with the forking road, the sense of wonder has not left the traveller and never will, by the look of it, hence:

I shall be telling this with a sigh

Somewhere ages and ages hence:

Two roads diverged in a wood, and I –

I took the one less traveled by,

And that has made all the difference. ( Frost 1946, 131)

He applauds his choice now and anticipates that he consistently will in the future. Even though he does not claim that he has made the perfect choice or picked the perfect road in the view of the residual feeling of regret evoked by “sigh”, he does think that his choice has “made all the difference”. Again, the traveller swings between grief in “sigh” and the pride in “made all the difference”, confirming the emotion of



uncertainty, curiosity and awe which the objective correlatives of the “Two roads diverged in a yellow wood” and “the one less traveled by” serve.

“In Hardwood Groves” which appeared in Robert Frost’s first and “most nostalgic book, *A Boy’s Will*” (MacArthur 229) is a poem about rebirth and renewal. Frost contemplates the cycle of life and death of vegetation to conclude that death and decay are instrumental to regeneration. His botanical observations across changing seasons lead him to draw his metaphors of rejuvenation on the image of “the falling leaves” which serves as an objective correlative. The speaker in the poem is convinced that trees in spring put on the same leaves that they have shed in the previous autumns. This intimation leads the observer to construct a rationale in which he traces the life cycle of the leaves as they journey from the thick shades of the trees downward into the ground where they merge with the soil so that they “fit the earth like a leather glove.” Leaves must make this probably painful and certainly unwholesome journey in the opposite direction from the heights of light to the lows of darkness. Dismaying enough to the leaves and the observer alike is that on their way to “decay” in the dark earth, the leaves go “past things coming up” (Frost 1946, 37). The Persephone-like leaves spiral down to the underworld, aware that they must make this sacrifice so that they “can mount again/ To fill the trees with another shade”. It is a journey worth making because in the end they will have a new lease of life.

As a physical reference, the falling leaves make a perfect objective correlative to embody several emotions that the speaker in the poem experiences as he contemplates the arduous journey the leaves make. There is the emotion that reassures him of rebirth inevitably following decay. And indeed, the poem ends in a note of optimism that the renewal observed in other worlds makes the speaker declare “I know that this is the way in ours” (Frost 1946, 37). Based on the botanical information, the knowledge professed dissipates any skepticism and invites readers to likewise place their trust in the ingenuity of the natural world. Had the speaker chosen “believe”, for instance, the certainty would have slightly diminished as knowledge outweighs belief. Other emotions refer to sacrifice and the suffering it entails and which leads to achievement, i.e., the painful labour prior to rebirth. In this regard, the falling leaves are seen as giving themselves entirely to flora; they endure being “pierced” and “put beneath” by the “feet of dancing flowers”. The pain is worth enduring and the anonymity is the fare the leaves pay on their way to renewal. On their way to the ground, the leaves have to descend off and abandon the grandeur of high branches while they watch other living things go up. In other words, they are altruistically decrowned and then annihilated, making room for other living things. They have to suffer change of colour and texture; they selflessly surrender to being feasted on by the soil in the hope that they will soon nourish the mother tree that sheds them in the first place. It is a baptism of fire and an anonymous toil for while the mother trees live on, thanks to the leaves and while the flowers are lavished with love and admiration, the leaves themselves are passed over in silence. As the unknown and almost unacknowledged agents of life, the leaves garner little attention and almost no appreciation or mention. They are treated as accessories and taken for granted because in effect unless a tree dies, it will not fail to put on green leaves every spring. In all, if Frost intends the falling leaves to serve as a trope for anonymous, life-giving labour, then they make an ideal objective correlative. Their journey which the poem remarkably traces evokes pathos so that the reader experiences the mixed feelings of grief inflicted by oblivion, but also the joy of an upcoming restoration all at one go. The falling leaves as a physical reference help the poet build an argument about the worth and value of unnoticeable vehicles of life. Frost pays tribute to the leaves being the catalysts of renewal and agents of resurrection. In so doing, he raises them above flora and employs them as a trope to construct his narrative on an analogous renewal of fauna, yet to be proved. This hypothetical rebirth awaiting other living beings including human beings worms its way into the consciousness of readers who would marvel at the fine logic of the hypothesis and probably hesitate before reluctantly dismissing it as nonviable. If Frost believed in reincarnation, then his hypothesis was not altogether far-fetched. After all, there is no proof that the falling leaves would spring back to life and reincarnate in their previous form as leaves.

The journey motif shapes the argument in “Into My Own”, which was also collected in *A Boy’s Will*. This poem pivots on a “physical and emotional journey” and draws on the subsequent “harrowing and enlightening experience” (Fagan 9, 8). It opens with an objective correlative embodied in the image of “dark trees” which the poet intends to stand for primeval nature, untamed by human beings. The dark trees lie deep at the heart of the wilderness beyond human reach and their darkness fortifies them against the reach of civilization. The voice in the poem is aware of and regrets the fact that for others the dark trees evoke

“gloom” and all negative emotions associated with it. Even though he himself does not dismiss the unwholesome intimation altogether, he still would love others to think of the dark trees in different if not indeed positive light. The speaker ventures to reinvent the image of dark trees so that they shake off any traditional, negative associations, and he expresses his wish that these dark trees were not seen by others as “the merest mask of gloom” (Frost 1946, 5). If the image of “dark trees” functions as a physical reference, the dark trees are refashioned to reflect emotions of delight, gratification and probably elation. In very simplistic terms, as an objective correlative, the dark trees are conditioned to signify the enigmatic darkness, but more importantly the thrill associated with navigating and exploring dark woods. All these emotions are in part new to the image of dark trees which conventionally typifies the very opposite in that dark woods imply mystery, but also danger and death. These unsavory emotions which are ordinarily accessory to dark trees are even confirmed after the speaker throws in “doom” to whose edge he wishes the dark trees would stretch. While his first wish (that the dark trees were not “merest mask of gloom”) hardly introduces any favourable sentiments and merely casts doubt on the gloom conventionally linked to darkness, the second wish in which “doom” is a catalyst evokes emotions that are entirely divorced from any pleasantness. And in its so being, Frost’s trope veers to a different area of meaning since the dark trees, as an objective correlative, invite an almost contrary and probably fortuitous interpretation. Their meaning moves from the literal to the symbolic if they insinuate death or, at least, end that “doom” conventionally evokes.

The emotion that the dark trees as a physical reference passes on to readers and observers is no longer simply the exuberance of navigating the wilderness and the peace that comes along with living removed from civilization. The voice in the poem promises himself that once he is enveloped by the dark trees, he will be free of “ever finding open land,/ Or highway where the slow wheel pours the sand” (Frost 1946, 5). The speaker emerges as urbanization or civilization-phobic, therefore, engulfed in the dark trees, his phobia is no longer triggered. Neither darkness, nor solitude frightens the speaker, but the prospects of finding open or treeless land and highways for humans to develop and urbanize. The latter are both subsidiary physical references, that is, objective correlatives that successfully paint urbanization in negative colours. Notwithstanding the certainty expressed above, fear is evoked earlier as it comes hand in hand with venturing into the dark gloomy plot of trees which is too thick to let the breeze in and vast enough to touch the edge of doom. To dissociate these morbid emotions from the image of dark trees, the speaker weaves a scenario in which his loved ones are called to follow in his steps and right into the arms of primordial nature. Deirdre Fagan traces the autobiographical basis of this reference, describing Frost as “a playful father who was involved in his children’s” life. She cites Lesley Frost’s memory of how Frost’s children often followed him “into the woods, ... listening to his tales of goblins and fairies, absorbing his detailed botanical expositions” (Fagan 2007, 9). Dismissing biographical information dismissed, Marit MacArthur suggests that Frost probably invites “readers” whom he expects to be “impelled by the same longing” to likewise abandon urban zones and head back to the wilderness (2014, 229). The dark trees shed any subtle nuances of thought summoned up by gloom and doom and their literal meaning is reinstated. Notably, the meaning remains trapped between the intended blissful emotion that the venture into the dark trees promises the longing speaker in the poem and the evoked cheerlessness of the dark trees masking the gloom leading to doom. Therefore, the dark trees as an objective correlative fails to do justice to the emotion the speaker feels in these moments of prolepsis. While the readers are aware of the epiphany that the speaker experiences, they can neither ignore the gloom nor doom likewise associated with the dark trees. In all, the poem is laden with physical references as objective correlatives that pull in opposite directions and tear out the emotion intended.

### 3. Conclusion

The objective correlative is a vehicle of emotion and the poet’s trope to help the reader recreate and experience the aforesaid emotion. In the three poems analyzed above, several objective correlatives are identified which Robert Frost sculpts to serve his themes. Aided by his observations of the natural world and within environments untouched by urbanization, Frost argues about the delights and dismay of choice, philosophizes about death and renewal and offers appraisal of the joys of primordial experience. His objective correlatives leave the door wide open for various philosophical narratives of existential nature. Choice embodied in the objective correlative of the diverging roads is double-edged and baffling, making the individual entertain doubts and regrets. Frost’s flora-based pictorials inspire readers to draw parallels between their human and non-human worlds only to conclude that existence is perpetual. Existence is

debated to be by no means nihilistic, but rather cyclical and repetitive. However, the objective correlative of the dark trees seems to fall short of doing justice the emotion the poet endeavours to transfer. The readers are divided between the speaker's idyllic descriptions of the dark woods and the gloom evoked by the mention of doom.

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