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Was T. S. Eliot’s “tantalus jar” actually a Leyden jar?

Eric A. Schiff, Syracuse University, October 15, 2017.

Abstract: T. S. Eliot wrote the introduction to the volume of Ezra Pound’s *Selected Poems* that was published in 1928. In an important and oft-cited passage, he used the term “tantalus jar”. In the present paper, we show that this term was a coinage. It likely refers to the Leyden jar, which was an early device invented in the 1700s for storing electrical charge. Eliot may have become acquainted with it through *The Golden Bough* (1912), which he refers to in later work. We speculate as to whether Eliot’s coinage was intentional or not.

The great poet T. S. Eliot is also noted for his literary criticism, and his introduction to the 1928 volume of Ezra Pound’s poetry is well-known. In one of its essential paragraphs Eliot used an obscure term, the “tantalus jar”, as a simile:¹

Those who expect that any good poet should proceed by turning out a series of masterpieces, each similar to the last, only more developed in every way, are simply ignorant of the conditions under which the poet must work, especially in our time. There is a gradual accumulation of experience, like a tantalus jar: it may be only once in five or ten years that experience accumulates to form a new whole and finds its appropriate expression.”

The paragraph has been referenced in publications by a number of critics and poets over the years, although to my knowledge no one has previously attempted to define or explain “a tantalus jar”.^{2- 10}

What on earth is it? An [internet search](#) uncovers about two dozen hits. Nearly all refer to Eliot’s essay, and none to any specific device or object.¹¹ Further, the story of Tantalus, a semi-divine figure in Greek mythology, doesn’t correspond well to Eliot’s meaning. Tantalus had been condemned by Zeus to an existence in Hades in which fruited boughs and water were nearby, but inevitably receded when Tantalus reached out for them.¹² Around 1880, [tantalus](#) became a term used for a locking rack that



Tantalus and Sisyphus in Hades (ca. 1850), [August Theodor Kaselowsky](#) (1810-1891).

displays bottles of liquor, but makes the contents unreachable “to servants and younger sons”.^{13,14} Eliot’s “tantalus jar” refers to an object with rather different properties. It accumulates some quality until a critical level is reached, and an important discharge occurs.

There is no “tantalus jar” in physics.¹⁵ The qualities Eliot describes are, however, found in the [Leyden jar](#). These jars are well-known to contemporary physics teachers, and had attracted scientific and popular attention since the 1700s. A Leyden jar accumulates the electrical charge from a static electricity generator. Ultimately the accumulated charge is discharged in a giant spark. This can be used in scientific experiments, or to electrify students, or (as Benjamin Franklin did) to electrocute the holiday turkey.¹⁶

Is it possible that Eliot slipped and used the term “a tantalus jar” when he meant a Leyden jar? We cannot be certain, but it is possible. We know that the story of the Leyden jar was included in J. G. Frazer’s influential 12-volume *opus magnum*, [The Golden Bough](#) (3rd edition, 1912). Eliot’s “Notes” that he appended to his 1922 masterpiece, “The Waste Land”, explicitly acknowledged the influence of these books.¹⁷ Here is Frazer’s text: “the sacred man is charged just as a Leyden jar [an early device that was used for storing and then discharging static electricity] is charged with electricity; and exactly as the electricity can be discharged by contact with a good conductor, so the holiness or magical virtue in the man can be discharged or drained away by contact with the earth.”¹⁸ Eliot had very likely read this passage years before he wrote his introduction to Pound’s 1928 volume. It matches both the literal and the literary use he made of the hitherto unknown tantalus jar.

If Eliot’s usage was a slip, it’s an intriguing one. For Eliot, the Leyden jar of his experience did spark masterpieces. However, there is no guarantee for the less talented that mere accumulation will lead to anything of note. For us, experience may be accumulating in a “tantalus jar” that will never spark. A tantalizing possibility is that Eliot’s usage was not a slip, but a new coinage and a joke. For the 1948 reprinting of his introduction to Pound’s poetry, Eliot added a postscript.¹ He explained that he saw no reason to change his original after twenty years. If he knew of an outright error, one presumes he would have corrected it. If his use of the term “tantalus jar” was a joke, it was so obscure that it has apparently taken 90 years, and the advent of internet searches, to get it.

This paper was written in honor of Prof. Kameshwar C. Wali’s 90th birthday. Kamesh Wali and I have enjoyed many conversations and interactions about literature and the arts (and physics) over the years. Eliot’s paragraph was once our subject, with S. Chandrasekhar, long ago.



A battery of four Leyden jars from the collection of the *Musée EDF Electropolis* in Mulhouse, France. ©2013 Wikimedia editor “Arnaud_25”.

Notes and citations

- ¹ Ezra Pound, *Selected Poems – edited with an introduction by T. S. Eliot* (Faber and Faber, 1948), pp. 15-16. This book is a 1948 reprinting of the 1928 volume, but Eliot added a brief postscript (p. 21) explaining why he had not revised the introduction. By 1948, Eliot's attitude was likely tempered by the fact that Ezra Pound had become infamous for his propaganda broadcasts on behalf of the Axis powers during World War II.
- ² George Williamson, *A Reader's Guide to T.S. Eliot: A Poem-by-poem Analysis* (Syracuse University Press, 1998), p. 39. This volume reprints an earlier edition. The first edition of this book was published in 1953.
- ³ Kathleen Kampmann Namphy, *The Philosophical Foundations of T. S. Eliot's Critical Theory* (Stanford University, 1978), p. 262. Doctoral dissertation.
- ⁴ William Oxley, *The Cauldron of Inspiration* (Universität Salzburg, 1983), p. 185. Doctoral dissertation.
- ⁵ Carole Seymour Jones, *Painted Shadow: The Life of Vivienne Eliot, First Wife of T. S. Eliot* (Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2009), p. 217.
- ⁶ A. David Moody, *Thomas Stearns Eliot: Poet* (Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 11.
- ⁷ Ronald Bush, *T.S. Eliot: a study in character and style* (Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 70.
- ⁸ Saurindra Mitra, *T.S. Eliot, the critic: a study in critical ideology and method* (Mittal Publications, 1985), p. 30.
- ⁹ Robin Grove, *Early Poetry of T. S. Eliot* (Sydney University Press, 1993), p. 26.
- ¹⁰ John Paul Riquelme, *T. S. Eliot* (Salem Press, 2010), p. 208.
- ¹¹ A search for the term "tantalus jar" was done using the google search engine (<https://www.google.com/search?q=%22tantalus+jar%22&oq=%22tantalus+jar%22>), which yielded twenty results. A search using the Proquest database found an additional four doctoral theses that quoted Eliot's paragraph. None of these sources takes up the definition of a tantalus jar.
- ¹² Robert Graves, "[108. Tantalus](#)", *The Greek Myths* (Penguin, 2012), p. 342.
- ¹³ "[The Tantalus](#)", *Pullman* (December 2008), p. 5. *Pullman* is the magazine/catalog of the Pullman Gallery in London, England. It quotes the phrase "servants and younger sons", but without a citation. The gallery was selling a 1903 sterling silver "Betjeman Patent Tantalus". The Betjeman family later spawned a Poet Laureate of the United Kingdom, [Sir John Betjeman](#).
- ¹⁴ For the term "tantalus" (in the sense of a stand or rack for liquor bottles), the earliest literary usage noted in the *Oxford English Dictionary* is 1888. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle used the term in an 1899 story. The Betjeman patent for a tantalus was granted in 1881. I have not uncovered earlier uses of "tantalus" in this sense.
- ¹⁵ There is a "Tantalus cup". It's also known as a "[Pythagorean cup](#)". This is a demonstration device used to illustrate the principle of a siphon.
- ¹⁶ Ernie Tretkoff, "[December 23, 1750: Ben Franklin Attempts to Electrocute a Turkey](#)", *APS News* **15**, 11 (December 2006). Leyden jars are the forerunners of capacitors in modern electronics.
- ¹⁷ T. S. Eliot, *The Complete Poems and Plays 1909-1950* (Harcourt, Brace, & World, 1962), p. 50. "Notes on 'The Waste Land'": "To another work of anthropology I am indebted in general, one which has influenced our generation profoundly; I mean *The Golden Bough*; I have used especially the two volumes *Adonis, Attis, Osiris*." *Adonis, Attis, Osiris* is the title of Part IV of the third edition, which consists of two volumes.
- ¹⁸ Sir James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion. Third Edition. Part VII – Balder the Beautiful - the fire festivals of Europe and the doctrine of the external soul - Volume 1* (MacMillan and Co., Limited, London, 1913), [p. 6](#).