

Is the Author Dead? Juxtaposing the Poet and the Person to Understand T. S. Eliot, a Notable Modernist

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Abstract:

At the outset of my paper I will put forth how the nature of the modern world can be best interpreted if one's reading admits the conditional mode of such approximation. Such an exercise will enable me to explore Eliot's early poems which refuse to get pigeonhole in any watertight critical compartment. In this paper I use the phrase "death of the author" in a more general sense than the one assumed in Roland Barthes celebrated essay *The Death of the Author* (1967). Probably inspired by the postmodernists' extensive practice of authors rewriting previous texts, Roland Barthes declared the Author dead to all times and cultures. However, I am set out to bring arguments against Barthes' contention, that "a writer no longer contains within himself passions, humors, sentiments, impressions, but that enormous dictionary, from which he derives a writing which can know no end or halt[...]" (1967) by reading the select poems of T.S. Eliot in tandem with his life to present how such an activity can generate newer ways of engaging with them, as the 'text' of the poet's life can also be a constituent of what we term as 'context.' While scrutinising these poems, I will highlight how the poet's detachment from his subject and his deep involvement simultaneously go together. The proof in my argument is provided by T.S. Eliot's statement, "But of course, only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to escape from these things" from his celebrated essay *Tradition and Individual Talent* (1919). Furthermore, I use the term "impersonality" in a general vein, though I am well aware that the modernists' professed poetics of "impersonality" (in a line descending from Baudelaire through Mallarme to T.S. Eliot) is, however, somehow at loggerheads with their prioritizing of the self over the other, or what Virginia Woolf understood by "moths" and "middlebrows" getting in the way of the elect.

Key words: modernism, author, impersonality, biography, revaluation.

Before embarking on the tour which this paper seeks to navigate it is imperative that the ground be made clear so that the journey is smooth and enabling. There are two areas that this paper aims to address: (i) What is Modernism? (ii) Is the conjunction of authorial life and text fallacious? The texts through which I have chosen to attend these fields are T.S. Eliot's *The Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock*, *The Hollow Men*, *Portrait of a Lady*, and *A Dedication to my Wife*.

Understanding Modernism:

It is generally taken for granted that novelty is the marked feature of the modern world which is a radical break from the past, where the *new* is accepted as a valid position. This notion can be

corroborated from a definition put forward by Bradbury: “The task of Making It New meant the need to go on ahead, finding a new way through modern experience — a task of discovery and dissent, a venture through the dangerous limits of the imagination, a breaking free from the frozen structures of the past.” (Bradbury 1989: 3) However, my contention is that the nature of the modern world that subsumes the literary and the non-literary can be best interpreted if one’s reading admits the conditional mode of such approximation. In this regard I would like to quote from Frank Kermode’s essay on “Modernisms”:

The fact that defining the modern is a task that now imposes itself on many distinguished scholars may be a sign that the modern period is over. We need a language to argue about it, as we argue about Renaissance. The formula devised will, in the same way, vary with time. A documentary history of the modern would have been different twenty years ago, and will be different twenty years hence. (Kermode 1968: 28)

Seen from this angle, it is no longer possible for historical study of modernism to subject itself to the periodical cataloguing which rests on accumulating the common features as can be discerned in the conventional methods of writing literary histories. Yet, my thesis does not seek to ignore or invalidate the developments of New Historicism and Historicist studies and swerve towards a poststructuralist approach. I am in agreement with B. Choudhury who has cogently argued:

Recent Historicist studies have shown that it is not the complete absence of period that is desirable or that it hinders analysis, but the marking of texts in terms of stasis that closes the potential avenues of reception. Thus, the stark configuration of literary periods in terms of manifest strategies for the sake of showing tendencies in the arts appears naive. The modern in literary history is functional and is relative to its mode of appropriation. (Choudhury 2001: 5)

At this stage, the operative parameters must be set to pre-empt my study from acquiring a stage of stasis – the theoretical assumptions that underlie the study of modernism will be taken into account, but caution will also be maintained from accepting everything that is handed down to us as theory at face value. We cannot forget the Alan Sokal affair where after publishing his article, *Transgressing the Boundaries: Towards a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity*, Sokal went on to repudiate the text as manipulated and concocted in order to ‘expose’ the inadequacies of deconstruction and poststructuralism.

An insightful work that can make the road clear is *The Problematics of European Modernism* by Richard Sheppard. Here, Sheppard addresses the ‘problematique’ with the tripartite position of methodology, diagnosis and response. He analyses the existing methods of study and proffers three strategies along with their existing limitations – (a) definition of the term by pinpointing one or more key features, concerns or ‘common traits’; (b) focus on one or more key features of modernism by setting them in a one dimensional historical or sociological context; and (c) a study of the paradigm shift across a range of disciplines. In a succinct manner, Sheppard points out “modernist texts vary greatly in the degree of complexity with which they present the ‘problematique’ which they are confronting and trying to resolve,” and the variety in responses invariably highlight the relational aspects amongst the practitioners. Hence, instead of adhering to any idea of modernism as given I intend to explore the early poems of Eliot which refuse to get pigeonhole in any watertight critical compartment. However, my avowed aim is not to overturn or overrule previous study but to explore new horizons of understanding Eliot and highlight the possibilities of critical practice.

The theory of impersonality and the author:

Although Eliot's prose does not fall within the ambit of my study, references to some of them will help establish my argument. To begin with, I would like to bring forward Eliot's theory of impersonality which is one of the focal points in his essay, *Tradition and Individual Talent* (1919), at times considered as a manifesto of modernist poetics. Let me quote the many oft-quoted statements of this essay:

Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality. (Eliot 1999 [1932]: 21)

Keeping in mind that Eliot considers poetry as an escape from emotion, it is readily inferred that there is no outpouring of his emotions in any of his poems. However, a slight glance at the very next sentence which is most of the time elided may force us to rethink about ignoring the poet's emotions in understanding a poem:

But of course, only those who have personality and emotion know what it means to want to escape from these things. (Eliot 1999 [1932]: 21)

While scrutinising the poems selected for the present paper, I will show how the poet's detachment from his subject and his deep involvement simultaneously go together. At this point, Lyndall Gordon's remark comes in handy:

As more is gradually known of Eliot's life, the clearer it seems that the 'impersonal' facade of his poetry—the multiple faces and voices—masks an often quite literal reworking of personal experience. (Gordon 1977: 2)

No doubt Gordon's comment is conditioned by his own situatedness, yet we can agree that it is not the conjunction of authorial life and text which is fallacious, but the fact that the life is used to judge rather than contextualize the work. The placement of an author's life beside his work can open up a channel of interpretation and enquiry, rather than one of evaluation. This is what I will attempt to do in the next section of my paper.

Bringing biography to understand a text:

Now let me read the afore-mentioned idea of Eliot's theory of impersonality in tandem with his poem *The Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock*. This poem is not a love song in the ordinary sense of the term as it hardly conforms to the markers associated with a love song. Keeping in mind the poet's dictum, that poetry is an escape from emotion, we can easily infer that there is an eschewal from outpouring any personal emotion by the poet. But can that stage be so conclusively achieved? What about his second remark (as has been quoted) that follows it? Can we overlook the stamp of the poet's lived experience in his poetic creations? I presume the answer cannot be a stark 'Yes.' I think reading a poet's life along with the poems composed can generate newer ways of engaging with the text, after all a poet's life can also be a part of the context in which we situate a text for interpretation. Furthermore, what is a 'context'? Is it not constituted by 'texts'?

The tension between scepticism and belief forms the hallmark in Eliot's poems, such as *The Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock*, *Portrait of a Lady*, *Gerontion*, *The Hollow Men*. The never ending anxiety, the inability to utter the right word or to take any decisive step that mark Prufrock's character suggests a paralyzed will. The same happens with the male persona of

Portrait of a Lady, whose ambiguities of thought and feeling make him no much different from Prufrock. Even the hollow men are no different:

Shape without form, shade without colour,
Paralysed force, gesture without motion

(*The Hollow Men*)

However, the classic case in this regard is *The Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock*, where sceptical utterances overpower statements of belief and assertion. A few lines from the poem will make the point clear:

Oh, do not ask, 'What is it?'
Let us go and make our visit...
It is impossible to say just what I mean!

(*The Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock*)

The effect is quite bathetic, after all Prufrock's 'overwhelming question' which raises the expectations among the readers remains a question that should not be asked; his loquacious manner gets simply reduced to the impossibility to express what he means. It is the 'negatives' which dominate the poem, as Prufrock's elaborate monologue conveys nothing affirmatively.

When we take into account the personal side of Eliot in this period it becomes evident that he was highly dissatisfied with the intellectual culture that permeated England and America in the early part of the twentieth century. Commenting on the intellectual arena of England and America in the first decade of the twentieth century, Eliot starkly depicted the scenario as an 'intellectual desert.' In this desolate atmosphere, it was only France which offered some succour and ray of hope. As Eliot muses:

Anatole France and Remy de Gourmont still exhibited their learning, and provided types of scepticism for younger men to be attracted by and to repudiate. (Eliot 1934: 451)

This comment bears specific merit in the context of my paper because scepticism hovered over his mindset at that period and percolated into his poetic composition. This can be read as a reason behind the tortuous and satiric manner that has its imprint on Prufrock's comments and observations in the poem.

Another important aspect that we should consider is allusiveness, which is one of the most striking features of Eliot's poetry. As S.K. Nath persuasively argues in his "Scepticism and Belief in T. S. Eliot's Poetry":

It is not that Eliot merely refers to other, earlier works of art in the context of his poems; he very often speaks through those other voices. His highly allusive technique subdues his own voice so that very often it becomes extremely difficult to track down one predominant poetic voice or the poet's own voice. The result is the creation of a pervading sense of uncertainty, tenuity, and lack of rigidity. (Nath 2003: 52-53)

The fact that Eliot's personality was not immune from getting affected by others can be established by his own assertion. It is an established fact in Eliot-criticism that he was deeply influenced by Laforgue and Baudelaire; he himself acknowledged his debt to Dante. This can be asserted by quoting a passage where Eliot talks about being 'carried away by the work of one poet', definitely he should be referring to his own experience:

Everyone, I believe, who is at all sensible to the seductions of poetry, can remember some moment in youth when he or she was completely carried away by the work of one poet. Very likely he was carried away by several poets, one after the other. (Eliot 1932: 103)

It is quite interesting to know the reason behind his advocacy of wide reading:

It is valuable because in the process of being affected by one powerful personality after another, we cease to be dominated by any one, or by any one, or by any small number. The very different views of life, cohabiting our minds, affect each other, and our own personality asserts itself and gives each a place in some arrangement peculiar to ourself. (Eliot 1932:104)

In the afore-mentioned passage, Eliot adds a note of caution in affirming anything “being affected by one powerful personality after another.” Yet it is quite interesting to note that the multiple affect by a host of personalities on an individual’s mind ultimately leads to the assertion of its own personality simultaneously accommodating the other views.

The entire atmosphere of the poem *Portrait of a Lady* is vitiated by scepticism, the male persona and the lady doubting each other’s words; their friendship is based on distrust and suspicion where they try to guess and make calculations about each other’s intentions. Despite Eliot’s avowed principle of impersonality, the personal element remains very much clear in this poem. In a letter to Ezra Pound, Eliot encloses a copy of the poem, briefly comments on it, and then says:

It will please you, I hope, to hear that I had a Christmas card from the lady, bearing the ‘ringing greetings of friend to friend at this season of high festival’. It seems like old times. (Eliot 1988: 86)

Valerie Eliot explains who the lady is:

Miss Adeleine Moffat, the subject of the poem, lived behind the State House in Boston and invited selected Harvard undergraduates to tea. During a visit to London in 1927 she asked the Eliots to dine, offering ‘a modest choice of dates to sacrifice yourselves on the altar of New England’, but they were away. (Eliot 1988: 86)

Even a famous critic like F.R. Leavis sensed the presence of a personal element in this poem. While discussing the issue of impersonality achieved by Eliot in the poem *Gerontion*, Leavis cites the example of *Portrait of a Lady*, where Eliot has not achieved the status of impersonality:

The dramatic derivation of the verse is not all that there is dramatic about *Gerontion*: it has a really dramatic detachment. In this respect it represents a great advance upon anything printed earlier in *Poems 1909-1925*. *Prufrock* and *Portrait of a Lady* are concerned with the directly personal embarrassments, disillusionments and distresses of a sophisticated young man. (Leavis 1963 [1932]: 72)

At this point, it will be interesting to take a look at *A Dedication to my Wife*, a poem which can properly conform to the idea of a *love poem* that Eliot wrote after his second marriage. Here we find the intensity of emotion and unshakable faith in this particular relationship which is seemingly absent in *Prufrock* and *Portrait of a Lady*:

The breathing in unison

Of lovers whose bodies smell of each other

Who think the same thoughts without need of speech

And babble the same speech without need of meaning
 No peevish winter wind shall chill
 No sullen tropic sun shall wither
 The roses in the rose-garden which is ours and ours only

(*A Dedication to my Wife*)

We can infer that the peace Eliot was hankering after was bequeathed to him in his second marriage, which was marked by simple human love and faith in human relationship.

To wind up my discussion, I would like to say that, in the postmodern world, there is a questioning of fixity which in turn has opened up literary studies to continuously re-reading and re-interpreting previous positions. Even a *stable* term such as Modernism is not free from reevaluation. Helmut Lethen, for example, working within a poststructuralist frame, considers that “‘Modernism’ itself is a critical construct developed within the realm of Postmodernism. The concept was formed so as to form a dark background for the brilliant claims of Postmodernism ... the postmodern situation created the possibility to see modernism as a closed and rather rigid entity.” (Lethen apud Connor 1987: 186) As to my connecting literary work and biography, I would like to quote Sean Burke who, in his essay, *The responsibilities of the writer*, logically concludes: “Societies are not, in any case, likely to lose interest in who is speaking. The commercial fortunes of biography in our day and age alone testify to the fact that the demand to retrace a work to its author is virtually as powerful as that to retrace a crime to its perpetrator, a murdered body to its murderer.” (Burke 2006: 487)

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