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“Impersonal Poetry” As An Oxymoronic Standard

Dichotomies are impossible to avoid within T.S. Eliot's poetry, in his explorations of life and death, solitude and relationships, past and present, but also within the essence of his writing itself—the relationship between author and narrator. Is it possible to separate Eliot from the many voices present within *The Waste Land*? Some believe that narrators are a different consciousness entirely from their authors, but is that psychologically possible? Especially within a poem which is so complex and researched, which includes so many of Eliot's perspectives and experiences, it seems difficult to fathom that his influences can be disregarded. The author's perspectives on war and the environment, on what it meant to be an intellectual modernist poet, and the psychoanalysis of the underlying motivations for writing are all critical pieces to familiarize oneself with his works. Chaos is the heart of *The Waste Land*—exacerbated by the many voices of the narrators constantly changing. In order to remedy this lack of order, the audience must take into account T.S. Eliot's psychological and historical contexts and his experiences which have influenced the work.

To begin, the time period in which Eliot lived and wrote undeniably finds its way into *The Waste Land*, in both themes and explicit content. Firstly, the impact that the first World War had on Europe as a whole is something explored by Eliot in many of his works. Imagery within his signature work, especially its first section ‘The Burial of the Dead’, is often evocative of war-torn lands, desecrated and chaotic. Even from the first stanza of the poem, centered on a

narrator who has clearly not experienced firsthand war herself, there exists a tonal throughline—as one researcher puts it, “Certainly the opening section of ‘The Burial of the Dead’ has a clear memoir-quality, reminding both Marie and the reader of happier times before the fear and death that choked Europe during World War I” (Johnson 78). The impact of the first narrator reminiscing about the ‘time before’ is reflective of the way Eliot himself felt about life pre-WWI. The setting serves as an homage to the way that areas affected by war—the “Unreal City, Under the brown fog of a winter dawn” symbolizes a post-war London, where the crowds are aimless and isolated. The “rats’ alley Where the dead men lost their bones” (Eliot, lines 60-61; 115-116) evokes a decaying memory of a battlefield. As Semy Rhee elegantly states, “Rather than discussing the condition of modern Europe in factual terms, Eliot uses the poetic, the allusive, and the obscure to depict an image of the physical desolation of the war-torn society and also communicate a sense of spiritual disillusionment and despair” (Rhee 7). Chaos, which is reminiscent of war, is not only present in the landscape, it is the form, and the voices, a jumbling of disjointed themes. While Eliot attempts to assert that good poetry is “an escape from emotion...personality” (“Tradition and the Individual Talent”), he fails in *The Waste Land* by unifying all these ideas with his own opinions of the war. He references Europe constantly throughout the poem, suggesting that the chaos caused by the war has broken the country and the people who reside in it—a society which is “...Lamented by a poet who is deeply concerned for his country in the midst of his personal confusion and disillusionment” (Rhee 10). This is further proven by the many voices echoing these sentiments in the poem. All depictions of war, regardless of the person speaking in the work, are inherently tinged with Eliot’s own distaste for Europe which emerged after the war. The atrocities that Eliot associated with war are inescapable, although he ironically never fought—however, the wild imagination of the man

gives the reader a clear insight into what Eliot believed the war to be like. The voice of a soldier in *The Burial of the Dead* has been reduced to a madman all too familiar with death, asking his companion from a war ““That corpse you planted last year in your garden/ Has it begun to sprout?”” (Eliot, lines 71-72). Clearly driven to irrationality to cope with the burials of the millions seen in war, Eliot’s soldier has become a shell of a person, grouped with the masses “[undone by death]” (Eliot, line 63). After all, Eliot is the key in understanding and interpreting his own works. Without the context surrounding the war that stems from Eliot’s own life during it, the chaos would be unjustifiable and non-evocative. With the knowledge that the author suffered from the effects of war in England, one piece of the poetry is more easily understood. In simple terms, the reason that *The Waste Land* is regarded as a canon staple is not for the content itself, but how deeply it reflects the mind who wrote it.

Closely connected to the destruction of the war are Eliot’s opinions of the natural world and environmentalism, with which he was greatly concerned. Most of Eliot’s poetry, in some way, comments on the industrialization of large cities and the negative consequences which it unforgivingly inflicts on the people living there. *The Waste Land* is perhaps the most glaring example of this, as the entire setting is painted as a no-longer-natural hellscape, where “the sun beats, And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief, And the dry stone no sound of water” (Eliot lines 22-24). Eliot makes his distaste for urbanization clear, evoking images of cities being places of death— not only literally, but also places of death for creativity, uniqueness, and individuality. By emphasizing so often the feelings and thoughts of narrators trapped inside this ecological nightmare, “Eliot’s no man’s land shows modernity’s disappointment effects... on the planet, enlightening the existential situation of twentieth-century life and suspecting the ecological disaster is approaching from inside the shadows of the very

venture of urban progress itself (Hasan 30). In almost every section of the poem, and further, within each speaker, some form of perverse description of the environment is present. For example, *The Fire Sermon* begins with a narrator left alone, mourning the “summer nights” filled with liveliness and humanity, which has now been abandoned by even the native nymphs (Eliot, lines 177-179). Nobody in the poem enjoys living in this titular wasteland, just as Eliot hated living in the city. This is one of the followable throughlines of the poem— the hatred for what the world has become due to abuse and intervention of mankind. *The Fire Sermon* has an intense emphasis on the ways people living in this ecological dead zone are impacted, noting that even the animals seem sluggish (Eliot line 87-88). The impact of war and industrialization on England as a whole is something that Eliot takes great care to emphasize as the enemy in his poem, even in abstraction through the mouths of his narrators.

Continuing to look into the importance of ecological conservation which Eliot was so passionate about, water is a huge motif in *The Waste Land* as a whole— the lifeblood of ecosystems and humanity. There is a scarcity in the earlier sections of the poem, but later a deep-rooted fear of death at the hands of it. Water has existed far before humanity, and will continue long after the narrators in *The Waste Land*, Eliot himself, and the readers have died. There is immortality to water, a juxtaposition to society. As Paramveer Chahal puts it, “On river banks, all civilizations developed and nourished. It opened the door for a rich culture... However, human growth has gone beyond all natural limits, and as a result, mankind has completely lost what is known as an aristocratic spirit. The collapse of human civilisation began at that time and reached its apex in the wasteland depicted in the poem.” (3). The perversion of the environment, humanity’s incessant need to colonize and conquer, has led to the circumstances which leave the narrators, and Eliot, broken down and hopeless. Eliot is giving his own perspective— “*The Waste*

Land incidentally recommends to its reader a homologous world in which material and typical universes are experienced as one – the broken city of *The Waste Land* reflects precisely the psychic breaking down of the storyteller” (Hasan 31). Eliot was tired of living in industrialized, urbanized London, a sigh of exasperation which can be heard while reading *The Waste Land* due to it so closely reflects his ideals. The chaos which the poem inflicts on the reader with its myriad of narrators and jumble of seemingly unrelated musings are connected once again, a theme of environmentalism emerging once the reader understands Eliot’s own stance.

Additionally, a historical criticism would not be complete without an examination of how Eliot’s poetry reflects and challenges the works of other poetry at the time, which was concerned with intellectualism and modernity. Other writers and audiences during the high modernism period were familiar with references to “high art” in literature— and many of them— however, what makes Eliot unique is his specific focuses and unique fascinations with particular pieces. It is obvious to readers of *The Waste Land* that Eliot enjoys including nearly imperceptible references to other pieces of literature and music, which makes sense for a modernist poet, as they valued intellectualism and the canon. However, the distinction comes from T. S. Eliot himself, regarded as one of the leaders of the modernist movement. His work was so unique and novel in his time, and he broke an incredible number of traditions in his writing. As one article posits, “Modern art and literature broke the traditional connections with the past, as Eliot did through introducing new language and style to poetry. He experiments with his own techniques regarding the composition of the poem that make the poem modern” (Ullah et al., 4181). Any modernist poet could reference the bible, or operas, or mythology, but it is because of Eliot’s fascinations with those particular things that *The Waste Land* becomes an homage to his intellect. The anarchy of disjointed references, seemingly random German, and strange quotations tells us

more about the author than it does about the poem. It shows us the time period in which he's writing, the values that he held close, and gives reason to the confusing form and voices. To put it plainly, Eliot's specific niche of background knowledge, including references to Shakespeare in 'A Game of Chess', French poetry in 'The Fire Sermon', and religious texts in 'What the Thunder Said', connects him intrinsically to everything that he writes, notably when he places these references which were so dear to him in his poetry.

Furthermore, psychological analysis, especially concerning Lacan's theory of desire and its connection to Eliot's religious journey is a key piece to consider when evaluating *The Waste Land* as an author-central work. Jacques Lacan was a psychoanalyst in the 1900s whose life overlapped with Eliot's for a significant span of decades. His theory of desire posits that, generally, individuals feel a lack of wholeness or satisfaction because they desire an unobtainable object, "the Other", which is formed by each person's unique environmental circumstances. Furthermore, language as a "signifier" is unable to express this desire because it is part of the unconscious— as summarized by scholar Tamara Dellutri, each individual desires recognition from their "Other", which they are wholly unable to achieve because they are unable to use language to ask for it— the unconscious desire has no way to be recognized by the individual and therefore cannot be fulfilled (Dellutri 45). While applying this theory to *The Waste Land*, the central question becomes "can a work of poetry— a utilization of language and expression—tell us about Eliot's own, perhaps unconscious, desires?". To begin tackling this, it is necessary to look at the piece as a jumbled, disconnected whole. It is a work of language and syntax, something that Lacan believes inadequate to truly unlock the unconscious' desires. However, because poetry's goal is to evoke emotion and thought through the use of form, metaphor, and feeling, it is more closely related to the unconscious than simple spoken or written language.

Following this logic, it is possible to extrapolate what Eliot's desires are from this work, even considering the jumbled desires and hopes of his group of narrators.

With Lacan's theory of desire kept in mind, the connections to Eliot's life as a man searching for his own "other" are clear. The narrators present in *The Waste Land* all struggle to find a "master signifier", a reasoning behind the way things are or the way things ought to be. In fact, "The speaker[s] in *The Waste Land* lives in a decentred and autistic world where the previous master signifier, God, is dead or no more enough to fulfil his task. In such a context, the whole poem is made up of a mass of signifiers flying in the air without an organising principle. Even the speaker[s] feel split and decentred; [they are] not subject[s] at all" (Birlik 213). The chaotic tone that is the result of having such a large amount of voices within the poem is intentional, like everything Eliot included in his poetry. They mirror the plight of the author himself— an inability to narrow down and fully understand what exactly was causing him a sense of dissatisfaction. Eliot struggled to fully identify his connection to God, his "other" which left him feeling less-than-whole for much of his life. During the time of writing *The Waste Land*, Eliot may have been searching for a way to identify and obtain the thing he desired most. This, of course, becomes present in his poetry, from the characters like the Fisher King, to references to the Holy Grail, to scattered images of Christ. It's easy to miss without the context, especially since so many references are historically niche or extremely old. The narrators, by extension, reflect these feelings of confusion and dissatisfaction— especially given the form, where there are plenty of voices telling different stories, searching for different "other"s. In summation, chaos emerges in the lives of people unable to attain and act on their desires (according to Lacan's theory). This becomes the spine of *The Waste Land*— the narrators mirror the author's

feelings of Lack and desire. It does not always present as God, but the narrators struggle to continue without a sense of purpose in the same way that many believe Eliot struggled.

In conclusion, the intimate connections between Eliot and his epic *The Waste Land* are impossible to ignore when reading for a deep understanding of the poetry. The standard he himself created for poetry to be impersonal is one which he does not follow. Clearly, the circumstances of the life that Eliot lived— aftershocks of the Great War, the spread of industrialism, and the elevation of intellectualism— have had irrefutable influence on *The Waste Land*. As some psychoanalytic critics and this essay have argued, the psychological context of Lacan's theory of desire and its effect on Eliot's own life works its way into the poem as well. As a whole, *The Waste Land* is a work concerned with chaos, made only more bewildering by his choice to include many narrators. However, the narrators can be seen as pieces of Eliot himself, mirroring his desires, fears, political beliefs, and social life. The pieces necessary to fully appreciate and interpret such an intensely self-immersed poem are the same ones which biographical and historical critics have found to be ever-present in context. Diving deeply into the poem which has left an impression on literature and poetry forever, there is much to be learned not only about reading, but about writing. The author is the connection to the poem, and to claim impersonality is the ideal is a disservice to both Eliot's own works and all of poetry. The greatest poems in history are never separated from their authors, and Eliot should not be the first. Taking into account the historical and psychological context is not just important, but compulsory for any reader who wishes to become truly familiar with any work.

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