THE EXPERIENCE OF READING T.S. ELIOT AS AN INTERPRETIVE STRATEGY
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I

In his latest book, *How to Read Literature*, the renowned Oxford literary theorist Terry Eagleton writes, “Poetry is concerned not just with the meaning of experience, but with the experience of meaning” (Eagleton 192). Earlier, in the same study, Eagleton states, “The experience which matters is the experience of the poem itself” (Eagleton 137). T.S. Eliot also understood that a sensate approach to interpreting poetry would glean a more profound analysis. Again, Eagleton agrees: “the conscious meaning of a poem does not matter all that much. This is why Eliot did not greatly care what interpretations of his work readers came up with. It is the impact his poetry makes on the guts, the nervous system and the unconscious which concerns him most” (Eagleton 68). I have long instructed my undergraduate students that they should approach Eliot’s work with the heart over the mind. In so doing, they will gain a level of understanding of the poet’s work beyond (though not wholly divorced from) the analytical. T.S. Eliot’s poetry is meant to be experienced as much as it is to be understood — if not more so the former.

Such an approach can also be dialogical, augmented by the various experiences different readers have of Eliot and share as part of an open discussion. This paper/presentation will attempt to show how this can occur and what learning will come from such experiential, peer discussions. We will discuss two of Eliot’s works: “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” (1915) and “The Hollow Men” (1925). I chose these two pieces because of their length — i.e. they can be addressed in one setting, however incompletely — and because they are filled with a plethora of images, symbols, and unique phrasing that illicit an emotional response.
II

“The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” is the entrée that most secondary and undergraduate students have of T.S. Eliot. There is a standard interpretation of this piece that students are habitually taught. Prufrock is trapped in his upper-class existence. He most likely works for a member of the aristocracy: Prufrock is not “Prince Hamlet,” rather, he is

an attendant lord, one that will do
To swell a progress, start a scene or two
Advise the prince; no doubt, an easy tool,
Deferential, glad to be of use,
Politic, cautious, and meticulous;
Full of high sentence, but a bit obtuse;
At times, indeed, almost ridiculous —
Almost, at times, the Fool.

In other words, Prufrock is more like Polonius than Hamlet or Claudius. Such self-abnegation appears throughout the poem. Prufrock has “measured out [his] life with coffee spoons” and feels he should have been “a pair of ragged claws / Scuttling across the floors of silent seas.” There is a burning question he longs to ask, probably to one of the women in the drawing room (the poem’s setting), but fears he will be misunderstood and, therefore, become an object of even more scorn. (These women are already chatting about his thinning hair and appendages.) Or it may be, as Lyndall Gordon suggests, that “Prufrock’s overwhelming need is to ask not a lover’s question but a metaphysical one” (Gordon 68). The question may be about his very existence.

Prufrock is a man trapped in the banal existence of his social class. The very title of the piece sets the tone for what follows, as does the epigraph from Dante. We quickly learn that this is not a “love song.” The suggestion that it is a romantic ballad is dismissed by its juxtaposition with the prim and proper, upper-crusty appellation of the protagonist. His first name is not Romeo or Ricardo. It is J. Alfred. Prufrock does not exactly roll off the tongue either; it is hindered by three sets of hard consonants. Like Guido da Montefeltro, confined to The Inferno,
Prufrock is sure that his narrative will never be heard by the living. In sum, Prufrock retreats into a world that is a “despairing introspective day-dream,” a world of “self-pity and self-disgust” (Drew 35).

How is this understanding distinct from the experience first time readers have of this poem? Furthermore, how does what they share about their reading of “Prufrock” augment understanding wrought through experience?

One may pick up on the numerous allusions that Eliot weaves into this poem — not to mention his oeuvre. We have the beheaded John the Baptist from the Gospels, a dramatic reference to Andrew Marvell’s “To His Coy Mistress,” not just a naming of “Prince Hamlet” in contrasting self-recognition, but a reference to his famous soliloquy toward the poem’s climax: “No! I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be” (cf. “To be, or not to be”). This approach will help elucidate the poem’s meaning, but what do we learn from an affective reading?

Certain feelings were invoked in me when I first read this piece as a sophomore. The first came in the third line. The “patient etherized upon a table” created in a feeling of lifeless inertia — a state of suspended animation. Is this not how Prufrock moves throughout his society? This is followed by “sawdust restaurants with oyster shells,” a foreshadowing of the “ragged claws / Scuttling across the floors of silent seas.” The latter image is a painful one, conjuring a cloistered crustacean moving in a mechanical, and dare I say in a crippled, staccato limp across the depths of a mute desert. The loneliness and brittle movement can be felt.

“The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” is filled with other such experiential images, which we will unpack during our discussion. For now, I will touch upon one more. An equally tender image surfaces beginning at line 55. Aware of eyes that scrutinize, Prufrock sees himself “sprawling on pin / …pinned and wriggling on the wall.” The narrator conjures entomology, but
also crucifixion. The verb “wriggling” is particularly poignant here. One thinks of a victim writhing in pain while being examined by indifferent spectators who do not intervene to assuage the suffering. Interestingly enough, part of the telos of crucifixion was public humiliation.

Interestingly enough, a few of semesters ago I asked a couple of students who had not read “Prufrock” before to do so and to respond offering what they “felt” the poem meant. I offered no suggestions. What they said was intriguing. Their initial response was that the poem was very confusing. One student confessed, “Once I read the line about him going bald,” which appears almost a third of the way through the piece, “it began to make more sense.” Both students latched onto the fact that Prufrock is an older gentleman. Denis Donoghue reminds us that “in an interview in 1962 [Eliot] said that Prufrock was a man of about forty and in part himself and that he was using the theory of split personality” (Donoghue 7). These students felt that Prufrock was much older than forty. “He is a very old man,” they said. Part of what led them to this conclusion, as they wrestled with the poem’s meaning together, came from an impression rooted in the totality of the verse. Much like the title character in Leo Tolstoy’s The Death of Ivan Ilyich, who is reflecting on his life from his deathbed, my students felt that Prufrock was reflecting on his life — evaluating whether he “lived it the right way.” One student stated that if Prufrock had to live his life over again, he would not change anything. As the conversation continued, the same student observed that maybe he would. “He plays two roles in his life,” she said. “One role is positive and the other is negative.” When asked to expound upon this, she claimed that some of the other characters in the milieu of the poem see Prufrock as a Hamlet figure, although, as he states, he is the prince’s assistant (e.g. “an attendant lord”). The other Prufrock, the inimical one, has a “deep, bad secret.” The secret is not the question he longs to ask one of the women in the drawing room, part of the standard interpretation. Prufrock’s
query is a self-evaluation—or metaphysical, as noted above by Lyndall Gordon. “He is looking at the life he led,” one student said, “and is trying to decide if he deserves to go to heaven or hell.” The face he wears changes with each social context (“There will be time, there will be time / To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet.”)

What astounded me most was the students’ ability to glean a candid image of Prufrock, Eliot, and the poem’s context on a first reading! Prufrock is an older gentleman—whether he is in his forties (as Eliot suggests) or his eighties—and, although not royalty, he is a member of the elite. He is a man of means and privilege. One student commented that “[Prufrock] seems like a business man. I can picture him going to work wearing a suit, but I do not know where he goes.” Throughout his literary career, Eliot went to work each morning impeccably dressed in a three-piece suit, umbrella in hand, donning a Stetson. He worked on foreign accounts for Lloyd’s Bank in London and later became a director at the publishing firm Faber and Gwyer, which became Faber and Faber. Another student said, “I picture [Prufrock] being blue-blood. I see him walking the streets of Boston, in a place like Beacon Hill.” The same student said that she felt the poem took place in the early 1900s. As an undergraduate at Harvard University in the first decade of the twentieth century, Eliot often walked through Beacon Hill and used this area of Boston as the inspiration for some of his verse, including “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.” One imagines the narrator walking the mile from the Union Oyster House near Quincy Market (“sawdust restaurants with oyster shells”), through Scollay Square, turning up Tremont Street as he heads for the Back Bay. You can see him traversing the cobblestone walkways past tightly knit brick townhouses at nightfall (“When the evening is spread out against the sky”). This trek leads him to wherever he was going to contemplate asking his “overwhelming question.”
III

For the sake of providing ample time for open discussion, let us proceed and examine another one of Eliot’s prominent works: “The Hollow Men.” I chose this 1925 piece for its manageable length as well as its numerous, experiential symbols — some of which Eliot developed in “The Waste Land” three years earlier.

Immediately one is struck by the title. The adjective “hollow” conjures a sundry of possibilities: e.g. not only a concave shape, but also complete vacancy, muted or muffled sound, and a state of being famished or parched. The hollow men are stuffed, but, like scarecrows, it is with straw. This could be literal or metaphorical. Regardless, it suggest an aridity that can be felt. We experience this at the poem’s outset.

We are the hollow men
We are the stuffed men
Leaning together
Headpiece filled with straw. Alas!
Our dried voices, when
We whisper together
Are quiet and meaningless
As wind in dry grass
Or rats’ feet over broken glass
In our dry cellar

The word “dry” (as well as its past tense and past participle “dried”) appears three times in these brief, ten lines. What does the reader feel from this stanza? The union of disparate but complementary images here — whispering dried voices, wind in dry grass, and even rats’ feet scuttling over broken grass — summon a prickly, crackling, desiccated sensation that pervades all five senses.

This sensation follows us throughout the poem. The opening of part III refers to “This” (the poem’s setting) as
...the dead land
This is cactus land
Here the stone images
Are raised, here they receive
The supplication of a dead man’s hand
Under the twinkling of a fading star.

The land is lifeless. It is also prickly like a cactus. Recall not only the similar feelings evoked in the first part of the poem, but note the foreshadowing to the opening of the fifth part: an allusion to the nursery rhyme “Here We Go Round the Mulberry Bush.” The nineteenth century Shakespearian scholar James Orchard Halliwell-Phillipps once noted the connection between “Mulberry Bush” and a similar child’s game with the lyric “Here we go round the bramble bush” (Halliwell-Phillipps 127). Indeed, a bramble is prickly. This section of the poem also references a dead man who offers a lifeless prayer. He is not unlike a fading star struggling to emit its last sign of life (“twinkling”). Elizabeth Drew notes that “The images of the dryness, the nullity, the emptiness are joined [here] by further symbols of agonizing frustration” (Drew 96). We recall the use of these images earlier. The “fading star” appears precisely halfway through part II.

“The Hollow Men” contains several other images and symbols that will enable readers to decipher the poem on a visceral level, whether or not they understand the poem cognitively. This is the case with most of Eliot’s work. As an example, peruse short pieces such as “Rhapsody on a Windy Night” or “Gerontion” or longer poems such as “The Waste Land” or Four Quartets as prime examples. After some concluding remarks, we will examine the ways in which you (as learned readers) applied this approach to both “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” and “The Hollow Men.”
Is poetry only experiential? Are there no intended meanings that writers infuse into their verse? Of course, both suggestions are valid: we are to be aware of how poetry makes us feel (and how that will assist interpretation) and we are to use our minds to unravel meaning. If we read a poem such as “Those Winter Sundays” by Robert Hayden (1975), for example, we are easily lured into deciphering the meaning of the verse. It is a childhood memory of the altruistic love that a father had for his son — a love that the son only appreciates in retrospect. If, however, we read a more recent piece by Geoffrey Hill, such as his first of three “To the High Court of Parliament” (the poem which opens his rather difficult 1996 collection Canaan), do we think or do we feel? If the former, we will approach the poem as an enigma and find ourselves (at least most of us) utterly confounded.

Where’s probity in this —
    the slither-frisk
    to lordship of a kind
    as rats to a bird-table?

This is just the first stanza. Most reach for the dictionary to look up “probity” and wonder what “slither-frisk” means. I am not sure what Hill intends with the second line, but I can feel cool, scaly hands moving down my back to my legs in slink, serpentine fashion. I am not sure what he means by “rats to a bird table,” but I feel something ominous, which complements “the slither-frisk.”

Think of other arts forms: music, for example. Tomaso Albinoni’s “Adagio in G Minor” is intensely somber and heart-wrenching. Audiophiles do not need to be told that. Likewise, “Spring” from Vivaldi’s Four Seasons is jubilant and heartening. I do not need to think to arrive at that conclusion. The ears tell the heart. In terms of poetry, the heart is informed by the eyes.
More research needs to be conducted in this area, of course. My own interests in this subject lie not only in the experience of the student as he/she reads poetry; I am equally fascinated by the auditory-dimension: how *listening* to poets read their own work adds to an understanding of its meaning. This is also experiential. More of this to come. For now, our discussion will be enriched by hearing what you have to say about your experience of reading T.S. Eliot and how that experience is augmented by the experiences of others as dialogue.
Works Cited


The reader’s stance. An important distinction is usually neglected: The reading process that produces the meaning, say, of a scientific report differs from the reading process that evokes a literary work of art. Neither contemporary reading theory nor literary theory has done justice to this question. The aesthetic reader experiences, savors, the qualities of the structured ideas, situations, scenes, personalities, emotions, called forth, participating in the tensions, conflicts, and resolutions as they unfold. Also, within a particular aesthetic reading, attention may turn from the experiential synthesis to efferent analysis, as some technical strategy is recognized or literary judgment is passed. Similarly, in an efferent reading, a general idea may be illustrated or reinforced by an aesthetically lived-through. Eliot became a prominent poet in the aftermath of the chaos and convulsions of the First World War. Europe was home to existential philosophy owing its origin to Kierkegaard. This was a reaction against German idealism and the complacency of established Christianity. (We can find an echo of the existential philosophy in our own Charuvakas and Jabalis.) Eliot uses concepts from Sanskrit texts as a framework to give shape to and support the many ideas that constitute the human psyche on a spiritual journey. What sparked his interest in Vedic thought is not recorded but it is known that he was occupied with Sanskrit, Pali and the metaphysics of Patanjali.