

Sophia Ghoneim

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“Transhistorical idealization:”

### The Rise and Fall of The New Criticism Movement

From Foucault’s *What is An Author*, to Roland Barthes’s *Death of The Author*, twentieth-century discourse has swung back and forth regarding the separation of the art from the artist, and the separation of the author from the person. In this discourse, T.S Eliot claims his place with the infamous 1919 essay *Tradition and the Individual Talent*, where he represents the voice of the New Criticism movement, which “assumes that a text is an isolated entity that can be understood through the tools and techniques of close reading.”<sup>1</sup> Before Eliot claimed this place, however, Friedrich Schleiermacher, often referred to as “the founder of modern, general hermeneutics,” had swung literary analysis in another direction. Schleiermacher believes that “The two major tasks of textual interpretation are to comprehend the language and historical culture of a text (grammatical interpretation) and to reconstruct an author’s purpose (psychological or “technical” interpretation).”<sup>2</sup> Though T.S Eliot’s and Schleiermacher’s differ in their stance on the role of the author’s psychology, with Eliot deeming it as separate from the author’s work, and Schleiermacher thinking that “divinatory interpretation,” which “seeks to identify intuitively with the author”<sup>3</sup> lends an insight into the meaning of the text, the two theorists do not completely contradict each other. For instance, T.S Eliot focuses on the

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<sup>1</sup>Nasrullah Mambrol, “New Criticism,” *Literary Theory and Criticism*, May 30, 2021, <https://literariness.org/2021/05/30/new-criticism/>.

<sup>2</sup>Vincent B. Leitch et al., *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, 531.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

“historical sense,”<sup>4</sup> and the relationship between literary tradition and contemporary texts, putting forth the theory that the two simultaneously modify each other. Similarly, Schleiermacher values comparative interpretation, which he defines as understanding “a text as a type or historical genre.”<sup>5</sup>To analyze T.S Eliot’s and Schleiermacher’s theories in contrast and comparison to each other, this essay will be looking at them through each other. Through a Schleiermacher-inspired, biographical, psychological, and thematic analysis of T.S Eliot’s poetry, it will challenge Eliot’s impersonal theory, with the aim of establishing whether Eliot’s personality corresponds with his personality as an author. More specifically, we will examine whether Eliot’s anti-Semitic emotions may have affected his poetry. In addition to this, to challenge whether “the parts can be understood only from the whole,”<sup>6</sup> we will examine Juliet Anthony’s claim that “Eliot's anti-Semitic poems are integral to his oeuvre.”<sup>7</sup>

In *Tradition and the Individual Talent*, Eliot puts forth the notion that poetry “involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence; the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it.”<sup>8</sup> In this sense, Eliot believes that when examining a poet “You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead.”<sup>9</sup> Similarly, Schleiermacher emphasizes the importance of comparative interpretation, which “seeks to understand a work as a characteristic or type.”<sup>10</sup> To put this

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<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 885.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 531.

<sup>7</sup>Walter A. Strauss, “The Merchant of Venom? T. S. Eliot and Anti-Semitism,” *South Central Review* 14, no. 3/4 (1997): p. 31, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3190206>.

<sup>8</sup>Vincent B. Leitch et al., “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2018), pp. 885-886.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 886.

<sup>10</sup>Vincent B. Leitch et al., *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, 531.

analysis to use, this essay will look at *The Waste Land*, as an example of T.S Eliot's canonical poetry. If Schleiermacher were analyzing *The Waste Land*, he would likely say that the poem is iconic of its time, modernist in nature, and embodies the dark, distanced imaginism often utilized by twentieth-century, post World War One poetry. The themes of post-war hopelessness in the poem are characterized by an intoxicating "silence," and dead chaos; "A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,/And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief."<sup>11</sup> This chaos peaks intermittently in the poem, before surrendering again to a static and collective death, "After the torchlight red on sweaty faces/After the frosty silence in the gardens/After the agony in stony places/The shouting and the crying/Prison and palace and reverberation/Of thunder of spring over distant mountains/He who was living is now dead/We who were living are now dying."<sup>12</sup> Moreover, the poem touches on fatal poverty, a "loss" of "silk handkerchiefs" and "profit."<sup>13</sup> In this sense, perhaps Schleiermacher would say that *The Waste Land* is a poem uncomfortable with "the roots that clutch," and unsure of the "branches [that] grow Out of this stony rubbish,"<sup>14</sup> a poem unable to process history as a whole, a scream into the wind that takes the past into the present, and the present into the future. In short, he would say *The Waste Land* is filled with existential dread regarding the degeneration of the modern world, trapped in and apathetic towards what came before it. It is a poem with little to no predecessor, a poem that acts as a separator between two bundles of groceries on the conveyor belt of poetry, preceded by the chaos of world war one, and followed by the surge of the New Criticism movement. Furthermore, Schleiermacher's theory that the whole is understood from the parts, so the parts can be

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<sup>11</sup>T. S. Eliot, "The Waste Land by T. S. Eliot," Poetry Foundation (Poetry Foundation), accessed November 3, 2022, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/47311/the-waste-land>, lines 25, 44.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., 371-378.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., 201, 357.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., 22-23.

understood only from the whole and that understanding is an unending task<sup>15</sup> would surely lead him to consume as much of T.S Eliot's poetry as possible. In the process of this, Schleiermacher would land on the poem "Burbank with A Baedeker: Bleistein with A Cigar," known as Eliot's most anti-Semitic poem, where he writes that "The rats are underneath the piles./ The jew is underneath the lot."<sup>16</sup> Or perhaps, he would first read "Grenotion," where he writes "My house is a decayed house,/And the jew squats on the window sill, the owner,/Spawned in some estaminet of Antwerp,/Blistered in Brussels, patched and peeled in London."<sup>17</sup> Or perhaps he would start with Eliot's Dirge, which reads as follows: "Full fathom five your Bleinstein lies/ under the flatfish and the squids./ Graves' Disease is a dead jew's eyes!/ When the crabs have eat the lids/Lower than the wharf rats dive./ Though he suffer a sea-change/ Still expensive, rich and strange."<sup>18</sup> To understand these poems alongside *The Waste Land*, Schleiermacher would first look at them through a historical lens. For instance, the notion of "decayed house" and "the jew" being "Still the owner," expresses a stereotype which "appeared in the wake of World War I."<sup>19</sup> As the Holocaust Encyclopedia describes it, "A stab-in-the-back legend attributed the German and Austrian defeat in World War I to internal traitors working for foreign interests, primarily Jews and communists," which created an idea that "Jews had started the war to bring Europe financially and politically into ruin and make Europe susceptible to Jewish 'control'."<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, as Walter Strauss describes it, this notion of representing Jews as "rats [...] Spawned in some estaminet of Antwerp" is a "vilification" reminiscent of the "anti-semitic hate

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<sup>15</sup>Vincent B. Leitch et al., *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*.

<sup>16</sup>Walter A. Strauss, "The Merchant of Venom? T. S. Eliot and Anti-Semitism," *South Central Review* 14, no. 3/4 (1997): p. 31, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3190206>, 37.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., 36.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., 37.

<sup>19</sup>"ANTISEMITISM IN HISTORY: WORLD WAR I," United States holocaust memorial museum (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum), accessed November 3, 2022, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/antisemitism-in-history-world-war-i>.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

sheet of the nazis.”<sup>21</sup> Some understand Eliot’s depictions as “satire,”<sup>22</sup> while others see it as a trait of the formation of the “‘men of 1914’,” such as Ezra Pound, who used “anti-semitic statements and poetry [...] as a means of shocking their audience through a poetry of ugliness.”<sup>23</sup> Schleiermacher’s beliefs that “Understanding the poet is a part of understanding the poem,” would mean that there is another way in which Schleiermacher would have sought to analyze these depictions. Indeed, alongside historical, comparative, and grammatical analysis, Schleiermacher, by using divinatory interpretation, would seek “to understand the writer intimately to the point that one transforms oneself into the other,”<sup>24</sup> would aim to “reconstruct [Eliot’s] purpose (psychological or “technical” interpretation)” “in the search for [...] inner unity.”<sup>25</sup> In this process, Schleiermacher would stumble upon a lecture that Eliot performed at the University of Virginia in 1933:

“The population should be homogeneous; where two or more cultures exist in the same place they are likely either to be fiercely self-conscious or both [tend?] to become adulterate. What is still more important is unity of religious background; and reasons of race and religion combine to make any large number of free-thinking Jews undesirable. There must be a proper balance between urban and rural, industrial and agricultural development. And a spirit of excessive tolerance is to be deprecated.”<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>21</sup>Ibid., 36.

<sup>22</sup>Walter A. Strauss, “The Merchant of Venom? T. S. Eliot and Anti-Semitism,” *South Central Review* 14, no. 3/4 (1997): p. 31, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3190206>, 36.

<sup>23</sup>Williams, Dominic. “Modernism, antisemitism and Jewish identity in the writing and publishing of John Rodker.” (2004), 2.

<sup>24</sup>Vincent B. Leitch et al., “Part Two The Technical Interpretation,” in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2018), pp. 544.

<sup>25</sup>Vincent B. Leitch et al., *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, 531.

<sup>26</sup>Walter A. Strauss, “The Merchant of Venom? T. S. Eliot and Anti-Semitism,” *South Central Review* 14, no. 3/4 (1997): p. 31, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3190206>, 31.

In the same way that Schleiermacher believes that the parts can be understood only from the whole, and that to understand a poet's poetry, one must understand the poet, Juliet Anthony, in his study *T.S. Eliot, Anti-semitism, and Literary Form* argues not only that Eliot's anti-Semitic poems are a direct result of his authentic emotions, but also concludes that "Eliot's anti-Semitic poems are integral to his oeuvre, an oeuvre which is to be valued and preserved. That means the whole oeuvre, a necessary consequence of the case against the tendency to dismiss these poems as marginal."<sup>27</sup> Anthony argues that shared themes across Eliot's poetry can be linked, or are founded on the basis of anti-Semitic values. The degeneracy of the modern world, for instance, described in *The Waste Land* is indistinguishable from the "declines" of "the smoky candle end of time"<sup>28</sup> featured in *Burbank With A Baedeker*. Furthermore, just as the vilified rat descriptions riddle Eliot's anti-Semitic poetry, in *The Waste Land*, he mentions on multiple occasions "A rat [that] crept softly through the vegetation" with a "chuckle spread from ear to ear."<sup>29</sup> He talks of the "rats' alley/Where the dead men lost their bones."<sup>30</sup> Not only that, but when addressing the audience "who turn the wheel and look to windward," reminding them of their eventual demise, he addresses the reader as "Gentile or Jew."<sup>31</sup> The obvious implication here is that one can either be "gentle, or jew," but not both. It is in this sense that Juliet Anthony describes anti-Semitism as being "integral to his oeuvre." Eliot, in response to these analyses would point out the contradicting paradox of the notion that 'One must already know a man in order to understand what he says, and yet one first becomes acquainted with him by what he says.' T.S. Eliot would say that as an author, he "not/Speak, and [his] eyes failed, [he] was neither/Living nor dead, and

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<sup>27</sup>Ibid., 33.

<sup>28</sup>T.S. Eliot, "T.S. Eliot - Burbank with a Baedeker," poetry verse, accessed November 3, 2022, <https://www.poetryverse.com/ts-eliot-poems/burbank-with-baedeker>, 20-21.

<sup>29</sup>T. S. Eliot, "The Waste Land by T. S. Eliot," Poetry Foundation (Poetry Foundation), accessed November 3, 2022, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/47311/the-waste-land>, 209,211..

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., 128-129.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., 362-363.

[he] knew nothing.”<sup>32</sup> He would say that he is “an extinction of personality,” “a catalyst,” and that “the more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates.”<sup>33</sup> In all, he would answer that there is no getting to know the poem through the author and that there can be little connection made between his personal life and his writing. It is difficult to believe, however, that his hateful lecture at the University of Virginia has nothing to do with the writing of *Burbank With A Baedeker*, for instance. This claim, when one becomes aware of Eliot’s entourage; such as his close friend, the “jewish baiter Ezra Pound,” and the French readings of the “bigoted Kipling and Wyndham Lewis and Henry Adams,” starts to make a little more sense.<sup>34</sup> While Eliot would have us believe that he writes through “Dante, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Blake, Conrad, and ancient Sanskrit,”<sup>35</sup> George Bornstein in *T.S Eliot and The Real World* argues that this “transhistorical idealization” overlooks the “foregrounding of historical contingency.”<sup>36</sup> For instance, Bornstein criticizes Ricks’s edition of Eliot’s *Inventions of the March Hare*, arguing that it “negates the notebook as actual historical object, treating the text of the poems as purely linguistic events transferable to other contexts without loss.”<sup>37</sup> In this sense, Bornstein criticizes the New Critical movement’s method of analyzing “where the poems came from, and of where they went to in Eliot's other work,” only through “other works of literature,” as it misses out on “the revelation of Eliot's work as biographically and historically

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<sup>32</sup>Ibid., 42-43.

<sup>33</sup>Vincent B. Leitch et al., “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2018), pp. 888.

<sup>34</sup>Williams, Dominic. “Modernism, antisemitism and Jewish identity in the writing and publishing of John Rodker.” (2004).

<sup>35</sup>“The Waste Land by T S Eliot, Hogarth Press Edition,” British Library, accessed November 3, 2022, <https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/the-waste-land-by-t-s-eliot-hogarth-press-edition>.

<sup>36</sup>George Bornstein, “T. S. Eliot and the Real World,” Michigan Quarterly Review (Michigan Publishing, University of Michigan Library, June 1, 1997), <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/mqr/act2080.0036.320/--t-s-eliot-and-the-real-world?g=mqrq%3Brgn>.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid.

contingent.”<sup>38</sup> Juliet Anthony and Bornstein’s analyses, in their own ways, break down the illusion of the impersonal, transhistorical artist, respectively showing that Eliot’s personhood is expressed and embedded in the whole of his oeuvre and that instead of viewing poetry as timeless, we should be inspecting its historical and biographical origins.

In many ways, Eliot’s *Tradition and The Individual Talent* adds valuable insight into the concept of authorship in literary analysis. It borrows and takes further Foucault’s notions that writing “implies an action that is always testing the limits of its regularity, transgressing and reversing an order that it accepts and manipulates,” and that it is “voluntary obliteration of the self that does not require representation in books because it takes place in the everyday existence of the writer.”<sup>39</sup> *Tradition and The Individual Talent* is equally insightful when studied alongside Barthes’s *The Death of The Author*, in which he writes that “the new criticism movement has often done no more but consolidate [the sway of the Author].”<sup>40</sup> To view an artist through the lens of “a finely filiated platinum [...] introduced into a chamber of containing oxygen and sulfur dioxide”<sup>41</sup> seems to create an analysis where “only language ‘performs’ and not ‘me’.”<sup>42</sup> Some argue that the theory of the Impersonal Artist transcribes a beautiful impression of inspiration already existing and of the artist being a sponge that transforms material, and that it has done

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<sup>38</sup>Ibid.

<sup>39</sup>Michel Foucault, “What Is an Author? 1969,” Open University, accessed November 3, 2022, [https://www.open.edu/openlearn/pluginfile.php/624849/mod\\_resource/content/1/a840\\_1\\_michel\\_foucault.pdf](https://www.open.edu/openlearn/pluginfile.php/624849/mod_resource/content/1/a840_1_michel_foucault.pdf), 300.

<sup>40</sup>Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author - Tufts University,” accessed November 3, 2022, <https://sites.tufts.edu/english292b/files/2012/01/Barthes-The-Death-of-the-Author.pdf>, 143.

<sup>41</sup>Vincent B. Leitch et al., “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2018), pp. 888.

<sup>42</sup>Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author - Tufts University,” accessed November 3, 2022, <https://sites.tufts.edu/english292b/files/2012/01/Barthes-The-Death-of-the-Author.pdf>, 143.

much to kill “the public myth of the artist,”<sup>43</sup> as David Bowie has utilized it, for instance. However, I find that the idea of the impersonal artist treads dangerously close to the ‘separate the art from the artist,’ and ‘separate the person from the artist’ discourses, which place art in a realm above moral criticism, where no one is responsible for it, and where free speech is indistinguishable from hate speech. Moreover, while the impersonal theory operates under a prerequisite of the death of the author, it can lead to a certain idealization of artistic genius, where we cannot analyze their poetry through their personhood because the author is so ungraspable and ethereal. As David Frum puts it, the “Matthew Arnold idea that great poetry is something ennobling, inherently high and virtuous [means] that poetry [which] is imbued with feelings that are wicked and wrong, must cease to be good poetry — and if the poetry is indisputably good, as Eliot’s is, then anything in it that is wicked and wrong must somehow be quarantined away from the poet himself.”<sup>44</sup> It is in this sense that the theory of the impersonal artist is dangerous, because in its own way it idealizes the artist, and posits their poetry as authorless, and thus, moralless. Perhaps the best way of practicing the impersonal author theory is not to quarantine an author’s life in the aim of protecting their poetry, but by showcasing the complexity of their ‘inner-unity’<sup>45</sup> Maybe it is by swapping Eliot’s “High Anglican persona” for a truer “far messier, fallible, and more prolific poet caught in contingencies of both biography and history”<sup>46</sup> that we can best honor T.S Eliot all the while acknowledging the insensitivities and detrimental depictions present in his poetry.

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<sup>43</sup>Matt, “Death of the Author: David Bowie's Blackstar,” Small Reason, June 12, 2018, <https://www.smallreason.com/david-bowie-blackstar/>.

<sup>44</sup>“David Frum,” T.S. Eliot, Anti-Semitism and Literary Form | David Frum, accessed November 3, 2022, <https://davidfrum.com/article/t-s-eliot-anti-semitism-and-literary-form>.

<sup>45</sup>George Bornstein, “T. S. Eliot and the Real World,” Michigan Quarterly Review (Michigan Publishing, University of Michigan Library, June 1, 1997), <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/mqr/act2080.0036.320/--t-s-eliot-and-the-real-world?g=mqrg%3Br gn>.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid.

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