

T.S. Eliot's War Trauma

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I.

In one of many offhand notes to his early criticism, Eliot conceded that he had “personal reasons” (Ellmann 5) for asserting impersonality in literature. Certainly, the process of composing his manifesto of impersonality, ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’, involved a filtering of personal issues. Published in *The Egoist* in July 1919, five months earlier, “Reflections on Contemporary Poetry” gives many clues to these issues. In contrast to the later essay, this one makes close analogies between the experiences that contribute to one’s development as a writer and man. It even stresses the “peculiar personal intimacy” between the young and “dead author.” Describing this “intimacy” through its conversational tone, the article preserves the immediacy of personal reminiscences, yet which are displaced, taken out of their original context:

It may overcome us suddenly, on first or after long acquaintance; it is certainly a crisis; and when a young writer is seized with his first passion of this sort he may be changed, metamorphosed almost, within a few weeks even, from a bundle of second-hand sentiments into a person. The imperative intimacy arouses for the first time a real, an

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unshakeable confidence. That you possess this secret knowledge, this intimacy, with the dead man, that after few or many years or centuries you should have appeared, with this indubitable claim to distinction; who can penetrate at once the thick and dusty circumlocutions about his reputation, can call yourself alone his friend: it is something more than encouragement to you. It is a cause of development, like personal relations in life, it may and probably will pass, but it will be ineffaceable. (*The Egoist*, July 1919, 39)

The most likely candidate for Eliot's literary "friend" is, of course, the French poet Jules Laforgue, whose style of ironic detachment made possible the early achievements of "Prufrock" and "Portrait of a Lady." However, Eliot keeps in tow the "personal relations in life" which pass but are "ineffaceable." The sharer of this "secret knowledge" and "intimacy" in Eliot's personal life is most likely his friend during his "romantic year" in Paris, Jean Verdenal, killed in the Dardanelles campaign in 1915. Both literary and personal influences, then contributed to Eliot's development as a writer, through which, he comments, "we have not borrowed, we have been quickened, and we become bearers of a tradition". He reflects at the end of the essay, as if making a note to himself: "One ought properly at this point to revert to the question of tradition, and to the consideration of what in the developing and maturing of verse, changes and what remains the same" (*The Egoist*, July 1919, 40). When he came to do this in "Tradition and the Individual Talent", he would remove the role of life experiences from the writer's development, leaving only the suggestive comment at the end, "But of course, only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to escape from these things" (*The Egoist*, December 1919, 73). The "passion" of a "personal" relationship that for Eliot had been the basis of literary development, and of belonging to a

tradition, is now replaced by an ideal notion of tradition.

The differences between these two essays, one never reprinted, the other which has since become identified with the values of the "age of Eliot," direct us towards the contradictions, not merely between his poetry and criticism, biography and literary career, but within these spheres. In particular, it reflects the ambivalent presence of Verdenal, in one perspective coupled with Eliot's literary experiences, in another as something to be escaped from by means of literature. In this paper I will consider the role of personal experience in Eliot's poetic development during the war years. I will conclude with a revision of his notion of "impersonality", not as something that transcends individual suffering, but on the contrary, as something that is itself born of suffering.

II.

In January 1916 Eliot wrote to Conrad Aiken that he had "lived through material for a score of long poems, in the last six months" (*Letters* 126) since marrying Vivien Haigh-Wood, and yet an unprecedented drought in creativity followed. In the same letter he mentions Vivien's ongoing illness and Verdenal's death; he follows this news with the conspicuous levity of a new stanza of adolescent verse about 'King Bolo's big black bassturd kween'. Less than a decade later he would prohibit a biography of himself, then order his literary executor John Hayward to "suppress everything suppressible" (Seymour-Jones xvii); by doing so he prevented any of this "material" from being made public, at least, in an undisguised form (Gordon 1). As A. D. Moody puts it, in 1916 Eliot was, "like his Hamlet, up against an emotion he could not elucidate" (55-56). He had experienced a "horror" which prevented him from writing, but which eventually would become

material for inspiration. Literary biographers have focused upon his problematic relationship with Vivien as the source of all this personal horror, but here I will suggest how his personal history was entangled with the history of his time. The crucial link was Jean Verdenal, who tied Eliot's experience of the war to his most intimate self.

In Paris 1911, Eliot and Verdenal had probably been drawn most to each other by the shared contradictions in their personalities. In his letters Verdenal complains of rationalism, despite pursuing medicine as his career. One can sum up Verdenal's philosophical and cultural attitudes in his letters as anti-rationalist, idealist, and romantic. For Verdenal, and probably for Eliot while in Paris, Bergson's philosophy offered a foundation of unity for his divided self. He presented to Eliot his later belief in "l'élan de la vie", as a consequence of his growing ability to be "moins peur de la vie et à voir les vérités moins artificiellement" ("less afraid of life and to see truths less artificially"). (*Letters* 33-34)

In a sense, Eliot's remembrance of Verdenal in 1916 continued from their relationship in Paris in 1911, but in a symbolic and tragic way. Verdenal had attempted to realise his "élan de la vie" by joining the 18th Infantry Regiment in March 1913; he served on the Western Front from the opening of the war, and from November till February 1915 as a medical officer. Having moved east to the Dardanelles, he was killed while tending a wounded soldier on the battlefield. A citation made two days before his death recorded that "Barely recovered from pleurisy, he did not hesitate to spend most of the night in the water up to his waist, in order to help with the evacuation of the wounded, thus giving a fine example of self-sacrifice" (*Letters* 20).

This citation would prove resonant in Eliot's poetic remembrance of Verdental, first here in 'Dans le Restaurant', and later as the 'Death by Drowning' section of *The Waste Land*:

Phlébas, le Phénicien, pendant quinze jours noyé,
 Oubliait les cris des mouettes et la houle de Cornouaille,
 Et les profits et les pertes, et la cargaison d'étain:
 Un courant de sous-mer l'emporta très loin,
 Le repassant aux étapes de sa vie antérieure.
 Figurez-vous donc, c'était un sort pénible;
 Cependant, ce fut jadis un bel homme, de haute taille. (*CPP*
 51)

[Phlebas, the Phoenician, a fortnight drowned,
 Forgot the cries of the gulls and the Cornish surge,
 The cargo of tin and the profit and the loss;
 A current undersea carried him down
 Through all the stages of his former life.
 Think now: how hard his luck
 Who used to be a fine tall fellow.] (Moody 77)

Eliot's remembrance of Verdental in this section of the poem involves an identification of himself, and other victims of the war, with his dead friend. The theme of drowning links them most closely, as suggested in the reference to the Cornish sea. While at Torquay in January 1916 Eliot had noticed the "signs of war" (*Letters* 127) with torpedo boats searching for German submarines. Drowning was the means of death that Eliot had feared for himself in the prospect of returning to America during the war. On 23 July 1915, a month after his marriage, and preparing to sail the next day, he wrote a letter to his father in the event of his own death. The

prospect of death seems to have been recurrent for Eliot, especially in terms of whether his father would support Vivien. A letter to his brother Henry in November 1916 broaches the issue, but what begins as an apparent concern for practical arrangements becomes an obsessive reflection on the certainty of his own death:

I am very anxious about [Vivien's] future in the event of my death. \$5,000, (insurance), at any possible interest, would not be enough to keep her. While I hope soon to be self-supporting, I don't know whether I shall ever earn enough money to leave her to live upon after my death. *What do you know about [my father's] affairs at present?*

It is another superstition of mine that if you *don't* face any possibility of disaster it is much more likely to happen. Besides, your own interest, and besides the *comfort* it would be to have you here, it would be a great deal to me to know that there was someone near who would look out for Vivien in case I died. [...]

I must stop now. Always affectionately

Tom.

But whether you were here or not, I should like you to be the person to make yourself responsible for her in my stead. *Will you do that?*

I want *all* of my family to take the sort of interest in her which would persist after my death; but I depend especially on you. (158)

The Christ-like figure of Phlebas as mythical sailor who sacrifices his life to save the dying Fisher King, and the fertile land, is more prominent

in *The Wasteland*. In "Dans le Restaurant" the individual loss is foregrounded, following the dishevelled waiter's memory of a childhood love affair interrupted by a vicious dog. The current carries Phlebas through the past stages of his life, as a funeral ceremony, but without anyone to perform the rites, or to pay him remembrance. As in "Gerontion," there is the imperative to "think now" of him, and of one's own mortality. Verdenal would remain a ghost-like figure in Eliot's poetry, whom Eliot wished to identify with, yet who was outside the grasp of full remembrance. Eliot longed to follow Verdenal by actively participating in the war, since this offered the only means of reunion with him, and perhaps, of realising his own "élan de la vie."

Despite his consistent scepticism of Verdenal's sentiments after leaving Paris, Eliot's marriage to Vivien can be regarded as his alternative to Verdenal's attempt to realise his "élan de la vie" by going to war. Perhaps also echoing the prevailing notion of serving in war as a man's greatest test, Eliot quoted the wife of his friend Jack Gardner that marriage was "the greatest test in the world", "a test of the character [that] affects every action" (107). He married Vivien a week before Verdenal was killed. In turn, this act of identification with Verdenal would plunge him into a deeper experience of the war: despite frustrating his ambivalent desire to volunteer, it entrapped him in a position of powerlessness and despair, which would ultimately link his psychological experience, however distantly, to the soldiers on the front.

Eliot's concluding afterthought in "Tradition and the Individual Talent," that "only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to want to escape from these things," is even more relevant to Vivien than himself. Having been diagnosed with "moral insanity," where feeling was in excess of intellect (Seymour-Jones 14), her extremely subjective

personality left her unable to distance and protect her inner self from a violent outside world. She had this effect upon Eliot too, who could not distance his own self from hers, as he expresses the effect of a woman's laughter in "Hysteria," from 1915:

As she laughed I was aware of becoming involved in her laughter and being part of it, until her teeth were only accidental stars with a talent for squad-drill. I was drawn in by short gasps, inhaled at each momentary recovery, lost finally in the dark caverns of her throat, bruised by the ripple of unseen muscles. (*Complete Poems* 32)

At times Eliot even shared her clinical symptoms, for instance in September 1916 he claimed that the dampness of their room in Bosham had aggravated her neuralgia and given him mild rheumatism in the left leg. Vivien's perennial attacks of neuralgia formed a conduit between the soldiers' trauma and himself. Eliot reported in November 1915 how, after hearing her brother Maurice's stories from the trenches and witnessing the return of officers and men, she was "pretty well knocked out by it, and [...] had neuralgia in consequence" (*Letters* 121).

In Eliot's words, his marriage to Vivien was "hastened by events connected to the war" (109), since he was taking on the responsibility of financially supporting her in the wake of her family's recently straitened circumstances. However, he found it very difficult to honour this pledge to her, complaining to Conrad Aiken in August 1915, "What I want is MONEY! \$! £!! We are hard up! War!" (110) The following month, while apologising to his father for past "blunders" and promising to return to his "original course," he exasperatedly declared that "we are not planning to make living easier: the question is how to live at all" (114). The couple's financial problems made them dependent on Bertrand Russell; they

borrowed his flat, which led to Vivien's affair with him. Under the strain of money and Eliot's absence, in August 1915 Vivien fell ill. Her neuralgia continued over the winter and the following spring, and then throughout the autumn of 1916 (see *Letters* 113, 133, 143, 150).

Throughout this period Eliot was unable to write a line of poetry, having "been far too worried and nervous". Also, he noted, London's literary scene was deserted, with the departure of the Vorticists, in particular Wyndham Lewis, as well as Ford Madox Hueffer and T. E. Hulme. Eliot was caught in a vicious circle: the decline of literary periodicals by 1916 left him without a market to sell any of his poetry, and the consequent financial anxiety made him unable to devote his attention to poetry anyway. In a rare confessional moment, Eliot summed up the first year of his marriage: "The present year has been, in some respects, the most awful nightmare of anxiety that the mind of man could conceive, but at least it is not dull, and it has its compensations." (151)

1917 brought Eliot a brief respite of optimism, with his taking up employment at Lloyds Bank in March, then America's entry into war on 6th April. From believing vaguely that "the war must end sometime", and that "life here simply consists in waiting for the war to stop", by late April he hoped "fixedly for the war to end in the autumn" (165, 171, 177). In a letter to Eliot's mother Vivien describes with a remarkable in sightfulness that is borne of her lack of detachment, the effect of war on men, especially Eliot:

I long for the end of the war (such an expression is most futile to express my longing) and when we can come to America. The fact that America has declared war is rather terrible to me. I so dread that Tom might have, some day, to fight. And yet I think he would almost like to. You, over there, do not realise the bad and dreadful effect war has on the

characters of young men (and old men). If they are nervous and highly strung (as Tom is, and also my brother) they become quite changed. A sort of desperation, and demoralisation of their minds, brains, and character. I have seen it so, so often. It is one of the most dreadful things. But how can they help it? (*Letters* 173)

Vivien's diagnosis of her husband is extremely accurate, both in how the war had caused a desperation and demoralisation of his mind, brain and character, and in how it had inspired a paradoxical longing to fight. Eliot confirms this second point in a letter three days later to his mother, welcoming America's declaration of war as "the right thing":

I am pleased for several reasons, but chiefly because I think the war was so momentous as it was, that winding it up as a world war will be the best chance now for a satisfactory conclusion. I wish that our country might have a chance to refresh its memory as to what war really is like, - now that it is such a very vivid thing to Europe (174)

As if repeating his assurances to a "rather troubled" Vivien, now suffering from neuralgia, rheumatism and catarrh, he declares that he will only go to war if "called out". America's intervention at least offered the strong possibility of a decisive end to the war, and it gave Eliot an opportunity, and further pressure, to make a direct contribution to this aim.

As an American, for the first time he could believe that he was actively participating in the war, if only as a bank clerk at Lloyds. He explained to his father: "The foreign work is I believe the most interesting part of banking, especially at the present time, when one can from time to time see very big things happening in which one plays a small part without

really knowing what is going on" (184). He could begin to identify with the soldiers on the front, as an individual at least making some contribution to the great events that were beyond his personal control. In July he boasted with an almost heroic pride to Eleanor Hinkley in America that "if I have not seen the battle field, I have seen other strange things, and I signed a cheque for two hundred thousand pounds while bombs fell about me" (189). He could imagine that America was the civilian territory, while Britain, and especially London, had become a site of war. He wrote to his mother, as if he were a soldier to a naïve civilian, "you cannot realise what it is to live in the midst of alarms of war!", then listed out the fiancé of one of Vivien's friends, an Oxford friend, the brother of his instructor as recent casualties. Like a soldier writing home from the front, he anticipated what they would do, "when I come home from the war" (179–81). His identification with the soldiers is closest when comparing himself to his naively enthusiastic brother:

I see the war partly through the eyes of men who have been and returned, and who view it, even when convinced of the rightness of the cause, in a very different way: as something very sordid and disagreeable. That would be my spirit. (183)

This sense of being an active participant in the war, and in history, made it possible for Eliot to begin writing poetry again in April 1917. He wrote quatrain poems in French which began as exercises in language, with diction from Tristan Corbière and structure from Théophile Gautier's *Camées*. As we have seen, in the last French poem, 'Dans le Restaurant' his poetry gradually began to articulate his personal experience. However, it is only from 1918 onwards that his poetry directly registered the shock of war.

In this final year of the war, Eliot was forced to recognise his personal defeat. The optimism of 1917 faded as Russia had sued for peace, and Germany advanced in the Spring Offensives. As Vivien confided to his mother, Eliot's work at the Bank became exhausting rather than liberating (185). Crucially, though, Eliot no longer felt himself outside history: to be paralysed as an individual had become a collective experience. The only way to find meaning in his apparently futile personal life was by locating its relevance to the world beyond, and he achieved this by recognising the futility of that world.

Out of this recognition he would formulate a notion of impersonality, which took a very different form in the essay 'Tradition and the Individual Talent'. Eliot first suggests this notion of impersonality in a letter from 1 March 1917: "It is some comfort to think of our difficulties as impersonal -that is, that thousands of other people, in a good many countries, are suffering worse from the same cause, and that the whole world is going to find living harder after the war" (160). He repeats these sentiments to his father in late December, and anticipates communicating them to a wider public in the distant future:

Besides, everyone's individual lives are so swallowed up in the one great tragedy, that one almost ceases to have personal experiences or emotions, and such as one has seem so unimportant! -where before it would have seemed interesting even to tell about a lunch of bread and cheese. It's only very dull people who feel they have "more in their lives" now - other people have too much. I have a lot of things to write about if the time ever comes when people will attend to them. (214)

As usual, he is trying to give his situation a positive form for his father: experience of "the one great tragedy" is far more important than personal

experience.

III.

The final defeat that Eliot would suffer though, was in the closing months of the war, as the Allies finally achieved victory over Germany. In a last attempt to grasp some self-determination in relation to the war, in August 1918 he applied for enlistment in the American Navy, only to be passed for limited service, given his tachycardia and congenital hernia. On 26th October the American Navy Intelligence sent for him, only for him to return to his work at Lloyds on 9th November, two days before the Armistice. Eliot concludes 1918 with an assessment that echoes himself two years earlier: "This has been the most terribly exhausting year I have ever known, and one unfortunate event has crowded another" (250).

To return to the beginning of my paper, to the question of Eliot's "impersonality": Ellmann characterises his impersonality as merely a form of decorum to preserve the poet's identity against the trend of popular psychology (7); however, impersonality is crucial to Eliot's early poetry, if in an inverted way to what he argued. As a poet he achieved impersonality by immersing himself in the futility of historical events, to articulate it through his own subjective, personal voice. Impersonality, for Eliot, represents the extinction of the individual in the face of overwhelming large-scale events, not a triumph over individual suffering to master one's relation to them.

Eliot's experience of the war can be characterised as a series of personal defeats, to the point of his near annihilation, and he communicates this condition in his most powerful "war poetry" which includes 'Sweeney Among the Nightingales', 'Ode on Independence Day, July 4th 1918', and 'Gerontion' of 1918. Eliot's war trauma was not caused on the site of battle, but ironically was exacerbated by his absence from it: from the

sense of powerlessness in his marriage, and his futile wish to redeem the loss of Verdenal. We have also witnessed Eliot's strategies of controlling, and concealing this problem. Compared to Vivien's letters, which seem to have the immediacy of having been composed during abreaction therapy, Eliot attempted to frame his letters within an empowered ego, especially when writing to his father. His poetry also employs strategies to conceal, while exposing, his trauma. Having abandoned his line of development up to the war, of increasingly intense and prophetic psychological monologues, he continued to follow Pound's lead in writing satirical studies which dealt with history in a generalised authoritative voice. Stan Smith describes the collection *Poems 1920* as "history as a state of mind"(Smith 104). Maud Ellmann, however, argues that 'Gerontion' is "less to do with history than amnesia" its characters "exist in the paralysis between the need and impossibility of speech: 'And how should I begin?'" (82, 86) She demonstrates how the historical contextualisation of 'Gerontion' "reverses the poem's strategies, replenishing its broken images with memory and sense."

Perhaps, however, Ellmann is too confident of how a reading of the poems in terms of "history" can fill in their gaps with memory and sense. After all, the peculiar quality of Eliot's experience of history lies in its disorientation. In my following reading of the 'Ode' I will attempt to avoid the excesses of biographical criticism, which have attempted to fix down the poetry's ambiguities onto supposed biographical certainties. The ambiguity communicates the truth of Eliot's experience, and should be preserved in interpretation. With its title 'Ode on Independence Day, July 4th 1918' Eliot aggressively confronts historical with personal circumstances. The poem actually did betray too much for Eliot to be comfortable with, as is reflected in his exclusion of it from the American edition of *Ara Vos Prec*. Specifically, he worried about his mother's

response to the poem, as he wrote to his brother Henry in February 1920: "I thought of cutting out the page on which occurs a poem called 'Ode' and sending the book as if there had been an error and an extra page put in" (*Letters* 363).

Most of the poem follows word associations through sound, as in "Tired," "Tortured" and "Tortuous" preceding each stanza, and the sibilance of the opening "Subterrene laughter synchronous / With silence." This quality gives the poem a sense of danger of what each word will trigger through its associations. And yet, the choice of words also distracts the reader from an identifiable truth, either through its obscure meaning or ambiguous allusions. The first stanza plays on the classical reference of the priestess who inhaled the mephitic vapours from a chasm beneath the temple of Delphi, then communicated the words of Apollo to visitors from all Greek states. Eliot describes how in his case the poet's role as seer for the state has fallen into decline, not only because the words are misunderstood, but because the foetid vapours only yield a hysterical laughter suppressed by silence.

The rest of the poem enacts this situation through its suggestive exposures which yet resist interpretation. The subject, both "tortured" and "tortuous", is the aggressor smoothing his hair the morning after nuptials with "blood on the bed", and victim to his bride as "succuba eviscerate". H.A. Mason outlines three possible sources for the line '(Io Hymen, Hymenæe)': the deluded Cassandra in Euripides' *Trojan Women*, the celebratory marriage poem by Catallus, and the poem of agonised desire in 'Children of Adam' by Whitman (Mason 330–31). Furthermore, James E. Miller picks up the sources of Catallus and Whitman, but gives them a homosexual significance (51–54). The final stanza, as explained by Mason, continues this indeterminate sexual drama in the narrative of Perseus, Andromeda and the dragon (Mason 311). As Miller argues, the figure of

Verdenal is suggested in the dragon's "cheapextinction", "washed beneath Charles' Wagon," but the nature of his betrayal by Eliot as Perseus and Vivien as Andromeda cannot be explained by the narrative of the myth.

IV.

Preserving these ambiguities, or repressions, then, "Ode" testifies to an indeterminate guilt and fear, lurking in the "Mephitic river." This material is given a further context in the poem's epigraph, which Eliot added for publication in 1920. If the poem was written on July 4th 1918, then it was before Eliot's rejection for enlistment by the United States Navy. The epigraph from *Coriolanus*, "To you particularly, and to all the Volscians / Great hurt and mischief," is deliberately taken out of context to contribute to the poem's ambiguity. On its own it addresses the reader, threatening him with hurt and mischief. In the play, however, Coriolanus is introducing himself, describing how in the past he did the Volsces harm, and reflects on the futility of these actions for his former country, upon which he now wishes hurt and mischief. This double meaning in the epigraph reflects Eliot's struggle to position himself in history divided loyalties to his English readers, threatening his English readers with hurt and mischief, while pledging his alliance to them.

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Abstract

T. S. Eliot and War Trauma

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This paper traces the personal experience belying Eliot's poetry after the First World War. It focuses on Eliot's remembrance of his friend Jean Verdenal who died at Gallipoli, and Eliot's marriage to Vivien whose attacks of hysteria linked him to the trauma symptoms of soldiers. Eliot's traumatic experience of the war was a consequence of his paralysed inability to participate in a historical event which determined every aspect of his life. He attempted to overcome this disempowerment by simulating an active role in history, claiming the home front as part of the battlefield, and in failing to enlist in the US Navy at the close of the war. I conclude the paper with a demonstration of how these experiences contributed to his poetry, by focusing on 'Ode on Independence Day, July 4th 1918'. I argue that the poem's resistance to interpretation is symptomatic of Eliot's dual concealment and confession of his personal relation to historical events.

Key Words: Impersonality, First World War, hysteria, biography, home front, concealment, confession, personal.