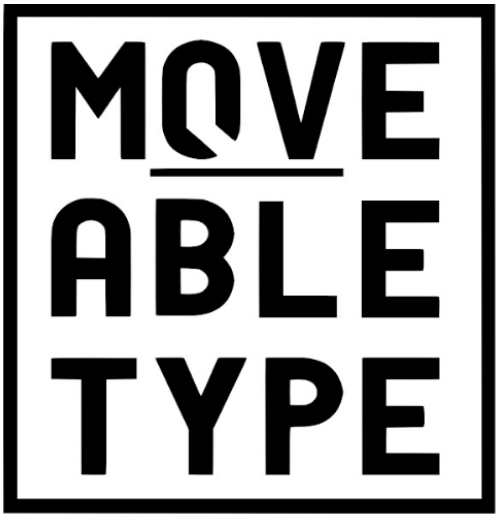

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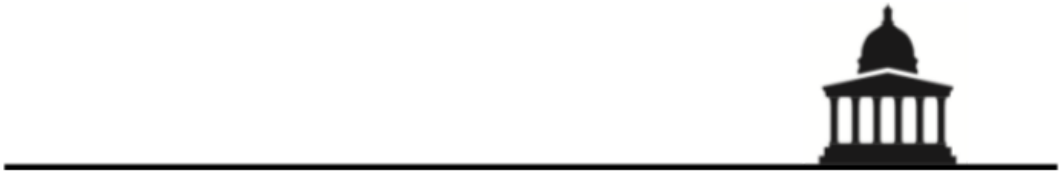

T. S. Eliot: Close Reading, and the Question of Feeling

Rowena Gutsell

> And *be personal*, you must be personal, or else it's no good. Nothing's any good.
>
> — Vivienne Eliot, to Henry Eliot[1]

T. S. Eliot's Smile

T. S. Eliot's author portraits are, on the face of it, emblems of unfeeling. From the pencil-sketched portrait which looms on the cover of Faber's *T. S. Eliot: Collected Poems, 1909-1962*, to the photographs reproduced in the glossy centrefold of Lyndall Gordon's well-known biography, *The Imperfect Life of T. S. Eliot* (2012), a certain facial motif can be seen to curl around these images, and cling. Indeed, the visage we encounter in these public photographs belongs far more to Ozymandias than to Alfred J. Prufrock: statuesque and imperious, wan yet knowing, Eliot's smile, like that of Percy Bysshe Shelley's faded tyrant, might best be described as a 'sneer of cold command'.[2]

Eliot, by his own account, was no admirer of Shelley. His ideas, Eliot would write in 1933, were those of 'adolescence', while the man himself 'was humourless, pedantic, self-centred, and sometimes almost a blackguard'.[3] Yet, despite Eliot's distaste for the sonnet's author, 'Ozymandias' does offer a way of thinking about several tensions which animate Eliot's own critical prose: between persona and

[1] Letter quoted in Lyndall Gordon, *The Imperfect Life of T. S. Eliot* (London: Virago, 2012), p. 167. Italics original.
[2] Percy Bysshe Shelley, 'Ozymandias', *Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. Fiona Sampson (London: Faber and Faber, 2011), p. 15.
[3] T. S. Eliot, 'Shelley and Keats', *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (London: Faber, 1964), pp. 87-103, p. 89.

(im)personality; passion and dispassion; and empirical and intimate modes of reading. For if 'Ozymandias' deploys a degree of irony in praising the sculptor who 'well those passions read', it is a predicament which carries over, in some form, to our own readings of Eliot: for any attempt to 'read' Eliot's 'passions' in his various visual and written self-representations is similarly fraught.[4] Not least because Eliot's smile, in his authorial portraits and his critical essays, appears, if anything, to be one of *dis*passion: a cool and rational marker of 'disinterestedness'—that critical disposition advanced by Matthew Arnold in 1865, and taken up and redoubled by Eliot in his own critical prose.[5] In light of this, we might conclude that Eliot's smile indexes a critical *persona*, rather than presenting readers with anything remotely *personal*.

With this in mind, we may stand to gain from reading Eliot's public smile as a 'form', as he defines it in 'The Possibility of a Poetic Drama' (1920): that is, not merely "such and such a pattern" which repeats itself from image to image, but also "a precise way of *thinking* and *feeling*".[6] In this essay, I will venture that the 'form' of Eliot's smile rhymes, in some sense, with his famously impersonal critical style; that the aloof smirk directed at the photographer's lens has something to tell us about the 'precise way of thinking and feeling' Eliot sought to cultivate through his cold (and at times, sneering) critical manner. Over the coming pages, I will suggest that amidst Eliot's early, ardent efforts to cultivate, and implement, a rigorously empirical standard for literary criticism—a standard which demands, above all else, that the critic stand back, and appraise the text coolly, rationally, and impersonally—are occasional moments of closer, more intimate engagement

[4] Shelley, 'Ozymandias', p. 15.
[5] Matthew Arnold, 'The Function of Criticism at the Present Time', Essays in Criticism: First and Second Series Complete (New York: A. L. Burt Company, 1900), pp. 1-31, p. 1.
[6] T. S. Eliot, 'The Possibility of a Poetic Drama', *The Sacred Wood* (London: Faber and Faber, 1997), pp. 50-59, p. 53. Emphasis mine.

with his objects of study, guided by personal feeling. In some of these moments, we encounter style's equivalent of a private smile, where the mouth upturns at a remembered pleasure; while in others, we discover something closer to an embarrassed grimace, or what Frank Kermode has described as Eliot's 'shudder' of self-recognition.[7] Although Eliot self-styles, in his early essays, as the impersonal critic *par excellence*, close reading stands to reveal that his own mode of textual engagement is at times guided by, and flushed with, private feeling. T. S. Eliot, this essay will suggest, is the impersonal critic for whom criticism is a deeply—if ambivalently—personal affair.

*

'Modern criticism', pronounces Eliot, in the first paragraph of his 1920 essay, 'The Perfect Critic', 'is degenerate'.[8] Here, and across the essays of his first prose collection, *The Sacred Wood: Essays in Poetry and Criticism* (1920), we find Eliot well and truly on the offensive. Eager to style himself, in these early years, as what Helen Thaventhiran has suggestively described as a 'radical empiricist', Eliot had many a withering remark in store for those who failed to meet his exacting critical standards.[9] Unsurprisingly, it is in 'The Perfect Critic', and its tellingly-titled companion essay, 'Imperfect Critics' (1920) that we find Eliot at his most prodigious, and his most litigious. Matthew Arnold is dismissed as 'rather a propogandist [*sic*] for criticism than a critic',[10] Algernon Charles Swinburne

[7] Frank Kermode, 'Eliot and the Shudder', *London Review of Books*, 32.9 (13 May 2010), https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v32/n09/frank-kermode/eliot-and-the-shudder [accessed 19 February 2022].
[8] T. S. Eliot, 'The Perfect Critic', *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism* (London: Faber, 1997), pp. 1-14, p. 2.
[9] Helen Thaventhiran, 'Introduction: Modernist Criticism and the Meaning of Meaning', *Radical Empiricists: Five Modernist Close Readers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 1-28, p. 4.
[10] 'The Perfect Critic', p. 1.

possesses 'faults of style [which] are, of course, *personal*', his 'undisciplined sentences […] index[ing] […] the impatience and perhaps laziness of a disorderly mind',[11] and Arthur Symons writes neither 'criticism', nor engages in 'the expulsion, the ejection, the birth of creativeness'.[12] Despite appearances, this litany of insults is no mere exercise in the honing of a dismissive idiom. Crucially for Eliot, this screed also serves to clear the ground for an introduction of an allegedly more rigorous procedure for literary criticism, shed of political or 'propagandist' motivations, purified of all 'personal' 'faults of style', and sanitised, too, of any and all 'impressionistic' tendencies.[13] Having swept these 'degenerate' critical habits to one side, Eliot outlines a set of principles which, by his account, any aspiring critic would do well to observe. Like the prose which sets them out, these principles promise clarity and economy, as well as the restoration of modern criticism's otherwise ailing health: for the so-called 'perfect critic' of Eliot's title is compelled to do no more (and certainly no less) than look 'solely and steadfastly at the object' of study, and allow 'intelligence itself [to] swiftly [operate] the analysis of sensation to the point of principle and definition'.[14] If Eliot self-styles as an empiricist anywhere in his critical prose, this is surely a stand-out moment: this ideal—and idealised—critical scenario seems pulled directly from the laboratory, or even the operating theatre, and is set up in precise, rational, even materialist terms. If Eliot is entreating fellow critics to get *closer* to the object of study, it is a closeness achieved with scalpel in hand—a closeness to the text which is predicated on impersonal, empirical scrutiny, and which certainly holds no traces of that *other* modality of closeness: the closeness of intimacy, of recognition, of a personal attachment to the object of study. And yet, as Leonard Diepeveen

[11] 'Imperfect Critics', *The Sacred Wood*, pp. 14-31, p. 14. Emphasis mine.
[12] 'The Perfect Critic', p. 5.
[13] 'The Perfect Critic', p. 2.
[14] 'The Perfect Critic', p. 9.

observes, 'though he regularly asserts the need for evidence, Eliot doesn't often provide it.'[15]

Indeed, despite the positivist lexis which crowds the essays in *The Sacred Wood*, Eliot's engagement with his chosen 'object[s]' often takes place at a theoretical distance. And while this distance enables Eliot to uphold his critical principle of unfeeling (it is difficult, after all, to feel close to an object one refuses to scrutinise in any significant degree of detail), this often occurs at the expense of the close, empirical attention Eliot claims readers ought to pay to the object of critical focus. Dispensing with his recommended method, Eliot can often be found to trade local, empirical analysis for broad theoretical pronouncements, allowing his critical insights to take the form of neat heuristics which may then be applied to texts of many different modes and forms. A typical example of this can be found in one of *The Sacred Wood*'s later essays, '"Rhetoric" and Poetic Drama' (1919), where Eliot ventures that '[rhetoric] is one of the words which it is the business of criticism to dissect and reassemble'.[16] Given this insight, it is reasonable to expect the same critic to undertake such 'business', if only by way of example. And yet, as is often the case in Eliot's literary criticism, the assertiveness of his critical voice belies the fact that precious little rhetorical analysis *of* 'rhetoric' ever gets underway. He may offer illustrative quotations from 'Elizabethan and Jacobean poetry', as when he reproduces several lines from *Othello*, followed by a clipped line from *Antony and Cleopatra* (a passage so brief, that it reads more like a cue than a quotation: 'the barge she sat in . . .'), but none of these examples, even at a stretch, are tended to with any degree of empirical scrutiny.[17] Between these two quotations, we are greeted, not with close critical appraisal, but rather, with a

[15] Leonard Diepeveen, 'Taking Literature *Seriously*: Essays to 1927', *A Companion to T. S. Eliot*, ed. David E. Chinitz (Oxford: Blackwell, 2009), pp. 263-274, p. 264.
[16] "Rhetoric' and Poetic Drama', *The Sacred Wood*, pp. 65-71, p. 66.
[17] "Rhetoric' and Poetic Drama', pp. 65; 68.

passing gesture towards their overall similarities: the 'really fine' rhetoric of Shakespeare on display in *Othello* 'also occurs once', Eliot notes, 'in *Antony and Cleopatra*, when Enobarbus is inspired to see Cleopatra in this dramatic light'.[18] And though we might, after this string of quotations, at last expect a closer, comparative engagement with these two passages, Eliot, having reproduced these lines, moves on to other concerns entirely: 'Shakespeare made fun of Marston, and Johnson made fun of Kyd […]'.[19] If we are seeking empirical 'analysis' of the 'object' in this or any of the essays across *The Sacred Wood*, we may well need to temper our expectations, and be guided by an assessment such as Thaventhiran's, who describes Eliot not as a close reader, but rather, a close *annotator*.[20] For certainly, where close reading is concerned, the grasp of Eliot's reader is often met with little more than a handful of dust. Emotionally distant he may be, but an empirical close reader, he is not.

And yet, despite his uneasy relationship, in practice, to the empirical method he so vigorously promotes in *The Sacred Wood*, there is, as I have already suggested, a case to be made for Eliot as a close reader of rather a different kind. Eliot may well be a distant generalist when it comes to applying his own 'Aristotelian' method (Aristotle's "scientific mind" qualifying him as the 'perfect' critic for whom this eponymous essay is titled), but where he turns to his attention 'solely and steadfastly' to texts which have, in some way, *touched* him, we find not a 'sneer of cold command', but rather, a mode of responsiveness which feels altogether more personal; a style of textual intimacy which is suggests more personal feeling than his own critical mandates seem willing to accommodate.[21]

[18] "Rhetoric' and Poetic Drama', p. 68.
[19] "Rhetoric' and Poetic Drama', ibid.
[20] Helen Thaventhiran, 'Annotation: T.S. Eliot and Marginal Commentary', *Radical Empiricists*, pp. 31-57.
[21] Eliot, 'The Perfect Critic', p. 11.

But before we get closer to two moments where personal feeling seems to suffuse Eliot's otherwise strictly unfeeling critical style, it is useful to turn to Eliot's own account of readerly emotion. For, given that Eliot's reputation is hardly that of a critic who endorses the literary-critical function of feeling, he certainly has a lot to say about the fundamental role emotion plays in the reading and writing process—so much so, that it's tempting to regard him, if ambivalently, as a theorist of poetic feeling. This claim is easier to uphold in relation to Eliot's later prose, where, as Marianne Thormählen writes, 'he speaks quite comfortably about poetry being fundamentally concerned with the expression of emotion and feeling', but his early prose, though less comfortably, has plenty to say on the matter, too.[22] An exemplary instance can be found in 'The Perfect Critic', where Eliot writes, in his characteristically tight-lipped register: 'The end of the enjoyment of poetry is a pure contemplation from which all the accidents of personal emotion are removed'.[23] Readers familiar with Eliot's more widely-read essay, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' (1919), may notice an echo of his famous pronouncement that '[p]oetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality; but an escape from personality'.[24] Assertive in tone and declarative in form, these two mandates share more than just a cool and imperious voice; they are linked, too, by the common critical principles of impersonality, and unfeeling: of the writer in relation to their craft, and, more relevantly, here, of the reader in relation to the object of analysis. And yet, if we look a little more closely at the precise wording of Eliot's declaration in 'The Perfect Critic', a paradox emerges: how are we to *enjoy* reading poetry, if all

[22] Marianne Thormählen, 'T. S. Eliot, Emotion and the Reader', *English Studies*, 96.4 (2015), pp. 444-457, p. 453.
[23] 'The Perfect Critic', p. 12.
[24] T. S. Eliot, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', *The Sacred Wood,* pp. 39-50, pp. 48-49.

'accidents of personal emotion are removed'? Isn't enjoyment, after all, in some sense a personal emotion?

Of course, the case could be made—and likely, Eliot would make it—that an 'impersonal' enjoyment is one which doesn't allow the reading subject's own memories, experiences, and extraneous impressions to colour their own response to the text. In other words: the only relevant mode of 'enjoyment' for the literary critic comes when one is stirred solely by the words on the page, and not by any personal associations they may happen to evoke. And yet, as we will see, even Eliot's own critical prose finds ways, at surprising moments, to accommodate fleeting expressions of his own more personal feelings. At times, especially when we encounter Eliot reading *himself* in the act of reading, his usually aloof, impersonal critical style slips into a more intimate, even confessional, register.

These moments rarely take centre-stage. In fact, their marginal positioning gives the reader the sense of looking through the keyhole—of encountering a private scene of reading, only incidentally made public. The vignette I would like to focus on was published thirteen years after *The Sacred Wood*. It is taken from a set of lectures given by Eliot during his tenure as Harvard University's 'Charles Eliot Norton Professor of Poetry', later being published under the title *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (1933). In this volume, in a note tucked rather unassumingly between the introduction and the first chapter, Eliot slightly but perceptibly tempers his earlier, dogmatic stance on the question of emotion. Insisting, still, that an 'escape' from emotion and personality is necessary for 'mature' artists and readers, Eliot, in this liminal space (not quite introduction, not quite first chapter), offers a rich and lingering account of the ways in which 'emotion' and 'personality' shape and direct our earliest textual encounters,

exploring the ways in which we experience, and then 'rapidly assimilate' poetry as 'adolescent' readers.[25] Allowing for a rare autobiographical vignette, Eliot recalls

> […] clearly enough the moment when, at the age of fourteen or so, I happened to pick up a copy of Fitzgerald's *Omar* which was lying about, and the *almost overwhelming introduction to a new world of feeling* which this poem was the occasion of giving me. It was like *a sudden conversion*; the world appeared anew, painted with bright, delicious and painful colours [my emphasis].[26]

Rarely do we get such a strong sense of a personal voice in Eliot's critical prose. The first-person pronouns which envelop the first sentence's main clause—starting with 'I', and ending with 'me'—mark out a *private* Eliot, who is both the subject *and* the object of an intense 'conversion' experienced when first reading Edward Fitzgerald's famous 'translation' of the *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyum* (1865).[27] Fittingly, in recounting this experience, Eliot's register itself undergoes a 'conversion': from what Thaventhiran describes as his usually 'terse, laconic, even utilitarian' critical manner, to a mode more willing to yield to (and even luxuriate in) moments of personal feeling.[28] Instead of tending to the text as a discrete object, ready for rational appraisal, Eliot 'assimilate[s]' the poem into a personal narrative—a scene of reading which, upon recollection, stirs up a string of sensory, aesthetic, and intensely *emotional* descriptors, where the world, as it touches the young Eliot after reading, is 'bright', 'delicious', and even 'painful.'

[25] T. S. Eliot, 'Note on Chapter I: on the Development of Taste in Poetry', *The Use of Poetry and The Use of Criticism* (London: Faber, 1964), pp. 32-36, p. 33.
[26] 'Note on Chapter I', p. 33.
[27] *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam, Translated into English Verse by Edward Fitzgerald* (London: Leopold B. Hill, 1920).
[28] Thaventhiran, p. 48.

Eliot's usually 'terse' syntax melts into strings of subclauses which cascade, rushing with the 'overwhelming' experience of having entered into the world of the text, and of having been changed (or 'converted') by it—a far cry from assessing the object coolly and rationally, from a quasi-empirical distance. For though this impersonal mode of reading, set up in *The Sacred Wood* as the ultimate standard for literary criticism, implies *empirical* closeness to the object of study, here we find a far more vivid, even palpable, mode of closeness at play: for in this scene of 'Reviving old desires' (to quote the *Rubaiyat*), Eliot's prose style takes on shades of the poem's own indulgent aesthetic philosophy, as though, through the route of memory, the *Rubaiyat*'s style merges with Eliot's own.[29] In his own critical prose, it is almost as though Eliot himself has, albeit briefly, been 'converted' into a close reader of his youthful feelings, and, in an intimately imitative sense, into a close reader of the *Rubaiyat* itself—'impressionistic', 'adolescent', and sans quotation though this mode of close reading may be.

Eliot's Embarrassments

In closing, I want to take up this thread, of Eliot as a close reader of himself, and tug, just a little, at a curious phenomenon which can occasionally be sensed in some of his later critical writings. For where Eliot is given the opportunity to reflect on his own criticism decades after the fact, we are often met with the stylistic equivalent of a grimace—or, as mentioned earlier, what Frank Kermode describes as Eliot's 'shudder' of embarrassment.[30] For Kermode, as Thaventhiran observes, Eliot's shudder is usually evoked when, in reading, he 'experiences a particular line with heightened responsiveness', and is then moved to quote—'or

[29] *Rubaiyat*, IV, l. i.
[30] Kermode, 'Eliot and the Shudder'.

very often [misquote]'—it.[31] For Kermode and Thaventhiran both, the shudder is one of Eliot's 'kinds of responsiveness as a reader'—usually as a reader experiencing a frisson of 'shock and surprise' evoked by the text at hand.[32] (Eliot, notes Kermode, 'looked for these qualities in his own verse', and 'admired' them in the verse of others.)[33] But the shudder, I think, can also be used to make sense of another of the 'kinds of responsiveness' Eliot experiences as a reader of his own critical prose. Specifically, the shudder of embarrassment, or the cringe of disavowal. In his 1964 preface to *The Use of Poetry*, Eliot admits, with a strangely confessional air: 'I reprint *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* in the faint hope that one of these lectures may be taken instead of *Tradition and the Individual Talent* by some anthropologist of the future'.[34] Describing 'Tradition' as 'perhaps the most juvenile and certainly the first to appear in print' of his essays, Eliot marks it as 'the product of immaturity', written 'somewhat under the influence of Ezra Pound's enthusiasm for Remy de Gourmount'.[35] In other words: as a reader of his own critical prose, Eliot feels he can sense *too much* personal feeling in his earliest works—his early 'enthusiasm[s]' are, to his eyes, overly visible, and in reading these essays back many years later, he cannot help but sense, with a shudder, his own Shelley-like 'immaturity.' It is his 'faint hope' that the prefaced lectures—of which, '[at] least, I am neither ashamed of the style nor of the matter'—might come to replace 'Tradition' as the critical work which most readily bears his image. This seems to suggest that even where Eliot most vehemently strives to uphold the principle of critical impersonality, he cannot help but read back over his critical archives, years later, with personal feeling, and with

[31] Thaventhiran, p. 32.
[32] Thaventhiran, p. 34.
[33] Kermode, 'Eliot and the Shudder'.
[34] T. S. Eliot, 'Preface to the Edition of 1964', *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*, pp. 9-11, p. 9.
[35] 'Preface', *The Use of Poetry*, p. 10.

a remonstrative eye for its inadvertent—yet painfully *readable*—demonstrations of personality.[36]

Indeed, Eliot would shudder with even greater verbosity in an interview some twenty-two years after *The Sacred Wood*'s publication, reflecting that, 'on re-examination', the essays in this collection

> embarrassed me by their callowness, and by a facility of unqualified assertion which verges, here and there, on impudence. The *Hamlet*, of course, had been kept afloat all these years by the phrase 'objective correlative'—a phrase which, I am now told, is not even my own but was first used by Washington Alston.[37]

The intensity of Eliot's responsiveness, here, to his own writing, is similar in degree to the closeness he recalls feeling to Fitzgerald's translation of the *Rubaiyat*, albeit in reverse; while the former sustains a closeness based on deep, sensuous enjoyment, the closeness on display here is one just as personal, but one attended by the blush of shame. Indeed, Eliot even goes so far, here, as to call upon 'empirical' examples, drawing attention to his earlier, oft-cited phrase—the 'objective correlative'—so as to, in rather a self-abasing manner, discount its use altogether. And what's more, by actually getting close to these early essays, Eliot comes to rather a chastening revelation: that despite his vehement exhortations that literary critics pursue an empirical, Aristotelian method, these very essays possess 'a facility of unqualified assertion which verges, here and there, on impudence'. Eliot's word choice is at once puzzling, and suggestive: for if

[36] 'Preface', *The Use of Poetry*, p. 10.
[37] Quoted in Bradley Greenburg's essay, 'T. S. Eliot's Impudence: Hamlet, Objective Correlative, and Emotion', *Criticism*, 49.2 (Spring, 2007), pp. 215-239, p. 215.

'impudence' means, ultimately, a lack of shame—a lack of personal, introspective *feeling*—then Eliot seems here to concede, in a roundabout way, that his earliest essays were too 'adolescent', to 'immature' in their pursuit of critical impersonality at all costs.[38] Indeed, in closely tending to his earlier works, Eliot discovers, with a shudder of embarrassment, that his principle of impersonality—so vehemently expounded across *The Sacred Wood*—was something of a personal matter all along.

[38] "impudence, n." *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, June 2022, www.oed.com/view/Entry/92900 [accessed 11 July 2022].