T.S. Eliot and Reader-Response Criticism Miss

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"From time to time, every hundred years or so, it is desirable that some critic shall appear to review the past of our literature, and set the poets and the poems in a new order. This task is not of revolution but of readjustment." [1]

Abstract

In the first half of the 20th century and in the climate of a great literary upheaval, reader-response theory was slouching towards the 1960s to be born. The present paper vindicates that T.S. Eliot anticipates the critical theory known as reader- response theory despite being one of the progenitors of New Criticism. T.S. Elliot has hitherto been viewed as one of the promulgators of New Criticism, which considers the text as an autonomous and self-regulating system, or an autotelic artifact. The bard makes vociferous demands on his readers not to be under the sway of their emotions in the reading process. Literary interpretation requires deflection from the author's intention and his personal history as well as the extirpation of the reader's feelings, because the text has a life of its own. By making a close reading of his essays, one might decrypt the vestiges of what comes later to be known as reader-response criticism. Eliot oft recedes from a purely aesthetic view of literature, proffering an alternative to a strict New Critical approach.

Eliot belongs to New Criticism, which stresses the objectivity of the literary text. New Critics view the text as an autotelic artifact, an autonomous entity, which has its own life. Hence, the critic should not divagate from the text, which is the main concern, to the life of the artist or the effect of the text on the reader. The intention of the author and the feelings/emotions of the reader are otiose because they are likely to vitiate the interpretation of the literary work. New Criticism seeks to divert the reader's attention from the historical and social contexts that might interfere in the interpretative process. It calls for the "close reading' of the text.

To debar the interference of the reader's emotions, New Critics coin the terms the intentional and the affective fallacy. The intentional fallacy is an attempt te depersonalize and impersonalize the literary text, purging it from the taints of the author's personal life and experiences. Hence, the reader is required not to decrypt the traces of the author in the text. In his essay, "Tradition and the Individual Talent", Eliot explains his theory of impersonality as follows: "The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrífĩce, a continual extinction of personality."[2]. Eliot's theory of impersonality makes the role of the author in the text dwindle. He urges the reader to consider literature apart from the author's emotions and feelings. In another essay, "Dante", Eliot maintains that knowledge about the author and his life are likely to preclude rather than facilitate literary interpretation. In his words,

> In my experience of the appreciation of poetry I have always found that the less I knew about the poet and his work, before I began to read it, the better. A quotation, a critical remark, an enthusiastic essay, may well be the accident that sets one to reading a particular author; but an elaborate preparation of historical and biographical knowledge has always been to me a barrier [3]

In Roland Barthes's critical parlance, the reader must assume the death of the author. In his essay "The Death of the Author", Roland Barthes expresses his diatribe against biographical criticism as follows:

The image of literature to be found in ordinary culture is tyrannically centered on the author, his person, his life, his tastes, his passions, while criticism still consists for the most part in saying that Baudelaire's work is the failure of Baudelaire the man, Van Gogh's his madness, Tchaikovsky's his vice. The *explanation* of a work is always sought in the man or woman who produced it, as is it were always in the end, through the more or less transparent allegory of the fiction, the voice of a single person, the *author* 'confiding' in us[4]

In addition to the intentional fallacy, the affective fallacy urges the reader to approach the text with an affective or emotional detachment. New Critics attempt to separate what the text is from what it does. According to them, literary interpretation is prey to the danger of the reader's subjectivism. In his staunch support of the New Critics' idea of affective fallacy, Eliot states: "The reader in the ignorance which we postulate is unable to distinguish the poetry from the emotional state aroused in himself by the poetry, a state which may be merely an indulgence of his own emotions. "[5]So, for Eliot the reader's emotional discharge should not be allowed. Interpretation must be a critical rather than a creative act. Eliot displays his abhorrent stance towards critics whose criticism of a literary work is made up of "comment and opinion, and also new emotions which are vaguely applied to his own life. The sentimental person, in whom a work of art arouses all sorts of emotions which have nothing to do with that work of art whatever, but are accidents of personal association, is an incomplete artist." ("The Perfect Critic" 7) Thus, to be valid, literary interpretation requires the text to be a hermetic, self-sufficient whole, immune from the stains of the reader's feelings and emotions.

Despite befitting himself under the rubric of New Criticism, Eliot, in his essay, "The modern Mind", avows the importance of the reader and the personal experience he brings to the interpretative process. He writes: "Even when two persons of taste like the same poetry, this poetry will be arranged in their minds in slightly different patterns; our individual taste in poetry bears the indelible traces of our individual lives with all their experience pleasurable and painful"[6]Since meaning is generated in accordance with the reader's psychological make-up, the text is open to wide range of interpretations. According to Eliot, the meaning of a poem "is what the poem means to different sensitive readers" and "a valid interpretation [of a poem] must be at the same time an interpretation of my feelings when I read it." Eliot adds saying that "a good deal of the value of an interpretation is-that it should be my own interpretation."[7] So, in the act of reading, the reader shapes the literary text to fit the pattern of his own experience. His background, thoughts and feelings are likely to imbue the text with rich ramifications of meaning. Hence, the view that meaning resides only in the text makes literary interpretation stagnant.

In another essay, "Religion and Literature", Eliot affirms the reader's inevitable emotional flow during the interpretative process. He writes:

The author of a work of imagination is trying to affect us wholly, as human beings, whether he knows it or not ; and we are affected by it, as human beings, whether we intend to be or not. I suppose that everything we eat has some other effect upon us than merely the pleasure of taste and mastication; it affects us during the process of assimilation and digestion; and I believe that exactly the same is true of anything we read.[8]

To put it succinctly, the reader's emotional incursion in the reading process is unavoidable.

One's reading of the text is likely to reveal aspects of his/her personality. As Eliot maintains, "the man whose taste in poetry does not bear the stamp of his particular personality, so that there are differences in what he likes from what we like, as well as resemblances, and differences in the way of liking the same thing, is apt to be a very uninteresting person with whom to discuss poetry.

"[9]What the quote implies is that a work of art, inevitably, appeals to the reader's senses, imparting psychological and social impressions.

Eliot goes further to assert that reading a literary text might even tergiversate the reader, leaving indelible traces on his personality. According to him, "What we read does not concern merely something called our *literary* taste, but […] affects directly, though only amongst many other influences, the whole of what we are." ("Religion and Literature 394) Thus, Eliot's view collides head on with that of Louis Rosenblatt, who conceptualizes literature as a personally meaningful experience. According to her, the literary work is likely to offer "a significant and enjoyable experience for [them] and experience that involves [them] personally and that [they] can assimilate into [their] ongoing intellectual and emotional development."[10] Very much like Rosenblatt, Eliot asserts the importance of literature in one's development. He states that

The fiction that we read affects our behaviour towards our follow men, affects our patterns of ourselves. When we read of human beings behaving in certain ways, with the approval of the author, who gives his benediction to this behavior by his attitude towards the result of the behavior arranged by himself we can be influenced by towards behaving in the same way." ("Religion and Literature" 393)

For Eliot, evacuating the text from the reader's everyday life is likely to depriveit from the potential array of benefits it might serve in self-development. According to Eliot, "And by using, or abusing, this principle of isolation you are in danger of seeking from poetry some illusory *pure* enjoyment, of separating poetry from everything else in the world, and cheating yourself out of a great deal that poetry has to give to your development."[11]

In his comment on Eliot's theory of impersonality, the critic Christ Baldick states that Eliot's theory of impersonality "may look like an evasive denial of human feeling, but in fact the escape, which is a transfer of the feeling into the impersonal work of art, is conceived as an intensification of the feeling in such a form that it can be reproduced successfully in the reader"[12] So, emotions, either of the author or those of the reader, cannot be dumped by the reader. This view is in tune with Eliot's definition of the objective correlative, a technique Eliot proposes in order to transfer feelings to the reader. In his much celebrated essay "Hamlet", Eliot states: "The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an 'objective correlative': in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked."[13]In other words, emotions can be better kindled by dint of an objective correlative, which does not objectify the author's emotions or baffle his emotional discharge. It rather aims at evoking and sparking the same emotions in the reader.

So, New Criticism and Reader Response theory meet on the point that the locus of meaning is sought apart from the author's intention. But it seems difficult to fit Eliot under New Criticism despite his alignment with this critical school. In some critical essays Eliot contradicts himself by avowing the importance of the reader, who brings to the text his knowledge and experience.

One ventures to say that the difficulty of Eliot's poems is intended to make the reader more industrious. Except for the pedant, T.S. Eliot is a stumbling block."The Waste Land, in particular," is a rarity of literature. Very much like the questor of the Holy Grail, the reader of "The Waste Land" indulges in a quest to decipher the meaning of this leviathan poem, which is still a controversial work of art. The poem does not have a monolithic meaning. It is a vampire that will never lay down. Is "The Waste Land" a personal work of art written at the moment of its author's psychological breakdown, or is it "only the relief of a personal and wholly insignificant grouse against life"? Is it a representation of the disillusionment of the post-World War generation? Or is

"The Waste Land" a poem, which is composed of unrelated, unconnected fragments, which have no meaning at all? The meaning of "The Waste Land" is still question-begging. Its readers are encumbered with the thorny problem of interpretation, which prompts them to indulge in the task of "squeezing and squeezing the word until it yields a full juice of meaning"[14]

Indeed, the poem's difficulty is meant to give the reader an active role. In his discussion of the reasons which make poetry difficult, T.S. Eliot writes: "There is the difficulty caused by the author's having left out something which the reader is used to finding; so that the reader, bewildered, gropes about for what is absent, and puzzles his head for a kind of 'meaning' which is not there, and is not meant to be there."[15] So, Eliot provides clues for his readers, and he keeps them in constant search for meaning. His poems engage the reader into an intellectual cogitation rather than imparting him directly with the meaning, thus giving him a more important role.

Some critics opine that Eliot's poems, like "The Waste Land", takes the reader at face value because he is not writing in the language of his fellow human beings. But Eliot, in fact, is asking for the collaboration of the reader to interpret this poem. He maintains that the meaning of a literary text lies between the author and the reader. He writes:

> If poetry is a form of 'communication', yet that which is to be communicated is the poem itself, and only incidentally the experience and the thought which have gone with into it. The poem's existence is somewhere between the writer and the reader ; it has a reality which is not simply the reality of what the writer is trying to 'express', or his experience of writing it, or of the experience of the reader or of the writer as a reader. Consequently the problem of what a poem 'means' is a good deal more difficult than it at first appears.[16]

This view collides head on with that of Wolfgang Isere, who points out that the "work is more than the text, for the text only takes on life when it is realized, and furthermore the realization is by no means independent of the individual disposition of the reader[…]The convergence of text and reader brings the literary work into existence."[17]

In the same vein, the critic Jo Ellen Green Kaiser, in explaining the difficulty of poems, like "The Waste Land", proffers the following justification: "The reader is asked to shift focus from considering the very possibility that order, as a concept, has failed, to considering how this poem is—or can be—ordered. In effect, when faced with the poem's "difficulties," the reader is told to become a better reader rather than to investigate the foundational source for his or her readerly discomfort."[18] The meaning of "The Waste Land" is concealed rather than exposed; thus, the poem is left for the reader to interpret. To use Roland Barthes's words, the poem is a writerly text because it is rich with psychological, social and historical meanings, convolutedly conveyed through rich symbols and images. The reader must probe into the symbolic meaning the writer cannot say openly, and try to understand what lies beneath the surface and the author's conscious or unconscious play on words. The ambiguity and obscurity of Eliot's poems is an incentive to make the reader a partner in the interpretation of a literary text. He seeks to make the reader exert all his literary skills to unveil the meaning of his poems. The locus of meaning is to be sought beneath the surface.

Eliot resorts to allusion to make the reader toil at explaining the text's meaning. This method, which depersonalizes the work of art, challenges the view that meaning is solely resident in the author. In words, which are reminiscent of T.S. Eliot's "Tradition and the Individual Talent", Roland Barthes states: "We know now that a text is not a line of words releasing a single 'theoretical' meaning (the 'message' of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture. " ("The Death of the Author" 148) So, the text's meaning is never completely inherent in its author because it is a palimpsest of literary layers.

Part of the difficulty of Eliot's poems, especially "The Waste Land", is due to the use of allusion, which makes him subject to vitriolic attacks by critics, who view that his poems are addressed to a small coterie of readers. For the reader to understand the meaning of his leviathan poems, he needs to be a ramshackle encyclopedia. The fact is that the bookish poet is not bloated with showing his encyclopedic learning. T.S. Eliot uses the technique of allusion to entice the reader to read and examine the sources and the original texts alluded to. His fervid desire is to make his readers knowledgeable by digesting the heavy food of literature of any period. They should understand Homer, Shakespeare, Marvell, Dante …..etc So, taking into account the allusions with which the poem abounds, the autonomy of the text, which is celebrated by the New Critics, seems to be an illusion.

In addition to the allusive method, the silences and gapes in "The Waste Land" are meant to give voice to the reader, a space for the reader to generate meaning by his own. The reader is asked to complete what is absent. Reading "The Waste Land", in particular, is very exhaustive because of the poet's elimination of transitions and cohesive devices. He uses a form which is formless, fragmented and chaotic. Eliot disperses meaning into fragments; the result is a poem which seems to be composed of 'a heap of broken images'. The role of the reader is to collect these fragments and to bind them in order to constitute a unified whole, a meaning that is kept hidden. The gaps in the text are likely to enrich its interpretation, imbuing it with multifarious meanings. In this respect, Wolfgang Isere states that

> the gaps have a different effect on the person of anticipation and retrospection […] for they may be filled in different ways. For this reason, one text is potentially capable of several different realizations, and no reading can ever exhaust the full potential, for each individual reader will fill in the gaps in his own way, thereby excluding the various other possibilities; as he reads, he will make his own decision as how the gap is to be filled.[…]but modern texts, are often so fragmentary that one's attention is almost exclusively occupied with the search for connections between the fragments ; the object of this is not to complicate the 'spectrum' of connections, so much as to make us aware of the nature of our own capacity for providing links.("The Reading Process" 193)

So, the reader has to pit against the hidden sedimentary layers of meaning, which he must plumb and uncover in the reading process. He is encouraged to pore over the text's sense and to make assiduous attempts to decipher its meaning, which seems shrouded in secrecy. Thus, the reader becomes like a magpie, who picks up fragments, then he associates them in order to construct meaning for the apparently fragmented poem. His role is very much like that of Tiresias who "unites all the rest". He should have a synthetic mind, which mixes and unites the fragments of the poem into a harmonious whole.

Eliot, who spurns any reference to the reader's social, historical, or cultural context, betrays the New Critical stance by invoking the 'horizon of expectation', a term coined few years later by the prominent figure in reader response theory, Robert Jauss. According to Jauss, meaning in a particular culture is determined by a set of rules and expectations. He coins the term 'the horizon of expectations' "to designate the set of cultural norms, assumptions, and criteria shaping the way in which readers understand and judge a literary work at a given time […] Such 'horizons' are subject to historical change, so that a later generation of readers may see a very different range of meanings in the same work, and revalue it accordingly."[19] Since meaning and culture are tightly linked, readers' reactions or responses to the text cannot be insulated from their horizon of expectations, which includes their shared beliefs, experiences, and literary conventions. The horizon of expectations does not merely change from one community to another; it also alters with the passage of time. Thus, even within the same community, and due to the socio-historical, literary, and cultural changes, each generation of readers articulates its own interpretation of the same work of art.

In his critical essay "Ben Jonson", T.S. Eliot makes a tacit reference to Jauss's notion of the horizon of expectations as follows:

When we say that Jonson requires study, we do not mean study of his classical scholarship or of seventeenth-century manners. we mean intelligent saturation in his work as a whole; we know that in order to enjoy him at all, we must get to the centre of his work and his temperament, and that we must see him unbiased by time, as a contemporary[20]

So, Eliot importunes his readers to interpret Ben Jonson's poems not in relation to his age and culture but rather in relation to theirs. In other words, they should situate the poem in their socio-historical context. In his essay "Andrew Marvell", Eliot asserts the fluidity of meaning, which is in perpetual change in the course of time. He writes: "[L] ike the other fluid terms with which literary criticism deals, the meaning alters with the age, and for precision we must rely to some degree upon the literacy and good taste of the reader."[21] The same view reverberates in another essay where he states that "what a poem means is as much what it means to others as what it means to the author; and indeed, in the course of time, a poet may become merely a reader in respect to his own works, forgetting his original meaning-or without forgetting, merely changing."("The Modern Mind" 130)What the quote highlights is that the artist is not the Author-God of his text. Once the poem is published it belongs to the author as much as to the reader. Also, the meaning of the poem alters with time. Hence, one cannot read a poem without a sense of belonging to an age or a culture.

Any literary text has some psychological impacts on the reader, who, consciously or unconsciously, weaves webs of connections between his personal experience and the text, which might touch the bowels of his inner self. Furthermore, the meaning of the literary text is constructed in accordance with the community or the culture of the individual; it does not occur in a vacuum. Reading literary texts give us information about the socio-historical and the cultural context in which the text was constructed.

After its publication, readers of "The Waste Land" were deluded by its pessimism and nihilism. They view in the poem a close vicinity to their personal experience. In response, Eliot states: "Various critics have done me the honour to interpret the poem in terms of criticism of the contemporary world, have considered it, indeed, as an important bit of social criticism. To me it was only the relief of a personal and wholly insignificant grouse against life; it is just a piece of rhythmical grumbling."[22] So, the British audience of the 1920s saw themselves reflected in "The Waste Land", which came to be read as a representation of the sickness of the epoch. One might say that the meaning of a poem potentially ramifies into as many selves as there are people or societies.

Like Robert Gauss's concept of 'the Horizon of expectations', Stanley Fish, coins the term 'interpretative communities', which refers to a set of rules and assumptions, which the author employs in the act of writing. These strategies and assumptions are embedded in the author's community. Hence, within the same community, the author's intention and the reader's interpretation dovetail with each other. Fish writes:

> Interpretative communities are made up of those who share interpretative strategies not for reading (in the conventional sense) but for writing texts, for constituting their properties and assigning their intentions. In other words, these strategies exist prior to the act of reading and therefore determine the shape of what is read rather than, as is usually assumed, the other way round.[23]

So, accordingly, the writer and the reader of the same community are prone to infuse a text with the same meaning since they have a set of shared rules and attitudes. Of utmost significance, the same work is received differently by different interpretative communities. Interpretative communities, according to Fish, explain "the stability of interpretation among different readers (they belong to the same community) […] Of course this stability is always temporary (unlike the longed for and timeless stability of the text) Interpretative communities grow and decline."("Interpreting the Variorum" 304) So, in the same interpretative community, meaning varies with time and circumstances.

In a tone echoing that of Fish, Eliot states that

> each generation, like each individual brings to the contemplation of art its own categories of appreciation, makes its own demands upon art, and has its own uses for art. 'Pure' artistic appreciation is to my own thinking only an ideal, when not merely a figment, and must be, so long as the appreciation of art is an affair of limited and transient human beings existing in space and time. There is for each time, for each artist, a kind of alloy required to make the metal workable into art, and each generation prefers its own alloy to any other.("Shelly and Keats",109)

So, it is impossible to conceive of poetry as a pure aesthetic artifact, which is insulated from the events of everyday life. Each generation of readers has its own expectations of the work of art. The author's mode of writing and his ideas unconsciously tallies with his society's rules and assumptions. Hence, in the act of writing, the author cannot not shirk these expectations. In the same vein, Eliot states that "Each age demands different things from poetry, though its demands are modified, from time to time, by what some new poet has given. So our criticism, from age to age, will reflect the things that the age demands." ("The modern Mind" 141) So, the interpretation of a literary text cannot be cordoned off from the reader's socio-historical and cultural demarcations. Hence, space and time cannot be sundered in meaning-making. Along similar lines, Eliot writes:

> No two readers, perhaps, will go poetry with quite the same demands. Among all these demands from poetry and response to it there is always some permanent element in common, just as there are standards of good and bad writing independent of what any one of us happens to like and dislike; but every effort to formulate the common element is limited by the limitations of particular men in particular places and in particular times; and these limitations become manifest in the perspective of history.("The Modern Mind" 141-142)

Though each reader generates his own meaning, which is in tune with his idiosyncratic traits, there are always things, which are shared among members of the same community. Bur what is common is always determined by time and space.

Reading "The Waste Land", in particular, provides modern readers with a kind of vicarious life. In his essay "Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca", Eliot writes: "All great poetry gives the illusion of a view of life."[24] So, the modern generation is apt to interpret his leviathan poem "The Waste Land" as a representation of the disillusionment of a generation. Reading poetry will inevitably bring out of the reader's past some sentimental evocations.

In "The Music of Poetry", Eliot maintains that:

A poem may appear to mean very different things to different readers, and all of these meanings may be different from what the author thought he meant. For instance, the author may have been writing some peculiar personal experience, which he saw quite unrelated to anything outside; yet for the reader, the poem may become the expression of a general situation, as well as of some private experience of his own. The reader's interpretation may differ from the author's and be equally valid-it may even be better. There may be much more in a poem than the author was aware of.[25]

It is quite plausible to say that Eliot, here, is referring to "The Waste Land", which is interpreted as representative of the disillusionment of a whole generation. The previous statement is very significant. For Eliot, criticism, like writing poetry, cannot be devoid of individuality or personality of the reader. He conceives of his reader as an active recipient of the text; he becomes involved in an intellectual cogitation to ascribe the poem a meaning, which might differ from that of its author, but it is by no means less valid. Any meaning the reader constructs or generates is likely to enrich the text.

Conclusion

As the paper has shown, the principles of reader-response criticism hark back to T.S. Eliot, who, despite being a New Critic, urges his reader to strain too hard to find meaning. He impels them to make huge intellectual efforts to unpack the text's cryptic words. In fact, for Eliot, the reader's thoughts and feelings are not the sworn enemies that must be vanquished in the interpretative process. The age of New Criticism is a bleak critical period. By applying a reader-response approach, one can not only read Eliot's poems against his rules; one can even contextualize him in any age and century. Eliot aspires to make his readers voracious and industrious. In his essay, "Dante", he writes: "nothing but laziness deadens the desire for fuller and fuller knowledge" ("Dante" 238)

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