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## **Tradition in Modernist Poetry: The Historical Sense and Impersonality in T.S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"**

Healy, Patrick

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**Tradition in Modernist Poetry:**  
**The Historical Sense and Impersonality in T.S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"**

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Patrick Jeremiah Healy  
Student Number (3732789)

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Second reader: Dr. M.S. Newton

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*A large part of any poet's "inspiration" must come from his reading and from his knowledge of history.*

– Thomas Sterns Eliot, "To-day"

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
<b>Abstract .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Introduction and Thesis .....</b>	<b>2</b>
<i>The Historical Context of Modernism .....</i>	<i>2</i>
<i>Tradition and the Historical Sense .....</i>	<i>6</i>
<i>Roadmap .....</i>	<i>10</i>
<b>Chapter 1 .....</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>Impersonality as Criticism to Romanticism .....</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>Chapter 2 .....</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>The Historical Sense in “Love Song” .....</b>	<b>16</b>
<i>Allusion to Homer .....</i>	<i>20</i>
<i>Allusion to Shakespeare .....</i>	<i>24</i>
<b>Chapter 3 .....</b>	<b>27</b>
<b>Theory of Impersonality in “Love Song” .....</b>	<b>27</b>
<i>Allusion to Dante .....</i>	<i>27</i>
<i>Contribution to the Academic Discussion .....</i>	<i>38</i>
<b>Conclusion .....</b>	<b>41</b>

## ABSTRACT

In the essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” T.S. Eliot develops a particular stance of aesthetic criticism by arguing that poetic novelty can only be achieved in relation to a wider literary tradition. The essay coins the term ‘historical sense’ to describe a poet’s skill in constructing a dramatic framework through inter-textual allusion. This thesis identifies allusion as a key device Eliot used to position his modernist poem “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” within a wider literary tradition. Although his critical essay is not a systematic guideline to poetic analysis, my thesis sets out to appropriate key principles from the ‘historical sense’ into an interpretive framework to close read his poem. In doing so, this thesis explains why the modernist poem alludes to medieval, classical, and biblical texts; with particular emphasis on why the epigraph refers to Dante’s *Inferno*. This thesis suggests that “Tradition and the Individual Talent” can serve as a useful guideline to analyse how, and why the poem combines innovative and traditional elements. Although the essay was published five years after the poem, this thesis argues that the poem already contains nascent clues to the idea of combining past and present elements. Furthermore, Eliot’s essay presents a theory of ‘Impersonality’, which serves as a second interpretive framework to further close read into ambiguous passages. Overall, my comparative reading of these two primary texts will reveal some limitations and strengths to Eliot’s aesthetic philosophy; and furthermore, demonstrate that this complex relation between tradition and innovation is Eliot’s most significant contribution to high modernism.

## INTRODUCTION AND THESIS

Born in St. Louis, Missouri, Thomas Stearns Eliot (1888 – 1965) had studied philosophy at Harvard in 1906, and continued his studies in French literature at Sorbonne, Paris, where he was inspired by French Symbolist poets to write a new ‘modernist’ poetry of urban environments and ordinary individuals. Throughout the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, European and English artists had begun to depict what was distinctively ‘modern’ about the times they were living in. Lewis describes a cultural movement in the 1920’s as a period of “high modernism” characterized by a “high conception of the status of art” (108). A movement of artistic experimentation that came to fruition out of an earlier period that faced change to various facets of society and culture.<sup>1</sup> Expounding upon the historical context that gave rise to a highly experimental concept of poetry is relevant when considering T.S. Eliot’s critical engagement with the currents of his epoch.

### **The Historical Context of Modernism**

The American poet, Ezra Pound (1885 – 1972), who was a fellow expatriate and contemporary to Eliot, famously expressed the aspirations of modernism in his slogan “Make it New” (Lewis 26). He wanted his poetry to show alternative perspectives of the modern world to those who had become accustomed to seeing only one side. In a similar vein, the Russian literary theorist Viktor Shklovsky argued that modern art makes old conventions come alive again by making them seem new or strange. He emphasizes that “The technique

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<sup>1</sup> The closing of one era and onset of another (specifically from the 19<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> century) is coined by the French term: “fin de siècle” (“end of the century”). The term is suggestive of a ‘new era’ in Western civilization characterized by scientific and technological innovation. Consequentially, these innovations affected the status of art. Numerous art movements were initiated, such as Symbolism, Art Nouveau, Aestheticism, and Modernism, which share in their goal to create ‘art for art’s sake’: a philosophy that divorces moral and aesthetic properties in art. Theodor Adorno states: “beauty has been evacuated from the progress of art” (60). The sole depiction of beauty, independent of didactic purposes, forces the arts into a new status. Poet’s efforts to transgress conventionality in classical lyrical poetry led to more abstract versification.

of art is to make objects ‘unfamiliar’... to make forms difficult” (3). The intentionality to make forms difficult through ‘defamiliarizing’ artistic conventions gave rise to a new form of non-figurative art that was explicitly difficult to comprehend (Richter 778). One that had violated traditional versification, such as stanzas, meter, rhythm, and syntax. For example, James Joyce’s last novel, *Finnegans Wake*, published in 1939, compiled 100-letter nonsense words of multilingual jargon as an attempt to reconfigure language in such a way that would disrupt existing, mimetic assumptions of it being a reliable signifier between words and their meaning. In response to such unorthodox thinking, this ‘defamiliarization’ became the underlying justification for creating newly abstract literature.<sup>2</sup> This emergence of abstract literature was a prerequisite to other counter-culture movements in post-modernism, such as The Beat Poets or the avant-garde Language Poets who also disrupted traditional versification. Consequentially, a tension between innovation and tradition permeated the cultural era that Eliot found himself in.<sup>3</sup>

Nevertheless, Ezra Pound’s phrase – which he offered initially as advice to translators of poetry – was itself a translation borrowed from the French sinologist, M.G. Pauthier (1801-1873) (North 10). Pauthier (1832) transcribed an Ancient Taoïste aphorism as: “Renouvelle-toi complètement chaque jour; fais-le de nouveau, encore de nouveau, et toujours de nouveau” (344).<sup>4</sup> Pound translated Pauthier’s “fais-le de nouveau” into the iconic phrase “Make it New” which could also be rendered as ‘do it again,’ ‘self-renovate,’ or ‘update the old conventions,’ (North, 10). Thus, taken in its original context, one could argue that the

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<sup>2</sup> Complications between language and representation had been addressed by the Symbolist poet, Stéphane Mallarmé (1842 – 1898), who wrote of a ‘crisis in verse’. This crisis challenges conventional understanding of language being a reliable signifier of external reality (Rainey 123).

<sup>3</sup> Pericles Lewis notes: “The year 1922 became known as the *annus mirabilis* (marvellous year) of modernism, and throughout the 1920s modernism remained the dominant force of new literary production in English,” (124).

<sup>4</sup> “Renew yourself completely every day; do it again and again, and again.”

modernist's ambition to represent new aspects of reality is in fact a very old one. To the point that this aspiring phrase contradicts the misconception that 'making it new' was achieved by 'abandoning the old'. This contention was taken up by Eliot in his own critical writings, which this thesis sets out to explore.

Since Pound, Eliot, and many other English writers sought to develop new forms of literary expression that could portray the drastic changes occurring in their culture and society, a 'modernist contention' arose between varying approaches to artistic representation (Lewis 5; Russel 407). To summarize the contention occurring at that time, Lewis notes that contemporary scholars have generally oscillated between two ambivalent views of modernism: "on the one hand, that modernism meant an end to all conventional forms of representation, and on the other hand, that it meant creating newer and 'more appropriate' conventions of representation than the older ones" (5). The quote suggests that the demand for innovative techniques was seemingly incompatible with adherence to pre-existing conventions. Although Eliot is recognized as an influential figure of high modernism in both British and American literature, it may come as a surprise to know that instead of trying to liberate himself from poetic conventions (from strict adherence to meter and rhyme), he took a unique approach that sought to reconcile modernism's demand for innovation with adherence to tradition (Russel 407; Kenner 12; Lewis 27). It is in this tension between tradition and innovation that Eliot exhibits his most significant contribution to modernism. My thesis explores this tension through a comparative analysis of Eliot's critical essays and poetry; in order to demonstrate the extent to which his critical concepts can be useful as an interpretive framework to poetic analysis.

The subsequent overview of this contention between innovation and tradition focuses on Eliot's own aesthetic criticism as a basis for understanding why his poem "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" (hereafter referred to as "Love Song") frequently alludes to classical and

medieval works. It was during his graduate studies in Paris, between 1910-1, at the age of twenty-two, when Eliot drafted the poem “Love Song” (Sultan 78; Southam 3). The poem was initially published as a single manuscript in *Poetry* magazine in 1914; and arranged to be the first in Eliot’s volume titled “Prufrock and Other Observations,” published by the *Egoist* press in 1917 (Lewis 129). This volume of “Observations” was Eliot’s first major publication; of which four poems were subsequently included by him into his 1930 book *Selected Poems* (Southam 11). Pearce speculates why the volume was titled after J. Alfred Prufrock, suggesting that most of the poems within it “do have much in common with the first poem in mood and attitude and language” (57). That is to say, the volume’s collection shares many of the qualities found in “Love Song” which implies that Eliot was preoccupied with creating a series of works that would reflect a common theme. This thesis focuses on “Love Song” as a primary text in order to assess probable reasons why Eliot was preoccupied with combining experimentation with tradition as an underlying motif.<sup>5</sup>

“Love Song’s” inter-textual references to Dante and Homer are reflective of core principles in Eliot’s aesthetic philosophy. These principles are set forth in his essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (hereafter referred to as “Tradition”).<sup>6</sup> The essay was published in December 1919 as an anonymous piece in *Egoist*; and subsequently included by Eliot into his volume of select essays *The Sacred Wood*, published in 1920 (Russel 405). In addition to being a poet, Eliot was a prolific literary journalist and critic. In 1919, he contributed a series of critical essays for *Times Literary Supplement* and *Blast* magazine, where he began to confront a contentious field of theoretical practices – one where “the main lines of opposition

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<sup>5</sup> This thesis refers to the following edition: Eliot, T. S. “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.” *Poetry Foundation*, Poetry Foundation, 2026, [www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44212/the-love-song-of-j-alfred-prufrock](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44212/the-love-song-of-j-alfred-prufrock).

<sup>6</sup> This thesis refers to the following edition: Eliot, T.S. “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” in *Yale Architectural Journal*, Vol. 19, no. 2, 2015: 36-42. <https://catholicliberaleducation.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Eliot-Tradition-and-the-Individual-Talent.pdf>.

had already been drawn” (Menand 26). Thus, Eliot’s essay emerges from an active engagement with the contentions of literary criticism in his cultural era, and specifically in regard to the way modernists should relate to their cultural and historical past.<sup>7</sup> A synopsis of the essay and its critical reception is followed by an explanation of my purpose for selecting it as a comparative text to “Love Song.”

### **Tradition and the Historical Sense**

“Tradition” is ambitious in trying to address a variety of topics concerning authors, poetry, and their relations to literary classics (Russel 406). The essay’s concept of ‘a tradition’ describes it as a monument of all literary classics ever written: “a whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country ... composes a simultaneous order” (*TIT* 37).<sup>8</sup> The order is composed of canonical and historical works of European origin.<sup>9</sup> On the same token, this order of tradition accumulates by the supervening of novelty (*TIT* 37). The idea of perpetual addition differs from Pound’s concept of tradition – expressed in his 1918 essay “The Tradition” – whereby tradition is “a return to origins” (92). Pound’s idea implies a return to simplicity and fixed point, which contrasts with Eliot’s idea

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<sup>7</sup> Arthur Waugh’s collection of essays *Tradition and Change: Studies in Contemporary Literature*, published in 1919, is an analysis of how writers blend classic themes with new forms – a concept that is still relevant for our understanding of ways in which contemporary art grapples with cultural history, identity, and other socio-political issues (Menand 33). His work is similar to “Tradition” not because they share a critical method or aesthetic program, but because they respond to the same cultural problem of how modern literature can relate meaningfully to the past under conditions of rapid social and artistic change.

<sup>8</sup> This thesis uses the abbreviation *TIT* to indicate “Tradition and the Individual Talent”.

<sup>9</sup> The literature of epic and lyrical dramas left behind by the dead poets, such as Virgil, Ovid, Dante, or Shakespeare, is what constitutes the great European tradition (Russel 408). It is well attested that such authors have shaped the values and culture of Western civilization (Macdonald *et al*, 418-21; Zhang *et al*, 53). This relates to Eliot’s concept of a ‘unified European sensibility.’ He argues that prior to the seventeenth century, European literature and thought shared a coherent intellectual and emotional framework in which feeling, thought, philosophy, and belief were integrated rather than divided. This sensibility was sustained by a common classical, mythological, and Christian inheritance; whereby Eliot strives to re-establish a continuity with Europe’s shared cultural past.

of complexity brought on by “a *living whole*” of perpetual increase (Rabaté 214). This complexity involves constant adjustment and conformity between the old and new. Tradition can change; but Eliot argues that this change must not be mistaken for improvement. He values originality to the extent that it “conforms” (37) to a tradition by making inter-textual reference to classic works.

This conformity can be illustrated in the first of Pound’s *Cantos*, published in an early version in 1917, which began with an extended paraphrase of a passage from *The Odyssey*. This was also an important model for Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, and, of course, Joyce’s *Ulysses* which made an extensive use of mythological parallels to describe contemporary life.<sup>10</sup> Having named but a few examples, many modernists share the sense that a recourse to myth, whether Greek or Roman, pagan or Christian, ancient or medieval, helps contextualize their work in relation to a broader tradition. This may explain in part why Eliot felt it necessary to address the ‘historical sense’ in his critical essay, and why it may be an appropriate lens to interpret the poem’s links to Dante. Unlike those who innovated through abstract representation, Eliot and Pound are notable figures who regarded tradition with greater reverence (Lewis 121). Rather than rejecting literary conventions altogether, they sought to enter into a conversation with works of the past as a more appropriate way to renew them.

Adding to the point, “Tradition” claims that the ‘best and most individual parts’ of a work are “those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, have asserted their immortality most vigorously” (*TIT* 37). This quote implies that the most novel aspects of a modernist work are reworking former things into something new. Prufrock’s dramatic monologue can be read as a continuation of a scene from Dante’s *Inferno* – carried through by “Love Song’s” epigraph.

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<sup>10</sup> Modernist writers who wrote lengthy epic dramas is a kind of classical model that is continuous with the tradition of their Greco-Roman forebearers. Although Eliot’s poetry is relatively short, he draws heavily from classical sources to enrich its moral significance.

Drawing this parallel between old and new is said to counter the idea that novelty is achieved when a poem ‘least resembles other works’, or that it is laudable when a poet “differs from his predecessors” (*TIT* 36).<sup>11</sup> It is from tradition that an author discovers novelty – not in the abandonment thereof.

The essay is careful to mention that tradition is not blind repetition of prior works; nor is it attained by mere inheritance from predecessors. Instead, it involves an educated sensibility of what makes a work truly traditional or classic. An individual who studies the literary canon “with great labour” procures a “historical sense” (*TIT* 37). Henceforth, the essay’s concept of tradition abruptly shifts from describing historical references in a work, to a description of the historical sense as a crucial component of the creative writing process. It compels a poet “to write not merely with his own generation in his bones” but “of the timeless and of the temporal together ... is what makes a writer more acutely conscious of his place in time, of his own contemporaneity” (*TIT* 37) The quote affirms that historical knowledge makes one acutely aware of how the present compares to the past. Procuring a keen historical sense enables a poet to write in a way that transcends their own temporal circumstances; conveying deeper truths to things that seem temporal or unfamiliar.

“Love Song’s” intertextual references to Dante, Homer, Shakespear, and biblical prophets, may suggest that lying behind Prufrock’s present experiences are certain timeless meanings that are best apprehended in relation to these other sources. In sum, this comparison

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<sup>11</sup> Eliot’s critique of poetic innovation struggling to gain independence from tradition is an issue that Harold Bloom addresses in his 1973 book *The Anxiety of Influence*. Bloom informs a psychoanalytical reading of how poets innovate by struggling against – and deliberately misreading – their poetic predecessors. Contemporaries are anxious to assert their authenticity and originality through an Oedipal struggle that seeks to overcome the genius of a poet forefather through innovative misreadings. This complex relation between the poet and the entire Western tradition was anticipated in “Tradition and the Individual Talent”. The originality of Eliot’s argument asserts that it is not a relation to individual predecessors, but an absorption of the entire literary canon present at the very moment of innovating a new work.

to other works makes a reader, author, or fictional character more aware of their contemporaneity. Such themes are explored in the subsequent chapters. For the purpose of my comparative analysis, this thesis expects “Tradition” to guide my reading of select passages in the poem in order to explain the deeper question of why Eliot weaves together the cultural past into his highly experimental poem. Therefore, the first half of the central research question asks: to what extent does Eliot’s allusion to classical texts in “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” achieve ‘the historical sense’ – as defined in the essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent”?

I have understood the essay to be Eliot’s personal defence of literary criticism that set out to establish the ‘historical sense’ and theory of ‘Impersonality’ as two fundamental components to his aesthetic philosophy. My understanding aligns with Menand’s (2002) meta-analysis of Eliot’s work, who claims that “‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’ ... is generally understood to contain the essentials of Eliot’s aesthetic theory;” of which ‘tradition’ and ‘Impersonality’ are two terms “with which Eliot the critic is commonly associated” (20) (the essay uses the term ‘tradition’ and ‘historical sense’ interchangeably). Being that these concepts are associated with Eliot’s aesthetics, it is implied that they are an important consideration when analysing his poetry. Eliot’s complex bifurcation of Impersonality is understood as a pushback against Romanticism but can also be seen as a critique to poetry in general. This relation between Impersonality and Romantic criticism is explored in the following section. Selecting the ‘historical sense’ and ‘impersonality’ as focal points is most appropriate when considering the question of whether, and how, he employs them into his poetic work. The latter half of the research question shall consider how Eliot’s theory of ‘Impersonality’ might be useful in explaining why the epigraph in “Love Song” refers to a medieval Italian epic, namely Dante’s *Inferno*.

Overall, the aim of my comparative reading identifies parallels between Eliot's critical concepts and poetic practice. Furthermore, to examine ways in which Eliot's renders tradition and innovation in "Love Song," and how it may complement our understanding of the essay's precepts. This falls under the assumption that his aesthetic philosophy is reflective of his own poetic practice too. Although "Love Song" was published two years prior to "Tradition," the fact that it makes frequent reference to historical texts supports my hypothesis that there are nascent traces of these ideas evident already in his early poems. In sum, 'Impersonality' and the 'historical sense' are fundamental concepts in Eliot's aesthetic program which might be traceable to his early poem. This thesis hypothesizes that Eliot did integrate these concepts into crafting his early work. The subsequent section will offer a review of the existing literature pertaining to this specific topic and offer a suggestion as to how my thesis will contribute to this discussion.

## **Roadmap**

Chapter One is a short chapter overviewing Eliot's bifurcation of Impersonality. It summarizes critical interpretation of Impersonality as both a defence against Romanticism and poetics in general. Furthermore, the chapter suggests how my thesis contributes to the limited scope of research pertaining to comparative reading of these primary texts. Chapter Two will appropriate key components of the 'historical sense' into a theoretical framework before close reading passages in "Love Song". My analysis will locate instances where Eliot applies this concept to poetic creation. This will answer the question of whether "Tradition" aids poetic interpretation. Chapter Three will appropriate key aspects of Impersonality into an interpretive framework for poetic analysis, with particular focus on the poem's epigraph. This comparison investigates whether or not Impersonality can aid our understanding of that particular passage. The thesis concludes with a summary of key findings and how it contributes to the academic literature; along with suggestions for future research.

## CHAPTER 1

### Impersonality as Criticism to Romanticism

Matthiessen considered “Tradition” to be a polemic against nineteenth century Romantic sentiments (7-8). It is well attested that Eliot’s aesthetic program “enlists under the banner of ‘Classicism’ (supposed to signify reason, order, objectivity) against ‘Romanticism’ (signifying the irrational, the subjective)” (Reeves 110-1). To briefly clarify this distinction, Abrams uses ‘the Mirror’ to symbolize a Classicist’s approach to mimetic art which reflects ideal forms of nature.<sup>12</sup> On the other hand, his concept of a ‘Lamp’ symbolizes a Romantic approach that projects, or expresses the individual’s thoughts and feelings as a “contribution to the object it perceives,” (viii) – a contribution of personal impressions to how they view the world. This expressionism becomes central to the Romantic period beginning in the late eighteenth century (Taylor 413).

Eliot’s thesis of Impersonality is a direct challenge to this expressive and personalized tendency. Several passages in “Tradition” rebuttal such Romantic tendencies by arguing that ‘mature poetry’ is not born out of any expression of personality, or from any particular intensity or complexity of emotion (*TIT* 39). Rather, his concept aims to ‘depersonalize’ poetry away from being a medium of self-expression, describing it as: “a continual extinction of personality ... to something which is more valuable” (39). That is to say, instead of private and self-referential meaning, a poet’s historical sense enables them to integrate a ‘more valued’ tradition into their work. “Tradition” rejects the Romantic idea that poetry is born out

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<sup>12</sup> Debate over whether artists in any medium can express universal objectified truths are as old as Plato’s *Republic* (fifth century B.C.). Plato famously banishes poets from the ideal community because, in his view, they cannot speak universal truths sincerely but reflect only their personal experiences. Poets (and their fictional characters) are imperfect reflections of the ideal form bounded by the limits of human knowledge and communication (Russel 408).

of powerful emotions or distinguished personalities.<sup>13</sup> At the same time, Eliot is not rejecting emotions altogether. A poem's subjective meaning can become more apprehensive through drawing inter-textual references to familiar, classical works.<sup>14</sup>

Although Matthiessen argues that Eliot's notion of 'depersonalization' is a rejection of Romanticism, C.K. Stead has identified post-Romantic inheritances in Eliot's concepts (Reeves 111). Stead's argument is accompanied by a general revision of literary history that began to see Modernism as continuous with Romantic expressionism.<sup>15</sup> For example, the Romanticist's sense of cultural disintegration and yearning to unify disparate experiences: such as rationalism and emotional sensibility; tradition and revolution; or their disregard for the tenants of authority, are some qualities that prefigure Modernism and Eliot's views (Lewis 5-6).<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Romanticism is understood to place greater emphasis on emotion in the arts. In the preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (1800 edition), the English poet, William Wordsworth, described the romantic impulse as a "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings." (245). This sentiment was in stark contrast to Classicism which regarded ungoverned emotions and nature as subordinate to intellect and rationalism

<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, in his essay *The Metaphysical Poets*, Eliot criticizes Romantic and Victorian traditions for having separated thought and feeling. His idea of a 'dissociation of sensibility' ushered in a culture and artistic form based too heavily on subjectivity and self-expressionism (284). The "dissociation of sensibility" is Eliot's argument that earlier poets were able to think and feel at the same time, fusing intellect and emotion into a single, unified poetic experience. After the early 17th century, this unity broke down, and poets increasingly treated reason and emotion as separate realms. He claims that it is a dissociation that Modernist poets ought to repair.

<sup>15</sup> Charles Taylor argues that expressionism had a profound influence on Modernism. M. H. Abrams and Paul de Man have treated Modernism essentially as a late form of Romanticism. For insightful analysis of their commonalities, see Paul de Man, "Literary History and Literary Modernity"; in de Man, *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*, 142–65.

<sup>16</sup> Charles Taylor further notes a key difference between romantic and modernist expressionism. Romantic expressionism represented reality outside of the mind, whereas modernist expressionism represents an inner, psychological realism of the mind (420). Modernists were often times more pessimistic than the romantics to accept that no reintegration of human life was possible after the Great War. Accepting the fragmented condition of post-war society made abstract imitation appear incomplete and radically different from its predecessors.

In regard to the essay's description of 'Impersonality,' I argue that it has further implications to poetics in general and goes beyond just Romantic criticism. Thus, my approach to Impersonality shall examine the extent to which Eliot uses it in his own creative process. The elastic definition of 'Impersonality' also involves "the relation of the poem to its author," (as opposed to the poem's relation to other poems) (*TIT* 39). It is a theory of poetic creativity in general. It describes the artist's mind as a catalyst that infuses varied 'elements' into something new. These elements can be images, words, or feelings which get suspended in the mind until some unexpected fusion takes place. The elements fuse into new compounds which then become 'the material' for poetry.<sup>17</sup> But Eliot argues that this infusion occurs autonomously – without the conscious effort of an author. The poet's creative process is a "concentration which does not happen consciously or of deliberation" (*TIT* 42). It is a process that ought to be independent of personal subjectivity and temporal circumstances. My purpose for using Impersonality as an interpretive framework shall reveal the extent to which Eliot's poem adheres to his own aesthetic criteria.

Unlike Matthiessen's critique that "Tradition" is a polemic against Romanticism, my understanding of the essay aligns with contemporary scholarship. Masson suggests that "Tradition" can read as a preface to poetic reading because Eliot often demonstrates his theoretical concepts in poetic works. Adding to this point, Reeves's (2006) states that, "The immediate object of 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' is to define poetic value and originality" (108). The quote suggests that the immediate purpose of 'impersonality' and 'the

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<sup>17</sup> Eliot elaborates this idea in *Modern Tendencies in Poetry* (1920): "The mature poet, in the operations of his mind, works like the chemist ... He is aware of a great number and variety of elements which can be combined into new and important compounds; his training ... made him exceptionally sensitive to what they can be made to do. He is in tune for perceiving new relations, as the scientist is" (214).

historical sense' is to achieve originality as the touchstone for poetic value. A claim that supports my hypothesis that Eliot does seek to demonstrate his concepts in his poetic work.

Critics have rendered "Tradition" in new directions by drawing on his aesthetic principles to analyse various texts. Most notably, Ellmann uses Impersonality as a framework to do a deconstructivist reading of "Tradition", *The Waste Land*, and other works.<sup>18</sup> She argues that Eliot's concept of 'eliminating personality' merely reinstates it in a different guise: stating: "Because the poem [*Waste Land*] can only abject writing with more writing, it catches the infection that it tries to purge, and implodes like an obsessive ceremonial under the pressure of its own contradictions" (p. 107). Her deconstruction suggests that Impersonality is paradoxical in its effort to use self-expression in order to eliminate it. Since Eliot's ideas 'collapse under the pressure of its own contradiction,' he can only reject disturbing material by writing about it; and ends up reenforcing the very thing he is trying to reject. My examination of Impersonality within "Love Song" furthers the discussion of this paradox and takes this into account when comparing the poet to the critic. The analysis section will demonstrate how different modes of close reading can unveil paradoxes within Eliot's aesthetic philosophy.

Furthermore, Kermode took to Eliot's "theoretical speculations" of tradition as a stable model to close read several authors, such as Andrew Marvell, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Brontë's gothic novel *Wuthering Heights*, in order to identify literary qualities that have rendered their works as 'classic' to the English tradition (Reeves 117). This demonstrates a further attempt to use "Tradition" as a touchstone for artistic originality. Since my focus is to compare the two primary texts, it remains outside of the scope to compare my findings

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<sup>18</sup> A deconstructivist reading is a method of textual analysis, originating from the philosophy of Jacques Derrida, that seeks to dismantle the assumption that a text has a single, stable, or unified meaning. Instead of looking for a "correct" interpretation, this approach assumes that all texts contain inherent contradictions, gaps, and ambiguities that undermine their apparent logic (Sikirivwa 44).

with Kermode's. A suggestion for further research could compare artistic qualities between these works as another way to apply Eliot's ideas. Lastly, Sultan's research on "Love Song" is limited in its scope of how it compares with Eliot's criticism. It primarily focused on identifying historical sources that Eliot drew from to craft paradoxical themes.

Overall, these critics have not applied Eliot's concepts to interpret poetic ambiguity – let alone any sufficient investigation that links Impersonality to the historical sense. Most critics have drawn from Eliot's historical sources in order to evaluate his work, rather than drawing from Eliot's own critical ideas. Therefore, in light of this review, my thesis adds to a gap in research by exploring instances where Eliot may have appropriated his theories into poetic expression. Using "Tradition" as a lens to locate Impersonality in "Love Song" will test Menand's skepticism toward systematizing Eliot's criticism. Moreover, considering Modernism to be continuous with Romanticism, my thesis revises Matthiessen's anti-Romantic reading by demonstrating how self-expressionism re-enters Eliot's poetry through its motifs and formal structure. This in turn will extend Ellmann's account of impersonality as a paradoxical theory. Regardless of paradox, it remains highly relevant to our understanding of the modernist period and to Eliot's contribution therein.

## CHAPTER 2

### The Historical Sense in “Love Song”

It is important to consider two things when trying to appropriate Eliot’s concepts into a framework. Firstly, Menand (2002) warns of the temptation “to discover in Eliot’s criticism some sort of theoretical system,” and that “developing a systematic guideline of literary analysis was never Eliot’s ambition” (20). The chosen essay is not meant to serve as a systematic guideline for poetic analysis; nor is it meant to unravel any sort of concrete meaning in “Love Song”. Eliot purposefully did not commentate on “Love Song” because he wanted its ambiguity to appeal future readership. Nevertheless, despite noting that Eliot’s essays are not meant to be treated as a methodological guideline to poetic analysis, he does claim to have discovered a silver-lining of impersonality throughout Eliot’s poetry. He claims that most of Eliot’s critical views have remained coherent throughout his work and could be generalized into a description of Eliot’s aesthetic philosophy *ad hoc*. In contrast to the prior warning, his latter point states that:

The notion of projecting a coherence of aesthetic principles to poetic analysis *ad hoc* is not discredited, because Eliot’s literary criticism can be reduced to a general theoretical description of literary production and reception ... even if that description is not, in the end, especially helpful as a means of understanding literature. (Menand 20-1).

This supports my aim of procuring a well-defined set of principles as an interpretive framework is not discredited. It also supports my expectation to find thematic intricacies between these two primary texts – a coherence of principles that is not self-evident by reading them in isolation. Moreover, my thesis tests Menand’s (2002) argument to see

whether my application of Impersonality and the historical sense to poetic analysis will prove useful in understanding its ambiguities.

The first component of Eliot's historical sense seeks to incorporate classical references to portray the modern world. Eliot's integration of tradition into modernism is achieved through utilizing specific literary devices not mentioned in "Tradition." My comparative analysis sheds light to limitations in Eliot's seminal essay and also answers the question of how the poem achieves a historical sense. Overall, the assessment reveals the extent to which Eliot's concepts are useful as interpretive frameworks. Rather than "writing with one's own generation in his bones" (*TIT* 37) – which implies the portrayal of one's own local context – a poem ought to reflect 'timeless' features underlying an phenomenon.<sup>19</sup> Conveying subjects in a more timeless, or universalized way can be achieved through "contrast and comparison among the dead [poets]" (*TIT* 37). As if the poem's subject is in 'dialogue' with other texts that have addressed similar issues in time past. To the point that any subjective viewpoint, or local circumstances should, according to Eliot, refer to the great literary tradition in order to convey deeper dimensions to their narrative. This is an educated sensibility that requires sufficient knowledge of historical works in order to make such comparisons.<sup>20</sup> In sum, the first component of this framework seeks for instances where Prufrock alludes to other literary figures.

A brief explanation of the poem's genesis will help identify its underlying modernist theme, which is necessary to know before considering the question of how, and why it incorporates the historical past. In the book *What Dante Means to Me*, Eliot refers to Charles

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<sup>19</sup> In his book *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (UPUC), Eliot claims that "[Poetry] may make us from time to time a little more aware of the deeper, unnamed feelings which form the substratum of our being" (155). And so the essay's preoccupation with the historical sense reflects this deeper search for universal truths.

<sup>20</sup> Eliot's intellectual thoroughness and respect for the past made him the kind of "exhaustive critic" he described in UPUC who dares to review the entire history of a literary tradition (108).

Baudelaire (1821 – 1867) and Jules Laforgue (1860 – 1887) as two symbolist poets who's work taught him that the "source of new poetry might be found in what had been regarded hitherto as the impossible, the sterile, the intractably unpoetic" (126). Moreover, he states that "the poet, in fact, was committed by his profession to turn the unpoetical into poetry" (126). Eliot's 'high' concept of modern poetry – borrowed from the Symbolists – aimed to turn unpoetical, sordid aspects of the modern world into something suitable for poetry. Taking up the character of Prufrock set within a dark industrial metropolis seems to be a strange work of restoration to turn these unsavoury, unheroic subjects into poetry (Snook). Aspects that were formerly considered improper for traditional poetry have become the subject for a newly experimental type of poetry. Nevertheless, Eliot was sympathetic to the great literary tradition and sought to position his work in relation to other classics. It is necessary to first acknowledge the prominent critique of "Love Song" before introducing my contribution to the discussion.

The theme of "Love Song" does not describe love in the ordinary sense, but rather, it parodies romantic ideals by giving insight into the narrator's dramatic monologue. Prufrock says "Let us go then, you and I" (*LS* 1)<sup>21</sup> while navigating "through half-deserted streets" (4) pondering upon his insecurity to socialize with women. Prufrock's indecision to act has consequentially distorted his "particular way of looking at experience" (Pearce 57). The environment itself reflects his idiosyncrasies back to him as he compares the skyline of an evening sunset to "a patient etherized upon a table" (*LS* 3). The overt strangeness in rhyme and subject matter had undermined its aesthetic appreciation upon initial reception.<sup>22</sup> The

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<sup>21</sup> This thesis uses the abbreviation *LS* to indicate "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock".

<sup>22</sup> An anonymous review in *Literary World* remarks: "There is something interesting, yet bizarre in its subject matter and rhyme, which may contribute to its sense of being perhaps, too experimental and hardly poetic." The poem's experimentalism was not culturally transformative at the time – being appreciated by few elitist literary circles (Masson).

narrative jump cuts are fragmented and disorienting which emulate a stream of consciousness writing process as the principal subject of the work (Sultan 87). Pound remarks that the poem is “an attempt to condense the James novel,” (7) suggesting that its underlying theme of a ‘divided-consciousness’ is closely associated with the American-British novelist, Henry James (1843 – 1916).<sup>23</sup> Consequentially, the text’s non-linear narration, discontinuity of discourse, and complexity of tone, can be read as an attempt to mirror a ‘psychological realism’ as experienced in the author and protagonist’s mind. This idea can be associated to Henri Bergson who argued that time is experienced as a continuous duration (*durée*), rather than linear compartmentalization (Gillies 95). This idea carries over to literary experimentation with linearity which sought to renew conventional modes of reading.

One could argue that Eliot and Pound’s development of free verse over traditional meter was actually undertaken in the name of mimesis. The stream of consciousness as a narrative technique<sup>24</sup> breaks from the ‘realist’ convention of the omniscient narrator, corresponds to another form of realism. One that Ian Watt calls the “realism of presentation,” (290); which attempts to present a psychological realism as experienced by the author and fictional character rather than told from the viewpoint of an omniscient narrator (Lewis 5). To the point that modernism has a mimetic intention underlying its apparently ‘non-mimetic’ art. And so, the stream-of-consciousness in Eliot’s “Love Song” is reflective of a cultural

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<sup>23</sup> Henry James was committed to “the deeper psychology” wherein only the protagonist’s experience of reality is portrayed. This relates to Prufrock’s interior monologue that seems to dictate his perception of the world. This feature was shared by other modernists, such as Yeats, Proust, Joyce, Kafka, Pound, who held the author’s psychic experience as the principal subject of their work (Sultan 84).

<sup>24</sup> Stream of consciousness is a narrative style mimicking the unfiltered, continuous flow of a character's thoughts, sensations, and memories, often appearing disjointed, illogical, or fragmented to capture the mind's true workings, distinct from structured narration. Coined by psychologist William James (1842 – 1910), it became a key literary technique for Modernist writers like James Joyce and Virginia Woolf, plunging readers directly into a character's psyche through interior monologue, free association, and sensory details, prioritizing psychological depth over plot, (Cuddon 660-1). See William James’s *Principles of Psychology*; quoted by Stephen Kern (1983) in *The Culture of Time and Space*, 24.

zeitgeist,<sup>25</sup> rather than emerging from a particular literary tradition. This is problematic to the question of why this experimental poem incorporates classical, medieval, and biblical references.

### **Allusion to Homer**

In the final scene of “Love Song”, when Prufrock has come to terms with his inadequacy for greatness, he takes on the voice of a weary old man at the beach:

I grow old ... I grow old ...

I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled.

Shall I part my hair behind? Do I dare eat a peach?

I shall wear white flannel trousers, and walk upon the beach.

I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each.

I do not think that they will sing to me. (126-31)

Prufrock expresses futility by composing lyrics about vain, temporal issues like what clothing he should wear. The phrase “Do I dare” (*LS* 128) echoes a motif of his doubt and fear over his failure to take meaningful action. A motif that also echoes Dante’s insecurity when invited by Virgil to journey with him into hell. Alternatively, Prufrock’s self-loathing turns not into courage or hope, but ‘descends’ into a fear over the most trivial matters in life. Eliot parodies Prufrock’s unheroic qualities when faced with “the overwhelming question” (*LS* 16).

The passage’s prosimetrum alternates to an ironic effect: between rhyme and prose; statement and question. Additionally, the passage reflects a general theme of juxtaposition:

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<sup>25</sup> “Zeitgeist” is a German term for “spirit of the age”. It refers to the moral and social climate of a particular period in history — the set of ideas, values, and attitudes that define an era (Dudai 251-2).

between irony and sincerity; colloquial and formal language; ancient and modern. Prufrock's inner conflict with questions and indecisiveness jump cuts away from the present realism to a romanticized picture of "the mermaids singing each to each" (*LS* 130). But Prufrock's doubt, again, drowns away the hope of hearing them sing to him. It is a poignant allusion to the Sirens singing out to Odysseus in Homer's epic drama. A scene in which the Sirens offer irresistible wisdom to deceive Odysseus – a moment that displays the hero's quality of mastering divine temptation. The Siren's song is a cultural and imaginative reference to the folly in man's judgement. A desire for transcendence that gets ruined under the weight of Prufrock's materialist naturalism, expressed in the closing line: "Till human voices wake us, and we drown" (*LS* 137).<sup>26</sup> The allusion compares, or contrasts, the modern character to an ancient one in order to enhance the unheroic concerns for growing old and wearing trousers rolled. The allusion makes Prufrock feel unworthy of great song or epic drama. He is unsuited for either Romance or Realism.

The poem concludes by stating: "We have lingered in the chambers of the sea / By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown / Till human voices wake us, and we drown" (*LS* 135-7). The poem shows how modern man's universe is quiet, "lingering in the chambers of the sea." Without the metaphysical voices calling, his teleological quest will drown in hopelessness. The "human voices" represent Prufrock's inclination to hear only himself, his own personality, and self-referential meanings. Consequentially, it leaves him paralyzed like "a patient etherized upon a table" (*LS* 7) – a simile made in the poem's opening lines. The multiple layers of binary contrast work out a sense of depth to the present moment. Although Prufrock's statements are rhythmic and personal, it contains no trace of the author.

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<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, one could interpret Prufrock's earlier statement: "I should have been a pair of ragged claws / Scuttling across the floors of silent seas" (*LS* 79-80) as an indirect reference to naturalist materialist philosophy. This metaphysical doctrine holds matter to be the fundamental substance of nature and consciousness. A view that was defended until the late nineteenth century (Tlumak xi).

The passage's meaning is allusive and less important than Eliot's aim to develop an idiom of speech ("lingered in the chambers of the sea / By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed"). For Eliot to write this way seems new and strange to the poetic tradition (Sultan 80; Snook). But a brief comment on Eliot's reliance on allusion and idiom will suggest that his verse is actually in line with tradition.<sup>27</sup> I refer to Eliot's 1923 essay "Ulysses, Order, and Myth" to point out the relation between allusion and the historical sense. These devices are not mentioned in "Tradition," but key to answer why "Love Song" embeds ancient references into modernist experimentation. Eliot's essay calls allusion "the mythical method" because it draws a "continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity" (177).<sup>28</sup> Allusion is a device that many Modernists have used to compare the modern world against a backdrop of mythical stories. His essay argues that *Ulysses*'s parallel between Homer's *The Odyssey* to Joyce's outing in Dublin gave "a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history" (177). Rather than reflecting disorder and non-figuration, allusion gives shape and significance to the formless reality of the modern world (Domestico 1).<sup>29</sup>

Likewise, Prufrock's existentialism at the beach refuses to draw similes from his immediate environment (disorienting as it is) but invokes comparison to the distant past. The historical sense creates a continuation or dialogue with Homer's picture. My comparative reading shows that allusion is key to unlocking a historical sense in poetry. It helps to keep

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<sup>27</sup> This view aligns with Cleanth Brook's essay "Modern Poetry and the Tradition" which also argues that modern poetry is a continuation of the English literary tradition – a view shared by Eliot.

<sup>28</sup> A survey of allusions in the first section of *The Waste Land* shows Eliot's technique for incorporating fragments of tradition into his work. Aided by Eliot's own notes and comments, scholars have identified allusions in this first section of seventy-six lines to about one allusion every two lines (Southam 138).

<sup>29</sup> The Modernist's effort to synthesize past and present can also shape contemporary perception of classic works too. Fritz Senn (1984) has demonstrated that a reading of Joyce's *Ulysses* ineluctably influences perception of Homer's *Odyssey* too," (Rabaté 210). Alternatively, Eliot's essay deals not with the interpretation of classical texts, but a way of relating oneself to the historical past.

experimental passages in line with some sense of tradition. As the mermaids sing “each to each”, so does the living whole of European classics ‘sing’ to each other through this ‘mythical method’ of inter-textual allusions. This idea is linked to The Great Conversation – a term that describes an ongoing exchange of ideas and values across Western intellectual history, carried through the arts and literature.<sup>30</sup> Instead of artists working in isolation, the Great Conversation is a corpus of works that revises and respond to earlier voices (Hutchins 2). As if literature was a constant stream of statement and restatement. This idea matches with Eliot’s concept of the European tradition as a “simultaneous existence” (*TIT* 37) among great classics that ‘sing’ to each other. The historical sense clearly demonstrates that the present can echo the past, and that temporal and timeless themes can synthesize within great works of literature.

A final example of the historical sense in this passage will demonstrate how allusion can also achieve a sense of innovation. This is linked to a second, critical component of the historical sense which rebuttals “blind repetition” of former works (*TIT* 37). Eliot affirms in “Tradition” that the test of poetic value is determined by how well it “fits in” to the order of tradition (*TIT* 37). In Eliot’s book *Dante*, he looks to Dante in order to define or consolidate his own practice of allusion and idiom (Manganiello 2). I argue that the historical sense of allusion – viewed as a classical device – is based on Eliot’s critique that the poetic revolution in Dante’s time was also characterized by a ‘search for a proper modern colloquial idiom’ (38) – what Dante called *lingua volgare*. Since Dante reconciled archaic and fragmented dialects into a unified, Florentine language – so does Eliot attempt to reconcile the fragments of post-war society into an ideal European tradition. Manganiello further notes that Eliot and

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<sup>30</sup> The phrase is most famously associated with Robert Maynard Hutchins and Mortimer J. Adler, especially in the context of the “Great Books of the Western World” project (University of Chicago). Hutchins described education as participation in this enduring conversation about fundamental human questions. This is already anticipated in Eliot’s notion of poet’s procuring a historical sense of the entire literary tradition.

Dante's effort to combine vernacular and noble sentiments produced a literature that was 'amendable to modern adaptation' (2). Eliot renews the medieval practice of *lingua volgare* by concentrating on the divine as it appears in Prufrock's world, rather than timid adherence to portray as it appears in the world of Dante. As illustrated in the select passage, Prufrock's allusion to Homer portrays a renewal of Odysseus's fate into something new. A work that parallels tradition and innovation; past and present; which is a key component of the historical sense not addressed in "Tradition".

To answer the first part of the research question: firstly, the motif of binary oppositions is how Eliot imbues structure and significance to Prufrock's formlessness. Secondly, drawing allusions to Homer is how the poem achieves a historical sense. Allusion helps convey deeper meaning to modernism's ambiguity. Allusion gave shape to Prufrock's experiences – even to the point of physically seeing the past within the present world. Moreover, Eliot's poetic practice achieves a historical sense by renewing an ancient practice that Dante and others have done. My comparative reading between the primary texts had identified allusion and idiom as two devices that are linked to the historical sense. Rather than timid adherence to the way Eliot's predecessors have used allusion, he experiments with it to discover a new form of narration. Allusion became fundamental to Eliot's aesthetic, and functions as a key component of the historical sense not addressed in the select essay. As a result, the historical sense not only assists with greater comprehension, but it gives sufficient depth to the passage and author's meaning. It is a framework that gave sufficient explanation to "Love Song's" allusive and strange references to past works.

### **Allusion to Shakespeare**

The following allusion to Shakespeare's play *Hamlet* will briefly demonstrate a close reading that uses the historical sense and Impersonality as an interpretive framework:

No! I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be;  
 Am instead Polonius<sup>31</sup> an attendant lord, one that will do  
 To swell a progress, start a scene or two,  
 Advise the prince; no doubt, an easy tool (117-25)

In this passage, Prufrock explicitly rejects the role of tragic hero by denying identification with Hamlet and instead aligning himself with Polonius, a secondary, often ridiculed court figure. Hamlet represents decisive action and moral gravity, whereas Polonius is cautious. By positioning himself as “an attendant lord,” Prufrock defines his identity through passivity rather than agency. The historical sense is evident through Prufrock’s explicit identification to Hamlet as a familiar tragic hero in the English tradition. This self-characterization reflects the poem’s broader theme of paralysis, where the individual is acutely self-conscious yet incapable of heroic action. The Shakespearean allusion functions as a structuring metaphor that reinforces the modernist’s psychological realism. It is a continuation of historic characters that get reintroduced into a modern context. A clear demonstration of how: “The historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence” (*TIT* 37). Through ironic allusion and deliberate self-positioning, Eliot allows Shakespeare’s tragedy to illuminate his modern character without replicating Shakespeare’s lyrical form.

Importantly, Eliot’s reference to Shakespeare also avoids what “Tradition” explicitly rejects: “blind or timid adherence” (*TIT* 37) to past models. Hamlet is not reproduced, but rather, displaced and reimagined. Hamlet remains unchanged, but his meaning is recontextualized by Prufrock. The passage confirms that Eliot’s engagement with tradition is

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<sup>31</sup> In his book *Inventions of the March Hare*, an early draft of “Love Song” mentions Polonius in this passage. Eliot omits it in later publications. My thesis refers to the earlier draft of this passage in order to expound upon the interrelation between historical references and impersonality.

neither reverential nor dismissive, but dialectical – using the past to shape modern consciousness.

An Impersonal reading would consider Prufrock's use of literary allusion, irony, and symbolism as a way to construct a dramatic persona. In this sense, his emotion is not directly stated but gets embodied through a cultural reference. This aligns with Eliot's claim that poetry results from the "escape from personality," (*TIT* 42) not its indulgence. This passage hints at Impersonality by construing a dramatic framework that allows emotion to emerge from allusion, rather than from autobiographical confession. Internal construction gives the poem its own logic, rather than a medium for Eliot to express his personal views. The following chapter further builds upon Impersonality by linking it to the historical reference found in the poem's epigraph. The chapter will appropriate key aspects of Impersonality into an interpretive framework in order to demonstrate how a comparative reading between "Tradition" and "Love Song" is useful to explain ambiguous passages.

## CHAPTER 3

### Theory of Impersonality in “Love Song”

In his 1929 book *Dante*, Eliot describes *The Divine Comedy* as ‘the highest achievement of poetic tradition’ (251). He argues that Dante’s epic poem served as a model that is still relevant to modern poetry.<sup>32</sup> Dante wrote in vernacular rather than Latin, thereby innovating linguistically while remaining deeply rooted in classical, biblical, and medieval traditions. Eliot viewed this synthesis as paradigmatic for modernism: genuine innovation arises not from rejecting tradition, but from reworking it to meet the conditions of the present. This conviction underlies Eliot’s belief that modern poetry must engage the past in order to articulate the dislocations of modern life.

In his epic poem, *The Divine Comedy*, Dante exemplifies a consciousness of the past that is simultaneously active in the present. He situates moral truths within a vividly realized social and political world populated by historical figures, personal enemies, and other contemporaries. Eliot admired this capacity to render metaphysics through local situations. This method directly informs Eliot’s own poetic practice in “Love Song”, where Prufrock’s psychological paralysis is framed through allusions to various literary figures. Most notably in the epigraph.

### Allusion to Dante

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<sup>32</sup> Eliot states his purpose for writing the book *Dante*: “My purpose has been to persuade the reader first of the importance of Dante as a master – I may even say, the master – for a poet writing to-day in any language. And there ensues from that, the importance of Dante to anyone who would appreciate modern poetry, in any language” (41). Dante wrote in an Italian vernacular that still carried the intellectual unity of medieval Latin, because he and his contemporaries were trained to think abstractly in that shared language. Whereas modern European languages often reflect distinct national habits of thought, medieval Latin created a common conceptual ground across cultures. This is why *Comedia* speaks with a universality that transcends national boundaries: it emerges from a linguistic tradition shaped by a pan-European intellectual and Christian heritage.

Standing at the outset of “Love Song” are two *terzine* from Dante’s epic poem, *The Divine Comedy*. Unlike Eliot’s allusion to the Sirens and Odysseus, the epigraph is a direct quotation from Dante’s *Inferno* – first of three parts in *The Divine Comedy*. It reads in the original medieval Italian, as follows:

S’io credesse che mia risposta fosse

A persona che mai tornasse al mondo,

Questa fiamma staria senza piu scosse.

Ma perciocche giammai di questo fondo

Non torno vivo alcun, s’i’odo il vero,

Senza tema d’infamia ti rispondo.

[“If I thought that my reply would be to someone who would ever return to earth, this flame would remain without further movement; but as no one has ever returned alive from this gulf, if what I hear is true, I can answer you with no fear of infamy.”] (*Inferno* 27.61-6) <sup>33</sup>

These lines were spoken by Guido da Montefeltro, a man who confesses the sins that have condemned him to hell. He is answering the wayfarer, Dante, who asked to hear his story. During his earthly life, Guido ignored conviction and gave evil council to Pope Boniface VIII. Consequentially, he is enclosed within a flame and left imprisoned among the Fraudulent Counsellors. The scene is set within the eighth circle of *Inferno* called Malebolge (evil ditches). Sayers’s English translation of *The Divine Comedy* comments that the

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<sup>33</sup> This translation is from the 1897 Temple Classics series, translated by J.M. Dent. It was used by Eliot to read Dante’s work (Manganiello 4).

Malebolge is “the image of the city in corruption: the disintegration of every social relationship, personal and public” (58). The description resembles Prufrock’s setting within a dark metropolis. He personifies his environment as “Streets that follow like a tedious argument / Of insidious intent / To lead you to an overwhelming question...” (LS 14-6).

Prufrock’s tone is an unsettling one that gets projected onto the urban landscape. To the reader familiar with *The Divine Comedy*, Prufrock’s disorientation among city streets that led to an overwhelming question closely resembles the fictional Dante, who was lost in a dark Forrest until confronted with an overwhelming prospect of descending into Hell (Hollahan 93). Dante is informed by Virgil that this arduous journey has been preceded in earlier times by two heroic figures: Aeneas and Saint Paul. Before Dante musters the courage to go on, he hesitates and claims to be unfit for the journey:

But how should I go there? Who says so? Why? / I'm not Aeneas, and I am not  
Paul! / Who thinks me fit? Not others. And not I. [...]

As one who wills, and then unwills his will, / Changing his mind with every  
changing whim, / Till all his best intentions come to nil. (*Inferno* 2.31-3; 37-9)

Dante’s anticipation for failure gets heightened in comparison to heroic figures; and is similar to Prufrock’s self-comparison to Odysseus, Hamlet, John the Baptist, and other heroes. Both find themselves inadequate in their own eyes as well as in others' eyes. Dante’s inner conflict between willingness and unwillingness, “till all his best intentions come to nil,” parallels to Prufrock’s complaint: “I am no prophet – and here is no great matter; / I have seen the eternal Footman hold my coat, and snicker, / And in short, I was afraid” (LS 89-92). Dante is exhorted by Virgil and by the vision of Beatrice, whereas Prufrock is unsupported by a guide or vision, and never finds that spiritual wherewithal to act. The profundity of Prufrock’s agony is parodied in comparison to Dante and Lazarus’s – figures of faith that have returned

from the underworld to tell their tale. The irony lies in Prufrock's strange claim that there "is no great matter" while perceiving the "eternal Footman" of death. A quote that parallels modern man's materialism with the inescapableness of spiritual matters.<sup>34</sup> One could read the epigraph as Guido's address to Prufrock. A character who's lack of faith forbids him of ever returning to bliss. Another lens could read the opening statement as Prufrock addressing the reader 'without fear of infamy,' – an invitation to the inferno Esque metropolis. Unlike allusion, Eliot uses the epigraph to draw parallels between Dante, Prufrock, and Guido in order to demonstrate a historical sense that positions modernism as continuous with the past.

In the essay "What Dante Means to Me", Eliot comments on why he borrowed lines from Dante, stating: "Certainly I have borrowed lines from him, in the attempt to reproduce, or rather, to arouse in the reader's mind the memory of some Dantesque scene, and thus establish a relationship between the medieval inferno and modern life" (128). The epigraph draws a comparison between Guido's sin that landed him in hell with Prufrock's psychological descent. It arouses a negative tone towards the dim and disorderly metropolis made up of 'cheap hotels and sawdust restaurants.' The adverb used in Prufrock's ambiguous statement "Let us go *then*, you and I" (*LS* 7, italicized added) could read as an imaginary continuation of Guido's speech; or the adverb reads as a dialogue with Guido. As if they were co-habiting the same setting. Furthermore, another lens could read the adverb as Prufrock's open invitation to an unknown audience. The adverb opens up multiple readings into whom the statement is intended for.

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<sup>34</sup> Even at a time of his most relativistic position, Eliot knew that one could not avoid metaphysics. He writes in *Letters*: "Of course one cannot avoid metaphysics altogether, because nowhere can a sharp line be drawn – to draw a sharp line between metaphysics and common sense would itself be metaphysics and not common sense" (80).

Unlike a Shakespearian soliloquy – where the character is front and centre on stage speaking aloud his thoughts to an audience – Prufrock’s indirect address “Let us go then, you and I” is a soliloquy to an unknown audience. Comparing a sunset to an etherized patient has no aesthetic appeal to the common reader. Additionally, the point of calling this poem a ‘love song’ lies in the irony that Prufrock never dares to voice out what he feels (Friesen & Masson). He gives utterance in soliloquy only to himself because he knows that (like Guido) no one will overhear him. This renewal of the dramatic monologue turned inward to voice out a narrator’s psychological realism has carried into postmodern works that succeed the modernist project to disrupt expectations. Similar to “Love Song”, Samuel Beckett’s play “Waiting for Godot” emulates a dual-conscious soliloquy towards no audience and concludes with no resolve.

If one were to read “Love Song” as a ‘divided consciousness’ – as Pound proposes in his letter to Harriet Monroe<sup>35</sup> – it will make the dramatic monologue read as a modernist form of self-expressionism (rather than a dialogue with the past). It is a modern form of expressionism in the sense that the narrative progression is fragmented and lacks connection to what precedes. There is no explicit connection to the epigraph and reads as a departure from tradition. Having identified several instances of ambiguous interpretations, the subsequent analysis demonstrates problematic aspect of comparative reading.

The narrative technique of dramatic monologue resembles the modernist’s stream-of-consciousness technique. If Eliot’s stream-of-consciousness is the principal subject of “Love Song”, it would be problematic to the notion that a new work should emerge from a past tradition. Although the poem speaks back to past works, its experimental narrative technique is reflective of Eliot’s local culture. Modernism’s ‘poetry of shock’ towards the masses and

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<sup>35</sup> Ezra Pound wrote a letter to Harriet Monroe (editor of *Poetry* magazine) in September 1914, whereby he describes “Love Song” as a lyrical imitation of Henry James’s stream-of-consciousness narrative method.

academia was the cultural zeitgeist in Eliot's era – making “Love Song” a product of local culture. This argument challenges the poem's adherence to the historical sense. Additionally, Eliot's adherence to Impersonality is challenged by the poem's highly organized stream-of-consciousness. The sequence of unrelated scenes does emulate a style of subconscious writing, but the poem's intentional rhyme suggests an underlying organization: “Streets that follow like a tedious argument / Of insidious intent / To lead you to an overwhelming question... / Oh, do not ask, “What is it?” / Let us go and make our visit. / In the room the women come and go / Talking of Michelangelo” (*LS* 17-20). The free verse sets out to structure rhyme in arresting ways and becomes central to the poem's nuances of tone and emotion. The tone is purposeful in its effort to disrupt linearity and deliver shock in unexpected ways. If one reads this ‘stream-of-verse’ as deliberate, it would make the poem personal in its expression. It would complicate Eliot's notion of Impersonality which claims that (mature) poetry is not an expression of personality, nor should it contain any trace of the author (*TIT* 39-40). The verse's fragmentation reflects *the poet's* anxieties over traditional abandonment; and suggests a personal critique of modern culture.

Comparing this argument to a quote from “Tradition” will demonstrate the limitations in Eliot's critique: “Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality.” If the poem's stream-of-consciousness technique is a highly organized one – that is meant to shock readers through juxtaposition – then the poem is truly personal and emotional in its origin. The underlying theme of a ‘divided consciousness’ is personal in its effort to innovate new techniques without adherence to traditional verse. The argument against a poet's ‘turning loose of emotion’ and ‘expression of personality’ are claims hardly different from Eliot expressing his own views through *Prufrock*. Eliot's opposition to Modernist's abandonment of tradition echoes the previous generation of Romantic's who likewise opposed Classicist's

abandonment of emotion. And so, it is difficult to estimate the extent to which Eliot's "Love Song" adheres unto his own principle of 'escaping from personality,' for it is personal in its origin.

My suggestion aligns with Ellman's claim to have found contradictions in Impersonality. Since "Love Song" emerges from this particular culture, it may speak to the contemporary reader as Eliot's personal viewpoint of his epoch. Expressing his viewpoint would not render it impersonal, but personal. On the other hand, because "Love Song" is reflective of Eliot's particular culture, one could also argue that the poem is not tainted by someone who identified as "a classicist in literature, royalist in politics, and Anglo-Catholic in religion" (Eliot ix). His personal sympathy for the great European tradition is nuanced and is not forced into "Love Song" – rendering it impersonal compared to what it could have been, namely a romantic poem written in the iambic pentameter. From Eliot's perspective, "Love Song" may actually be impersonal in its accurate portrayal of his era, regardless of personal opinion. Evidently, my interpretive paradox demonstrates Eliot's unique contribution to modernism. It contains nuances between historical allusions and also the abandonment of tradition.

To further illustrate this interpretive ambiguity, I refer again to the opening lines: "Let us go then, you and I / When the evening is spread out against the sky / Like a patient etherized upon a table" (*LS* 7-9). Prufrock compares an evening skyline to an image that does not follow from what preceded it. The open invitation ("Let us go then, you and I") has no explicit continuation from the epigraph and seems to disconnect from Dante. In fact, the poem's motif of disconnection between irony and sincerity; free verse and iambic pentameter; are all representative of Eliot's *personal critique* of his cultural zeitgeist (Materer 54). The binary contrasts do not speak to the common complaints, laments, or joys of mankind. It is a condemnation to this type of lover, and a critique to his culture for its spiritual dryness which

gets expressed most famously in his poem *The Waste Land*. “Love Song” is inaccessible to the common reader and limited in its public appreciation. This means that the poem is not in line with Eliot’s aesthetic theory which sought to ‘fit in’ with tradition. It lacks a quality of timelessness to it as a whole and is not traditional in the ordinary sense. This raises question as to whether the poem’s allusions are sufficient enough to reflect Eliot’s desired quality of timelessness or tradition. Neither is the poem Impersonal in its underlying purpose, for it speaks to the issues permeating his particular culture.

However, “Tradition” and “Love Song” are two texts where Eliot speaks healingly back to the cultural desert he found himself in. These primary texts are a pragmatic attempt to deal with cultural issues, rather than lamenting the disorientation brought on by the Great War. Eliot found himself in a culture where moral themes relevant to the human experience (love, death, virtue, faith) have become arbitrary concepts occasionally dealt with. For example, the Imagist<sup>36</sup> poets were critical of moralistic clichés and sought for an aesthetic that could paint striking similes and unpredictable rhythm in order to force language out of repetitive clichés. Eliot affirms in his essay that the “material of art is never quite the same” (TIT 38). This means that it is necessary for art to change, but this change is not synonymous with improvement.<sup>37</sup> The attempt to disrupt the rhyming couplet: “Let us go then, you and I / When the evening is spread out against the sky / Like a patient etherized upon a table” (LS 7-9) mirrors a zeitgeist of renewing poetic clichés. Furthermore, the ‘women’s talk of

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<sup>36</sup> Imagism is a modernist poetic movement that sought to replace abstraction and ornament with precise, concrete images, concise language, and rhythms shaped by ordinary speech rather than traditional meter. Pound uses the antique – the forgotten mode – as a corrective to the sham traditions of the past. His major poem of the war years, “Homage to Sextus Propertius”, translates and adapts passages from the writings of a difficult poet of the early Roman Empire into a modern American voice.

<sup>37</sup> Eliot’s claim that artistic development is not an improvement may have been a challenge to Friedrich Schleiermacher’s romantic hermeneutics. This hermeneutic presupposes an improvement to interpretation based on the advantage of historical perspective. This view supposes that the dead poets are more ignorant than contemporary poets.

Michelangelo' at a party is repetitive throughout the poem. It is cliché – mere artistic noise with no meaning to the ladies' personal lives. Tradition is supposed to be an awareness of how the past differs from the present, not a model that artists must repeat.

In the spirit of high modernism, this thesis will move onto a counterclaim to my former argument. If on the other hand, “Love Song’s” passages were to have been written through a genuine ‘stream-of-consciousness’, it *would* render the work Impersonal. There is a dimension to Eliot’s definition of Impersonality that does align with the idea of disconnection and shock – but only if the poem was written with minimal participation from the author. If “Love Song’s” stream-of-consciousness were to have been written subconsciously (as implied by the technique), then it does eliminate conscious participation from the author – rendering the work truly impersonal. Whether Eliot had consciously or unconsciously infused disparate images together is impossible to know; but the following counterargument reveals a significant paradox to the theory of Impersonality when compared with two different modes of reading free verse. The subsequent analysis demonstrates how a comparative reading of these two primary texts can unveil paradoxes in Eliot’s aesthetic philosophy. A brief reiteration of key aspects in Eliot’s theory of Impersonality shall help illustrate this point.

To reiterate Eliot’s definition of Impersonality: the author’s writing process should be a *subconscious* one that infuses disparate images into new compounds. “Tradition’s” analogy of a catalyst claims that “the newly formed acid [the poem]” has “no trace of platinum [the author]” (*TIT* 39). This means that a new compound of images or phrases should have no trace of an author’s personality. Impersonality tries to minimize subjectivity in the writing process: “a concentration which does not happen consciously or of deliberation” (*TIT* 42). A new poem achieves impersonality to the extent that an author’s emotions (or circumstances) give no shape to the outcome. Consequentially, this opens up the possibility for narratives to appear incomplete and fragmented, because the subconscious creative process may not

necessarily follow linearity. The subconscious synthesis of unrelated images, words, feelings, or phrases are suspended in the subconscious mind until some unexpected fusion takes place, where these ‘elements’ form into new compounds and become “the material” for poetry (*TIT* 40).<sup>38</sup> Impersonality gives poetry an autonomy that is independent of its creator. Thus, novelty is not personal innovation but entails a deeper origin. The essay refers to Canto XV in the *Inferno* to argue that the last quatrain just “came” to the author – autonomously – and “did not develop simply out of what preceded” (*TIT* 40). Eliot suggests that the mature poet is one who ‘allows’ images and words to appear subconsciously. This explains why the poem’s shocking imagery seems to take shape on its own accord and not from its proceedings.

With this framework in mind, a reading of Prufrock’s opening statement demonstrates an impersonal creative process. The opening stanza is impersonal to the extent that it brings together unrelated images: “Let us go then, you and I / When the evening is spread out against the sky / Like a patient etherized upon a table” (*LS* 7-9). The etherized patient appears unexpectedly, as if Eliot’s subconscious had synthesized unrelated images into something new and shocking. The inconsistent rhyme suggests minimal effort by the writer to force it into proper completion. This aligns with Eliot’s statement of Impersonality: “The emotion of art is impersonal ... [it] has its life in the poem and not in the history of the poet” (*TIT* 42). Eliot’s subconscious creativity sought to develop a character with an autonomous voice that is not the author’s – rendering the work impersonal. Assuming that Eliot’s free verse follows

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<sup>38</sup> In his essay “The Metaphysical Poets”, Eliot details what he initially meant with combining disparate ‘elements’ together: “When a poet’s mind is perfectly equipped for its work, it is constantly amalgamating disparate experience; the ordinary man’s experience is chaotic, irregular, fragmentary. The latter falls in love, or reads Spinoza, and these two experiences have nothing to do with each other, or with the noise of the typewriter or the smell of cooking; in the mind of the poet these experiences are always forming new wholes,” (287). Eliot is essentially highlighting a defining feature of Impersonality: the ability to take fragments from the world and the mind, which would otherwise remain unconnected, and forge new, integrated forms of experience.

a genuine stream-of-consciousness technique, this poem has no trace of the poet's personality.

Eliot's aim was to develop a theoretical approach to poetic writing that attains a higher essence of what poetry ought to be – one that is not merely self-reflective or expressionist. The essay's concluding remark “a poet cannot reach this impersonality without surrendering himself wholly to the work to be done” (*TIT* 42) implies that the work of “Love Song” was to give his new poetry and characters an autonomy that is independent of the poet's own personality. This quote correlates with the advent of New Criticism theory<sup>39</sup> which argues for a similar lens to readership. There is a paradox to Eliot's theoretical concepts which have been revealed through different lenses of close reading. Ellmann has also recognized this paradox, stating: “It is unclear from the title whether Prufrock writes the love song, or the love song writes him, whether it is by him or about him. But the rhetorical obsessiveness suggests that the subject is entrapped in his discourse like an actor imprisoned in a script” (76). This quote implies that “Love Song” is an impersonal work that is detached from authorial intention. Although Prufrock speaks through a dramatic monologue, his speech is repetitive and circular, suggesting that he is *produced by* the discourse he inhabits rather than in control of it. This idea is New Critical in its assumption that the text itself takes precedence over the author's intended purpose.

New Criticism can be linked to Eliot's theory of Impersonality in that they both shift attention away from the author's personal life to the literary work itself. New Criticism is an interpretive methodology that aligns with my reading of “Love Song” internal structures, juxtapositions, and interplay between formal devices within the work. Using the historical sense as a theoretical framework, my close reading has analysed the poem's use of allusion to

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<sup>39</sup> New Criticism is a formalist approach to literary analysis that studies texts as self-contained, autonomous objects, independent of external contexts such as the author's biography, historical events, or social conditions. New Critics focus on intrinsic features within a text—such as allusion, irony, paradox, rhyme, and structure — in order to uncover how these elements interact to produce unity and meaning.

suggest that he did adhere to his own aesthetic principles set out in “Tradition.” On the other hand, my analysis challenged Eliot’s concept of impersonality by drawing on poetic passages that do not necessarily align with his own aesthetics.

Those who defend art’s autonomy emphasize its formal features, the way that the work itself creates the rules by which it can be interpreted and understood. This idea can be traced to Impersonality as a method of depersonalizing the work from the poet’s context. Those who share in this aestheticist sensibility tend to emphasize the formal qualities of the literary work, as opposed to its thematic content. In this sense, what Prufrock expresses is not Eliot’s private interpretation of the modern world, but rather, expresses itself as an autonomous product that emerged from a particular zeitgeist. “Love Song” contains meaning that transcends its own status as ‘representation’, and goes beyond the understanding of its audience, even the intentions of its creator.

### **Contribution to the Academic Discussion**

This study’s findings can now be situated in relation to the critical positions outlined in the literature review. While earlier critics such as Matthiessen and Russel have emphasized “Tradition” as a polemic against Romantic subjectivity, my analysis of the formal features in “Love Song” suggests that Eliot’s rejection of personality is not complete or consistent. The ambivalence within stream-of-consciousness as highly structured verse implies authorial intention to direct speech to a certain end. On the other hand, the narrative juxtaposition between distant images and emotions does reflect Eliot’s definition of Impersonality as a creative process. In this respect, my findings yield a complexity to using Impersonality heuristically, since it involves two separate things: qualities within a poem and a poet’s creative process. This theoretical complexity aligns with Menand’s caution against treating

Eliot's criticism as a systematic methodology; demonstrating instead that its principles generate interpretive tension when applied to Eliot's own poetic practice.

Moreover, the paradoxes identified by Ellmann – particularly in the way that impersonality reinforces the very self-expressionism it seeks to escape – are shown to emerge not merely at a theoretical level, but through formal analysis of Eliot's allusive and fragmented verse. One may interpret Eliot's experimental form as an expressive medium, or as an impressionistic reflection of his cultural surrounding. The nuance of these forms complicates a clear answer to whether "Love Song" exhibits impersonality or not. Finally, while Kermode's conception of tradition as a definitive framework remains unexplored in this thesis, my findings suggest that tradition and the historical sense function more as a comparative mechanism through which modernist uncertainty is articulated. Taken altogether, these findings indicate that Eliot's most enduring contribution to modernism lies not in the coherence of his aesthetic philosophy, but in the productive contradictions between his critical ideals and poetic practices.

Although not explicitly addressed in this thesis's earlier critical framework, Harold Bloom's theory of poetic influence – set forth in his 1973 book *The Anxiety of Influence* – is a more recent development of Eliot's engagement with tradition. "Love Song's" revision of Dante, Shakespeare, and Homer enact the kind of anxious self-positioning Bloom identifies as characteristic of poetic originality. Prufrock's repeated self-comparison to heroic and prophetic figures is not a gesture of reverent continuity, but a confrontation with the past that compares itself through failure and inadequacy to achieve their level of greatness. In this sense, Prufrock's historical sense does not overcome the anxiety of influence but stages it. He does not escape the past's influence but dramatizes its inescapability. Tradition is not dispensable knowledge of history, but an acute awareness of how "the present is directed by

the past” (TIT 37). It is an antagonistic struggle to find one’s own voice within the entirety of tradition.

Future research may build upon this thesis by extending its comparative framework to Eliot’s later poetic works, such as *The Four Quartets*, in order to assess whether the tensions between tradition, impersonality, and poetic practice persist or are reconfigured over time. Further comparative studies could also examine Eliot’s historical sense alongside other modernist approaches to tradition, particularly those of Ezra Pound.

## CONCLUSION

This thesis set out to examine the relationship between T.S. Eliot's critical essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent" and his early modernist poem "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," with particular attention to the concepts of the historical sense and Impersonality. Through a comparative close reading, it has demonstrated that Eliot's poetic practice is deeply informed by his aesthetic philosophy, even while simultaneously exposing tensions and paradoxes within that philosophy. By appropriating Eliot's own critical terms as interpretive frameworks, this study has shown how "Love Song" works out competing demands of innovation and tradition that defined Eliot's modernist project.

The first part of the research question asked: to what extent does Eliot's allusion to classical texts in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" achieve 'the historical sense' – as defined in the essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent"? The analysis of allusion in "Love Song" reveals that Eliot successfully enacts the historical sense as described in his essay. My reading of the poem's engagement with Dantean epigraph, the Homeric Sirens, and the Hamlet passage shows how allusion functions not as an antiquarian reference, but as a structural and comparative device that situates modern psychological experience within a broader literary continuum. It also lends depth and structure to its fragmented, experimental form. Rather than functioning as decorative erudition, these allusions operate as a "mythical method" that situates Prufrock's psychological paralysis within a timeless framework of human inadequacy and moral uncertainty. In this respect, the poem confirms Eliot's claim that poetic originality arises not from the rejection of tradition, but from its creative transformation. The historical sense thus proves to be a productive interpretive framework for understanding why "Love Song" embeds the cultural past within a distinctly modern idiom.

At the same time, the application of Impersonality to “Love Song” yields more ambivalent results. The second part of the research question considered how Eliot’s theory of ‘Impersonality’ could be useful in explaining why the epigraph in “Love Song” refers to Dante’s *Inferno*. The poem’s highly organized stream-of-consciousness and cultural anxieties complicates any strict separation between poet and poem. My close reading reveals that “Love Song” can be understood both as an impersonal work that exceeds authorial intention and as a deeply situated response to the spiritual and social disintegration of early twentieth-century life. This tension exposes a central paradox in Eliot’s theory that emerged from multiple readings of select passages. My thesis argues that the highly conscious organization of rhyme is not exemplary of a subconscious and impersonal creative process. On the other hand, the poem’s shocking combination of disparate images – of disorienting jump cuts and disharmonious verse – does in fact align with Eliot’s elastic definition of Impersonality. Focusing on the interpretive ambiguity of Eliot’s ‘stream-of-consciousness’ technique, my suggestion is that “Love Song” reads as an *impersonal* and *personal* work.

Furthermore, my thesis sought for ways in which his early work adheres to aesthetic criticism and to determine whether or not his concepts serve as useful guide to poetic interpretation. Impersonality is a theory of poetic creation that was meant to critique the Romantic poet’s tendency to express personal emotion. It is not a self-imposed rule for creating modernist poetry. Moreover, the historical sense deals not with the interpretation of poetic texts but offers a way of relating oneself to the historical past. I argue that this result has lasting implications for contemporary readers who are faced with the question of how to engage with the literature and culture of the past. To the conclusion that these concepts are insufficient to be used as a reliable framework for poetic analysis. Rather than undermining Eliot’s aesthetic program, this paradox highlights the complexity of modernist poetics and underscores the difficulty of reconciling formal autonomy with historical consciousness.

Ultimately, this thesis argues that Eliot's most significant contribution to high modernism lies precisely in this unresolved tension between tradition and innovation, impersonality, and expression. "Love Song" not only demonstrates Eliot's critical principles but reveals their limitations. By revealing both the strengths and contradictions of Eliot's aesthetic philosophy, the poem affirms the enduring relevance of his critical thought while resisting any attempt to reduce it to a fixed system. In doing so, Eliot's work exemplifies modernism not as a break from the past, but as a continuous dialogue with it – one that will hopefully continue to shape literary criticism and poetic practice today.

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