

**Creative Impulse in the Modern Age:
The Embodiment of Anxiety in the Early Poetry of T. S. Eliot (1910-1917)**

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This hidden violence upon the self, this cruelty of the artist, this desire to take oneself as a piece of difficult, refractory, anguished material and form something of it; to brand it with a will, a critique, a contradiction, a contempt, a negation; this sinister and dreadful labour [sic] of love on the part of a soul, whose will is divided in two within itself, which makes itself suffer from delight in the infliction of suffering; this whole *active* 'bad conscience' has finally (as already anticipated) – as the true fountainhead of idealism and imagination – produced an abundance of novel and strange beauty and affirmation, and perhaps has really been the first to give birth to beauty at all.

(Nietzsche 2013; 73)

ABSTRACT

Through focused analysis of T. S. Eliot's early poetry (1910-1917), this work investigates whether, and if so, how anxiety may be worthwhile or particularly constructive for poetic production in the modern world. To provide intellectual history pertinent to Eliot's artistic development, the first chapter, "Global and Individual Anxiety pre-*Waste Land*," traces 19th century philosophical inquiry by which Eliot was likely influenced. Kierkegaard's concept of global anxiety and Nietzsche's "man of resentment" constitute two central theories of the modern person's intellectual and psycho-physiological predicament. The transition between a faith-based and empirical proof-based society in part explains the pervasive anxiety of pre-WW I Europe, as does the broader spiritual uncertainty engendered by a fomenting distrust of truths subjective, and hence necessarily objectively unverifiable. The state of mind in which Eliot writes *The Waste Land* (1922) cannot be fully understood without tracing the spiritual and moral concerns of the pre-war era and those that were strongly reinforced by the Great War itself.

The second chapter, "The Rhetorical Embodiment of Anxiety," demonstrates through close textual analysis that Eliot's early verse is both generative and remedial of anxiety. In order to explore the connection between pain and artistic production, I analyze the presence of skepticism, inaction, solipsism, and despair in Eliot's self-lacerating and morbidly self-conscious personae. I also discuss the rhetorical means by which Eliot conveys disembodied agency, stunted volition, and seemingly unattainable self-possession. His evocation of repetitive thought processes—mirroring self-paralysis as actions are dissociated from agents—coincides with his search for an overarching morality to transcend the banal propriety of his sociocultural milieu.

Chapter 3, "The Anxiety of Artistic Production," poses the question of how the modernist artist may *presume* (to recall Prufrock's persistent query, "how shall I presume?") to produce art

in the modern world. Is it possible in such a chaotic environment to create ordered art, and must art necessarily denote order or might it instead serve a different, more provisional purpose, one more compatible with modernism's disoriented and dissociated sensibilities? Preceding Chapter 4's exploration of the effects of artistic generation on the artist, this chapter traces anxieties with a dilatory function *before* the art's conception. Public reception of the work, the elusiveness of finding a cohesive voice, and the near-impossibility of justifying a poetic enterprise in the face of national instability and even tragedy: these are just a few of the anxieties plaguing the modernist artist, perhaps preventing him from even attempting to reflect the neuroses of his time. Even if the artist determines that there is something new to be *said*, he must overcome the metaphysical reality of death—which, for Eliot, represents the ultimate inability to connect with others—believing that timeless art lends meaning to the vast expanse of time beyond his own life.

The fourth chapter takes up the elusive symbiosis of sickness and poetic productivity by interrogating the psychophysiological symptoms that present themselves in the poet who sacrifices himself to artistic production. What had been a morbid fascination for the representatives of *fin-de-siècle* decadence becomes the subject matter of Eliot's forensic and increasingly impersonal style. Does attained artistic sublimity necessarily presuppose perverse health? Offering a reading of Mann's *Death in Venice* (1912), concomitant with Eliot's early verse, I demonstrate that the artist's ambivalently divided self—between a bourgeois and bohemian sensibility—manifests at the level of form. Both Eliot and Mann create personae representing the “delicate heroism suited to the times” and thus epitomizing the man of the era, for better or for worse (DV 46). I incorporate early Mann because both writers subtly lament the modern age's lost *telos* of beauty, evoking the tension between the finite body and the (perhaps) immortal mind by coupling spiritual sublimation and physical deterioration. I argue that the

artists' depiction of sickness parallels the moral, physical, and psychological downturn of Europe at the turn of the 20th century. The feckless and sick Herr Spinell of Mann's "Tristan" (1903), just as the languid Emma Bovary of Flaubert's classic novel (1856) half a century earlier, epitomize the potential for the modern consciousness, facing new economic, social, and spiritual pressures, to devolve into aggression and violence. These literary figures attest to and warn against reliance on material, rather than spiritual comforts, as meaningful categories of existence.

The final chapter, "Anxiety and the Bourgeois Sensibility," determines the "work," in a non-material but rather intellectual and spiritual sense, that Eliot's early verse accomplishes for his age. What is at stake in Eliot's poetic unveiling of the volatile psychological state hidden by the placid surface of bourgeois propriety, and how may he reveal its unsavory effects from *within* this very culture? Probing the ambivalence of the bourgeois cultural marker, I argue that Eliot's early verse exposes the inauthenticity of scripted communicative modes. Preventing modern people from engaging with eternal truths, moral conformism supplants independence of thought—while material success in a consumerist culture obscures the normative good—and these developments are detrimental for both social discourse and literature. The modernist artist broadly, and Eliot in particular, aims to combat the general ignorance of the insidious social tyranny engendering a widespread dissolution of the causative link between feelings and agency.

Eliot's early verse reflects his nascent conviction that bourgeois life is inconsistent with the façade that it insists on presenting. Yet ever-present in the poetry are glimpses of hope suggesting that subjectivity of experience and slavish pursuit of material goods might not necessarily imply the fundamental incommunicability of human souls. Manifesting his preoccupation with social and spiritual decadence, the embodied anxiety in Eliot's verse reveals his profound desire to confront it, both in himself and in his deeply troubled, war-embittered age.

INTRODUCTION

My principal concern in this work is to analyze the generative and inhibitive effects of anxiety in a poet himself acutely attuned to its manifestations, drawbacks, and peculiar benefits. Remarkably, in his early poetic enterprise Eliot creates personae embodying and refracting the ambient anxieties of his entire era. I have approached this subject from a variety of epistemological perspectives, including but not limited to influential 19th and 20th century philosophical theories of anxiety, formalist readings of poetry and fiction from the late Victorian and early modernist periods, and contemporary scholarship engaging with principal figures representing the “inward turn” of modernist literature. At stake is the salient and complex concept of the physical and mental state most conducive to the production of timeless art. Are anxiety, sickness, and pain prerequisites for the modernist artist’s creative impetus?

Evoking the fundamental tension between universal truth and individual desire, predilection, and emotion, my work “worries” over what Eliot accomplishes by writing worried poetry. I have chosen to focus on the verse written and published between 1910 and 1917 in part because it coincides with Eliot’s most direct engagement with tormented, self-plagued personae whose persistent self-questioning leads to no future remedial action. In this sense, Eliot’s early verse objectifies—by its very rhetorical embodiment—a crippling array of symptoms of the physical, moral, and spiritual devolution that he observes in European society and in which he takes an ambivalent part.

Limiting my textual analysis to this early period is also a way of treading humbly in the domain of ultimate questions and taking Eliot’s own advice, since “it is easier for a young poet to understand and to profit by the work of another young poet, when it is good, than from the work of a mature poet” (MTP 217). While varying in self-proclaimed literary quality and critical

reception, the poems with which I engage consistently probe the question of whether the modern person—facing rapid and seemingly irrevocable political polarization, a materially-oriented consumerist culture, and an increasing distrust of God, among other prevalent and distressing modern developments—must necessarily be sick, miserable, anxious, intellectually stunted, and spiritually *vide*.

Eliot's early poetic enterprise stems, then, from an inalienable desire to discover an authentic communicative mode even while acutely aware of the inherent ineffability of subjective truth and the linguistic limitations of an arbitrary, imperfect system of language. His self-locating within the modern petit-bourgeois cultural sensibility renders even more convincing his poetic evocation of the Faustian myth of human love and high artistry. Scientific and spiritual forms of knowing also seem mutually exclusive; the age simultaneously increases in empirical knowledge and declines in certitude and meaningful interpersonal communion. The resonance between Eliot's ultimate questions and those of both Nietzsche and Mann indicates that aggression may be a necessary byproduct of this persistent inner doubt and self-loathing. These trends help to explain why pervasive sexual anxiety may correspond with a general decadence of communicability in the context of a transactional consumerist culture in which words and actions are increasingly devoid of deeper meaning.

As a developing artist in this sociocultural context, Eliot relies on the poetic medium to probe the essential question—later adumbrated in Heidegger's 1927 *Being and Time*—of whether boredom and anxiety are more authentic affective ways of being in the world than happiness. As a whole, my work continues and honors this question's seeming insolubility. I hope to show that anxiety—Eliot's individual anxiety, the ambient anxiety of his era, the accrual of global anxiety over time—constitutes an underexplored and undeniable creative impetus for

Eliot and his contemporaries. Not in the clinical sense, but rather as a quotidian force with which the thoughtful individual necessarily grapples, modern anxiety is paradoxically both inhibitive and generative. This work, in addition to demonstrating the young Eliot's engagement with profound existential questions of meaning, affirms that anxiety is a valuable framework for analyzing the conditions of timeless artistic production in the modern world.

I. CHAPTER 1: Global and Individual Anxiety pre-*Waste Land*

This analysis of anxiety in T. S. Eliot's verse is rooted in a deep interest in the poet's relationship to things metaphysical. Eliot's ambivalent posture towards the spiritual and religious realms informs the oppositions he creates between coherence and dissociation, permanence and temporality. I seek to explore the effects of the poetic mechanisms employed by Eliot in evoking "ultimate questions": why we are here, for what purpose, if any, and how a rapidly changing world makes discerning these answers more and more difficult. Eliot considered the contemplation of these questions the most fruitful of human endeavors; his poetry is a testament to his perpetual search for truth. His vacillation between extreme self-consciousness and a desire to lead others to grace does not indicate a lack of will, but rather a profound humility before the absolute. The plethora of interpretative avenues engendered by his highly allusive and lyrical verse reflects the idea, central to Eliot's theory of the artist, that although the poet may never offer answers, he must ask ultimate questions for the common spiritual good.

With the advent of mass destruction through technology in the First World War and the surge of political polarization and radicalization following its conclusion, the interwar period artist—the painter, sculptor, musician, novelist, poet, critic—dwelled in an inevitably anxious age. It is perhaps the memory of those unsettled, post-World War I years that led Eliot to later pronounce W. H. Auden's 1947 poem, "The Age of Anxiety," to be "his best work to date" (Maxwell). Though not outspoken on the topic of mental health, Eliot persistently probes the issue of anxiety in his work, which suggests an inextricable link between his own anxiety and his creative impulse. Similarly, Eliot famously observes that "Dostoevsky had the gift, a sign of genius in itself, for utilizing his weakness; so that epilepsy and hysteria cease to be the defects of an individual and become—as a fundamental weakness can, given the ability to face it and study

it—entrance to a genuine and personal universe” (Eliot “London Letter”). Anxiety is perhaps one such weakness that may be generative in an artistic sense while destructive in a personal one.

Eliot’s pursuit of ultimate ontological questions is his way of facing and studying his own anxiety and that of his age. Like Eliot, I am less concerned with defining anxiety in clinical terms and more interested in its manifestations in literary structure and form. By planting within his oeuvre iterations of these questions, Eliot seeks to preserve the humanity of an increasingly anxious public. He is a figure anxious about his own anxiety, and many of his personas seem vapid, indecisive, bereft of volition—all aspects of his own persona that so tormented him. His troubled, nuanced, and ultimately formative relationship with his own anxiety significantly influences his poetic theory. Yet even more fundamentally, Eliot’s commitment to impersonal imagery and to avoiding confessional lapses corresponds with a conviction that “transmuting personal sufferings into art might be a way of transcending them while fashioning something worthwhile out of the damage” (Crawford 341). Eliot’s early poetry thus traces his own coming to terms with the idea of anxiety as worthwhile and constructive in a poetic sense.

Extending beyond individual anxiety, a sort of global anxiety is inevitable in the modern world. In his 1844 work *The Concept of Anxiety*, the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard defines anxiety as “the psychological state that precedes sin, that comes as close as possible to it, as anxiously as possible, yet without explaining sin” (Kierkegaard 112). Evidently, his concept of anxiety is inextricable from Judeo-Christian notions of innocence and guilt. Though published over half a century before Eliot’s maturity, Kierkegaard’s text defines anxiety in terms strikingly prescient of Eliot’s experience and those of his contemporaries. Kierkegaard views anxiety as originating out of a state of innocence; while there is no explicit “dissension and strife” in this state, the proliferation of possible courses of right and wrong action “begets anxiety”

(Kierkegaard 50). Presaging the modernist “inward turn,” the philosopher links anxiety and artistic production in positing, “a state of the soul like this would lend itself nicely to poetic treatment” (Kierkegaard 124).

The foundational text’s most recent translator identifies Kierkegaard’s contribution to philosophical and psychological inquiry: increasing humankind’s awareness of its unique capacity to reflect on what makes it unique as a species. According to Hannay, Kierkegaard

places anxiety where it belongs, in that dawning consciousness, peculiar to humankind, of a forced capacity to reflect on the manner of its own existence, among other things but somehow very centrally, on the nature or role of this very capacity...[His] purpose is to put readers back on track, to restore these topics to an ‘actuality’ where the problem is faced head-on. (Hannay xiv-xv)

This gift of self-analysis, though, comes with a liability: anxiety. This anxiety is perhaps a form of illness or side effect of membership in our species: “How should so brave and rich an animal not also be the most endangered, the most chronically ill, the most seriously ill animal, of all?” (Nietzsche 2013; 107). Yet such an illness may be constructive for the artist who sedulously confronts it with a posture amenable to viewing it as itself generative. In his early verse, Eliot does just this, exploring the ways in which the poet may rhetorically embody anxious patterns of thought, thereby writing poetry *about* anxiety.

There are striking similarities between Kierkegaard’s theory and many of Eliot’s early personae. The former’s text is characterized by a heightened sense of “not being in immediate continuity with our surroundings but in some way above or apart from them, able to see ourselves as selves in relation to the world, and to other selves with whom we share it” (Hannay x-xi). This language of being removed or lifted to a higher plane of consciousness is reminiscent of many of Eliot’s personae—paralyzed by indecision through crippling subjectivism, passive and estranged observers of a world seemingly beyond their reach. They might also be understood

as an iteration of Nietzsche's "man of resentment," who, unlike the "aristocratic man," "is not sincere or naïve, neither honest nor candid with himself," but rather: "His soul *squints*; his mind loves dark corners, secret passages and hidden doors, everything covert appeals to him as *his* world, *his* security, *his* comfort" (Nietzsche 2013; 27, emphasis original). The artist is mired in the subjectivity of his own experience; as he dizzily contemplates the panoply of possibilities at his disposal, he is stunned to inaction by "the possibility of possibility" (Hannay xi).

Paradoxically, this discomfort is both familiar to and comfortable for him (Kierkegaard 75). Unable to choose between myriad options, the anxious self thus inhabits "a hobbled freedom where freedom is not free in itself but tethered" (Kierkegaard 60). This uncertainty about an unknown future leads to anxious thought patterns "usually predicated on 'what if...?' questions" (O'Gorman xi). While the individual still maintains agency to navigate the array of options, he perceives his own power as ambiguous, becoming diffident and irresolute (Kierkegaard 53). Interestingly, according to Kierkegaard the young person is perhaps especially prone to anxiety because his spirit is furthest away from his physical body (Kierkegaard 88). His lack of experience precludes him from accurately predicting the effects of his actions. That anxiety may be at its most acute in the formative years supports the idea that Eliot's early poetry constitutes his most targeted exploration of anxious thought patterns.

Eliot's short 1915 poem, "Introspection," provides an illuminating image of anxiety as it affects the modern artist. Fittingly given Eliot's preoccupation with Laforguan irony, the poem's title elicits misleading expectations; while one hopes that introspection will result in fruitful self-awareness of how to escape the confines of one's own mind, "the claustrophobic writhing of a brain-snake, makes introspection anything but transcendent" (Vendler 99). The persona imagines anxiety as a snake that has swallowed its own tail:

The mind was six feet deep in a
 cistern and a brown snake with a tri-
 angular head having swallowed his
 tail was struggling like two fists
 interlocked. His head slipped along
 the brick wall, scraping at the
 cracks. (RM 273)

The alliterative opening lines with “six” and “cistern” contribute to the poem’s incantatory quality, luring one into an image of anxiety that reflects both its nature and its function. The embodied mind is at the bottom of a water reservoir with no chance of escaping the threat that it poses to itself, as if to mimic the way in which one’s anxiety drives his mind in a downward spiral. The mind and the predatory snake are thus effectively inextricable, evoking Nietzsche’s reference to “that grave, insidious illness from which mankind has not yet recovered, the suffering of man from the affliction called *man*” (Nietzsche 2013; 71, emphasis original). The imprisonment of the mind “six feet deep in a / cistern” creates a menacing sense that there is no way out except up—except overcoming anxiety—but the mind perceives this to be impossible, slithering around on the ground like the snake, “scraping at the / cracks” (5-6; RM 273). There is perhaps a connotation of sinfulness to the snake; its ordinary brown skin suggests that the anxious spiral is a diurnal occurrence for the persona, if not so familiar as to become mundane.

That the snake has swallowed its own tail reveals both obdurateness and a self-destructive impulse; it is no coincidence that the verb ‘to worry’ once meant to choke, strangle, or distress human beings or animals (O’Gorman 1002). The snake’s self-destructiveness, in turn, corresponds with the many references to the act of breaking, through enjambment, especially of the snake’s tri- / angular head. Through simile and poetic inversion, the persona compares the snake struggling to “two fists / interlocked” (4-5; RM 273). If one fist represents rationality and the other the irrationality characteristic of anxious thinking, the resulting image is a sort of arm-

wrestling match between the anxious thinker and himself, which is fueled and prolonged by pride. The snake at the bottom of the cistern thus helps to depict anxiety as “the harassment of the mind *by* the mind” (O’Gorman 1002).

One tenable explanation for the mind’s increased self-perturbation in the modern age is the dawning awareness that rationality is inadequate. While empirical reason enables us to answer previously insoluble questions about our world, it cannot reveal the spiritual truths we seek. Paradoxically, as scientific and technological achievement becomes normalized, the modern person gains cognizance of “the rootlessness of his or her own inner life; its lack of anchor in certainty or purpose” (O’Gorman 109). Perhaps even more fundamentally, reason cannot necessarily help us understand ourselves: “As far as our selves are concerned, we are unknown” (Nietzsche 2013; 3). The modern age is thus characterized by a general disillusionment with “the whole cultural myth of the ‘birth of reason,’ of the fantasized change from faith to thought as the guiding power of human lives” (O’Gorman xiii). Worry is first named in literature during the Victorian period, and the terms “irritability” and “neurosis” come to the fore as the field of clinical psychology consolidates itself as an empirical science in the early 1900s¹ (O’Gorman 27, 33, Routh). That self-help manuals flourish after World War I is perhaps one “result of [the public’s] lack of belief in anything worth believing” (Kirk 221). This sense of anomie, this *weltanschauung*, is inherently anxious.

Kierkegaard identifies this transition from a faith-based to empirical proof-based social order as the main causative factor of his generation’s anxiety. He foregrounds the disconnect between truth’s increase in “abstract clarity,” which corresponds to scientific or empirical knowledge-building, and the “constant decline” of certitude (Kierkegaard 167). Some 40 years

¹ This corresponds to Lightner Witmer’s 1896 founding of the field of clinical psychology.

later, Nietzsche points to a more spiritual unease, “the very *anxiety* that springs from having no ideal, the suffering from the lack of a great love” (Nietzsche 2013; 132, emphasis added). Both of their observations parallel Hugh Kenner’s more recent claim that we live “in a world where ‘we know too much, and are convinced of too little’” (Kirk 68). The overarching idea, spanning over 170 years of intellectual theorization, is that “empirical knowledge cannot itself suffice” (Kirk 251). A proud epistemological orientation—a dearth of humility before the unknowable—only leads to confused and unproductive frustration. In Kierkegaard’s, and eventually in Eliot’s view, humility is perhaps the only hope for ameliorating the modern person’s anxiety.

Yet even the humble are susceptible to what Kierkegaard terms global anxiety. Global anxiety is distinct from what may be called individual, or circumstantial anxiety, which is predicated on disturbing events or changes in one’s life. Global anxiety (*Angst*) is described by Heidegger in *Sein und Zeit/Being and Time* (1927) as well as Kierkegaard, who both “draw what can be called anthropological conclusions from the inherent presence in the human of a global anxiety, one that differs from a generalized anxiety that focuses on specific events and situations even though indiscriminatingly” (Hannay xxiv). Global anxiety can on the one hand be explained by Kierkegaard’s theory that anxiety has consistently accrued throughout the generations, so the effect of anxiety in the later individual is more pronounced because of the “quantitative accumulation that the race puts behind it” (Kierkegaard 64). More broadly, it is “the reflection of that generational sinfulness in the entire world”—a kind of objective anxiety as opposed to one’s own situational, or subjective anxiety (Kierkegaard 70). Kierkegaard’s vision of global anxiety depends on the idea, relevant to Eliot’s later theory of the Moral Imagination, that “perfection in oneself is therefore the perfect participation in the whole” (Kierkegaard 35). As is palpable in

Eliot's early poetry, the individual's anxiety is inveterately linked to the larger context in which he relates to others.

Twentieth century writers place an unprecedented emphasis on analyzing the implications of transcending the individual's worries within his own mind. Yet detecting a larger culturally determinative phenomenon at stake, they aim "to apply an antidote not to an individual but to—the new twentieth century" (O'Gorman 36). This epidemiological diction echoes George Lincoln Walton's 1908 statement identifying worry as "the disease of the age" (O'Gorman 36). Nietzsche presages Watson's proclamation in his 1887 polemic, *On the Genealogy of Morals*. He describes the detrimental effects of the condition that one must stymie his aggressive instincts in order to coexist in a society governed by laws designed to guarantee mutual protection (Holub xxii). This condition is the origin of Nietzsche's "bad conscience"—a largely unavoidable malady, or "an illness in the same sense that pregnancy is an illness" (Nietzsche 2013; 70, 74). If anxiety is indeed inevitable, humankind in general, and the artist in particular, might learn to reap its potential benefits.

Like anxiety, pain is perhaps a prerequisite for becoming an artist in the modern era. The narrator of Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* suggests as much in asserting "that nearly every great thing that exists exists 'in despite,' and was brought to completion despite distress and torment, poverty, abandonment, physical weakness, vice, passion and a thousand obstructions" (DV 8). As if in agreement, Eliot's friend and biographer, Russell Kirk, theorizes that "had there been no profound sorrow, there might have been no high poetry" (Kirk 365). While Eliot's poetry is notably impersonal, his raw emotion provides the "creative impulse, and his feelings would have been less intense, in brighter circumstances" (Kirk 350). Indeed, once Eliot remarried and "attained his desire of spirit, the creative impulse diminished" and his period of

producing canonical poetry had elapsed (Kirk 351). This connection between a wanting spirit and artistic production constitutes the rationale for my guiding question: Must the poet be and dwell in a state of anxiety to do his best work?

I must again emphasize that the kind of anxiety with which I am concerned is and should not be understood as a disorder in the clinical sense; while Eliot's anxiety is obsessive and sometimes even debilitating, it is largely generative and indelibly impacts his proclivity for poetic production. This aspect of anxiety explains the poet's ambivalence about his own nervousness and perceived inability to say just what he means. Anxiety, paradoxically beneficial, is perhaps also distinctly poetic in character: "The profounder the anxiety, the profounder the people. Only a prosaic stupidity will think of it as a disorder" (Kierkegaard 52). The artist's anxiety is not an imperfection; on the contrary, the "magnitude" of anxiety "is a prophecy of that of the perfection" (Kierkegaard 79). Foreshadowing the contributions of Sigmund Freud, Kierkegaard claims that "the more pristine the human being, the deeper the anxiety" (Kierkegaard 64). While somewhat ethically problematic, this theory supports the correlation between anxiety and artistic production, as does Nietzsche's 1871 adage, "Es giebt keine schöne Fläche ohne eine schreckliche Tiefe" ("No beautiful surface without a terrifying depth") (Nietzsche 1910; 159). Both reinforce the argument that anxiety, though often employed with a negative connotation, may be constructive and meaningful for the poet.

Eliot, who possesses what Miguel de Unamuno called the "tragic sense of life" (Kirk 4), seeks to establish a productive relationship between evoking the representative character of individual and global anxiety in the interwar period *and* somehow attenuating that anxiety through its very rhetorical expression. The crux is that the poet may capture anxiety by modeling its affective and expressive patterns, thereby harnessing its creative energy for good instead of

naught. It seems that he has no other choice, as “the more imagination a man possesses...the more he must torment himself” (Kirk 37). In other words, the artist is caught between loathing anxiety’s paralyzing effects and becoming addicted to its generative capability. Kierkegaard captures this tension in the chiasmus, “Flee from anxiety he cannot, for he loves it; really love it he cannot, for he flees from it” (Kierkegaard 53). In a sense, finding a rhetorical means of shaping and articulating a potentially self-paralyzing phenomenon in objective, poetic form frees one from subservience to inexpressible anguish: “Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion” (T&IT 111, Kirk 62). Harold Bloom theorizes that the strong poet is necessarily “both hero of poetic history and victim of it,” and thus when poetry becomes progressively more lyrical, subjective, and stems more directly from personality, the anxiety of influence is strongest (Bloom 62). If Bloom is right, then Eliot’s theory of impersonality can be seen as a mechanism intended to relieve his own anxiety of influence; in other words, impersonal, non-confessional poetry which diverts the poet’s own personality is a way of rendering the poetry *not* a release of emotion, but rather an escape from emotion. Part of this escape entails rendering the emotion no longer acute and isolated unto itself, but rather shared among a perceived and actual community. By transmuting personal pain through what, in his famous 1919 essay on tradition, Eliot calls the “objective correlative,” the artist harnesses his fundamental weaknesses, gaining access to poetic material that would not exist without them (Eliot “London Letter”).

It should no longer be taken as a coincidence that much of Eliot’s canonical poetry is conceived and written when he is feeling physically, spiritually, or emotionally unwell (Crawford 332). His poetry functions to *contain* a moral, psychological, and social dilemma; it is a way of writing himself out of trouble. Anxiety is a precondition for the poetry itself. In writing

poetry that embodies anxiety, Eliot is able to objectify a crippling constellation of symptoms by subjecting them to a formal, condensed, disciplined articulacy. This view of anxiety echoes Freud's argument that paranoia cannot be treated from without because its peculiar symptoms are themselves already a form of self-treatment (Pfau Nov. 2016). Eliot's early verse is both generative and remedial of anxiety—about himself as an artist, about love and sexuality, about mass human conflict, about the futility of time and the specter of life devoid of spiritual meaning.

This is not true for Eliot only. In general, the artist's anxiety is perhaps "curiously beneficial" in a rhetorical sense because it leads him to "try to act by taking everything into account" (O'Gorman xiv). This anxious disposition and circular thinking process expose avenues of thought that might otherwise lie unexplored. The aspect that fascinates and troubles Eliot is the impossibility of "retelling" worry in language, since worry is "always something other than the words by which it's known to others" (O'Gorman 20). This very elusiveness is the impetus for his aesthetic theory of impersonality. Anxiety is intimately related to language "because it mimics the patterns of logical analysis and in this sense it is *possible* to talk about and to represent" through linguistic and rhetorical structures (O'Gorman 20). Yet for Nietzsche and for Eliot, language can only convey the inner-workings of the mind to a certain extent: "Language, by employing subjects and verbs, may deceive us into believing that there are autonomous agents free to perform actions," but in reality, "there is no substratum of being that is independent and able to choose one action over another" (Holub xix). Similarly, words seem to possess a generative and creative capability that attempts evocation, but is in fact limited only to description; Mann's Aschenbach, for example, "felt painfully, as he had often done, that words are able to praise physical beauty but not to reproduce it" (DV 42). Language is incapable of

escaping the subjective, and if one can find no way of describing himself and his experiences in objective terms, then experience itself is rendered necessarily incommunicable.

The personae evoked in Eliot's early poetry demonstrate the role of language in contributing towards, or ameliorating, anxiety. The figures embody reticence and diffidence, suggesting that "reserve is precisely muteness," and "language, the word, is precisely what saves, saves from the empty abstraction of reserve" (Kierkegaard 150). The artist's role is to learn to live with anxiety, using "the pain, the distress, and the anxiety in which they reflect religiously upon" as a generative artistic force to prompt others to seek broader spiritual truths (Kierkegaard 130)—in short, to try to understand and articulate the meaning of human existence. This pursuit corresponds with the modernist writers' impulse to engage "with worry as a feature of the interior mental spaces they represented," thereby making anxiety both a subject and a crucial rhetorical component of complex literature (O'Gorman xvii).

Artists achieve a particular effect by writing meta-poetry about anxiety. In other words, the poetic medium becomes a vehicle for expressing the very difficulty, and perhaps impossibility of conveying psychological amplitude. A moment in "East Coker," the second of the *Four Quartets* published in 1940 (RM 925), is a prominent, albeit anachronistic example: Eliot's persona deems his "way of putting it" to be "not very satisfactory: / A periphrastic study in a worn-out poetical fashion" (RM 187). This is a humble appraisal or shoulder-shrug of the verse's own value. Eliot is evidently already plagued by a tragic sense of his poetic limitations in 1914 when he writes to Harvard friend Conrad Aiken in enclosing some short poems: "I know the kind of verse I want, and I know that this isn't it, and I know why. I shan't do anything that will satisfy me (as some of my old stuff *does* satisfy me – whether it be good or no) for years, I feel it more and more" (MH 270, emphasis original). The irony lies in the fact that if he were

really aware of why the poetry wasn't satisfactory, he would simply transcend it at that moment, not some number of years into the hazily uncertain future.

Eliot's letter suggests that one prominent aspect of the artist's anxiety, even when he believes his own work of value, is the inconsistent rhythm of quality production. Eliot oscillated between crippling worry and astounding productivity, sometimes overcome by anxiety and other times suppressing it "with a determination approaching the inhuman... becoming in his way what *The Waste Land* terms a 'human engine'" (Crawford 378). Perhaps viewing labor "as something indispensable to the preservation and justification of existence in society" (Freud 49), the young Eliot worked tirelessly as a student, lecturer, and London bank clerk (Crawford 320). Taking time for leisure felt unnatural to him (Crawford 299), and he dwelled in inanity; a loved one noted in 1918 that "it is more than one can endure to see a young man so worn and old-looking" (Crawford 296, *The Letters Vol. 1* 254-255). Eliot suffered a sort of physical and psychological collapse in 1919, sleeping for two full days and writing to John Quinn: "I am worn out. I cannot go on" (Kirk 79), an admission all the more concerning since his behavior, even among intimate friends, was generally "subject to an iron control" (Kirk 45). His confession serves to explain why Ezra Pound writes to William Carlos Williams: "The point is that Eliot is at the last gasp" (Kirk 79). Later in 1921, "Eliot the Seeker" suffered a "crisis of the Self" (Kirk 59) during which he sought the expertise of a psychiatrist, admitting that he "could not quite switch off" his frenetic mind (Crawford 389). Of course, these traumatic years (1919-1921) also coincided with considerable poetic productivity—a late 1919 letter to Quinn anticipates a long poem, which Eliot mentions again to his mother in late 1920 (RM 547-548). This poem is, of course, *The Waste Land*, published in 1922. It was only "later in life [that Eliot] came to suspect that sickness and poetic creativity could be linked," perhaps even more intimately when the

sickness pervades both body and mind (Crawford 332). Tracing the poet's early verse serves to contextualize and explain the anxious mental state out of which comes *The Waste Land*.

II. CHAPTER 2: The Rhetorical Embodiment of Anxiety

There is an undeniable connection between pain and artistic production. It seems that “important human achievements—in art and in the history of ideas—come primarily from sorrow” and the insoluble dilemmas of life in the modern world (O’Gorman 147). In identifying Eliot as “a worrier himself and a writer on worry,” O’Gorman deems Eliot “worry’s first poet” (O’Gorman 17). He is right to foreground the young Eliot’s profound uncertainty, loneliness, and proclivity to skepticism, inaction, solipsism, and even despair—all of these tendencies are nurtured by his inherent predilection for mysticism and doubt as well as his studies of Indic philosophy and language at Harvard. His self-steeping in French Symbolist poetry not only influences these strands of thought, but also inspires Eliot’s early poetic enterprise (Marx 66).

One technique that Eliot likely gleans from his reading of Baudelaire and Laforgue is an early iteration of his theory of the objective correlative: locating psychological tensions in an external object. The 1914 poem “The Burnt Dancer,” for example, confines the persona’s brain within a flitting moth:

Within the circle of my brain
The twisted dance continues.
The patient acolyte of pain,
The strong beyond our human sinews,
The singèd reveller [sic] of the fire,
Caught on those horns that toss and toss,
Losing the end of his desire
Desires completion of his loss.

(MH 62-63)

There is in fact a dual confinement: that of the circle circumscribing the persona’s brain and that of the “singèd reveller of the fire,” or the moth itself. The sense of imprisonment is thus perhaps even more pronounced in this poem than in “Introspection,” in which the mind is plunged deep into a cistern and merged with a predatory snake. The “twisted dance” that continues is

reminiscent of the anxious thought patterns characterized by an almost choreographed mundaneness. Like the dancer of a formal waltz, the “patient acolyte of pain” is all too aware that he will carry out the same motions, endlessly reaching the same result, because he is hopelessly “caught on those horns that toss and toss.” Perhaps the most horrific image derives from the magnificent chiasmus: “Losing the end of his desire / Desires completion of his loss.” Like the snake swallowing its own head in “Introspection,” the chiasmic mechanism renders desire and loss virtually inextricable from each other. The ambiguity of the closing line hinges on the missing verbal phrase; it can be read with the mind-moth as the subject, in which case the pain seems too much to endure, and the “completion of his loss” thus a welcome yet tragic end to suffering. Yet it can also be read as “Desires [are the] completion of his loss,” implying that desire, which manifests on the individual level as will and volition, necessarily leads to loss. The underlying question is whether desiring anything is worth the pain of either attaining it and losing it or never attaining it at all.

The 1917 poem, “Portrait of a Lady,” also explores disembodied will, yet evolves to imagine the human brain no longer trapped within an external object but instead inhabiting a flesh-and-bone person. The poem stylistically resembles much of the verse of Jules Laforgue, especially “Autre Complainte de Lord Pierrot” (“Another Complaint of Lord Pierrot”). Eliot is perhaps drawn to the French poet out of a shared impulse to investigate the psychological undercurrent of polite upper-crust society. Just as Eliot in several early poems, Laforgue skillfully articulates “anxieties involved in conversations — real, abandoned and imagined — between men and women” (Crawford 122). The persona of “Portrait of a Lady” establishes the scene somewhat indirectly through two textual devices. First, he addresses the reader in the second person: “You have the scene arrange itself—as it will seem to do—” (RM 10). This is

distinct from “I arrange the scene” or “The scene arranges itself”; the former implies more agency on the persona’s part, while the latter indicates a disembodied will, as if the scene were to arrange itself of its own accord. The mechanism is more precise than either of these; the persona does have the scene arranged, but there is something odd about this grammatical construction that absconds the persona’s actual role in the setting of the scene. What is the relationship between the scene’s arrangement and the persona’s volition? The rhetorical structure lends the phrase a troubling ambiguity that permeates the poem’s overall tone. The second way in which the persona indirectly establishes the scene is related to the part of the line after the caesura: “—as it will seem to do—”. Yet again, the persona’s description evades making a direct causal link between action and result. It is unclear whether the scene that arranges itself reflects reality or whether it only *seems* to the persona that he wills a tangible change. In both cases, the lady referenced in the title could be either real or a composite of many futile encounters, and the conversation could be actual or imagined. The effect is a compounding urgency of the persona’s self-questioning about perception and reality, about how to escape the confines of his mind.

The persona exhibits many manifestations of anxiety in his conversation with this real or fictive woman. Of course, the conversation is on the surface one-sided; it seems plausible that Eliot chooses to confine the male persona’s contributions to an interior monologue because he recognizes that his *own* conversations with women to date are “so inauthentic that he could not bear to reproduce them in written form” (Vendler 87). Tellingly, Vendler’s own prose reinforces the distancing of self palpable in the male persona’s lack of a “public idiom” in the conversation; in referring to “the words that Eliot presumably heard himself saying aloud” (Vendler 87) Vendler at once implies that Eliot’s own difficulties communicating meaningfully with women

provide the dialogic model for “Portrait of a Lady” and that Eliot, like his persona, is a strangely passive listener hearing *himself* fail to communicate.

One probable result of this self-alienation, on the part of both Eliot and his persona, is a heightened attunement to its corresponding sensory effects. The male persona may not be capable of contributing anything but inane, scripted lines to the woman, but he is all too aware of his own sensory response to the unfolding conversational debacle: “Inside my brain a dull tom-tom begins” (RM 11). In the 1910 edition, Eliot writes the line as “a droll tom-tom,” yielding it perhaps even more tempting to conflate the persona with the poet, who is precisely funny in an odd way (MH 328). The onomatopoeic sound of “tom” puns on the poet’s name (O’Gorman 18), suggesting that he recognizes this circular thinking as innately personal. The voice in the persona’s head is not an exterior pressure, but rather an interior anxiety. This distraction prevents him from expressing his thoughts and desires candidly with the woman: “—And so the conversation slips / Among velleities and carefully caught regrets” (14-15; RM 10). The prevalence of velleities², wishes or inclinations too feeble to engender action, reinforces the ambiguous agency in the poem’s second line. The alliterative “carefully caught regrets” contributes to the effect of the uncertain verb tense, as it is impossible to regret an action that one “carefully caught” before committing; the persona is overly tentative in his actions because he considers all possible ramifications of a given statement in a paralyzing process of self-screening before he speaks. Perhaps this is what the woman indicates by saying, ““Ah, my friend, you do not know, you do not know / What life is, you who hold it in your hands”” (II, 4-5; RM 11). If the woman is fictive, this dialogue could reflect the persona’s own anxiety about lost

² Velleities are pervasive in the German original of Hermann Kurzke’s *Thomas Mann: Life as a Work of Art* when he discusses Mann’s 1903 short story, “Tristan.” The ancient Greeks called the phenomenon *akrasia*; in translating the term, Willson opts for “fecklessness,” or ineffectuality, which is certainly an aspect of velleities yet fails to encapsulate the latter’s air of social decorum.

opportunities. An inability to recognize what life is and why we live is the epitome of an existential crisis; yet unsettlingly, the persona fails to address the urgency of the dilemma, saying “I smile, of course, / And go on drinking tea” (II, 10-11; RM 11). The smile does not convey lightness of spirit, but rather “falls heavily” and the woman easily detects it as forced (III, 9; RM 13). This persona would be sympathetic to Eliot, “always reticent about his private tribulations” (Kirk 1), who in 1915 edits out the original 1910 version’s telling line: “And all the disturbing things that are left unsaid” (I, 7; MH 327, 331). In keeping his countenance and remaining “self-possessed” the persona avoids making a scene or disrupting a pleasant December afternoon taking of tea (II, 38; RM 12). Both the poet and the persona are thus masters of dissembling, committing themselves to pleasantries and propriety on the exterior, yet simultaneously “unable to love or to escape from the stuffy closet of self” (Kirk 10). This personal torture is “the Hell of energy exhausted altogether...and the way to it may be paved with good intentions” (Kirk 109). Eliot is here exploring a bourgeois inanity, a sense of propriety bereft of fecundity.

Yet the persona’s façade crumbles when he scrutinizes the disconnect between his inner mind and his presentation to others. He wonders if his ideas are “right or wrong” (II; RM 43), reflecting his search for an overarching morality, a vision of Eliot’s Moral Imagination, that could redeem him from banality. He is able to stay composed in mind and manner “Except when a street piano, mechanical and tired / Reiterates some worn-out common song / With the smell of hyacinths across the garden / Recalling things that other people have desired” (II, 39-42; RM 12). In these lines replete with nostalgia and anxiety, the persona cannot numb himself to others’ base desires because they tempt him to indulge his own—even as he yearns for higher meaning. The language of reiteration and recall reinforces the idea that the piano constitutes an unwelcome temptation, conjuring from without desires that the persona has abnegated and overcome. The

pathetic fallacy of the tired mechanical street piano also reflects the persona's search for an exterior scapegoat for the dull tom-tom already pounding inside his head.

The persona reinforces the concept that pain induces repetition in describing "the voice" that haunts him (II, 16; RM 12). The familiar, dissonant, ominous voice returns "like the insistent out-of-tune / Of a broken violin" (II, 16-17; RM 12). The broken instrument, which would likely emit no sound at all, conjures an unsettling aura as if to presage the uncomfortable conversation that will soon ensue between the persona and the woman. The sounds are not only atonal, but also redundant, and the frenetic music evoked foreshadows the synesthetic sense of the fragrance of hyacinths. This blending of sensory input invests perception itself with an amorphous quality, which in turn reveals the persona's anxiety about the subjectivity of experience and his fundamental inability to organize isolated fragments of perception into a cohesive whole of reality. This subjectivism explains why the horrific truth of the incommunicability of souls comes as a surprise to the woman, but not to the persona. The latter dramatizes Kierkegaard's "spiritless" individual who "has become a talking machine" that does not truly listen and respond, but merely repeats "philosophical rigmarole" by rote (Kierkegaard 115-116). Even in the persona's company, the woman is thus disappointed by the impossibility of communication. She consequently feels utterly alone: "For everybody said so, all our friends, / They all were sure our feelings would relate / So closely! I myself can hardly understand" (III, 19-21; RM 13). Her extreme disillusionment is palpable in the enjambment of "So closely!", as she comes to terms with the insufficiency of frivolous conversation for the modern person. The woman attributes the failed fruition of their friendship to fate; reinforcing the sense of misplaced agency, she does not blame the persona's insincere smile, rendering his troubled spirit opaque to others,

for the hopelessness of organic spiritual communion. Like the persona, she has perhaps come to view the effects of subjectivity as ineluctable.

The crippling consequences of subjectivism are perhaps most famously conveyed in “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” drafted largely during Eliot’s 1910-1911 year abroad in Paris, finished in Munich as he suffers from cerebral anemia, and published in *Prufrock and Other Observations* in 1917 (Crawford 332). The poem’s rhetorical structures, derived from Victorian dramatic monologues (Vendler 111), embody anxiety in part through circularity. The fifth line, “The muttering retreats,” reflects the nervous repetitive tendencies later exhibited by the persona: “The yellow fog that rubs its back upon the window-panes, / The yellow smoke that rubs its muzzle on the window-panes” (15-16; RM 5). It is as if the persona, upon reaching the end of the line, is dissatisfied with his evocation of the scene and must reconsider. The shift to smoke as opposed to fog, and muzzle instead of back, seems not to be the point; it is, rather, the uneasy repetition of the similar yet slightly off-kilter images in close succession. After 1914, yellow fog acquires an additional interpretive valence as a reference to the Great War, though Eliot claims in a 1936 letter that the version published in 1917 “does not differ from the [1910-1911] original in any way” (RM 363). Prufrock lingers on the image, perhaps out of insecurity about the inherent impossibility of rendering something real out of arbitrary, limited language. The yellow substance thus circles in on itself, as if saying the same thing in two barely different ways were to render it more believable, as if the persona feels compelled to establish a lacking textual authority. “It is impossible to say just what I mean!,” he exclaims, revealing his painful awareness of ineffability (104; MH 45). The persona of Eliot’s 1915 poem, “Do I know how I feel? Do I know what I think?,” similarly laments: “There is something which should be firm but

slips, just at my / Finger tips” (14-15; RM 269). Both action and artistic expression evade the poet mired in excruciating subjectivism.

The refrain in which Prufrock questions whether, and if so, how he should presume is perhaps the most striking indication of anxious circular thinking, or “the need to repeat, and the desire to affirm and confirm” (O’Gorman 1014). In the space of barely 15 lines, the persona poses the first variation of his question—“So how should I presume?”—repeats it again, and then questions whether he should presume at all. The proximity establishes the question as an obsessive tendency rather than an innocuous, fleeting worry. Pervasive in Prufrock’s relentless barrage of self-directed questions is a sense of urgency—he is remarkably anxious about his own anxiety. The indentation of each refrain serves to highlight his circular and unproductive thinking by visually separating it from the un-indented, constructive self-reflection. This suggests that there is something monotonous and ineffectual about the self-questioning; he has already asked himself these questions, and to no avail in terms of engendering meaningful action.

As distinct from true action, Prufrock is trapped within an obsessive, self-paralyzing cycle in which he dissociates the effects of his actions from his own agency. As an anxious thinker, he methodically analyzes the implications of his decisions, becoming immobilized in “well-informed, well-argued, impressively analyzed *indecision*” (O’Gorman 107, emphasis added). Prufrock’s tortured consciousness of his own agency is antithetical to Hannah Arendt’s neo-Aristotelian account of action: “To act means to take an initiative, to begin ... to set something into motion (which is the original meaning of the Latin *agere*)” (Arendt 177). In other words, action is never something derivative but instead positively originates a state. Prufrock’s actions are entirely derivative because he is not sufficiently aware of his own agency, whereas action should establish the agent’s active role in the world “in an original and transformative

sense” (Pfau 2013; 395). Action should be unique to the agent’s identity and should tangibly change his surroundings. Rather than merely perceiving events as happening *to* him, the agent’s true action “pivots on an act of imagination that approaches ‘world’ as a space of sheer possibility” (Pfau 2013; 395). Evidently, Prufrock’s anxious circular thought processes inhibit these acts of imagination, denuding the world around him of its space of possibility.

“Prufrock” has often been called a poem about “the disease of solipsism,” or the view that the self is all that can be known or proven to exist (Spears Brooker 132). Eliot himself develops a theory that the present stripped of the potential for action may lapse into a form of solipsism in his 1920 essay, “Modern Tendencies in Poetry”:

If you imagine yourselves suddenly deprived of your personal present, of all possibility of action, reduced in consciousness to the memories of everything up to the present, these memories, this existence which would be merely the totality of memories, would be meaningless and flat, even if it *could* continue to exist. (215, emphasis original)

According to Eliot, meaning is derived not solely from the sum of one’s memories, but rather from the possibility of engendering future action. This is because “life is always turned toward creation; the present only, keeps the past alive” (MTP 215). If the potential to act in the present and to shape one’s future is damaged, one’s sense of identity—one’s sense of self and how that self may understand other selves also shaping their own presents—is necessarily disturbed.

Even the minute particularities of punctuation reinforce the concept that the persona’s alienated agency and consequent manner of reasoning severely inhibits his ability to engage in true action. For example, in the famous line—“To wonder, ‘Do I dare’ and, ‘Do I dare?’”—the humble comma before the second question acquires an immense rhetorical role (38; MH 6). Within this single line, the persona asks himself the same question, yet not without a slight pause. The pause signifies that the persona is cognizant of the circularity of his thinking; the comma represents his brief hesitation before capitulating and falling again into the quagmire of

self-interrogation. The comma may also indicate the omission of any logical thought progression *between* the two instances of “Do I dare?” in the persona’s mind. In other words, he censors or condenses his stream of consciousness after judging it unproductive and irrelevant for himself and for the poem, thereby emphasizing his inability to avoid returning to the same question. This circular thought, forming a prison of the self within his mind, is “both an emblem of security, and a mental practice of confinement, a pattern from which the mind struggle[s] to be free” (O’Gorman 1011). The compact nature of this self-questioning is perhaps even more striking than the “How should I presume?” refrain because there is no buffer of poetic commentary between the two iterations of the question.

A distinct but equally compelling reading is that the “Do I dare?” questions refer to hypothetical actions. The repeated self-questioning thus reveals that the persona seeks to occlude his own impulses, even from himself. His shame is perhaps related to Nietzsche’s theory of the “taming” of man, which has “made not only the joy and innocence of the animal repugnant to him, but also life itself – so that sometimes he holds his nose, and, like Pope Innocent the Third, makes a blacklist of his own horrors” (Nietzsche 2013; 53). This act of viewing oneself as a horrific creature who does not deserve to act on his impulses in turn contributes to the persona’s sense of self-alienation.

Prufrock’s iterative second-guessing also prompts him to perceive that he has already presaged his entire existence. He claims, “For I have known them all already, known them all— / Have known the evenings, mornings, afternoons” (49-50; MH 6). The persona has spent such a prolonged period, perhaps even years of his life, thinking circularly that he believes he can predict how he will respond to environmental stimuli—in short, how his evenings, mornings, and afternoons will be shaped, if not in content, in essence. Yet Prufrock’s ostensible prescience

poses a certain paradox: his undeniable diffidence before decisions seems incompatible with the capacity to amass worldly experience of his life's trajectory, or of female eyes and arms, as the next two stanzas suggest. His seemingly brazen statement thus indicates a lack of *will* to experience rather than a reflection of how much he has actually experienced. In this sense, the refrain in which the persona purports to have "known them all already" is a form of a defense mechanism insulating him from his own self-judgment for spurning social interaction. He yearns to convince himself that conquering his anxiety is unnecessary because he has already encountered these "types" of people and concluded that he has nothing to gain from them. The persona erroneously, out of fear or perhaps out of pride concomitant with social anxiety, thinks there is no reason to act because the future is foreknown (Hillis Miller 140). His temporally removed self adumbrates the contours of his life, obviating meaningful action in the present.

The verb tense also supports this sense of self-alienation via the juxtaposition between the imagined future and the stagnant present. "I have known" is slightly different from "I knew" them in the past, though it still suggests a tangible distance between the persona and himself. The young Eliot seems to grapple consistently with self-alienation, one prominent spiritual effect of anxiety; in the undated (perhaps 1915) poem, "In silent corridors of death," which Eliot considered largely a failed poetic attempt, the persona depicts himself as alienated from his own soul: "Somewhere the soul crying. / And I wander alone" (4-5; RM 275). This self-alienation reduces the persona to a state of vacuous apathy, as conveyed in the asyndetonic line "Without haste without hope without fear" (6; RM 276). Similarly, the Prufrockian persona has already known everything that could happen to him, but that knowledge has become obsolete; this collapsing of tense conveys temporal anxiety, as if the persona were somehow able to realize these social interactions posthumously. The self-distancing accentuates the persona's tone of

resignation, which is in turn reflected in the non-sequential ordering of “evenings, mornings, afternoons” (50; RM 6). Beginning the list with the end of the day foregrounds the idea of exhaustion and finality, of a quasi-posthumous persona at once inert and resigned from the possibility of remedial action. The result is the pervasive and unsettling notion that knowledge has no fecundity; knowing them all already, instead of corresponding with active life experience, necessarily leads to no place or action. The “I have known them all” refrain is thus the persona’s desperate effort to legitimize his own social anxiety and to avoid admitting that it prolongs his agonized indecision. One fatal consequence of his subjectivism, then, is that the present collapses past and future into “a frozen time” (Hillis Miller 140). Prufrock, trapped in the confines of his damaged sense of self, is incapacitated by the very failure to seek answers *beyond* the scope of subjective experience.

In the persona of Prufrock one may recognize much of the young Eliot’s characteristic mounting tension between “his alienated erotic self” and “his transfixed social self” (Vendler 113). Prufrock is in fact the most successful early fusion of these two fractured aspects of Eliot’s identity, which had heretofore been “separated out into various incompatible discourses in his early experiments in language” (Vendler 113). In Prufrock Eliot supersedes the objectified mind-moth of “The Burnt Dancer” or the mind-serpent of “Introspection”; the dissociated self is no longer tethered to an external object but rather “integrated as an inevitable, even necessary companion” to the poet’s own physical body (Vendler 107). Prufrock is a notable achievement, then, not only because it marks the poet’s most cohesive and compelling mastery of voice in his young adult life, but also because it corresponds with Eliot’s own self-recognition within the modern-day petit-bourgeois persona that he creates. In Prufrock, internal doubts about purpose or meaningful interactions are no longer envisaged in an external metaphor but are instead

embodied within a tormented persona simultaneously bearing resemblance to, but also distanced from the poet himself.

Prufrock seems to show us that one way to cope with persistent inner doubt is to stoke oneself in aggression. This may be true not only for Prufrock, but also for the poet in general; Bloom theorizes in a chapter on purgation and solipsism that the “sublimation of aggressive instincts is central to writing and reading poetry” (Bloom 115). Manifesting (perhaps repressed) aggressive tendencies, the persona states in the stanza with the “there will be time” refrain that “There will be time to murder and create” (28; RM 6). While it may seem incongruent that the persona employs aggressive diction even as he dithers before moments of decision, Eliot deliberately employs the jarring word “murder” rather than simply “destroy” because he does not simply aim to oppose creating and neglecting to create. Instead, the word “murder” hints at the “constitutional inclination of human beings to be aggressive towards one another” (Freud 145). Evidently, one aspect of the Prufrockian disposition is oscillation between self-paralyzing indecision and parlous aggression. Prufrock’s equilibrium is voluble, regardless of external causes of anxiety—and this volubility in and of itself engenders anxiety. When one attempts to act only after taking everything into account, he merely entertains scenarios, evading rationality itself (O’Gorman xiv). The *telos* is lost as possibilities proliferate; similarly, the goal is not to reach a tenable course of action because there is no longer a normative decision-making framework. In this dearth of possible paths forward, the individual becomes desperate: “Alas for this mad, melancholy beast, Man! What wild fantasies are visited upon this beast, what perversity, paroxysms of hysteria, madness and *bestiality of ideas* spring forth immediately, if he is impeded in the slightest way from being the *beast in deed!*” (Nietzsche 2013; 79, emphasis original). This continuous suppression of the urge to act—due to an inability to make decisions

and an indomitable sense that one must contain his desires in order to protect societal decorum—will necessarily eventually result in aggression.

The young adult Eliot is plagued by an ambivalent understanding of the roles of aggression, intellectual communion, and sexual intimacy in relationships. His 1914 complaints to Aiken about “sexual anxiety and about not having lost his virginity” coincide with his “longing for whole communion with another human being” (Crawford 160, Kirk 351, L1 80-82). In a sense, the sexual anxiety that Eliot experiences between 1910 and 1915 can be seen as just another aspect of his deep anxiety about connecting to others in general. The nervous sexual attacks he suffers during his year in Paris and later as a young Londoner (Crawford 152), then, are perhaps due in part to his troubled companionship with Aiken and with the young Frenchman Jean Verdenal³ (Crawford 255). Another prominent source of Eliot’s sexual anxiety is his prolonged and unconsummated epistolary relationship with the young Bostonian with a propensity for drama, Miss Emily Hale (Crawford 190). Yet perhaps the single most influential aspect of Eliot’s sexual anxiety—his “sexual needs as a young man and his sensitivity to the symbolism of love as a binder or a rebinder”—is his somewhat impulsive 1915 marriage to the British Vivien(ne) Haigh-Wood (Spears Brooker 127-128, Crawford 262). Vivien, according to the Eliots’ friend and perhaps her sometime lover, Bertrand Russell, is a woman “who lives on a knife-edge, and will end as a criminal or a saint” (Crawford 244). The emotional strain of living with and trying to connect to a woman intermittently on the verge of suicide proves paradoxically conducive to Eliot’s poetic production. His exploration of the idioms of sexual

³ Eliot and the medical student Verdenal were close friends who lived in the same boarding house during Eliot’s Parisian year. Verdenal was killed in 1915 in the trenches during the Great War, and Eliot dedicated *Prufrock and Other Observations* as well as the *March Hare* (MH) Notebook to him (RM 370-371). Their mutual affinity for pondering the absolute is evident in their correspondence. Verdenal writes in a playful, yet mystically inclined 1911 letter to Eliot: “The will to live is evil” (L1 20, Crawford 155).

frustration and the breakdown of communicability between the sexes is thus not only a poetic, but also a daily, mundane endeavor. Eliot even claims to have “deliberately died” in the year of his marriage “just to go on with the outward form of living” (Crawford 262). Tragically, his marital relationship thus comes “to reinforce rather than alleviate his need for transcendence” (Spears Brooker 128), and he consequently finds himself still searching for both a physical and spiritual-emotional Absolute.

Eliot’s dramatic yet honest language evokes the Faustian myth⁴ of the mutual exclusivity of human love and high artistry. The implication is that Eliot cannot at once be a productive poet and an ordinary human being; the poet must eschew worldly pursuits to dedicate himself to literary creation, which is a “painful and unpleasant business: it is the sacrifice of the man to the work, it is a kind of death” (L1 471). His relationship with Vivien, both a source of sexual frustration and emotional discomfort, is a constant strain on the young Eliot as a husband and poet. In a Miltonic sense⁵, Eliot, like the persona of “The Triumph of Bullshit,” craves an unprecedented mental and cultural communion with a woman, but cannot find it. In his post-1915 poetry, Vivien’s mental illness can be understood “both as an inhibiting and creative force” (O’Gorman 1011). One of the couple’s acquaintances, Stephen Spender, writes that Vivien “found Eliot inhibiting and inhibited, yet worshipped him,” and Russell famously says that “she married him to stimulate him, but finds she can’t do it” (Kirk 33).

⁴ The Faustian myth can be traced from Christopher Marlowe’s 1592 tragic play, *The Tragical History of the Life and Death of Doctor Faustus*, through to Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s early 19th century tragic play *Faust*. It is a trope also present in the image of eyes, or lakes, in Stéphane Mallarmé’s 1887 poem “Le pitre châtié” (“The Chastised Clown”) (Stan 2016).

⁵ Milton, John. “The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce.” *The Complete Poetry and Essential Prose of John Milton*. Edited by William Kerrigan et al., New York, NY, Random House: Modern Library Edition, 2007.

This sense of impending mutual frustration is conveyed through the ABAB structure of “The Triumph of Bullshit⁶,” classified among Eliot’s juvenilia and published in 1910. It resembles rhyme royale, except with 8 lines and an inconsistent rhythm; it thus does not quite fit any pre-established form, just as the persona’s style of flirtation does not appeal to any of the ladies. They interpret his attempts to converse as galamatias, just gibberish or senseless talk of an “unduely [sic] vociferous / Amiable cabotin,” or poser in the dramatic sense (17-18, RM 253). It is clear that the persona’s level of sophistication puts women ill at ease, inhibiting meaningful interaction. The line, “Quite innocent—‘he only wants to make shiver us.’”—is an utterly self-conscious attempt to rhyme with “fumiferous” (23; RM 253). The forced rhyme parallels the persona’s desperate desire to engage both intellectually and sexually with women, revealing that this is a poem about discomfort in a variety of social settings involving women—not only in the most intimate of contexts. The meta-analysis of the sexual act itself, replete for the poet with

⁶ The final two stanzas of the poem are reproduced here for reference. This is obviously not Eliot’s most enlightened work, even among his juvenilia, but the level of aggression epitomized by the male persona, to be further discussed in Chapter 4, is notable:

Ladies who think me unduly vociferous
 Amiable cabotin making a noise
 That people may cry out ‘this stuff is too stiff for us’—
 Ingenuous child with a box of new toys
 Toy lions carnivorous, cannon fumiferous
 Engines vaporous—all this will pass;
 Quite innocent—‘he only wants to make shiver us.’
 For Christ’s sake stick it up your ass.

And when thyself with silver foot shall pass
 Among the theories scattered on the grass
 Take up my good intentions with the rest
 And then for Christ’s sake stick them up your ass.

(RM 252-253)

both intellectual and bodily discomfort, undermines the spontaneous and natural joy of the intimacy sought by both Eliot and his persona.

The poem is farcical not only in a sexual sense, but also in a bodily one, conveying the more uncomfortable aspects inherent in human intimacy. The poet's deft choice of diction is one manifestation of the persona's aversion to total disclosure, both emotional and physical. Crotchety⁷ may mean irritable, but the word's resemblance to the body part is undeniable. Similarly, constipated can mean inhibited or slow-moving in the sense of interpersonal communication, but necessarily connotes the unpleasant and painful bodily dysfunction. In his Afterword of Mulk Raj Anand's 1935 novel *Untouchable*, E. M. Forster⁸ criticizes our collective sense of shame about natural bodily processes and lust. From this reticence and prudishness, he says, "grave evils have resulted, both physical and psychological, with which modern education is just beginning to cope" (Anand 142). Eliot's persona is perhaps one example of the dastardly psychological effects of this impulse to stigmatize and shame unavoidable biological needs.

The sexual anxiety embodied in Eliot's poetry corresponds to a long literary and philosophical tradition. According to Kierkegaard, "all poets posit anxiety" when describing love, "in however pure and innocent a light they present it" (Kierkegaard 87). Yet the acts narrated in "The Triumph of Bullshit" and in the 1914 poem, "The Love Song of St. Sebastian," are far from beautiful, pure, and moral (Kierkegaard 87). If Kierkegaard claims that anxiety is still present even when an erotic description is "undisturbed in its joy by any lascivious reflection," it must be all the more dominant in such a violent sexual scene (Kierkegaard 87). Eliot writes to Aiken in 1914 that the poem "is not good, is very forced in execution, though the

⁷ "Crotchety" and "constipated" feature prominently in the poem's first stanza. See Chapter 4 for the reproduction and further analysis of stanzas 1 and 2.

⁸ Forster would one day express jealousy after reading *The Waste Land* (Kirk 65).

idea was right, I think” (RM 267). He may have considered this poem a largely failed attempt in part because he was troubled by the level of sexual anxiety expressed therein—what must this suggest, he might ask himself, about the man who wrote it?

“The Love Song of St. Sebastian” dramatizes both self-imposed and interpersonal violence toward the persona’s object of sexual desire, corresponding with the relevant biographical idea that “nowhere is [Eliot] more completely an aesthetic prisoner of his class than in the realm of sexuality” (Vendler 96). Nietzsche posits in 1877 that “when humankind is no longer able to express its aggressive instincts externally, it turns them inwards,” either through psychological self-torture or physical self-harm (Holub xxii). The persona demonstrates this kind of intense self-loathing when he implies that the only imaginable situation in which the woman would take him “without shame” is if he “should be dead,” in the odd, convoluted subjunctive tense (19; RM 266). Granted, the persona states that he is “hideous in [her] sight,” which does not necessarily imply that others would find him unattractive or otherwise undesirable (17; RM 266). Yet in this intimate context, it seems irrelevant what other women may think; the persona seems to define his self-worth based on this woman’s evaluation alone. The persona’s sexual anxiety spurs violence and aggression directed at both himself and his object of desire. Lyndall Gordon claims in *Eliot’s Early Years* that the persona’s “martyrdom is not only self-inflicted, but is an exhibitionist attempt to gain a woman’s attention” (Gordon 61). Perhaps he is also anxious that after he gains her attention, she will not reciprocate his desire or the desire will persist unconsummated. The strange perversions of the sexual act described in the poem are further complicated by the fact that the persona perhaps merely *entertains* the violent intentions; the conditional verb tense—“I would flog myself until I bled” (4; RM 265)—renders indiscernible whether or not he actually fulfills them. The violent acts would be horrendous in and of

themselves, but all the more troubling is the dramatization of premeditated violence⁹. The persona is perhaps motivated by what Nietzsche describes as “the satisfaction of being able to wield, without a scruple, his power over one who is powerless, the delight ‘*de faire le mal pour le plaisir de la faire*’, the delight in sheer violation; and the lower, the more abject the creditor is in the social scale, the more this delight will be cherished” (Nietzsche 2013; 50). It is thus clear that the sex of the object of affection is exceedingly relevant; the male persona perceives the woman to be powerless, facilitating the “combination of erotic desire and erotic victimization” which in turn only intensifies his sadistic pleasure at causing her suffering (Vendler 101).

There is a strange dissonance between this portrayal of violence itself, whether solely imagined or actually executed, and the physical details of the woman on which the persona fixates. The obsessive mental return to a single physical trait reflects the collapsing of time and space necessitated by a subjectivist perspective. As he strangles the feminine object of desire with a towel, the persona focuses on her “curled ears” in a desperate attempt to cling to something objectively beautiful. The question that arises is why the persona would kill the woman he loves; it seems that he believes that only through violence can he achieve communicability: “I think that at last you would understand” (32; RM 266). His desire to cause the woman harm stems in part from his intense jealousy that other people should desire the object of his affection and love, however perverse or strange is this rationale: “And I should love you the more because I had mangled you / And because you were no longer beautiful / To anyone but me” (36-38; RM 266). It is also a direct result of his inability to act; the persona is so mired in inaction that he would congratulate himself for *doing* something, no matter how

⁹ The evocation of a sexually disturbed and consequently violent persona is not original to Eliot. Ricks identifies Swinburne’s *The Leper* (1866) as a potential source of inspiration. Similarly, Grover Smith traces a link from Yeats’s *He Wishes His Beloved Were Dead* (1899).

hideous, to her. By eliminating the possibility for anyone else to find the woman desirable, he would reserve her for himself. The idea that this is the only situation in which the persona can imagine a woman being faithful to him reveals the adverse effects of a severely attenuated sense of self.

Yet this poem is not a glorification of violence, but rather a warning of what could happen in the case of extreme sexual anxiety. Anxiety is nothing if it is not irrational, and the epitome of irrationality is murdering one's lover on the mere supposition that another could desire her, in order to spare himself the pain of losing her. The persona says "You would love me because I should have strangled you / And because of my infamy" (34; RM 266). Similar to the persona's evocation of self-harm, his use of the double subjunctive renders uncertain which of the conditions he actually meets—that is, whether or not he strangles the woman or merely imagines that her love would be the result of such violence. The use of the conditional in "You would love me" and the conditioned predicate in "because I should have strangled you" is, by definition, ambiguous, as if to evoke the persona's habitual second-guessing of the threshold between wishing and willing, of the limits imposed by his subjective perception. The convoluted grammatical construction could indicate a real action, yet it could also indicate that the persona now feels he should have acted more forcefully, but fails to do so. The latter reading only becomes more compelling in context. If one views the persona as at least somewhat consistent across Eliot's early poems, seeking notoriety seems incompatible with his painful diffidence; infamy would thus be synonymous with another form of self-flagellation. "The Love Song of St. Sebastian" should thus be read as "an exploration of violent, sometimes self-loathing behavior that may emanate from sexual frustration" (Crawford 203). The product constitutes the poet's hypothetical dramatization of the dire consequences of rampant sexual anxiety.

This discussion of sexual anxiety embodied within Eliot's early verse is not as interesting in its own right as it is a manifestation of something palpable in Eliot's age. His poetic experiments in these transitional years between young adulthood and married life suggest a nascent conviction that "erotic passions and anxieties ripen within the sheltered, partly repressed sphere of personal life" (Gay 1984; 403). Eliot's own sexual anxiety, just one facet of his perceived inability to connect meaningfully with others, expresses a societal disenchantment with the fecklessness and inaction of bourgeois social propriety—rules, both written and unwritten, inherited from the Victorian middle classes of the 19th century (Gay 1984; 404). The bourgeois century has earned a reputation for hypocrisy; 20th and 21st century moralists describe it as "amply supplied with teachers of denial instructing their fellows in reticence, evasion, or silence before the facts of life" (Gay 1984; 404). The biological need for sex is one such fact of life, but the reality of the difficulty of actual married life is another. Sexual anxiety is thus certainly connected to romantic anxiety in general, or the fear that one may not be "enough" for his object of romantic desire. The 1915¹⁰ unpublished poem, "In the Department Store," conveys such percolating concerns in the mind of Eliot's persona:

The lady of the porcelain department
Smiles at the world through a set of false teeth.
She is business-like and keeps a pencil in her hair

But behind her sharpened eyes take flight
The summer evenings in the park
And heated nights in second story dance halls.

Man's life is powerless and brief and dark
It is not possible for me to make her happy.

(MH 56)

¹⁰ In his 1970 *T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound*, Donald Gallup concludes that this poem must have been composed in 1915. Significantly, this is the year of Eliot's marriage to Vivien Haigh-Wood. While it is impossible to determine whether the poem was composed before or after their marriage, it is clear that issues of conjugal satisfaction were pressing on Eliot's mind in this time.

While by no means as compelling a depiction of the breakdown of the myth of romantic bliss as the chess pieces making conversation in *The Waste Land*, the persona's perception of the lady reveals a cheapening of, if not an utterly faithless outlook on, romantic involvement. The false teeth, the disconnect between the lady's outer appearance and her inner dreams, the structural chasm between the first and second stanzas (which focus on the persona's evocation of the lady) and the final one (which enters the psyche of the persona himself)—all of these elements correspond with a sense of falseness, impossibility, futility. The false teeth on a seeming young woman and the "heated nights in second story dance halls" in tandem conjure a pervasive aura of financial as well as moral decadence; the persona here depicts a woman whose deficient hygiene parallels her unsavory living conditions, presumably without sufficient calefaction. The pun on the pencil in her hair and her "sharpened eyes," perhaps a commentary on excessive makeup, is itself cheap, as if the persona were rhetorically performing the very dissolution he observes. The last stanza, mimicking the brevity of life through its abbreviated length, also contributes to this overwhelming sense of breakdown when its origin is revealed—Eliot in fact owes his penultimate line to Bertrand Russell's *The Free Man's Worship* (1903), who in turn owes it to Hobbes' *Leviathan*: "and the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short" (MH 213-214). Eliot's own complex and perhaps sexually jealous relationship with Russell yields it tempting to assume that the last line may be a byproduct of his developing feelings of inadequacy towards his own wife. In the pre-Vivien and early marital years, then, it is evident that the reciprocity between pain, discomfort, and anxiety is the single most significant factor of Eliot's poetic inspiration.

III. **CHAPTER 3: The Anxiety of Artistic Production**

A discussion of the anxiety of artistic production could take multiple forms, angles, and even directions due to the range of postures with which the artist approaches his art throughout the production process, as well as the variety of reactions to different iterations of the product. The issue at hand in this chapter is whether there are manifestations of anxiety to which one who is artistically inclined (if such a characteristic could be identified or described) is necessarily predisposed. In other words, in this chapter¹¹ I explore aspects of the artist's anxiety that are not necessarily dependent upon the successful production of art—anxieties that precede the writing process and that may in fact have a dilatory function.

While modernist artists are particularly conscious of the reception of their work, this consciousness in fact originated long before the turn of the 20th century. With respect to British literature in particular, after Ben Jonson (1572-1637) “the shadow fell, and with the post-Enlightenment passion for Genius and the Sublime, there came anxiety too, for art was beyond hard work” (Bloom 27). Bloom here refers to the transition between the focus on mimesis and imitation characteristic of the Renaissance (1300s-1600s) and the obsession with individual genius and innovation inaugurated with Enlightenment (1650s-1800s) thinkers such as Kant, Goethe, Voltaire, Rousseau, and Locke (Bloom 50). Though the anecdote may strike the contemporary scholar as humorous, it is “a striking testimony to the anxiety of creative spirits in the presence of critics” that Monet began subscribing to clipping services in the 1880s (Gay

¹¹ In the fourth chapter on sickness and poetic productivity, I will investigate adverse physiological responses to the generation of art. In the timeline of production, these psycho-emotional elements of artistic production ensue as a direct result of the actual generation of art; the issues at stake in the present chapter, on the other hand, might actually impede artistic production.

1998; 113). According to the prevailing Western aesthetic sensibility, Monet should not have been exceedingly anxious about monitoring the minutiae of public approximations of the quality of his art. Yet he might have been concerned about his work's breadth of appeal, or that the energy required to understand and appreciate it might exceed the level generally exerted by the public. Eliot expresses a similar anxiety in his 1920 essay "Modern Tendencies in Poetry": "The contemporary poet is advised that he ought to make a wider appeal, that he ought not to require of his public, erudition – that is, trained sensibility or subtlety of feeling – that is, concentrated attention" (MTP 212). Tinged with a tangible sense of contempt, Eliot implies a position he will later articulate—that the reader should be willing to *work* to understand a poem. This expectation is in part a manifestation of Romantic period hermeneutics; Eliot here extends the Wordsworthian, chiasmic concept that it is not the reader who evaluates the quality of a given poem, but rather the poem that tests the reader's hermeneutic proficiency. The writer, then, is faced with the challenge of establishing and maintaining a wide readership while demanding of the reader an advanced degree of deliberate, concerted interpretive energy—without which the body of work's meaning and/or significance is invariably obscured. Yet even while this model presupposes that the reader "be faithful to the spirit of the work," one may not necessarily identify the author and his intentions as "a fixed point of meaning" (Rajan 579). The writer thus remains acutely anxious, perhaps precisely about the *impossibility* of a fixed meaning, and paradoxically still about the potential misinterpretations thereof (Rajan 579).

Even before anxiously anticipating the reception of one's work, the artist may first worry whether there is anything new to be *said*. For Eliot, the very realization of or uncertainty about this question is the poet's "first shock," and is in fact patently healthy for poetic production: "He discovers that something new to him and to him unique is valueless because it has already been

better said by someone else” (MTP 213). Gaining considerable critical attention is Bloom’s somewhat chronologically sweeping iteration of this anxiety, which he calls the anxiety of influence. Bloom argues that “the covert subject of most poetry for the last three centuries has been the anxiety of influence, each poet’s fear that no proper work remains for him to perform” (Bloom 148). He notes that this form of consciousness—placing oneself as an artist in a continuum with other major and minor poets—is distinct from the anxiety of style, which has existed “as long as there have been literary standards” (Bloom 148). In his 1919 essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” Eliot addresses this question of how the artist fashions his unique identity or voice in the face of a dense and ever-evolving plethora of literary influences, to some of which, given early attachments to style and paradigms of form, he may feel strictly indebted. According to Eliot, the poet in training “can neither take the past as a lump, an indiscriminate bolus, nor can he form himself wholly on one or two private admirations, nor can he form himself wholly upon one preferred period” (T&IT 107). Given the precise posture considered by Eliot to be imperative, it is conceivable that achieving the desirable and most constructive relationship to both past and contemporary poets might prove an anxiety-producing challenge. According to Bloom’s theory and a version of Eliot’s, even when the poet does produce something worthy of standing alongside his peers, he must remain conscious that “no poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone” because “his significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists” (T&IT 106). Put similarly, one’s past and current artistic accomplishments are forever examined in comparison to the projection of what one might become with just a bit more assiduous effort: “To divine the glory one already is becomes a mixed blessing when there is deep anxiety whether one has become truly oneself” (Bloom 101). Art is only ever examined, in other words, relative to other art.

That the past and present are inextricably linked is a concept palpable in both Bloom and Eliot as a young critic—yet the two are sharply at odds with regard to how the writer should relate to the accumulation of past voices when producing new art. For Bloom, one’s predecessors necessarily prompt “immense anxieties of indebtedness” as the strong maker struggles with the extent to which he has successfully *created* himself as a unique and individual artist (Bloom 5). Yet while Eliot acknowledges that that the poet steeped in his relation to and continuity with the past “will be aware of great difficulties and responsibilities” (T&IT 107), for him these past voices are largely enabling. His art thus gains a heightened significance as a manifestation of his carefully wrought aesthetic and formal sensibility with respect to past and contemporary artists. Each fully realized poem should embody this sensibility since it is necessarily “an evasion not only of another poem, but also of itself, which is to say that every poem is a misinterpretation of what it might have been” (Bloom 120). When the poet is seen (or sees himself) as responsible for creating art that maintains the integrity of his most deeply held formal convictions, each product of that conviction gains immense self-reflective and interpersonally communicative significance among the artist’s literary milieu and broader audience. As such, for the artist the poem is a compact and consequently high-pressure form.

Related to the question of whether anything new remains to be conveyed in poetry is that of whether the modern world is an appropriate context for art. In an environment haunted by imminent and actual war, death, destruction, and broad cultural and national *nerviosité*, what is the role of the modernist artist in making sense of chaos through formally ordered art? If it must simultaneously reflect the world in which it is produced and be unified around aesthetic principles (Spears Brooker 119), is art *possible* around the turn of the 20th century? In his 1923 review of *Ulysses*, Eliot considers Joyce’s use of myth as an underlying organizational schema,

“a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history” (UOM 478). In other words, while the novel’s plot itself demonstrates the “awareness of fragmentation” and “dissatisfaction with brokenness” shared by Joyce and Eliot (Spears Brooker 123), Joyce’s project signifies a “step toward making the modern world possible for art” (UOM 479). Proclaiming *Ulysses* “the most important expression which the present age has found,” Eliot criticizes one contemporary for deeming the work “an invitation to chaos, and an expression of feelings which are perverse, partial, and a distortion of reality” while he determines it to be precisely the opposite (UOM 477). In his review, Eliot thus suggests that Joyce achieves a feat analogous to Laforgue, who demonstrates the capacity of poetry to capture, express, and make sense of “the emotional quality of contemporary ideas” and feelings (MTP 216). Both Joyce and Laforgue, and of course Eliot, are not simply good writers or literary innovators. Their value lies, rather, in their insightful representation and refraction of their respective times’ challenges and neuroses.

Emerging as a prominent poet in early 1920s Europe required facing, in an artistic sense, one such stressor: the reality of war. War, and the presence of mortality in the media, brought the inevitability of death into the forefront of individual and national consciousness. In this sense, even once the pre- and interwar poet decides that there is something he must say—“not that he wants to say something, but that there is something to be said”—he must accomplish this in a span of time that seems perhaps more than ever to be ever-closing in on him (MTP 214). He is anxious, then, about his own finiteness and whether he will be able to produce his life’s work in the indefinite years of life allotted to him by an often increasingly doubted and distrusted greater

power¹². Because we must die—and are even more acutely attuned to our own mortality in the wartime context—we necessarily “experience life as something accidental, transient and which could be otherwise, so to speak” (Simmel 76). Perhaps even more than the average person, the poet is exceedingly aware of the juxtaposition between the finite body and the potential to transcend its limitations through art.

Death, in a crucial sense, does not simply denote the end of one’s existence, but additionally corresponds with the expiration of one’s capacity to fulfill his life’s work—hence Mallarmé’s famous regarding of death as “precisely the discontinuity between the personal self and the voice that speaks in the poetry from the other bank of the river, beyond death” (de Man 181). De Man’s diction hints at the fundamental value of literature—the capacity to outlive its creator—for those who subscribe to the prevailing naturalistic framework, thus believing in limited time. Because “time is only ever ‘spent,’ expends itself, is lost, wasted, consumed, and thus denudes present experience of its meaning and fullness no sooner than it has taken place” (Pfau Dec. 2016; 1), an art form that transcends time has the potential to confer meaning on an existence moving *de facto* towards death. Death is also mysterious and unknown, constituting “a future from which we anxiously recoil, either because it eludes our attempts at ‘accurate prediction’ or because we shudder at what we foresee” (Pfau Dec. 2016; 3). Uncertain of how long he has to work, the artist dwells in a perpetual state of poetic anxiety, imploring “the Muse for aid in divination, which means to foretell and put off as long as possible the poet’s own death, as poet and (perhaps secondarily) as man¹³” (Bloom 61). It is even plausible that the poet

¹² Thomas Mann’s *Gustav Aschenbach* will provide a relevant fictional example of this death-oriented anxiety—and its potentially unsavory effects—in the following chapter.

¹³ Thomas Mann’s *Doctor Faustus* presents an almost opposite, yet equally anxiety-driven scenario in which the protagonist infects himself with syphilis precisely to compel himself to finish his life’s work in a consciously and deliberately truncated period of time.

rebels more forcefully than others do “against the consciousness of death’s necessity,” simply because his sense of self is inveterately linked to his art (Bloom 10). In the event of an unpropitious or unexpected death, the poet’s purpose may be tragically unrealized and his existence consequently bereft of (or at least robbed of its fullest) meaning¹⁴.

Death also engenders anxiety because it in a sense represents the extreme of Eliot’s entrenched fear, shared widely in the modern world, of failing to connect with others. As I have shown, Eliot’s early verse often depicts human existence as a sphere “of dereliction, isolation, loneliness, and thus abandonment to nothingness,” suggesting that “the heart of death is the absence of relationship” (Ratzinger 81-82). Death terrifies because it makes impossible in post-life what in life already seems nearly insurmountable—connecting meaningfully, both physically and spiritually, with others. The vision of a world in which interpersonal communion is elusive and perhaps unachievable “is precisely what guarantees the barrenness of the wasteland,” because for Eliot, “without connection, there can be no birth; without reconnection, no rebirth” (Spears Brooker 124). It is only the possibility of future remedial action—the birth and vitality of volition—that gives Eliot hope and allows him to function as a poet, husband, and citizen while still susceptible to “the compulsive analogue of the melancholy of poets” (Bloom 58). On a still higher plane, the poet’s fear of expiration is not only personal, but also universal, as if each poet’s success effectively “battles against the death of poetry” (Bloom 12).

On the micro level, however, the poet’s quotidian task, especially in the European interwar period, remains shaping the chaos of contemporary life into art. While “the horror and

¹⁴ Bloom astutely notes that the poet’s consciousness is curiously analogous to that of Milton’s Satan: “The state of Satan is therefore a constant consciousness of dualism, of being trapped in the finite, not just in space (in the body) but in clock-time as well” (Bloom 32). Satan’s, and the poet’s, is a dual—spatial and temporal, not to mention a spiritual or cosmic—anxiety.

ecstasy of everyday existence” is given, the method of transforming it into pattern must be found (Spears Brooker 110). Referring to this uniquely poetic task as finding “a vehicle adequate for the expression of any modern thought or emotion” (MTP 218), Eliot identifies as a particularly modern problem an increased cognizance of the difficulties of rendering complex meaning in language¹⁵. He first notes that on the linguistic level English poses “peculiar difficulties in writing” because of its complex roots and its composition of “diverse elements” (MTP 218). Yet part of the difficulty transcends lingual barriers—in other words, is inherent in relying on language, itself an arbitrary and imperfect system, to communicate. Not even the literary or poetic consciousness can escape “from the duplicity, the confusion, the untruth that we take for granted in the everyday use of language” (de Man 9), from the “ambivalence of a language that is representational and nonrepresentational at the same time” (de Man 185). In fact, literature itself runs the risk of inauthenticity when it claims or even implicitly supposes an exalted status for language—when it seeks meaning by falsely suggesting that it may circumvent the intrinsic, limiting characteristics that in fact define it (de Man 14). To avoid this pitfall, the modern artist must remain keenly aware that

the simplest of wishes cannot express itself without hiding behind a screen of language that constitutes a world of intricate intersubjective relationships, all of them potentially

¹⁵ Eliot cites Mallarmé as an example of a heightened attunement to this modern problem, claiming that the French poet “gets his modernity, his sincerity, simply by close attention to the actual writing” (MTP 217). He continues: “What Mallarmé had to say is not so important or interesting as what the poets previously mentioned [Laforgue, Rimbaud, Corbière] had to say, but he called attention to the fact [that] the actual writing of poetry, the accident and syntax, is a very difficult part of the problem” (MTP 217). This hyper-consciousness of the difficulties of the modern writer—of form, of being the representative of an age, of juggling words—famously resurfaces in part V of “East Coker” (1940), the second of the *Four Quartets*:

Trying to use words, and every attempt
Is a wholly new start, and a different kind of failure
Because one has only learnt to get the better of words
For the thing one no longer has to say, or the way in which
One is no longer disposed to say it. (RM 191)

inauthentic... The interpretation of everyday language is a Sisyphean task, a task without end and without progress. (de Man 11)

In his early poetry, Eliot navigates one such web of intricate intersubjective relationships—namely, the polite, upper-crust bourgeois culture surrounding him and in which he enjoys the benefits while suffering the costs—with a mind to detect and expose the potentially inauthentic strands therein¹⁶. Even so, and even when successfully producing incisive and timeless art, his artistic temper is vexed simultaneously by the limited time he may dedicate to his poetry *and* by whether he may legitimately justify spending time on something that could be perceived as trivial or not altogether necessary. Eliot writes in a December 1917 letter to his father, “Everyone’s individual lives are so swallowed up in one great tragedy, that one almost ceases to have personal experiences or emotions, and such as one has seem so unimportant!” (L1 242). Like Rilke, Eliot is concerned that his poetic enterprise is (or may be considered) frivolous when people are dying on the WWI front. Though he feels that there is something that must be said—and, in addition, that he is uniquely predisposed to say it—he perceives that his audience may be otherwise intellectually and emotionally engaged: “I have a lot of things to write about,” he confides to his father, “if the time ever comes when people will attend to them” (L1 242).

¹⁶ Another valence of Eliot’s critique of the bourgeoisie is its spiritual hollowness and superficial, slavish devotion to the material world. He articulates this aspect most pressingly after his 1927 conversion to Anglicanism, for example, in his 1934 poem Chorus III from ‘The Rock’:

The Word of the Lord came unto me, saying:
 O miserable cities of designing men,
 O wretched generation of enlightened men,
 Betrayed in the mazes of your ingenuities.

...

I have given you power of choice, and you only alternate
 Between futile speculation and unconsidered action.
 Many are engaged in writing books and printing them.
 Many desire to see their names in print,...

(RM 161)

Yet the desire to somehow transcend his own consciousness, surrendering himself to his art, in large part allows Eliot to justify his poetic endeavor in the face of widespread national tragedy. He writes tellingly in 1919 that the poet “must be aware that the mind of Europe – the mind of his own country – a mind which he learns in time to be much more important than his own private mind – is a mind which changes” (T&IT 107-108). Eliot carries out this “continual self-sacrifice” because he recognizes that in his work lies the expression of “something which is more valuable”—in fact, invaluable—for the mind of Europe (T&IT 108). Far from indulging in feelings of helplessness and paralyzing fear, Eliot’s own private emotions have only a poetically instrumental function and do not constitute the focus of his work, hence the often-cited pronouncement: “The more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates” (T&IT 109). The poetry is impersonal in the sense that the emotions it evokes resonate beyond the poet’s consciousness and prompt deep thought coupled with visceral emotional responses in its readers.

Of course, this disentangling of personal and universal emotion is not achieved without painstaking effort. Comparing poetry to science, Eliot writes in 1920 that “if we take poetry seriously as a work and not as the mere ebullition of a personality, we shall find that the poet’s training and equipment is parallel to the training and equipment of the scientist; we find that his purpose is parallel; and that his attitude toward his work is parallel” (MTP 213). In other words, poetry is the practiced devotion to “the social virtue of detachment from one’s own imagination” (Bloom 86), which for Eliot follows naturally from the premise that “the emotion of art is impersonal” (T&IT 112). This theory of impersonality is historically continuous from Baudelaire to Mallarmé, paralleling and coinciding with “a genetic movement of gradual allegorization and depersonalization” (de Man 176). Similarly, like the man of science, who pursues research not

out of a desire for self-expression but rather “by a complete surrender of himself to the work in which he [is] absorbed,” the poet is consciously devoted to “continuing a work which will be continued after him” (MTP 213-214). The poet is fatefully cognizant of the ephemerality of life, but importantly,

it is through these timelessly meaningful contents that temporal life reaches its own purest heights. As life absorbs or flows into these contents that exceed it, it moves beyond itself without losing itself but rather while attaining itself. Only in this way can its development, understood as a process, achieve meaning and value and come to know why it exists. Life must first be able to separate its contents ideally so that it can consciously rise toward them, and it achieves this separation with respect to death, which can annul the *process* of life but cannot attack the meaning of its contents.

(Simmel 76, emphasis original)

Simmel convincingly argues that while the process of life must end, the timelessly meaningful contents of one’s life continue to work influence long after his death. His argument parallels that of Max Weber’s famous 1918 Munich lecture on science as a vocation: unlike art, scientific achievements soon become outdated and obsolete. On the other hand, like art, “scientific works can last as ‘gratifications’ because of their artistic quality” (Weber 7). Eliot similarly affirms (presumably as a general statement, but almost certainly in part influenced by his own experience) that “what the artist wants, besides a livelihood, is primarily that he shall continue to give enjoyment to a few scattered and exceptional and lonely people long after he is dead” (MTP 222). Simmel’s theory of timeless art adds another valence to a truth of immense importance to the developing Eliot: that the “deeper, more general truth emerges only” through the paradox of impersonality (Taylor 481). For Eliot, unemotional poetry is both more representative of his time “and pathologically, more interesting” (MTP 219).

Of course, and somewhat paradoxically, only complex and idiosyncratic individuals may produce unemotional poetry. Eliot wisely and (although again denying a one-to-one correspondence between his theory of the artist and himself) self-referentially quips, “only those

who have personality and emotions know what it means to want to escape from these things” (T&IT 111). Yet despite his personal psychological and emotional intensity, in the modern age “it is not the ‘greatness,’ the intensity, of the emotions, the components, but the intensity of the artistic process, the pressure, so to speak, under which the fusion takes place, that counts” (T&IT 109). The modernist artist is thus characterized by a nascent and unignorable consciousness of the challenges and potential pitfalls of the artistic process—replete with anxieties but ultimately constituting his age’s only hope for authentically moving “through the self and beyond the self” via art (de Man 171). Eliot’s early verse is truly modern in its self-conscious engagement with “the incessant conflict that opposes a self, still engaged in the daylight world of reality, of representation, and of life, to what Yeats called the soul” (de Man 171). Remarkably, even as a young adult, Eliot’s is a simultaneously fearful and brave poetic enterprise—one that probes with equal vigor his own tortured consciousness and that of his age.

IV. CHAPTER 4: Sickness and Poetic Productivity

Influence is *Influenza*—an astral disease.
If influence were health, who could write a poem? Health is stasis. (Bloom 95)

I have already intimated that Eliot discerns later in life a link between sickness and poetic creativity (Crawford 332), or what Bloom definitively calls “the perverse health or attained sublimity of the achieved poet” (Bloom 105). Eliot’s friend Wyndham Lewis comments worriedly on “the haggard and exhausted mark” of his face in the late 1930s (Kirk 151), and while out of the temporal scope of my work, I believe that Eliot begins developing this habit of intense and overworked exhaustion as a stimulus for poetic production between 1910 and 1917. The years between 1922 and 1925, following the publication of *The Waste Land*, coincide with his most extreme physical breakdowns; at times he approaches a near-catatonic state¹⁷ while working full-time in his bank role and operating the *Criterion*, to say nothing of his domestic stressors. While often frustrated and under the weather, Eliot finds that “such sensations [are] conducive to poetry” and hence does not always do everything in his power to mitigate them (Crawford 224). It may be that Eliot, like Vivien in her dramatic epistolary self-diagnoses, is somewhat self-indulgent in his feelings of physical weakness. Katherine Mansfield journals, “He

¹⁷ One may detect the level of physical, mental, and spiritual exhaustion in the following letter to Mary Hutchinson from 20 February 1925. Eliot’s correspondence from the period is both less thoughtful and more formal and businesslike than in less emotionally draining times.

My dear Mary

I have had in mind to drop you a line for some time, but even cutting it down to the minimum I have had a certain amount of correspondence to deal with in one way or another each day, and quite enough of this business of family letter writing to exhaust one’s energy. I am getting on, except for extreme feebleness of body and spirit. Vivien has been *very* ill – much iller than she realised [sic] or yet realises [sic]. Yesterday she seemed better, today I am not so sure, and it will be a long time before we see daylight. Meanwhile keep me in your mind as we do you.

Affectionately

Tom.

(L2 589)

suffers from his feelings of powerlessness. He knows it. He feels weak. It is all disguise” (Crawford 404). Mansfield’s hypothesis is plausible in the sense that Eliot keeps himself on the verge of nervous and physical breakdown because it is in this condition that he writes best.

Of Eliot’s contemporaries, Mann is perhaps most consciously interested in what happens to artists at this precipice. Bloom deems Mann “a great sufferer from the anxiety of influence, and one of the great theorists of anxiety” (Bloom 52). From his early years, beginning with *Buddenbrooks* (1901) all the way through his final novel, *Doctor Faustus* (1947), Mann’s oeuvre focuses on themes of death, disintegration, and the inveterately linked relationship between love and suffering¹⁸ (DV 76). Mann creates the protagonist Gustav Aschenbach in 1911-1912 when his physical health is poor. Correspondingly in the heavily autobiographical work, Aschenbach’s psycho-physiological exhaustion and eventual demise from cholera both reflect an existential divide between two conflicting selves (DV v, 46). Aschenbach explains that “poets cannot be wise or dignified” because of their “incorrigible natural penchant for the abyss”—the bohemian lifestyle against which bourgeois societal values are intended to act as a barrier (DV 60). Due to his own predilection for the abyss, Aschenbach claims that “the confidence the crowd has in us [artists] couldn’t be more laughable” (DV 60). In juxtaposing the bourgeois and the bohemian ways of life, Aschenbach recalls how “the bourgeois mentality of his fathers” contrasts his own life, which “had deviated from theirs to the point of degeneracy” under the spell of art (DV 46). At first glance, this self-diagnosis seems hard to reconcile with Aschenbach’s unflinching sense of decorum, manifest in so many gestures, such as the respectful, mechanical greetings “performed

¹⁸ It is no coincidence that the narrator of *Death in Venice*, like Eliot in “The Love Song of St. Sebastian,” conjures this figure with whom Eliot was perhaps overly conscious as a young adult—lauding his “composure beneath blows of fate, graciousness in the midst of torment” as “an active achievement, a positive triumph” (DV 8). Notably, these blows of fate are both physical and spiritual; according to Christian tradition and abundantly manifest in literature and art, St. Sebastian is not solely brutally murdered, but rather *martyred*.

so distinctively, with such a cachet of good breeding, dutifulness and self-esteem” when entering the dining room (DV 22). Aschenbach, by means of the narrator’s free indirect discourse, over-expresses his bourgeois propriety and decorum as if to compensate against the threat of dissolution through his wayward desires:

He sat there, the master, the artist...who in such exemplarily pure form had renounced bohemianism and the murky depths, had abrogated his sympathy for the abyss and had vilified vileness; the man who had ascended the heights; the one who had overcome his learning and outgrown all irony, who had grown accustomed to the obligations imposed by the confidence of the masses. (DV 59)

Aschenbach is supremely self-conscious of the contradiction between his outer façade as the consummate bourgeois and his inner fatalism about the solidity of that persona. He desperately attempts to renounce the “murky depths” of the bohemian abyss yet is acutely aware of the way in which his subterranean, heterodox desires conflict with, and ultimately threaten to undo, bourgeois norms and his public persona modeled on these norms. The most striking irony in the narrator’s characterization is that Aschenbach somehow believes that he can overcome his learning and outgrow all irony. Though his psyche suffers from an excess of self-awareness, presaging the idea that poetic influence is “a disease of self-consciousness” (Bloom 29), he is not yet cognizant of a basic artistic truth: he may not simply visit as would a tourist, but must rather *dwell* among the abject in order to be able to faithfully render it in art.

This tension between the confidence of the masses and integrity to one’s own unruly desires also manifests on the level of aesthetic form. The wellspring from which art derives is not the pain from dwelling in the abyss itself, but rather the sympathy *for* the abyss after having ostensibly superseded it. Aschenbach seems to imply that it may be best to remain unaware of exactly *how* and by what unsavory byways beautiful works of art happen to have come into being. Producing art to satisfy aesthetic form thus implies suffering even as it is the only

remedial possibility for transcending that suffering. Mann's narrator muses on this ambivalence of form:

Does not form possess a double face? Is it not moral and amoral at the same time – moral inasmuch as it is the result and expression of discipline, but amoral and even immoral to the extent that by nature it contains within itself an indifference to morality and indeed essentially strives to make morality bow before its proud and sovereign scepter? (DV 10)

At the level of form, the artist struggles between his impulse to conform to a discipline that itself runs counter to morality. Ultimately, the artist's morality is subservient to his commitment to form. It necessarily occupies a lower echelon of the artist's priorities, as the art alone, the Faustian myth contends, dominates his consciousness and motivation.

The classic dichotomy between will and control is palpable in one fleeting interaction between gray-haired Aschenbach and Tadzio, his young object of romantic interest. When Tadzio catches Aschenbach's gaze and smiles alluringly in response, Aschenbach's bohemian self is titillated while his bourgeois sensibility is horrified: "You shouldn't smile like that! Listen, no one should smile at someone else that way!" (DV 42). The narrator describes the force compelling "the misguided man to keep his eyes rigidly under control" as "a shameful anxiety" (DV 49). The bourgeois rules of decorum that Aschenbach aims to uphold are in fact painful because they contradict his sexual impulses and, perhaps, only ever serve to keep those impulses at bay. Aschenbach's internal conflict is heightened as he whispers to himself "the standard formula of longing – impossible in this case, absurd, perverse, ludicrous and yet even here still sacred and respectable: 'I love you!'" (DV 42). It may at first glance seem surprising that the narrator deems Aschenbach's love for the young boy "still sacred and respectable." Yet the moral judgment becomes clearer in considering authorial intent. That "absurd, perverse, ludicrous" sexual desires between an older man and a young boy are somehow appropriate destabilizes the value of bourgeois norms in communicating authentic desire. This "standard

formula of longing” is almost a script—and thus, Aschenbach’s love is only acceptable because it is formulated with and conforms to the bourgeois communicative code. Mann’s and Eliot’s creative explorations converge in this ironic questioning of the merit and legitimacy of bourgeois interpersonal expression. Irony is uniquely suited to this task because it captures “some of the factitiousness of human existence as a succession of isolated moments lived by a divided self” (de Man 226). Aschenbach’s utterly self-aware internal conflict between the bourgeois and bohemian sensibilities foregrounds this concept of the divided self.

Like Mann, Eliot is also interested in this tension between self-actualization and literary production and repute, as if the two priorities were (in theory and practice) mutually exclusive. It is clear that Aschenbach, at least on one level, values the latter. He has “ascended the heights” by overcoming his own penchant for the bohemian abyss and becoming a respected, canonical writer—even a cultural and ideological model for young people (DV 59). Yet his tortured inner monologue and his eventual death as a result of the mysterious, concealed epidemic of Indian cholera—a metaphor, among other meanings¹⁹, for his inner degeneration and that of an entire culture associated with bourgeois decadence—suggest in tandem that integrity is in fact the greater virtue. Aschenbach meets his demise not because he is unwilling to suffer; rather, he aims to cultivate the “quintessence of the virtue that remains active in spite of suffering” (DV 7). He instead dies because he is suffering for the wrong reason, because he is either unable or

¹⁹ In addition to reflecting Aschenbach’s degenerating identity as an individual, the cholera metaphorizes the illness plaguing the institution of the quintessential writer that he represents: anthologized, elevated to the nobility (“von” Aschenbach) by age 50, and thus inert almost as a museum artifact. It is also significant that Aschenbach, like Eliot, is childless, thus embodying sterility and the lack of any viable future confronted by his generation. The cholera, a medical fact that Aschenbach morally blunders in failing to communicate to Tadzio’s family, merely confirms at an empirical level his lack of moral viability in a rapidly modernizing world.

unwilling to act on his overwhelming desires due to an ingrained deference towards, and self-suppression in favor of, the culturally accepted bourgeois sensibility.

Aschenbach, like many of Eliot's personae, is reminiscent of a general tension coming to the fore in his era. He aims to live "a life of self-conquest, a life 'in despite of things,' a harsh, persevering and abstemious life, which he had shaped into a symbol of the delicate heroism suited to the times" (DV 46). He represents the man capable, no matter the consequences, of repressing his impulses for the ostensible benefit of himself and of society as a whole²⁰. As Freud had begun to argue during the same years, repression is an indispensable feature of the bourgeois sensibility and life-form; ambivalent about the bourgeois label ascribed to him by his generation, Mann himself inhabited the contradiction between bourgeois and bohemian values inherent in Aschenbach's persona. Accordingly, the task of mastering the will was central to the Victorian pedagogic agenda (Gay 1998; 19). Aschenbach can be seen as the product of the clash between these two forces, and he is one of many such fictional and historical figures of his era:

Gustav Aschenbach was the poet of all those who labor on the brink of exhaustion, of the overburdened, of those already worn out, of those still holding their heads up, of all those moralists of achievement who, puny of body and short of means, acquire the effects of greatness at least for a time through an exaltation of the will and wise stewardship of their resources. They are many, they are the heroes of the age. (DV 8)

Like Eliot, Mann depicts Aschenbach as perpetually exhausted, as a man who "had never known idleness, never known the carefree recklessness of the young" (DV 6). He is brave, but in a different sense than those who will soon enter the battlefields of the First World War—he is not physically strong, but strong only in his "exaltation of the will." When Aschenbach takes a

²⁰ Aschenbach represents what Nietzsche signals as a concerning development in the modern man: the "bad conscience," a result of the stymying of aggressive and "abnormal" impulses in order to guarantee coexistence in a mutually peaceful society (*On the Genealogy of Morals* 70, 74).

respite from his work, he feels a “restless and reluctant desire – *and this had been the case in his younger years especially* – to return to his noble labors, the sober, hallowed servitude of his normal routine” (DV 34, emphasis added). Eliot also exhibits a lacking capacity for leisure time and an inability to slow down without his mind roving unchecked, entering painful territories (“A Review of *Passages from the Letters of John Butler Yeats*, Selected by Ezra Pound”). Mann similarly implies that only in his almost mechanized routine is Aschenbach capable of suppressing his wayward sexual impulses—a practice requiring more active willpower in his younger years, before the self-suppression crystallizes into unthinking habit. Yet the mechanism of suppression falters throughout the narrative as Aschenbach becomes increasingly conscious of its cost. As his biological clock seems to elapse ever more quickly and especially with the menacing onset of Indian cholera, he sees in Tadzio an apparition of his own bygone youth. Much of his attraction to the boy lies in his desire to reacquire the diminished *telos* of beauty. Beauty, after all, for Aschenbach is none other than “that noble purity, simplicity and evenness of form” (DV 10)—a *telos* reflecting the normative good that he personally, as well as the modern age more broadly, has somehow lost.

In this sense, Aschenbach’s attraction to Tadzio coincides with not only his desire to recuperate “effortlessly incarnate beauty” but also his ineluctable movement towards sickness and death (Taylor 469). It is fitting that Tadzio himself encapsulates both personal sublimation and destruction, as “the epiphanies of being for Mann have this profoundly ambiguous character” (Taylor 469). Similarly for Proust, restored time “is bought at the cost of a pitiless destruction of the illusions of love” (Taylor 469). Here again lies the Faustian myth of the artist—one may not simultaneously devote himself to both art *and* love, and in opting to express his love for Tadzio,

Aschenbach necessarily puts into motion—or at least willingly offers himself as a sacrifice to—his personal annihilation.

Mann's Aschenbach and Eliot seem to share this deep-seated anxiety about the ephemeral lifespan of human beings. The former is obsessed by "his fear, shared by every artist, that he might not complete his life's work, that his clock might run down before he had accomplished what was in him and had given all of himself" (DV 4). As he approaches Aschenbach's stage in life, Eliot writes in 1958 that he feels he is "working frantically against time" (Kirk 341). As Mann suggests in *The Magic Mountain* (1924), the artist is not divorced from the sociocultural and geopolitical concerns of his era. For this reason, he may in large part be anxious that the public may not respond favorably to his work, causing him to lose hope in the purpose of posing ultimate questions:

If they secretly supply him with evidence that things are in fact hopeless, without prospect or remedy, if the times respond with hollow silence to every conscious or subconscious question, however it may be posed, about the ultimate, unequivocal meaning of all exertions and deeds that are more than exclusively personal—then it is almost inevitable, particularly if the person involved is a more honest sort, that the situation will have a crippling effect, which, following moral and spiritual paths, may even spread to that individual's physical and organic life. (Mann 1924; 31)

Mann intimates that the public, if disinterested or failing to engage with the core questions at stake in his oeuvre, may tremendously impact the artist's physical health. This in part explains why tuberculosis, in "Tristan," proves such a fitting condition for the internally desiccated bourgeois woman, Gabriele. The illness, progressing slowly and often undetected, even seems to possess a vicariously ennobling quality; those suffering from their deteriorating respiratory system evolve a heightened awareness of their morbidity. As the illness creeps further and further into the infected person's consciousness, it increasingly strengthens one's spiritual attunement, as if clinging to vitality were to combat physical decrepitude. In a sense, then, illness

paradoxically appears to “spiritualize” those suffering from it. If one perceives death to be indeed inevitable—and not solely so, but also strikingly *imminent*—then it more actively informs his current decisions. The German-Jewish philosopher Georg Simmel theorizes that “death limits, that is, it gives form to life, not just in the hour of death, but also in continually colouring [sic] all of life’s contents” (Simmel 74). In the case of a terminal illness, the estrangement of body and consciousness is all the more pronounced. One tragically senses that he has more to contribute to the world, yet his physical being is irrevocably finite; only through the production of timeless art might his mind in a way continue even after his physical expiration.

If Aschenbach, like Eliot and many of his personae, is a man unwittingly representative of his age, then his rapid descent into sickness and death is a commentary on the moral, physical, and psychological trajectory of Europe. *Death in Venice*, like *The Waste Land*, may then be framed as a manifestation of the intensifying “antibourgeois aggression” propagated by modernist writers across genres (Gay 1998; 23). In this sense, both works of literature are crafted to reflect, prognosticate, and warn against the “existential disorientation and damaged psyche” of the years just before and following the First World War (Pfau Dec. 2016; 8). It may be that Eliot and Mann only achieve fame because they respond to the mounting antibourgeois sensibility by creating personae/characters who themselves embody the collective moral, physical, spiritual, and psychological decadence into which Europe unquestionably lapses. Crucially, this embodiment is mutual, or rather reciprocal: “Poets, not otherwise than philosophers, painters, sculptors, and musicians, are, in one sense, the creators, and in another, the creations of their age” (Bloom 104). Mann’s narrator also foregrounds the symmetry and interdependence between the artist and the temporal and spatial context in which he produces his art:

In order for a significant production of the intellect to make a broad and deep impact immediately, there has to be a secret relationship, in fact a congruence, between the

personal destiny of its creator and the general destiny of the generation in which he lives. (DV 7)

Mann's purpose, similar to Eliot's, is to render more explicit through his work this "secret relationship" between writer and public. It is ambiguous whether the collective "sickness," manifest explicitly in Aschenbach but dissolutely in the contemporary society, produces anxiety and panic or whether these reactions in fact stem from the sickness itself. In other words, is post-WWI Europe sick because it is anxious or anxious because it is hurtling irrevocably towards physical, spiritual, and psychological devolution? Aschenbach exhibits uncertainty about this directionality just before his death: "He was suffering from certain attacks of dizziness which were only partially physical, and which were accompanied by a violently increasing anxiety, a feeling of inescapability and hopelessness; and it was not clear whether that feeling related to the outside world or to his own existence" (DV 60). This anxious questioning only compounds the building sense of mutual personal and societal infrastructural breakdown.

These interior conflicts, of course, all take place as an anxious undercurrent hidden beneath the placid, organized, decorous surface of a society that very much still operates according to the bourgeois sensibility. Similarly, Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1856) is in part an investigation and critique of Emma Bovary's turbid psychological state, fomented by Monsieur Rodolphe and Monsieur Léon's petit-bourgeois concepts of courtship, love, marital obligation, sexuality, and adultery. Emma is so tormented because the "various forms of hyper-stimulation" to which she subjects herself are insufficient means "to evade her terminally secure and aimless, provincial existence" (Pfau; "After Sentimentalism" 411). In one of the novel's most iconic scenes, Rodolphe convinces Emma to commence a flirtatious engagement that quickly precipitates into a full-scale adulterous affair. He persuades her to ignore the societal rules constraining female desire, but she responds by defending these very norms: « Mais il faut

bien suivre un peu l'opinion du monde et obéir à sa morale » (Flaubert 211) (“‘But still,’ said Emma, ‘we still have to pay some attention to society’s opinions and abide by its morality’”) (Flaubert trans. Lydia Davis 126). Later, however, after intensely suffering the abandonment of her lover, Emma apparently has not come to understand Schopenhauer’s distinction between wishing and willing (Pfau 2013; 411). She may wish to maintain her reputation, but she wills into action her still stronger wish of sexual adventure. Believing her life to follow a tragic script analogous to those of the romantic novels that she peruses, Emma’s fatalistic mentality “reflects modernity’s fundamental loss of ‘action’ (or ‘deed’) as a meaningful category” (Pfau 2013; 411). She adopts the lexicon of Rodolphe’s parting letter in one rejecting her second lover, Léon, only to fall victim once again to the same vanities of scripted bourgeois seduction. Emma’s actions are thus denuded of their transformative power because they do not originate from a true agent; she tragically forfeits her agency to the sappy, foretold trajectory of petit-bourgeois romance. Though he has forgotten her in the interim, Léon deceives Emma into thinking that he has been miserable without her: « Et moi, donc ! Oh ! j’ai bien souffert...Souvent, je vous écrivais des lettres qu’ensuite je déchirais » (Flaubert 305-306) (“‘I, too! Oh, how I suffered!’...‘Often, he went on, ‘I would write letters to you and then tear them up’”) (Flaubert trans. Lydia Davis 207). In order to seduce her, Léon thus takes advantage of Emma’s fateful attachment to bourgeois ideals and coded manifestations of desire. While his manipulation suggests that he operates somehow above societal rules, the always-ironic narrator reveals that Léon is in fact very much still subject to their insistence on repressing wanton desire and safeguarding complacency and inaction as premier bourgeois virtues:

Léon était las d’aimer sans résultat ; puis il commençait à sentir cet accablement que vous cause la répétition de la même vie, lorsque aucun intérêt ne la dirige et qu’aucune espérance ne la soutient...Cependant, la perspective d’une situation nouvelle l’effrayait autant qu’elle le séduisait. (Flaubert 183)

Léon was tired of loving without having anything to show for it; then, too, he was beginning to feel the despondency that comes from leading an unvarying life, with no interest to give it direction and no hope to sustain it. . . . And yet the prospect of a new situation frightened him as much as it attracted him.

(Flaubert trans. Lydia Davis 102-103)

Once their amorous adultery comes to resemble a marital relationship, Léon is apparently disillusioned about the potential of true love. Though awakened to the banality of conjugal life, he is too *comfortable* to try to address it; he wishes but does not will remedial action to ameliorate the repetitiveness of his “same life”—presaging what Bloom calls the “repetition compulsion” (Bloom 77)—even while enticed by the prospect of a change.

Flaubert also alludes to the modern person’s moral, spiritual, and religious decadence through Emma’s convalescent reliance on a perverted religious relationship. She conflates the supreme God with the lover with whom she first commits adultery: « Quand elle se mettait à genoux sur son prie-Dieu gothique, elle adressait au Seigneur les mêmes paroles de suavité qu’elle murmurait jadis à son amant, dans les épanchements d’adultère » (Flaubert 283-284) (“When she knelt at her Gothic prie-dieu, she would address the Lord with the same sweet words she used to murmur to her lover in the ecstatic transports of her adultery”) (Flaubert trans. Lydia Davis 188). Her religiosity is only instrumentally meaningful; she does not strengthen her relationship with God for its own sake but rather solely to diminish her psychological and sexual dependence on Rodolphe. Yet the content of her prayers betrays what on the exterior seems an about-face change from adulterous hedonistic desire to selfless commitment to the deity; she merely attempts to supplant Rodolphe with God on the sacred pedestal of her undivided devotion. Emma’s religious awakening thus coincides with Flaubert’s astute indication of what might ensue if modern people pour fervor of religious strength into less worthy or otherwise more frivolous pursuits.

One such pursuit is that of material wealth and worldly, rather than religious comfort. Emma, for example, renders her household financially vulnerable unbeknownst to her husband at the hands of a manipulative merchant, Monsieur Lheureux. She cannot resist the exquisite merchandise from other French locales with which Lheureux insidiously extorts her household income by granting an installment-based payment system at high interest rates. Flaubert thus explores the connection between luxury items and sensuality, revealing that “comfortable surroundings could become insinuating aphrodisiacs” (Gay 1984; 440). Similarly, Margaret Hale of Elizabeth Gaskell’s 1855 *North and South* has “‘a keen enjoyment of every sensuous pleasure,’ of objects she was too poor to afford but sensitive enough to covet” (Gay 1984; 440). The shame of her almost singlehandedly incurred financial ruin and near prostitution at the hands of former lovers and other men to obtain desperately needed capital contributes to, even precipitates Emma’s subsequent suicide. Her self-destructive impulse—stealing and ingesting arsenic from the local Yonville apothecary—is painfully Romantic, but Flaubert ironically subverts the stereotypical suicide with a gruesome image of black liquid streaming from the corpse’s gaping mouth, staining the luxury gown and velvet casket upon which Charles insisted on indulging to honor his poor late wife (Flaubert 406, 403).

Thomas Mann’s 1903 short story, “Tristan,” reinforces and expands upon this image of the artist’s violent, destructive impulse. The artist figure, Herr Spinell, sees Gabriele Klöterjahn as a femme fatale who ruins her artistic potential—both as subject and maker of art—by marrying a philistine businessman. A writer with an inflated self-image, Spinell spends much of his time in his own room avoiding social interaction by reading the one, slim volume he has published to date. Infatuated with Gabriele, he ultimately writes a caustic letter to her husband expressing his profound hatred for him and the bourgeois sensibility he represents. His act is

both violent and cowardly; the two men live in the same sanatorium, but Spinell resorts to the page instead of confronting Mr. Klöterjahn in person. The indirect assault supports Spinell's characterization as an immensely anxious figure with "a halting way of speaking that almost amounted to an impediment—as though his teeth got in the way of his tongue" (Mann 1903; 328). His awkward speech perhaps also dramatizes his ineffectuality as a writer. Mann's narrator foregrounds the irony that Spinell's painstaking effort produces only mediocre content: "You would have drawn the conclusion, watching him, that a writer is one to whom writing comes harder than to anybody else" (Mann 1903; 349-350). Just as Emma's, Spinell's actions are seemingly dictated by a tragic script. In one monologue, he reveals his resignation to a futile life dominated by pain:

I, and other people like me, work hard all our lives to swindle our consciences into feeling pleased and satisfied. We are feckless creatures, and aside from a few good hours we go around weighted down, sick and sore with the knowledge of our own futility. We hate the useful; we know it is vulgar and unlovely, and we defend this position, as a man defends something that is absolutely necessary to his existence. Yet all the while conscience is gnawing at us, to such an extent that we are simply one wound. Added to that, our whole inner life, our view of the world, our way of working, is of a kind—its effect is frightfully unhealthy, undermining, irritating, and this only aggravates the situation. (Mann 1903; 331)

Through this explicit self-characterization as both feckless²¹ and sick, Mann's Spinell helps to situate Eliot's tormented personae among a broader array of images of the artist—one that reaches the current century. The pain associated with artistic production, as Bloom theorizes based in part on Nietzsche and Freud (Bloom 8), is inseparable from the poem's meaning and is partly generated as a result of the anxiety of influence (Bloom 43). The tortured Spinell eventually coerces the pale, tuberculosis-ridden Gabriele into disregarding the doctors' orders by playing the piano, which reduces her to a physical state from which it is left vague whether she

²¹ Recall the discussion of velleities and fecklessness with regard to Mann's "Tristan" from Chapter 2.

rebounds. The piece that Spinell asks her to play—the prelude and *Liebestod* (“love-death”) from Wagner’s 1859 *Tristan & Isolde*—is not insignificant. Mann knew that in his 1888 *Der Fall Wagner*, Nietzsche characterizes the composer as a *névrose*, the embodiment of his entire era’s neurotic condition (Nietzsche 1928). Mann’s artist figure, like many of Eliot’s personae, is morally ambivalent; he is cognizant that defying the doctor’s orders will cause Gabriele’s health to dramatically plunge. Both halting and aggressive, Mann’s Spinell suffers from profound psychological pain and insidiously inflicts that pain on an innocent female object of desire.

Eliot’s 1910²² poem, “The Triumph of Bullshit²³,” prominently features another such abrasive and outright sadistic male figure. The persona’s crass imperative directed towards women at large—“For Christ’s sake stick it up your ass”—demonstrates the potential for sexual anxiety to engender aggressive words and acts (RM 252-253). Some scholars explicitly link

²² Ricks notes that it is uncertain whether this poem dates from 1910 or 1916. In any case, Eliot sends the poem to Wyndham Lewis before 1915. The most probable scenario is that Eliot drafts the poem in 1910 and revisits it with revisions in 1916 (MH 307-308).

²³ See the poem’s first two stanzas for reference (the last two stanzas are reproduced and discussed in Chapter 2):

Ladies, on whom my attentions have waited
 If you consider my merits are small
 Etiolated, alembicated,
 Orotund, tasteless, fantastical,
 Monotonous, crotchety, constipated,
 Impotent galamatias
 Affected, possibly imitated,
 For Christ’s sake stick it up your ass.

Ladies, who find my intentions ridiculous
 Awkward, insipid and horribly gauche
 Pompous, pretentious, ineptly meticulous
 Dull as the heart of an unbaked brioche
 Floundering versicles freely versiculous
 Often attenuate, frequently crass
 Attempts at emotion that turn isiculous,
 For Christ’s sake stick it up your ass.

(RM 252-253)

Eliot's desire for "sexual transcendence" with his "own experience of fragmentation and his longing for the Absolute" (Spears Brooker 127)—in other words, the desire for wholeness is not only sexual, but also spiritual. In the scope of this poem, the persona's aggression acquires a spiritual dimension through the parallel alliterative phrase "Floundering versicles feebly versiculous" (MH 253). A versicle is a short sentence said or sung by the minister in a church service, to which the congregation gives a response (OED Online); it is thus ironic that the persona's refrain begins with "For Christ's sake." The persona addresses this hostile imperative not to a single offender, but to all ladies, revealing a "troubled eroticism—an exploration of violent, sometimes self-loathing behavior that may emanate from sexual frustration" (Crawford 203). Similarly, the pun "If you consider my merits are small" conveys not only sexual, but also social anxiety. In this instance, given the intense romantic anxieties that Eliot suffers in Paris while composing this poem, it is especially tempting to conflate him with the persona (Crawford 151-152). The use of the somewhat esoteric word "etiolated," meaning feeble and indicating a loss of vigor or substance, also verges on the self-referential through its anagrammic reshuffling of the poet's surname. By employing the words "alembicated" and "orotund," meaning, respectively, excessively subtle and pretentious, the persona paradoxically and self-consciously commits the same error for which he spurns women for criticizing him. Even still, his resistance to change suggests that while sexually frustrated, the persona is irrevocably (at least for the time being) mired in pride.

Freud's own definition of anxiety—"angst vor etwas," or anxiety *before* something—indicates a connection between this state of stasis and an impending, yet still unknown change. To Freud, anxiety is "clearly a mode of expectation, like desire" (Bloom 57). While agreeing that anxiety is, analogous to pleasure, something *felt*, Bloom adds that "it is a state of unpleasure

different from sorrow, grief, and mere mental tension”—and that it is consequently uniquely conducive to poetry (Bloom 57). He also reverses the classic paradigm that poems must give pleasure, countering that “poems are not given *by* pleasure, but by the unpleasure of a dangerous situation, the situation of anxiety of which the grief of influence forms so large a part” (Bloom 58). Poems, according to this theory, arise out of discomfort, pain, and in many cases, even sickness—physiological symptoms of psychological distress. Whether or not the anxiety of influence accounts for “so large a part” of Eliot’s nervousness and physical weakness in his early 20s and beyond, his poetic productivity is undoubtedly linked to this very state.

V. CHAPTER 5. Anxiety and the Bourgeois Sensibility

Baudelaire, Kafka, Huysmans, Mann—each of these late Romantic and/or modernist writers craft prevaricating, solipsistic, and self-lacerating personae so as to probe the deep-seated, carefully concealed vanity and vulnerability of bourgeois life. The detrimental effects of societal decorum are a familiar paradigm in the writings of Nietzsche, who claims that our “original animal state of happiness, danger and vitality” is destroyed by this “contrasting condition of individuals subjected to consciousness, memory and misery” (Holub xix). Nietzsche’s work coincides with the broader literary trend “inwards” to explore the nature of the mind; the modernist era parallels a broader cultural interest in investigating and exposing, through literature, the volatile psychiatric undertow of the placid surface of bourgeois culture.

Yet is the modernist artist a rebel or a complicit agent in propagating the philistine propriety encouraged and maintained by the bourgeois sensibility? While distraught before the “sheer destitution of modern, dissociated sensibility,” Eliot is bent on interrogating the communicative limits of bourgeois culture precisely because he maintains “some faith in the possibility of life arriving and thus fulfilling a *telos* that has only been deferred but cannot be dismissed as sheer illusion” (Pfau Dec. 2016; 8). In other words, he has not lost all hope that some normative good may be gained from authentic spiritual and physical communion. He thus aims to refract this good—as well as, bravely, the immense cost if this communion is not attained—in compact poetic form.

Much is at stake for Eliot in his exploration of the extent to which he may break with the bourgeois sensibility imposed upon him from both his Unitarian upbringing and his Bloomsbury London coterie. One intention, then, of his early poetry is to imagine, dramatize, and presage the ways in which this societal script may affect interpersonal communication, especially that

between the sexes. The 1910 poem “*Goldfish (Essence of Summer Magazines)*, III” captures the resulting cheapening of social intercourse in petit-bourgeois life:

...
 On every sultry afternoon
 Verandah customs have the call
 White flannel ceremonial
 With cakes and tea
 And guesses at eternal truths
 Sounding the depths with a silver spoon

(MH 28)

The scene’s bourgeois context is unmistakable: cakes and tea, which also make an appearance in Prufrock, the verandah, the quintessential white flannel, not to mention the socioeconomic connotations of “a silver spoon.” Yet beneath the surface is an undercurrent of sexual tension. The diction of “sultry” refers to not only the hot and humid summer afternoon, but also an indomitable, ever-looming sensuality. Similarly, the very dissonance between “white flannel,” coding purity, and the sultry afternoon hints that no true communion, either intellectual or physical, will take place at this gathering. The desultory, quasi-scripted conversation accompanied by cakes and tea shows that “although the motions of social intercourse are mimed, no contact of mind or soul takes place” (Vendler 86). The last two lines reveal the crux of the matter for Eliot: what bothers him most about these scripted and formal, yet ultimately meaningless speech-acts is “their very pretense of intellectual seriousness” (Vendler 89). The seeming highbrow and sophisticated talk is in fact only a cheap façade masking a hollow core replete with trivialities. Bourgeois propriety and decorum is thus fundamentally incompatible with the expression of “eternal truths” that so plague Eliot. While the persona might prefer to sound the depths of his heart and soul, at this summer verandah table the only material available to him is a silver spoon.

This conspicuous lack of engagement with “the depths” explains why the bourgeoisie may merely guess about the nature of eternal truths. Guesses constitute one component of the “exquisitely tuned meaningless speech-acts of social exchange,” which also include promises, compliments, and supposes (Vendler 90). There are only so many formulations of a polite compliment, for instance, and to Eliot the mundane predictability of this script is “a terrifying threat to genuineness of voice” (Vendler 87). This frustration maps onto not only Eliot as a young man, but also his developing poetic sensibility. Eliot’s own Protestant, upper-class milieu “was almost inhumanly restrained in what it allowed by way of permissible conversation between the sexes” (Vendler 86). When constrained to the limits of an acceptable code of speech, how may the artist innovate, let alone express eternal truths? The famous refrain, “In the room the women come and go / Talking of Michelangelo” references this “virginal modesty” to which upper-class women are confined, within the boundaries of which they might engage in “acceptably superficial ‘cultural’ interests” (Vendler 86). The preposition “of” signals this superficial engagement with a cultural icon; the women do not talk *about* the Italian artist but rather skirt the surface, as if to name-drop familiarity with his fame but not to discuss the actual artistic intervention associated with it. In other words, they perform a level of cultural engagement with an artist whose true meaning and significance woefully evades them.

For this reason, the term “bourgeois”—already a defined social class by 1837 upon Queen Victoria’s ascension to the throne—connotes a certain level of hypocrisy, either conscious or unconsciously. The middle class took pride in its socioeconomic status while increasingly recognizing the “interminable contrast” between freedom and control that prompts the development of its cultural values. The age of Victoria is thus characterized by an “increasingly opaque, anxiety-producing situation” as the old paternalistic order crumbles, but does not

seamlessly transition to “the reign of the young” (Gay 1986; 3). During this time in flux, coinciding in part with Eliot’s early poetic enterprise, “the boundaries between erotic expressiveness and reserve were shifting, problematic, [and thus] almost impossible to map with any sense of finality” (Gay 1986; 3). Like Mann’s Aschenbach, the European bourgeoisie sought to suppress its own wayward impulses for the organizational benefit of society as a whole, but was still tragically incognizant of the individual costs of that suppression. The level of anxiety rose to such a level towards the end of the 19th and into the first decades of the 20th century that “it was only rational for the bourgeoisie to develop an almost desperate commitment to privacy and to mount a largely sincere, only partly conscious search for refined variants of earthly desires” (Gay 1986; 3-4). In other words, the diminishing confidence in a well-defined social code of acceptable discourse and interaction also issued forth “an age of anxiety,” and consequently the term “bourgeois” was both one of reproach and self-respect (Gay 1998; 3). The bourgeoisie was proud of its socioeconomic standing while simultaneously comforted and troubled by its limited (and limiting) standards of acceptability. Eliot’s ambivalent relationship towards his own bourgeois cultural markers reflects the term’s dual nature.

While certainly belonging to the bourgeoisie and enjoying both its financial benefits and associated cultural cachet, Flaubert reserves for his middle-class contemporaries a spurning asyndetonic critique:

Bourgeois are commonplace, cowardly, colorless, censorious, sentimental, devious; their pleasures are abominable, their moments of happiness squalid, their political opinions foolish; they have no inkling of the inner life and are so obsessive in their habits that they fall ill when they go to bed at an unaccustomed hour. They are of course materialistic from head to toe, lacking all sense for the exotic, the adventurous, the extraordinary. (Gay 1998; 26)

His harangue identifies economic, political, personal, and cultural markers of the bourgeois sensibility which he considers, evidently, abhorrent. Yet Flaubert, like von Aschenbach and

Eliot, resists these very anxieties in his own ambivalent posture towards his ever-changing sociocultural context. Indeed, across national boundaries and especially near the turn of the 20th century, the bourgeoisie is characterized by “financial worries and status anxiety,” “shabby gentility,” and a marked “tension between the modern lust for, and the fear of, originality” (Gay 1998; 6-7, 11). It is this last aspect that most pressingly plagues Eliot and the artists of his era.

Nietzsche and the young Mann are both preoccupied by “the stunted intellectual culture of the modern person—formally rational but of dissociated sensibility; politically dependable but lacking inner goals; reliably productive but denuded of introspective tendencies—a self plagued by proto-existentialist indifference” (Pfau 2013; 399). In this description one recognizes Emma Bovary, utterly alienated from her own agency, herself a product of a woeful dearth of deep thought. Yet even for Prufrock and Aschenbach, introspection, counter to Plato’s own expectations, yields no remedial prospect (Plato 103-104). That is, even when the modern person of dissociated sensibility aims to think and act productively, engendering imaginative and transformative change, it is out of self-interest rather than an authentic desire to enrich his relationship to eternity. In the petit-bourgeois mentality, spiritual consciousness is “hidebound and self-interested”; it is “neither rational nor irrational but, if anything, minimally articulated as skeptical prevarication or agnostic indifference” (Pfau 2013; 403). In other words, modern life takes a decisive turn from God—a development deeply troubling to the middle-aged Eliot, and of increasing concern even as early as 1910-1917.

As a direct consequence of proto-existentialist indifference—this unfruitful introspection predicated on “what-if” worries—independence of thought is supplanted by “petit-bourgeois moral conformism,” as diagnosed by Alexis de Tocqueville (Pfau 2013; 376). There comes to exist, then, an inverse relationship between the amassing of worldly and spiritual wealth. The

modern age is thus characterized by “the unlimited acquisition and possession of commodities, just as the distinction between goods and the good has become definitively erased” (Pfau 2013; 389). The *telos* is obfuscated and eventually lost as material success in a consumerist culture overshadows a spiritually-oriented normative good. Yet the average petit-bourgeois lives and operates in relative ignorance of this phenomenon, and it is precisely this incognizance that the modernist writer aims to counteract and address through literature. As a result of both literary discourse and intellectual debate, among other factors, the bourgeoisie of the later 19th century becomes

incrementally more conscious of the essential pettiness of its founding vision; having tied the notion of happiness to trivial socioeconomic aspirations (and no less banal psychosexual fantasies) rather than to the fulfillment of a normative good (*telos*), it finds quotidian life aimless, phantasmagorical, and replete with proto-Freudian neuroses and incipient despair. (Pfau 2013; 411)

As Eliot’s is a particularly “classed” anxiety, his early poetry is in large part designed to probe the triviality of this bourgeois façade, revealing its turbid psychological undercurrent. With the overarching goal of inspiring thought about ultimate questions, Eliot responds to the broader manifestations of bourgeois anxiety in his own British-American pre-WWI context, including but not limited to “editorials bemoaning moral decay, warnings by physicians or divines against the scourge of ‘self-pollution,’ politicians showing anxiety over foreign competition or falling national birthrates, a widespread anxiety over anxiety, all beyond rational calculations” (Gay 1998; 13). He gains an acute consciousness of these developments not only as a young adult in London but already as a Harvard undergraduate. From 1911 he is certainly *au courant* of George Santayana²⁴’s theories about the bourgeois century’s “addiction to duplicity” (Gay 1984; 404). Santayana concomitantly claims that polite culture suffers “from conventionality, the studied

²⁴ One of Eliot’s most influential Harvard professors, the Spanish-born philosopher develops the ideas at hand in his 1911 essay “The Genteel Tradition in American Philosophy.”

escape from life” and that the results lie “conspicuously across the American cultural landscape: superficiality, insincerity, disingenuousness, a lack of true seriousness” (Gay 1984; 404). Eliot as a young Londoner draws similar conclusions about European genteel culture.

It is thus fitting that throughout his life Eliot profoundly admired Henry James, one American who “effectively subverted the dominant self-deceptions of the nineteenth century” (Gay 1984; 404). Eliot’s alignment with James’s literary subversion corresponds with clear social and political implications—namely, James’s, and eventually Eliot’s, genius lies in identifying and critiquing a form of social tyranny imposed by “the oblique coherence of social conventions, customs, and manners that comprise the humdrum life of the modern petit-bourgeois individual” (Pfau 2013; 408). Tyranny no longer solely manifests in “the caprices and excesses of an ancient régime” but rather is propagated by social codes of decorum, unwritten rules that perhaps affect everyday life to a similar degree as formal law. The pervasive bourgeois obsession with privacy raises “to unprecedented heights the wall between what people discussed and what they felt” (Gay 1986; 168), which in turn corresponds with a full-scale dissolution of the causative link between internal feelings and outward agency in a transformative sense. The damaging effects of these self-constraining social codes reflect Mill’s “anxiety about a new type of hidebound and intellectually stunted ‘herd mentality’” acknowledged by both Nietzsche and Fontane as “a troubling consequence of modern liberalism” (Pfau 2013; 409). The danger pinpointed by Eliot is that language and reality are necessarily intertwined; even constraining patterns of speech leads to clichéd acts, which in time form—and hence denude of meaning—one’s behaviors (Pfau 2013; 412).

For Eliot, censoring and disguising convictions through polite speech-acts in order to maintain social acceptance is not only hypocritical in an interpersonal sense (Gay 1984; 404), but

also detrimental for literature. In the tradition of the 19th century moralists Flaubert, Baudelaire, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Freud, who “devoted themselves to the detection and denunciation of hypocrisy,” Eliot harnesses the literary effect of this hypocrisy and ironically exposes it within his early work (Gay 1984; 418). Freud, in his “imaginative perspective on cultural mendacity,” claims that unlike “the unconscious hypocrite [who] is simply man in civilization,” the true hypocrite “knows what he is doing, and does it to his own advantage” (Gay 1984; 418). Eliot, then, is one such true hypocrite, hyper-aware of his own nervousness and that of others and consequently seeking to express it in literary form for a specific social purpose. Echoing Freud’s observation, Gay astutely notes that this nervousness is “less a pervasive symptom of bourgeois society than of those who detected it”—Eliot, Joyce, Woolf, and a host of highly sensitive modernist period intellectuals (Gay 1986; 349).

Eliot’s particular brand of nervousness is a modern disease in the sense that it is only fully diagnosed in the modern age, but its roots are ancient: Plato and St. Augustine, among other medieval mystics (Gay 1986; 330). These thinkers already worried that their contemporaries might be having the experience, but missing the meaning, as Eliot later puts it in “The Dry Salvages” (1941). He is unconvinced that everything is as it seems on the exterior and consequently aims in his early poetry to interrogate the essential assumption from Heidegger’s *Being and Time* that “boredom and anxiety are more authentic affective ways of relating to the world than happiness” (Soni 241). Eliot’s early poetic enterprise corresponds with his simultaneous engagement in and self-distancing from modern petit-bourgeois culture; his ironic and painful portrayals of cheap, meaningless social discourse elicit ultimate questions about the meaning and purpose of human existence and experience.

Boredom and anxiety are not the only, nor the most extreme unsavory side effects of the bourgeois sensibility. That the bourgeoisie most explicitly suffers incipient modern neuroses is only to be expected: “Bourgeois bungling in love, as their critics perceived it, was only a particular symptom of greater failures—failures in aesthetic discrimination and moral perceptions, failure above all in the supreme domain of the finer feelings” (Gay 1986; 45). The finer feelings are obscured by trite speech-acts denuded of true affect and meaning. Eliot’s 1917 poem, “Hysteria,” is a targeted exploration of the presumptive anxious undercurrent of decorous bourgeois interactions. It explores what this bungling in love looks and feels like, but fittingly, the poem’s action is limited to the persona’s inner awareness of trivial, outward goings-on. There is, as in “Portrait of a Lady,” a conspicuous dearth of personal, spiritual, physical, or even intellectual communion. In other words, the poem’s complexity does not arise from the mundane events it describes—a man and woman sitting down at a restaurant—but rather from the persona’s hyperconsciousness of and disturbed reaction to the unfolding interaction:

As she laughed I was aware of becoming involved in her laughter and being part of it, until her teeth were only accidental stars with a talent for squad-drill. I was drawn in by short gasps, inhaled at each momentary recovery, lost finally in the dark caverns of her throat, bruised by the ripple of unseen muscles. An elderly waiter with trembling hands was hurriedly spreading a pink and white checked cloth over the rusty green iron table, saying: “If the lady and gentleman wish to take their tea in the garden, if the lady and gentleman wish to take their tea in the garden ...” I decided that if the shaking of her breasts could be stopped, some of the fragments of the afternoon might be collected, and I concentrated my attention with careful subtlety to this end. (RM 26)

Eliot here conveys the persona’s painful temporal and spatial remove from the laughing woman through various rhetorical strategies including dramatic monologue, decorous speech and syntax, repetition, and the impersonality of the passive voice. Addressing the reader in the first person, the persona reveals his discomfort with being implicated in the woman’s laughter, which seems to him hollow and unconvincing. The woman’s sense of humor is fundamentally unknowable to

the persona perhaps in part because he cannot escape his own subjective experience to construct a meaningful reality. The bourgeois façade of communicability through polite toasts and teas is nothing more than a crude parody of authentic interpersonal communion. The woman's laughter is a nearly violent affront, as the persona is "bruised by the ripple of unseen muscles," as if he were lodged against his will in the woman's throat (MH 26). Even after the conclusion of this symbolic taking of tea, the persona's bruises will reveal his non-reciprocal involvement in a way of life with which he refuses to comply.

As the persona analyzes the significance of the woman's laughter in real-time, he seems simultaneously a part of and outside of the scene. His hyperconsciousness indicates a prior state of anxiety characterized by a jarring dissonance between mundane action and vexed, private thought. The persona is acutely aware of the minor shifts of focus of his own attention—mechanisms of perception that operate largely in one's subconscious. He concentrates his "attention with careful subtlety" in a manner so intentional as to seem forced, suggesting that he is incapable of sharing in the woman's laughter in part *because* he is so distracted by his incessant analysis of the situation (RM 26). It is evident that the persona's irrevocable remove depends rhetorically upon his dramatic inner monologue, which establishes the higher platform or plane from which the persona precludes his own involvement in the woman's grounded action below.

It thus stands to reason that the waiter must state his entreaty twice, once for the base level of pure action (wishing to take tea in the garden) and again for the higher act of *willing* it to happen. In addition to the sheer propriety of diction—"If the lady and gentleman wish to take their tea in the garden"—it is significant that the waiter does not ask a simple, grammatically standard question (MH 26). He instead formulates the phrase as a hypothetical without delivering

a “then” clause. It is as if the question itself, or even the hypothetical with a “then” clause, to express causation, would have been too direct, too forward to appeal to bourgeois decorum. It is possible that the waiter did, in fact, ask the question directly, but the reader is privy only to the persona’s evocation; the way in which the persona portrays the interaction is even more illuminating than how it actually unfolds, if it does at all. The ellipsis after the second iteration of the statement, as well as the incomplete hypothetical construction, in tandem reflect the inalienable influence of the principle of indeterminacy of action; the persona is reminiscent of that of Jules Laforgue’s “Dimanches”—“J’aurai passé ma vie à faillir m’embarquer” (“I shall have spent my life failing to embark”)—with which Eliot is undoubtedly familiar (Laforgue 338-339). Eliot’s persona cannot predict the consequence of taking tea in the garden; he cannot ascertain the objective consequences of *any* action because he is paralyzed by polite, yet ultimately hollow speech-acts, by his hyper-consciousness of the incommunicability of basic human truths.

Thus self-alienated, the persona also fails to confer agency upon himself and others. Even the grammatical construction of his description of the woman’s laughter confirms his diminished, indeed absent sense of agency: “I decided that if the shaking of her breasts could be stopped, some of the fragments of the afternoon might be collected” (MH 26). Immediately apparent is the juxtaposition between the use of the first person in “I decided” and the shift to the passive voice in the remainder of the sentence. The persona clearly does the deciding, but it is not apparent whether it is he that will stop the shaking of the woman’s breasts, and more importantly, whether *he* will collect the fragments of the afternoon. This obfuscation of agency reflects the persona’s inability to recognize his own capacity to enact, foregrounding the tension between *wishing* her to stop laughing and *willing* it, even subtly through polite entreaty or body

language. The persona's utilization of the passive voice in the latter part of the sentence seems to relegate action to the realm of "might have been" instead of acknowledging the possibility of remedial action in the present. In "Hysteria," reality consequently exists solely in subjective fragments of perception. It is impossible for the persona or for anyone to construct or experience an objective, whole reality because each individual's reality is partial and subjective. This contributes to the persona's social anxiety, and in turn reflects the young Eliot's own temptation towards solipsism (Hillis Miller 139).

The poet further dramatizes the detrimental effects of subjectivism in "Oh little voices of the throats of men," which he encloses in a letter to Aiken in 1914 (RM 1137). The persona emphatically describes "Impatient tireless undirected feet! / So confident on wrinkled ways of wrong" (MH 264). His metonymic characterization of directionless people bereft of identity implies their inadequate sense of right and wrong. These "so confident" individuals may seem to possess agency and to carry out their lives according to their own volition, but the persona identifies a striking bifurcation between outer appearance and inner turmoil: "Appearances appearances he said, / I have searched the world through dialected ways; / .../ And always find the same unvaried / Intolerable interminable maze" (MH 264). Their erroneously assumed autonomy is illusory; the persona suggests that the "undirected feet" are unwittingly subject to the providence of a higher power who is perhaps uniquely capable of objective perception. The human being may only be certain of his own experience: "This word is true on all the paths you tread / As true as truth need be, when all is said: That if you find no truth among the living / You will not find much truth among the dead. / No other time but now, no other place than here, he said." (MH 265). These bleak lines impugn the existence of objective truth, undermining the

hope-furnishing idea that it even exists to be found. The persona thus creates an unsettling aura of uncertainty about not only the current life, but also that to come.

One may legitimately wonder why Eliot finds himself an appropriate critic of the superficiality of bourgeois social intercourse since he exists *within* it. Indeed, his close association with Virginia Woolf's Bloomsbury Group and his cachet among British literary and cultural élites seemingly contradicts his poetic enterprise—to undermine the value of bourgeois communicative scripts, especially those dictating interactions between men and women. Yet given his purpose, from "Portrait of a Lady" to "Hysteria," his impulse to call these bourgeois social norms into question must correspond with an earnest, deep-seated desire to eradicate them from his *own* being. In this vein, Eliot's posture recalls that of Flaubert, whose "disavowal of his own class looks like a response to the fear that he had not really escaped it. He was, it seems, projecting onto his fellow bourgeois qualities he detected in himself, making enough noise to drown out his anxiety" (Gay 1998; 32). Eliot hopes that in creating a timeless persona who has measured out his life in coffee spoons, he might himself avoid lapsing into the bourgeois inanity plaguing his generation both in his birth country and his adopted European home. The embodiment of anxiety—regarding bourgeois inanity, the relentless accumulation of transgressive and violent acts throughout history, the production of ordered art in a chaotic present, the physical and psychological impacts of the artistic sensibility—is an under-analyzed and essential analytical framework for understanding Eliot as poet, critic, and man.

VI. EPILOGUE: Living in the Age of Anxiety

My work is not the first to posit that Eliot might not have written much of his canonical poetry in a less anxiety-ridden temporal and geographic space. Both Kirk and Crawford, among others, identify these particular stressors as not only linked to, but also particularly generative of a poetics embodying and articulating the broader psychological shifts of a war-embittered and culturally tense European context. My specific contribution aims to dwell on the (presumed) impetus of scholarship such as Gordon's *Eliot's Early Years* and Vendler's *Coming of age as a poet: Milton, Keats, Eliot, Plath* to understand how the young Eliot's cultural and ideological upbringing—almost an inculcation in Unitarian and traditional American Midwest upper-class values and codes of acceptable sociability—affects the ultimate questions with which his poetic enterprise consistently engages.

Yet rather than analyzing Eliot's biographic trajectory as an end unto itself, I have intended for Eliot's early verse, from poems considered failed attempts to those lauded both at the time of publication and a century later, to serve as my work's primary discursive vehicle. In this way, Bloom's proclamation—"A poem is not an overcoming of anxiety, but is that anxiety" (Bloom 94)—inspires a larger methodological orientation based on the idea that Eliot's early verse articulates aspects of his nuanced relationship with anxiety, and that of his age, that are fundamentally indescribable by any amalgamation of biographical details or synthesis of contemporary history and intellectual inquiry. The poetry, to put it simply, does much of the work; it performs, embodies, and subjects to formal articulacy a phenomenon that transcends its often historical placement in the high modernist canon (Eliot, Joyce, Mann, Woolf, and so on) and with which my generation is, whether we like it or not, necessarily familiar.

Any further study undertaken within my general critical framework of anxiety could take several directions. In my view, one of the most worthwhile courses would be expanding the focus to other writers and artists operating in Eliot's geographic and temporal context. This project would incorporate formalist readings of works of poetry and fiction by other contemporary figures, particularly women who have traditionally been less conspicuous in critical work on "canonical" modernist texts—certainly Woolf, but also Gertrude Stein, Mina Loy, and especially Djuna Barnes, in whose work, notably, Eliot saw great promise. The intention would be to more fully probe the issue of the decay and/or possibility of spiritual, physical, and intellectual communion between and among the sexes.

As a second course of study, the productive framework of anxiety could be extended either/both temporally and/or geographically to treat works not necessarily directly associated with modernism but rather with postmodernism or the post-45 critical realm. Applied to a different corpus of texts, the framework would facilitate a compelling analysis of how and why these more contemporary texts engage with anxiety, and to what effect with regard to helping us come to terms with what it means to be a human being in a rapidly technologically evolving and increasingly politically polarized world. Works and authors that seem particularly suited to the framework include Don DeLillo's *White Noise* (1985), Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* (1977), and Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007). With great poise and rhetorical innovation, these novels examine the striking ways in which global anxiety in the 21st century might differ from that of the 20th—be it an entailment of global, late-capitalist and consumerist culture, shifting relationships to the physical and spiritual worlds, or tensions between cultural traditions that emerge through increased globalization.

I am persuaded that the precarious relationship between (personal and ambient) anxiety and creativity is particularly apparent to me as a member of the current generation of undergraduates. It is not coincidental that Eliot's alertness to issues of anxiety, his self-steeping in Laforgue's images of decay, and his attraction to self-inhibiting, self-alienating personae, all coincide with his own undergraduate years. Of course, Eliot's attunement to anxiety prompts his inalienable desire to be, simultaneously, spiritually still and in physically in motion—writing some twenty years later, “I said to my soul, be still” (RM 189)—to become, as it were, a poet. Eliot devotes considerable mental and emotional energy to developing a Christian contemplative ethos even before, but especially after his 1927 conversion to Anglicanism. Already in his early poetry one senses his brave search for a form of attention that pivots on, even presupposes a kind of “stillness”—a disposition that itself welcomes “despair [as] a necessary prelude to, and element in, the joy of faith,” as Eliot writes of Pascal in his 1958 introduction to the *Pensées* (Pascal xvi). Like the French figure, Eliot manifests in his early poetry a profound spiritual humility, all the more precious for its rarity in the modern age. The poet, gifted with “the mind to conceive, and the sensibility to feel, the disorder, the futility, the meaninglessness, the mystery of life and suffering,” offers us invaluable insight into how we may be still enough to apprehend, let alone dedicate our short existences to the pursuit of ultimate questions (Pascal xix).

It is striking and perhaps disquieting, then, to at once observe and belong to a body of young thinkers whose response to overwhelming and seemingly indomitable anxiety is either to remain constantly in motion, relentlessly searching at full- (often unhealthy) speed for meaning in a largely secular Western world, or to medicate and thereby eradicate the anxious patterns of thought which plague us. In other words, we fail to pause to reflect upon the causes and potential, ultimately more constructive and perhaps even redeeming effects of our anxiety.

Eliot's early verse deserves critical attention in the modern context precisely *because* it epitomizes, even embodies one such pause. Modeling a worthwhile, both/and orientation that regards anxiety both as a liability and a gift, Eliot's early poetic enterprise allows him to literally come to terms with the anxiety, disenchantment, and modern cultural devolution of his age. Paradoxically—yet perhaps as a lesson to our own dynamic, turbulent, and in many ways, unsettling age—the body of work testifying to his tormented grappling with these issues can be seen as both their diagnosis and their cure.

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ABBREVIATIONS

ⁱ MH: *Inventions of the March Hare: Poems, 1909-1917*

ⁱⁱ MTP: "Modern Tendencies in Poetry"

ⁱⁱⁱ L1: *Letters* Volume 1

^{iv} L2: *Letters* Volume 2

^v T&IT: "Tradition and the Individual Talent"

^{vi} RM: Ricks & McCue, *The Poems of T. S. Eliot*

^{vii} UOM: "Ulysses, Order, and Myth"

^{viii} DV: *Death in Venice*