

Constructing A New Stage:

The Re-Formation of the Romantic in Wallace Steven's "Of Modern Poetry" and T. S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"

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Introduction

Alyssa's essay points to a central issue in understanding modernism: its vexed relationship with romanticism, and its constant, nervous attempts to delineate the boundaries of that relationship, particularly by claiming for itself a radical newness. While, as she points out, much modernist critical writing stated an implacable opposition to some central romantic tenets, that purported opposition was always a lot less clear—and more interesting—in the poetry. Newness, as she suggests, is never pure, and is always most interesting when it is murky.

-Dr. Leonard Dieveveen

Ezra Pound's slogan "Make it New" has become so ubiquitous in the discussion of Modernist poetry that it verges on cliché. Nonetheless, the importance of Pound's imperative to the understanding of Modernist poetry and the critical and cultural environment in which it developed cannot be underestimated. Both the audience and poets of this movement were acutely conscious of the fact that such poetry was new—that it represented an intentional departure from the poetic traditions that preceded it. Wallace Steven's "Of Modern Poetry" and T. S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" reflect an intentional opposition between Modernism and Romanticism. Both of these poets write from within a self-consciously new movement, one that generally characterizes Romantic poetry as artistically inferior and irrevocably flawed. In the poems themselves, however, the relationship between the Romantic and the Modernist is less clear-cut. "Of Modern Poetry" and "Prufrock" suggest that the defining difference between the two movements lies not in poetic theory and practice but rather in the changing demands of the environment in which the poetry is created.

In *Romanticism and Classicism*, T. E. Hulme describes the Romantic movement as centred around the idea of the individual as "an infinite reservoir of possibilities."¹ The principles Romanticism were originally articulated by William Wordsworth in his "Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*." Wordsworth argues that in using "the very language of men,"² the poet should seek to express "the general passions and thoughts and feelings of men."³ Poetry should follow "the fluxes and refluxes of the mind when agitated by the great and simple affections of our nature."⁴ Accordingly, Wordsworth advocates the use of nature and rural life as subjects for poetry because they allow for a more direct connection with "the essential passions of the heart."⁵ Because "the mind of man [is] naturally the mirror of the fairest and most interesting qualities of nature,"⁶ it is possible for his true character to be revealed through contemplation of the natural world. For Wordsworth and his Romantic peers, the object of poetry is "truth, not individual and local, but general, and operative [. . .] carried alive into the heart by passion."⁷ Essentially, poetry must speak to mankind in its universal nature and so must be concerned with

particular incidents and images that manifest universal qualities. It is this emphasis on the universal and the infinite that Hulme identifies as the essential flaw in Romanticism. He argues that the “bitter contrast” between the Romantic rhetoric of infinite possibility and the finite nature of man renders Romantic poetry ineffective,⁸ a criticism common among Modernist writers. However, it is precisely this Romantic desire to find and communicate truths of universal import that appears in the poems of Stevens and Eliot.

In that early review of *Harmonium*, his first volume of poetry, Stevens is described as “a poet who strains every nerve every moment to be unlike anyone else who ever wrote.”⁹ The reviewer not only identifies Steven’s poetry as new and different, he claims that it is intentionally so—a quality that Stevens himself, in “Of Modern Poetry,” asserts as both common and necessary to the Modern poetic movement. “Of Modern Poetry” is constructed around the metaphor of poetry as an actor performing for an audience. Through this metaphor, Stevens contrasts the Modern poetry that is the subject of the poem with the poetic tradition that precedes it. Steven’s speaker conceives of Modern poetry as active; it is constantly “in the act of finding / What will suffice.”¹⁰ The poetry of the past is portrayed as static, being performed on a stage already set and merely “[repeating] what / Was in the script,”¹¹ while Modern poetry must go so far as to “construct a new stage” upon which it may perform.¹² The structures in place for the older poetry cannot be used for the newer and so must be replaced. This newer poetry is unconcerned with traditional aesthetic conventions of harmony. Instead, it is “twanging a wiry string that gives / Sounds passing through sudden rightnesses.”¹³ Stevens emphasizes this awkward, unharmonious aspect of modern poetry by employing an irregular rhythmic pattern within lines of approximately the same length, consistently undermining reader’s attempts to impose formal resolution. The poem’s playful structure is most evident in the phrase “the delicatest ear of the mind,”¹⁴ in which the very word that describes a sensitivity to flaws is itself extremely awkward. Modern poetry is consciously new and different, flouting conventions of poetic beauty in favour of the twanging instrument that nevertheless is able to arrive at “sudden rightnesses.”¹⁵

Perhaps the most significant effect of Stevens’s theatre metaphor is to repeatedly draw attention to the audience of this new poetry. The new poetry must be conscious of its readers, for they take on the role of “an invisible audience [listening] / Not to the play, but to itself.”¹⁶ Modern poetry has to be capable of expressing an emotion that already exists in its audience so that they experience it as “an emotion as of two people.”¹⁷ It must seek to encounter its audience and to create an authentic connection through this encounter. Essentially, it must be able, as Romantic poets aspired, to communicate on a universal level. Steven’s speaker describes an “invisible audience”¹⁸ that experiences poetry as if listening to itself, demonstrating the implied necessity that this poetry be capable of speaking to something common to mankind. The mandate that Modern poetry must “learn the speech of the place”¹⁹ recalls Wordsworth’s assertion of the poetic importance of the very language of men.²⁰

However, where Romantic poetry aimed to communicate with mankind as a whole, Steven’s Modern poetry endeavors to achieve a genuine connection with the men and women “of

the time.”²¹ This connection differs from the Romantic connection between poet and audience not through any difference in impulse. Rather, it differs because “the theatre was changed.”²² The modern world is different, and in order to achieve the authentic communication that poetry requires, poetry must alter as well. In order to “face the men of the time and to meet / The women of the time,”²³ Modern poetry cannot speak to the whole of mankind through images of the universal in nature: “it has to think about war.”²⁴ Instead of widespread universal truths, modern poetry can only impart “sudden rightnesses,” providing moments of insight “wholly / Containing” and yet limited to the individual consciousness.²⁵ In “Of Modern Poetry,” Stevens presents a yearning for the kind of universality professed by the Romantics, but this yearning exists in a context that makes its fulfillment impossible. Modern poetry is therefore forced to construct a new stage and forego universal truths of mankind in favour of commonalities between individual minds.

If Modernist poetry is to be interpreted as taking place on a new stage, then T. S. Eliot must be seen to stand at its centre. “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” has been variously greeted as “the quintessence of twentieth-century poetry”²⁶ and an act of “literary rebellion.”²⁷ From its opening stanzas, Eliot distances his poem from the Romantic tradition while at the same time powerfully recalling it. “Prufrock” begins with a journey through a familiar landscape, but it is the chaotic and artificial landscape of urban London rather than the natural landscapes commonly described in Romantic poetry.²⁸ The images of this landscape—“the yellow fog,”²⁹ “the yellow smoke,”³⁰ and “the soot that falls from chimneys”³¹—are images of pollution, but they are associated through Eliot’s use of metaphor with the natural image of a dog. This poem does follow “the fluxes and refluxes of the mind,” but rather than pointing to any universal truth,³² these fluxes and refluxes consist of only “a hundred indecisions / And [. . .] a hundred visions and revisions, / Before the taking of toast and tea.”³³ Throughout the poem, Eliot suggests Romantic principles while at the same time undermining their realization. His is not a Romantic landscape, and Prufrock does not live in a Romantic world. It is precisely this fact that lies at the heart of Prufrock’s tragedy.

Hulme argues that where the Romantics conceive of a world in which man possessed infinite possibility, the Classicists consider man to be “an extraordinarily fixed and limited animal,”³⁴ existing in a world in which he “never [forget] this finiteness, this limit of man.”³⁵ The world of Prufrock is just such a limited one, and Prufrock himself is just such a limited man: “[e]yes [can] fix [him] in a formulated phrase,”³⁶ and he cannot hope to be more than “an attendant lord.”³⁷ He travels the “half-deserted streets,”³⁸ hoping that he might achieve some kind of meaningful connection with his surroundings,³⁹ but he simply returns to “the room [where] the women come and go / Talking of Michelangelo,” and so to the meaninglessness of his life.⁴⁰ Prufrock, like Steven’s speaker, longs for the universal truths of Romanticism but is unable to attain them. His desire to communicate his own, individual truths is paralyzed by the fear that, should he ask his overwhelming question, he would still fail to make the necessary connection. It is by no means clear that Prufrock even knows the exact words of the overwhelming question he wants to ask. He has an impulse to speak to and understand others in a

world in which universal truths do not exist. He experiences directly what Hulme calls “the bitter contrast between what [he thinks he] ought to be able to do and what man actually can.”⁴¹ Eliot’s use of frequent but inconsistent rhyming furthers the impression of a potential for order and harmony that is constantly present but never realized. Prufrock even goes so far as to “hear the mermaids singing, each to each”⁴² and so to glimpse an image of meaningful community and conversation, but his sense of limitation is such that this image leads him only to a statement of profound isolation: “I do not think that they will sing to me.”⁴³ Despite his desire to partake of Romantic, universal truths, Prufrock turns inward to the fixed and limited fluxes and refluxes of his mind.

Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” depicts a man engaging with Romantic ideals of universal truth and shared human experience in a world that is fixed, limited, and isolating. Stevens’s “Of Modern Poetry” shares in the desire for the fulfillment of Romantic ideals but finds the theatre of the times, in which this poetry must perform, ill-suited to such ideals. Both poems ultimately turn inwards to achieve their truths. Stevens does so through the moments of rightness that enable connection between the poetry and its audience. Eliot however, has Prufrock retreat into himself, yearning for connection and in doing so looks beyond Wordsworth’s “essential passions of the heart” and into what Eliot describes in his essay “The Metaphysical Poets” as the object of “the most curious explorers of the soul”: “the cerebral cortex, the nervous system, and the digestive tracts” of the limited human being.⁴⁴ Hulme states that poetry “chooses fresh epithets and fresh metaphors, not so much because they are new, and we are tired of the old, but because the old cease to convey a physical thing, and become abstract encounters.”⁴⁵ Such is the case for Stevens and Eliot. In the modern age, Romantic ideals become abstractions. Eliot’s and Stevens’s poems ultimately aim to renovate and recast these ideals so that poetry can again respond to the modern world and thus regard meaning.

Notes

¹ T. E. Hulme, “Romanticism and Classicism,” *The Norton Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Poetry, Volume 1: Modern Poetry*, eds. Jahan Ramazani et al. (New York: Norton, 2003), 891.

² William Wordsworth, “Preface to Lyrical Ballads,” ENGL 3242.03, *Poetry of the Earlier Twentieth Century Course Kit*, ed. Joel Baetz (Halifax: Dalhousie University, 2007), 747.

³ *Ibid.*, 753.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 745.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 743.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 752.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 751.

⁸ Hulme, 892.

⁹ Mark Van Doren, “Poets and Wits,” *Wallace Stevens: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Charles Doyle (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985), 40.

¹⁰ Wallace Stevens, “Of Modern Poetry,” *The Norton Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Poetry, Volume 1: Modern Poetry*, eds. Jahan Ramazani et al. (New York: Norton, 2003), 255.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 3-4.

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- ¹² *Ibid.*, 10.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, 20-21.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 13.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 21.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 15-16.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 17.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 15.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 6.
- ²⁰ Wordsworth, 747.
- ²¹ Stevens, 7-8.
- ²² *Ibid.*, 4.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, 7-8.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, 21-22.
- ²⁶ Rev. Of "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" by T.S. Eliot, *New Statesman*, 1917, *T. S. Eliot: The Critical Heritage, Volume 1*, ed. Michael Grant (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982), 75.
- ²⁷ Arthur Waugh, "The New Poetry," *T. S. Eliot: The Critical Heritage, Volume 1*, ed. Michael Grant, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982), 68.
- ²⁸ T.S. Eliot, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," *The Norton Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Poetry, Volume 1: Modern Poetry*, eds. Ahan Ramazani et al. (New York: Norton, 2003), 463-66.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, 15.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, 16.
- ³¹ *Ibid.*, 19.
- ³² Wordsworth, 745.
- ³³ Eliot, "Prufrock," 32-34.
- ³⁴ Hulme, 891.
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*, 892.
- ³⁶ Eliot, "Prufrock," 56.
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*, 112.
- ³⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.
- ³⁹ *Ibid.*, 10.
- ⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 13-14.
- ⁴¹ Hulme, 892.
- ⁴² Eliot, "Prufrock," 124.
- ⁴³ *Ibid.*, 125.
- ⁴⁴ T.S. Eliot, "The Metaphysical Poets," *The Norton Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Poetry, Volume 1: Modern Poetry*, eds. Jahan Ramazani et al. (New York: Norton, 2003), 953.
- ⁴⁵ Hulme, 894.