



RESEARCH ARTICLE

THE PROBLEMATIC OF INTERPRETATION: T. S. ELIOT'S EXPERIMENTS IN
FLUIDITY OF EXPRESSION AND MEANING

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ABSTRACT

How the perennially evolving combinations of words in the textual space communicates with the reader and what role the author has in the entire project remains an intriguing aspect of the deep-seated anxiety regarding the efficacy of the verbal modules in negotiating the frontiers of communication. The centrality of interpretation evolves as a significant constituent of the referential and communicative function of the Logos and its multifaceted extensions in critical discourse today. The emerging contradictions posit intriguing questions about the limits of interpretation and the relative positions of the creator, interpreter and the text in the process of the emergence of meanings. In the Eliotian discourse, there are express references to the infinite possibility of textual interpretations with a concomitant awareness of the necessity of some sort of margin at the terrible flow of interpretive profusion. The discursive experimentations with expressions and volatile meanings in form of interpretative mazes remain a premise of an intriguing enquiry.

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INTRODUCTION

A poet may believe that he is expressing only his private experiences; his lines may be for him only a means of talking about himself without giving himself away; yet for his readers what he has written may come to be the expression both of their own secret feelings and of the exultation or despair of a generation. He need not know what his poetry will come to mean to others

T. S. Eliot

The task of a creative text is to display the contradictory plurality of its conclusions, setting the readers free to choose –or to decide that there is no possible choice. In this sense a creative text is always an Open Work. The particular role played by language in creative texts – which in some sense are less translatable than the scientific ones – is just due to the necessity to leave the conclusion to float around, to blur the prejudices of the author through the ambiguity of language and the impalpability of a final sense....a text can have many senses...

Umberto Eco

How the perennially evolving combinations of words in the textual space communicates with the reader and what role the author has in the entire project remains an intriguing aspect of the deep-seated anxiety regarding the efficacy of the verbal modules in negotiating the frontiers of communication. This is an anxiety provoked much earlier by the enormously consequential task of locating the exact meaning of the Word of God or the Logos - the problematic of biblical hermeneutic. The centrality of interpretation evolves as a significant constituent of the referential and communicative function of the Logos and its multifaceted extensions in critical discourse today. Historical scholarship is believed to have been dislocated by an intense concentration on the verbal details of a text, a praxis executed in 'Practical Criticism' of I. A. Richards, indirectly in the works of F. R. Leavis, and William Empson, and in the speculation of 'New Critics' like John Crowe Ransom, R. P. Blackmur, Robert Penn Warren, Allen Tate, Cleanth Brooks and W. K. Wimsatt. What the 'intrinsic approach' proposed eventually led to the conception of

a literary text as an independent and autotelic entity with a self-sufficient meaning that was to be elucidated by a critical interpreter. Concomitantly emerged a rejection of the 'intentionalist fallacy' that presumed that the evidence of authorial pre-textual intentions were significant for establishing the meaning of a given verbal icon. Enquiries of hermeneutic, phenomenological or structural linguistic origin diversified and extended the perceptual profiles about meaning and interpretive endeavours. From the partial congruence of Saussure's insistence on the arbitrariness of the signifier with the anthropological theories of Levi-Strauss, can be discerned a diversified quest for deep structures and recurrent patterns underlying human operations and the text. Ideas of meaning and communication entailed a bewildering play of fixity and instability that eventually reached a point where the excavation of an underlying textual meaning becomes redundant. Interpretive attempts to limit the contexts conferring meaning or to impede the perennial, self-dissolving instabilities of the process of writing is repudiated as 'authoritarian'. A strange contradiction emerges in the form of a stringent critique of post-structuralist praxis that is said to be indulging in a 'double game' of simultaneously introducing individual interpretive strategies while reading and tacitly depending on communal norms while communicating the interpretation to others in writing. The role of the reader comes under focus. The emerging contradictions posit intriguing questions about the limits of interpretation and the relative positions of the creator, interpreter and the text in the process of the emergence of meanings.

Some of Eliot's formulations voice deep-seated dilemmas that are overt anticipations of perceptions developing in subsequent phases. Umberto Eco's unease with the reader's license to produce unlimited, uncontrolled flow of interpretations, expressed in his Tanner Lectures, highlights a concern discerned in some of the critical formulations of T. S. Eliot. Recounting the evolution of a pursuit of 'secret meanings', encoded in words that apparently escape the attention of the mass and is amenable to be interpreted by an initiated few, Eco projects a tradition evolving through the endeavours of Hermeticism and Gnosticism, a practice in which every peeled layer or decoded secret is conceived as an antechamber to a still more cleverly concealed truth. An apparent disdain towards the surface meaning and its easy

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accessibility marks the efforts of those whom Eco calls 'Followers of The Veil'. "Interpretation is indefinite", admits Eco, and adds-The attempt to look for a final, unattainable meaning leads to the acceptance of a never-ending drift or sliding of meaning...Every object, be it earthly or heavenly, hides a secret. Every time a secret has been discovered, it will refer to another secret in a progressive movement toward a final secret. Nevertheless there can be no final secret. The ultimate secret of Hermetic initiation is that everything is secret. Hence the Hermetic secret must be an empty one because anyone who pretends to reveal any sort of secret is not himself initiated and has stopped at a superficial level of the knowledge of comic mystery. Hermetic thought transforms the whole world theatre into a linguistic phenomenon and at the same time denies language any power of communication. (p.32)

In the Gnostic vision the individual is conceived as fraught with divine potential, provisionally cast into an exile. There is an insistence on the spiritual aspect against the meanings bound to mere matter and an indication of an inherent aspiration to truth and redemption. In both the Hermetic and the Gnostic heritage, Umberto Eco discerns a pursuit of a transcendental secret. He refers to Georg Simmel who argued that power consists in convincing others that one has a secret: The secret gives one a position of exception; it operates as a purely socially determined attraction. It is basically independent of the context it guards but, of course, is increasingly effective in the measure in which the exclusive possession of it is vast and significant...From secrecy, which shades all that is profound and significant, grows the typical error according to which everything mysterious is something important and essential. Before the unknown, man's natural impulse to idealize and his natural fearfulness cooperate towards the same goal: to intensify the unknown through imagination and to pay attention to it with an emphasis that is not usually accorded to patent reality. (pp.332-333)

This tendency reflected in many modern approaches rendered the text an open-ended universe where the reader goes on discovering infinite interconnections in his attempt to discover a concealed secret through the projected words. The reader seems to suspect that every line communicates a travesty of signification, hiding another layer of secret meaning. Disturbed with this uninterrupted chain of apparently infinite deferrals, Eco says – as soon as a pretended meaning is allegedly discovered, we are sure that it is not the real one; the real one is the further one and so on and so forth; the *hylics* – the losers – are those who end the process by saying 'I understood'.(p.39)

Eco distances himself from this tendency in his insistence on the reader's ability to recognize and resist over-interpretation of a text, simultaneously without obdurately clinging to the interpretive validity of any single reading of a text. Eco projects the notion of 'intentio operis', the intention of the work, which he argues, plays an important part as a source of meaning which cannot be reduced to the pre-textual authorial intent or 'intentio auctoris'. It also confers a constraint upon the free play of the reader's intent or 'intentio lectoris'. Eco broadly endorses the contention of the New Critics in his denial of pre-textual authorial intent as the most significant criteria in an interpretive venture. Eliot, we know, had disowned patron position in relation to New Criticism; yet, reading Eco we recollect Eliot's assertion of a distinction between the voice of the text, the voice of the 'Empirical Author' and the voice of the reader. Discussing the mode of appreciating a literary text, Eliot, in his Introduction to *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*, emphasizes an organization and reorganization of an independently evolving pattern; a notion that apparently comes close to the notion of Eco's 'intentio operis' or the dictates of the text:

It is a second stage in our understanding of poetry, when we no longer merely select or reject, but organize. We may even speak of a third stage, one of reorganization; a stage at which a person already

educated in poetry meets with something new in his own time, and finds a new pattern of poetry arranging itself in consequence.(p.19)

One might register a discomfiting supremacy of the reader's voice in the "person already educated in poetry" that consecutively organizes and reorganizes, even though the Eliotian discourse already defines such an organizing sensibility as a conglomerate of previous numerous interpretive ventures that unconsciously and perennially affect his present act. An intriguing interplay of a multiplicity of 'intentio operis' so to say, merely includes one more such textual voice in the ever-evolving intricacy of an interpretive pattern. As Eliot says in 'Tradition and Individual Talent': 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, and that this change is a development which abandons nothing en route, which does not superannate either Shakespeare, or Homer, or the rock drawing of the Magdalenian draughtsmen...What happens is a continual surrender of himself as he is at the moment to something which is more valuable. The progress...is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality.(pp.16-17)

The "extinction of personality" seems to indicate a permeation of the other voices of old texts that Eliot finds 'valuable', into the present interpretive as well as creative intellect. After all, it is not Homer or Shakespeare themselves, who communicate with the modern author, but their works that he has read.

Eco's express diatribe against the endless 'peeling' of signification in an interpretation of a text in quest of a perennially deferred meaning brings us to the analogy of "a sphinx without a secret" used by Maud Ellman in her *The Poetics of Impersonality: T.S.Eliot and Ezra Pound*. Eliot's works like *The Waste Land*, poses multiple facets to interpreters; Ellman argues against scholarly attempts at resolving the gaps and ambiguities of the poem with some sort of a hidden meaning that keeps altering with every 'peeling' of the layers of the poem:

Now *The Waste Land*, like any good sphinx, lures the reader into hermeneutics, too: but there is no secret underneath its huggermuggery. Indeed Hegel saw the Sphinx as the symbol of the symbolic itself, because it did not know the answer to its own question: and *The Waste Land*, too is a riddle to itself. Here it is more instructive to be scrupulously superficial than to dig beneath the surface of the poem's buried skeletons or sources. For it is in the silences between the words that meaning flickers, local, evanescent – in the very 'wastes' that stretch across the page. These silences curtail the process of the author...Moreover, the speaker cannot be identified with his creator, not because he has a different personality like Prufrock, but he has no stable identity at all. The disembodied 'I' glides in and out of stolen texts...this subject is the victim of a general collapse of boundaries. (pp.91-92)

If an overtly post-structuralist interpretive venture encourages the autonomy of what Eco calls the voice of the text, critics like Jonathan Culler resists the text's monopolistic exclusion of certain questions and inclusion of others. Culler argues that the restrictions on certain types of questions, imposed by pragmatists like Rorty or Stanley Fish, tantamounts to kicking away the ladder on which they had mounted to professional glory, and a denial of the ladder's utility to the succeeding generation. Cultivating a state of wonder at the infinite multidimensional encounters between the text and the interpretations is what Culler finds necessary for discovering the infinite potential of a text. Responding to Umberto Eco's Tanner Lectures on Over-interpretation, Culler, as another participant of the Seminar, argued – Umberto Eco linked over-interpretation to what he called an 'excess of wonder', an excessive propensity to treat as significant elements which might be simply fortuitous. This *deformation professionnelle*, as he sees it, which inclines critics to puzzle over elements in a text, seems to me, on the contrary, the best source of the insights into language and literature that we seek, a quality to be cultivated, rather

than shunned. It would be sad indeed if fear of 'overinterpretation' should lead us to avoid or repress the state of wonder at the play of texts and interpretation. (pp.122-123)

In Eliot, one discerns a startling apprehension of these opposing approaches and the profound concerns playing around the idea of the autonomy of textual words and intrusion of purely personal hermeneutic enquiry. Eliot's enquiry often leads to a subtle resolution of the dichotomy in the form of an interpretation in which the content and style are given equal weightage. The former acts as the means that may be diverse; this is a proposition reflecting a subtle acknowledgement of the diversity of the interpretations, an indication that the final product – the text emerges as an autonomic product of style. Eliot points out in 'From Poe to Valery':

A complete unconsciousness or indifference to the style at the beginning, or to the subject matter at the end, would however take us outside the poetry altogether: for a complete unconsciousness of anything but subject matter would mean that for that listener poetry had not yet appeared; a complete unconsciousness of anything but style would mean that poetry had vanished.(pp38-39)

In the Eliotian discourse, there are other express references to the infinite possibility of textual interpretations with a concomitant awareness of the necessity of some sort of margin at the terrible flow of interpretive profusion. At times there is discerned a detailed depiction of development of the creative consciousness through a plethora of purely personal experiences as in the 'Introduction' to *The Use of Poetry and Use of Criticism* while in other instances emerge an overt recognition of what Eco calls an 'intentio operis' that operates between the 'intentio auctoris' and the reader's interpretive multiplicity:

The poem's existence is somewhere between the writer and the reader; it has a reality which is not simply the reality of what the writer is trying to 'express', or of his experience of writing it, or of the experience of the reader or of the writer as reader. Consequently the problem of what a poem 'mean's is a good deal more difficult than it at first appears.(p.30)

Perceptions like this look forward to Eco's:

In some of my recent writings I have suggested that between the intention of the author (very difficult to find out and frequently irrelevant for the interpretation of the text) and the intention of the interpreter who (to quote Richard Rorty) simply 'beats the text into a shape which will serve for his purpose', there is a third possibility. There is an *intention of the text*.(p.25)

The problematic of interpretation of the words in a text evolves as a corollary to deeper folds of anxiety that questions the position of the author. What is reflected in Foucault's suggestion of circulating anonymous texts, de Man's conception of language at a metaphorical and essentially fictional structure, Derrida's dislocation of any fixity of logocentric or phonocentric centrality and Barthes's announcement of the author's death, seems to have been troubling the modernist mind as puzzles that continually defied satisfactory resolution. Historical, cultural, philosophical, and literary perspectives are felt to be essentially linguistic; an awareness that implicates a disquieting deference of any quest for salvation through the words. Meaning, Eliot says in *The Sacred Wood*, is not an individual construct, but dependent on a linguistic heritage:

No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists.(p.49)

The cultural lineage from the past is rooted in an awareness of the essentially fluid nature of cultural centrality. Culture, in the Eliotian perspective is a space where various contradictory forces continually collide to enter new combinations. "We must not think of our

culture", warns Eliot in his *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture*, "as completely unified". Only a dead and fossilized culture may be totally homogeneous; the absolute unity of a global culture is a utopian 'impossibility':

We are the more likely to be able to stay loyal to the ideal of the unimaginable culture, if we recognize all the difficulties, the practical impossibilities of its realization. (p.137)

The voice of tradition ringing in a text also is not a singular voice. Voices from Homer to the present render a textual fabric essentially plural, a text that mutually interacts with the present and the past to create an ever-changing resource of the contextual – the variable. *The Sacred Wood* says:

What happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it...existing monuments [are]...modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) works of art among them.(p.50)

The inherent sense of plurality and transitional flux is recognised in Roland Barthes's 'From Work to Text' that defines the essential plurality and stereophonic cultural elements in a text:

The text is plural...an irreducible plurality. The Text is not coexistence of meaning, but passage, traversal: hence it depends not on an interpretation, however liberal, but on an explosion, on dissemination. The plurality of the Text depends, as a matter of fact, not on the ambiguity of its contents, but on what we might call the stereographic plurality of the signifiers which leave it (etymologically, the text is a fabric)...what he [the reader] perceives is multiple, irreducible, issuing from heterogeneous, detached substances and levels...all these...are half identifiable: they issue from known codes, but their combinative operation is unique, it grounds the stroll [of the reader] in a difference which cannot be separated except as *differance*. This is what happens in the Text: it can be Text only in difference...its reading is semelfactive...and yet entirely woven of quotations, references, echoes: cultural languages (what language is not cultural?), antecedent or contemporary, which traverse it through and through, in a vast stereophony. (pp.59-60)

Interestingly enough, Eliot's concept of 'Impersonality' of the author harbours an implicit recognition of the free performance of the verbal modules; a proclivity that Barthes finds operative in Mallarme, Valery and Proust. Eliot, in his 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', projects the poet as a mere catalyst who has no power to bend the linguistic structures to suit his personal need of expressing his individual emotions, ideologies or dicta; on the contrary, it is the overall system of language that takes control, enabling a myriad play of infinite combinations and rendering the poet a mere medium:

The other aspect of this Impersonal theory of poetry is the relation of the poem to its author. And I hinted, by an analogy [that of the catalyst], that the mind of the mature poet differs from the immature one not precisely in any valuation of 'personality', not necessarily being more interesting, or having 'more to say', but rather of being more finely perfected medium in which special, or very varied, feelings are at liberty to enter into new combinations.(p.54)

The implicit acknowledgement of the 'impersonality' of the poet operating subserviently to the words and the process of endless permutations is further endorsed when he defines 'honest criticism' or good interpretive efforts:

Honest criticism and sensitive appreciation is directed not upon the poet but upon the poetry. (p.53)

The proximity to Barthes is not to be overlooked. In 'The Death of the Author', Barthes says:

for Mallarme, as for us, it is language which speaks, not the author; to write is to reach, through a preliminary impersonality – which we can at no moment identify with realistic novelist’s castrating “objectivity” – that point where not “I” but only language functions, “performs”: Mallarme’s whole poetics consists in suppressing the author in favour of writing...Valery...continued to cast the Author into doubt and decision, emphasized the linguistic and “accidental” nature of his activity, and throughout his prose works championed the essentially verbal condition of literature...(p.50)

With the authorial intent rendered subservient to the ‘performance’ of the text, emerges an awareness of the deeper problematic of interpretation; how far the words are valid as communicative instruments and how much they really convey, open up a whole range of disturbing dilemmas. In *Knowledge and Experience*, Eliot had shown that words develop ideas or objects that find their identity only in relations, and meaning emerges in a relational domain. The authorial self and the intricacy of private perceptual complexes can never attain an absolute status through words, as both are subject to flux of experience, and their relation is perennially transient. In *On Poetry and Poets*, Eliot asserts, There may be much more in a poem than the author was aware of. The different interpretations may all be partial formulations of one thing; the ambiguities may be due to the fact that the poem, means more, not less, than ordinary speech can communicate.(p.31)

Eliot assigns significant role to the reader in this triadic structure of the creator-text-interpretive community. In ‘The Music of Poetry’, he muses:

The reader’s interpretation may differ from the author’s and be equally valid, it may even be better. (p.31)

This unobtrusive observation whets troubled speculations regarding the enormity of interpretive variations and the possible confusion of ‘meaning’ in the process. The implications are terribly inclined towards a fluidity where even the charismatic hermeneutics of the luminescent Logos stands threatened.

The Eliotian discourse, read in the light of later enquiries and speculations, yield newer insights. His quest for the Word and the succour of the Inner Word of the communion, we note, had been pierced with doubts that came to assume much larger proportions in the succeeding decades. Barthes’s ‘The Death of the Author’ in a way takes Eliot’s assumption to its logical end and brings out the deletion of the centrality implied:

literature (it would be better, from now on, to say writing), by refusing to assign to the text (and to the world-as-text) a “secret”, i.e. an ultimate meaning, liberates an activity we may call counter theological, properly revolutionary, for to refuse to halt meaning is finally to refuse God and his hypostates, reason, science, the law (p.54)

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