

# ELIOT'S *THE WASTE LAND*: DEFAMILIARIZATION OF PAST AND PERSONALITY\*

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**Abstract:** In this paper I argue that T. S. Eliot's emphasis on tradition and impersonality is, in fact, a device to defamiliarise 'past' and 'personality'. My argument is based on Victor Shklovsky's notion of 'defamiliarization', which maintains that devices of various kinds are used in literature 'to defamiliarise language and to awaken readers to the intricacy and texture of verbal structure. Such defamiliarization is, therefore, the manner in which poetry functions to rejuvenate and revivify language'. I further argue that Shklovsky's notion of 'defamiliarization' should be seen in a new perspective because, firstly, it is not only 'a feature of text but of interaction of text with context' and secondly, it 'cannot be separated from the psychology of the reader or from the particular and changing social and historical context which conditions it'. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922), the paper explores, is not merely a 'new tissue of past citations' but a rereading of the habitual historical perception, a vital reaction against the misreading of the cultural past 'making the old conventions alive and significant for contemporary readers', making the past with all its 'pastness' and personality with its 'extinction' appear extraordinary, atypical, composite, shocking, and novel.

## 1. Introduction

J. Bottum in his paper "What T. S. Eliot Almost Believed" (see *First Things*, 1995: 25-30) states, "Too much has been said about *The Waste Land* to make original comment about it possible". But I assume that in the presence of the rich and varied existing critical corpus on *The Waste Land* in particular and on Eliot in general from F. O. Matthiessen (1935), Helen Gardner (1949), Elizabeth Drew (1949), Hugh Kenner (1959), and C.K. Stead (1964), Grover Smith (1958), Nancy K. Gish (1988), and Gareth Reeves (1994) to Christopher Ricks (1994) and Anthony Julius (1995) it is not easy to make

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original comments on *The Waste Land* possible. And the task is more difficult when one embarks on a critical venture to reconcile the anathematized exclusion of the social, cultural and historical influences on a work of art by the adherents of Russian Formalism with those of a "philosophical poet" (Helen Gardner and Allen Tate, 1997) like Eliot who believed in the intrinsic moral function of poetry (Stead, [1964]1980: 122). However, "Eliot's view that language had become stale and unprofitable in industrial society, unsuitable for poetry, has affinities with Russian Formalism (Eagleton, [1983] 2001: 36). Besides, his "organized violence on ordinary speech" (Jakobson, quoted by Krishnaswami *et al.* 2001: 111) in the use of language of poetry, his modernist taste for the aesthetic form, and his theories of impersonality and tradition may be seen as text's representation of reality as technique of defamiliarizing the social ideas of a dominant culture (that is to say, the social ideas of a dominant culture of the inter-War years in Europe) in order to make strange the reality's apparent coherence. The paper will show how Eliot has used the techniques of defamiliarization in *The Waste Land* for the recontextualization of tradition, and culture, and depersonalization of art.

## 2. Defamiliarization: A Central Concept of 20<sup>th</sup> C Art

Shklovsky's concept of 'defamiliarization' is claimed as a central concept of 20th century art, ranging over movements including Dadaism, postmodernism, and science fiction (Wikipedia, 2002). Shklovsky's concept of 'defamiliarization' is discussed in his seminal essay, *Art as Technique* ([1917] in Davis, 1986: 55). He explains:

Habitualization devours works, clothes, furniture, one's wife, and the fear of war. "If the whole complex lives of many people go on unconsciously, then such lives are as if they had never been." And art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone *stony*. The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects "unfamiliar," to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. *Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object; the object is not important.*

According to Shklovsky, the "ultimate purpose of literary art is estrangement, or "making strange", displacing language out of its usual, workaday meaning and freeing it to stimulate and produce fresh linguistic apprehensions—of language itself and the world" (Ibid: 51).

That is to say that familiar, known, recognizable, monotonous, and uninteresting things are made to look strange, uncommon, fresh, new, atypical and then rescued from the 'devouring jaws' of habitualization for a close scrutiny or even for creating a sense of shock and wonder. "...familiar situations and actions are defamiliarised and we see them from a deautomatised angle" (Krishnaswami *et al.* 2001: 110). Thus, the technique of defamiliarization is based on the function of literature which refurbishes "freshness to perception which has become habituated and automated: to make things strange, to make us see them anew" (Cook, 1994: 131). Shklovsky further (1917 in Davis, 1986: 59) formulates:

Now, having explained the nature of this technique, let us try to determine the approximate limits of its application. I personally feel that defamiliarization is found almost everywhere form is found. In other words, the difference between Potebnya's point of view and ours is this: An image is not a permanent referent for those mutable complexities of life which are revealed through it; its purpose is not to make us perceive meaning, but to create a special perception of the object—it *creates a "vision" of the object instead of serving as a means for knowing it.*

According to Shklovsky, the aim of defamiliarization is "to create the vision" that results from the deautomatization of perception. Automatised perception is not an object and this is called by Shklovsky as "recognition" as opposed to "seeing". For him the aim of imagery, the aim of creating new art, is to return the object from "recognition" to "seeing" (Shklovsky [1940]1974: 114 *cited.* in Cook, 1994:131).

Like the modernists, the Russian Formalists and the New Critics both "sought to move away" (Davis, 1986: 46) from nineteenth-century romantic attitudes in criticism and aimed "to explore what is specifically *literary* in texts", and both rejected "the limp spirituality of late Romantic poetics in favour of a detailed and empirical approach to reading". But while "the New Critics regarded literature as a form of human understanding, the Formalists thought of it as a special use of language" (Selden, 1985: 6-7). For the Formalists, form was not the expression of content, "content was merely the 'motivation' of form, an occasion or convenience for a particular kind of formal exercise" (Eagleton, [1983]2001: 3) and defamiliarization "was not conceived as taking place at the level of content....It is,

rather, at the level of form, that the 'glass armour of the familiar' is shattered" (Cook, 1994: 132). Russian Formalists "attempted not only to isolate and define the "formal" properties of poetic language (in both poetry and prose) but also to study the way in which certain aesthetically motivated devices (e.g., defamiliarization [*ostranenie*]) determined the literariness or artfulness of an object" (Grodin and Kreiswirth, Eds. 1997). Defamiliarization also plays an important function when the Formalist approach viewed the literary work without authorial impact and the impact of the social, historical, and cultural factors contributing to its creation but the sum total of the internal formal relationships. Hence, it began as a mechanistic, autonomous, autotelic, static and ahistorical view of literary creation. However, the "external relationships with other cultural systems and their dynamics were also the foci of their analyses especially in the second phase of formalism" when some of the proponents (like Jakobson and Tynyanov) of Formalism "attempted to partially reconcile that view with a diachronic, dynamic one, and to reduce the gap between art object and the reality to which it refers" (Surdulescu 2002). Defamiliarization was then deemed as working in a text intertextually ('syn-functionally') or intratextually ('auto-functionally') (Tynyanov "On Literary Evolution" [1929] in Matejka and Pomorska Eds. 1976: 66-78 cited in Cook, 1994: 132). Pointing out the limitations of the formalist theory Guy Cook offers vital adjustments:

Clearly, here, the formalist desire to treat the text as autonomous and independent of history and authors runs into trouble, for the corollary of this theory is that defamiliarization is not a feature of text, but of the interaction of text with context. (Ibid. 134)

He further comments:

In particular, the claim to deal with texts as autonomous objects does not fit with the notion of defamiliarization, which, far from being the fixed feature of an isolated text, is a variable which can not be separated from the psychology of the reader or from the particular and changing social and historical context which conditions it. (Ibid. 139)

Now we can examine Eliot's use of the technique of defamiliarization in *The Waste Land* in a broader perspective.

### 3. Defamiliarisation of the 'historical sense'

Today it is axiomatic to accept that T. S. Eliot's poem, *The Waste Land* "is a masterpiece of innovative poetic design and embodies an entirely new and original poetic technique" (Shahane, 1987: 1). With all its "relation to the dead poets and artists" (Eliot ([1919] in Martin and Furbank, Eds. 1975: 80), it is what Roland Barthes has called a text "a new tissue of past citations" (Barthes, 1981: 39). And a modernist poet's "serious reevaluation of the limits of literary form", "open breach from the past", reaction against "romantic irrationality", and a kind of "poetic experience that is not brought to the text but is generated precisely out of the text's particular patterning of structure" (Davis, 1986: 11-13) have been found unmistakably reflected in *The Waste Land*. However, there are critics like Graham Hough (1860: 120) who while reading Eliot's poetry "is [are] simply confronted with an extension of the liberties that have been normal in English verse over a great deal of its history" but later agrees that "no doubt all the formal devices he employs can be found somewhere before, but he employs them in such different proportions and combinations that the result is in effect a new thing". David Craig (1973: 290-294) considers *The Waste Land* as "one of the outstanding cases in modern times a work which projects an almost defeatist personal depression in the guise of a full, impersonal picture of society". And he believes that "History, reality, are being manipulated to fit an escapist kind of prejudice, however detached the writer may feel himself to be". At this point, it would be pertinent to evaluate Eliot's ([1919] in Martin and Furbank, Eds. 1975: 78-85) concept of 'tradition' which he says, is not a "blind or timid adherence" to the past but tradition "is a matter of much wider significance". He further says,

It can be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labour. It involves in the first place a historical sense...and the historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence...This historical sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional. And it is at the same time what makes a writer most acutely conscious of his place in time, of his contemporaneity (Ibid.)

He also considers this historical sense "as a principle of aesthetic". Eliot's concept of 'tradition' is evolutionary and dynamic. It is a means

of direction and of being getting transformed in a new way. For a poet, it is a matter of great responsibility. It is "the relation of the poet to the past". Eliot's emphasis on tradition underlies the social focus of art (Birje-Patil, 1977: 7). It points both to the social function of poetry and tradition as an artistic principle. The artistic principle of Eliot can be considered equivalent to the Russian Formalist's category of "[A]rtistic motivation' which yields motifs contributing to defamiliarization" (Cook, 1994: 137). Thus the artistic principle in *The Waste Land* dramatises the defamiliarization of past against the background of the 'dominant' or the unifying theme of sterility.

#### **4. *The Waste Land*: Defamiliarization of past against the background of the unifying theme of sterility**

##### **4.1 Eliot's use of linguistic form as a means to defamiliarise the past**

*The Waste Land* opens with Eliot's linguistic selection and combination that critiques Chaucer's depiction of spring in *General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales* and the great event of Christ's resurrection, Easter, in the world of the poem making it both timeless and temporal. The habitual historical perception is thus defamiliarised involving the reader's "estranging", "slowing down" or "prolonging" perception and thereby impeding their habitual, automatic relation to objects, situations, and poetic form itself (Grodén and Kreiswirth, Eds. 1997). The second line refers to the Lilac flowers, 'breeding/Lilacs out of the dead land' symbols of spring, renewal in nature, and fertility but the reference to the land that is dead at the time of spring is paradoxical. By using paradox and irony in the opening lines, Eliot also reverses the conventional poetic form further intensifying the effect by the repeated use of the present participles; 'breeding', 'mixing', 'stirring', 'covering', 'feeding' and by using such expressions as 'Winter kept us warm' 'forgetful snow' and 'Summer surprised us'. He further defamiliarises reader's perception of the spring season and all the conventional ideas associated with it by suddenly bringing the movement of its inhabitants whose movement is caught between 'memory and desire' suggested by the combination of past and present tenses. This combination is an important feature of Eliot's use of linguistic form as a means to defamiliarise the past. This technique can be noticed throughout the poem. The following are a few examples from the each section of the poem:

And I was frightened. He said, Marie,  
Marie, hold on tight. And down we went.  
In the mountains, there you feel free.  
I read, much of the night, and go south in the winter.  
(*"The Burial of the Dead"*, ll. 15-18)

Under the firelight, under the brush, her hair  
Spread out in fiery points  
Glowed into words, then would be savagely still.  
'My nerves are bad tonight.  
(*"A Game of Chess"*, ll. 118-21)

By the waters of Leman I sat down and wept...  
Sweet Thames, run softly, till I end my song  
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But at my back in a cold blast I hear  
The rattle of the bones, and chuckle spread from ear to ear.  
(*"The Fire Sermon"*, ll. 184-87)

Gentile or Jew/  
O you who turn the wheel and look to windward,  
Consider Phlebas, who was once handsome and tall as you.  
(*"Death by Water"*, ll. 319-21)

He who was living is now dead  
He who were living are now dying  
With a little patience  
(*"What the Thunder Said"*, ll. 328-30)

Eliot's use of lexical items, repetitions and syntactic variations with the change of context can be cited as the examples of defamiliarization of the past by using the linguistic form in a novel way, "even creating a sense of shock and wonder". The lines cited above from the third section of the poem can amply illustrate this device of Eliot.

#### 4.2 Defamiliarising the past through the mythic structure

Eliot employs the old Nature myth as a poetic logic as if to recompense the absence of a logic of discourse in the poem. The 'dominant' of sterility runs throughout the poem with the variations of the fertility cults found in Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough* in the forms of the burial of the vegetation gods and the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ with the suggestions of sacrifice, penance and salvation. The death-wish of Sibyl, the burial of the dead, the double-consciousness of Tiresias, the rape of Philomela, the distraction of Actaeon, and the Christian myths of resurrection are put side by side the contemporary figures and situations to defamiliarise the past. Let us take, for instance, the situation of the typist girl whose boredom, indifference, and agony is shocking the way Eliot mingles physical and the spiritual barrenness of the modern man by bringing into the picture the figure of Tiresias, "throbbing between two lives", as a victim who has "foresuffered all": promiscuity of the past and the permissiveness of the present. The past and present meet in a twilight world which is pathetic and impotent enhancing the unifying theme of sterility in the poem making the action at once contemporary and ageless. Furthermore, the use of the lexical items like 'taxi', 'automatic', 'gramophone' connecting them with the lexical items such as 'strange', 'troubled' 'confused', 'synthetic' 'sad', and the various metonymic variations of the word 'fire' used in the previous section foreground the artificiality, suffering, hollowness, timid apathy, meaningless diversions, and the neurosis of Belladonna, 'the lady of situations', the agony of Lil, the typist girl and the Thames daughters. Myth as a "schema of imagination" (Joseph Margolis quoted by Righter 4-5), an "imaginative possibility" (4), and "a spiritual principle" (see Righter, 1975) provide Eliot with an aesthetic form which dramatizes the physical and emotional needs of society. References to Sibyl, Tiresias, Philomela, Actaeon and Diana and many other pagan and Christian myths - 'the withered stumps of time', in view of Righter (Ibid), "are not parts of a single narrative"(35). However, a closer look in the light of the above discussion will show that these are the part of a single narrative but the sequence of events of this narrative are not bound by a linear chronological link.

Eliot uses the motif of the quest of the Holy Grail and the Fisher King taken from Frazer's *The Golden Bough* and Jessie L. Westons's *From Ritual to Romance* and mingles them with Madame Sosostris's



figures on the Tarot cards in the first section and the narrator 'fishing in the dull canal' in the third section of the poem bringing the past and the present with a psychic awareness that it is only in dying man can hope to be re-born, that the fertility of the waste land will be restored and life will be renewed. Otherwise, he will be 'the bankrupt inheritor' of the 'fragments' of the past and 'the voices of the past', which are, in the absence of positive values,

a deformed echo: Madame Sosostris blindly touting devalued gods, Mr. Eugnides offering bribes in return for a simulacrum of love, the grass singing by the empty chapel. As the Narrator hears and sees these things, he is at one with the maimed guardian of the Grail. His suffering is unredeemable. It is therefore pointless. But so inured has he become to it that even the slightest stirrings of life are painful (ll. 1-7). All he can do is sit and survey the potent past of which he knows himself to be the bankrupt inheritor (Coote, 1985: 103).

### **5. Defamiliarization of personality: depersonalization of art and its relation to tradition**

Writing against the romantic irrationality and spontaneity in poetic creation Eliot asserts, 'Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality' ([1919] in Martin and Furbank, Eds. 1975: 78-85). He further says, "The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality" and "The emotion of art is impersonal. And the poet cannot reach impersonality without surrendering wholly to the work to be done" (Ibid).

Evidently, Eliot strove for achieving impersonality in his poetry. He practiced what he preached. For him "impersonality represents aesthetic insight" when the feelings of the poet are "under firm control" and the mind is "properly trained". "Therefore, impersonality in Eliot does not mean non-involvement. It means control—*Damyata*. The heart responding:

Gaily, when invited beating obedient  
To controlling hands. (Birje-Patil, 1977: 11)

Like Russian Formalist's reaction against nineteenth-century romantic attitudes in literary criticism, Eliot's reacted against "a heap of sociopolitical axioms and perverse misreadings of the cultural past" of

his time. As a defamiliarising technique he provided "the poetics of juxtaposition" "the technical advance of a new aesthetic" (Cooper, 1987).

### **5.1 Allusions in *The Waste Land*: 'the poetics of juxtaposition'**

Quotations from various sources with the mythical, historical, literary, contemporary references used by Eliot are the important part of this "poetics of juxtaposition" in *The Waste Land* so much so that they, like other outstanding lines from his other poems, "reverberated pregnantly throughout the literary imagination of the twentieth century" (Kimball, 1999). These quotations intricately woven in the text structure of the poem can be considered as creating "sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known" and in this context "defamiliarization is not a feature of text, but of the interaction of text with context". Defamiliarization is the use of some strategy to force us to look, to be critical (42). We experience the described objects as strange, elaborate, artificial rather than familiar, simple, natural (44). Defamiliarization occurs when the context of reference introduces elements which in any way deviate from the expected cultural context. There are numerous techniques by which this can be effected. They include, for example, the introduction of sociologically deviant characters with discourse styles at odds with the norms of the narrative voice...there are texts in which the poet attempts to construct a world which is a logical denial of inversion of the experiential norms supplied by the context of culture (89-90) (Fowler, 1986). Eliot's *The Waste Land* is such a poem in which characters/figures like Sibyl, Tiresias, Marie, arch-duke, Son of Man, Tristan and Isolde, the hyacinth girl, Madame Sosostris, the drowned Phoenician sailor, Belladonna, the Hanged Man, Mrs. Equitone, Stetson, the society lady, Cleopatra, Dido, Belinda, Imogen, Philomela, Actaeon, Diana, Ophelia, Ariel, Prince Ferdinand, Lou, Lil, May, Albert, the bartender, the typist girl, the young man carbuncular, the nymphs, the loitering heirs of city directors, Sweeney, Mrs. Porter, Mr Egnides, the one-eyed Smyrna merchant, Elizabeth and Leicester, Buddha, St. Augustine, the Thames daughters, the European cities personified as a woman who fiddled whisper music on her long black hair, Jesus Christ with his three disciples, the Knight on his mythical journey of quest, the lean solicitor, Coriolanus, Hieronymo, Prajapati and many more move about, in a timeless world of 'memory and desire', 'Tolling reminiscent bells' of history, religion, culture and tradition.

With the use of allusions Eliot "promote[s] the emergence of a new aesthetic to compensate for the lost connections with the past" and "a kind of creative surrender of the artist" which will contextualise the tradition and depersonalize the artist. Allusions provide a reader with a context to perceive the past in new ways that add meaning to the present, with all its layers of connotations. The text of the poem provides its own "structural emotions" (Eliot [1919] quoted in Davis, 1986:12-13) to the readers. For instance, firstly, the context of the complex water symbolism in the line taken from Shakespeare's play, *The Tempest*: 'Those are pearls that were his eyes', used in the first section of *The Waste Land* and again repeated in the second section of the poem is different in both the places. Secondly, it points to the modern man's inability to understand the meaning of his cultural heritage. In the first place it suggests the life-giving as well as the destructive powers of water in the context of the drowned Phoenician Sailor and again connects itself with the fourth section of the poem 'Death by Water' with the moral insight of beyond the fire of desire holding out a promise of rain and the possibility of salvation in the last section "What the Thunder Said". In the second place it is just a meaningless repetition of the past the 'withered stumps of time' caused by the stressed urban living. Similarly, the use of names, quotations, situations, their ironic variations and their resonance ranging from Petronius, Chaucer, James Thomson, the Bible (Ezekiel, Ecclesiastes etc.), John Donne, Richard Wagner, Aldous Huxley, Grail legends, Shakespeare, Walter Pater, Hinduism, Dante, Punic Wars, John Webster, Thomas Middleton, Alexander Pope, Virgil, Milton, Ovid, John Lyly, D.H.Lawrence, a popular song in the years of the First World War, Buddha, Spenser, Andrew Marvell, the Fisher King of mythology, John Day, Sappho, Robert Louis Stevenson, Homer, Oliver Goldsmith, Dante, Baudelaire, St. Augustine, William Morris, Hermann Hesse, an anonymous Latin poem *Pervigilium Veneris*, Gerard de Nerval, Thomas Kyd, and finally to the formal ending of the great *Upanishads* strike a note of absolute novelty by a radical departure from traditional poetic style and structure.

In *The Waste Land* the soul-searching quest of the modern humanity from the physical landscape—disintegrated, desolate, sterile, diseased land with 'empty cisterns and exhausted wells', with dry 'dull canal' and 'sunken' Ganga – towards an expectation and possibility of spiritual regeneration 'of spring', 'a damp gust/Bringing rain', the 'black clouds' gathering 'far distant, over Himavant' is defamiliarised

through an impersonal artistic medium of which allusions are an important device.

## 6. Conclusion

History of art and literature furnishes many examples of artists and poets like Appollinaire (1880-1918), Magritte (1898-1967), Schonberg (1874-1951), Picasso (1881-1973), Pound (1885-1972), Cummings (1894-1962), Hopkins (1844-1889) and Donne (1572-1631) who have developed their art with pronounced techniques of defamiliarization to give new meanings to familiar things and settings. Eliot's recontextualization of tradition, and culture, and depersonalization of art are what Fowler (1986: 37) has said, "an activity of critical interpretation to keep the best of them [old conventions] alive and significant for contemporary readers". His significant difference from others lies in his art, which is based on "a principle of aesthetic, not merely historical, criticism (Eliot [1919] quoted in Davis, 1986: 80) which is further used as a device to defamiliarise the popular poetic myths prevalent during the times when he started his poetic career.

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