



Eliot's Mechanism of Sensibility: poetic form and media change

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A CERTAIN revisionist trend has been visible in Eliot studies these last ten years, patiently resituating the austere snob of legend within the broad cultural-material history of his protracted moment of maturation – let's say between 1911 and 1922. Scholars as various as David Chinitz, Juan A. Suárez, Sebastian Knowles, David Trotter, Loretta Johnson, Barry Faulk, and Melita Schaum have contributed significant advances to our knowledge of Eliot's engagement with a variety of popular cultural forms and traditions, from music hall, jazz and department stores to gramophones and the cinema.¹ Not only has Eliot's substantial biographical investment in these cultural modes been unearthed, but far more important, the traces of their impress on the verse itself are now beginning to be mapped in earnest. What may surprise those like Cynthia Ozick, still under the spell of the New Critical version of Eliot, is the extent and the profundity of those traces, which once properly recognised are impossible to ignore or dismiss.² Indeed, in one of those rare reversals in reputation of a poet too easily assailed during the 1980s and 1990s for his cultural elitism and traditionalist mandarinism, Eliot is today being refashioned as a prescient and extraordinarily sensitive mediator of the major currents of twentieth-century cultural and technological change.

None of this should really be so surprising, and I would hope that for many of us this recent development in Eliot scholarship has confirmed and consolidated a feeling that our inveterate readings of the early poetry,



and the draft of 'Sweeney Agonistes', had urged all along—that, as Eliot wrote of the Metaphysical poets, here was a 'mechanism of sensibility which could devour any kind of experience [very much including popular and mass culture].... Our civilisation [as Eliot averred] comprehends great variety and complexity, and this variety and complexity, playing upon a refined sensibility, must produce various and complex results. The poet must become more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate if necessary, language into his meaning'.³ I want to argue here that Eliot's verse, far from retreating into the garret of poetic purity, precisely 'dislocates' itself and its language by deliberately assuming positions at critical points of contact between newer, mechanical, mass media, and the retreating authority of older, Enlightenment media, and thereby tests what remains of 'experience' and the humanist subject whose ballast it was – and finds its meaning .

In the conceptual system of media theorist Friedrich Kittler, darling of the new technological turn in modernist studies, the modern period can be characterised as a moment in which one media system or 'discourse network' rapidly gave way to another. Each of these media systems was attached to, and sustained, a specific image of 'Man'. The Enlightenment discourse network, presided over by the printed word and vouchsafed by the handwritten draft and its metonymic association with personality and breath, had as its very purpose the production, discipline and maintenance of the authentic and irreducible human 'soul'. The discourse network of the second industrial revolution, on the other hand, typified by gramophones, typewriters and the cinema, is quite uninterested in the production of individual 'souls', and may more properly be understood to mark that historical moment at which automatic technologies of storage and communication, and the economic powers behind them, undertook to liquidate the unique individual and foment instead the 'mass' which would dominate twentieth-century politics and culture.⁴ To Kittler's pertinent vision, we would want to add that one system does not simply displace the other, and that instead what we witness is a momentous clashing of gears and a vastly diffused friction between two incompatible, but actually coexisting systems of media.





The medium positioned at the point of maximum torsion in all of this is, of course, the printed word, whose pre-eminence as bourgeois Europe's medium of storage and communication for two hundred years was now suddenly imperiled – indeed made theoretically redundant, along with the conception of 'Man' it had protected. As Kittler puts it, 'the time of the apparatus liquidates Man. Given the apparatus, Man in his unity decomposes, on the one hand, into illusions dangled in front of him by conscious abilities and faculties and, on the other hand, into unconscious automatisms'.⁵ Or, more bluntly still, 'The soul, the inner self, the individual: they were all only the effects of an illusion, neutralized through the hallucination of reading and widespread literacy....[C]inema is what kills the soul'.⁶ In Eliot's poems, only the flickering outlines of a reaction to cinema can be discerned (although David Trotter has done much to trace these contours accurately⁷); but the point to acknowledge is how succinctly the verse bears witness to the irresistible march of the technical apparatus in all its manifestations over the illusions of the 'inner self', whether or not this was Eliot's explicit purpose in any particular poem. For it is as though the literary word, by virtue of its very sudden endangerment and marginalisation, is charged with a redoubled seismographic sensitivity to repercussions in the media ecology, unbeknownst even to the most meticulous of its practitioners. 'A communications technology', states Kittler of the written word, 'whose monopoly is just ending, records precisely the following message: the aesthetic of shock. What reached the page of the surprised author between 1880 and 1920 by means of the gramophone, film and typewriter – the very first mechanical media – amounts to a spectral photograph of our present as future'.⁸

In an early poem, 'First Debate between the Body and Soul', this agon between media systems is almost too explicitly thematised, and assumed too peremptorily in its declarative passion:

*And a street piano through the dusty trees
Insisting: 'Make the best of your position' –
The pure Idea dies of inanition
The street pianos through the trees
Whine and wheeze.*



*Imaginations
Masturbations
The withered leaves
Of our sensations*

*The eye retains the images,
The sluggish brain will not react
Nor distils
The dull precipitates of fact
The emphatic mud of physical sense
The cosmic smudge of an enormous thumb
Posting bills
On the soul. And always come
The whine and wheeze
Of street pianos through the trees.⁹*

It was, to be sure, a common enough complaint. John Philip Sousa had written in 1906, 'sweeping across the country comes now the mechanical device to sing for us a song or play for us a piano, in substitute for human skill, intelligence, and soul'.¹⁰ In Eliot's poem, the animus against mechanical culture is concentrated into the figure of the 'street piano', the barrel organ, which emblematically tumbles the bourgeois parlour-instrument of choice out onto the grimy topos of quotidian repetition. It is, in Tim Armstrong's words, 'an obscurely potent symbol for evacuated meanings and automaticity'.¹¹ Eliot's animus against it is modulated into a refrain in which the post-human noise of that instrument (the 'whine and wheeze... through the trees') insistently interrupts the poem's more graceful cadences. The sound echoes the sense in a rather banal manner here, but it is an early indication of the direction Eliot would take in diagnosing the ways in which new technologies had battered on to the 'withered leaves / Of our sensations'—via strategic formal homeopathy and mimesis, as we shall see further. At any rate, this prevailing unease with a sensory stimulation taking place completely independent of anyone's effort, ability or wish to attend to it, and yet dominating all imagination, is then restaged on the terrain of vision: 'The eye retains the images', the persona duly notes, as though of cinema's dependency on



the optical phenomenon of retinal retention, a technological exploitation of a biological automatism over which the bamboozled subject has no conscious control. Eliot's poem moreover registers the insuperable division between auditory and visual stimuli in the first machine age, and their colonisation by technologies which 'masturbate' the senses faster than the 'sluggish brain' can process the data; all underwritten by the 'cosmic smudge of an enormous thumb / Posting bills / On the soul'.

Of course, the problem here is that, as a species of 'complaint literature', this early poem imposes its futile judgment on a world that has already become indifferent to its values, and its medium. If the 'whine and wheeze... through the trees' of the street pianos in the 'First Dialogue' can stand as an early indication, though, already we can sense the predominant aesthetic tactic to come, in a kind of embryonic form: do not repress or disavow the despised material, but bring it, mimetically, into the formal conception of the poetic work. As Eliot learned to do this with more sensitivity and greater technical skill, the ideological need to impose judgments was subordinated to the dizzying formal consequences of a genuine introjection of the first machine age into the body of verse. Already in 'Portrait of a Lady', the motif of the street piano has undergone a significant modification in the treatment:

*I keep my countenance,
I remain self-possessed
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.
Are these ideas right or wrong?*

Here the belated technics of the dramatic monologue are deployed to insert no small wedge of irony into the grain of the complaint about the 'mechanical and tired' reiterations of administered culture. And the fact that the transition to the hyacinths in the garden is so abrupt and immediate (with only the copula 'with' to manage the adjustment in tone), means that we are then obliged to re-position the existing ironies of this new, Prufrockian voice within a larger and extra-poetic framework of affects and memories, wherein the 'worn-out common song' is suddenly





flooded with a pathetic intensity and a negative capability hitherto unthinkable not only within Eliot's work, but in all English poetry. The mimesis in this instance is not sonorous so much as it is phenomenological: the mechanical sounds of a technological culture are integrated formally within a complex emotional constellation, a kind of mechanical, vicarious nostalgia, that could not possibly exist apart from those sounds. I do not want to say that the street piano is 'redeemed' as a result, but that its saturation of the acoustic dimension in this scene is allowed to rattle the 'self-possession' of an exhausted lyric voice enough to propel it beyond the bounds of conventional expression, and into a new hybrid sensibility: half lyric and half mechanical, automatic and anonymous but not without real pathos – 'Recalling things that other people have desired'. It is a strange case of a machine-like 'memory which might be carried outside the human frame'.¹² Are these ideas right or wrong? It is impossible to say, and that is what makes the affective structure so interesting and serviceable to literature.

The determinate word here would probably be 'depersonalisation' – provided we accept Eliot's famous advocacy of that state as a working allegory for more general subjective dynamics being played out between the two media systems themselves. That is to say, insofar as the new, mechanical media have objectively begun to dismantle the bourgeois subject and its precious inner soul, any serious poetry will concern itself with the consequences of this extrinsic technical reprogramming and depersonalising of the individual, but draw it into the technical concerns of poetic form, rather than leave it as 'content'. What we find in Eliot's early poetic voice is a high-risk verbal and metrical emulation of the impersonal storage and repetitiousness of modernity's more characteristic technologies. Remember that Eliot, in the second section of the 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' essay, associates the poet with two different meanings of the word 'medium'. First the poet is adduced as himself a medium, a selfless material support of affective communication: 'a... finely perfected medium in which special, or very varied, feelings are at liberty to enter into new combinations'.¹³ Second, though, he is charged with the greater responsibility for his own, proper medium, namely





language and the printed word: 'the poet has, not a "personality" to express, but a particular medium, which is only a medium and not a personality, in which impressions and experiences combine in peculiar and unexpected ways'.¹⁴ Far from being a confusing slip, this polysemy is immensely productive and useful, since it allows us to introduce a dialectical negativity into any straightforward talk of the 'medium' in this period. In essence, Eliot proposes that a poet is a medium of a medium, a redoubled medium. It is the function of the poet not only to cultivate the health and resilience of his own medium, but to mediate that health and resilience through his own person in a direction other than inward. A medium of a medium is necessarily an interface, and is obliged to effect transpositions, transferences and translations between his medium and other media. That is, very succinctly, how I understand Eliot's prescriptions about impersonality to operate; for it is only at a relatively abstract and 'inhuman' level that anyone who 'knows what it is to have' a personality and emotions could wish to escape these latter and set up as a communicating vessel between language and, say, the street piano or gramophone, let alone cinema or the rotary press.

'Literature thus occupies... the margin left to it by the other media', writes Kittler, the great medium of the previous two centuries now picking its way grimly among the vacant lots and the sawdust-trampled streets of a metropolis bombarded by other sign systems.¹⁵ Thrown back upon its own resources, forced to ruminate obsessively on its own hypothetical 'material element', poetry inevitably discovers, as a direct result, strange channels and resonances between its own medium, and those newer ones crowding it out of public contention: 'Attention to materials and the transposition of media are two sides of the same positivism. Only the methodologically rigorous isolation of individual groups of signs or cultural technologies can make such exact connections possible'.¹⁶ And the decisive thing in Eliot's poetic is the way in which these connections are made most dramatically across those blank spaces in the social field not yet mapped or colonised by either literature or its new rivals: what cannot yet be properly 'seen' or 'heard'. In Eliot's hands, literature thus learns to avail itself of the immense reservoir of the hitherto sub-literary



and improper, and discovers there, logically, the means of its adaptation and survival in the hostile new media ecology; and also, I hope to show, its justification for doing so.

*They are rattling breakfast plates in basement kitchens,
And along the trampled edges of the street
I am aware of the damp souls of housemaids
Sprouting despondently at area gates.*¹⁷

In a letter to his daughter, poet George Oppen asked, 'Will I have to explain to young readers that the first shock of Eliot's "damp souls of housemaids" and similar lines was not the rather perfunctory dismissal of housemaids as people, but the fact that he saw them at all?' Marjorie Perloff comments: 'what Oppen means is that the dismissal, at least on the part of his own left-wing circle, of Eliot's metaphor as a snobbish putdown of the lower classes, ignores the fact that the very act of writing about [them] was something of a revolution in his time and place'.¹⁸ It is in exactly the same spirit that Lawrence Rainey, in his annotated edition of *The Waste Land*, writes that '*The Waste Land* was unprecedented in placing an anonymous typist within the domain of serious poetry, as it does in part III; until then such subjects had been treated only in light or humorous verse'.¹⁹ In either case, one thing is striking: the 'lower-class' subject matter is neither seen nor heard, properly. 'I am aware of' is rather different from 'I can see', and of course the only witness of the sad tryst between the typist and her 'young man carbuncular' is the blind Tiresias. When she 'smooths her hair with automatic hand / And puts a record on the gramophone', the scene immediately dissipates – there is no point poetry competing with those sounds, whose scratchy timbre and lilt we can always already hear anyway. Even more pointedly, the gramophone, as a more refined and perfected machine of sonic inscription than the street piano, threatens to dispossess poetry entirely of its most hallowed function, the regulation of a sonorous relation to the world. The poem cannot record what sounds the needle makes in the shellac grooves of the disk precisely because, as we shall see, those sounds are incompatible with any symbolic or imaginary medium. The drift to the margins left by the new mechanical media leads serious poetry to grope in the unmapped



terrain of 'lower-class' London the way a blind deaf-mute would, in the very vibrations of a tactile brushing against what has never been seen nor heard.

Why this should be so, why the extraordinary sensitivity and receptivity to newer media effects should have compelled Eliot so regularly to adopt 'lower class' vantage points in his verse, will find some further elucidation in the 'London Letter' to *The Dial* of November 1922, the remarkable essay on Marie Lloyd and the music hall tradition. You will recall that Eliot there celebrates Marie Lloyd as representing and expressing 'that part of the English nation which has perhaps the greatest vitality and interest' – namely, the working class. He goes on to wonder at the extraordinarily 'strong hold' she had 'on popular affection', and to extol the great sympathy her audiences had for her; for 'no other comedian succeeded so well in giving expression to the life of that audience, in raising it to a kind of art'.²⁰ 'It was all a matter', says Eliot, one craftsman to yet another *miglior fabbro*, 'of selection and concentration'; those choice Poundian words. There follows an astounding social diagnosis which, if it is laced with irony, nevertheless stands tall as a denunciation of the triumphal march of what Eliot would call (indeed coin) 'bullshit'²¹ – a trend of cultural insincerity and automatism which, we are invited to see, began with the upper and middle classes, and now stands poised to engulf the class with the 'greatest vitality and interest':

*her death is itself a significant moment in English history. I have called her the expressive figure of the lower classes. There is no such expressive figure for any other class. The middle classes have no such idol: the middle classes are morally corrupt. That is to say, their own life fails to find a Marie Lloyd to express it; nor do they have any independent virtues which might give them as a conscious class any dignity. The middle classes, in England as elsewhere, under democracy, are morally dependent upon the aristocracy, and the aristocracy are subordinate to the middle class, which is gradually absorbing and destroying them. The lower class still exists; but perhaps it will not exist for long.*²²

Indeed, continues Eliot, waiting there to annihilate it are the serried ranks of new cultural technologies, like the 'cheap and rapid-breeding cinema' which prohibits collaboration and insists on 'lulling' the mind



'by continuous senseless music and continuous action too rapid for the brain to act upon'. After a sufficient diet of this, Eliot argues, the working class will descend into the 'same state of protoplasm' and 'listless apathy' which already characterises the bourgeoisie.²³ The triumph of bullshit will have been completed; the 'entire civilized world' would then be forever snuffed out. What is fascinating about this fierce jeremiad, which brings to the surface all the tensions that supercharge Eliot's early verse, is the clear parallel it draws between Marie Lloyd and Eliot himself, not least in the uncanny correspondence between her death, the death of England's last authentic culture, and the publication of the single masterpiece by the middle-class's lone, improbable 'expressive figure', Eliot's own *Waste Land*. But even more, what lingers in the mind is Eliot's characteristic addition of a third term to the tired binary opposition of 'individual' and 'mass' – namely, the 'popular'. Of course, he was not alone in this. In the epochal clashing of gears between two media systems *circa* 1910, the greatest casualty was not the 'individual' or the 'personality' after all, illusory social excrescences which Eliot all too clearly saw were ripe for pulping and recycling anyway, but the 'popular' as a more or less organic flowing back and forth of imaginary energies between performer and audience, 'expressive figure' and readership (or as Eliot would come to have it, pastor and flock). Perhaps it was to mourn that terrible extinction, whether you want to call it a nostalgic petty-bourgeois fantasy or not, that Eliot set up his uncanny transpositions between poetic text and the new media; for the human victims he laments are so very often those for whom the death of Marie Lloyd was much more than an occasion for a spirited essay, for whom indeed, their very existence as a culturally distinct, resilient and nationally grounded class was now precisely at stake. The new internationalism, of mass cultural media as of mass politics, was at hand.

In his melancholy and elegiac maps of London's 'popular' class on the eve of its colonization by that triumphant machinery, Eliot enlisted the technical services of impersonality to force a convergence between old and new media, to strike sparks across voids in the social grid, and to evacuate the cargo of the soul into a replete positivity of automatic



noises and unconscious reflexes. We return, 'automatically', to the moment the typist and her 'automatic hand' reach for and drop the gramophone needle, forcing a gap in the poem inadequately closed by the subsequent 'automatic' citation of Shakespeare's *Tempest* – for this unheard recorded music, after all, will not have crept 'by me', but only through me, insidiously, into that unrepresentable and uncanny zone beyond all representation where the gramophone scratches and skips its mechanical way, the real itself: 'of the real nothing more can be brought to light than what Lacan presupposed – that is, nothing. It forms the waste or residue that neither the mirror of the imaginary nor the grid of the symbolic can catch: the physiological accidents and stochastic disorder of bodies'.²⁴ Such is the proper 'waste land' surveyed by Eliot in his masterpiece, ragging Shakespeare and playing the dusty archive of Jacobean tragedy over a poetic gramophone held to the ears of those unable or unwilling to hear, even though IT IS TIME, and the textual 'nothing' that insists on interrupting and forestalling all narrative momentum in the epic is 'nothing' other than the stochastic disorder of their own bodies, dislocated and disjointed by the interpenetration of incompatible media systems.

Notes

- 1 See David Chinitz, *T. S. Eliot and the Cultural Divide* 2nd ed. (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2005); Juan A. Suárez, 'The Arts of Noise: The Gramophone, T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, and the Modernist Discourse Network', in *Pop Modernism: Noise and the Reinvention of the Everyday* ed? (University of Illinois Press, Urbana and Chicago, 2007); Sebastian Knowles, 'Death by Gramophone', *Journal of Modern Literature* 27.1/2 (2003): 1-13; David Trotter, 'T. S. Eliot and Cinema', *Modernism/Modernity* 13:2 (2006): 237-265; Loretta Johnson, 'T. S. Eliot's Bawdy Verse: Lulu, Bolo and More Ties', *Journal of Modern Literature* 27:1/2 (2003): 14-25; Barry Faulk, 'Modernism and the Popular: Eliot's Music Halls', *Modernism/Modernity* 8:4 (2001): 603-621; Melita Schaum, "'Just Looking": Class, Desire, and the Consuming Vision in T. S. Eliot's "In the Department Store"', *Journal of Modern Literature* 23:2 (1999): 335-350.
- 2 Ozick associates Eliot unequivocally with the notion of 'absolute art' and other high-cultural clichés in 'A Critic at Large: T. S. Eliot at 101', *New Yorker* (20 Nov., 1989): 119-54.
- 3 Eliot, 'The Metaphysical Poets', *TLS* 1031 (20 Oct., 1921), reprinted in *The Annotated Waste Land with Eliot's Contemporary Prose*, Lawrence Rainey ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), p. 199.
- 4 See Kittler's remarkable accounts of this substitution in his *Discourse Networks: 1800/1900* trans. Michael Metteer, with Chris Cullen (Stanford University Press, Stanford CA, 1990); *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz (Stanford University Press, Stanford CA, 1999); and *Literature, Media, Information Systems: Essays* ed. John Johnston (OPA, Amsterdam, 1997).



- 5 Kittler, *Discourse Networks*, *op. cit.*, p. 224.
- 6 Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, *op. cit.*, pp.151, 155.
- 7 See David Trotter, *Cinema and Modernism* (Blackwell, Oxford, 2007), pp.125-158.
- 8 Kittler, *Literature, Media, Information Systems*, *op. cit.*, p.29.
- 9 Eliot, 'First Debate between the Body and Soul', in *Inventions of the March Hare: Poems 1909-1917* ed. Christopher Ricks (Harcourt Brace, San Diego, 1998), pp.64-65.
- 10 John Philip Sousa, 'The Menace of Mechanical Music', [Sept. 1906], cited in Knowles, 'Death by Gramophone', *op. cit.*, p.2.
- 11 Tim Armstrong, 'Player Piano: Poetry and Sonic Modernity', *Modernism/Modernity* 14:1 (2007): 2.
- 12 *Ibid.*, p.8.
- 13 T.S. Eliot, *The Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot* ed. Frank Kermode (Faber and Faber, London, 1975), p. 41. Further page references included parenthetically in text.
- 14 *Ibid.*, p.42.
- 15 Kittler, *Discourse Networks*, *op. cit.*, p.250.
- 16 *Ibid.*, p. 272.
- 17 Eliot, 'Morning at the Window', in *The Complete Poems and Plays of T. S. Eliot*, *op. cit.*, p. 27.
- 18 Marjorie Perloff, *21st-Century Modernism: The "New" Poetics* (Blackwell, Oxford, 2002), p.26.
- 19 Rainey, *Annotated Waste Land*, *op. cit.*, p. 10.
- 20 Eliot, 'Marie Lloyd', in *The Selected Prose*, *op. cit.*, p.172.
- 21 In his early poem, 'The Triumph of Bullshit', in Ricks, *op. cit.*, p.307.
- 22 'Marie Lloyd', *op. cit.*, p. 173.
- 23 *Ibid.*, p.174.
- 24 Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, *op. cit.*, pp.15-16.