

“On or about 1922”: A Voyage through Poetics and Neurosis, as found in Personal Letters

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Abstract

Critical thinking of the 1910s forecast a tempestuous 1922, which scarcely requires any introduction. Frequently, formulations of parallel psychic states can be observed in most modernist manifestos even before 1922, such as Woolf’s proposition of material/spiritual novelists in “Modern Fiction” (1919) or Eliot’s intellectual/reflective poets in “The Metaphysical Poets” (1921). The Modernist mind is, for Eliot, as for Woolf or Pound, (as opposed to Victorian materiality) predominantly introverted, intellectual, centripetal, and schizophrenic. This paper, however, instead of focusing on the Modernist writings of 1922, explores the archival repertoire of personal letters exchanged between eminent modernists to unseal the “semi-transparent envelope” of their psychic interior. These personal letters, diaries and memoirs – filled with testimonials of events such as Woolf meeting Vita Sackville-West in December, or Katherine Mansfield finishing her final short story, “The Canary” – offer no less insight on the bond between poetics and neurosis than the literary marvels such as *The Waste Land* or *Ulysses*.

Keywords: Modernism, Modernist Archive, Neurosis, Personal Letters



“My nerves are bad tonight. Yes, bad. Stay with me.
 Speak to me. Why do you never speak? Speak.
 What are you thinking of? What thinking? What?
 I never know what you are thinking. Think” (*The Waste Land*, 110-114)

1922 is an accumulation of what preceded from around 1910 and all that followed till 1930, intellectually, neurotically and predominantly privately. In an uncanny way, Modernism is personal; a proclamation of personality. Thus, Flaubertian ‘style nerveux’ was an ineluctable sequela of a modernist’s neurasthenia. Not to be forgotten that in the twenties, the war ravaged Europe had some over eighty thousand soldiers undergoing the treatment for trauma, holding on to ‘fragments against their ruins’. The discourse on neurosis, voyaged with Freud-Breuer and brimming with continental currents of Jung and Adler, swayed the stylistic bend of modernism. Accompanying Freud’s seminal text, *Massenpsychologie und Ich-Analyse*, what had the seismic effect on the literature of 1922, was *Psychologische Typen* of Carl Gustav Jung. The psychic association with the high modernism can be traced in Jung’s formative lecture of 1913 at the Psychoanalytical Congress (also happened to be the last time when Freud and Jung met) which this paper proposes to establish as the defense for intruding the personal to apprehend the poetics.

Jung, a crafty methodologist, classified two contrasting psychic states in accordance to the patient’s attitude towards the external world: Hysteria and Schizophrenia. As opposed to hysteria where a patient exhibits symptoms of ‘organic illness,’ and tends to be more expressive, a Schizophrenic person displays no such traits, rather inhibits the primordial, primitive characteristics that transcends the frontiers of ‘individual’ case histories and thereby segregating himself from the ‘external reality’, or to borrow Jung’s words, ‘isolates the personality’ (Jung 457). Jungian psychoanalysis, therefore, aligned hysteria with the ‘centrifugal movement of libido’ and affixed schizophrenia with the “centripetal” (456). So, Eliotesque ‘escape from personality’ – a further plunge into the self instead of fleeing from it, as stated by C. K. Stead – had a long tradition of interweaving psychology and philosophy that would shape the literary corpus of the early twentieth century. The shift from Victorian realist partisans to Baudelairean ‘flâneurs’(shell-shocked at the turn of the century) who ‘live and sleep in front of the mirror,’ can also be seen as the transference from ‘externospection’ to ‘introspection’; or from extroverted ‘tough-mindedness’ to introverted ‘tender-mindedness’, to follow Alfred Binet’s and Alfred Adler’s coinage, respectively. Quoting Adler, it is in this context that Jung defined tender-minded personality as “intellectualistic, idealistic, optimistic, religious, free-willist, monistic, dogmatical” (459), while on the contrary, concentrating on the senses, a tough-minded personality is more materialistic. Not so surprisingly, this fundamental break is also apparent in Virginia Woolf’s famous formation: “In contrast with those whom we have called materialists, Mr. Joyce is spiritual; he is concerned at all costs to reveal the flickerings of that innermost flame which flashes its messages through the brain” (Woolf, *Common Reader* 62). Jung’s proposition moreover assimilated Wilhelm Worringer’s aesthetic divisions based on Riegl’s idea, abstraction and empathy – two contrarily posited creative volitions (wollen), two contrapuntal libidinal natures, which lie at the essence of artistic episteme of modernism and realism, correspondingly. When an empathetic artist indulges in associating with organic beauty, he/she resides into externalization of emotions, abstraction by ensconcing himself/herself in ‘an inner fastness, securing [oneself] by the invention of regular geometrical figures,’ amidst ‘an immense spiritual dread of space’ (Jung 460). The litany of Modernist’s zeal for classicism



and abhorrence towards romanticism, for the obvious reason, took place in the same treatise, as to be found in Hulme's staunch pronouncement, 'I object even to the best of the romantics' or his prescription of integrating classicism, abstraction and geometric structure in literature (Daiches 1122). This argument – perpendicularly bisected with the hypothesis that the modernist's delving into 'life within' was schizophrenic, neurotic and introverted – hence, can be concluded with a brief passage which would supplement the theoretical framework for dissecting the memorabilia further:

In the mechanism of introversion, the libido concentrates itself wholly on the complexes, and seeks to detach and isolate the personality from external reality. This psychological process is associated with a phenomenon which is not properly speaking "repression," but would be better rendered by the term "devaluation" of the objective world. (Jung 457)

This reading, at the same time, necessitates a perfunctory discussion on modernist poetics that can be pursued as a direct progeny of the prior discourse and what the prodigious minds of twenties themselves had to preach, publicly. It was not only Eliot who became aware of the alienation from the sensibilities, 'turning loose of emotion', but the whole epoch and the modernist ethos itself which were responsible for the paradigm shift as they realized collectively that "a book is the product of a different self from the self we manifest in our habits, in our social life, in our vices" (Proust 76). A sojourn with an almost religious fervor for abstraction which embarked its expedition with Hopkins's 'inshape', reached the crescendo with Breton's first manifesto of surrealism, in 1924. No doubt that both the banality of fabricated realism and contemporaneous sing-song romanticism became volatile in front of the scathing criticism of Eliot's "The Metaphysical Poets" (1921) or Pound's "Prologomena" (1912), as they believed ardently, the Modernism must "move against poppy-cock, it will be harder and saner, it will be what Mr. Hewlett calls 'nearer the bone'" (Pound 59). Even so, having said that, all the colossal poetics of modernism would have collapsed nimbly if it was not revolved around neurosis which Ben Hutchinson abridges accurately: "the language of the 'nervous system' would go on to define the modernist era... through Prufrock's 'magic lantern [which] threw the nerves in pattern on a screen,' to the frazzled wife in *The Waste Land* whose 'nerves are bad tonight'" (Hutchinson 110). Deriving poesy out of the chaos of vanity, bourgeois values, and war-ridden politics, was the bona fide 'epiphany' for the British modernists, particularly those associated with the Bloomsbury Group. Despite the fact that the academic consensus has moved beyond the zenith of biographical criticism quite a long ago, it would still be unfair to be oblivious to the intimate interactions that were accountable for the parturitions of *The Waste Land* or *Jacob's Room* in 1922.

On the eve of the twentieth century, with Venessa's 'Friday Club' and Thoby's 'Thursday Evenings', Bloomsbury group – famous for 'living in squares, painting in circles, and loving in triangles' – began the odyssey that practically revolutionized the yardstick of artistic form. Apart from their vested interest in sexuality¹, the other thing knitting them firmly together was psychoanalysis, for instance, be it Leonard's reviewing Freud meticulously, Adrian practicing professionally, or Woolf's countless diary entries that witness how great the impact was. So much so, that Woolf in *Moments of Being* confessed her writing *To The Light House* was an act of psycho-analytical therapy, "I suppose I did for myself what psycho-analyst do for their patients" (Woolf, *Moments* 81). As a matter of fact, later on, Leonard and Virginia Woolf's Hogarth Press also became a



great patron of psychology, by publishing a significant amount of literature including Roger Fry's 1924 pamphlet *The Artist and Psycho-Analysis*. Besides, the more dazzling the social life progressed, for Georgian idiosyncratic geniuses – the cross-bearers – the more solitary, desolate, and cloistered their private world metamorphosed into, which reflected vividly nowhere except in the letters and memoirs. Among all four children of Leslie and Julia Stephen, Virginia Woolf was the better artisan and also emotionally the most vulnerable one, to the extent that even as early as in 1913, she attempted suicide by overdoing her barbiturate and within another two years she had yet another attack, more serious in nature. But it cannot be overlooked that by 1922, she also had completed her first three novels which provided, rightfully so, the niche she needed to pacify her anxiety, in her own words, her 'remarkable nervous system', periodically. Now, to encapsulate her psyche in motion, Bergsonian 'la duree', this paper delimits itself by January to December, 1922, the pinnacle of everything Modernism stood for.

Virginia Woolf, being a prolific logophile, wrote as many as six to seven letters per day that exposes her wide range of passions, eruditions, wits and eccentricities, and to her, intelligibly, "venerable are letters, infinitely brave, forlorn, and lost. Life would split asunder without them." (Woolf, *Jacob's Room* 39) 1922 was eventful for her, since this was the year she founded Hogarth Press with her husband, weekly wrote for *Times Literary Supplement*, finished "Mrs. Dalloway in Bond Street" and perhaps, most remarkably, met Vita Sackville-West in December, which ignited a life-long companionship. Although, before this, four of her close acquaintances, two of them being her in-laws, were killed in the world war, the 'war of the patriarchs' didn't affect her sanity much, as Nigel Nicolson justly pointed out, "yet so little did all this mean to her that her letters contain almost no reflection to it" (Nicolson xvii). Of all her companions and confidants – from Lady Ottoline Morrell, Dora Carrington to Roger Fry, Clive Bell – it was Venessa to whom she could exfoliate her persona, unfold her self-irony: "I write – I read – write – read – from morning to night. For an hour I wet myself on the high road – back to tea – Shakespeare, Joyce – and so on. It is a very exciting life, entirely devoid of human beings." (Woolf, *Letters* 520) Most likely, to escape her sick routine 'to prepare a face to meet the faces,' Woolf retreated from meeting compatriots, during her chronic illness. On 21st January, she addressed E. M. Forster by saying, "Everyone is reading Proust... It seems to be a tremendous experience, but I'm shivering on the brink, and waiting to be submerged with a horrid sort of notion that I shall go down and down and down and perhaps never come up again" (499). Nonetheless, the tumultuous year turned out to be merrier at the very end since the last letter of her to Vita was the first of many billets-doux to be exchanged. For Eliot, in other circumstances, however, the denouement was quite different.

To weigh up to Woolf's intense inflammable nature of the epistles, Eliot was poised and pragmatic as most of the letters were business oriented while the rest also being polite with a few exceptions hither and thither. Considering that Eliot, in 1922, working in the foreign transactions department at Lloyds Bank, still not a Briton, stressing over conjugal issues, suffering from depression and mental breakdowns, at least found *il miglior fabbro* Pound as a friend and a guide, who took great care both of Vivian, and Eliot, negotiated with the publishers relentlessly, and without whose scrupulous attention *The Waste Land* couldn't demolish the orthodoxy of English Poems, to a degree that Eliot acknowledged to John Quinn: "I feel that he deserves the recognition much more than I do... I think that this manuscript is worth preserving in its present form solely for the



reason that it is the only evidence of the difference which his criticism has made to this poem” (Eliot, *Letters* 748). One thing is for certain, that Eliot has shown signs of Jungian schizophrenia clinically more than any of his peers, which is evident from Pound’s letter to Scofield Thayer, the editor of the *Dial*: “I am afraid Eliot has merely gone to pieces again. Abuleia, simply the physical impossibility of correlating his muscles sufficiently to write a letter or get up and move across a room” (640). In May 1922, Eliot himself admitted to Leonard Woolf knowing about Woolf’s deterioration, “we know what constant illness is, and I think very few people do” (667). Vivian, in the meantime, ailing severely, was Eliot’s primary concern, as her traits comprised, to borrow from her letters to Pound, ‘increasing mental incapacity’, ‘migraines’, ‘physical exhaustion’, ‘Insomnia’, because of which she had to cease contacting individuals, and would suffer from Bronchitis soon. Controversies, like an ill omen, also never disappeared from his life; especially, an article published in Liverpool Post, outraged him to the point of appointing a solicitor; the news of his neurasthenic conduct, staying Margate, and then Lausanne at the advice of Ottoline Morrel, were all over the place. Unlike Woolf, Eliot had not written a lot to his siblings, with one exception of Henry Eliot, the last letter of the year, and for the very reason of its emotive complexity, it deserved to be quoted at length:

If I were not tied to the bank I could have gone abroad with her for a time; as it is she is not only under the strain of her own treatment but the strain of our very tense and always rushed and overworked mode of life. We thought of you a great deal on Christmas day and wished that you were here (816).

Since the publication of *The Waste Land* – the greatest symphony on the crisis of civilization – critics² went at great length, for obvious reasons, to establish the influence of Eliot’s anesthesiologist Roger Vittoz at the sanatorium of Lausanne (autumn, 1921), whose *Traitement des psychoneuroses par la Reeducation du Control Cerebral* had the utmost effect on forming of the poetic unification. Restraining ‘the swarm of inarticulate feelings’, that Eliot vehemently opposed later on, was a direct consequence of Vittoz’s treatment of neurasthenia as it aided him to understand the paramount importance of ‘dissociation of sensibility’; the significance of balancing two states of mind, objective and subjective, that leads to the impersonal experience of ‘the deepest terrors and desire,’ which also Webster or Shakespeare did. This theorization of ‘mental balance’ predates Freud, goes back to John Keble’s proto-neurotic precepts of poetry, as examined by Abrams in depth: “Poetry is a divinely bestowed medicine because... it is able to satisfy opposed motives by giving ‘healing relief to secret mental emotion, yet without detriment to modest reserve.’ It is, therefore, ‘the art which under certain veils and disguises... reveals the fervent emotions of the mind” (Abrams 147). In a warm Christmas Letter in 1921 to his brother, unburdening himself, Eliot explained his psychic labor as a poet, and how he was to trying “to be *calm* when there is nothing to be gained by worry, and to concentrate without effort” and went on to talk about “mental hygiene” which he was willing to discuss with Henry in great detail – “I felt that I got, or was beginning to know you better when there exists any difficulty in speaking...., I only hope that we can keep the new connexion alive by writing, and at least begin where we left off, when we meet again” (Eliot, *Letters* 614).

Most of these excerpts, the longing and belongings, which went down in history without perturbing the course of the events and can still connect the contemporary reader with the long-lost Modernist’s mind, ‘who fell in love’ or ‘read Spinoza,’ on or about



1922. Their Apollonian quest for a center, by channelizing the libidinal torrent caused by the agony of urbanity, forged the poetics of the nervous system which was thoroughly intellectual, metaphysical, spiritual, and schizophrenic. In sum, the poetic man oeuvre “did not work outward to building up a generalized emotion, but inward, to build up a complex pattern of meaning within” (Daiches 1124). To conclude, all the vestiges of the personal turbulences, ferments, essentially brought forth a radical ‘will to form’, that which can be witnessed from an ‘exhausted’ Eliot’s exuberance as expressed to Richard Aldington, “I am now feeling toward a new form and style” (Eliot, *Letters* 787) owing to the realization that “this generation must break its neck in order that the next may have smooth going” (Woolf, *Letters* 563).

Notes

¹Woolf’s diary entry on January 21, 1918, recalls Lytton’s Strachey’s reminiscences of British Sex Society: “50 people of both sexes and various ages discussed without shame such questions as the deformity of Dean Swift’s penis; whether cats use the w.c.; self-abuse; incest – incest between parent and child when they are both unconscious of it, was their main theme, derived from Freud.” See *Diary of Virginia Woolf*, Vol.1, edited by Anne Olivier Bell, HBJ, 1977, pp.110

²For detailed analysis, see Harris, Amanda Jeremin. “T.S. Eliot’s Mental Hygiene.” *Journal of Modern Literature*, vol. 29, no. 4, 2006, pp. 44-56. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/3831879. Accessed 8 Sept. 2021.

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