

Asking the “Overwhelming Question”: Or, Why do Poets Fail at Difficult Conversations?

Frances Grace Fyfe

A Thesis

in

The Department

of

English

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts (English Literature) at

Concordia University

Montréal, Québec, Canada

April 2024

© Frances Grace Fyfe, 2024

CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY
School of Graduate Studies

This is to certify that the thesis prepared

By: Frances Grace Fyfe

Entitled: Asking the "Overwhelming Question": Or, Why Do Poets Fail at Difficult Conversations?

and submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts (English)

complies with the regulations of the University and meets the accepted standards with respect to originality and quality.

Signed by the final examining committee:

_____ Examiner

_____ Examiner
Dr. Stephen Ross

_____ Thesis Supervisor(s)
Dr. Jason Camlot

_____ Thesis Supervisor(s)

Approved by _____
Dr. Kevin Pask, Graduate Program Director Chair of Department or Graduate Program Director

Dr. Pascale Sicotte

Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences

Abstract

Asking the “Overwhelming Question”: Or, Why do Poets Fail at Difficult Conversations?

Frances Grace Fyfe

T. S. Eliot’s declaration that “poets in our civilization, as it exists at present, must be difficult” owes something to the experience of art the poet championed, one in which anxiety around poetry’s difficulty would be transformed into an “authentic” relationship between reader and text. This thesis argues Eliot’s pronouncement that poets should enact a difficulty of the most authentic order really means that poets should try to enact poems in the model of dynamic, informal speech between reader and text—something for which we might use “conversation” as a shorthand. At the same time, I also consider the way conversation is always a problem for poets, at least those working in the proto-professional literary landscape in which Eliot was invested, a time when critics were developing strict methods to judge poetry based on its properties rather than its effects. This is not just because the proto-professional poet’s formal expertise comes at the expense of their ability to engage in informal, affective speech, but also because to authentically represent such speech means to *fail* to do so, since success in conversation means ceding formal authority in favour of spontaneity itself. In linking developments in modern literary criticism to extraliterary forms of communication difficulty, I argue our contemporary obsession with difficult conversations speaks as much to a desire for “authentic relationships” as it does to an anxiety around the increasing professionalization of artmaking in industrial modernity, and the kinds of interpersonal communication it seems to foreclose.

Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Difficulty and/as Modern Poetry	5
Communication Difficulty in the Post-Rhetorical Era	14
Conversation and/as Authenticity	20
Conclusion: “Prufrock” and the Overwhelming Question	26
Works Cited	40

Introduction

The difficult conversation is ascendant. Everywhere you look, it seems, people are either avoiding or obsessing over how to have them, something the success of manuals like *We Need to Talk* and *Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most* can attest to. Our on-screen fascination with difficult conversations reached its apex two years ago on HBO's *The Rehearsal*, where ordinary people enlisted the help of host Nathan Fielder to elaborately stage and rehearse conversations they didn't want to put off any longer. Fielder, a comedian, has been charged with exploiting the vulnerability of his participants for maximum on-screen awkwardness. And yet, for all its discomfort, the show's representation of the intense emotions that occur when these staged conversations inevitably dissolve into real life chaos can come across as remarkably sincere. It seems for all I want to avoid the difficult conversation, I can't look away.

The simultaneous fear of and desire for the difficult conversation has made it an especially tricky topic to talk about, as evidenced by its metaphors of distance. We may note how those engaged in one "grasp" at words, "gesture to" meaning, or "dance around" what needs to be said. Rather than say it outright, then, I propose an approach to the study of the difficult conversation that considers it something like an "aesthetic category," the theorist Sianne Ngai's term for "a form linked in a specific way to a judgment based on the feelings our perception of the form elicits" ("Theory of the Gimmick" 467).

More specifically I trace our contemporary understanding of the difficult conversation—and all the ambivalent feelings it elicits—to another category that elicits similar, ambivalent feelings: modern poetry. Difficulty was central to the prominence of high modernist poetry and came, via critical pronouncements like T. S. Eliot's that "poets in our civilization, as it

exists at present, must be difficult,” to stand for a generic definition of poetry itself. In its early reception as today, this difficult poetry was met with anxiety by readers who felt they did not understand it. And yet the generation of anxiety was also, for the defenders of difficult modernist poetry, proof of said poetry’s *authenticity*: its ability to faithfully represent how hard it is to communicate with one another in the first place.

Upon further inspection, though, I argue the perceived difficulty of interpersonal communication—how impossible to say just what I mean!—is disproportionately magnified in the modern poet population. This is because the rise of modern criticism, whose existence owes something to the popularization of difficult, high modernist poetry, had an effect on the perceived “difficulty” of informal spoken communication. With so much emphasis on formality in writing and interpretation, speech becomes, by virtue of its exclusion from institutional structures of modern poetry, *difficult*, something that can no longer be easily taught and learned. We might say the professional poet’s authority in writing and interpretation then comes with a correlative disability, what John Guillory calls their “professional deformation”: an inability to speak in anything outside of the most prescribed, formal situations. The inability to speak dynamically, or with charisma, I argue, becomes a defining aspect of modern poetic character, what we might otherwise refer to as professional awkwardness.

I argue the modern poet’s inability to succeed at conversational speech raises a problem for their pursuit to represent the most “authentic” difficulty. If, after all, the most authentic form of communication difficulty would be that inherent to conversational speech, any representation thereof would require ceding a level of formality the poet can never bring himself to do in real life. Indeed, I mean to show Eliot’s writings on the importance of formal difficulty and impersonality in poetry actually display anxiety about his own desire to return to more

spontaneous and intimate forms of conversational speech that his professionalism seems to forbid.

I read this tension between a desire for formal authority and intimacy into Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." Here, I argue, it is the speaker's professional formality that bars him from engaging in any kind of intimate conversational speech, represented, most tellingly, by his inability to "force the moment to its crisis," which may or may not involve, as Edward Lobb writes, "asking a woman on a date." That said, I believe if the poem offers a way out of the bind of professional awkwardness it is in the poet's genuine *inability* to ask or answer the "overwhelming question." Faced with a conversational situation that eludes even the professional practice of composition, both poet and speaker are returned, via the sublime terror of radical awkwardness, to the state of the *amateur*, the lover, with all the intimacy that entails.

It is the dynamic potential of Eliot's failure to represent the overwhelming question, I argue, that sheds light on the dynamic potential of the difficult conversation. Here, finding oneself at a loss for words, while terrifying, also gives way to the fetish of industrial modernity: the authentic relationship. By reading the tension between formality and authenticity alongside contemporary speech manuals on the difficult conversation, then, we might think about how, in relationships between reader and text, as in relationships between people, the radical awkwardness of amateurism gives way to intimacy itself, one that always requires one forego professional authority. In so doing, I propose a reading of the difficult conversation as a distinctly poetic conceit, or rather, consider how it gives modern, professional life the feel of what Eliot wanted poetry to do in the first place.

In the first section of this thesis, I will consider how the perceived pressures of modern life made interpersonal communication seem especially difficult, and how poetry emerged as an

art form that would represent this interpersonal communication difficulty most paradigmatically. In the second section, I will consider how the perceived difficulty of interpersonal communication was a bigger problem for the new professional class of poet-critics, whose investment in “impersonality” in writing led them to a correlative disability: an inability to engage dynamically in conversational speech. In the third section, I consider the way the formal difficulty championed by Eliot and his contemporaries masks a desire to represent that which is *authentically* difficult to communicate: conversation, which, at least in its classical sense, involves a rejection of formality in favour of intimacy and spontaneity. Finally, I consider how this tension between formality and intimacy plays out in Eliot’s “Prufrock,” and consider how its ultimate refusal to answer “the overwhelming question” links contemporary understandings of the authenticity of difficult conversations to the evolution of modern poetry and its criticism.

Difficulty and/as Modern Poetry

Difficulty was invented in the modern period. Or rather, difficulty has an important status in the history of modern literature and its criticism, having become the most noted characteristic of what was to become the canonical texts of high modernism. In what follows, I will trace contemporary ideas we have inherited about the fundamental difficulty of interpersonal communication to developments in modern poetry and its criticism. My hope is that by better understanding the investment with which modern writers, and poets especially, put into equating difficult writing with “authenticity,” we will be better able to examine the critical reflexes we bring to extraliterary forms of communication difficulty today.

The idea that the difficulties of modern life were exerting themselves on artistic expression appears in T. S. Eliot’s famous provocation from his 1921 essay on “The Metaphysical Poets,” where he wrote that “poets, in our civilization, as it exists at present, must be difficult” (65). Eliot produced his essay at a time when, as David Castiglione notes, “the debate around difficulty [in poetry] was polarised and ridden with strong feelings,” with detractors who thought it nonsense in one camp, and its defenders, who championed difficult art as a faithful re-creation of modern life, on the other (147). For Eliot, who belonged firmly in, and was, in many ways, the vanguard of the latter camp, difficult art was reflective of the “great variety and complexity,” of contemporary civilization, and he felt “this variety and complexity, playing upon a refined sensibility, must produce various and complex results.” It is only natural then, for Eliot, that the “poet must become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate if necessary, language into his meaning” (65).

Eliot’s pronouncement that poetic language must be dislocated “into” its proper meaning suggests a larger trope that difficulty is an inherent property of language itself, an idea that finds

its origins in eighteenth century debates around the origins and philosophy of language. Around this time, as Hans Aarsleff notes in his seminal work *From Locke to Saussure: Essays on the Study of Language and Intellectual History*, philosophers like Condillac and Locke were beginning to refute the “Adamic doctrine,” whereby words were thought to contain elements of the perfect language created by Adam in his prelapsarian state (25). For Locke, the idea that words were equal to their essence was a serious mistake; rather, language was a social institution that reflected the world of its speakers, an idea that Aarsleff argues lays the foundation for the modern philosophy of language that is familiar to us today as a system of “arbitrary” designation.

Indeed, Locke’s idea that language reflects individual experience as opposed to the other way around already implies that language is somehow difficult, in the sense that it is *impoverished* (the two share a root in the Latin *difficultatem*) (OED). This is partly because, according to Wilhelm von Humboldt, who Aarsleff considers a successor to Locke, “[t]he entire manner of the subjective perception of objects is necessarily carried over into the formation and use of language” (25). Because, von Humboldt continues, “the word originates precisely in this perception, it is not a copy of the object itself, but of the image it creates in the mind” (quoted in Aarsleff 27).

Imperfection, or incoherence where language is concerned, then, manifests in two ways: first, in the gap between the essence and the image it creates in the mind, and then in the gap between these minded images and their outward expression into words. Aarsleff reads the trace of both Locke’s and Humboldt’s idea of language’s opacity into Wordsworth: “[o]wing to the impenetrable subjectivity of ideas to which words are tied,” the poet writes, “each individual had a radically private language that virtually precludes all hope of perfect communication” (quoted in Aarsleff 27). For Wordsworth, language revealed “the sad incompetence of human speech,” or,

as Aarsleff writes, “the difficulty of ever gaining assurance that two speakers fully understand each other” (18).

Theories expounding language’s “incompetence” would have been familiar to Eliot, who had taken a particular interest in F. H. Bradley’s claim that reality consists solely of idea or experience, even appending a now famous quote from Bradley’s to the notes section in *The Waste Land*: “[i]n brief, regarded as an existence which appears in a soul, the whole world for each is peculiar and private to that soul.” For his part, the difficulty of communicating interiority shows up, not just in the poem’s formal incomprehensibility (many early reviewers charged *The Waste Land*, and the notes appended to it, as a work of “non-sense”), but in actual scenes of thwarted interpersonal communication. For Juan Suárez, for example, communication in Eliot’s poetry does “not entail intimate contact but the cold comfort of machine connections” (752). In the particular example in *The Waste Land* from which Suárez is drawing, communication difficulty is highlighted by the media of industrial modernity: the typist’s turning of the gramophone after mechanical sex represents, for him, the way language has been “detached from the ‘physical presence of speakers’” (751). Language’s dislocation, or dissociation, to use Suárez words, from human corporeality seems to make up the very media of modernity, said poem included.

The idea that the difficulties in interpersonal communication that naturally arise as a product of language’s imperfection get magnified in modern life, and that poetry has a duty, in turn, to reflect these modern communication difficulties, can be found ten years later in Babette Deutsch’s 1935 work of criticism, *This Modern Poetry*, which considered poetry “[a] method which seeks to register the motions of the mind under the pressure and the friction of modern life” (quoted in Diepeveen 109). “Seeking” is here the verb par excellence: poetry’s ethos,

according to Deutsch, is to approximate a notation of individual, minded expression. Perhaps this is why Deutsch considers poetry a “method,” as opposed to an object unto itself, an evidence of working through without ever fully arriving at a congruent self-expression. In George Steiner’s 1978 essay “On Difficulty,” he describes this method as an “impulse,” and an “honest” one, at that, “arising from the intermediate status of all language between the individual and the general” (273). Steiner’s understanding of difficult poetry as an impulse, and later, a “compulsion,” has something in common with Eliot’s pronouncement, written half a decade earlier, that poets *must* be difficult. The idea that difficulty in poetry is a compulsion, like Eliot’s idea that difficulty in poetry is imperative, suggests that difficulty is somehow irresistible, unconscious, and inevitable.

Indeed, as Leonard Diepeveen notes in his book on *The Difficulties of Modernism*, it was the supposed naturalness or inevitability of difficult art, and poetry especially, that helped it rise to cultural prominence in the modern period. The claim, he writes, is “one of mimesis”; if “the work reflected modern culture or human psychology; it was therefore more *honest*,” or authentic (95). In a somewhat ingenious rhetorical move, the authenticity of difficult art was evidenced, for its defenders, by the often negative response it provoked. As Diepeveen notes, early critics met difficult poetry with anxiety, laughter, or even anger; for their part, difficulty’s champions took these critic’s early, adverse reactions to their advantage, making them seem like “bourgeois philistinism,” implying that the generation of anxiety was in fact proof of the poem’s authenticity (I would go so far as to say that every high school teacher who tells their students they should not be expected to “understand” poetry, and every high school student who meets poetry with contempt because of it, owes something to Eliot’s essay on the metaphysical poets) (69).

Indeed, in the critical debates around difficulty in art, it was the category of poetry that rose to prominence as the literary form uniquely suited to reflect both the complexity of

contemporary existence and the difficulty of expressing it to others (what we can think of as both the compulsion towards difficulty and the difficulty thereof). Of course, the idea that poetry is well suited to represent ineffability is not new to the modern period. Ben Lerner quotes Percy Bysshe Shelley's pronouncement that "the most glorious poetry that has ever been communicated to the world is probably a feeble shadow of the original conceptions of the poet" to note how "[e]ven the most impassioned Romantic defenses of poetry reinscribe a sense of the insufficiency of poems" (86).

Likewise, poetry is not the only literary form to treat communication difficulty, a category I take, generally, to mean any kind of incongruence between what one wishes to and is able to express, or make understood, to another. The notion of "miscommunication due to a mistaken inference about intention," as Henrik Nielsen has written, is, after all, one of the pillars of fictive writing (65). Today, as Bronwen Thomas notes, a new interest in verbal interaction associated with the rise of a "therapy culture" (more on that later) has led to increased scholarship on, broadly speaking, communicative strategies in the novel (8). Robyn Schiffman's 2008 article on "*Werther* and the epistolary novel," for example, reconsiders the way the epistolary genre actually thematizes acts of miscommunication and inadequate models of exchange, leading to "fractured communities of people" (in *Werther*, the failure of the postal system to deliver letters on time leads to the protagonist's isolation and despair) (421). Because its representation of character's dialogue—or in *Werther*'s case, dialogic letter writing—suggest direct and unmediated access to events without the intervention of a "teller," it seems novels are well suited to explore communication difficulties, which lead, it would seem, at best, to humorous mishaps, and at worst, suicide.

In her own survey of novels from the early decades of the twentieth century, Thomas similarly notes that writers were taking new interest in the “miscommunications that characterize so much of our day-to-day interactions with one another” (8). New stylistic approaches to dialogue, such as in the novels of Ivy Compton-Burnett, for example, generate a sense of what Thomas calls “linguistic poverty as opposed to verbal virtuosity” (31). Still, Thomas notes, the very idea of dialogue in the novel already implies some kind of narratological “communicative strategy” (423). If, as Thomas, quoting John Mepham maintains, “modernist writers are interested less in what is said than in the process of saying it, with all of the difficulty and self-consciousness that may entail,” then it would seem poetry, at least according to emerging theories that saw the form as a recourse for emotional expression (and not for inquiry, for example) could more faithfully represent an isolated individual’s attempt *to* communicate, or express *something* in the first place (423). Indeed, as John Guillory has written, by the early twentieth century critics had begun to understand that “[p]oetry yields a terminology for perspectivism,” and indeed, that “[t]he poetic metaphor offers an invaluable perspective from which to judge the world of contingencies” (22).

Of course, owing to the inadequacy of language to bridge the gap between idea and designation, the possibility of an adequate expression of personal, individual experience in poetry seems to be compromised from the beginning. Ilit Ferber writes how, in the designative theories of language that view language “solely through the prism of its theoretical content and contribution to the development of knowledge,” language is representative of the moment that rationality overcomes subjectivity (205). According to these terms, she writes, affect is then “conceived of as a barrier to linguistic expression insofar as [its] almost crude immediacy is considered the obverse of rational linguistic articulation” (205). But poetry, at least from the

Romantic period onwards, is also seen to be the site through which affect might approximate itself *into* language. Maybe this is because, as Aarsleff notes, poetry from this time onward was not necessarily governed by strict metrical or linguistic formula: Aarsleff notes how Condillac and Wordsworth both argued that poetry is “characterized by the association of ideas that governs the expression of passion and emotion, while prose, the style of the philosopher, relies on the ‘connection of ideas.’” In other words, since poetic language relied on what Wordsworth called the “effective and natural use of association,” it seems well suited to both reveal *and* explore the inadequacy of language for expressing interior feeling (quoted in Aarsleff 377).

Similarly, as Edward Lobb notes, “poetic economy has . . . always depended on the omission of superfluous connectors, allowing the reader to infer the meaning.” But poets of the modern period, he notes, “took the process a step further, emphasizing the reader’s construction of meaning” (167). Seen this way, poetic tropes of allusion and indirection—what Eliot sees as “essential” poetic strategies in his 1921 essay—start to look like strategies poets have *always* used to deal with the inadequacy of language to express interiority. Or, as Steiner notes, in the “technocratic” and “mass-consumer society” in which poets of the modern period were working, “the ancient trope of inadequate discourse—the conceit whereby words fall short of the unique immediacies of experience—become a more general issue” (274). It seems the perceived “linguistic poverty” of this time, to use Thomas’s words, comes to stand for poetic discourse itself. *It is impossible to say just what I mean!*

Indeed, we can read this modern conflation between poetry and communication difficulty into Eliot’s critical writing: although poets in the present civilization, as he writes in “On the Metaphysical Poets,” *must* be difficult, the evidence as to why is not necessarily provided. Eliot’s provocation, it seems, *goes without saying*. This has two meanings. First, as noted earlier,

difficulty in writing, and poetry especially, is understood to be a compulsion magnified by modern life, that is to say, inevitable. But more importantly, the existence of difficulty in writing, which, after all, as Steiner reminds us, is a primarily communicative art form, *is itself hard to explain*. If, then, poetry had become, as the critic L. A. G. Strong wrote in 1941, “not a communication but a record,” we can follow this idea to its logical conclusion: *poetry is not a communication but a record of how difficult it is to communicate with one another in the first place* (Strong quoted in Diepeveen 106).

Thus, while poetry appears to have embedded within itself the “ancient trope of inadequate discourse,” its ability to represent ineffability takes on new significance in the modern period, at a time when prominent poet-critics like Eliot were captivated both by theories of radical subjectivity and preoccupied by the way the technologies of industrial modernity seemed to thwart more intimate forms of interpersonal communication. Not only that, but the modern period was also a time where poetry’s so-called difficulty, or incomprehensibility, takes on a special status in the history of literary criticism, where anxiety around poetry’s difficulty would be, for Eliot and his fellow defenders of difficult modernism, proof of its authenticity, or its ability to faithfully mimic real life communication difficulties. Seen this way, the anxiety generated by difficult poetry has something in common with the “compulsion,” that, according to George Steiner, impels poets to write difficult poetry in the first place: in the psychological sense of the word, both compulsion and anxiety share a definition as an “instant impulse.” The conflation between compulsion, anxiety, and authenticity will be important when we turn to the category of the difficult conversation, which is seen as a kind of inevitability where interpersonal relationships are concerned, and which generates an anxiety that is nonetheless proof of said relationship’s “authenticity.”

We are still a little ways away from tackling the difficult conversation that guides this thesis outright. But I hope to have shown that one of the underlying assumptions that underpin it—that an inadequate recourse to linguistic expression is a natural fact of life and our relationships with one another—comes into sharper relief with the advent of industrial modernity, and simultaneously, cannot be separated from metaphors of and dominant critical attitudes about poetic creation that emerge in this period. In the next section, I will further sketch the relationship between the difficult conversation and modern poetry, this time by considering how the rise of institutional English studies (whose existence owes something to the popularization of difficult, high modernist poetry) had an effect on the perceived “difficulty” of informal spoken communication. More specifically, I will consider how new forms of literary interpretation demanded by modern poet-critics crowded out instruction in earlier, oral forms, thereby turning spoken communication into, essentially, a “formless” category: one in which the institutional poet lacks proper entrainment and, more than any other member of the population, comes to find *difficult*.

Communication Difficulty in the Post-Rhetorical Era

In order to show how the difficult poetry championed by Eliot reorganized the categories of speech and writing from within the university, we must first consider what literary study looked like before it revised its teaching methods from principles extracted from Eliot's own critical writings. In his sociological account of institutional English studies, John Guillory observes that the modern practice of literary criticism, or the study of text's formal elements, is a relatively new phenomenon. Instead, from antiquity to the nineteenth century, he writes, "[l]earning to speak, read, write, translate, comment, interpret, and dispute defined virtually all of what students did" in formal educational systems. These pedagogical activities had as their goal to instruct students in elevated forms of both spoken and written language. This practice, broadly called "rhetoric," or "the full array of pedagogic techniques for raising language to the level of a formal practice," was, Guillory notes, in Greek culture "a techné and in Roman an ars" (127).

The epochal "break" with rhetoric—whereby classical rhetoric ceded its role as the primary mode of instruction in liberal arts curriculum—Guillory argues, owed something to the vernacularization of literate culture in the nineteenth century. When Latin and Greek texts dominated the university curriculum, they also dictated the methods by which they would be interpreted: the western school was arranged around the oratory practices of elocution, recitation, and perlocutionary speech carried over from those Latin and Greek cultures. But as these Latin and Greek texts were eventually discarded for English ones, so too were the methods that had preserved them. As Guillory, quoting Franklin Court, points out, "early attempts to produce a vernacular oratory were sidetracked by the fact that [new instructional methodologies]

increasingly drew [their] examples from English literature, a body of writing that interested students for other reasons than the aim of public speaking” (137).

Guillory considers how the new discourse of *belles lettres* that took rhetoric’s place, a discourse oriented less towards speaking than to reading, was to become a precursor to the modern practice of “criticism” in the early decades of the twentieth century, since it was the emphasis on the cultivation of a readerly sensitivity supposed by *belles lettres* that would get taken up by the New Critics in the development of the methodology of “close reading.”

Although, as Daniel Green writes, Eliot was not personally responsible for transforming Anglophone literary studies under the aegis of New Criticism, his early essays were a primary inspiration for its proponents, who wanted to bring an “academic respectability” to the study of poetry (64). In “The Perfect Critic,” for example, Eliot explains what *not* to do: the critic should not impose his emotions upon art objects (6–7). “He must simply elucidate,” “to see the object as it really is” (11, 14). It is also in this essay collection Eliot first names his “impersonal theory of poetry,” a now famous assertion that poetry is “not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion . . . not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality” (“Tradition and the Individual Talent” 53).

As Gail McDonald notes, it was thanks to these writings that professors working at British and American universities in the early decades of the twentieth century would move from instruction in oratory arts to instruction in the formal properties of written text, encouraging students to attend to matters such as “rhythm, rhyme, connotations, tone, and so forth” (411). This careful attention to textual elements would form the basis of a new kind of evidentiary argumentation, a practice that ultimately signaled the decline of classical rhetoric when, as

Guillory notes, the written examination came to displace the oral examination as the “dominant means of assessment” (139).

Of all literary forms, poetry emerged as an obvious object for this new form of textual inquiry, thanks as well to Eliot’s critical writings that not only, as McDonald notes, promoted poetry as somehow “salvific” to modern culture, but also considered how poetry, more than any other literary form, demanded a more “scrupulous” attention “to the interplay of effects” it contained (417). Likewise, Daniel Green draws attention to the fact that the most important criticism actually produced by the New Critics was in fact the close reading of lyric poetry, including what he considers “the most distinguished book to be written by a New Critic, Cleanth Brooks’s *The Well Wrought Urn*.” Green quotes Brooks, who writes “[t]he poem communicates so much and communicates it so richly and with such delicate qualifications that the thing communicated is mauled and distorted if we attempt to convey it by any vehicle less subtle than that of the poem itself” (69). In accounts such as these, critics (who were often themselves poets) worked to promote the study of poetry as much as they did the “idea” of poetry—that by paying attention to what “delicately qualified” each poem from another, one would come to learn about the subtlety that is the “vehicle” of poetry itself, which was coming to be seen, as Leonard Diepeveen writes, “art’s paradigmatic form” (*Modernist Fraud* 15).

The “delicate qualifications” that distinguish poetry from other literary forms are pretty much fungible with the “allusions” and “indirections” Eliot’s ideal, difficult poet should use to “force, to dislocate [. . .] language into his meaning”: both are the kind of tropes that make poetry uniquely immune to paraphrase. It might be said then, that the New Critical practice of close reading that took inspiration from Eliot’s critical writings developed not just in attenuation to poetry itself, but to poetry’s specific *difficulty*, which, following George Steiner, “encloses”

“multiplicity of meaning” (264). The importance of poetic difficulty to the development of close reading is corroborated by Daniel Green’s sense that the New Critics inspired by Eliot realized “how even more ardent one’s ‘loving attention’ can be when the object of that attention is as textually compact and verbally concentrated as a poem,” especially the “highly figurative and allusive verse of the metaphysicals [which they] held in particularly high esteem” (66).

The difficult poetry championed by Eliot and his contemporaries, then, has an important relation to the development of the English department in the post-rhetorical epoch, even giving it impetus to exist: it was poetry’s particular recourse to textual *difficulty* that inspired instructors to develop new literary critical methodologies at the same time that it gave students in the university something to focus these emerging literary critical methodologies on. The emergence of modern “criticism” as a distinct practice, separate but concomitant with modern poetry, is illustrated in an anecdote about John Crowe Ransom recounted by McDonald. Although, she writes, “Ransom disagreed in print about the artistic worth of *The Waste Land*, [he] did not disagree about the need for a criticism equipped to read poems like *The Waste Land*” (418). It seems here Eliot’s investment in the critical promotion of difficult poetry (his provocation that poets “must be difficult”) helps secure sympathy for his own difficult poetry as a result: as McDonald notes, describing the “fashion for Eliot among Oxford undergraduates” in the twenties, “[i]t was Eliot the critic who prepared [them] to meet Eliot the poet” (637).

It may be more specific to say, however, that the popularity of Eliot’s difficult poetry was garnered thanks to his perceived *authority* as a critic. That is, equally important to what Eliot wrote was the magisterial, authoritative tone by which he wrote it: the unqualified modal verb “must,” in the phrase “poets, in our civilization, as it exists at present, must be difficult,” suggests some incontestable expertise on the subject. Indeed, as Leonard Diepeveen has written,

whether or not you agree with them, Eliot's critical writings "[show] the same concerns with boundaries and evidence" as those in other professions (*Modernist Fraud* 38). Or, as McDonald notes, it was precisely the rigorous attention to the text's formal qualities Eliot's "impersonal" critical methods dictated that "took criticism away from the gentleman amateur, replacing the vagueness of genteel appreciation with the specificity of teachable methods" (415). In other words, it was through the kind of "impersonal" analysis of difficult poetry Eliot's critical writings promoted, that, following McDonald, Green, and Diepeveen, literary study became "professionalized" within the university, a process that transformed English studies into a modern "academic" department committed to "scholarly" investigation. As McDonald has written, this new form of scholarly investigation was "adept at seeing a poem as a little world, one in which the disorderly energies of modernity had been masterfully shaped into a unity that was itself a form of knowledge, autonomous, irreplaceable, and as central to civilization as science, politics, or religion" (412). And no one, it seems, is better equipped for this investigation than the professional poet-critic, arbiter of the most authoritative difficulty.

Interestingly, the new forms of interpretation demanded by formally difficult poetry didn't just confirm the end of classical rhetoric, they in fact redefined the very categories of speech and writing as we understand them today. As Guillory notes, "the gradual exclusion of speaking from the curriculum" in the classroom's transition from instruction in classical rhetoric to instruction in modern criticism meant that "speech comes to mean . . . speech *as opposed to* writing, and it is this speech that falls outside the formal practice of the school." In other words, the side effect of the professionalization of literary criticism is also the "deprofessionalization" of its newly defined opposite: as Guillory writes, the new "competence of literacy" constitutes its "new systematic relation" to the "informality of speech" (143).

Interesting to note that the “competence of literacy”—what we can think of as literature’s new critical “authority”—was made possible by shifting the value of formality from rhetoric to criticism, denigrating it in the former while celebrating it in the latter. Guillory’s study of the history of classical rhetoric helps explain this phenomenon. While Guillory links the “final break” of rhetoric in the university to the emergence of formal literary criticism in the early 1900s, for example, he also notes a distrust for “artificial” use of language as early as the eighteenth century. Guillory points to Kant’s footnote to his *Critique of Pure Reason*, which states, “[e]loquence and well-spokenness (together, rhetoric) belong to beautiful art; but the art of the orator (ars oratoria), as the art of using the weakness of people for one’s own purposes (however well-intentioned or even really good these may be) is not worthy of any respect at all” (quoted in Guillory 149).

Kant’s assessment, Guillory notes, falls into a growing movement that saw rhetoric less as “a system for the training of cognition,” as it had once been conceived, and more as a practice of “mere” elocution, reducible to a “taxonomy of tropes” (148, 146). Kant’s distrust for its “[e]loquence and well-spokenness,” for example, speaks to a concern that rhetorical instruction had come, lamentably, to focus only on *how* one was to speak rather than what kinds of knowledges one could communicate—the kind of instruction that would teach students to “coerce the listener’s soul by meretriciously eloquent allurements” as opposed to “[coalescing it] with reason,” as a contemporary to Kant would have it (147). As such, for Kant, as for others, the kind of rhetoric around which the western school was organized was no longer “worthy of respect” because it capitalized on beauty or artfulness to disguise more base desires. It was, in other words, *hypocritical*.

Conversation and/as Authenticity

In his book on the “Ethics of Performativity,” Howard Pickett explains how being hypocritical came to be one of the “only unforgivable sins in modernity.” This is because it flew in the face of being “truthful” to oneself, a virtue that, from early modernity onward, we have come to consider “an absolute, unqualified good” (2). This preoccupation for self-congruence, also known as “sincerity,” has been explored by the literary critic Lionel Trilling, who argues that the virtue (not simply the term) came into existence in early modernity. “Previously used to describe pure or unadulterated things,” Pickett, quoting Trilling writes, “‘sincerity’ eventually became a characteristic of people, thanks in part to a decisive increase in the rate of social [and geographic] mobility” (4). The circumstances of this new, postfeudal world demanded new recourses to judge expressions of character based on new claims to identity and inwardness, as paraphrased by Pickett: “Is this stranger as trustworthy as he claims to be? For that matter, is he even who he claims to be?” (4).

In addition to changes in social mobility, Pickett also notes how sincerity’s rise was influenced by theology. Where medieval Christian thinkers “viewed life as a quest to recover the image of God of which humans were created,” Pickett notes how once reformist thinkers like Martin Luther, John Calvin “ruptured” the idea of “similarity or likeness between God and the human person,” speech and action came to be viewed not as a way to commune with God but expressive of the “internal, particular, and even unique ‘self’ within.” In later years, attempting to conform to a Godly external ideal became not simply unachievable, but also unadvisable. “Being true to oneself became preferable to imitating another, divine or otherwise,” Pickett writes, “in leu of concordia—or a related imitatio Dei (imitation of God)” one should aim for “cordis sinceritas (sincerity of heart)” (5).

While sincerity emerges as a way of conceiving one's relation to God, Pickett writes, the virtue gave way, over time, to a way of conceiving one's relation with others. As Trilling notes, authenticity, like sincerity, requires "a more exigent conception of the self and what being true to it entails," although in this case it is through a "downward movement through all cultural superstructures to some place where all movement ends, and begins" (11). Like sincerity, then, authenticity is premised on the rejection of the social mores that prohibit the expression of one's "inner self." As Pickett writes, "only by shedding my social roles or personae—the hypocritical "masks" I wear to conform"—do I become my true, authentic self" (8).

While sincerity and authenticity are not exactly the same, Pickett notes how both traits define themselves *against* the language of performativity (the word for hypocrisy, he notes, comes from the Greek for "stage actor") (1). Authenticity and sincerity's emphasis on anti-performance present a problem especially for the oratory aspect of rhetorical instruction, which typically involved, as Guillory writes, the "imitation" of "pre-circulated" speeches (143). If, according to the modern "sincerity ideal" identified by Trilling, and later, Pickett, one should not "imitate" as an actor, or attempt to conjure an idealized version of themselves into speech, one would do better than to engage the highly stylized rhetorical practice around which the western school was organized. Rhetoric, seen this way, after all, looks less like an expression of inwardness and more like a rehearsal thereof. Authentic expression, Pickett's argument goes, is prior to any instruction in it.

We can consider then, how the emergence of modern literary criticism that Guillory's book treats capitalized as much on the vernacularization of literate culture as it did on authenticity's "anti-performative" ideal. The result of this twinned process—the end of rhetoric and the beginning of modern criticism, or the shifting of the value of formality from the first onto

the second—means that speech in the liberal arts curriculum is, as Guillory writes, “relegated” once and for all, “to the extracurricular domain” (145). The result of this move is such that *all* speech becomes a blind spot for the practice of criticism, which, by the early decades of the twentieth century had turned its attention to the formal “compositional practices of invention, arrangement, and style” conjured by high modernist writing, and poetry in particular (137). Speech in the post-rhetorical educational setting, by contrast, takes on a curious formlessness, and, without any aesthetic criteria by which one might judge it, becomes, in a word, *difficult*: both to define and succeed at. Or, as Guillory writes, without any authorizing body to show what constitutes the ideal of speech, “[s]peaking well is today understood as the effect of a *dynamis*, a power that is possessed by some and that cannot finally be taught” (150).

Interestingly, the trope of “speech as informality,” or that which falls outside the purview of formal instruction, has a thread that runs both prior to and alongside the history of classical rhetoric. In his social history of language practices in early modern Europe, Peter Burke identifies “conversation” as a “particular kind of speech act, speech event, or speech genre” that exists irrespective of the “technical languages of particular professions” and expertises (29). “In the late classical Latin of Seneca,” he observes, “conversation meant something like ‘intimacy’” (95). Throughout the middle ages, it continued to be associated “with privacy, [as] opposed to oratory or ‘public speaking’” (114).

In his book, Burke considers a number of speech manuals on “The Art of Conversation” that emerged in the seventeenth and the nineteenth centuries in England and France, a “group of texts which, whatever their titles, tell their readers how to speak, whether generally or on particular kinds of occasion” (90). But no sooner did these texts emerge, Burke notes, did they begin to stress the notion that the “rule or norm in conversation” they encouraged “must not be

understood in too mechanical a fashion” (92). As an example, Burke notes how Samuel Johnson was admired in his time for his conversational skills, which included a rejection of ceremony and an “incorrigible breaking of the no-contradiction rule” (112).

Burke’s example points to a problem where conversation and its representation is concerned: conversation’s history, is, as he quotes from French historian Georges Mongrédien “so difficult to write” because any reference to *actual* spontaneity in speech is contradicted by the prescriptive nature of the treatises (89). Another way to think about the reason conversation is so hard to write about—both in the scholarship and in the manuals themselves—is because it has such an ambivalent relationship to “ceremony,” or formality to begin with. As Burke notes, “a truly general theory of conversation” must always take into account “the tension and the balance . . . between spontaneity and study” (92). Perhaps it is the tension and balance between conflicting terms that makes conversation difficult to define, even today. As Martin Warren notes in his book on *Features of Naturalness in Conversation* (a work of academic scholarship and a modern day “speech manual” unto itself), “[n]o generally accepted definition of conversation exists, beyond the fact that a conversation involves at least two people talking together” (8). Equally, what constitutes a potentially successful conversation is not something, that, at least immediately, can be demonstrated in writing, since the “ideal form” of conversation seems, conversely, to be all about rejecting formality, or, to use a metaphor from earlier, not following a set “script.”

So the first thesis on poetry and difficult conversation in the modern period is that the process by which modern poetry rose to popularity within the academic institution—the crowding out of rhetoric for the formal criticism of meticulously “composed” texts—is also the process that defines speech *as* informality itself. Likewise, it is through this process that the

category of speech and the ideal form of speech become one and the same, that is, to say, informal. And inasmuch as this dynamic form of speech is no longer something one can learn in school, it also becomes inherently *difficult*, both to define and to “do” successfully. While ideas about conversation’s informality have been around since antiquity, I argue, it is in the epochal break with rhetoric that this informality comes into sharper relief as a generic convention of speech itself (and, as we will see later, a source of anxiety for the new professional class of poet-critics).

Another way to say that conversation is difficult to define is that its ideal is anti-performative to the extreme, and by the logic that authenticity is anti-performative, it can also be seen as the most “authentic” form of communication. Or, conversation, inasmuch as it originates in informality and privacy, can actually be read, in the modern period, as shorthand for the ideal of authenticity itself, which is all about communicating anti-performativity, after all.

But here we arrive at an interesting paradox, and the animating concern of this thesis: although modern formal criticism and poetry define themselves *against* speech in the epochal break with rhetoric, the new ideal of informal speech created by this break—otherwise known as “conversation”—also shares its DNA with modern poetry, inasmuch as they are both concerned with communicating that which is authentically difficult. Recall that for a critic like Eliot, difficult poetry was the more honest, authentic, and vigorous art form, just as, for Burke, conversation is the most intimate, anti-performative and spontaneous speech act. See how already, the language between the two gets mixed up. As communicative forms they share certain generic conventions.

At the same time, if art, and poetry in particular, has an imperative, as Eliot wrote, to represent that which is *authentically difficult to communicate*, it is only natural that conversation,

the most authentically difficult form of communication, should become a central concern of only the most serious and professional working poets in the twentieth century. Rather than this being just a metaphor for something, I argue, actual conversation and its real life difficulty haunts poet-critics like Eliot, whose desire to make a poem in the model of the inherent difficulty of conversation is in tension with the formal compositional practices that were so central to modern poetry's critical authority. How to grapple with this tension? What would a successful poetic representation of an authentic conversation even look like? As a way into this question, I propose a reading of Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" that argues the poem is actually "about" this problem—the problem the professional encounters when writing a poem about the difficulty of conversation itself.

Conclusion: “Prufrock” and the Overwhelming Question

Loosely speaking, Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” is a dramatic monologue whose speaker obsesses over time and its effect on what he has to say. As Andrew Bostick writes, the general critical consensus of the poem is that of “a powerfully depressing and somber meditation on the poet’s inability to say anything at all in the modern world” (2). The poet’s inability to speak finds its representation in the titular Prufrock, a speaker who struggles and eventually fails to communicate that which would “force the moment to its crisis,” (which may or may not involve, as Edward Lobb writes, “asking a woman on a date” [171]). In any case, for Bostick, Prufrock’s failure to articulate that which would generate any kind of meaningful action culminates in his ultimate abdication of the role of Prince Hamlet, imagining himself instead as an “attendant lord,” watching from the sidelines instead, we are made to presume, of speaking the lines that would let him take matters into his own hands (2).

Difficulty where interpersonal communication is concerned—which sometimes looks like a total abdication of the category of speech itself—is all over this poem, from the no less than eleven questions that Prufrock leaves unanswered (including the “overwhelming” one that he spends the whole poem avoiding) to his trailing off into speechlessness, represented by ellipsis at the line breaks. Even the potential for readerly communion seemingly offered by the poem’s direct address, “Let us go then, you and I,” is quashed when the speaker changes his mind only ten lines later, interrupting himself abruptly to say “Oh, do not ask ‘What is it?’ / Let us go and make our visit.” Like the impossibility of “reducing a universe into a ball,” the difficulty required to say or explain what the poem means is barred by the insurmountable effort it seems would take to do so.

In “Prufrock,” then, local instances of disfluent or difficult communication between the titular character and the characters that surround him are mirrored by the poem’s larger discourse of disfluent or difficult communication between text and reader. Indeed, not only, as Edward Lobb notes, is the etherized patient in the poem’s opening lines, like Prufrock, “unable to communicate,” it is also unclear to readers what such an image communicates more generally. “Early reviewers and critics,” he writes, encountering the image for the first time, “expecting a visual simile, accused Eliot of writing nonsense” (168). What is meant by nonsense is, of course, that the image does not exactly “speak for itself.” The sense that the reader does not know what the poet is trying to say, or that the path to finding what that is will not be straightforward might be best exemplified in its use of literary allusion, which, as Longxing Wei writes, magnifies “difficulty because too much obscurity is assumed” (38).

But if “Prufrock” magnified obscurity to draw attention to the shortcomings of language, as Lobb writes, “it would not be one of the central poems of the twentieth century.” It is also, he argues “a poem, the poem, of awkwardness and embarrassment” (175). What distinguishes the poem’s representation of awkwardness from its representation of communication difficulty more generally is a bit tricky to discern, since the dictionary definition of awkwardness is also “a situation that is difficult and not relaxed.” Or, as the philosopher and theologian Adam Kotsko writes, the awkwardness of any particular situation is “difficult to pinpoint, and our usual way of speaking about [it] doesn’t clarify things” (5). But perhaps by trying to pinpoint the source of awkwardness in the poem, we will better understand the role of difficulty therein.

Tellingly, perhaps, the examples Lobb chooses to represent peak awkwardness in the poem depict conversational situations. The scene where Prufrock “imagines attempting to discuss the afterlife, in a clearly erotic setting,” he writes, is “deflated by a woman with more

physical activities in mind,” who responds coolly, “That is not what I meant at all. / That is not it, at all.” Here, a character has clearly misread the social situation, a theme Lobb argues is mirrored in an earlier encounter where, as he writes, when “the presumably cosmic Footman engages in a merely personal, implicitly sexual sneer at Prufrock’s appearance” (172). Either way, Lobb argues that in both examples the sexual and the metaphysical “collide with deliberate awkwardness,” wherein Prufrock “cannot imagine an encounter at either level that is not marked by embarrassment.” Perhaps collision is a useful way to think about how awkwardness operates generally. In the examples Lobb selects at least, awkwardness occurs when intimacy is confused—meaning both the “minged with” and “ruined by”—something else, leading to a general atmosphere of what Lobb calls the poem’s “sexual loneliness” (172).

For my part, I locate the “sexual loneliness” made manifest in Prufrock’s conversational awkwardness to his overt “formality.” That is, he is at his most awkward, or uncomfortable, when the social situations he wishes to engage in collide with something unexpected.

In Guillory’s account of the development of the institution of modern criticism, professional authority is derived from formalization, a process that demanded its practitioners develop “expertise,” “acquired with difficulty, by the path of the ‘discipline’” (36). By virtue of how “rarified” this process of knowledge acquisition is, aspiring professionals, Guillory argues, end up with a “correlative disability, or what has sometimes been called a ‘professional deformation’” (x). Prufrock, who quotes across several centuries of literary tradition has something in common with the deformed scholar Guillory writes about, “crippled” by an “artifice of education,” whose “constitutional solitariness” comes from having holed himself up with his books all day, and not, we are made to assume, speaking to others, let alone potential suitors (6). The kind of guy who dresses stiffly in formal attire—his “morning coat [and] collar

mounting firmly to the chin”—and who quotes the Gospel According to John in front of a woman who presumes to sleep with him tends to keep people, at least those outside the discipline, at a distance.

“Clear definitions of what constituted professional behaviour,” writes Maria Martimianakis in her sociological survey of the term, were “important as self-regulation became a marker of legitimacy for any occupation striving for recognition as a profession” (831). It is for this reason, she writes, professionals invest considerable resources and energy in “modelling” professionalism through replicable “manners” and “bearing” (830). In other words, professionalism is “prescriptive,” providing its practitioners the language by which they might anesthetize themselves against the potential awkwardness that comes from blurring what she calls “personal and professional roles” in the workplace (834). A good example of the way formalization relies on and effects speech patterns is in “shop-talk,” the often mundane jargon or subject matter peculiar to an occupation or a special area of interest, which in Prufrock’s case, could be the domain of two thousand years of literary and philosophical scholarship.

While Prufrock’s formality, what we can also think of as his “professional authority,” is what bars him from conversing in a personal, or intimate way, and results in his ultimate failure to “get the girl,” in Lobb’s words, it was Eliot’s own professional formality that made the poem so successful in the first place. In her survey of various poets’ first “perfect poems,” Helen Vendler attributes “Prufrock’s” success to Eliot’s rarified compositional sensibility. Here Vendler notes Eliot’s wise choice to eliminate thirty-three lines of the *Pervigilium* section (which appeared in the original version in Eliot’s notebook), which, she argues, “stutter [with] self-repeating end-words with feminine endings” (109). It was only by integrating multiple literary and philosophical allusions which are “carefully husbanded” into “solid accents on each

end-line monosyllable” that Eliot’s poem becomes, in Vendler’s words “perfect,” expressing a totally “coherent personal style” (1). This expression of a totally coherent personal style is, of course, made possible only through professional study, that is, it was only by having read (or at least having seemed to have read) his source texts widely that the poet was able to carefully incorporate, eliminate, and rewrite them into his poem, strategically deleting earlier material to “congeal [its] fluidities into a ‘final form,’” as Hannah Sullivan writes of the modernist editing tradition (8, 19).

Such formality, which also looks like “restraint” on behalf of the poet, might seem at odds with earlier, Romantic ideas of poetic creation and character, which, in Wordsworth’s preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*, took composition for the “spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” later “recollected in tranquility” (183). Indeed, in her survey of transnational Romantic literature, Sandra Tomc notes how asociality on the part of the poet, or the artist’s social exile, was seen to be “representative of the adversarial position of the arts as a whole in modern capitalist societies” in the Romantic period (3). In this time, she argues, the poet’s affective sensibilities and their inability to conform to regular social mores (which are often one and the same) were seen to be directly related to their “productivity and audience appeal,” and, conversely, helped them market and make a living off their poetry (2). Tomc points here to the “Byronic rebels” who “transcend the crass circumstances of exchange” by “rebell[ing] against [the professionalization of authorship] and retreat into the idealized realm of the ‘aesthetic’” (2, 22, 16).

But the investment in the institutionalization of poetry secured by Eliot’s critical writings, inadvertent or not, would not have allowed for such “Byronic rebellion” against the professionalization of authorship. Eliot, whose critical writings would go on to dictate the very

institution of formal modernist poetry, would not have been able to extricate himself from its economic logic—he was to become, in the years since his breakout poem, a very public critic whose opinion was sought out in journals, and later, in the editorial work of a major publishing house. Basically, he was invested in the kinds of professional institutions that make high modernist poetry, not least of all his own poetry, sell. Perhaps this is the determining difference between Romantic and modern poets in the wake of the invention of modern criticism: the latter simply cannot afford to be asocial. They must give lectures, arrange meetings, go to lunch. If there is a concession to their lack of Romantic asociality, it might be their *anti*-sociality, a kind of awkwardness that possesses none of the *dynamis* that comes from an outright rejection of social norms, but rather signals the friction that comes from engaging in personal situations in a professional way. This awkwardness is well characterized, in what is now, as Michael Opest writes, a “stock image” to Eliot biographers and critics alike. “Come to lunch on Sunday,” Virginia Woolf wrote to her brother in law in the 1920s, “Tom is coming, and, what is more, is coming in a four-piece suit” (quoted in Opest 31).

For all his perceived formality and “impersonality,” what we can think of as his awkwardness (in its dictionary definition as that which is “not relaxed”) in more intimate social situations, Eliot remained haunted by the idea of some romantic, pre-professional mores, which often manifest in an interest in the speech patterns of the lower classes. Ben Harker writes Eliot “lamented the disappearance of the vernacular authenticity of the ‘lower class’ beneath cinema, radio and the rising protoplasmic inundation of the middle classes.

” Likewise, Vendler notes, Eliot held a “withering irony” for the “ritualized discourses” of upper-class courtship and yet, for all his “intense analytic intellectuality” couldn’t seem to extricate himself from them (88). Perhaps the most telling example of Eliot’s desire to return to

an “authentic” speech style can be found in the letters he exchanged with Ezra Pound in dialect, a crude and offensive imitation of Black speech, which, as Michael North writes, the poets used “to mock tradition, aristocracy, [and] European culture, by comparing them to something earthier, more natural” (57). “This dialect became in [Eliot’s and Pound’s] correspondence an intimate code,” North explains, where the two could collaborate “against the London literary establishment and the literature it produced” (57–8). Dialect, North suggests, offered the poets some recourse to inward expression they felt the “gray cultural authorities [of] Europe” had prohibited (63). By virtue of the fact that Eliot represented the very cultural authority against which he was railing in these letters, these opinions could not be shared publicly, a compromised situation Eliot seems aware of when North suggests that, for the poet, the letters were something of a “dirty secret” (57).

Given his not-so-public fascination with the kinds of speech patterns that seemed to permit the lower-classes a more immediate and intimate form of “personal expression,” we might think, then, how Eliot’s critical writings on the importance of “impersonality” actually display anxiety about the relative authenticity of his own lyric expression. Mowbray Allan highlights this anxiety more generally when he notes Eliot’s ambivalence between Romantic and modern aesthetic ideals. “So marked [was] Eliot’s reaction against subjective idealism,” Allan writes, “that his career as a whole may be seen as an heroic effort to free himself from the limitations of nineteenth-century idealism and romanticism” (16). And yet, Allan writes, a Romantic desire for “expression” still carries through Eliot’s work, something Allan finds in the continuity of Eliot’s earlier critical thought with that of the Romantics, citing Eliot’s 1927 statement that “[w]hat every poet starts from is his own emotions” (16).

Such an inquiry into Eliot's public promotion of impersonality in poetry and its interpretation and his more private interest in the "authentic" speech patterns of the lower classes raises potentially awkward questions about modernism's investment in formal difficulty in the first place. Was the reason Eliot was so vehement about formal difficulty—his insistence that poets *must* be difficult and allusive, for example—nothing but a way to "authorize," his own awkward, impersonal character, his inescapable upper-class mores that were at odds with earlier, received ideas about romantic-lyric creation? Certainly, by adopting a critical attitude that valorizes communication difficulty as a formal property of all "mature" poetry, Eliot authorizes the conceit by which the poet can both fail at more "intimate" forms of interpersonal communication in real life and then call such failure on the page "art." Seen this way, his investment in modernism's radical transformation of affect's place in art, such that its "pleasure [is] produced [only] by the gratification of the pure intellect," as Marius de Zayas has it, might start to look like a cheap trick or gimmick, defined by Sianne Ngai as a "dubious yet attractive [promise] about the saving of time, the reduction of labor, and the expansion of value," where in this case a credit to Eliot's personality is directly debited to an output of his poetry (de Zayas quoted in "Modernist Fraud" 67, *Theory of the Gimmick* 2). Or, as Bostick puts it, "Prufrock's" "presentation of poetic ephemera," might be read as nothing more than mere "evasion," "an attempt to shirk the necessity of answering the [overwhelming] question by spouting forth seemingly unimportant lines" (11).

Interestingly enough, I think this particular overwhelming question—whether the professional poet can ever succeed at authentic, intimate conversation given their formation—is something "Prufrock" is, in fact, intimately aware of. We might even say the ambivalent relationship between formality and intimacy in the development of modern poetry and criticism

is what the poem is *about*. Like his speaker, Eliot's private writings suggest he had a real desire to achieve some romantic, spontaneous way of relating to others without ceding any of the authority his compositional practice worked so hard to generate.

For my part, I believe "Prufrock" is both aware of and ultimately finds a way to free itself from the bind of its professional authority in its authentic failure *to* speak, that is, in the poet's genuine inability to represent the "overwhelming question." Eliot never tells us what the overwhelming question is, and as Lobb notes, "[m]ost critics remain as silent about [it] as Prufrock himself (170). Unlike the "evasive" technique of literary allusion identified by Bostick, Eliot's representation of the overwhelming question renders both poet and speaker into a speechlessness that even the compositional practice of editing and rewriting can't subsume, generating radical uncertainty about interpretation itself. As Lobb writes, "[m]ost critics remain as silent about the overwhelming question as Prufrock himself. Perhaps they take our knowledge of it for granted, but I suspect that many of them are afraid of being told 'That is not what [he] meant at all'" (170). Here, in its representation of a kind of disfluency that goes beyond everyday, generic professional awkwardness, I argue, is where we "Prufrock" finds its *dynamis*—the word Guillory used for those who possessed power in speech and which is also the Greek philosophical concept meaning "power" or "ability" that is central to the idea of potentiality and actuality. How the poem's power can be found in the poet's failure to represent something doesn't make a lot of sense, unless we think about how, in the anti-performative logic of "authenticity," fluency in speech is equal to a kind of failure. After all, as Pickett notes, authenticity really means foregoing the script entirely, which is literalized in Eliot's act of outright omission. It seems the overwhelming question eludes the professional practice of composition itself: it cannot even be rehearsed beforehand.

Such an exploration of the dynamic potential of “the overwhelming question” in the poem also allows us to make another, related argument, which is that “Prufrock” provides one of the first representations of a speech category that actually owes its contemporary understanding to the history of modern poetic development: that of “the difficult conversation.”

The idea of the difficult conversation is ubiquitous in contemporary culture, a result, perhaps, as Frank Furedi writes, of the way emotional deficits have “made their way into the cultural vernacular,” and where, as Bronwen Thomas notes, the promise of a “talking cure drives interpersonal exchanges in which the goal is some kind of enlightenment” about the self and its relation to others (12, 8). In any case, Google Trends reveals an overall steady increase in searches for “how to have a difficult conversation” over the past seventeen years, while an industry of contemporary speech manuals has emerged to redress the problem. In 1999, the Harvard Business School, better known for having published a book on negotiation and problem solving called *Getting to YES*, applied these concepts more generally in *Difficult Conversations: How to Talk About Things That Matter*, a guide that purports to help negotiate conflict in discussions “when the issues at stake are important and the outcome uncertain” (xv). The authors define a difficult conversation as “anything you find it hard to talk about,” and note they arise in “situations when we get so passionately involved that our emotions affect our ability to think, problem solve and appropriately communicate” (xxvii). In these “conflict situations,” the authors note, “feelings are the heart of the matter” (xxi). And regardless of the content of these matters, the conversations that lie at the end of them, they write, are motivated by “fear of the consequences—whether we raise the issue or try to avoid it” (xxviii).

The fact that fear of the difficult conversation exists regardless of whether or not the conversation ever takes place is definitive of the difficult conversation’s ontology. We might say

the overwhelming fear of the difficult conversation is both fear about the topic at hand and fear of the category of overwhelm itself, which perhaps explains why the evasion of the difficult conversations is one of the generic markers of it. Just as the manual notes (delicately, in the passive voice) that “at work, at home, and across the backyard fence, difficult conversations are attempted or avoided every day,” so too does Prufrock avoid confronting “the overwhelming question” and Eliot avoid writing it entirely (xxvii). *And in short, I was afraid.*

More specifically, I argue, the source of overwhelming fear in the case of the difficult conversation comes from the overwhelming fear of awkwardness that occurs where professional formality ends. As the authors of *Difficult Conversations* explain, “[t]act is good, but it’s not the answer to difficult conversations” (xxix). Here, the earlier tension between “spontaneity and study” maintained in the eighteenth century speech manuals on the “Art of Conversation” is only magnified. Despite purporting how to teach it, this book’s “answer,” it seems, for how to have a difficult conversation, is just to do it, which really means to *feel* the fear of doing it.

In *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, his 1757 treatise on aesthetics, Edmund Burke writes, “no passion so effectually robs the mind of all its powers of acting and reasoning as fear” (72). Such a description of fear and its capacity to overwhelm was important to theories of poetic development in the Romantic period. As noted earlier, it is in the later recollection of the “spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” that Wordsworth came to define poetry. What is most important in such a pronouncement is not the exact feelings themselves, but the way by which their strength exceeds the type of feeling one can typically account for in the moment. Since such fear itself is the “strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling,” it is also analogous, as Burke writes, to “the sublime,” to which all great art from the period would aspire (51). As Kant writes, although the feeling of the

sublime “is at once a feeling of displeasure, arising from the inadequacy of imagination in the aesthetic estimation of magnitude to attain to its estimation of reason,” it is also “a simultaneous awakened pleasure, arising from this very judgement of the inadequacy of sense of being in accord with ideas of reason, so far as the effort to attain to these is for us a law” (88). It seems the “awakened pleasure” comes from having survived this total loss of reason, to have felt oneself come close to some feeling which is totally excessive, unaccountable, what he calls that which is “absolutely great” (88).

The language the manual uses to describe the overwhelming fear of the loss of reason faced by the initiator of a difficult conversation has something in common with the language Kant and Burke use to describe the feeling of the sublime. Even the manual admits that, of the difficult conversation, there is little evidence beforehand to suggest one will survive such elongated precarity in a social situation. We could say, perhaps, of the fear that always accompanies the difficult conversation, *that it is the sublime terror of radical awkwardness*. Without a formal script to follow, both people party to the difficult conversation face, as the manual notes, a high potential for an “uncertain outcome,” to be left stranded and helpless before a delicate interpersonal situation without knowing what to say. But at the same time, the sublime terror of such radical awkwardness also opens onto that “awakened pleasure” which is most desired in modernity: the possibility of an “authentic relationship.” As the manual notes, people who engage in difficult conversations “learn that, more often than not, dealing constructively with tough topics and awkward situations strengthens a relationship. And that’s an opportunity too good to pass up” (xix). In other words, the awkwardness of the difficult conversation is terrifying and awesome enough to render even the most professional of people—even those who

purport to want to “escape” from emotion and personality entirely—to the state of the *amateur*.

I mean to argue, then, that *all* difficult conversations that take place in the modern period and beyond are generically related to the category of difficult poetry by way of such poetry’s lingering desire for an earlier, romantic kind of sublimation. This is because, regardless of whether difficult conversations are “about” romance and courtship, *all* difficult conversations, inasmuch as they represent a failure of the scripted speech of the professional, are related to amateurism, to love, or to intimacy itself. It is for this reason, I believe, that Lobb correctly intuitively awkwardness occurs in the poem when “the cosmic descends bathetically to the sexual” at the same time that he argues the overwhelming question must represent both Prufrock’s “fear of being thought foolish, credulous, unsophisticated” as well as “his fears about his own body’s inadequacies,” constituting, as Lobb writes, another “link between sex and metaphysics in the poem” (172, 175). What does awkwardness reveal if not the link between sex and metaphysics, or the sublime terror that is intimacy itself, terror that it is not necessarily out *there*, but here, in our relations with others? Maybe this is a description of nothing more than the modern authenticity ideal, which, after the medieval period, as Pickett writes, moves sincerity from a vertical relation with God to a lateral relationship with others. Perhaps it simply takes the inherent awkwardness of the difficult conversation to reveal that, even to the most formal of professionals, our existence is irreducibly social, such that, as Jean-Luc Nancy writes, “Being cannot be anything but being-with-one-another,” that existence is essentially “co-existence”: the risky business of intimacy itself, which is always so tenuously composed (3).

Maybe this is why we remain so fascinated with the difficult conversation to this day, despite purporting to avoid it at all costs. In the same way Eliot argued difficult poetry would be

“salvific” for modern life, so too is there something salvific about the idea of the difficult conversation. This is because in the difficult conversation, or even just the *idea* of the difficult conversation, professional authority must cede to overwhelming emotion—fear, panic, anxiety, and also the promise of a renewed authentic relationship it affords. In other words, it gives modern professional life the feel of the idea of poetry in its most romantic instantiation, the idea of poetry that even the most difficult, impersonal of poets couldn’t seem to shake. Even in the workplace, the genuine terror of unbearable awkwardness it portends touches something like the end of all social norms and the beginning of “real” “intimacy.” Whether terror of this sort is distinguishable from sublime romantic feeling is hard to say. Then again, so are lots of things.

Works Cited

- Aarsleff, Hans. *From Locke to Saussure: Essays on the Study of Language and Intellectual History*. University of Minnesota Press, 1982.
- Allan, Mowbray. *T. S. Eliot's Impersonal Theory of Poetry*. Bucknell University Press, 1974.
- Bostick, Andrew. *The Overwhelming Question: Refiguring Poetic Failure As Catalyzed Reading in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock."* 2012. Haverford College, Senior thesis.
- Burke, Edmund. *A Philosophical Enquiry Into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful With an Introductory Discourse Concerning Taste*. Harper & Brothers, 1863.
- Burke, Peter. *The Art of Conversation*. Polity, 1993.
- Castiglione, David. *Difficulty in Poetry: A Stylistic Model*. Springer, 2018.
- Diepeveen, Leonard. *The Difficulties of Modernism*. Routledge, 2003.
- Diepeveen, Leonard. *Modernist Fraud: Hoax, Parody, Deception*. Oxford University Press, 2019.
- "Difficulty." Oxford English Dictionary, *Oxford University Press*, https://www.oed.com/dictionary/difficulty_n?tab=factsheet. Accessed 22 February 2024.
- Eliot, T. S. "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." *Collected Poems, 1909–1962*, Harcourt, Brace & World Inc., 1936, pp. 3–7.
- . "The Perfect Critic." *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism*. Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1920, pp. 1–14.
- . "The Metaphysical Poets." *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*, ed. Frank Kermode, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975, pp. 59–67.
- . "Tradition and the Individual Talent." *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism*. Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1920, pp. 42–53.

- Ferber, Ilit. "Herder: On Pain and the Origin of Language." *The Germanic Review: Literature, Culture, Theory*, vol. 85, no. 3, 2010, pp. 205–223.
- Furedi, Frank. *Therapy Culture: Cultivating Vulnerability in an Uncertain Age*. Routledge, 2004.
- Green, Daniel. "Literature Itself: The New Criticism and Aesthetic Experience." *Philosophy and Literature*, vol. 27, no. 1, April 2003, pp. 62–79.
- Guillory, John. *Professing Criticism: Essays on the Organization of Literary Study*. University of Chicago Press, 2022.
- Harker, Ben. "Henry Green's Investments." *Modernism/modernity*, 2024, forthcoming.
- Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Judgment*. Translated by J. C. Meredith, Oxford University Press, 1973.
- Kotsko, Adam. *Awkwardness: An Essay*. John Hunt Publishing, 2010.
- Lerner, Ben. *The Hatred of Poetry*. McClelland & Stewart, 2016.
- Lobb, Edward. Ellipsis and Aposiopesis in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." *Connotations*, vol. 22, no. 2, 2012, pp. 167–186.
- Martimianakis, Maria Athina, Jerry M. Maniate, and Brian David Hodges. "Sociological Interpretations of Professionalism." *Medical Education*, vol. 43, no. 9, 2009, pp. 829–837.
- McDonald, Gail. "T. S. Eliot and the New Critics." *A Companion to T. S. Eliot*, edited by David E. Chinitz, Blackwell Publishing, 2009, pp. 411–422.
- Nancy, Jean Luc. *Being Singular Plural*. Translated by Robert D. Richardson and Anne E. O'Byrne, Stanford University Press, 2000.
- Ngai, Sianne. *Theory of the Gimmick: Aesthetic Judgment and Capitalist Form*. Harvard University Press, 2020.

Ngai, Sianne "Theory of the Gimmick." *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 43, no. 2, 2017, pp. 466–505.

Nielsen, Henrik Skov, James Phelan, and Richard Walsh. "Ten Theses about Fictionality."

Narrative, vol. 23, no. 1, 2015, pp. 61–73.

North, Michael. "The Dialect in/of Modernism: Pound and Eliot's Racial Masquerade."

American Literary History, vol. 4, no. 1, 1992, pp. 56–76.

Opest, Michael. "Dull Tom-Tom's Absurd Prelude: Ludic Modernism in Early T. S. Eliot." *The*

T. S. Eliot Studies Annual, vol.1, no. 1, 2017, pp. 31–56.

Pickett, Howard. "Introduction: The Ethics of Theatricality / The Theatricality of Ethics."

Rethinking Sincerity and Authenticity: The Ethics of Theatricality in Kant, Kierkegaard, and Levinas, University of Virginia Press, 2017, pp. 1–10.

Schiffman, Robyn L. "Werther and the Epistolary Novel." *European Romantic Review*, vol. 19,

no. 4, 2008, pp. 421–438.

Steiner, George. "On Difficulty." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 36, no. 3,

1978, pp. 263–276.

Stone, Douglas, Patton, Bruce and Sheila Heen. *Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What*

Matters Most. Penguin Group, 1999.

Suárez, Juan A. "T. S. Eliot's 'The Waste Land,' the Gramophone, and the Modernist Discourse

Network." *New Literary History*, vol. 32, no. 3, 2001, pp. 747–768.

Sullivan, Hannah. "Why Do Authors Produce Textual Variation on Purpose? Or, Why Publish a

Text That Is Still Unfolding?" *Variants: The Journal of the European Society for Textual Scholarship*, vol. 12, 2016, pp. 77–103.

Thomas, Bronwen. *Fictional Dialogue: Speech and Conversation in the Modern and*

Postmodern Novel. University of Nebraska Press, 2012.

- Tomc, Sandra. "Introduction." *Industry and the Creative Mind*, University of Michigan Press, 2012, pp. 1–24.
- Trilling, Lionel. *Sincerity and Authenticity*. Harvard University Press, 1971.
- Vendler, Helen. "T. S. Eliot – Inventing Prufrock." *Coming of Age as a Poet*. Harvard University Press, 2004, pp. 81–114.
- Warren, Martin. *Features of Naturalness in Conversation*. John Benjamins, 2006.
- Wei, Longxing. "T. S. Eliot's 'Obscurity' in The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." *International Journal of Applied Linguistics & English Literature*, vol. 5, no. 4, 2016, pp. 38–47.
- Wordsworth, William. "'Preface' to the Lyrical Ballads, 1800." *Lyrical Ballads 1798 and 1800*, edited by Michael Gamer and Dahlia Porter, Broadview Editions, 2008, pp. 171–187.