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The clown procession and the concept of masquerade in the poetry of T. S. Eliot: de/construction of laughter and the comic in the identity of the individual and society – different models of text de/construction and interpretation

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Abstract

This paper introduces the presented conflicts and convergence of two poetics in the interpretation of T. S. Eliot's poetry, which together constitute a dynamic poetic system. The poetics of detail-broader context, in relation to the deconstructionist poetics of trace-suggestion, intersect and mutually influence one another, leading to a transformation in the understanding of individual and collective identity within the urban setting. The main aim of this study is to research the urban environment, the concepts of laughter and the comic play a formative role in reshaping interpretations of identity – both personal and societal. Viewed through the lenses of the individual and the group, the notion of identity is repositioned, and its values are deconstructively shifted into a new hierarchical sequence of concepts. Within this sequence, the multiple refractions of image and reflection generate both personal and collective identity. Laughter articulates the formation of individual identity, while the comic points to the formation of both through poetics that engage with laughter and the comic simultaneously. Through metapoetic qualities and self-referential strategies, identity is linked to contemporary understandings of the self within the urban milieu. Interwoven methodologies of the deconstructionist model – disrupting binary oppositions of self and world and engaging cultural models – are presented alongside the detail-broader context poetics, which depict the city and its inhabitants through their behavior, thereby rendering both the city and the self in their search for identity – personal, civic, and social. From Eliot's early poetry in the Notebook to the officially published poems from 1917 onward, a multitude of voices emerge, serving as carriers of metonymic details that contribute to a broader metaphorical image. The analysis revealed that within this interplay, both the voices and images are transformed, granting the reader a space for deconstructive writing and interpretation. Laughter, the comic, irony, and satire form a double foundation: through a dual deconstructive gesture, they refer not only to the depicted images and scenes but also to the speaking figures within the poems and, ultimately, to the author himself. These results suggests that through metaqualitative means, within a dynamic poetic system, the author reasserts his presence and reestablishes his role – not merely as intentional subject, but as a deconstructionist operation of suggestion and trace, encoded in verses, signs, and numerous lacunae of signification within a complex poetic framework. *(примљено: 1. марта 2025; прихваћено: 27. маја 2025)*

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In T. S. Eliot's poetic framework, multiple interpretive pathways can be discerned. Some of these paths will lead to insight, while others may prove blind. In *Blindness and Insight*, Paul de Man (1971) – an American theorist of Flemish origin – articulates conclusions that closely align with the theoretical and philosophical positions of Jacques Derrida. De Man limits his analysis to literary texts, focusing primarily on the relationship between reading and interpretation as two fundamental operations necessary for understanding a literary text. Interpretation, in de Man's view, is always constrained by an interest in the text's essence, which he presents as a monovalent structure. The question of why this structure is univocal points to the construction and constitution of interpretation as a concept. For an interpretive text to fulfill its own purpose – that is, to interpret a literary work – it must commit to a particular interpretive mode, whether that be academic, theoretical, philosophical, or rooted in any number of hermeneutic approaches, such as those emerging from psychoanalysis, history, sociology, linguistics, or legal theory. In other words, every interpretation is logocentric, as Derrida has argued extensively across his writings. Each interpretation tends toward a finalizing gesture, aiming to determine what the text means in an ultimate sense. Put differently – in Derridean terms – every interpretation undergoes a reduction, a contraction of insight. In doing so, it produces an interpretation that is *blind* to those meanings which remain unspoken, underexplored, or entirely neglected within its own framework. Yet simultaneously, each interpretation is inherently self-contradictory: it narrows in order to expand. Thus, the binary opposition between reduction and expansion remains locked within an *aporia* – a path riddled with questions, but devoid of final answers. Derrida reminds us that aporias are a necessary component of all critical thought. It is precisely this mode of critical thinking that I propose in this paper – one that resists conclusive, decisive modes of thought rooted in binary logic and aimed at producing a single "truth" about a literary work, a truth that is often framed as indispensable and foundational to any scholarly inquiry. As Derrida writes:

> I would like to situate, from very far away and very high up, in the most abstract way, in few sentences, and in a form of an index, or a long note at the bottom page, *the places of aporia*[1] in which I have found myself, let us say, regularly tied up, indeed, paralyzed. I was then trying to move not against or out of the impasse but, in another way, *according to* another thinking of the aporia, one perhaps more enduring. (Derrida, 1993: 13)

The impasse, the site of blockage or non-passage, is the locus of aporia; yet traversing this terrain, I would suggest, may be not only more enduring, but more meaningful. The approach adopted in this paper is therefore aporetic. It does not seek a singular resolution in interpretation, but rather acknowledges multiple possibilities. Among these, I will give less emphasis to certain lines of inquiry – such as the social role of poetic subjects – and foreground others, particularly the role of

1 Emphasis by Milena Vladić Jovanov.

laughter in its ironic reversal, as a critical lens through which to examine society and, more specifically, urban life during the period in which Eliot writes of the city.

This paper does not aim to produce a singular truth about the text as a unified semantic whole. Rather, it proposes multiple truths that intersect in a deconstructionist manner – following Jacques Derrida – and through the rhizomatic systems described by Gilles Deleuze. These network-like systems correspond to Derrida's understanding articulated in *Margins of Philosophy*, as well as in works such as *Dissemination* and *Writing and Difference*. This theoretical framework views linguistic and textual units not as isolated entities, but as inherently contextualized – arriving already embedded within their environments. In other words, context is not something external to the text that the critic or recipient must discover; it is always already internal to the text itself. Such a complex configuration reveals the poetic system of T. S. Eliot's creative process, which, even in his early poetry, signals a dynamic not only in creation but in interpretation. In doing so, Eliot suggests that context is not an external option accessible to the critic, nor is it a closed or open allusion imposed from outside and tied to the "primary" text. Rather, the so-called "primary" text and the marginal text reverse roles – the former becoming the margin and vice versa. The binary opposition between center and margin collapses, each destabilizing and reconstructing the other. A compelling example within Eliot's[2] poetic system is the genesis of "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." In the volume *Inventions of the March Hare*, edited by Christopher Ricks, a detailed account of the poem's evolution can be found. Initially, the poem carried three titles within its manuscript versions: "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock (Prufrock Among the Women)," "Prufrock's Pervigilium," and "The Love Song of J. Alfred, Resumed." The second section, "Prufrock's Pervigilium," was omitted from the official publication in *Prufrock and Other Observations*, while the first and third titles remained. However, the poetics of creation tell a different story. The second section was not entirely removed; rather, it remains present in the form of five lines, directly lifted from "Prufrock's Pervigilium," and embedded in the officially published version of the poem. These lines function as an absent presence, constituting a context that is internal to the final text of the 1917 collection. Their significance for interpretation is so substantial that Charles Altieri,[3] in his lectures "T. S. Eliot's Innovations" delivered at the University of California, Berkeley, argued that they are logocentric in nature – so foundational, in fact, that interpreting "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" without them would be impossible. These lines enable a reading of Prufrock as a fragmented and unstable figure – scattered across thousands of details, images, and fragments that ultimately resist cohesion. This phenomenological fragmentation is mirrored by a corresponding psychological instability, as is demonstrated in the following lines:

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2 For a comprehensive understanding of the dynamic poetic system, the significance of the term, and the application of deconstruction to the interpretation of Eliot's poetry, it is highly relevant to consult Milena Vladić Jovanov's monograph *The Dynamic Poetic System of T. S. Eliot* (2014).

3 It is advisable to consult Altieri (2003), *The Particulars of Rapture: An Aesthetics of the Affects*.

> Shall I say, I have gone at dusk through narrow streets
> And watched the smoke that rises from the pipes
> Of lonely men in shirt-sleeves, leaning out of windows?...
>
> I should have been a pair of ragged claws
> Scuttling across the floors of silent seas. (Eliot, 1952: 5)

Elsewhere, Charles Altieri observes:

> We realize from his way with metaphor why Prufrock has so little substance and so much need: what drives his sense of self comes from an intricate complex of forces that simply cannot be represented in the form of an image. Rather there emerges something like *tentacles*[4] of feeling eager to attach to any lurking metaphoric possibility. (Altieri, 2006: 71)

However, there are also scholars who argue that Prufrock is anything but "composed" of fragmented elements – whether material or emotional. One such voice is William J. Austin, who, in *A Deconstruction of T. S. Eliot: The Fire and the Rose*, presents the following view:

> A unified self is characterized in part by single and coherent will. In the case of Prufrock, that will is dissipated, divided between the yearning yet passive private self, and complicated by a public *mask/mirage* for the benefit of *social propriety*.[5] As a poetic construction, Prufrock has his own expression for the reader as a play of differences, as a divided ego which achieves, perhaps, a semblance of unity, i.e., and aesthetic whole, only through the operations of the aesthetic object, the complete poem. (Austin: 1996: 124)

Although both authors strive, in their respective readings, to identify a form of unity within Prufrock's poetic voice and subjectivity, they ultimately diverge due to the issue of whether or not the poem can be regarded as a cohesive whole. That unity is, in a deconstructionist sense, disrupted by the presence of contextual gaps – what Derrida might term a "presence in absence" or "absence in presence." This pertains specifically to the five lines from the officially published version of Prufrock that originate in the earlier "Prufrock's Pervigilium." These lines function as destabilizing elements, provoking divergent interpretations in the critical perspectives of Altieri and Austin. Austin also emphasizes that an understanding of the poem as a unified whole is essential to comprehending the social mask adopted by Prufrock and the inner self that remains veiled behind it – a self that speaks ironically through the performance of this mask. Thus, the unity of the poem – or

4 Emphasis by Milena Vladić Jovanov.
5 Emphasis by Milena Vladić Jovanov.

more precisely, the dynamic poetic system – must account for both Eliot's early and officially published works. This is the objective of the present exploration: to trace all potential interpretive *lacunae of signification*[6] and semantic fractures, and to follow the various interpretive pathways concerning themes prioritized herein – namely, laughter, masquerade, and identity formation in both individual and societal contexts. This does not imply, however, that deconstruction, by neutralizing meaning, licenses purely impressionistic criticism or an "anything goes" approach to interpretation. On the contrary, deconstruction – properly understood – demands rigor in uncovering the aporias, structures, and absent presences that shape both textual meaning and its potential undoing. Derrida maintains that a binary opposition of concepts – though seemingly based on the confrontation between two opposing terms – cannot be resolved through simple neutralization. It is not merely a matter of opposing terms, such as presence/absence, but rather of a hierarchy wherein one concept (presence) is privileged over its counterpart (absence). In this hierarchical structure, presence dominates over the absent context, for instance, thereby establishing conceptual subordination. Deconstruction does not operate by neutralizing this opposition; rather, it proceeds through a double movement, a dual epistemological gesture that simultaneously inscribes both poles of the opposition. This gesture refuses to burden the reader with only a single "truth" about the text. Instead, deconstruction, as enacted within a complex system, reverses binary structures – disrupting and reconfiguring them through the simultaneity of their observation. Only in this way can deconstruction provide "means of intervention within the field of oppositions in which it operates." (Derrida, 1984: 268) Derrida overturns the axial structure that begins and ends with causal relationships, replacing it with a network of relations in which temporal instances – such as beginnings and endings – are displaced. Within this dynamic system, lines of poetic trace from Eliot's early work, such as "Prufrock's Pervigilium,", are repositioned in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," functioning not merely as absence but as a presence within the officially published poem. This displacement does not render "Prufrock's Pervigilium" less important; on the contrary, it functions as a *supplement* to "The Love Song," a term with deep Derridean significance. Displacement also applies to the recurrence of particular poetic fragments, such as the sound of the barrel organ in "Portrait of a Lady," which later reemerges in the form of Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde* and the violin in *The Waste Land*. Through this shifting of poetic material, new meaning emerges – not only for "Portrait of a Lady," but for *The Waste Land* as a whole. Lines from "The Death of Saint Narcissus,"[7] for example, are

6 The concept of lacunae of signification represents a theoretical term introduced in Vladić Jovanov (2014), and refers to conflicting interpretive trajectories, each of which constitutes a distinct lacuna – an aperture toward a meaningful whole, whereby the whole itself does not possess a definitive endpoint or an ultimate truth capable of being reiterated through paraphrase. Rather, it exists as a pathway that continually opens further routes of interpretation.

7 "The Death of Saint Narcissus" reveals an even more complex understanding of T. S. Eliot's dynamic poetic system, as it forms part of *The Waste Land* and may be found both in the facsimile edition of *The Waste Land* and in *Poems Written in Early Youth*. Not only does the poem appear in *The Waste Land* facsimile with only

integrated into *The Waste Land* either identically or with minor alterations. By refusing to place logos at the center of thought, Derrida also rejects interpretive approaches that, within academic discourse, would seek to elevate a single, dominant reading – such as a fixed or definitive understanding of laughter. This rejection is central to the aim of this paper since within the dynamic system of the poetic text – and the term "text" is used here deliberately – there is no hegemonic meaning that governs others. For this reason, the verses from "Prufrock's Pervigilium" operate as traces, as suggestions for future interpretations and for future understandings by the *educated reader*[8] as envisioned by Umberto Eco – or, more precisely, by the reader whom Eliot himself trains to engage with his poetry. Eliot, however, does not offer explicit instruction. Rather, through subtle hints, embedded traces, and recontextualized lines from earlier works, he leaves interpretive agency in the reader's hands. As poet and author, Eliot is unconcerned with how the reader connects these traces; instead, he fosters the creation of a new textual experience with each reading. Therefore, the deconstructionist method employed in this paper does not aim at establishing a stable representation, but rather a re-presentation of existing interpretations. It seeks to create new perspectives through repetition – understood here as a philosophical category central to deconstruction and postmodern theory, in which nothing is ever repeated identically, but always differently. Repetition – or rather, the re-presentation of the same – is, by the very constitution of deconstruction, impossible, as logocentrism is inconceivable within the metaphysics of deconstruction. Therefore, the poems referenced in this paper are to be understood as traces of other poems, and simultaneously as suggestions that defy chronological markers of causality, opening a complex poetic system to the reader. From this system, I have selected one interpretive pathway: the relationship between laughter and the comic as elements of personal identity, particularly as represented in the middle class and the bourgeois remnants of a society unable to adapt to a new mode of urban life. Eliot also includes the lower

minor alterations – ultimately removed by the editorial hand of modernist arbiter Ezra Pound – but it is also preserved in the aforementioned collection. Perhaps Pound deceived Eliot; yet, as subsequent editions show, Eliot did not abandon that which was originally intended for *The Waste Land*, but rather reserved it for later publication. What is particularly relevant to this study, however, is the dual epistemological gesture manifested through poetic voices that echo the same line, functioning – as does the text itself – as mutual mirrors. Whether the context of Narcissus enters *The Waste Land* or vice versa, the question is ultimately posed to the recipient. "The Death of Saint Narcissus" begins and ends with identical lines, forming a reversal within itself; moreover, its opening lines are those from *The Waste Land*, thus enacting – through the category of repetition – a space for the reader and their role, which may now be interpreted as the absence of the presence of death, or rather as the death that remains present in the everyday life of the urban inhabitant portrayed in *The Waste Land*. Alternatively, it may lead to a culturally encoded model drawn from Petronius's *Satyricon*, and the polysemous utterance of the Cumaean Sibyl, who longs for death because youth has fled her, and all that remains is her voice.

8 In his studies *On Literature* and *The Role of the Reader*, Umberto Eco (1984) discusses the various roles of the reader. One of these is the semantic role, in which the reader understands what is written in the text, while the other is the semiotic role, in which the reader transcends mere semantic comprehension and, hand in hand with the author, participates not only in the poetics of creation but also in the poetics of interpretation, which necessarily emerges from the former.

classes, whose linguistic expression and behavior reveal a distinctive cultural portrayal of life in the city. Thus, the city does not function as a metaphysical space for dwelling. Through techniques of self-referentiality, Eliot gravitates toward a naturalistic poetics, most notably in *The Waste Land*, where he depicts a love affair between an office clerk and a typist. Here, the city is portrayed in a way that reflects its inhabitants – their existence becomes the image of the place they occupy. Similarly, the city becomes a mirror of its people – inhabitants who do not communicate with one another, and whose cultural imagery invokes Dante's *Inferno*, a parallel explicitly suggested by Eliot himself. A comparative reading of these two infernal images – Dante's and Eliot's – reveals the construction of the city as an infernal landscape, a place of existential entrapment, as emphasized by Hugh Kenner, whom I will reference later. The city, then, is not only incapable of serving as a metaphysical habitat; within Eliot's poetic system, it is described from multiple class-based perspectives. At the same time, it becomes a metaphorical non-city – one that is continually deconstructed and reconstructed, echoing the historical cities of Jerusalem, Vienna, and others. The fictional and the real city merge into a composite image composed of numerous reflections, each offering interpretive entry points through the *lacunae of signification*. The paper's objective is to portray the city through absence of communication, an essential feature in the formation of identity. In this vision, the city's inhabitants resemble puppets or marionettes, mechanically repeating phrases, evoking the impression of a clown whose repeated gestures do not elicit laughter but rather provoke contemplation. What, then, was Eliot truly suggesting about the city and the identity of its residents, who mirror one another? The city becomes one dimension among many – what Gilles Deleuze calls one of the many dimensions or planes, a single interpretive choice that does not exclude others (Deleuze/Guattari, 1987). Yet, due to the internal contradictions of interpretation, such a reading must be presented as a necessary selection – in this case, through laughter and the comic. There is no beginning or end, no fixed boundaries between fictional and real cities, yet such boundaries paradoxically exist, as the city is revealed through poetic details: dirty shoes, worn-down heels, park benches where sparrows peck, rooms in which women awaken as visions of an unseen street – details found in both Eliot's early and officially published poetry. Deleuze and Guattari speak of such dimensions as sites constantly seeking their foundation, and it is precisely this that Eliot achieves in his depiction of the city. Partly through a poetics of detail – constructing a broader context of urban life that includes both the influence of the city on its inhabitants and the reflection of the city in their behaviors – Eliot presents a reversed mirror: the nature of the inhabitants reflects the nature of the city, and vice versa. Yet both undergo a metamorphosis, a mutual influence leading to a transformation – of both the city as a space and of the identities of those who dwell within it. This system, or network of interconnected textual units – each arriving with its context – manifests what Deleuze and Guattari describe as "different regimes of signs," and even "non-sign states" (Deleuze/Guattari, 1987: 21). Such a signifying network: "is composed not of units but of dimensions,

or rather directions in motion. It has neither beginning nor end, but always a middle (milieu) from which it grows and which it overspills" (Deleuze/Guattari, 1987: 21).

Therefore, I have chosen to present the poems in this paper as traces, as Derrida defines them "neither perceptible nor imperceptible" (Derrida, 1987: 65). In other words:

> In order to exceed metaphysics it is necessary that a trace be inscribed within the text of metaphysics, a trace that continues to signal not in the direction of another presence, or another form of presence, but in the direction of an entirely other text. Such a trace cannot be thought more metaphysical. No philosopheme is prepared to master it. And it (is) that which must elude mastery. Only presence is mastered. (Derrida, 1984: 65)

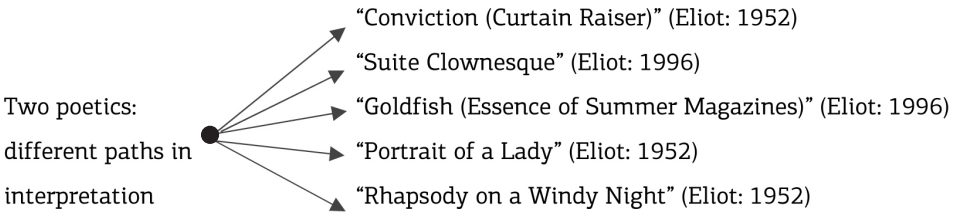
Thus, I do not treat the traces as indelible interpretive residues, nor do I read mimesis in terms of causal relationships. The poems selected for this approach – which reflect identity through masquerade and laughter – are not interpreted through a framework of causality. Instead, mimesis is approached through a deconstructionist lens: one that does not reject imitation outright, but rather interrogates its conceptual constitution. As Derrida writes:

> In each case, mimesis has to follow the process of truth. The presence of present is its norm, its order, its law. It is in name of truth, its only reference – reference itself – that mimesis is judged, proscribed or prescribed according to a regular alternation. The invariable feature of this reference sketches out the closure of metaphysics: not as a border enclosing some homogeneous space but according to a noncircular, entirely other, figure. Now, this reference is discreetly but absolutely displaced in the workings of certain syntax, whenever any writing both marks and goes back over its mark with an undecidable stroke. This double mark escapes the pertinence or authority of truth: it does not overturn it but rather inscribes it within its plays as one of its functions or parts. This displacement does not take place, has not taken place once, as an event. It does not occupy a simple place. It does not take place in writing. This dis-location (is what) writes / is written. (Derrida, 1981: 193)

Accordingly, the poetic texts discussed here are not read as transparent representations of identity, nor as mimetic reenactments grounded in metaphysical presence. Rather, they function as textual displacements – writing that marks and remarks itself in ways that resist mastery, disrupt causal linearity, and open up a space of play, undecidability, and interpretive multiplicity. In this sense, the poems emerge not as closed semantic units but as dis-located sites of trace, situated within the folds of a broader poetic system that destabilizes both origin and conclusion.

Axial structures adhere to mimesis, while rhizomatic systems permit unrestricted connectivity – both at the structural-semantic level and at the

thematic level – between units that carry their own context. In such systems, context may be juxtaposed and merged through comparative analysis with another context. For instance, an epigraph may be placed alongside another epigraph. A notable example is the epigraph originally written by Eliot for *The Waste Land*, which was a citation from Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. However, under the editorial influence of Ezra Pound – modernism's principal moderator – this was replaced with the now-canonical reference to the Sibyl from Petronius' *Satyricon*. Thus, line merges with line, poem with poem, opening new dimensions of interconnection. These dimensions of textual and contextual linking, which form the basis of my interpretive model, will be further illustrated in the diagrams that follow.



T. S. Eliot's poetic oeuvre constitutes a dynamic system in which the poems are interlinked through a deconstructionist mode of relation. The relational connectivity among the poems can be traced in multiple ways, one of which involves the recognition of details that later serve as entry points into a broader conceptual image. Such a detail is imagistic in nature. It may be geographical in origin, as when the poet directs our attention to specific topographical sites – for instance, in *The Waste Land*, where he references streets, a church, and a bridge in London[10] (Eliot,

9 The tables presented here illustrate distinct interpretative approaches that incorporate both poetic models. However, these insights are simultaneously insights and blind spots, thus leaving the reader with the task of further exploring the transformation of identity conditioned by society – society that is itself shaped by the metamorphic journey from awareness to self-awareness.

10 It is worthwhile to consider Hugh Kenner's essay, wherein he argues that Eliot, unlike other poets, chose to depict the specific city of London as a representative of urban life more broadly. This form of topographical determination exemplifies the relationship between poetic detail and the broader context, to which one is

1952). Alternatively, it may be historical in nature, as in *Four Quartets*, in the lines: "The backward look behind the assurance / Of recorded history, the backward half-look / Over the shoulder, towards the primitive terror" (Eliot, 1952: 133) – or in *The Waste Land*, in the first section, "The Burial of the Dead," where the poetic subject – the speaker – invokes war and calls upon his comrade Stetson: "You who were with me in the ships at Mylae!" (Eliot, 1952: 39). The detail may also be urban in character, directing the reader toward city life as the modern condition of existence. This modernity is signaled through the depiction of relationships among urban dwellers, emphasizing occupations that are typically metropolitan – such as the typist and the office clerk – whose love affair, rendered in a broader context, serves as a metonymy for urban life and, indirectly, for the city itself as the space they inhabit:

> At the violet hour, the evening hour that strives
> Homeward, and brings the sailor home from sea,
> The typist home at teatime, clears her breakfast, lights
> Her stove, and lays out food in tins. [...]
> He, the young man carbuncular, arrives,
> A small house agent's clerk. (Eliot, 1952: 43–44)

This urban thematics also appears in Eliot's early poetry, particularly in "The Notebook" (Eliot, 1996), where the city, its streets, and its appearance are depicted in such a way that they implicitly reveal the lives and behaviors of its inhabitants.

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directed through deconstructive suggestion. The essay in question is "The Urban Apocalypse" in Litz (1973). The very notion of a poetics of detail, which unfolds into a poetics of the broader context, is first proposed by the present author. Hence, the preceding discussion has outlined the types of detail which, through allusion, realize the poetics of the broader context. Poetics, therefore, is not only a mode of literary creation but may also function as a methodological approach. For example, if we take into account the experience of poetic creation, particularly the metatextual elements found in *Four Quartets* – wherein the poet expresses dissatisfaction with language's ability to convey definitive meaning and admits to a twenty-year search for the right expression – then poetics may also be seen as a methodological framework, granting insight into the formation of poetic texts that are at once acts of creation and fields of allusion, open to multiple interpretations. Moreover, it must be emphasized that what is at stake is the interplay and transformation not only of the poetics of detail and the broader context, but also of a poetics in which self-referential repetition of verses engages relationally with cultural models, including those of love "imported" from various earlier literary works. As will be seen further in the text, an example of this is the intertextual allusion to Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* in Eliot's "Portrait of a Lady," wherein a closed allusion to love from Shakespeare's era is transformed in Eliot's portrayal of the relationship between a younger man and an older woman through a deconstructionist reversal. This results in an intertextual irony whereby even the educated, Ecoian semiotic reader – though capable of closely following the poet's process – must nonetheless admit that their own foundations of love in the present moment are inherently different. Thus, it is suggested, albeit indirectly, that love in the modern city is not only devoid of passion but also lacks sensuality and emotional depth. Through this double – indeed, triple – mediation, the absence of sensuality and emotion introduces an absence of communication. It is not by accident that communication, as a final consequence, gives way to a love that "sounds" entirely different in the urban context. And depending on how love sounds – whether through the mechanical strains of a barrel organ or the refined notes of a violin, both of which Eliot uses consistently as motifs within his dynamic poetic system – one may also infer the character of the city in which such lovers reside, and of course, ironically, the lovers themselves.

A detail depicting the city – one that gestures toward a broader context not only of the urban environment but also of the lives of its inhabitants – is already present in a concentrated form in Eliot's early poetry. In the poem First Caprice in North Cambridge, we encounter verses that suggest the lifestyle of the urban resident through specific details describing the appearance and texture of the city itself.

Bottles and broken glass,
Trampled mud and grass,
A heap of broken barrows,
And a crowd of tattered sparrows
Delve in the gutter with sordid patience. (Eliot, 1996: 13)

The atmosphere of the urban environment – initially framed through exterior spaces – is later developed in *Prufrock and Other Observations* (1917), where it transitions into interior settings. In the drawing rooms and salons depicted in the collection, men are compelled to perform prescribed roles in accordance with the conventions of courtship. This is particularly evident in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," where male speakers frequently articulate thoughts that go unrecognized or misunderstood by the women present, thereby necessitating continual justification and self-explanation.

If one, settling a pillow by her head,
Should say: "That is not what I meant at all.
That is not it, at all." (Eliot, 1952: 6)

On the other hand, in the poem "Portrait of a Lady," we are presented with a complex relationship between a young gentleman and an older woman. In this dynamic, the lady speaks, while the gentleman remains silent, offering no verbal response to her questions, despite listening attentively. This absence of communication is further reinforced by the atmosphere in which the "conversation" takes place – an atmosphere the gentleman himself describes with the following words:

Among the smoke and fog of a December afternoon
You have the scene arrange itself – as it will seem to do –
With "I have saved this afternoon for you";
And four wax candles in the darkened room,
Four rings of light upon the ceiling overhead,
An atmosphere of Juliet's tomb
Prepared for all the things to be said, or left unsaid. (Eliot, 1952: 8)

What is depicted is the social atmosphere of upper urban society – specifically, the bourgeois class – where the relationship between the individual and society

is established in ways that influence the conceptual shaping of both personal and collective identity. What kind of society is so absorbed with itself and its own codes of conduct? And what kind of individual consents to live within such a society? In interpreting this distinctly urban social atmosphere, two poetic frameworks may be applied. The first is a poetics of detail and broader context, and the second is a deconstructionist logic of trace and suggestion. These are not two discrete or opposing poetics, but rather interwoven modes of reading that continuously transform one another.

Eliot's early poetry does not serve as a mere foundation for the poems written between 1917 and 1922 and beyond. On the contrary, what is at work is a double gesture – a movement in which suggestion becomes trace and trace becomes suggestion. As Derrida notes, interpretation must proceed by using "two hands" simultaneously – hands that both write and erase – to generate new meanings (Derrida, 1978). The dual nature of this gesture lies in its disruption of the conventional understanding of temporal distance, which, as Martin Heidegger calls it, is a "vulgar" or disordered conception of time (Heidegger, 2012). In such a temporal logic, causality collapses: the effect no longer follows the cause. Present time, therefore, is understood through a deconstructionist lens as a modification of both past and future (Derrida, 1992). Within this framework, the trace is not a consequence, nor is the suggestion a cause. In other words, the poetics of the deconstructionist act unfold within a complex system of relations between Eliot's early poetry (up to 1917) and the later officially published works, including *Prufrock and Other Observations* (1917), *Poems* (1920), *The Waste Land* (1922), and *Four Quartets* (1935–1942), among others. Deconstruction here is not reduced to a poetic mechanism of mutual influence between suggestion and trace, future and past, in the act of reading. Rather, it also constitutes a dual epistemological operation in which interpretation cannot end in neutralization. As Paul de Man notes, interpretation inevitably becomes a form of necessary totalization of meaning, as no reading can account for every possible insight (de Man, 1971). Thus, semantic play must at some point be momentarily suspended – anchored in select locations within the larger system. In this paper, I have undertaken such anchoring by focusing on two intertwined poetic modes for interpreting identity – individual and collective – within the city, under the unifying theme of laughter and the comic. Deconstruction, understood through this double cognitive gesture (Derrida, 1982), produces a reversal of oppositions established between early poems (1909–1917) and officially published works from 1917 onward. This reversal gives rise to a reconfigured value system within Eliot's poetics – one that not only integrates the early poems but also reinterprets the city itself. Where critics have traditionally viewed the city as a space in which the isolated individual searches for direction, this reading allows us to understand the city instead as a site in which the individual has already found direction – a direction that consists in the mutual recognition and self-knowledge of the city and the self as interdependent spaces of existence. In this vision, the self lives within and through the city, just as the city is shaped by the awareness and transformation of the self.

The individual, as a space unto themselves, internalizes conflicting images of the city and their own self-perception within it, ultimately arriving at self-aware insights about both their identity and the environment in which they live. This reflective process occurs through laughter – the individual laughs at themselves, at the social group to which they belong, and at the rigid, affected atmosphere of urban life to which they consciously conform. Yet this conformity is not without resistance; it carries undertones of rebellion, articulated through satirical outbursts in verses such as those found in *Preludes*:

Wipe your hand across your mouth, and *laugh*;[11]
The worlds revolve like ancient women
Gathering fuel in vacant lots. (Eliot, 1952: 13)

Let us examine how the poems from Eliot's early period and those written after 1917 call to one another and mutually reflect their themes and imagery. In the 1910 poem "Convictions (Curtain Raiser)," there are lines that are thematically linked to the motif of marionettes – a motif that is later transformed and displaced at the linguistic level in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." There, the speaker's inability to express himself is rendered through a discourse of fragmentation and performative constraint. This theme of inexpressibility, first intimated in Prufrock, can subsequently be traced – through a deconstructionist reading – into *Four Quartets*, where the poet, in a metatextual gesture, articulates the fracturing of language itself, confessing that words are "cracked" and ultimately inadequate to fully convey the poet's thought.

Among my *marionettes*[12] I find
The enthusiasm is intense!
They see the outlines of their stage
Conceived upon a scale immense
And even in this later age
Await an audience open-mouthed
At climax and suspense. (Eliot, 1996: 11)

Marionettes are figures – puppets – moved by strings controlled by a puppeteer. The speaker is animated by a metatextual quality perceptible to the attentive reader. His marionettes are the individuals within the city and society, whose emotions, like the painted cheeks of a clown, can be artificially inflated. These lines serve as a suggestion – a textual foreshadowing – of the verses that later emerge as traces in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock."

11 Emphasis by Milena Vladić Jovanov.
12 Emphasis by Milena Vladić Jovanov.

The eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase,
And when *I am formulated*,[13] sprawling on a pin,
When I am pinned and wriggling on the wall,
Then how should I begin
To spit out all the butt-ends of my days and ways?
And how should I presume? (Eliot, 1952: 5)

The poetic subject – the speaker, namely Prufrock – ultimately concludes that a "formulated phrase" is incapable of capturing the full dynamism of interpersonal relations. The metatextual quality introduced in the early poem "Convictions (Curtain Raiser)" is transferred into *Four Quartets*, where the poet explicitly points to the linguistic level already perceived by the reader in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." At first glance, this might be interpreted as the speaker's inability to express himself using socially acceptable language – whether regarding his emotions toward others, toward society, or toward himself as the Other within. This concept of the Other within the self – as the bearer of communication between Sein and Dasein, to borrow Heidegger's (2001) terminology – is further explored by Emmanuel Levinas (1979), who frames this internal relationality as essential to the discovery of the self.

In *Four Quartets*, there is a return to this metatextual dimension, now articulated as the inadequacy of language to express any form of finality or closure in the lived experience of the individual subject. In other words, even when an individual attempts to realize themselves within a particular framework of identity, language proves insufficient. If the individual remains content with pre-given words, they remain a marionette – both to themselves and to society. If, however, they recognize that language cannot stabilize meaning, they will acknowledge the play of *différance* – the movement of shifting meanings and signifiers – at the very moment when they first sensed themselves as a person. In *Four Quartets*, Eliot articulates this recurring metaquality in several ways. One of the most striking instances is the following:

So here I am, in the middle way, having had twenty years –
Twenty years largely wasted, the years of l'entre deux guerres –
Trying to learn to use words, and every attempt
Is a wholly new start, and a different kind of failure
Because one has only learnt to get the better of words
For the thing one no longer has to say, or the way in which
One is no longer disposed to say it. And so each venture
Is a new beginning, a raid on the inarticulate
With shabby equipment always deteriorating
In the general mess of imprecision of feeling,
Undisciplined squads of emotion. (Eliot, 1952: 128)

13 Emphasis by Milena Vladić Jovanov.

The poetics of detail and broader context also manifests in the interrelationship between Eliot's early poetry and the works published after 1917. This can be observed in the verses from "Convictions (Curtain Raiser)," which function simultaneously as both detail and suggestion of the lines found in "Portrait of a Lady." When the verses from these two poems are placed in parallel, the poetics of detail and the deconstructionist poetics of trace and suggestion become interwoven, giving rise to a transformation into something new. What is at stake here is Eliot's treatment of laughter – not merely as an emotional or social reaction, but as a poetic and philosophical device. Let us first examine the verses from the early poem and then those from the later "Portrait of a Lady."

"Where shall I ever find the man!
One who appreciates my soul;
I'd throw my heart beneath his feet.
I'd give my life to his control."
(With more that I shall not repeat.) (Eliot, 1996: 11)

Do these verses return us to, or rather gesture toward, what the lady desires in "Portrait of a Lady"? As Derrida asserts, "the context is always already within the text" (Derrida, 1978), and from this perspective, the lines from "Convictions (Curtain Raiser)" – when read as detail – can be interpreted as a kind of response to the unanswered questions posed by the lady to her silent interlocutor in "Portrait of a Lady." The detail thus functions not merely as an isolated poetic image, but as a trace that retroactively illuminates and reshapes the dialogue, or lack thereof, between the characters across Eliot's poetic corpus.

"You do not know how much they mean to me, my friends,
And how, how rare and strange it is, to find
In a life composed so much, so much of odds and ends,
(For indeed I do not love it... you knew? you are not blind!
How keen you are!)
To find a friend who has these qualities,
Who has, and gives
Those qualities upon which friendship lives.
How much it means that I say this to you –
Without these friendships – life, what cauchemar!" (Eliot, 1952: 8)

Within the poetics of detail and broader context, a parallel interpretive trajectory that affirms the interweaving of the two aforementioned poetic modes presents itself. In this framework, detail is constituted by the questions and responses exchanged – explicitly or implicitly – by the lady; the broader context is the young gentleman's path toward self-awareness, as he wonders what will remain, or what will transpire, should the lady die. The entire scene is rendered as a clownish procession, a masquerade staged theatrically, where paper roses stand in for real

ones, and where the laws of nature are reinterpreted and reshaped according to social conventions.

Two in a garden scene
Go picking tissue paper roses;
Hero and heroine, alone,
The monotone
Of promises and compliments
And guesses and supposes.

And over there my Paladins
Are talking of effect and cause,
With "learn to live by nature's laws!"
And "strive for social happiness
And contact with your fellow-men
In Reason: nothing to excess!"

As one leaves off the next begins.
[...]
My marionettes (or so they say)
Have these keen moments every day. (Eliot, 1996: 11)

Within the poetics of detail and image, the presence of a deconstructionist poetics offers itself for observation. It is not merely a matter of transformation, but of the emergence of self-awareness in the individual – an emergence that directly shapes the concept of identity. The paladins in Eliot's poetic play are presented within a metaquality, operating within the framework of performative urban roles. Yet despite their adherence to social conventions, they begin to question those very norms. Through this process of interrogating social identity, they arrive at a deeper awareness of the self – a dynamic that is exemplified in the following lines from "Portrait of a Lady":

Well! and what if she should die some afternoon,
Afternoon grey and smoky, evening yellow and rose;
Should die and leave me sitting pen in hand
With the smoke coming down above the housetops;
Doubtful, for a while
Not knowing what to feel or if I understand
Or whether wise or foolish, tardy or too soon...
Would she not have the advantage, after all?
This music is successful with a "dying fall" –
Now that we talk of dying –
And should I have the right to smile?[14] (Eliot, 1952: 11)

14 Emphasis by Milena Vladić Jovanov.

Conscious that laughter – when isolated – signifies nothing, the individual recognizes that lost laughter reflects a deeper solitude: a separation not merely from others, but from the self as a human being. This constitutes the primary rupture – a disconnection from oneself – that inevitably precedes alienation from society. No individual is ever estranged from others without first having become estranged from themselves. Once the individual becomes aware of mortality, the Paladin within them begins to grasp their role within a broader social model. This realization is facilitated by a cultural model – a system symbolically marked and highlighted through quotation marks. Fragments of identity are embedded within this cultural matrix, and in Eliot's "Portrait of a Lady," such a model emerges in the form of a veiled allusion to Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*. This is signaled in the line: "This music is successful with a 'dying fall'" (Eliot, 1952: 11). Here, the foundational poetic structure expands into a dual foundation of Eliot's poetic system, operating through self-referential gestures that point back toward a Shakespearean cultural model.

It appears that critics such as Lyndall Gordon and Ronald Schuchard have shaped their interpretations around authorial intention, linking their readings to Eliot's biography. Like any bio/graphy – that is, any narrative grounded in the life circumstances of the poet – such a path of interpretation is neither exclusive nor necessarily correct. While I do not intend to dismiss authorial intention as a legitimate critical tool, it is sufficient to adopt a reflective stance toward it, acknowledging its presence without granting it absolute authority. Rather, I refer to it critically, as an example of interpretive strategies that "circle around" what may have been – or might be imagined as – the author's intended meaning, interpreted through biographical lenses. For instance, Lyndall Gordon writes: "Turning irritably from one extreme possibility to another, Eliot looked on women from a literary distance. The distance was supported partly by his own inhibition, partly by a society in which the sexes were artificially separated." (Gordon, 2000: 36) Ronald Schuchard dedicates an entire chapter, "The Savage Comedian," to Eliot's role as a comic poet, stating: "Eliot has never enjoyed a public reputation as a comic poet or as an obscene poet, but his new friends in London were well acquainted with the lusty characters who peopled his bawdy ballads and limericks" (Schuchard, 1999: 87). This mode of interpretation – reliant upon authorial intention grounded in biographical data – is further reinforced by contemporary criticism. For example, Conrad Aiken, a close acquaintance of Eliot, observes:

> Mr. Eliot's notion of poetry – he calls the "observations" poems – seems to be a purely analytical treatment, verging sometimes on the catalogue, of personal relations and environments, uninspired by any glimpse beyond them and untouched by any genuine rush of feeling. As, even on this basis, he remains frequently inarticulate, his "poems" will hardly be read by many with enjoyment. (Aiken, 1917/2004: 299)

Interpretations of individual and collective identity through the lens of laughter and masquerade are relatively rare in studies addressing the identity of the poetic text and the individual as depicted in T. S. Eliot's poetic oeuvre. In the present reading, laughter reveals not only behavior, but more importantly, the voice within behavior – a voice marked by rigidity and repetition, mirroring the stiff, meaningless phrases that appear in contrast to the deeper existential questions Eliot's poetry pursues. Eliot's poems – from his early works to *Four Quartets* – can be roughly divided into those that depict urban spaces and urban dwellers, who, on both thematic and linguistic levels, navigate a woven semantic-structural network. Within this network, through introspection and questions such as "What does all this mean?" and "What is the nature of my life?" they seek a path toward self-awareness, expressed in diverse poetic forms. In "Embarquement pour Cythére," for instance, Eliot introduces a dual model: on one hand, the life of urban citizens shaped by habit and routine; on the other, a desire for introspection and self-knowledge, voiced through an indeterminate speaker, anticipating more developed methods in later poems. These later methods include the dynamic, deconstructionist model in which cultural frameworks interlace with urban imagery and figures, culminating in a broader poetic structure described here as the poetics of detail-image within the city. Through this double gesture – the dynamic interplay of early and later poetry – images of the city are linked with notions of the emptiness of speech and the staged performance of life. This movement spans from early verse through the formally published poems of *Prufrock and Other Observations* (1917) and ultimately into the meditative depth of *Four Quartets*. In "Embarquement pour Cythére," we encounter the following lines:

Ladies, the moon is on its way!
Is everybody here?
And the sandwiches and ginger beer?
If so, let us embark –
The night is anything but dark,
Almost as clear as day.

It's utterly illogical
Our making such a start, indeed
And thinking that we must return.

Oh no! why should we not proceed
(As long as a cigarette will burn
When you light it at the evening star)
To porcelain land, what avatar
Where blue-delft-romance is the law.

Philosophy through a paper straw![15] (Eliot, 1996: 27)

15 Emphasis by Milena Vladić Jovanov.

The urban scene becomes interwoven with the figures of individuals preparing for an outing. The imagery – ranging from fine-grained details to the broader compositional frame – thematically conveys the emptiness of habit and the superficiality of lifestyle among the middle to upper-middle class, through the implicit idea that going on an excursion is sufficient in itself – why even contemplate the return? The final verse introduces the theme of self-awareness, insight, and realization, conveyed through an indeterminate speaker. Yet the presence of the authorial metaquality is palpable, positioning the poet simultaneously as commentator on the preceding verses. The closing line – suggesting that all of this amounts to little more than "straw philosophy" – subtly signals a reflective withdrawal from the values of the scene described. This division of tone within the poem is not constructed as a rigid binary; rather, the verses of introspection and self-recognition flow seamlessly into Eliot's later works, such as "Preludes" and "Rhapsody on a Windy Night." If examined more closely, it can be observed that such images form interconnected textual fields, bound by a network of contextual relations. The verses thus invite a model of reading in which the reader becomes a composer of a new "poem," engaging in what Derrida would term deconstructionist writing. Such a form of creation simultaneously constitutes a new form of interpretation – one practiced by both the reader and the interpreter – and it is precisely this interpretive act that I attempt to enact. Turning to the lines from "Preludes," the morning city scene – where a young woman awakens – is not merely descriptive, but a reflection of the city itself. It captures the rhythm of urban life through rapid, catalog-like imagery that forms a metonymic metaphor – a composite image of the urban subject within the frame of an ordinary morning. This metonymic metaphor is evident from the very opening of the poem, where the lives of the city's inhabitants are depicted through the poetics of detail and broader context. These metonymic details, when placed within a wider metaphorical structure, illustrate a way of life – specifically, the routine of heading to work and the minor habits that precede it.

The morning comes to consciousness
Of faint stale smells of beer
From the sawdust-trampled street
With all its muddy feet that press
To early coffee-stands.

With the other *masquerades*[16]
That time resumes,
One thinks of all the hands
That are raising dingy shades
In a thousand furnished rooms. (Eliot, 1952: 12)

16 Emphasis by Milena Vladić Jovanov.

All of these images operate as masquerades, in which the author, with a concealed ironic smile, appears within the metaquality of the text. Through descriptions of the daily commute, Eliot portrays not merely routine, but an entire mode of existence for urban dwellers – and through that mode of existence, the city itself as a habitable space. Thus, the concept of masquerade becomes deeply entangled with the identity of the city, with the social image it projects, and with the individual living within it. Behind the seemingly indeterminate speaker's voice – one that subtly contains the authorial voice – lies the transition to a scene depicting a woman awakening at dawn in the city. Why emphasize urban dawn, and the city itself? Because here, there are two intertwined states of consciousness – two visions that mirror one another. The metaphor of awakening – both literal and figurative – links the individual's self-awareness to the consciousness of the street, positioning the city as a living organism, pulsing with life by day and night. This is achieved through overlapping imagery, wherein the woman's introspective moment becomes inseparable from the city's awakening. Metonymic details such as "blanket from the bed," "curled papers from hair," "yellow feet," and "soiled hands" are transformed into a dual image: one reflecting the woman's interior life, the other capturing the consciousness of the street. These two modes of awareness are interwoven, mutually constitutive. The verse continues: "The thousand sordid images / Of which your soul was constituted / Flickered against the ceiling." (Eliot, 1952: 12–13) Here, the interior of the room dissolves into the exterior of the street, as the chirping of sparrows – a distinctly urban sound – signals the return of the world:

> And when all the world came back
> And the light crept up between the shutters,
> And you heard the sparrows in the gutters,
> You had such a vision of the street
> As the street hardly understands. (Eliot, 1952: 13)

This layering of voices occurs at the linguistic level, marked by shifts in pronouns and narrative stance. From an indeterminate speaker, the poem transitions to third-person narration in its depiction of the woman and the city, then later introduces a male figure – another reflective consciousness – whose self-awareness is, again, interlaced with the image of the street. In this context, metonymic details begin to amplify metaphorical meaning, especially through religious imagery such as "a soul stretched across the skies," (Eliot, 1952: 13) which fades behind the city's buildings. The fusion of soul (as consciousness) and city imagery becomes even more vivid in the juxtaposition of introspective realization and urban routines depicted over the course of an ordinary day. Beginning with the previous evening, Eliot writes:

> The winter evening settles down
> With smell of steaks in passageways. [...]

The showers beat
On broken blinds and chimney-pots,
And at the corner of the street
A lonely cab-horse steams and stamps. (Eliot, 1952: 12)

From there, the poetic narrative unfolds into the morning commute – a characteristically urban situation – rendered through a sequence of metonymic details. Then follows the awakening, described both as a literal moment and as a metaphor for awareness:

The morning comes to consciousness [...]
You tossed a blanket from the bed, [...]
You dozed, and watched the night revealing
The thousand *sordid*[17] images,
Of which your soul was constituted. (Eliot, 1952: 12)

The cycle concludes in the evening once again, shifting to the image of a man whose soul is "stretched across the skies" – a haunting metaphor for spiritual and existential dislocation within the metropolis. The intensity of the scene is heightened not only through a series of metonymic details – compressed within the spatial framework of the image to represent temporality – but also through the metaphor of the soul as a representation of consciousness. In this instance, it is symbolically linked to religious imagery, simultaneously embodying the sky descending at twilight, just as the sun sinks behind the city's buildings. The self-awareness of the individual – identity and self-recognition – are metaphorically and intimately bound together, such that the image of the city becomes a mirror of the individual's inner self. This kind of (in)determinacy, and the seemingly scattered details of the city – connected by nothing but fragments – now coalesce on both thematic and linguistic levels. From the indeterminate authorial voice narrating the previous evening and approaching morning (in Parts I and II of *Preludes*), to the third-person perspective and personal pronouns such as "You tossed" (for the woman, in Part III), and "His soul" (for the man, in Part IV), culminating in the first-person singular pronoun "I" in Part IV – we are given a poetic narrative that simultaneously tells the story of the city and the story of a self within the city. As dawn breaks – recalling the Prufrockian pervigilium – the figure reaches a moment of awareness, recognition of the self and surroundings, and an emerging self-knowledge that remains unfinished. The poem does not resolve the philosophical and existential questions dispersed throughout Eliot's dynamic poetic system, particularly those concerning the individual's role in the modern world – a world in which the city is no longer merely a setting for life, but a formative force in shaping identity. The "I" that now emerges represents a mode of consciousness capable of naming itself in

17 Emphasis by Milena Vladić Jovanov.

the first-person singular. It fulfills a dual function: both as the voice of the speaker, moved by the images he observes, and as a participant in the urban narrative of twilight and dawn. Moreover, it implicitly invites the reader – especially the semiotically literate or "informed" reader – to identify with the poet. "I am moved," the speaker states, "by fancies that are curled / Around these *images*,[18] and cling: / The notion of some infinitely gentle, / Infinitely suffering thing." (Eliot, 1952: 12–13) This dynamic, deconstructionist poetic narrative culminates not in closure but in openness. The return to an indeterminate voice – which, through the double gesture, can simultaneously function as a metatextual authorial presence and as a resonant voice echoing across the poetic system – leaves the question of introspection and philosophical reflection unresolved. The "I" has not yet fully become – it is still in the process of becoming within this poem. Thus, the open space at the poem's end is not an endpoint, but a beginning – a space for readerly writing, in which the reader engages in the continued learning of poetic forms and meanings. The final lines of the poem are: "*Wipe your hand across your mouth; and laugh; / The worlds revolve like ancient women / Gathering fuel in vacant lots*"[19] (Eliot, 1952: 13). In this readerly writing, the scattered verses that gesture toward introspection – as a kind of autoscopy, a turning inward, an autogenesis – become a means of realizing one's own knowledge and its limits, both of the self and of others. The reader's response might now take the following form:

> *Philosophy through a paper straw!* ("Embarquement pour Cythère," 1910)
> *Wipe your hand across your mouth, and laugh;*
> *The worlds revolve like ancient women*
> *Gathering fuel in vacant lots.* ("Preludes," 1915, 1917)
> *The last twist of the night.* ("Rhapsody on a Windy Night," 1915, 1917)

It is particularly noteworthy that the concept of masquerade is employed dually within Eliot's poetic system. On the one hand, masquerade functions as a methodological device; on the other, it becomes a subject or object of representation – that is, it appears both as subject and object of depiction, whether in the images of the city, the individual within it, or the very process by which these are portrayed. Disguise (masquerade) thus operates both on a poetological level and within the direct representational framework of Eliot's depiction of the urban environment and its inhabitants. In this sense, masquerade always entails a certain distance – a poetological displacement, a concealed technique the reader later uncovers through the interweaving of various interpretive strategies, such as the dynamic-deconstructionist model, the detail-image poetics, or the interlacing of cultural models with urban and individual imagery. Yet masquerade also bears the connotation of grotesquerie, even caricature. In "Preludes," for instance, there is an

18 Emphasis by Milena Vladić Jovanov.
19 Emphasis by Milena Vladić Jovanov.

immediate suggestion of this in the lines describing a woman awakening, whose soul is composed of "sordid images." What, precisely, are these impure or stained images? Consider the lines: "The thousand sordid images / Of which your soul was constituted; [...] / And when all the world came back [...] / You had such a vision of the street – " (Eliot, 1952: 13) This imagery is later mirrored in the description of the male figure, whose soul is described in the phrase: "The conscience of a blackened street" (Eliot, 1952: 12–13). Given this textual and contextual reading – in which the lines of the same poem serve not only as support but also as contextual commentary for one another, while simultaneously linking with lines across other poems – it seems more accurate to suggest that Eliot's tone is not overtly satirical, but rather ironic. The "sordid images" may refer at once to consciousness, the street, the city, and the individual – a multivalent irony that resists singular moral judgment. This is reinforced by the poem's conclusion in the first person, where the speaker refers to those very same images in connection with: "the notion of some infinitely gentle, / Infinitely suffering thing" (Eliot, 1952: 13).

When we turn to masquerade as a direct subject at the thematic level, Eliot's early poem "Humoresque" offers an ideal opportunity to further examine the dual function of masquerade – both as method of poetic construction and as representation of entities and beings depicted. The poem enables us to explore the doubling of masquerade: as a mode of interpretation, and as content, pointing to the social and existential conditions underlying the poetic voice.

One of my *marionettes*[20] is dead
Though not yet tired of the game
But weak in body and in head:
A *jumping-jack*[21] has such a frame.

But this deceasèd marionette
I rather liked – I liked his face
The kind of face that you forget,
Locked in a comic, dull grimace;

Half-bullying, half-imploring air
And mouth that knew the latest tune,
His who-the-devil-are-you stare: –

Translated, maybe to the moon

With Limbo's other cast-off things
Haranguing spectres, fancy him there

20 Emphasis by Milena Vladić Jovanov.
21 Emphasis by Milena Vladić Jovanov.

"The snappiest fashion, just this spring's
The newest cry on Earth, I swear."

"Why don't you people get some class"
(And here contemptuous of nose)
"Your damned thin moonlight, worse than gas
Now in New York" – and so it goes;

Logic – a marionette's all wrong
Of premises – but in some star
A life! – but where would it belong?
And after all – what *masque*[22] bizarre! (Eliot, 1996: 325)

In Eliot's early poem from 1909, the concepts of marionettes, jack-in-the-box figures, and masks can be observed. The question of voice also arises – who speaks? Is it the marionette who addresses the audience, or is it solely the authorial voice? Before addressing this question of voice, however, it is necessary to pause at the linguistic level and examine the notion and usage of the word mask. The mask is inextricably linked with distance, functioning as a boundary between the self and the other. This notion of boundary is fundamental to the concept and realization of laughter. Henri Bergson (1913), in his *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, notes that we do not laugh at a joke unless we feel ourselves to be part of the group. In introducing distance, Bergson simultaneously introduces its opposite: belonging. Laughter thus becomes a dual concept – it implies both distance and inclusion. Groups may divide into smaller or larger collectives within the same social structure, but laughter functions as a marker of shared identity and social exclusion alike. When Eliot speaks of masks, he refers to their diverse social uses. Some masks function like clothing, worn in masquerade to signify belonging to a particular class. Others conceal what lies beneath and enforce belonging at all costs. Still others – particularly among the lower, working classes – do not serve to conceal characteristics but rather to highlight class identity, as in the conversation between two women in the pub scene of *The Waste Land*, where their linguistic register reflects their educational and class status. Masks are also worn by urban figures such as the typist and the clerk, but here they serve an autoreferential function, foregrounding traits that render these individuals alienated from the human core within themselves. This self-alienation leads to their estrangement from others living alongside them, and their shared condition collectively constructs the image of the city as a "new" space for life – a space not of communion, but of fragmentation.[23] Applying Jacques Derrida's insights from *Aporias*, we notice that

22 Emphasis by Milena Vladić Jovanov.

23 The relationship between communication, society, and organization is central to the work of Niklas Luhmann. For further reading, see his studies: *Art as a Social System*, *Organization and Decision*, and *The Making of Meaning: From the Individual to Social Order* (Luhmann: 2000; 2018; 2022).

masks simultaneously operate as shields and substitutes for the self. In the form of attire or outerwear, they function as protection – yet also as replacement: the true self remains concealed, and through the mask one declares affiliation with a specific social stratum. The mask thus becomes both cover and signifier, a mechanism by which identity is performed rather than revealed. In the volume *Humor in Modern American Poetry*, edited by Rachel Trousdale (2018), which features contributions from various authors on poets such as Ezra Pound, E. E. Cummings, Marianne Moore, Elizabeth Bishop, W. H. Auden, Emily Dickinson, Thomas Hardy, William Carlos Williams, and others, Trousdale notes in the introduction, "Theories of Humor and Modern Poetry," that humor is an integral element of poetic experimentation in modernist poetry. In other words, she identifies – much like what I argue in relation to masquerade – that humor functions as both a poetological device and a poetic response to contemporary reality, one that is not only constitutive of poetic method and creation, but also formative for the representation of lived experience and the identity of both the individual and society. Trousdale writes:

> Modernist poetry's reputation for difficulty leads many readers to overlook the fact that poets of the modern era are continually joking, mocking, and making puns. But modernist poets' playfulness underlies the very ambitions that make their poems so challenging and rewarding: their experiments with language, their reconception of traditional forms, their desire for sometimes drastic political change, and their radical reformulations of the relationships between readers, writers, and texts. (Trousdale, 2018: 1)

She continues in this tone:

> Humorous modernist poetry ranges from comic rhymes published in popular magazines to the absurd juxtapositions of The Cantos. For the poets discussed in this book the point of humor is not to provide "comic relief," a brief counterpoint to the poem's serious themes; rather, humor is a constitutive part of the poems' projects. Poets use humor to establish their own poetic authority; to redefine literary tradition; to demarcate their audiences; to make political points; to attack their adversaries and rivals; and, perhaps most unusually, to increase their readers' sense of community and capacity for sympathy. (Trousdale, 2018: 1)

This suggests that readers and critics alike have long divided Eliot's poetry into serious and non-serious categories, associating some of his work with high culture and others with popular culture. These divisions, of course, predate modernity. We may recall the classical distinction between high and low poetic style, which would later evolve into distinctions between scientific and poetic imagination. The latter also implied a division between knowledge acquired through intellectual study and knowledge that arises from an immediate apprehension of meaning. As Kathleen Raine writes in *W. B. Yeats and the Learning of the Imagination*:

> Poetry and other arts are basic modalities of human thought, concerned not with knowledge "about" but with knowledge "of," as music is itself its own meaning. [...] Imaginative knowledge is immediate knowledge, like a tree, or a rose or a waterfall or sun or stars. (Raine, 1999: 22–23)

Accordingly, Raine identifies Yeats as a poet of the imagination, whereas Eliot, she argues, is a poet most often studied in the university setting. She reflects on her own experience:

> When my generation, as students, first read *The Waste Land*, with its notes, we were impressed by the difficulty and obscurity of its references. [...] A whole academic generation busied itself with following up the notes to that poem which Eliot himself provided. Eliot was mapping out the territory of his own poetic domain relevant to his time and place in history, whose points of reference fall for the most part within the mainstream of European history and Christendom. Universities find it very easy to teach Eliot, for his boundaries are those of a known world. With Yeats it is otherwise. (Raine, 1999: 28)

The division between high and popular culture continued to such an extent that humor in T. S. Eliot's poetry came to be perceived as part of popular culture – that is, as a marginal element within his broader poetic system and poetological foundations, both in creation and interpretation. However, David E. Chinitz, in his book *T. S. Eliot and the Cultural Divide*, contends that Eliot's relationship with popular culture was far more complex and open than has often been assumed. Interpreting the concepts of "high" and "low" art, Chinitz argues: "Eliot's actual relations with popular culture were far more nuanced and showed a far greater receptivity than either his supporters or his detractors, today or during his lifetime, have realized or cared to admit" (Chinitz, 2003: 4). Chinitz notes that the long-standing assumption that modernism was antagonistic toward popular culture has undergone significant revision. He references Andreas Huyssen's influential study *After the Great Divide*, which was written under the influence of German philosopher and theorist of the avant-garde, Peter Bürger, particularly Bürger's seminal work *Theory of the Avant-Garde*. In his reworking of Bürger's theory, Huyssen distinguishes between two strands of modernism: "A mainstream modernism that was in fact inimical to popular culture, and a 'historical avant-garde' that, in its struggle against official high culture and the institution of art, remained receptive to the popular" (Chinitz, 2003: 4). Chinitz's observations reinforce the central claims of this paper, which are also substantiated by another key postmodern theorist, Jean-François Lyotard.[24] The

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24 It is essential to distinguish between the theories of postmodernism and the theory of deconstruction. In the present context, which concerns the relationship between avant-garde, postmodernism, and modernism, Lyotard's views on artistic practice largely align with the arguments presented in this study – particularly those grounded in deconstructionist theory and philosophy. It is noteworthy that Jacques Derrida dedicated several works to Lyotard, one of which is *Lyotard and Us* (Derrida, 2000).

notion of a perpetual avant-garde as an aesthetic phenomenon has frequently been called into question. Yet, when viewed through the lens of postmodernism – which can be understood as both a culmination and a subversion of modernism, as well as an embedded form of the avant-garde within it – the aesthetic value of avant-gardism becomes legible. Lyotard emphasizes that modernist aesthetics is founded upon the sublime, which seeks to present "the unpresentable," a content that may only be intimated as absence: "The aesthetic of the sublime, which presents the unpresentable to be put forward only as the missing contents" (Lyotard, 2004: 81). By contrast, postmodernism offers a reversal of this logic:

> The postmodern would be that which, in the modern, puts forward the unpresentable in presentation itself. [...] A postmodern artist or writer is in the position of a philosopher: the text he writes, the work he produces are not in principle governed by pre-established rules [...] those rules and categories are what *the work of art itself is looking for*.[25] The artist and the writer, then, are working without rules in order to formulate the rules of what will have been done. (Lyotard, 2004: 81)

This process – one which simultaneously searches for itself, describes itself, and presents itself as procedure – is precisely what I have identified from the outset as central to Eliot's poetics. It also aligns his work with later artistic strategies that link Eliot not only to the avant-garde, but also to postmodernism, posthumanism, postcolonialism, and beyond. Chinitz's assertion that Eliot was a multidimensional thinker and artist is therefore well-founded. However, due to the innovative nature of his poetic strategies – particularly in his engagement with popular culture – Eliot's approach remains, as Chinitz notes, "deeply ambivalent" (Chinitz, 2003: 5), a position which reflects the very complexity and radical openness that define his contribution to literary modernity.

Let us now examine the technique employed in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" and "Portrait of a Lady." The deconstructionist model enacted in both poems involves the interweaving of cultural paradigms, closed allusions – such as references to Shakespeare and *Twelfth Night* – and the imagery of the emptiness of speech and habitual gestures of urban inhabitants. In other words, the integration of the detail-broader context poetics into a deconstructionist framework destabilizes the binary opposition between allusion as an external contextual anchor – one that traditionally serves as origin or foundation for interpretation – and the internal repetition that undermines this structure. This dynamic is evident in both poems.

In "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," there are lines that connect identity consciousness to the individual's relationship with society, whereas in "Portrait of a Lady" the focus is on individual identity, articulated through a consciousness that observes absence – the absence of love and of meaningful communication

25 Emphasis by Milena Vladić Jovanov.

– ultimately reflecting a broader lack of intimacy and connection within urban society. This transformation in theoretical frameworks and interpretive models is mirrored by a transformation in the very concept of identity itself, which can be followed in lines such as:

> For I have known them all already, known them all –
> Have known the evenings, mornings, afternoons,
> I have measured out my life with coffee spoons;
> I know the voices *dying with a dying fall*[26]
> Beneath the music from a farther room.
> So how should I presume? (Eliot, 1952: 5)

In *Twelfth Night*, Duke Orsino longs for such an excess of love that, should it vanish like music, his heart would break.

> If music be the food of love, play on,
> Give me excess of it, that surfeiting,
> The appetite may sicken, and so die.
> That strain again! it had a dying fall. (Shakespeare, 1998: 693)

Prufrock reveals the stiffness of society, "Portrait of a Lady" the absence of love and communication in urban society, while "Convictions" presents laughter in which society is composed of individual clowns, Paladins, who live "according to natural laws." These figures, guided by reason, attempt to harmonize their behavior with the norms of particular social groups or classes of city dwellers, all the while avoiding any sense of "exaggeration." Already in this poem, laughter appears in traces through irony, which – besides laughter – by virtue of its reversal, also demands a form of knowledge: namely, communication between two interlocutors who mutually recognize the subject at hand. In both "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" and "Portrait of a Lady," irony emerges when the speakers realize that they are defined by societal standards, pinned down like a tie with a needle, formulated through language – and yet all of this means nothing if love is not achieved in a society where it is most difficult to express it through language. The phrase "I love you" has been uttered so many times that it has become a worn-out cliché; both the man and the woman know it is merely a trope. Their gestures and communicative absences are thereby rendered clownish, subject to the rules of laughter elicited by the automated gestures of a clown. The exaggeration of the clown's costume, another hallmark of laughter, is reflected here in the exaggerated adherence to social conventions – a fact that, through the path toward self-awareness, becomes visible in the behavior of both speaking figures in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" and "Portrait of a Lady." Henri Bergson notes: "The comic does not exist outside the

26 Emphasis by Milena Vladić Jovanov.

pale of what is strictly human" (Bergson, 1913: 3). What is human is laughable – nothing outside of it. Thus, automatism, disguise, exaggeration, and caricature are characteristics situated within the domain of the human. Consequently, anything mechanical masquerading as life becomes laughable, for, as Bergson observes, "Our laughter is always the laughter of a group" (Bergson, 1913: 6). Laughter is a social phenomenon. Accordingly, a group of urban inhabitants is formed to represent society, as seen in the case of Prufrock and the relationship between a younger man and an older woman of the upper bourgeois class, both residing in the city. This group may engage in pretense, but within laughter, it also achieves mutual understanding. However, it possesses an additional characteristic: the final, hidden thought that arises when laughing at another. It is as if there simultaneously exists a longing to live differently, as expressed in Eliot's more isolated verses – verses which stand in stark contrast to the clownish urban procession that transitions through various locales, interiors, and exteriors, representing through this movement a display of themselves. In this regard, Bergson remarks:

> However spontaneous it seems, laughter always implies a kind of secret freemasonry, or even complicity, with other laughers, real or imaginary. How often has it been said that the fuller the theatre, the more uncontrolled the laughter of the audience! On the other hand, how often has the remark been made that many comic effects are incapable of translation from one language to another, because they refer to the customs and ideas of a particular social group! (Bergson, 1913: 6–7)

Let us now observe how this is rendered in the poem *Suite Clownesque*, in the image of a collective group of urban citizens who are all familiar with the rules of social conduct, yet whom the poet – through distance and critical reflection – depicts as a well-trained but overtly exaggerated clownish troupe.

> Across the painted colonnades
> Among the terra cotta fawns
> Among the potted palms, the lawns,
> The cigarettes and serenades.
>
> Here's the comedian again
> With broad dogmatic vest, and nose –
> Nose that interrogates the stars,
> Impressive, sceptic, scarlet nose;
> The most expressive, real of men,
> A jellyfish impertinent,
> A jellyfish without repose. (Eliot, 1996: 32)

However, Eliot's poems present us with a multilayered interweaving. What becomes apparent at first glance is the exaggeration of social behavior, wherein

automatism mimicking a living organism – and conversely, the living being reduced to mechanical behavior – becomes the source of humor. But why does it become humorous? What boundary is crossed when a face breaks into a smile or when it secretly sneers? What is transcended is the human, though the phenomenon remains within the bounds of the human. Irony, as a form, is not merely a device of reversal; it is dual: directed both at society and, since the individual is a member of society, at the individual as well. If the individual performs the joke or enacts the ironic twist, then he necessarily laughs at himself. In other words, the poet also laughs at himself, as he belongs to the very society he describes – one in which individuals oscillate between being comedians and being self-critical, as portrayed in "Portrait of a Lady" and "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," while simultaneously acting as performers in their own staged productions. This dual division – between comedic performance and introspection – emerges from the realization that I am the one who belongs to the group at which others laugh, as in *Portrait of a Lady*. It is articulated through lines that intertwine metatextually and autoreferentially. The clowns by automatism – that is, the urban inhabitants – are described in the following lines from the poem "Suite Clownesque":

> Leaning across the orchestra
> Just while he ponders, legs apart,
> His belly sparkling and immense. (Eliot, 1996: 32)

The enumeration is interrupted by punctuation – graphically marked with a colon – followed by a verse that functions both as a foreshadowing and, retrospectively, as a trace of introspection, as discussed earlier in this paper: "It's philosophy and art." (Eliot, 1996: 32) The stanza continues with the depiction of a clown who, through his nose, probes for insights but also surveys his audience – that is, the troupe to which he belongs. In Eliot's poetics, nothing is ever simple. Though he is a resident, he is simultaneously a presenter, a performer staging a production not only for us, the readers, but also for his own audience, who stand with him upon the stage. Society has fractured in its own reflection, and the self-reflection has become double and dark; the cosmetic layer is applied and removed simultaneously, yet the makeup remains, no matter how thoroughly wiped away, for it gestures – through traces – toward laughter directed at the individual, then at the group, then again at the individual within the group, and finally at the cultural model which, under modern conditions, can no longer be fulfilled. However, every cultural model is also presented as a mirrored reflection from the other side. It is not the object of laughter, but rather a part of the laughter that encompasses the individual – particularly when the speaker in "Portrait of a Lady" quotes the phrase dying fall, relying on the reader's recognition that it is a reference to Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, and to a love that dies with the final cadence when the music ends. Laughter, in Eliot's poetics, is as multilayered as its foundations.

In "Portrait of a Lady," the speaking figure of the young gentleman points to a form of repetition that is autoreferential when it comes to the allusion to

Shakespeare – graphically emphasized by the use of quotation marks in the line "dying fall." Who is quoting whom? Is it the speaking figure citing Shakespeare's Orsino, or is it Eliot's Prufrock echoing him? The voices[27] are not only transformed, but, as Peter Hühn (2005) notes in his essay "T. S. Eliot: 'Portrait of a Lady'" within the volume *The Narratological Analysis of Lyric Poetry*, they are essential to the emergence and formation of consciousness in the sense of self-awareness and self-recognition. The moment the narrator – namely, the young gentleman – shifts from an extradiegetic position, in which he merely listens to the lady and responds inwardly, often through verses that serve as traces and intertextual links to other parts of Eliot's poetic system,[28] to an intradiegetic one – becoming part of the story rather than observing it from outside – he becomes aware of the role the older lady plays in his life, of himself within his environment, and of her impending death, which is tied to the phrase "dying fall." Only at that point do the descriptions of the city acquire meaning or a more integrated significance, as does the gentleman's understanding of love. The cityscapes described in "Portrait of a Lady" are, through

27 It is also valuable to examine studies that focus on the relationship between voice and role, or more precisely, the self-awareness of the "speaking voice," and whether there is a singular voice or a multiplicity of voices in Eliot's poetry. In *T. S. Eliot's Silent Voices*, John T. Mayer (1989) argues that spiritual wandering is portrayed through physical movement – through streets, pubs, exteriors, attics, and rooms – and that this woven path represents a search for a unified voice, a unified self capable of grasping both the city and the self, and thus determining meaning and the individual's role in life and society. The role Mayer identifies following this journey is that of the poet. Conversely, Ed Madden (2003), in *Tiresian poetics: Modernism, sexuality, voice, 1888–2001*, contends that there is no dominant voice in Eliot's poetry. He particularly highlights *The Waste Land*, which many critics have believed to be held together by a speaking figure in the first-person pronoun "I." Madden argues, however, that although this pronoun is often associated with Tiresias, it does not grant him interpretive authority over the otherwise fragmented episodes, at least not to a reader relying solely on the semantic level – thus excluding the semiotic or deconstructionist methods. Madden asserts that Tiresias holds no interpretive superiority, especially considering that, in the well-known scene of the typist and the clerk, he is situated on a couch in the typist's room, a metonymic detail that symbolically points to a larger metaphorical image. Hence, Tiresias' position is perspectival – aligned with the typist's gaze – rather than explanatory of the entire episode. Among other studies, one may also consider Leonard Diepeveen's *Changing voices: The modern quoting poem* (1993), which treats poetic voices from a deconstructionist angle, as sites of absent meaning. Highlighting the dangers of privileging a single, monolithic voice expressed through the first-person pronoun "I," Diepeveen warns that doing so risks obscuring multiplicity and reducing interpretive possibility. Davidson (1995), in *T. S. Eliot and hermeneutics*, similarly identifies a polyphonic structure, distinguishing between narrative voices and a singular monologic voice, especially in *The Waste Land*, where only their mutual transformation through interrelation enables a coherent interpretation. The voices in Eliot resonate with laughter, irony, self-irony, and the entire spectrum of comic tones – all serving the pursuit of self-knowledge and urban awareness, ultimately illuminating both individual and collective identity.

28 Within the framework of a dynamic poetic system and via a deconstructionist model – one that includes cultural references (e.g., to Shakespeare, Dante, Wagner), the poetics of detail and broader context, and early poetic lines such as those in *Goldfish* – one may return to *The Waste Land*, particularly the allusion to Wagner's opera *Tristan und Isolde*, which represents the passionate love between two lovers. Immediately following this reference, we encounter the "hyacinth garden" scene, in which a young man and the so-called "hyacinth girl" appear. The man is struck silent, rendered unable to speak or know anything, unlike the gentleman from "Portrait of a Lady," who arrives at understanding through silence. In contrast, the hyacinth garden youth possesses understanding and self-awareness already: "looking into the heart of light, the silence." This silence undergoes a dual transformation in deconstructive interpretation, binding text and context, and through *différance*, arrives at meaning – a critical lens for interpreting what silence represents in *Portrait of a Lady*, where dialogue is notably absent. For a more detailed analysis, see Vladić Jovanov (2014).

trace-verses,[29] connected to urban depictions found in the detail–broader context poetics of "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," especially in its well-known opening lines. Let us now consider the final lines of "Portrait of a Lady" alongside the opening of "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock."

> Well! and what if she should *die*[30] some afternoon,
> *Afternoon grey and smoky, evening yellow* and rose;
> Should die and leave me sitting pen in hand
> With *smoke coming down above the housetops;*
> Doubtful, for a while
> Not knowing what to feel or if I understand
> Or whether wise or foolish, tardy or too soon...
> Would she not have the advantage, after all?
> This *music* is successful with a *"dying fall"* –
> Now that we talk of *dying* –
> And should I have *the right to smile*? (Eliot, 1952: 11)

In "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," the poem opens with an evening enveloped in yellow fog and yellow smoke that settles upon the rooftops and coils around them like a cat. Alongside this urban description, and interspersed between these images, arise introspective questions – regarding the role of the prophet, of Hamlet, of the Fool, and even the very possibility of asking such questions – particularly as Prufrock, on the level of language, proclaims himself to be meaningless. This assertion introduces a double irony. The reference is to the well-known lines in which Prufrock declares that he is not Hamlet; yet he does not merely say he is not Hamlet, but that he was never meant to be: "No! I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be" (Eliot, 1952: 7). The verb to mean here may imply "was not meant to be," but can also signify "I do not mean anything" – that is, "I have no meaning." At this moment, in this place, he suggests that he neither should be present nor signifies anything at all. Hence, both irony and laughter are directed outward, toward others, and inward, toward Prufrock himself. Rachel Trousdale notes in *Humor, Empathy, and Community in Twentieth-Century American Poetry*:

> Eliot's early poems are full of the conventions of comedy – absurd juxtapositions of high and low culture or diction; reversals of expectations; irony; satire – and abound with characters who laugh and smile for reasons quite disconnected from the sensation of humor. [...] Even Eliot's references to Shakespeare's tragedies are frequently to comic figures like Polonius. The poems in Prufrock use overt laughter to signal failed communication (particularly between men and women) and consciousness not just of oneself as acting but of the act as meaningless. (Trousdale, 2021: 106)

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29 The concept of trace-verses (stihovi tragovi) as a theoretical term was introduced in Vladić Jovanov (2014).

30 Emphasis by Milena Vladić Jovanov.

Communication fails in "Portrait of a Lady" as well, but, as previously emphasized, the only successful communication is that which culminates in the lines about death and love – love until death, until the final breath, sound, or cadence – that is, the self-awareness and realization attained by the young gentleman. Trousdale further observes:

> Prufrock invites us both to feel with him and to laugh at him. Prufrock's list of self-criticisms is delivered via comically self-deprecating observations, but the laughter we are invited to is clearly not pure mockery: Eliot's sympathies are with his speaker. [...] Prufrock's status as near-Fool makes him both central and peripheral in his own life. Where Shakespeare's fools comment on the actions (or inactions) of the heroes, Prufrock comments on himself, behaving as insider and outsider simultaneously. (Trousdale, 2021: 106)

As previously outlined, distance – both in irony and in laughter – represents a dual possibility: it allows for a critical perspective on society, facilitates self-recognition, and also enables the presentation of laughter itself as a fundamental aspect of every culture and society. Prufrock, much like the gentleman in "Portrait of a Lady," as Rachel Trousdale observes, occupies a position both within and outside of the narrative. This dual position reflects both distance and belonging, a stance attainable only by an inhabitant or member of a social circle – someone who moves along its periphery, yet possesses the capacity to step into its very center. John Xiros Cooper, drawing on Lyndall Gordon's insights (as cited earlier), notes:

> All the poems in *Prufrock and Other Observations* expose and subvert psychologically the solidities and certainties of that upper middle-class world in which Eliot was raised. Many of them resemble those peculiarly vulnerable moments, when, on opening a door, someone catches sight of a gesture or a look that suddenly makes vividly clear a hidden secret or hypocrisy or self-delusion. (Cooper, 1987: 13)

What is particularly relevant for my analysis is the manner in which Cooper approaches the interpretation of *imago*. The transformation and interweaving of metonymy and metaphor from Eliot's early to later poetry, and the importance of the image both as a detail and as a metaphorical representation of something beyond itself have already been addressed. Interpreting the poem Aunt Helen, Cooper states:

> Images and narrative events in these early poems also function metonymically. [...] A "Dresden clock" is both a Dresden clock and a decorous metonymy for a whole way of life, a life that Eliot clearly knew his readers would instantly place, hearing in the specificity of the reference the banal music of a conventional existence, which includes the predictable bourgeois suspicion of what the servants are always up to behind the scenes. All the details in the

> poem function metonymically to situate the lived density of this way of life, and not only the objects, but also the small social acts, such as the open ease of the footman and housemaid in the absence of their mistress. (Cooper, 1987: 14)

As I have emphasized on numerous occasions, such details reveal not only social class but also laughter, humor, irony, and a duality in which the metonymic detail shifts toward a metaphorical meaning, thereby constructing a broader context – that is, an interpretative framework.

What remains is to articulate, in a subsequent exploration, all those insights to which I have remained blind. For example, the relations between "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," *The Waste Land*, and *Four Quartets*, or between "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" and "Prufrock's Pervigilium," *Descent from the Cross* (presented in the form of poems corresponding to the fourteen stations where Christ paused on the way to Golgotha), and *Four Quartets*. We will observe that, within each interpretive trajectory, one may uncover both the trace and the suggestion of laughter and the comic, embedded in the construction of individual and collective identity in the urban context. Thus, I conclude with the fourth section of the early poem "Mandarins," which gestures simultaneously toward society and toward the author himself – toward Eliot, who, despite regarding himself as a metic,[31] nonetheless belongs to the very society he portrays.

> Still one more thought for pen and ink!
> (Though not indicative of spleen):
> How very few there are, I think
> Who see their outlines on the screen.
> And so, I say, I find it good
> (Even if misunderstood)
> That demoiselles and gentlemen
> Walk out beneath the cherry trees,
> The goldwire dragons on their gowns
> Expanded by the breeze.
> The conversation dignified
> Nor intellectual nor mean,
> And graceful, not too gay …
>
> And so I say
> How life goes well in pink and green! (Eliot, 1996: 22)

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31 The notion of the poet as a metic appears in a letter Eliot addressed to Mary Hutchinson in July 1919, in which he wrote to his friend that, being an American, he did not understand either her language or her tradition, and in this regard, he considered himself a metic. In ancient Greece, a metic referred to a person who lived on the margins of society. Such individuals were simultaneously within and outside the social order. Metics were those who possessed particular skills necessary to society, yet they did not hold the status of free citizens – thus neither entirely free nor enslaved. The metaphorical richness of the term suggests that the poet, as such, is a metic within their own society: one who possesses unique skills, yet, because of those very capabilities, belongs to all and to no one (Eliot, 1988: 316).

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Sažetak

POVORKA KLOVNOVA I KONCEPT MASKARADE U POEZIJI T. S. ELIOTA: DE/KONSTRUKCIJA SMEHA I KOMIČNOG U IDENTITETU POJEDINCA I DRUŠTVA – RAZLIČITI MODELI DE/KONSTRUKCIJE I INTERPRETACIJE TEKSTA

U radu se promišljaju pitanja identiteta pojedinca i društva u poeziji T. S. Eliota sa posebnim osvrtom na ranu poeziju 1909–1917. iz *Beležnice* pesama koju je uredio Kristofer Riks. Teme maskarade, smeha, smešnog, satiričnog i ironijskog u predstavama različitih slika gradskog života upućuju na detaljnije proučavanje mnogostrukih identitetskih obrazaca u Eliotovoj poeziji, što predstavlja jedan od primarnih ciljeva proučavanja u radu. Maskarada, smeh i smešno nisu samo lakanovski odrazi u iz/gradnji identiteta već i ključni elementi eliotovske poetike *detalj-šira slika* i dekonstrukcionističke poetike deridijanskog tipa *trag-nagoveštaj*. Njihove konvergentne i sukobljene relacije, kroz post/dekonstrukcionističke i post/strukturalne uvide, dovode do otvaranja novih problemskih situacija i postavljanja pitanja da li je maskarada samo izraz ili je već deo identiteta individue modernističkog doba. Umetničkim postupcima autoreferencijalnosti, različitim oblicima metakvaliteta i ironijskim obrtima ukazuje se na bitno promenjen proces recepcije. Čitalac putem dekonstrukcionističkog *pisanja*, stvara „delo" u procesu čitanja. Time se stvaraju nove *lakune označavanja* u različitim, međusobno povezanim odnosima u prolazima i prostorima *između* pesama, što utiče na različite interpretacijiske *uvide* ali i *slepila* koji su novi uvidi u pristupima čitanja i tumačenja poezije danas, rečeno teorijskim rečnikom Pola de Mana. U radu se dolazi do zaključka da je potrebno revidirati procese recepcije kroz ponovljena čitanja u kojima se, što pokazuju analize u radu, formira i identitet čitaoca koji nije više samo obrazovan da bi bio pripremljen za „teške" modernističke tekstove, eliotovski rečeno, već se kroz čitanje i tumačenje recipijent dalje obrazuje što utiče ne samo na identitet modela čitaoca u semiotičkom pristupu Umberta Eka, već i na oblikovanje identiteta čitaoca kao savremenika i sa/učesnika u savremenom društvu i relaciji njihovih prepletenih identiteta. Istovremeno, ovim putem se ispituje i sam pojam identiteta poetske tekstualnosti i postavlja pitanje o poetskom kao takvom. Doprinos rada ogleda se u fukoovskom okretanju ka analizi aktuelnih problema savremenog društva. Na pitanja, problematiku, egzistencijalnu situaciju savremenog čoveka i društva u kom pojedinac živi u vrsti prisutnog odsustva, egzila i mogućih svetova psiholoških egzila, nasilja i odsustva sa/osećanja, putem dvostrukih dekonstrukcionističkih poteza, T. S. Eliot skreće pažnju na još jedan poetički oblik. Reč je o poetici *iskustva stvaranja* u kojoj umetnički postupak, kako je Žan-Fransoa Liotar naveo, sam kao postupak traži da bude ispitivan u čitanju i tumačenju, u svojevrsnoj ponovnoj izgradnji i dekonstrukcionističkim dopunama, rečeno teorijskim uvidima Žaka Deride. Takvi umetnički postupci, kojima se Eliot koristio u svom delu, nude i moguće odgovore na pitanja ograničenosti

modernističkih mogućnosti prikazivanja ne/prikazivog i već predstavljenog. Rad upućuje na dalje proučavanje pojma maskarade kao šireg tematskog okvira za korišćenje poznatih kulturoloških modela i identitetskih obrazaca u kojima dolazi do novih i pomerenih vrednosti, u čijim oblicima su smeh, smešno, maska i uloga dovedeni u vezu sa religijskim simbolima i temama u poetskom delu T. S. Eliota.

Ključne reči:

T. S. Eliot, identitet, smeh, maskarada, ironija, dekonstrukcija, autoreferncijalnost, metakvalitet.