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Honor Paper

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Throughout the ages, critics have had many discussions about how much an artist's life has influenced his work. In some cases, the autobiographical nature of the work is fairly obvious. The paintings of Van Gogh offer a good ^{yes} example of this. One critic believes that "by giving expression to his desperate emotions [Van Gogh] was, however briefly, triumphing over them" (Cunningham 400). Similarly, in music, Beethoven is notorious for funneling his emotions into his art. His music "tells us how he feels, what his succession of moods is, and what conclusion he reaches" (358). Other cases, however, are a little less clear-cut. For instance, Mozart led a life that was filled with poverty, depression, and unceasing frustration, however his music "reflects only the highest and most noble of human aspirations" (345). So how can anyone know to what extent any piece of music, art, or literature is autobiographical? This debate escalates into heated arguments when the artist under discussion is T. S. Eliot, the father of the "objective correlative."

You create a helpful context here - good example to illustrate your points

Eliot recorded a succinct (although by no means complete) definition of the objective correlative in the Sacred Wood:

The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an "objective correlative;" in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked. (100)

So the question at hand is, did he or did he not use his experiences as part of a formula to evoke a specific emotion, or did he, as some modern critics seem to think, use poetry as a vent for his emotions--as catharsis? *Effective question*

In an attempt to understand the matter better, it is necessary to return to Eliot's poetry. Are there actually details in his poems that could be construed as autobiographical?

One possibility is that the summers Eliot spent with his family on the New England Coast contributed major elements to the content of his poetry. For instance, is it merely coincidence that the ocean plays such an important role in Eliot's imagery? At the end of "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," the speaker says, "I shall wear white flannel trousers, and walk upon the beach. / I have heard the mermaids singing each to each. / I do not think that they will sing to me" (Eliot 7). Was Eliot's mind wandering back to his happier childhood haunts? The very first verse of "Sweeney Erect" evokes the New England shore also: "Paint me a cavernous waste shore / cast in the unstilled Cyclades, / Paint me the bold anfractuous rocks / Faced by the

snarled and yelping seas" (Eliot 25). This picture is more blatantly sinister than the one that contains aloof mermaids. Again, in what is probably Mr. Eliot's most well-known work, "The Waste Land," we find sea imagery at the very end. "I sat upon the shore fishing, with the arid plain behind me" (Eliot 50). After all, he even devoted a whole poem to the sea in "Marina." Referring to "Ash Wednesday," Bergonzi asserts that Eliot draws "directly on his boyhood memories of the New England shore" (141). Would Eliot have used this imagery so often if he had not summered by the Atlantic?

Certainly in some places he would have, such as his use of the Fisher-King myth in "The Waste Land". The water imagery is built into the myth he taps, not his own part.

Another possible autobiographical element concerns Eliot as an undergraduate at Harvard University from 1906-10, where he became a student of Bertrand Russell. Russell thought Eliot was "altogether impeccable in his taste but [had] no vigour or life--or enthusiasm" (Bergonzi 27). This could almost describe Eliot's poetry as well as his personality; a ^{lack} of life permeates all. According to Bergonzi, Eliot's opinion of Russell is recorded in "Mr. Appolinax:"

His laughter was submarine and profound
 Like the old man of the sea's
 Hidden under coral islands
 Where worried bodies of drowned men drift down in the
 green silence,
 Dropping from fingers of surf. (Eliot 18)

Is this analyzation of his professor a record of his actual thoughts, or purely a vehicle to carry the emotion Eliot wanted to portray in this particular poem?

Another acquaintance of Eliot's was immortalized in "Lines to Ralph Hodgson Esqre," one of his Five-Finger Exercises. Hodgson and Eliot became friends around 1930, about the same time that Eliot and his wife, Vivien, became separated. There is even a picture of Eliot and Hodgson with their dogs, which they walked together quite often. Also Hodgson was raising canaries at the time. So what emotion is Eliot trying to capture in the poem when he writes: "How delightful to meet Mr. Hodgson! / (Everyone wants to know him)-- / With his musical sound / And his Baskerville Hound . . ." Also, "He has 999 canaries" (Eliot 92). This is more a caricature of Eliot's impression of his friend than an objective picture to lead us to a specific, predetermined emotion (Apeseloff 343-44).

I could go into detail about several more suspiciously coincidental details, but instead, I will just mention them briefly. Why is it that a large portion of "The Waste Land" was written during 1921, the year when Eliot suffered a nervous breakdown and went to Margate and Lausanne for treatment and convalescence? Is the hopeless depression of that poem not indicative of Eliot's mental condition at the time of its writing? And what about the Ariel series? Why do poems of conversion, such as "Journey of the Magi" and "A Song for Simeon" emerge at the time of Eliot's conversion to Anglicanism?

These details tend to support the idea that Eliot's poems are somewhat autobiographical. Does this mean that Eliot violated his own idea of what poetry should be? Was he being hypocritical when he said that an artist should express his personality indirectly "through concentrating upon a task which is a task in the same sense as the making of an efficient engine or the turning of a jug or a table leg"? (Bate 536) My answer is NO. The problem has more to do with definitions than hypocrisy. Just how, according to Eliot, does one avoid being autobiographical in one's poems? He claims that

by the time [the experience that the poet is so bursting to communicate] has settled down into a poem it may be so different from the original experience as to be hardly recognisable. The "experience" in question may be the result of a fusion of feelings so numerous, and ultimately so obscure in their origins, that even if there be communication of them, the poet may hardly be aware of what he is communicating; and what is there to be communicated was not in existence before the poem was completed. (Bate 544)

If Eliot really believed this, then any autobiographical experience that he may have incorporated ^{good point} into his poetry was somehow transformed, or metamorphosed, into another slightly different, and therefore ^{completely non-autobiographical?} non-autobiographical experience.

Eliot was, therefore, able to write about the places and emotions that he knew best without violating the principle of the

objective correlative. For example, "The Hollow Men" is a poem of utter emotional and spiritual desolation. Eliot himself was still recovering from his nervous breakdown, and there was evidence that he was dissatisfied with his life. He therefore knew firsthand what kind of sounds and imagery might best reproduce his feelings. By doing so, his experiences became transformed into a poem which transcends his personal life, and diagnoses the people of the twentieth century as being "the hollow men / the stuffed men" (Eliot 56).

A few more examples with careful analysis would make this more convincing.

Eliot knew by experience which set of details would consistently produce a specific emotion, and he used these details, not to write about himself, but to write about life. Other artists may or may not be deliberately autobiographical, but it seems that the goal of most painters, musicians and writers is not to teach us the truth about their individual lives, but to show us the truth about life itself. *Do not ending*

A very coherent, fluent study. Your case seems logical, sound. However, your conclusion would have been much more convincing if you could have shared a careful analysis of some of his works to show more concretely how Eliot converted his own experience into objective correlatives which transformed the particular into universal.

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