A text does not tell readers everything; there are gaps or blanks, which Iser refers to as the “indeterminacies” of the text. “Readers must fill these in and thereby assemble the meaning(s), thus becoming coauthors in a sense” (Guerin, 355). Therefore, the newly-coined term indeterminacy does not mean block in understanding; instead, it is elevated as stimulus for readers, for it “may stimulate, but [does] not...demand completion from our existing store of knowledge” (Iser 177). It is I think this technique that T. S. Eliot manipulated so well in his early poems when he embarks on describing his modern world, a world—including England as well as America—that has experienced, since the turn of the 20th century, the absence of an ultimate truth and a presence of indeterminacy around. And by this sense of indeterminacy or sense of torpor and inertia, both experienced by the depicted personas in his early poems and by the reader in the act of reading, that Eliot hopes to demonstrate the meaninglessness and hopelessness of the world around, probably because of the disappearance of a center, a structure, even the absence of God Himself in the world he is
delineating. In the following section, we are to explore two of the prominent poems in Eliot’s early works—namely “The Portrait of A Lady” and “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” hoping to see how Eliot articulates this sense of uncertainty by manipulating in his poems the various indeterminacies in the actions and words of the characters described.

Key words: T. S. Eliot, Indeterminancy, Wolfgang Iser

Introduction: Poem as a dialogue with (in)determinacies

For a long time, poetry has been considered as a genre with a voice telling how he or she “feels” about a certain thing or event. When a reader begins reading a poem, it is as though he or she is plunged into a dialogue with the poet. Reading activity thus becomes an act of interaction between the poet and the reader. That is why T. S. Eliot defines poetry as a process of communication:

The poem’s existence is somewhere between the writer and the reader; it has a reality which is not simply the reality of what the writer is trying to “express,” or of his experience of writing it, or of the experience of the reader or of the writer as reader (21).

According to Eliot, “the poem” has a reality, existing between the poet and the reader, like a dialogue experienced by the two. Though not a tete a tete one, this kind of dialogue, which occurs when the reader is perusing the text of the poem, seems only to account for the poet-reader relationship. However, we now know the voices in poetry sometimes go beyond these two. Eliot remarks in his article “The Three Voices of Poetry” that

The first voice is the voice of the poet talking to himself—or to nobody. The second is the voice of the poet addressing an audience, whether large or small. The third is the voice of the poet when he attempts to create a dramatic character speaking in verse; when he is saying, not what he would say in his own person,
but only what he can say within the limits of one imaginary character addressing another imaginary character.

So here in fact we have several layers of communication involved in this understanding of poetry. Besides the communication between the poet and the audience, we often see dialogues between the poet as a created persona and other created characters, as pointed out in the third voice above. All in all, in these dialogues and communications, one might find it rare to see different voices, or imaginary characters, capable of reaching mutual understandings. There in the poems, conflicts and miscommunication often occur. On the level of the characters within the poetic works, we might classify it merely as a failure of communication, as is probably designed by the poet. Yet on the level of the poet-reader communication, many would call it the poetic unintelligibility as shared by most modern poetry. This is why I think poems, modern or no modern, are usually considered hard to grasp. Nevertheless, poetry can be understood. To reach an understanding out of this kind of communication, the reader may need some background knowledge as to how a poem has been created, what has been put in the poem, and what allusions and conventions lie behind the creating and understanding of the work. Such background information, including poet’s life, his philosophical views on the world, and even his opinions about poetry writing, in effect, “determine” the reader’s understanding of the poem he is reading.

In Wordsworth’s “My Heart Leaps Up,” for instance, readers have to know the poet’s idea of nature in order to “better understand” the subject or meaning of the whole poem: namely the poet’s praise of nature as the rejuvenating power for human beings. Moreover, Wordsworth’s autobiographical account in his Prelude, of his mountain-climbing experience along with his concept of “spots of time,” does play an important role in figuring out his romantic imagination as expressed in his poems. Perhaps the idea of the background information that “determines” the meaning of the poetry, I think, can be best illustrated by the reading of Tennyson’s fragmentary poem—“The Eagle.”
He clasps the crag with crooked hands;
Close to the sun in lonely lands,
Ringed with the azure world, he stands.
The wrinkled sea beneath him crawls;
He watches from his mountain walls,
And like a thunderbolt he falls.

We might find this short yet rich poem hard to grasp, or mistake it as too simple, as some critics do, if we do not know the title. With the title “The Eagle,” readers know that the third person “he” in the poem is actually a personified eagle, which symbolizes a king ruling “close to the sun” the crawling sea waves (personifying the obedient subjects). The ruler seems protected and secure from his “mountain walls,” watching and tyrannizing the world below, with his overwhelming and thundering power to punish any that he chooses. The cacophony in the first three lines—He [clasp]s the [crook]ed hands;/ Close to the sun in lonely lands, /Ringed with the azure world, he stands—implies discord between the ruler and the ruled. In a nutshell, this poem proves rich only when we know the determining elements of the title—“The Eagle.”

Indeterminacy in poetry: an “open-ended dialogue” refusing closure

Interestingly enough, the fact that readers need some “determinate” information in perusing poems does not preclude anything “indeterminate” in them. On the contrary, writers from the last century indeed know the benefits of indeterminate elements in literary

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2 According to Professor Yuan H. H., the poem has been used in the Chinese University of Hong Kong to tell whether students were capable of recognizing and interpreting a poem when they see one. Other critics also tend to ignore the potential richness of the symbols in this poem because of its simplicity.” For example, see the “simplistic interpretation” by Linda Sue Grimes at http://www.suite101.com/profile.cfm/lsgrimes
works. William Empson in his inspiring book *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, for instance, identifies such deliberate poetic devices—“the use of a single word or expression to signify two or more distinct references, or to express two or more diverse terms for this use of language”—as different types of ambiguity (Abrams 10). Wolfgang Iser even terms this kind of technique as “indeterminacies” in literature.

Indeed, there would never be any dyadic interaction if the speech act did not give rise to *indeterminacies that needed to be solved*. According to the theory of speech acts, these indeterminate elements must be kept in check by means of conventions, procedures, and rules, but even these cannot disguise the fact that *indeterminacy is a prerequisite for dyadic interaction, and hence a basic constituent of communication*” (59 emphasis added)

A text does not tell readers everything; there are gaps or blanks, which Iser refers to as the “indeterminacies” of the text. “Readers must fill these in and thereby assemble the meaning(s), thus becoming coauthors in a sense” (Guerin, 355). In short, the newly-coined term indeterminacy does not mean block in understanding; instead, it is elevated as stimulus for readers, for it “may stimulate, but [does] not . . . demand completion from our existing store of knowledge” (Iser 177). It is I think this technique that T. S. Eliot manipulated so well in his early poems when he embarks on describing his modern world, a world—including England as well as America—that has experienced, since the turn of the 20th century, the absence of an ultimate truth and a presence of indeterminacy around. And what is more, by this sense of indeterminacy or sense of torpor and inertia, both experienced by the depicted personas in his early poems and by the reader in the act of reading, that Eliot hopes to demonstrate the meaninglessness and hopelessness of the world around, probably because of the disappearance of a center, a structure, even the absence of God Himself in the world he is

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3 By “his early poems,” I mean his poems published before 1920, especially those found in *Prufrock and other Observations*(1917).
delineating. Here in the following section, we are to explore two of the prominent poems in Eliot’s early works—namely “The Portrait of A Lady” and “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” hoping to see how Eliot articulates this sense of uncertainty by manipulating in his poems the various indeterminacies in the actions and words of the characters described.

Voices of Uncertainty in “Portrait of A Lady”

“Portrait of A Lady” contains a dialogue between the poet as a persona and a lady he is portraying. In fact, this can be better termed an incomplete and unfinalized dialogue in that Eliot seems to hold his persona’s responding voice within and articulates it only for the readers. In the act of reading the poem, we are thus witnessing a dramatic monologue by the lady, and at the same time, eavesdropping on the persona’s inner voice responding to the lady’s. Because of this technique, instead of enjoying the portrait of a lady, we readers see more of Eliot’s portrayal of the persona’s inner truth, a portrayal of another “Prufrock,” though not as “prematurely aged, suspended between feelings of attraction and repulsion” (Williamson 70). Indeed, it is in the portrait of this younger Prufrock that we witness Eliot’s use of indeterminate images and descriptions which reveal a sense of uncertainty when we are reading, or in Iser’s terms a sense of indeterminacy.

The first section is scattered with music terms, which set up a “prelude” both for the lady and the youth. We know this is a time for an “intimate relationship” between the two, with “[an] atmosphere of Juliet’s tomb/ [prepared] for all the things to be said, or left unsaid”(6-7). Readers are here first acquainted with a time and place, where some love tryst is to occur, like a reunion scene for the lovers prepared and expected by both. Yet this scene also serves as a prelude that establishes from the very beginning the atmosphere of indeterminacy in the poem, due to its allusion to Shakespeare’s play Romeo and Juliet. In the play, “Juliet’s tomb” turns out to be not only the place where the couple reunite and escape from the
conflicts in reality, as designed by Friar Lawrence, but also the place where the couple are finally victimized in their star-crossed fates. Familiar with this allusion, readers are not sure whether this is a scene for culmination or for death. Moreover, such a feeling of uncertainty is aggravated in the youth’s inner response to the lady’s comment on the concert. While the lady keeps saying how much this Chopin music means to her, and how “rare and strange it is, to find/ In a life composed so much, so much of odds and ends”(20-21), the youth’s inserted inner voice directly contradicts her comment—“For indeed I do not love it.” This “false dialogue”—false presumably because of his reticence to the lady—shows either a miscommunication between the two, or their “false” relationship, though they seem to keep the façade of being together for so long. The music images that follow also account for their fake relationship:

Among the windings of the violins
And the ariettes
Of cracked cornets
Inside my brain a dull tom-tom begins
Absurdly hammering a prelude of its own,
Capricious monotone

That is at least one definite “false note”(29-35).

The “false tone” refers not only to the monotonous sounds of the tom-tom in the concert, the dull hammering of the percussionist instruments as received in the perceiver mind, but to their artificial communication which is enacted on their life stage. The cacophonous effect of the “cracked cornets,” along with the “capricious monotone,” well symbolizes the mismatch implied in this love affair. The certainty or the expectation of the couple being in a harmonious relation is thus disrupted, and the reader is not so sure of the result for this love tryst.

The sense of indeterminacy continues in the second section of the poem, though with the
help of flowery imagery for the portrait of the lady.

Now that lilacs are in bloom
She has a bowl of lilacs in her room
And twists one in his fingers while she talks.

“Ah, my friend, you do not know, you do not know
What life is, you who hold it in your hands”;
(Slowly twisting the lilac stalks). . .” (42-46)

Notice that the lady’s contradictory behavior of “twisting a lilac.” She “has a bowl of lilacs in her room, which symbolize innocence and youth,” but instead of cherishing them, she twists them. This in effect renders her following judgment on youth ironical—“You let it flow from you, you let it flow, /And youth is cruel, and has no remorse”(47-48). There is no wonder, however, that the poet’s comment on her words is inserted right afterwards: “The voice returns like the insistent out-of-tune/ Of broken violin on an August afternoon”(56-57).

A sense of revulsion is perceived in the poet as the youth. He “takes [his] hat,” making a move to escape from an awkward situation, probably trying to rid himself of the sense of repulsion and uncertainty by leaving this “bric-a-brac” (92).

However, even in this move of leaving, readers can perceive his feeling of indeterminacy in his self-questions at the end of the poem:

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? (114-120)

There is no definite answer of course to the questions above. Even though the youth has reached a decision to leave the love scene, what we witness from the whole poem is the sense of uncertainty and indeterminacy as articulated in the process of “their dialogues.”

**Prufrock as a victim of indeterminacy:**

The same indeterminacy actually repeats in “the Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” a work written and published almost at the same time as “The Portrait of A Lady.” This time, the persona is given a name, J. Alfred Prufrock, who is probably older than the youth in “Portrait.” Yet in this longer work, we readers witness a far more obvious delineation of the split selves in the form of a dramatic monologue, or better termed as an inner dramatic dialogue. And what is more, from this unique demonstration of inner conflicts, we see how and why a sense of indeterminacy is again aroused and even intensified when the poem unfolds itself to the end. When the reader is invited to go with the poet for an evening adventure into a social event, he finds himself totally lost in the guidance of this poet as “I.” So there is no wonder why critics like Kermode would give credits to Eliot’s power “to compound the reader” by disrupting the reader’s expectations (xvii). Along with the unfolding of the poem is the effect of torpor and inertia produced for the persona himself. We will see how this indeterminacy, along with its result of inertia, appears when we read the work.

From the very beginning, readers confront the title and the epigraph of the poem with mixed feelings. The levity of this “love song” and the seriousness of the allusion to Dante’s *Inferno* in effect perplex readers and thus prepare them for an “indeterminate” experience as

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4 According to Kermode, “Prufrock” was mostly written in 1911, when Eliot was in Paris and Munich, but was published in 1915, while “The Portrait of A Lady” was written in 1911 for the first two installments, and in 1911 for the final installment.
expressed in the above analysis of “The Portrait.” The introduction of “you and I” in the first line of the poem indicates a dialogue, or a “debate” as suggested by Williamson, which continues throughout the whole poem. This can not only be considered as a dialogue between, as I said, the reader and the poet as a persona, but also as a debate between the split selves of the persona that Eliot is describing. The monological voice in the poem seems to argue about whether it be wise to go for a visit to where “the women come and go/ Talking of Michealangelo”(13-14). Like the previous poem, the time (an evening) and the place on a certain street pre-set the atmosphere for the whole poem, “[I]like a patient etherized upon a table”(3), with a sense of languidness prevailing the work. If we compare “The Portrait” and “Prufrock,” we might easily find that, while the former poem focuses on the sense of indeterminacy, the atmosphere of the latter is intensified into that of inertia. Whereas we still witness a “decision” to escape from the lady, though a weak one, made by the youth in the previous poem, the persona in the latter poem remains victimized by the inactivity repeatedly suggested in the languid imagery of cats.

The yellow fog that rubs its back upon the window-panes,
The yellow smoke that rubs its muzzle on the window-panes
Licked its tongue into the corners of the evening,
Lingered upon the pools that stand in drains,
Let fall upon its back the soot that falls from chimneys,
Slipped by the terrace, made a sudden leap,
And seeing that it was a soft October night,
Curled once about the house, and fell asleep(15-22).

Williamson notes well that the cat image presented in the description of the fog not only suggests sex, but also a greater desire of inactivity, in that the timid “you” sees another kind of escape in the procrastination of time (60-61).

There will be time, there will be time
To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet;
There will be time to murder and create,
And time for all the works and days of hands
And time yet for a hundred indecisions,
That lift and drop a question on your plate;
Time for you and time for me,
And for a hundred visions and revisions,
Before the taking of a toast and tea (26-34).

To be sure, the “you and I” are currently on a visit to some room, yet what really intrigues and at the same time perplexes us is the implied indecision and indeterminacy in the telling of this grand adventure. There will be time for what? To prepare a face for whom? Time for a hundred visions and revisions of what? What we do know is the tea time awaiting for them (for the persona in fact), and before the taking of a toast and tea, there will be a long postponement.

After the lack of confidence in the physical depiction of the timid persona, the conflict within his mind is further augmented by his daring question—“Do I dare/ Disturb the universe?/ In a minute there is time/ For decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse” (45-48). This again is a good demonstration of a person perplexed and plagued by indeterminacy. And again, another image of inertia comes in for the character described:

And I have known the eyes already, known them all—

_The eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase,_
_And when I am formulated, 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? (55-61 emphasis added)

The speaker “I” has known all the things during the tea-time, though we readers may still be puzzled as to how it goes. Like the image of a patient etherised on a table, the “you” and “I” at the tea party are pinned and fixed as an insect wriggling on the wall, too afraid to “spit out the butt-ends of my days and ways” before the ladies and “sea-girls” in the room (61).

And like the youth in “The Portrait,” who finally reaches a decision, Prufrock also makes an ironic decision about indecision. He decides that he is “no prophet” like John the Baptist who sacrifices for preaching the coming of the savior. Nor is he Prince Hamlet, who after long procrastination “decides” to perform an avenging deed as asked by the ghost father. Nor would it be worthwhile for him to be Lazarus coming from the dead in order to tell others how great he is. In short, he desires to be “an attendant lord, one that will do / to swell a progress, start a scene or two, advise the prince [Hamlet]” (111-113). In short, he decides to remain “the fool,” leaving the decision to be made by other great figures. And the result of this decision about indecision is his getting old and languid—“I grow old. . . I grow old” (119)—comforting himself by keeping saying that he has experienced all he needs to know in life.

I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each
I do not think that they will sing to me.
I have seen them riding seaward on the waves
Combing the white hair of the waves blown back
When the wind blows the water white and black.

We have lingered in the chambers of the sea
By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown

98
Till human voices wake us, and we drown (123-130)

Though the sea imagery at the end of the poem helps us understand how the speaker—the “I”—justifies his decision about indecision, of not presuming to launch a great adventure before the sea-girls, he admits that this can end in their only “lingering” in the chambers of the sea, and even becoming victimized when “human voices wake [them] and [they] drown.

**Conclusion**

Wolfgang Iser once observes that in the act of reading, “[t]he most that can be said of the indeterminacies is that they may *stimulate*, but not that they *demand* completion from our existing store of knowledge” (177). In other words, the consistent indeterminacy in the two poems acts as a provocation to the audience. When we read Eliot’s early poems as illustrated above, we do witness that that it is by the indeterminacies in them that we readers are stimulated into another level of understanding, another way of looking at the works in questions: namely we take the expression of uncertainty or indeterminacy as a kind of experience Eliot wants to articulate. We see that indeterminacy is the end itself, and then there arises the situation that the actions and words of the characters become increasingly indefinite. Not only do the decisions and indecisions become aimless and meaningless but also the language of the characters no longer corresponds to what the intention of language ought to be.

**Works Cited**


