

The Type of Typist and the Tiresias of "I Tiresias" in T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*

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In "The Fire Sermon," the third section of *The Waste Land*, I am struck by that oft-mentioned "the eyes ... [that] can see/At the violet hour" (215-220). Violet, like the lilacs and hyacinths in section one, but whose eyes are these which see at that fateful hour? The typist's or the prophet's? This "typist" is metonymically named like the "human engine," or the "taxi throbbing waiting" (216-217). "Tiresias, though blind" may be read as a metonymy so tied to his function as a seer that his eyes are identified as himself, as the typist is with the machine she operates (219). Similarly, the typist is only ever named the typist since she never loses this function of her "automatic hand" (255).

However, Tiresias's name is not simply a metonymy; in other words, his name does not imply a single characteristic. Eliot's note claims that although he is "a mere spectator and not indeed a 'character,' is yet the most important personage in the poem, uniting all the rest" (Note to line 218). I take "character" to be a person's inner being or substance and "personage" to be the image that is projected and thus perceived by others; a persona was the mask worn by Roman stage-actors. I assume that Eliot knew the etymology of this word since he quotes the Latin poet, Ovid. "Like a taxi throbbing waiting," Tiresias is "throbbing between two lives," and as the typist he "too awaited the expected guest" (218-219, & 230).

Furthermore, this implies that Tiresias also acts in the poem. Tiresias masks these personages and is able to do so since his substance is trans-formative. He is man and woman in Eliot's poem.

Tiresias' transcendence of dichotomy is not limited to gender (e.g. "Old man with wrinkled female breasts," 220); he also transcends subject and object as seer and seen. The typist is syntactically joined with Tiresias. In fact, the sentence relinquishes its nominal subject, "I Tiresias," to the "typist" (219-223). At that fateful and "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" (221-224). The typist switches in this sentence from the passive, seen object of Tiresias, to the acting subject. In other words, there is a loss of self—the point at which subjectivity and objectivity meet. (NB: I define the self to be an individual person as the object of his or her own reflective consciousness.)

Her transformation mirrors Tiresias' status as "mere spectator," or seer, and "personage," or the mask that is seen (Note to line 218). Furthermore, Tiresias could function logically (given the syntax) as both subject and object, seer and seen, because, as the note indicates, he is the typist: "[A]ll the women are one woman, and the two sexes meet in Tiresias" (Note to line 218). What Tiresias sees, in fact, is the substance of the poem; in other words, he perceives and embodies the lack of form in *The Waste Land*. The confused syntax represents this transformation of substance—identity or personage.

Tiresias represents the whole of the poem; whereas, the typist acts a part of it. What then is the figurative relationship between Tiresias as a whole and the typist as a part, or

'type?' In other words, on what grounds—"divan or bed"—can the typist "melt" with all other men and women to become part of Tiresias (244)? The expansion to "all," the whole, depends on a prior reduction of individual human beings to standardized parts, or self-lacking "types," of which Tiresias has "foresuffered all" (243). However, his gift of prophecy depends on the supposition that human behavior is repetitive, that "all" is in fact the mere repetition of a single act into infinity, such as that "[e]nacted on this same divan or bed" (244). What, therefore, is the substantial difference between the "human engine," in which "all women are one woman," and the personage represented by Tiresias?

The Waste Land, itself, implies that there may be no difference since Tiresias and the "human engine" are equated: "[W]hen the human engine waits/Like a taxi throbbing waiting,/I Tiresias, though blind, throbbing between two lives" (216-219). By means of this elegant and intelligent chiasmus, Eliot links the waiting human engine to Tiresias, who throbs through the middle term of the taxi, which also waits and throbs. On the one extreme, Eliot places the modern, technological image of an engine, and on the other extreme he places the classical, mythological image of a hermaphrodite. What then does this juxtaposition of the "human engine" and "I Tiresias" imply about the modern human—man and woman?

Eliot notes that "all women are one woman," but does not say the same for men. However, what he does state is that "the two sexes meet in Tiresias" (Note to line 218). Furthermore, "the young man carbuncular" is never syntactically confused with Tiresias (231). In fact, Tiresias becomes parenthetical after the man arrives (Vide infra: 243-246). Although,

the syntax does not provide a clear subject for who (or what) “[e]deavours to engage her in caresses/Which still are unreproved, if undesired” (237-238).

I consider this scene to be fore-shadowed by Ovid’s “Rape of Philomela” alluded to by Eliot in “A Game of Chess.” The clerk, this carbuncle, is “[o]ne of the low” that Tiresias has “fore-suffered... among the lowest of the dead,” emphasizing the reduction of humanity in the modern wasteland. (243-246). In Ovid’s time, a “carbuncle” was a precious gemstone, but by Eliot’s time it has come to mean a painful, circumscribed inflammation; it is the London Brown, which polluted that unreal city by the burning of carbon-based coal (Vide: Webster’s Unabridged Dictionary). The typist, too, has been polluted by the “young man carbuncular.” No longer simply the “typist,” the “lovely woman stoops to folly” —to the clerk’s lowly level— when she is “alone” and no longer a whole self, but a part of the human engine “with automatic hand” (255). Again, what does the presence of the “throbbing” Tiresias with the waiting human engine mean?

Eliot’s inclusion of Tiresias, who “perceived the scene and [then] foretold the rest,” puts it in context “throbbing between two lives” —two times. Tiresias, who has “sat by Thebes below the wall,” links the modern time with the classical time (245). The transgender Tiresias has transcended time and space that which has been “[e]nacted on this same divan or bed” — the high or the low (244). This construction of a timeless myth in a modern setting provides meaning to this scene. By linking the unreal and chaotic present with the substantial traditions of the past, a pattern emerges from the disorder of *The Waste Land*. This pattern provides a mold into which the poem “melts” (Note to line 218). As the modern types of the typist and

clerk are perceived by the mythological Tiresias, a new type is formed—an archetype. ‘Tiresias’ in the expression, “I Tiresias,” is one such eternal type, and the ‘I’ provides the consciousness for which to reflect on this identity. Thus, “I Tiresias” is the expression of an autonomous (but not automatic) self—an individual human being.