Anonymity: The Literary History of a Word
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The adjective anonymous, which eventually gave us the noun anonymity, was brought into English from Greek in the late sixteenth century when it often showed off its learned source by its spelling anonymos. It was almost always used to describe a piece of writing or its author, and seems to have carried no generally held associations beyond the translation of its Greek root: without name. It stayed close to this lexical meaning until the first half of the twentieth century. Still, by the 1830s the accumulated changes in the cultural assumptions about writers and writings that are without name expanded the implications of the adjective. Then in the early twentieth century, new meanings, some of them expressed by uses of anonymous to describe things unrelated to authorship, began to rub off on the adjective from the noun formed by the addition of a suffix.

A noun made from an adjective belongs to a general class whose work is not mainly or usually to change the semantic role, that is, the root meaning, but to shift the grammatical class of the root (as in sad, sadness). In the first instances when anonymity appeared in English, which was not until the second quarter of the nineteenth century and then only rarely, and for more than fifty years after, it seems to have done just that work: to have been used only to describe authors or their writings in the state of being anonymous, of not being known by a name. The early history of the noun anonymity parallels closely the concurrent history of its root adjective.

Adjectival nouns formed by adding the particular suffix ity (usually of classical or French origin) belong to a subset of the general class by being specially associated with what linguists call greater “lexicalization,” or “vocabulary construction”; when such nouns are formed, something new in the language “has come into existence which did not exist before,” so that their full meanings cannot be recovered from their formation. These nouns, then, can be powerfully compact signals of cultural changes because of the “concentration of presupposition that is packed into a lexicalization by the time it is successfully institutionalized.” The adjectival noun anonymity demonstrates this process of word-making: it was institutionalized in the early twentieth century.

The origin and history of this noun constitute a minuscule model of the sorts of energetic transactions that take place over time among words, poems, other writings, and the pressures in the culture that produces and is produced by them. This model also shapes the discussion here. Its line of argument will trace the literary history of a noun—together with its parent adjective—which has by now become so packed with presuppositions and preoccupations that we can often sense the structure of feelings associated with it to be present even in contexts where the word is not explicitly used. Poems are the spaces where this model can best be demonstrated, because in them the accumulated force of its concentration of meanings can be felt most powerfully.

**Anonymous: Its Root Meaning**

Like vast numbers of other words englighted in the sixteenth century, *anonymous* was imported to serve a newly felt need. It became a conventional shorthand—soon abbreviated *anon.*—to sign writings whose authors were unknown, particularly poems that were for the first time offered in print to a public who had not had access to them when they were passed in manuscript among privileged circles of readers who might know their authorship without needing to be told.

The term *anonymous* seems not to have been known to Richard Tottel in 1557 when he put into print for the first time a miscellany of poems from such a manuscript. In it he grouped unassigned entries under the heading “Uncertain auctors,” itself a borrowing from signatures already used in manuscripts: *Incertus author, Incerti Authoris, the autor unsertayn.* In miscellanies of the 1570s, many poems were printed with—in place of the author’s name—only a blank space beneath them, or initials, or a personal motto like “My lucke is losse,” or were supposed in the title to be composed by someone using a fictitious name, as in “A louing Epistle, written by *Ruphilus* a yonge Gentilman, to his best beloued Lady *Elriza*, as followeth.”

By the end of the century, perhaps partly because the demand for such books grew as the supply of poems enlarged, the term *anonymous* was brought into the language. It showed up, under some poems where there is no author’s name or initials, in *Englands Helicon* of 1600 and *A Poetical Rapsody* of 1602. *Anonimus* and *Anomos* are inscribed there, as well as *Ignoto*, or an occasional pseudonym such as “Sheepheard Tonie.” In *Englands Helicon*, a few poems are followed by comments from the editor, for instance: “These three ditties were taken out of *Maister John Dowlands* book of tableture for the Lute, the Authours names not there.
set downe, & therefore left to their owners.”4 It is clear that in these contexts anonymous was a kind of name, or rather pseudonym, but since adjectives were still considered a category of noun in English as they were in Latin grammars, the free use of anonymous as belonging to either grammatical class says nothing special about the word.5

In this period we know that it was considered altogether improper for gentlemen and persons of rank to appear in print as poets, so that others who wanted to display their wit as a way of advancing themselves in courtly circles were driven to publish verse unsigned but under fancy disguises that could be seen through: Spenser’s The Shepheardes Calender was the most successful of those projects.

Probably because many of the poets in the early miscellanies were no longer living, their being named as the author of an entry did not necessarily signal loss of courtly dignity or lack of gentlemanly standing. Some of that latitude seems to have been granted to living poets in the same books, probably because the provenance of poems was so notoriously uncertain that accusations of unacceptable ambitions could not easily be brought against poets whose random verses showed up in miscellanies. Perhaps for the same reason, a poem or author said to be unknown was not assumed to have been buried in oblivion because of humble origin (an assumption first fully articulated in poetry in Thomas Gray’s “Elegy Written in a Country Church Yard” in 1751).

In the first half of the mid-seventeenth century, the absence of an author’s name under a poem in a miscellany or on the title page of a book of verse by a single poet could be read as significantly charged in various, often simultaneous ways. Some social disdain still attached to publication by persons of rank (and by women), and political caution called for some anonymous appearances. Denham’s Cooper’s Hill was printed unsigned in 1642, perhaps because he was Sir John Denham, perhaps as much because he was well known as a royalist. There was also still some social pressure against acknowledging one’s printed juvenilia: Milton did not sign his name to A Mask Presented at Ludlow in 1634, but announced it on the title page of Poems of Mr. John Milton in 1645.

Toward the end of the century, but more and more often in the eighteenth and much of the nineteenth centuries, so many poets published their work one time or another anonymously, and often not apparently for these traditional reasons, that it is tempting to attribute their unacknowledged appearances more to fashion, publishing tactics, or private caution than to the conventions then being largely emptied of their meanings by the pressures of many social changes. Prominent poets who published at least some of their work anonymously in this period include John Dryden, Alexander Pope, Jonathan Swift, Edward Young, Samuel Johnson, Mark Akenside, Thomas Gray, James Beattie,
George Crabbe, William Blake, William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Percy Bysshe Shelley, Robert Eyres Landor, John Keble, Alfred Tennyson, Robert Browning, Matthew Arnold, and James Thomson. Motives that impelled these and many lesser known poets to nameless appearances are sometimes unknowable, or so layered that it would be only guesswork to explain them.

Even so, we can see the widespread practice of anonymous publication in this period as a pattern that defines a new altogether unheard-of literary situation which made the practice feasible then. This different set of circumstances and the assumptions they supported is almost unimaginable from our perspective. It must be that authors in England well into the nineteenth century could reasonably expect that a poem or book of verse would be bought, read, and reviewed even if it was published unsigned. It may even be that in some instances it would have a better start in the world if it appeared anonymously. That, for instance, was the argument Coleridge made in 1798 in a letter to the publisher Joseph Cottle, who apparently had his doubts about bringing out the *Lyrical Ballads* unsigned: “As to anonymous Publications, depend on it, you are deceived.—Wordsworth’s name is nothing—to a large number of persons mine *stinks*—The Essay on Man, Darwin’s Botanic Garden, the Pleasures of memory, & many other most popular works were published anonymously.”

The reasonableness of this expectation about the fate of unsigned publications must have been built on the circumstances that many fewer volumes of poetry were printed than has been true since; that there was a much smaller and therefore more easily informed literary community of authors, publishers, critics, and book buyers; and, more importantly, that readers had been brought up on different habits of response to poetry, which disappeared in the nineteenth century.

To describe this transformation of readers’ expectations in the simplest way: before that time a poem was conceived of mainly as a skillfully made object fashioned according to formal conventions, rather than as a personal expression of its author. Sometime after let us say 1798, readers grew more in the habit of finding biographical connections between the poem and the poet, a practice naturally encouraged by their opportunities to trace among a number of works the shaping experiences and expressive tendencies of a poet known to be the author of all of them.

This interest of readers in finding self-revelation in recent and new poems was pervasive enough by the 1830s to make some poets anxious, early among them Tennyson and Browning at the crucial beginnings of their reputation-making. Tennyson’s first published poems were in-
cluded unsigned in 1827 in a volume inscrutably titled *Poems by Two Brothers*. In 1830 he allowed his name on the title page of *Poems, Chiefly Lyrical*, but gave to one of its entries the distancing title “Supposed Confessions of a Second Rate Mind not in Unity with Itself.” Along with the scathing epithet, the anachronistic title formula “Supposed” seems to have been designed as self-protection, as a device to separate the author from the imagined (and unnamed) first-person speaker, but there were scarcely any details in the poem itself to support that distancing.7 It was actually discouraged in the text by loud echoes of poems by Shelley, especially “Ode to the West Wind,” where the invitation to conflate poet and speaker is irresistible. Apparently recognizing that his device of separating himself from his poem had failed, Tennyson tried to thwart what he later called the “absurd tendency to personalities” of “almost all modern criticism” by refusing to let the poem be republished for more than fifty years, even using a legal injunction to prevent a journal from printing it in 1869.8

Browning chose the more direct tactic of withholding his name when he published his first poem in 1833, *Pauline: A Fragment of a Confession*, but must have felt the protection too flimsy because, like Tennyson, he suppressed the poem immediately after interpretations appeared that identified the “author” with the maker of the confession. One such was printed in an unsigned review shortly after the poem was published: “The author is in the confessional, and acknowledges to his mistress the strange thoughts and fancies with which his past life has been crowded. This is not always accomplished with becoming dignity . . . . in language worthy of one who evidently understood them so well; he sometimes runs slip-shod through his afflictions.”99 Browning prevented reprintings of this supposed confession until 1868, when, because his authorship of it had become widely known, he included it “with extreme repugnance” in an edition of his poems (*CH* 28n7).

The desire of poets to escape over-personal interpretations of their poems added a new reason for anonymous publication when the old ones were fading or had virtually disappeared. Though this cultural change did not expand the meaning of *anonymous* beyond its lexical root, it did widen its implications. This stretching of *anonymous* was one of the pressures that created the need for the noun *anonymity*. It began to crop up in popular journals in the 1880s and on into the early 1900s, perhaps because by then an unsigned book was enough of a rarity to stir interest and debate about the reasons for anonymous publication and its legitimacy.10
Anonymity: An Aesthetic Ideal

The anxiety Tennyson and Browning felt about the improper interest of readers in poetry as personal expression grew to be an almost obsessive concern among writers in the twentieth century. It informs the critical statements of poets in the early 1900s, and their various efforts to make poems dramatic, meaning by that overworked word what Browning intended when he used it in 1842 in the advertisement to his Dramatic Lyrics to describe his poems as “always Dramatic in principle, and so many utterances of so many imaginary persons, not mine.” In their critical writings, synonyms for dramatic are words like impersonal, objective, often they proposed the figure of the scientist as a representation of the poet, the poem as “a distillation,” “an amalgam,” a “metric figure.” The terms they used to describe their poems—Thomas Hardy’s dramatic impersonation, Ezra Pound’s persona, W. B. Yeats’s mask, T. S. Eliot’s objective correlative, Robert Frost’s voice—are attacks on expression and confession. Still, the literary system in the earlier twentieth century no longer made anonymous publication a feasible choice for these poets, although they sometimes played games with pseudonyms: Pound’s “Alfred Venison,” Wallace Stevens’s “Peter Parasol,” and Eliot’s “March Hare” and “Old Possum” are examples.

By the 1920s, anonymity was introduced into these critical discussions as a term for the concentration of qualities that make up this ideal literature, particularly poetry. Sometimes the noun still referred to writings that were literally unsigned, for instance in an article of 1930 in the Nation titled “The Cult of Anonymity.” It gives an account of a contemporary group of unidentified writers in Paris who were withholding their names from their published productions in an effort “to curb the exploitation of personalities, and to establish ’the art as an ideal, not the ego.’” While the noun here is attached to writings actually printed without name, its looser meaning—almost as an antonym for personality—smoothed the way for its use elsewhere for written pieces in fact signed by the author but exhibiting the impersonality associated with anonymity by removing the poet, so to speak, from the poem.

One place we can watch that extension happening is in a pamphlet published in 1925 by E. M. Forster with his name on the title page under the calculatedly impersonal title Anonymity: An Enquiry, which makes the essay sound like a disinterested investigation of a public issue. It is not that, but an urgently felt argument for a return to the literary past when “writers and readers . . . did not make a cult of expression as we do today. Surely they were right, and modern critics go too far in their insistence on personality.” Forster, we know, had private reasons for wanting to deflect public interest in autobiographical expression; he
distanced his argument that “all literature tends towards a condition of anonymity” from himself as novelist by choosing poems as his illustrations, both signed and not signed (AE 14). By obliterating that distinction—between poems literally without name and those, though signed, that suppress the author’s personality—from his description of the literary ideal, he cut the noun anonymity from its root meaning.

John Crowe Ransom went on with the argument in his essay “A Poem Nearly Anonymous,” first published in 1933 with the subtitle “The Poet and His Formal Tradition”: “Anonymity, of some real if not literal sort, is a condition of poetry. A good poem, even if it is signed with a full and well-known name, intends as a work of art to lose the identity of the author . . . .”15 Ransom, arguing more tendentiously than Forster, took aim at “those moderns to whom ‘expression’ seems the essential quality of poetry,” and at young poets who begin misguidedly by trying to “write their autobiographies, following perhaps the example of Wordsworth” (PNA 4, 3).

He chose Lycidas (signed only J. M. as it was first printed) as his paradigmatic poem to make his case for the necessity of “training,” “technique,” and skill in the making of a “fictitious personality,” to achieve the perfection that only “Formal Tradition” can give the poet: “Lycidas is a literary exercise, and so is almost any other poem earlier than the eighteenth century” (PNA 4). This is a more pugnacious statement of what Forster meant when he chose as his models of literary anonymity the poets in the Greek Anthology: “who would write and re-write the same poem in almost identical language, their notion being that the poem, not the poet, is the important thing, and that by continuous rehandling the perfect expression natural to the poem may be attained” (AE 15). Ransom’s more decisive statement explicitly added “spontaneity” and “sincerity” to the antonyms for poetic anonymity in its aesthetic sense.

**Anonymity: A Cultural Motif**

In an article by the literary journalist Henry Seidel Canby in 1926 titled “Anon is Dead,” both anonymous and anonymity are key words in the explanation he proposed for the phenomenon discussed earlier: that in the twentieth century works of literature rarely appear in print unsigned, while before 1850 there were as many important books of all sorts first printed anonymously as with the writer’s name attached. The blame for this historical change is not to be laid to the “vanity” of authors, but to the longing for “escape from the deadly anonymity of modern life,” which generates the “passion for nonanonymity” in the
“general man who feels his personality sinking lower and lower into the whirl of indistinguishable atoms to be lost in a mass civilization.” As a consequence, this “general man” longs for “vicarious experience” to be found in the intimate writings of “rich, glaring personalities” whose well-publicized names become legendary.14

Here anonymous still keeps strictly to its literal meaning, excluding the figurative sense that Forster and Ransom appropriated it for, as well as to its original attachment to writers and writings. Meanwhile anonymity has not only travelled a long way from its grammatical starting point, but bears no other resemblance to the aesthetic ideal called anonymity than its link with impersonality, here denounced as a social evil. In the language of the article, anonymity has become, in effect, a new word with a new frame of reference. It is associated with “City living” which is “essentially impersonal,” but also with “standardized” feelings, with “science” and its “laws that . . . ignore individuality completely,” with all that to the writer constituted “mass civilization.”

This disconnection allows the author of the article to paint himself into a lexical contradiction: the disappearance of “anonymous”—in the sense of unsigned—from modern literature is due to the inescapable presence of “anonymity,” understood as a cultural phenomenon. The writer’s apparent unawareness of the verbal oddity in using “anonymity” in this proposition, where it has nothing whatever to do with a piece of writing lacking the author’s name, shows that his generalizations, though heated, are not personal discoveries, but packaged phrases that by the 1920s expressed assumptions so deeply and commonly held they could be accepted without being questioned. They may have entered popular writing like Canby’s by the second quarter of the twentieth century from the vocabulary of sociology, where anonymity is a heavily charged term, but their origins, as the social historian William Cronin suggested in 1991, are “in the lessons we learned from nineteenth-century Romantic writers like Wordsworth” and others who followed him.15 There, indeed, we can find a vocabulary of images repeated over and over with an expressive force that pressed toward the institution of anonymity in the cultural sense that Canby used it for automatically.

In the last years of the eighteenth century, Blake’s poems, printed with his name on the cover, prophesied the condition of modern anonymity. “London,” beginning with its implacably impersonal title, forges a link between the suffering of modern city dwellers and society’s denial of their individual identity. The visionary who says, or chants, the poem reads “Marks of weakness, marks of woe” in “every face,” “every cry,” “every Man,” “every Infant,” and “every voice,” while in cruel contrast “each charter’d street” where the solitary poet wanders among this undifferentiated humanity is at least granted “each” its singular identity.16
A more insidiously particular connection between the indifferent cruelty of urban society and namelessness is implied by the earliest to be printed of Blake’s two poems titled “The Chimney Sweeper.” The lines of the poem are spoken by the boy sweep, who was orphaned as an infant perhaps before he had even a name. His speech is in part a kind of nursery rhyme full of affectionate nicknames for his child companions in labor, in contrast with the title of the poem, which names the boy only by the hellish work he is forced to perform. He accepts himself into that category when he announces his presence by the chimney sweeps’ cry, childishly lisping it “‘weep! ’weep!” The lesson he repeats in the last line in the language imposed on him by society teaches the children the same acquiescence by making them think of themselves in anonymous third-person plurals: “So if all do their duty they need not fear harm” (WB 117–18).

Wordsworth had completed a first version of his verse narrative about his residence in London by 1805, only a few years after he must have read Blake’s poems, but it was not published until shortly after his death in 1850 (as Book 7 of The Prelude). Soon it became a locus for the concentration of attitudes and feelings since gathered around the noun anonymity.

They are linked to its root meaning at the beginning of the narrative by lines remembering how the poet pondered what he had heard of London as a boy before he went to live there:

Above all, one thought
Baffled my understanding: how men lived
Even next-door neighbours, as we say, yet still
Strangers, not knowing each the other’s name.

(ll. 115–18)17

Here the poet’s voice sounds easy, smilingly imitating the familiar speech among “neighbours,” identifying with them in the comfortable plural “we.”

By contrast, in passages opening and concluding his narrative, he denounces the city in the tone of a prophet viewing it panoramically from outside space and time:

Rise up, thou monstrous ant-hill on the plain
Of a too busy world! Before me flow,
Thou endless stream of men and moving things!

The comers and the goers face to face,
Face after face . . .

(ll. 149–51, 156–57)
and at the end:

Oh, blank confusion! true epitome
Of what the mighty City is herself
To thousands upon thousands of her sons,
Living amid the same perpetual whirl
Of trivial objects, melted and reduced
To one identity, by differences
That have no law, no meaning, and no end . . .

(II. 722–28)

The overpowering sense in these passages is of huge masses in senseless motion: “men” indistinguishable from one another, scarcely even from “moving things”; reduced to synecdoches of “face after face”; unknown and unconscious living particles swept in a flood.

The descriptive passages between these framing visions illustrate them in details that fill in the panoramic denunciations. Some picture lonely urban scenes of “empty streets”

at late hours
Of winter evenings, when unwholesome rains
Are falling hard, with people yet astir,
The feeble salutation from the voice
Of some unhappy woman, now and then
Heard as we pass, when no one looks about,
Nothing is listened to.

(II. 662–68)

Then there are glimpses among the “sundry forms,” “single forms and objects,” “commingled shapes,” “shapes which met me on the way” of some one suffering creature who emerges from the “huge fermenting mass of human kind” like a ghostly apparition:

Behold, turned upwards, a face hard and strong
In lineaments, and red with over-toil.
’Tis one encountered here and everywhere . . .

(II. 200–207)

Or “See, among less distinguishable shapes / The begging scavenger with hat in hand.” For the young poet the epitome, the “type, / Or emblem” of humanity represented in London’s “overflowing streets” was the “blind Beggar, who, with upright face, / Stood, propped against a wall” like an object, with a “label” hung on his chest telling “His history, whence he came, and who he was,” without, perhaps, giving his name:
And, on the shape of that unmoving man,
His steadfast face and sightless eyes, I gazed,
As if admonished from another world.  

(Il. 647–49)

The city envisioned first in Blake’s poems and later as Wordsworth described it more fully in the 1850 version of The Prelude became an epitome of the modern condition for poets, essayists, novelists, and their readers in the second half of the nineteenth century and on into the twentieth. Similar uses of urban materials, the same clusters of images, crop up everywhere, cumulatively, in phrases and paragraphs and as the structural design of whole works, making it irrelevant and often impossible to trace the formulations, beyond likenesses, to some particular source. A brief catalogue of examples of very different writings confirms Raymond Williams’s observation that “a common structure of feeling was being formed,” which in the twentieth century came to be gathered in the noun anonymity.  

Benjamin Disraeli made an allegory out of the same material Blake had used in “The Chimney Sweeper” in his novel of 1845, Sybil, or The Two Nations. It tells an inserted tale of a child the narrator refers to as “the nameless one,” because when his mother went to work in “her factory” soon after his birth, she abandoned him without name, “baptismal or patrimonial.” After surviving most of his infancy on the street, one lucky day when he was five years old he joined a “crowd of men, women, and children” entering a factory, where he was given work because “A child was wanting in the Wadding Hole” (presumably a space only a small body could fit into). For that piece of good fortune “the nameless one” was given “even a salary, more than that, a name; for as he had none, he was christened on the spot—Devilsdust.” Like Blake’s chimney sweep, he was named by society for the filthy work that marked his only identity. The root meaning of anonymity, without name, becomes in this tale an allegorical emblem of the cultural horrors Blake denounced more than half a century earlier.

In 1850, Thomas Carlyle characterized what the title of his essay called “The Present Time” by images like Wordsworth’s of the streets of London where the human beings who made up its vast population were reduced to a grotesque mass of synecdoches: “the tramp of its million feet is on all streets and all thoroughfares, the sound of its bewildered thousandfold voice is in all writings and speakings, in all thinkings and modes and activities of men . . . .”  

In 1881, Arnold Toynbee, drawing on the structure of urban images already in place in literature, epitomized modern experience by another familiar synecdoche of unknown faces crowded in proximity: “In the
new cities . . . the old warm attachments, born of ancient, local contiguity and personal intercourse, vanished in the fierce contest for wealth among thousands who had never seen each other’s faces before.” The choice of detail here conveys the same experience as in Wordsworth’s many glimpses of strange faces, the sense of seeing only a sea of them above the shoulders of a crowd.

Later novelists, both English and American, borrowed increasingly from this tradition. In 1886 in *Demos*, George Gissing described the “uniformity” and “squalor” of what he sarcastically called a “neighbourhood” in eerie de-personifications like Wordsworth’s “dead walls”: “each of these dead-faced houses,” “each separate blind window.” The streets of Chicago that Upton Sinclair wrote about in *The Jungle* of 1906, where “the people who swarmed in them were as busy as ants—all hurrying breathlessly, never stopping to look at anything, nor at each other” could be the “ant-hill . . . / Of a too busy world” that Wordsworth wandered in a hundred years before, where “no one looks about, nothing is listened to.” In *Our America* of 1919 by Waldo Frank, the New York streets, “choked sluices” that “the brackish human flow pours through,” are squalid versions of Wordsworth’s “endless stream” pouring through London’s “overflowing streets” like a human “tide.”

Lewis Mumford, in his widely read book of 1938, *The Culture of Cities*, treated historically what Blake prophesied as a spreading plague that (in “London”) “blights” human lives. Mumford located it as a “blight that had its origin in England’s dark Satanic mills, as William Blake called them,” and called his own chapter on the spread of the metropolis in the century following Blake’s prophecy “A Brief Outline of Hell.”

Whole poems are structured by this cumulative vocabulary of urban images in the work of two late Victorian poets, James Thomson and John Davidson. In their different choices among ways of using examples offered by Blake and Wordsworth to reflect their own senses of late-nineteenth-century experience, they show what a variety of expressive possibilities this vocabulary offered.

Thomson imitated the simple brevity of Blake’s lyric poems in one of his own, dated 1866. By titling it “William Blake,” he made the nameless “He” in the first word of the poem a poet who “came to London town,” wandering lonely in a lonely crowd. Thomson accomplished this by using images that, because of their familiarity, had and still have generalizing power to make both the poet and the city into archetypes:

There were thousands and thousands of human kind
In this desert of brick and stone:
But some were deaf and some were blind,
And he was there alone.
Thomson’s nocturnal vision titled *The City of Dreadful Night* was first published serially in 1874 in four numbers of the *National Reformer*, signed “B. V.” (initials of his nom de plume “Bysshe Vanolis,” a coded tribute to Shelley and Novalis). In it Thomson expanded on Wordsworth’s glimpses of London inhabited by ghostly figures that signalled from another world: “shapes” and “spectres,” “phantoms,” ranging among “mansions dark and still as tombs”—like Wordsworth’s “Courts/ Gloomy as coffins”—or beings with “worn faces that look deaf and blind”; “Each man wrapt in his own doom”; whose “lonely sounding feet” and “bodiless voices” echoed in that “city of so lonely streets” and “weary roads”; where “one may count up every face he meets”; strangers who “speak to one another seldom”; who exist merely as “isolated units,” only the last a phrase belonging to Thomson’s generation that would not be found in *The Prelude* (CDN 1–48).

John Davidson wrote of his London experience in poems written in the 1890s and first decade of the 1900s, for instance in one with the title “London Bridge,” which actually refers to the railway station of that name but inevitably, and not altogether inappropriately, makes us think of the nursery rhyme and with its lighthearted chant predicting doom to the city. The vision of London in this poem expresses a sense of isolation and especially of loss of identity in a rushing torrent of humanity, of inundation, death by drowning: in “London’s sea, immense / And turbulent, a brimming human flood”; “a brimming tide of mind / As well as blood”; “this human tide, / As callous as the glaciers that glide / A foot a day, but as a torrent swift.” Here immersion in the inexorable flood of humanity means the loss of everything in life that is “Distinctly personal, innate or earned,” all swept away “In the dull, rapid passage” flowing “from the station to the street.” Not even the myriad faces of strangers but only “the common face” can be seen above the “urban crowds” that represent the modern experience of “London Bridge.”

This richly stocked collection of details, variously used in writings like these of many kinds, was from them absorbed into the forming of assumptions that became common by the early twentieth century, so that their pattern grew to be more than a description. Almost as firmly as the city itself, the constellation of imagery associated with it became an existential embodiment of a modern condition and state of consciousness. This linguistic event heralded the institution of *anonymity* as the code word for a cultural motif.

The clearest evidences of the pervasiveness and depth of its assimilation are poems that count on readers to bring the assumptions concentrated in this motif into play in their responses even to the smallest coded signals. A highly condensed example is a line from “The Lake Isle of Innisfree” of 1892, the poem of Yeats’s best known in the early
twentieth century: “While I stand on the roadway, or on the pavements grey.”28 Even out of context, the conventionally loaded words in combination make their points. Pavements are found in cities, and their material is by its nature “grey,” but in a poem of this period these details go far beyond what the words refer to, to suggest that the solitary speaker who says, or chants, the lines is lonely and estranged from his surroundings, which are isolating and alienating because colorless and standardized, dulling to personal feelings, indifferent to his individual self.

Or think of Pound’s most famous early poem, of 1913:

In a Station of the Metro

The apparition of these faces in the crowd;
Petals on a wet black bough.29

The title line tells us that this is another poem with an urban setting, preparing us for certain quite specific responses to what follows, which can be intensely concentrated because its few signals are highly charged. A vision of the modern city that catches a glimpse of beauty usually found in natural things follows a familiar pattern—compare Wordsworth’s vision of London in “Compos’d Upon Westminster Bridge, September 3, 1802”—and the perception that, though this loveliness makes a few human beings rarely precious, it is as fragile and brief as flower petals has been a cherished truth in English poetry since at least the sixteenth century. Encoded in the phrase “faces in the crowd” is a more distinctively modern thought: that the actuality of the urban condition dulls even the owners of “these faces” into living their lives as anonymously—impersonally—and unconsciously as nonhuman creatures do. The poem itself, a sentence fragment that excludes the first person, is eerily displaced from the scene it envisions.

To show one more poet exploiting the familiarity of the cultural motif expressed in this constellation of urban images, Frost—quite uncharacteristically—made a poem out of that material in 1928, “Acquainted with the Night.” A catalogue of phrases—“the farthest city light,” “the saddest city lane,” “the sound of feet,” “an interrupted cry / . . . from another street”—associates the feelings of other urban wanderers—typically nineteenth-century poets—with the solitary “I” who says, almost chants, the lines.30 Those feelings are powerfully expressed at the same time that Frost—quite characteristically—plays with their perhaps too ready familiarity and resonance, their formulaic quality, by a number of devices including the repetitions in the lines of the poem itself (in particular the five in a row beginning with “I”). The feelings of loneliness and
estrangement this city wanderer tells about might be at once an inescapable modern condition and a self-induced mood. If the associations of the images were not familiar—and their familiarity is what the poem is partly about—their doubleness would be lost on the reader.

A hypothesis of this discussion is that the specially wide appeal of these particular poems, their status as anthology pieces, has a great deal to do with their being expressions of the cultural motif of anonymity.

**Anonymity: A Modernist Paradox**

T. S. Eliot, icon and public voice of modernism, acknowledged debts to both Thomson’s “The City of Dreadful Night” and Davidson’s London verses, poems he read “between the ages of sixteen and twenty,” pairing them obviously because they shared what in writing about Davidson he called “a great theme.”31 In Davidson’s work in particular, Eliot remembered, he “found inspiration in the content of the poem, and in the complete fitness of content and idiom; for I also had a good many dingy urban images to reveal.” Beyond that, he credited Davidson with preparing him for the work of the French symbolists, who became his next models.

Earlier, Eliot had given a slightly different account of discovering the material he needed:

I think that from Baudelaire I learned first, a precedent for the poetical possibilities, never developed by any poet writing in my own language, of the more sordid aspects of the modern metropolis. . . . From him, as from Laforgue, I learned that the sort of material that I had, the sort of experience that an adolescent had had, in an industrial city in America, could be the material for poetry; and that the source of new poetry might be found in what had been regarded hitherto as the impossible, the sterile, the intractably unpoetic.32

The substitution of “an adolescent” for “I” is a thin layering over the confession that Eliot had personally experienced the sense of anonymity associated with the modern city.

To epitomize Charles Baudelaire’s “significance” for him, he then quoted two lines (from a poem in *Les Fleurs du Mal* titled “Les Sept Vieillards”) that he thought summed it up:

*Fourmillante Cité, cité pleine de reves,*  
*Ou le spectre en plein jour raccroche le passant.*

[City teeming like an ant-hill, city full of dreams, where the spectre in broad daylight accosts the passerby.]
“I knew what *that* meant, because I had lived it before I knew that I wanted to turn it into verse on my own account.” Again “I had lived it” here is an uncharacteristic lapse into a personal mode.

In turning the metropolis into “new poetry,” Eliot adapted this deeply embedded tradition of images to his own representation of modern anonymity, just as he said Baudelaire had done: “Inevitably the offspring of romanticism . . . he could, like anyone else, only work with the materials which were there. . . . he must express with individual differences the general state of mind—not as a *duty*, but simply because he cannot help participating in it.”35

Eliot began to experiment with the possibilities of this ready material in his early work, beginning with the poems in the manuscript originally titled “Inventions of the March Hare,” where we find familiar images like these in the first lines of “Silence”:

Along the city streets
It is still high tide.
Yet the garrulous waves of life
Shrink and divide . . .34

Although he left poems in this manuscript unpublished, he did not soon leave their preoccupations behind. In “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” which comes first in *Prufrock and Other Observations* of 1917, the opening lines are an invitation to walk “through certain half-deserted streets”—no more deprived of vitality than Wordsworth’s “half-frequented” London streets—into a state of consciousness figured by the city with all its echoes. These lines strike the dominant note not only of this poem, but of this first volume set mainly in the city, and of the rest of Eliot’s poems of his modernist period. Their culmination is in the much discussed passage of *The Waste Land* at the end of “The Burial of the Dead” (to be quoted in full later) which begins with a prophetic invocation—“Unreal City”—and ends with a fragment quoted from a poem by Baudelaire: “You! hypocrite lecteur!—mon semblable,—mon frère!”

As this discussion has already stated and, it is hoped, demonstrated, the accumulated language about the modern condition of anonymity has so permeated our literature that it is pointless to trace to particular sources lines like Eliot’s in this passage, for instance “A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,” or “And each man fixed his eyes before his feet.” Even so, Eliot himself gave multiple directions about his sources, as in the French quotation just above, in the later-cancelled notes to *The Waste Land*, and in many passages like those already cited from his prose about the models who inspired his urban poems.
What seems pointed in the context reconstructed in this discussion is Eliot’s persistent silence about Wordsworth’s extremely influential role in making the city a cultural epitome. It is inconceivable that Eliot did not know *The Prelude:* his own choice of the musical term “Preludes” for the title of a group of cityscapes is quite likely intended to set up a contrast between the impersonal purity of a poem made in the image of a musical composition and Wordsworth’s autobiographical narrative, about which the author himself said it was “unprecedented in literary history that a man should talk so much about himself.” It seems curious, too, that in paying so much attention to the lines of Baudelaire’s beginning “*Fourmillante Cité*” that Eliot says were the most important inspiration for his own city poems, and that he quoted in the note to the line “Unreal City,” he did not hear their sympathetic likeness to Wordsworth’s invocation of his teeming city as an ant-hill, and to his many figurings of its inhabitants as ghostly.

Of course there is no way to know to what degree a poet is deliberately suppressing, or is blocked from recognizing, or is merely forgetting the presence of another poet. Even so, Eliot has shown us both in his critical prose and in his early poems reasons why he never acknowledged Wordsworth even as a distant ancestor in the fashioning of urban images.

In 1917 Eliot, in his since most famous essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” announced his “Impersonal theory of poetry”: in sum, that the “progress of an artist is . . . a continual extinction of personality,” achieved only through the immense labor of acquiring a true sense of “tradition.” He epitomized the enemy position by quoting Wordsworth’s most famous statement, that poetry is “emotion recollected in tranquility,” without ever mentioning who wrote it. Of course Eliot’s readers would be expected to know the source, but the suppression of Wordsworth’s name seems in keeping with Eliot’s well known program of dethroning Wordsworth, in which one of his preferred tactics was if possible to ignore him, to leave him out of consideration as a way of suggesting his unimportance to Eliot’s generation of poets.

For the purposes of the argument here, Eliot’s refusal to name Wordsworth as the author of the famous “formula” (Eliot’s deliberately impersonal term) for poetry of “‘personality’” (Eliot put that word in quotation marks) can serve as an analogy for his silence about Wordsworth’s role in forming the tradition of urban poetry. Eliot was caught in what I am calling a distinctively modernist paradox. The materials he found best suited for the “new poetry” were “dingy urban images,” which could express the horror of modern cultural anonymity. The way of writing best suited for the “new poetry” promoted an escape for the poet into aesthetic anonymity. It would be an untenable position to recognize
Wordsworth as an early discoverer and explorer of the territory staked out as uniquely theirs by poets for whom Wordsworth’s influential presence was the chief threat to their impersonal poetry. So it was necessary for Eliot to locate the origins of the urban imagery he needed no earlier than Baudelaire, whom Eliot called “the greatest exemplar in modern poetry in any language” (B 341). This pronouncement stakes out another paradoxical position, since Les Fleurs du Mal was published in 1857, only seven years after The Prelude.37

Among the poems in Eliot’s first book, printed the same year as “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” the one that makes fullest use of traditional urban imagery is “Preludes.” It is the most useful choice of example here also because it is the one that performs the most visible experiments with the techniques to promote impersonality that Eliot is best known for in The Waste Land.

“Preludes” suspends “grimy scraps” of city living in four separately numbered parts, each drawing material from the “thousand sordid images” and familiar synecdoches of other poems similarly set in “the sawdust-trampled street / With all its muddy feet” where the poet wanders. While the imagery holds the parts together, the grammar dislocates them in this poem by all but eliminating the first person, who in the tradition of urban poetry is the lonely and estranged poet. Here it is not the poet who has a “vision of the street” but an initially unidentified “you” mentioned in the first word of part III, who turns out to be a woman with curlers in her hair looking through the “shutters” of her window, a detail tied to the “broken blinds” and “dingy shades” of parts I and II. In those sections, and again in the last lines of IV, the only pronouns are generalized “your” or “one.” The phrase “His soul,” which opens part IV is never located, unless it refers to whoever called the woman “You”: the poet displacing himself with a second-person pronoun38

The first-person nominative intrudes only in four isolated lines just before the end of the poem, sounding very nearly as if spoken by the familiar compound ghost of a nineteenth-century poet:

I am moved by fancies that are curled
Around these images, and cling;
The notion of some infinitely gentle
Infinitely suffering thing.

These lines are close in manner to some parodic language Eliot used in an essay about Wordsworth: “he went on droneing on the still sad music of infirmity to the verge of the grave.”39 In “Preludes” the droneing of this “I” is erased by the next and coarsest line of the poem: “Wipe your hand
across your mouth, and laugh.” (Said by an understudy for Eliot exorcising that ghost?)

These and other techniques of dislocation and displacement are instruments of aesthetic anonymity finely tuned to express the great theme of cultural anonymity in Eliot’s early writings, above all in *The Waste Land*, the archetypal modernist vision of the city. They operate through the separated parts of the poem, and in sections within parts, as in the closing passage of “The Burial of the Dead”:

Unreal City,
Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,
A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,
I had not thought death had undone so many.
Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled,
And each man fixed his eyes before his feet.
Flowed up the hill and down King William Street,
To where Saint Mary Woolnoth kept the hours
With a dead sound on the final stroke of nine.
There I saw one I knew, and stopped him, crying:
‘Stetson!
‘You who were with me in the ships of Mylae!
‘That corpse you planted last year in your garden,
‘Has it begun to sprout? Will it bloom this year?
‘Or has the sudden frost disturbed its bed?
‘O keep the Dog far hence, that’s friend to men,
‘Or with his nails he’ll dig it up again!
‘You! hypocrite lecteur!—mon semblable,—mon frère!’

(Eliot revised the first line of this passage, causing “Unreal City” to float unlocated, by cutting out what originally followed it: “I have sometimes seen and see.” If this had been left in place, it would have worked like Wordsworth’s use of the first person in his invocation of the “monstrous ant-hill”—“Before me flow, / Thou endless stream of men”—to ground the vision in the personal experience of the poet wandering lonely in a modern city. Eliot allowed the first-person to enter in line four but, as he told his first readers in a note in case they missed the allusion, the line is not spoken in Eliot’s own voice telling of his personal experience, but by or through Dante describing another vision of hell. The eight lines around it are pronounless, sometimes incomplete sentences, in the passive voice. They happen grammatically, unattached like the ghostly synecdoche of the “Sighs,” as if without any located person saying or doing what happens in them. Then the passage tilts into a shockingly
different mode, an absurdly dramatized speech by the stereotype of a suburban commuter who turns in the end into a poet—without knowing it?—by bursting into French—borrowed, the note says, from Baudelaire—in the last line. It addresses the reader as if from the grave, in the manner of an epitaph poem, much as in Eliot’s other favorite lines from Baudelaire the spectre accosts the passerby.

In the tradition of poetry about the modern metropolis, the author’s voice expresses personal feelings of dislocation and displacement, as well as ascribing them to the culture the city embodies. In Eliot’s modernist poems, where structure and grammar exclude a continuous first-person speaker, it is the poem itself that is dislocated, its center of consciousness displaced. These techniques act out the theory of impersonal poetry proposed in “Tradition and the Individual Talent”: that “the poet has, not a ‘personality’ to express, but a particular medium . . . in which impressions and experiences combine in peculiar and unexpected ways” (TT 9). Eliot’s formal techniques are the medium suited to working out the impersonal aesthetic of anonymity, in which Wordsworth was cast as the enemy. And they are the medium best fitted to represent the great theme of cultural anonymity, which to some unmeasurable but large degree was invented by Wordsworth, who in Eliot’s scheme invented the poetry of personality. It is the penultimate paradox of modernism that the distinctively “new poetry” of its most famous practitioner belonged centrally, however inadvertently, to this Wordsworthian tradition. The ultimate paradox is the amalgam in Eliot’s modernist poems of two distinct twentieth-century meanings of anonymity, both packed with historically accumulated assumptions that give those poems their great and exemplary power: anonymity as an aesthetic ideal and as a cultural condition.

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NOTES

7 Anne Ferry, *The Title to the Poem* (Stanford, 1996), pp. 72–73.
THE LITERARY HISTORY OF A WORD


10 Some examples are: James Lane Allen, "Anonymity: 'The Breadwinners,'" Critic, 3 (1883), 517-18; Harry Smith, "The Science of Anonymity," Good Words, 39 (1898), 99-104; Coulson Kernahan, "The Question of Anonymity and Pseudonymity: Should Authors Deny the Authorship of Their Own Work?" Chambers’s Journal, 7th series, 3 (1913), 241-44.


17 William Wordsworth, The Prelude, Or Growth of a Poet’s Mind, ed. Ernest de Selincourt (London, 1928), p. 229. All quotations from The Prelude are from this edition; hereafter indented passages are cited in the text only, by line numbers.


37 Surprisingly, I have not found any scholarly discussion of the possibility that Baudelaire read *The Prelude*, although we know that he was familiar with some contemporary English poetry.