The poem as a self-contained, independent work of art became one of the chief tenets of twentieth-century modernism. Emotional baring of the soul was rejected in favour of a posture of detachment and impersonality. According to T. S. Eliot in his influential essay ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’ (1919): ‘Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality.’ For the ‘is’ of this quotation, however, it might be more appropriate to substitute ‘should be’. Eliot was not commenting objectively on a given state of affairs, but seeking to impose a doctrine favourable to his own agenda and that of the early modernists. Ezra Pound was doing the same, but with a franker acknowledgement of the manifesto-like nature of his assertion, when he claimed a year or two earlier that poetry in the twentieth century would be ‘harder and saner’ and ‘as much like granite as it can be’, adding, ‘At least for myself, I want it so, austere, direct, free from emotional slither.’ What offended both Eliot and Pound was their sense that the poetry of the Romantics (and, more particularly, the Romantic tradition as developed by the Victorians) wore its heart too much on its sleeve, that it had become emotionally slack, and made the psychological state of the writer rather than the achieved substance of the poem too much the centre of attention.

Imagism was one strategy for getting round this state of affairs. The hard, sharp, haiku-like brevity of the Imagist poem focused attention on things outside the poet’s mind (even if, ultimately, this ‘objective’ thinginess became a ‘correlative’ for an emotional condition) and seemed to preclude first-person statement. But the presence or absence of personal pronouns is not in itself a key to the
impersonality which Eliot especially desired. ‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock’ begins with an unabashedly personal voice: ‘Let us go then, you and I’, and the body of the poem is full of personal lucubrations. As the title indicates, however, these are the sentiments of a named figure (and one whose name more than hints at his prissy, inhibited character). Like Browning, who had already set up a counter-current among the Victorians with his dramatic monologues that put words in invented characters’ mouths, Eliot uses a device which does not commit him to what Prufrock is saying – which enables him, indeed, to mock at Prufrock, and yet does not simply set up Prufrock as a target of satire. If there is a streak of Eliot himself in Prufrock, it is not Eliot’s own feelings which the poem luxuriates in. Prufrock is a persona with whom, to a degree, Eliot empathises, but of whom he can be simultaneously critical. Though creating him and contriving to put all that he says in a certain revealingly ironical light, Eliot speaks at the most only obliquely through Prufrock. In that sense the poem is personative rather than personal; its technique is such as to direct the reader’s scrutiny on to the imagined character and the idiosyncratic language by which he is projected, and not (at least until a much later stage of analysis) onto the thoughts and feelings of Eliot himself.

As a device the persona encourages indirection and irony. If it is, as Eliot claims, an ‘escape’ from emotion and personality, it may also in a sense be said to be an evasion. At any rate, it has the potentiality of becoming a double-edged weapon, capable, as it seems to have been for the early Eliot, of cutting a way through to new resources of wit and energy, but also of severing the poet from commitment in a way that is ultimately debilitating. W. B. Yeats and Robert Lowell are two striking examples of this ambiguous relationship. Both create public personae from which in time they feel the need to escape, as much as Eliot feels the need to escape from the personal into the supposedly impersonal; but in each one the relationship between public and private is of a different nature and leads to quite different uses of the persona. Both are masters of the art of rhetoric, which as suggested by the definition, ‘the art of persuasion’, implies a definite engagement with the audience to which their poems are addressed, and yet both become more persuasive as they move towards a language which divests itself of the trappings of a certain kind of rhetoric. Both are also poets who, to a degree, become public figures in the sense of making their mark