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THE LIMINAL TEXT:
T.S. ELIOT'S EVOLVING POETICS
AND THE WASTE LAND

by

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THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF ARTS
in the Department of
English

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Abstract

This thesis undertakes to re-examine T.S. Eliot's early prose and letters in an effort to create a context in which to read his poetry. It is shown that critics, generally, have overlooked this important material, but that this material reveals Eliot's struggle to articulate a poetics of what might be called liminality--occupying the threshold at which two or more things join without merging and becoming indistinct.

This poetics is shown to grow out of Eliot's own view of the individual human subject as liminal: an intersection of social "influences" and pre-logical "impulses" in constant flux. Eliot's conception of art as a collaboration between the audience and the creator, between tradition and the individual talent is also demonstrated. The work of art is shown to occupy a threshold which conflates the real and the ideal, thus creating a unique aesthetic experience.

From within this context, a reading of The Waste Land is attempted. This reading argues that the self-conscious poetics of liminality and collaboration--both substantive and formal--are articulated in poetic form in The Waste Land. And, using this poetics, the poem gives form to the extremely complex combination of "odds and ends, in constant flux, manipulated by desire and fear" which defines Eliot's conception of the Modern mind in particular, but also of any given state of mind in general.
For Spencer and Shannon
...any state of mind is extremely complex, and chiefly composed of odds and ends in constant flux manipulated by desire and fear. When, therefore, we find a poet who neither suppresses nor falsifies, and who expresses complicated states of mind, we give him welcome.

--T.S. Eliot (on John Donne)
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Thank-you, also, to Professor Kathy Mezel for assistance in both academic and practical matters, to Professor David Stouck for initially steering me in the direction of this thesis, and to Professor Tom Grieve who suggested not only the plan, but a good deal of the incidentals of this thesis.
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Chapter 1

The Facts in the Case of Mr. Eliot:
Context, Early Critics, Early Criticism

When I first read T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* I found it to be at once an irritating parade of pretentions and a meaningless babble of gibberish. It remains for me one of the most incoherent and incongruous poems in the language. There seems to be no context to account for its ludicrous juxtapositions. Stick-figure marionettes seem to perform a jerky song and dance at the instigation of some "drunken helot" puppeteer. It is as though a "jumble of stage properties," and two-dimensional characters were let loose on a dreamscape that makes *Alice in Wonderland* seem banal and predictable. But can such a monstrosity be nightmarish, as it is so often depicted, or is it merely ridiculous?

*The Waste Land* seems to toy with the very idea of context. To transform the voices of drunken bar patrons into the voice of Ophelia sets up problems of context which no amount of detached scholarship can thoroughly explain. A

1. In the November 1917 number of *The Egoist* Ezra Pound refutes a Mr. Waugh's judgement of Eliot as a "drunken helot."
certain excess always prevails. Do we, for instance, see
this scene as a serious condemnation of the bar patrons, or
do we feel that they have been elevated by their
association, more sinned against than sinning? Or, do we
feel that Ophelia's terrible sadness is made light of? Who,
or what, functions as the "Hamlet" in this scene? What
context applies? The "Notes" to which I turned so often on
first reading the poem remain completely silent on this
issue. They frustrate and undermine, rather than provide,
context. Such notes as the one where Eliot tells us that the
"dead sound on the final stroke of nine"(63) is "a
phenomenon which I have often noticed"4 do not help us with
context at all. How is such an observation even vaguely
relevant or important? Such categories as important and
trivial, central and peripheral, relevant and irrelevant,
even sacred and profane, lose their meaning.

In "What the Thunder Said" a number of questions seem
to get asked, except that there are no question marks.

What is that sound high in the air
Murmur of maternal lamentation
Who are those hooded hordes swarming
Over endless plains, stumbling in cracked earth
Ringed by the flat horizon only
What is the city over the mountains
Cracks and reforms and bursts in the violet air
Falling towers
Jerusalem Athens Alexandria
Vienna London
Unreal(367-777)

Subsequent references to the notes will be designated
"notes"). Page numbers will be given parenthetically in the
text.
Sentences begin with interrogatives but the questions never get asked. And the apparent placement of this scene, the "where" is so protean as to be "unreal." The real question, which never gets asked, is "why"?

The Notes also provide us with such chimeras of context as extensive quotations from Ovid—in the original Latin—for "anthropological interest" ("Notes," 72-3). Or, they provide us with such purposeless, yet detailed contextual information as "the currants were quoted at a price 'cost insurance and freight to London'; and the Bill of Lading, etc., were to be handed to the buyer upon payment of the sight draft"("Notes," 72). How does this information help us with the "demotic French" invitation to a "weekend at the Metropole"? And, despite providing such detailed and meaningless information in some spots, the Notes provide no "context" at all for such lines as "I think we are in rats' alley/ Where the dead men lost their bones." The Notes tell us that Tiresias is "a mere spectator." Well almost everyone in the poem is a spectator, or a relayer of information, which is mostly gossip, rumour, and myth.

Despite a complete absence of narrative tissue, the poem consists almost entirely of narrated bits randomly arranged. The result of all this layering of mediations—the narrations, the notes, the fortune telling, the literary allusions—is to unsettle the reading process itself. The verbal surface of the text is such dense and unpredictable
terrain that the reader becomes acutely conscious of the act of reading itself. The poem is unmistakably a reading experience which unsettles and strips away layers of habituation, both in reading and "experiencing." Not even the unexpected is allowed to become predictable. For all that it is a profoundly mediated poem, it will nevertheless become abruptly and immediately raw, the twitching, bare nerve-end suddenly exposed, addressing us directly, saying,

(Come in under the shadow of this red rock),
And I will show you something different from either
Your shadow at morning striding behind you
Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you
I will show you fear in a handful of dust. (26-30)

Expectations are continually thwarted. The poem fiddles whisper music--which continually creeps by us--and seems about to "glow into words" but then becomes savagely still, so that the children, for instance, who are evoked with such ventriloquial beauty⁵ as they stand in the choir loft, are made to sing gibberish:

Twit twit twit
Jug jug jug jug jug jug
So rudely forc'd
Tereu (203-6)

The context shifts so rapidly and unexpectedly that it devolves into a succession of individual bits of verbiage devoid of contexts. What is wanting is some larger context

⁵. I am referring to the fact that the words used are the words of another, earlier poet: Verlaine.
in which to place these many underminings of the very idea of context itself, a context in which the reversals, contradictions and irregularities can be located, and thereby grounded, and given meaning.

Context is also important, both to Eliot, and to a study of Eliot, because, as he observed in "The Three Provincialities,"

every literature has two sides; it has that which is essential to it as literature, which can be appreciated by anyone with adequate knowledge of the language, and on the other hand it has that which can only be enjoyed by a particular group of people inhabiting a particular portion of the earth.

It is not so much the suggestion that one of these contexts is more profitable than the other that makes this statement provocative, as the acknowledgment that there are different contexts, and that it is important to keep context in mind. Eliot clearly modifies and qualifies the Modernists' (or at least the modernist critics') exclusive focus on the text. The Waste Land, seems to merge these "two sides" of context to which Eliot refers: many of its references are specific to a particular time and place and yet they are essential to it as literature; it requires adequate knowledge of a number of languages, but that knowledge fails to unlock the poem. The terms universal and permanent, which Eliot suggested

elsewhere were relative terms anyway," lose their meaning. The context continues to elude, but the early criticism reveals Eliot's own concern with context, and as such offers a possible source for the absent one. Since the essay in which these words appear was published by Eliot in the same year as The Waste Land, it seems reasonable that the concerns it raises formed part of the mind-set from which the poem was written, and might help to restore some of the context which time and distance has obscured.

In examining that early criticism we find that Eliot offers his view about how literature should be taught and studied. In an essay entitled "The Education of Taste," Eliot succinctly expresses his opinion about the best way to teach, study, or discuss literature: "point to good literature and then be silent," he says. Rather than "enunciate" easy generalities, the instructor, or critic, or literary historian can and should

select and present the necessary and interesting facts (only he must be quite positive as to what is a fact, a hard one), and then he can indicate what work is good, and what is good in a different way."

As Eliot phrased it elsewhere, "there is no such thing as the interpretation of poetry; poetry can only be

transmitted." This leaves the critic, the instructor, and the literary historian with the job of simply observing and presenting the relevant facts. Facts provide the context in which the student, the audience and the reader can profitably read the literature. Facts do not presume to supply the profits of literary study; facts provide a context in which the literature can be profitably studied.

The early essays constitute precisely such a body of facts, which help establish the context in which Eliot's own poetry was written. And in fact, Eliot again stresses the importance of context in "The Education of Taste." Written as a review of J.W. Cunliffe's *English Literature During the Last Half-Century*, "The Education of Taste" becomes a critique of the standard text-book style, and of the pedagogical method Cunliffe demonstrates. Eliot's major objections are not to the book's proposed project of providing a context in which the literature to be discussed can be appreciated, but rather to its failure to accomplish that stated objective. According to Eliot, the "background" Cunliffe provides, and which he declares is crucial to "systematic study," is a "jumble of stage properties," and "a circus procession," because Cunliffe does not "bother his head" with the "labour of very great pains and infinite critical subtlety" required to provide an adequate background.

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It is a curious fact of Eliot criticism, however, that very few critics have bothered their heads with the very great labour of uncovering Eliot's own background, and pointing to the relevant facts as a way of better understanding the poetry. These early statements clearly show that the picture of Eliot which has been filtered through received opinion is overly narrow and reductive; and hence distorted. When all the relevant facts are taken into account, a picture of Eliot begins to emerge which is complex, at times unexpected, and suggestive of new possibilities in reading his poetry. What becomes clear is that Ezra Pound's dubbing of Eliot as "Possum" has been "preserved in amber" even though Pound himself meant that Eliot was "PLAYIN Possum."  

It is, perhaps, this inattention to the factual context which has given rise to the storm over The Waste Land, and the debate over its conscious design, that has raged virtually unabated since the poem's original publication.

10. Two critics who have attempted a kind of New-Historicist approach are Erik Svarney (The Men of 1914: T.S. Eliot and Early Modernism (Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1988)) and John Xiros Cooper (T.S. Eliot and the Politics of Voice: The Argument of "The Waste Land." (Ann Arbor: U.M.I. Research Press, 1987)). Cooper's work is very good, but his title alone indicates an approach to The Waste Land with which I cannot agree. As Eliot's early prose makes clear, poetry has no "argument." Svarney's work is also excellent, but his attempt to place all the "men of 1914" into a more complete historical context dominates his approach, and leaves a great deal to be said about the individuals he is forced to discuss as a group.

Some critics would deny its place in the canon altogether\textsuperscript{12}, or suspect that it is a massive hoax.\textsuperscript{13} Still others create ever more fantastic systems of structuration and cohesion in order to give unity to the most persistently, obstinately and self-consciously fragmentary poem in the language, proceeding, it must be assumed, from the belief that without unity the poem is without meaning. The numerous systems of structure which have been proposed include not only the tantalizing chimeras of structure which Eliot himself tentatively proposed, but also such systems as "fragmentary wholeness,"\textsuperscript{14} collage,\textsuperscript{15} parataxis,\textsuperscript{16} "mythic structure,"\textsuperscript{17} and many more.

\textsuperscript{13} Graham Hough, "Imagism and Its Consequences," in Knoll, 1964: 98-121.
\textsuperscript{15} Collage as a structural mode goes a long way toward providing a context, and has been proposed by such people as Harry Levin ["The \textit{Waste Land}: From Ur to Echt," originally published in \textit{Plural}, 1972; republished in \textit{Memories of the Moderns} (New York: New Directions, 1982): 35-46].
\textsuperscript{16} Jewel Spears Brooker and Joseph Bentley [Reading \textit{The Waste Land}: Modernity and the Limits of Interpretation, (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1990): 214], among others, refer to parataxis as the poem's "main method." Parataxis (i.e. the simple juxtaposition of images without connective or narrative tissue) bears close affinity to collage and has been a standard conception of the poem's procedure from nearly the first. I disagree with Brooker and Bentley, however, who claim that Eliot uses parataxis to demonstrate "lost coherence." I will argue that it is in precisely these 'paratactics' that Eliot finds the coherence, the voice, and the poetics he seeks.
Rising and falling in the currents of critical opinion, *The Waste Land* has had its bones picked in whispers by two main streams of criticism, which on closer examination turn out to be tributaries of the same stream of abstracting philosophical enquiry: that which imports current critical theory and vocabulary into the poem in order to talk about it, and that which attempts to find new source material from which to build a reading of it. Those who import current critical theory have tended, like Cinderella’s step-sisters, to force the heavy foot of theory into the delicate shoe of the poem, and the shoe won’t quite fit. They use current theoretical vocabulary either to make somewhat anachronistic claims, or to make statements which say old things in new ways, and do not provide significantly new readings.

Calvin Bedient’s *He Do The Police in Different Voices,* an excellent study and well worth reading because of its careful line-by-line study of the poem, nevertheless comes within this group. His reading of *The Waste Land,* and in particular his use of the critical terminology of Bakhtin, depends for its success on Bedient’s assertion that the poem is “ventriloquism,” and hence the product of a single consciousness, rather than the product of a number of competing voices. But, as Jewel Spears Brooker and Joseph Bentley observe, this position is indeed shaky since the poem defies any sense of the underlying unity implied by

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this assertion². As Graham Hough observes, in a different context, *The Waste Land* "conspicuously forgoes" any "unifying principle."²⁰

Bedient does resist the unfortunate tendency in some current criticism to use superficial and often trivial features, either of texts or their titles (or some equally marginal textual element) in order to ascribe anachronistic theoretical principles to texts. Despite obvious virtues, this is the failing, it seems to me, of both Ruth Nevo, who described *The Waste Land* as an "Ur-Text of Deconstruction,"²¹ and of Gregory S. Jay, whose deconstructive reading is a marvel of contemporary jargon, yet ultimately argues the time-honoured notion that *The Waste Land* is an hermeneutic riddle for the detective-critic to solve.²² In the end, though, Bedient also uses current critical vocabulary to say the same old things and attempts to force the foot of theory into the wrong shoe. Superficially, he recognizes that *The Waste Land* does not simply fit Bakhtin's theory, and he appears to avoid the usual tendency of seeing Bakhtin's various ideas—the dialogic, carnival, heteroglossia²³—as operative in every

23. It is not within the scope of this paper to outline and evaluate the works of Mikhail Bakhtin; however, it is worth
text which Bakhtin himself did not explicitly eliminate. But finally, he requires The Waste Land to conform in a kind of reverse to Bakhtin's model, and on slim evidence. By penetrating analysis of the poem's original title, Bedient comes to the conclusion, to which the poem is then required to conform, that there is only one voice in the poem, and that voice calls the same familiar tune.

The other main tendency in recent Eliot criticism has been to exhume and resuscitate his early writings and, for the most part, this performs a very valuable service to Eliot scholarship. The publication in 1974 of the early drafts of The Waste Land provided a variety of new insights into the genesis and metamorphosis of this most elusive and enigmatic of poems. The Facsimile Edition brought to light a number of new critical issues--including such troubling ones as Eliot's misogyny in some of the "suppressed" sections, and such "bogus," or at least irrelevant conjectures as Eliot's alleged homosexuality--noting that many of Eliot's ideas bear remarkable similarities to the ideas Bakthin has developed in such landmark works as Rabelais and His World, The Dialogic Imagination, and Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics. The main idea of the Carnivalesque is most thoroughly worked out in Rabelais and His World, while the concepts of heteroglossia and the dialogic, among a number of other very interesting ideas are worked out in The Dialogic Imagination, and Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics.


25. James E. Miller Jr. has written what in my view is a spurious and highly questionable analysis of The Waste Land entitled T.S. Eliot's Personal Waste Land, which uses wild conjecture and very fanciful hermeneutics to suggest that the poem is a "love poem" to Eliot's alleged homosexual
but the actual contents of those suppressed sections provided very few answers to the questions, which still vex critics today, about the poem and its poetics. Furthermore, the transcripts merely validated the uncanny prescience of Hugh Kenner's guesses about the poem's origins.\textsuperscript{26}

Then, in 1973, Anne Bolgan began a resuscitation of Eliot's doctoral dissertation with the publication of \textit{What the Thunder Really Said: A Retrospective Essay on the Making of "The Waste Land."} Bolgan's discovery, some years earlier, of this document which had been previously thought lost was, of course, a major contribution to Eliot scholarship, even if Eliot's philosophical argument "entirely overwhelsms" Bolgan, as John Xiros Cooper suggests,\textsuperscript{27} and distorts her resulting reading of the poem. Cooper argues compellingly that Eliot's philosophical accomplishments are over-rated by literary critics, and that Hugh Kenner's "otherwise fine"

lover, Jean Verdenal. More objectionable even than the method of this enquiry is the supposition that this claim is relevant. Miller offers no significantly new reading of the poem, preferring rather to engage in a kind of homophobic name calling.

\textsuperscript{26} In his essay, "How the Poem was Constructed," \textit{[Storm Over the Waste Land, ed. Robert E. Knoll (Chicago: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1964):2-7]} reprinted from Chapter 111, "The Death of Europe," in \textit{The Invisible Poet} (New York: Ivan Ob lensky, 1959) Hugh Kenner foresaw and accurately predicted most of the revelations that the original manuscripts were able to reveal. Kenner anticipated most of the 'revisionary' readings of the poem that have resulted from the introduction of the ideas of such recent theorists as Derrida, Lacan, Foucault and the many writers whose own work borrows heavily from those three.

\textsuperscript{27} Cooper, 98. The comment appears in his footnotes to chapter one. It reads: "It [Eliot's philosophical work] entirely overwhelsms less resourceful critics like Anne Bolgan."
book on Eliot (The Invisible Poet) is marred by "an amateur's overestimation of Eliot's philosophical sophistication." 28

However, other recent critics, like Lewis Freed, Piers Gray, Richard Shusterman, Harriet Davidson, and the tandem of Jewel Spears Brooker and Joseph Bentley 29 have found that Eliot's philosophical accomplishments were indeed impressive and sophisticated. Richard Shusterman and Cleo McNelly Kearns, for instance, have emphasized the hitherto ignored or misunderstood importance of Bertrand Russell's Logical Atomism to Eliot's philosophical thought. 30 Kearns has also re-examined the influence of Indic tradition on Eliot during his pre-conversion period 31 in the light of contemporary theory. Piers Gray has unearthed an important link in the chain of Eliot's development by incorporating the suggestive data from Josiah Royce's Seminar, 1913-1914: As Recorded in the Notebooks of Harry T. Costello, 32 which Eliot attended,

28. Ibid.
32. I am only acquainted with this work through Gray's discussion of it; nevertheless, its original publication and
and in which he participated rather prominently it would seem. Gray also thoroughly and carefully examines Eliot's unpublished graduate essays. Harriet Davidson has attempted to show that Eliot's philosophical ideas were remarkably similar to those of Martin Heidegger and were profoundly anticipatory of recent theory such as that of the two Jacques, Derrida and Lacan.

The difficulty that emerges from Davidson's otherwise fine work is that she too is required in some senses to force the current theory in ways which don't quite fit. As I will show, her insistence that Eliot radically, and prophetically, denied the existence of the autonomous individual subject is clearly contradicted by Eliot's early poetry and criticism. Davidson, like numerous others, is misled because of her concentration on Eliot's philosophical work. Aside from the downright erroneous assertions these philosophy-oriented critics make, these reductive analyses simply fail to account for the complexities and nuances of The Waste Land. There is more in The Waste Land than is dreamt of in their philosophy, or in their interpretations of the poetry.

Valuable as these various studies are, and of course there are many more in the same vein as Davidson's, they

Gray's discussion of it reveal its importance to a study of Eliot.
33. Davidson, 55. Says Davidson, "the key to [Eliot's] thought, particularly in this pre-conversion period is his complete rejection of the idea of a self, a rejection based, not as some commentators insist, on psychological grounds, but on philosophical grounds."
could have been more useful and comprehensive had they mined the important ore of Eliot's own writing about poetry and poets/ writers during the early period of his career. The importance of the philosophical material is undeniable, but to claim, as most critics to varying degrees have done, that Eliot's poetry and poetics can be "explained," even must be explained, in terms of his philosophy is to ignore Eliot's own observations about the nature of the philosophical enterprise and its clear differences from the poetic as well as critical practice. Lewis Freed, for example, makes the extreme claim that Eliot's early writing is "unintelligible" without Bradley, a claim he is perhaps only able to make because he almost completely ignores Eliot's early published criticism. Granted Freed is being deliberately polemical, and granted he means the philosophical writing, but had he (and the others) read Eliot's whole corpus during this period they would have discovered Eliot refuting them himself. The philosophy-oriented criticism, in particular, which ignores these "facts," ignores also that these facts stubbornly resist both philosophy itself and philosophical criticism. Theories and readings of Eliot's poetry generated out of his philosophical writing simply don't fit the facts as they are revealed in his non-philosophical prose.

In "[A Review of] Theism and Humanism" Eliot makes the frank observation that many of the inquiries and beliefs of philosophers are "limited by the meaning which the terms

34. Freed, xv.
have in practice." Eliot is reacting rather exasperatedly to the entire philosophical enterprise wherein someone could, in all apparent seriousness, prove or argue for the existence of the external world as having "that highest degree of probability" which is 'inevitability.'" Far from being a "probability" at all, says Eliot, such a belief is "something only a madman would doubt or a philosopher would assert." Eliot, in other words, dismisses things philosophical as largely irrelevant beyond the purely intellectual game-playing sphere. Tellingly, Eliot's most hostile reaction is to Mr. Balfour's (the author of the book he is reviewing) discussion of art and his theories about "aesthetics," wherein he claims that "when we [men] explicitly face the problem, we become deeply conscious of the incongruity between our feelings of beauty and a materialistic account of their origin." As one who does most explicitly face the problem, Eliot says "I fail to find... any such incongruity in art." Eliot gives the real world of lived experience primacy, not only over philosophy but in art, where "feelings of beauty" must have their origin in the materialistic world.

Of recent critics who have taken the philosophical tack with Eliot, only William Skaff has attempted to integrate all of Eliot's "interests" into a discussion of Eliot's poetics. Skaff, rightly I think, maintains that Eliot's

36. Ibid., p.265.
developing poetics were heavily influenced by such other of Eliot's interests as psychology, anthropology, and science, and in so doing, Skaff provides a necessary corrective to the heavily philosophical treatises which have dominated recent Eliot scholarship. Without presenting any revolutionary thesis, indeed by re-asserting what was well known and well accepted, Skaff seeks to produce a view of Eliot's development in which all things cohere. But Skaff concludes, wrongly I think, that Eliot attempted to eliminate the "opposition between the idea and life" and, like a "modern surrealist poet" attempted to "portray the content of the unconscious directly in the work of art." Again, the early prose clearly refutes Skaff. According to Eliot, the work of art transforms life, shows the awful separation between life and the idea, and makes something peculiar to art. Art uses the unconscious and the conscious, the "idea" and "life," but does so in such a way that the work produced is a thing unto itself. Skaff's concern to formulate an easily expressible interpretation of Eliot and Eliot's poetics results in an overly reductive assessment (all assessments are necessarily somewhat reductive) of Eliot. Virtually ignoring Eliot's poetry, Skaff fails to account for its full complexity. Reading the criticism selectively, he fails to account for all that Eliot theorized.

Had the philosophy-oriented critics read Eliot's early prose about poetry, they would have seen that it is laced with generous doses of dismissiveness toward philosophy and even to "ideas" in terms of their usefulness or value for the poetic enterprise. Eliot once declared, for instance, that "the 'historical' critic and the 'philosophical' critic had better be called historians and philosophers quite simply,"38 and that there was no point referring to their work as literary at all. In "Kipling Redivivus" Eliot remarks that philosophies and "ideas" are "not material which emotion can feed long upon."39 Given the importance for poetry that Eliot ascribed to "emotion," this is tantamount to saying that poetry will find no nourishment in philosophy. In praising Henry James, Eliot paid him the compliment that his mind was "so fine that no idea could violate it,"40 and that he was "too intelligent to court ideas."41 "The poet," Eliot says elsewhere, "knows that it is no good, in writing poetry, to try to be anything but a poet."42

The most damning denunciation of philosophy's relevance to his own practice comes in Eliot's letters. From at least as early as 1915, his letters make deprecatory reference to

philosophy in terms of its actual impact on "the mechanistic universe." In a long letter on matters philosophical to Norbert Weiner, dated 6 January 1915, Eliot observes that his "sympathies" incline toward a "relative materialism," and that "the mechanistic world is that to which one would tend to conform." He tells Wiener that

In a sense, of course, all philosophising is a perversion of reality: for, in a sense, no philosophic theory makes any difference to practice.

and

I am quite ready to admit that the lesson of relativism is: to avoid philosophy and devote oneself to either real art or real science. (For philosophy is an unloved guest in either company)... The only reason why relativism does not do away with philosophy altogether, after all, is that there is no such thing to abolish! There is art and there is science, which would never have occurred had not many people been under the impression that there was philosophy.43

The real world is the final referent for Eliot. "Art" and "science" are the realities which "occur" when people act out of the "illusion" that there is philosophy.

None of this is to suggest, however, that the philosophy-oriented criticism is of no relevance whatever. Indeed, even Eliot's denunciation of it suggests that philosophy, or the illusion that it exists, is an important

catalyst. In "Theism and Humanism," after discounting the primacy of philosophy, Eliot goes on to suggest that "our interest in art cannot be isolated from the other interests of life, among them interests of philosophy and religion." But while this appears to contradict his other claims, two important features of Eliot's poetics surface in this brief, and somewhat off-hand, statement. First, art itself is given primacy over Eliot's "other interests." Second, Eliot's recognition that art cannot be isolated from "other interests of life" must be read in the context of his rather cavalier dismissal of the philosophical enterprise in general, and his assertion of the primacy, once again, of lived experience--not as it is theorized, but rather as it is "lived" and "experienced."

Eliot observed in "The Function of Criticism" that "art may be affirmed to serve ends beyond itself; but art is not required to be aware of these ends, and indeed performs its function, whatever that may be, according to various theories of value, much better by indifference to them." Even more to the point, Eliot acknowledged that "even the purest literature is alimented from non-literary sources, and has non-literary consequences," and that "pure literature is a chimera of sensation; admit the vestige of

44. Ibid.  
an idea and it is already transformed." Moreover, in "A Brief Treatise on the Criticism of Poetry," Eliot declared, there are a variety of points of view from which a thoughtful and useful study of poetry can be made. Poetry is also a social document and may be made use of by the historian, the moralist, the social philosopher or the psychoanalyst.

Eliot's comments on the philosophies of poets, particularly the Romantic poets such as Blake and Coleridge, also indicate that Eliot does not entirely discount the place of philosophy in poetry. What he says instead is that poetry which is overtly philosophical results in a marriage which is not only not "felicitous," but also "too much occupied with ideas." He goes on to say that when a poet is philosophical "in the derogatory sense" of "courting ideas" then the poetry produced is not of the first intensity.

The overwhelming impression one gets from that early prose is that the writer is talking about himself most surely when he appears to be talking about someone else, and that, even without his necessarily being aware of it, Eliot used those early essays as a testing ground for developing a poetics which is considerably more subtle and complex than the few generalizations that are his legacy can possibly convey. Late in his life Eliot admitted that in his early

criticism: "I was implicitly defending the kind of poetry we all wrote," and with that as a sure guide to discovering what kind of poetry that actually was, it seems a matter of scholarly integrity to examine that early writing. In the same essay, though, Eliot also expressed his exasperation with those critics who presumed that he (Eliot) had "sketched out the design for a massive critical structure, and spent the rest of [his] life filling in the details." In fact, what a careful reading shows is that the critical pronouncements were often after-the-fact attempts to explain what had been done unknowingly. In a very suggestive observation, though, Eliot accounted for this dependence of theory on practice, saying "the instinct for tidiness compels us to try to do consciously what we perceive to be haphazard and unconscious."

There is one very salient feature of Eliot's early statements which must still be accounted for. He does not seem to have been able to articulate his poetics fully in the prose. Often, Eliot deliberately and consciously stops short of saying precisely what he means, or else he seems to be struggling to articulate something which is not quite clear. Even his cryptic observations about "truth" and "facts" betray this inability to articulate his thoughts: "If anyone complains that I have not defined truth, or fact, or reality, I can only say apologetically that it was no

part of my purpose to do so, but only to find a scheme into which, whatever they are, they will fit, if they exist."

Given Eliot's insistence on the importance of fact in particular, this admission clearly shows that, although Eliot "knew" hard facts when he encountered them, he could not define the term. Still more telling are the numerous occasions when he resorts to analogy in an effort to articulate an idea. It is as though he cannot find the language or the vocabulary for what he is thinking, and is forced to approximate. It is only in the poetry that Eliot finds ways of expressing his "whole of tangled feelings," but because there is that about poetry which prevents poetry from speaking for itself, Eliot's poetry enacts the poetics without articulating them.

Taken as a whole, however, the isolated strands of thought in the early prose do begin to form a web for a poetics which the poetry, at least figuratively, completes. Eliot's critical statements--famous and forgotten, infamous and ignored--reveal his opinion that the individual exists in flux between the social discourses which inform society in general and the central core of the self. We will see that not only the individual subject but the work of art as well exists in a kind of half-way state, conflating, but not uniting, disparate and often conflicting elements; yoking, but not merging. The earlier critical statements also reveal

Eliot's belief that the work of art hovers between the real

50. Ibid., 41.
and the ideal, or the actual and the imagined, simultaneously exposing and closing the gap between them. We will see that Eliot's ongoing concern with the relationship of individuals (either persons or works) to "the whole" (either society or tradition) resolves itself, or rather refuses to resolve itself, in this sense of liminality, or of "throbbing between two lives." Eliot seeks to bring disparate things into juxtaposition, but at the same time he always maintains the distinctions between them; he conflates and compares rather than merges.

The Waste Land's own curiously liminal position in relation to things canonical can be better understood in light of Eliot's liminal poetics. The poem's many, varied, and even conflicting effects, which no critical approach seems able fully to account for, also begin to be comprehensible in the full light of this recurring concern with liminality. By reading the poetry in the context of the early prose we can see Eliot's early groping toward a poetics of liminality. This poetics was never fully articulated in the prose; it was, however, enacted both substantively and formally in The Waste Land. By proceeding somewhat liminally; that is, by straddling Eliot's critical and creative writings, we can chart this development. If I have not yet fully defined or articulated this poetics of liminality which informs The Waste Land, I hope I have demonstrated the difficulty of doing so. It is only, after all, with the development of a post-modern critical
vocabulary, designed specifically to describe Modernism, that this poetics can even begin to be articulated. Obviously, ideas which are called post-modern, are actually only attempts to describe and explain modernism. Poets like Eliot, who operate at the edge of, even ahead of, language, have forced new ways of thinking, and new ways of talking about things, upon our awareness. Post-modern critics have then provided the vocabulary and the theoretical framework which is necessary for any attempt to explain Modernism. It is therefore no surprise that only now has it become possible to understand, let alone articulate the full import of what Eliot was theorizing in the early prose.

And, in an ironic and admittedly accidental way, Eliot's early prose even anticipates the problems we have in talking about him. What Eliot saw as the major problem to be overcome in studying Ben Jonson applies equally to Eliot himself:

He has suffered from his great reputation as a critic and theorist, from the effects of his intelligence. We have been taught to think of him as the man, the dictator....as the literary politician impressing his views upon a generation; we are offended by the constant reminder of his scholarship. We forget the comedy in the humours, and the serious artist in the scholar. [He] has suffered in public opinion as anyone must suffer who is forced to talk about his art.\(^\text{51}\)

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This ironically prescient vision of his own ultimate fate serves as a useful guide through the bewildering mazes of Eliot criticism and scholarship, both his own and that of others. Rather than concentrating on the ever-lengthening shadow of Eliot the man, the dictator, and rather than being offended by the constant reminder of his scholarship, it is time to pay attention to the serious artist, and, I will argue, to the "comedy" in Eliot, by paying attention to what Eliot said when he talked about his art through his discussion of other artists.
Chapter 2
TOWARD A DEFINITION OF THE SUBJECT:
ORIGINALITY, INDIVIDUALITY, PERSONALITY

More than any other single fact about Eliot, his view of personality and the individual subject has been misrepresented, misinterpreted, or misunderstood. This has been especially the case with the critics who focus on philosophy, either post-modern or Eliotic. Neither his philosophical writing nor his more famous pronouncements account fully for the subtle nuances of Eliot's fraught concept of the human subject. The problem with the philosophy-oriented criticism is that it conveniently ignores the statements Eliot made about the subject in his early critical prose, statements which stubbornly contradict the pronouncements of his philosophical analyses. The early critical prose outlines a complex view of the individual subject as partially constructed out of social influence and partly essential. The statements in the early critical prose also significantly inform Eliot's understanding of the relationship between the individual and society, between the individual and the tradition.

Eliot was raised as an American, with the strong emphasis on an Emersonian belief in the individual which that implies. Yet, as Peter Ackroyd convincingly argues, Eliot was conditioned by his Unitarian up-bringing to feel a
deep responsibility to his community.\(^1\) Given these contradictory impulses, it is not surprising that Eliot's comments on individuality, and its corollaries of "personality" and "originality" appear initially to form a bewildering tangle of contradictions and qualifications. The complex of ideas surrounding this issue is further complicated by Eliot's separation of the critical, the poetic and the philosophical enterprise. The philosophically oriented critics have relied on Eliot's philosophical discussions of the subject. Keeping this in mind, and keeping in mind the significant fact that Eliot himself rejected philosophy because the terms used are limited by the meaning which they have in practice, it is nevertheless necessary (and interesting) to begin where those critics have begun in order to see the disparity between Eliot's "theory," or philosophy, and his "practice" or his literary writing, both critical and creative.

Harriet Davidson follows the recent trend of "philosophical" critics in asserting Eliot's "thoroughgoing

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1. Peter Ackroyd, *T.S. Eliot* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1984). This aspect of Eliot's background underscores and informs all of Ackroyd's biography, beginning immediately in the first chapter, "Origins," where he says, "The pervasive and dominant presence in the [Eliot] household...was that of his [Eliot's] grandfather, William Greenleaf Eliot, who had died the year before Eliot was born. Eliot, even in old age, remembered his influence as that of one who 'rules his son and his son's sons from the grave, a Moses upon whose tablets were engraved the laws of public service'" (16). According to Ackroyd, Eliot still embodied "the Unitarian ethic of leadership and service," long after he had supposedly abandoned Unitarianism--the faith which characterized Christ as "a sort of superior Emerson."
non-subjectivity, and argues that 'the key to Eliot's thought, even in the pre-conversion period, is his complete rejection of the idea of a self.' Eliot's 'critique of the self...is central in all of Eliot's thought,' according to Davidson, and such other previous commentators as William Skaff, Piers Gray, and Richard Shusterman who all claim Eliot's dissertation denies the existence of the subject, or the individual self. In a similar vein, Brooker and Bentley assert that Eliot had formulated a concept of the human subject which bears close resemblance to that conception which traces its line of descent from Heidegger through Gadamer to Derrida—a conception of subjectivity as rooted in language.

Harriet Davidson enlists John D. Margolis' aid in making her case that Eliot's writings are "rooted in doubt about the self," but she tries to make that doubt mean something it does not attempt to mean. Margolis claims that Eliot's non-philosophical writings reject the idea of subjectivity. Nevertheless Margolis admits (and Davidson admits the admission) that Eliot's skepticism about the value of the individual self is based on his sense of the "insufficiency of the autonomous individual." "Doubting the

2. Davidson, 74.
3. Ibid., 55.
4. Ibid., 77.
5. Brooker and Bentley, 6-7.
sufficiency of the autonomous self should not be confused with doubting the existence of the self. The terms become fuzzy when they are "alimented," to use an Eliotic word, with contemporary critical jargon, but the basic premise being proposed by contemporary critics is that Eliot held the view that the individual human subject has no central core, and is rather just a matrix of social discourses, the sources of which are unknowable.

Some of Eliot's criticism appears to bear this out. For Eliot, the personality—even of Bradley himself, whose own rejection of the self Eliot is said to be emulating—seems to be more important than almost anything else. Bradley's personality is "manifested in" his style. Mikhail Bakhtin said that in novels, styles masquerade as characters; Eliot says style reveals personality. In other words, the

language-rootedness of identity, or personality is such that

7. Eliot felt at the time the dissertation was being published that its only real value was to show the extent to which his prose style had been influenced by Bradley. In "To Criticize the Critic," the title essay of his last essay collection (To Criticize the Critic (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1965):21), Eliot observes

I spent three years, when young, in the study of philosophy. What remains to me of these studies? The style of three philosophers: Bradley's English, Spinoza's Latin and Plato's Greek.

This follows on the heels of Eliot saying he wrote his best criticism when he was writing about someone whose style had influenced his own. Bradley, though not a poet, "affected" him "profoundly," he says, but it was Bradley's style, and the "personality as manifested in his works," rather than the philosophy itself which interested him.
one's personality is revealed in one's language. But, since language is something which is externally located and acquired, and which is by definition fundamentally communal, the personality revealed in this way cannot be said to constitute a central core of identity. As such, Eliot's remark that style reveals personality does seem to suggest that the subject has no central core.

But in his essay on Blake Eliot makes clear claims for the existence of a central core of the self:

It is important that the artist should be highly educated in his own art; but his education is one that is hindered rather than helped by the ordinary processes of society which constitute education for the ordinary man. For these processes consist largely in the acquisition of impersonal ideas which obscure what we really are and feel, what we really want, and what really excites our interest. It is of course not the actual information acquired, but the conformity which the accumulation of knowledge is apt to impose, that is harmful. Tennyson is a very fair example of a poet almost wholly encrusted with parasitic opinion, almost wholly merged into his environment. Blake, on the other hand, knew what interested him, and he therefore presents only the essential, only in fact, what can be presented and need not be explained....He was naked and saw man naked, and from the centre of his own crystal."

This quote is crucial because it elucidates the whole complex of Eliot's thought regarding individuality. "The centre of his own crystal" would sound very much like an expression of a belief in a central core of personality even if it were stripped of the support of surrounding statements. Those statements make Eliot's belief in such an S. "The Naked Man," 208.
essential entity very clear. Eliot argues that education is likely to "encrust" that central core with "parasitic opinion," and that "the accumulation of knowledge" is "apt to impose conformity" because the "impersonal ideas" will "obscure what we really are and feel." Significantly, Eliot makes this statement in an unguarded moment, so to speak, when he is concentrating on a specific task. Surely then these comments on Blake reveal Eliot's actual belief more truly than do statements made in the deliberate and calculated process of constructing a philosophical treatise: the terms here are those of "practice" rather than "theory." And the belief expressed is that there is a "real" self which knows what it thinks and feels, a self which is taught conformity by the usual methods of education. A seeming paradox arises. Eliot, who stresses often that order exists outside of any one individual, nevertheless resists conformity as it is created by the imposition of knowledge. For a solution to this apparent contradiction, however, we can turn again to the early prose, and particularly to Eliot's discussion of Romanticism versus Classicism.

Late in his life, Eliot remarked about the "recurrent theme of Classicism versus Romanticism" in his early writing. This opposition is predicated on underlying assumptions about the relationship between individuals and communities, at least in Eliot's discussion of that theme.

These terms, then, form the parameters within which Eliot himself envisioned the conflict, and as such form a useful starting place for an examination of Eliot's various attitudes to and utterances on the subject.

**Classicism/Romanticism**

In brief we can see that, for Eliot, Romanticism connotes a solipsistic self-expression which is fundamentally narcissistic, and fundamentally concerned with the individual. In a review titled "A Romantic Patrician," which Eliot wrote of *Essays in Romantic Literature* by George Wyndham, Eliot goes so far as to link Romanticism with Imperialism, suggesting that the typical Romantic (namely Mr. Wyndham) thinks the world is "an adventure of himself." George Wyndham's "curiosity" was employed "romantically," says Eliot, "not to penetrate the real world, but to complete the varied features of the world he made for himself." ¹⁰ We have seen questions raised by Eliot's demarcation of a "real" world, that is a natural versus an abstract, philosophically constructed world. Here we see Eliot's clear deprecation of Romantic individualism as a belief system characterized by an unwillingness to face the real world: "Romanticism is a short-cut to the strangeness [of a life] without the reality; and it leads its disciples

¹⁰ *Athenaeum* (May, 2 1919):266.
only back on themselves." He continues: "the only cure for Romanticism is to analyze it."¹¹

Eliot believes that Romanticism is inherently hostile to community because the Romantic constructs a philosophical universe without acknowledging its material origins. This belief led Eliot to describe the Romantic generation ("if it existed"¹²) as chaotic, to criticize the poetry of the Romantic poets as overly philosophical, and to denigrate the philosophies of the Romantic poets. The "chaos" of Romanticism prompts Eliot to dismiss the Romantic age as "ineffectual" and incapable of exerting "influence" on future generations. But this dismissal is problematic in at least two ways. First, Eliot is certainly aware that the writers in question have had a profound influence, so profound that in trying to eke out a new niche for himself he is virtually required to react fiercely against them. Second, he accuses the Romantic of creating a world for himself or even of himself, and yet those are the very terms he uses elsewhere to praise the great writers. A further but less provocative contradiction is raised, of course, by the notion of the "ineffectual imperialist." Basically, though, what bothers Eliot about Romanticism is that Romantics attempt to create the world "in their own image."¹³

¹¹ Loc. cit.
¹³ "The Comedy of Humours," Athenaeum (Nov. 14, 1919): 1180-1. Eliot makes the point in the context of an attempt to differentiate between creating characters which are "real" because they come from the author's actual experience of the
major fault, according to Eliot, was his self-absorption. His virtue—"personality"—was also his weakness, because his philosophy, like his visions, like his insight, like his technique, was his own. And accordingly he was inclined to attach more importance to it than an artist should; this is what makes him eccentric, and makes him inclined to formlessness.\(^4\)

Apart from the important ways in which this statement reiterates Eliot's distinction between poetry and philosophy, between art and "ideas," this assessment of Blake shows how Eliot can find Romanticism 'chaotically ineffectual.' The naked Romantic, for all his narcissistic will-to-power, can have no effect on society, because he does not proceed from an understanding of conditions in the real world.\(^5\) Too egocentric to recognize either the value, or the best means, of borrowing, of building, from what has gone before, Romanticism produces a very ineffectual, because formless, self-construct. The personal point of view, which Eliot will stress as crucial to both the critic and the creative writer, gets short shrift in Eliot's

world, and characters which are mere reflections of the author himself without an autonomous existence.

\(^4\) "The Naked Man," 209.

\(^5\) Many recent critics have shown that Eliot's judgement of Blake as disregarding the material conditions of the world is probably erroneous. I do not concur with Eliot's judgement, but find it important as a demonstration of what Eliot believed about Romanticism. Whether he was right or wrong is, if I may use the term, immaterial.
analysis of Blake, and of the long poem. Blake's longer poems and "poems requiring structure" fail because they rely on a personal, individual point of view. For Eliot, something of the self, something personal must be given over, or surrendered, in the name of structure.

According to Eliot, this eccentricity and formlessness in Blake "is most evident, of course, in the long poems--or rather the poems in which structure is important" because you cannot create a very large poem without introducing a more impersonal point of view, or splitting it up into various personalities.

This essay (1920) shows Eliot worrying one of the problems he is already encountering in the writing of his own long poem ("the longest poem in the English language [sic]" Pound said\(^{16}\)). What we learn from this discussion is that the apparent formlessness of The Waste Land conforms perfectly to Eliot's concept of structure, particularly as it relates to the long poem. What we might call a relational structure emerges in The Waste Land which is consistent with Eliot's concept both of the self and of the social structure of which the self is a partial expression. Eliot's own "personality" is surrendered to the work; the work consists of a number of smaller and seemingly disconnected fragments, and is, on the surface, formless. But the formlessness itself mimics the age to some extent, and even a cursory

glance at the criticism will attest that the poem as a whole has an almost infinite range of formal structures. More importantly, the poem exhibits such a deep consciousness of its age that it has been accepted as the quintessential expression of the age.

In "The Function of Criticism," written for *The Criterion* in 1923, Eliot expresses his views about automatic writing and the people who believe they can hear, and should listen to, an "inner voice," saying they ignore the relational nature of humanity which makes an order outside of any individual. For Eliot, the individual is only knowable through its relationships to other individuals. But Romanticism ignores the relational structure of society. The Romantic creates a world "in his own image," and is therefore, by definition, too "original" to be effective. Proceeding from the self rather than the world, and turning only back upon the self as a result, the Romantic can connect nothing with nothing.

Having said all of this, though, Eliot makes an apparent reversal when he says, "the Arts insist that a man shall dispose of all that he has, even of his family tree, and follow art alone." The Arts, he says, "require that a man be not a member of a family or a caste or of a party or of a coterie, but simply and solely himself."17 George Wyndham is a Romanticist precisely because he "plants himself firmly in a caste." But this apparent contradiction

in reality begins to delineate precisely what it is that for Eliot constitutes the subject. Eliot's criticism of Wyndham stems from the realization that to ignore the pervasiveness and the anxiety of influence is not to shed them or divest oneself of them, but rather to be molded "firmly in the caste" of them. Eliot's objection to Romanticism is not to any particular age, but rather to that attitude which ignores, or believes itself free from, influence. The best writers of the Romantic period, for Eliot, were those who were conscious of their age, the "completely awakened intelligence" which can "register and absorb" the "vibrations" of an age and give them "articulate voice." The consciousness of one's age which allows one to be a permanent representative of that age is only possible for the person who recognizes the influences and trends which have produced that age. To "dispose of" one's influences is only possible once those influences have been perceived with a "true cold hardness" and acknowledged. Wyndham is a "Romantic, riding to hounds across his prose, looking with wonder upon the world as upon a fairyland," because he does not acknowledge the influences which constitute the materiality of his own existence. "Better and more uncommon" than the Romantic, says Eliot, is "the Individual." And this individual, according to Eliot's discussion of Classicism,

is the person who knows the importance of recognizing the structure outside of any one person.

Eliot's discussions of Classicism proceed by negative definitions: Classicism, for instance, is not a simple alternative to Romanticism; neither is it a reverence for the great works of the past in place of an obsession with novelty. In "Ulysses, Order and Myth," Eliot observes that one can be 'classical' in a sense by turning away from nine-tenths of the material which lies at hand, and selecting only mummified stuff from a museum.  

 Obviously, this is not the kind of Classicism he values. He is at pains to assert the essential difference between a simple exhumation of that which is old and the more relevant historical method of Ezra Pound. Eliot's assertion that "the job of the poet should be to educate himself in poetry in order to be 'new'" implies that one cannot be new without knowing what has gone before, which is another way of saying that to know one's own influences and "point of view" is the only way of being "wholly oneself" or original. As Eliot phrased it, 

Pound's skill is to use his erudition to capture for contemporary readers a sensibility from another time and place. He finds in them what it is that we want.  

22. Ibid., 5.
Finding what is useful for the modern world is the purpose of discovering the old, but to find what is useful for the modern world entails more than simply discovering the old. After all, as Eliot also said, "Classicism loves novelty."²³ Classicism is "doing the best one can with the materials at hand."²⁴ This definition of the Classicist as bricoleur is not the only, but probably the most succinct, definition Eliot gives of his conception of Classicism. The important distinction is that the Classicist has a consciousness of the age. It is insufficient either to select mummified stuff from museums or to assume one can make the world in one's own image. One must use the materials at hand to produce something which is recognizably new—recognizable because it demonstrates its own knowledge of what has gone before, what lies at hand, and what time and place it occupies. Eliot "prized" both Dryden and Mallarmé precisely because they did this; they made what they could of their material.²⁵

Eliot's conception of the Romanticism/Classicism conflict answers questions too about the apparent contradiction between typical definitions of the two. Classicism "is not an alternative to Romanticism."²⁶ It is nothing peculiar to any time or place which accounts for

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²⁴ "Ulysses, Order, and Myth," 482.
²⁶ "Ulysses, Order and Myth," 482.
the difference, but rather a peculiar relationship to that
time and place. Romanticism versus Classicism, as Eliot
conceived it, depends upon a particular theory of the
individual subject or, rather, on a theory of that subject's
relationship to community. The distinction between a
Romantic and a Classicist is not even necessarily fixed or
consistent. Any one writer can be Romanticist or Classicist
at different times. One of Eliot's definitions of
Classicism, as "a goal toward which all good literature
strives, so far as it is good, according to the
possibilities of its time and place," requires even Eliot to
acknowledge that Austen, Blake, Byron and Goethe were all
Classicists at various times. The difference between the
Classicist and the Romantic, though, does not lie in the
possession or failure to possess personality. Rather, it
defines a relationship to the materials—to use the terms
Derrida borrowed from Claude Levi-Strauss—the bricoleur
over against the engineer. The Romanticist does not accept
what lies at hand, and thus dissociates himself from
society, whereas the Classicist tries to use what is
available to make something new or better. The Classicist
acknowledges his relationship to tradition and to community
without accepting it as it is; the Romanticist simply

28. Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign and Play in the
Discourse of the Human Sciences," in Modern Criticism and
108-122.
rejects influence out of hand, and is therefore original only in a negative sense, a mere product of unacknowledged and unconscious influences.

Influence/ Originality

Eliot's finely tuned sense of influence, which many observers have agreed appears to have significantly influenced the views and theories of Harold Bloom, is inextricably tangled up with his ideas about the individual self. In an essay ostensibly concerned with Henry James, whose own influence on Eliot is manifest, Eliot explains how James escaped the anxiety of Hawthorne's influence. Henry James' "tenderness" toward Hawthorne is

the tenderness of a man who had escaped too early from an environment to be warped or thwarted by it, who had escaped so effectually that he could afford the gift of affection.

Eliot goes on to say that "the soil which had produced [Hawthorne] with his essential flavour is the soil which produced, just as inevitably, the environment which stunted him." Eliot seems to be forming a picture of individuals as deeply affected by "the soil" which breeds them. In a similar vein he says, for instance, that

There could be written a very instructive account of American Puritanism, with its interesting transition to Transcendentalism; but this would be a history not of American but of Boston Literature, and it would turn out to be not so much a history of the brahminical canon of Boston literature as of Boston Society. 31

Interestingly enough he would seem to be emphasizing that American literature, with all its reverence for the individual, is deeply influenced by the social context out of which it springs; so much so in fact, that close enough scrutiny of the literature would actually turn out to be a history of the society which produced it. Eliot re-inforces this poetics, in "American Literature," when he argues that

The lack of intelligent literary society is not responsible for their [Hawthorne's, Poe's, Whitman's] shortcomings; it is much more certainly responsible for some of their merits. The originality, if not the full mental capability, of these men was brought out, forced out, by the starved environment in which they found themselves. 32

Starved environs force the individual to originality (the italics are Eliot's). Originality, by this definition, is created by influence; or, to be more precise, the lack of influence.

We have seen Eliot denigrate originality which results from ignoring influence. Now we see originality of a different kind also being depicted in, at best, an

32. Loc. cit.
ambivalent light. At least as early as 1917, in a review of *The Letters of J.B. Yeats*, Eliot seems to be of the opinion that originality is of minor importance, saying that "a poet seeks the truth, not originality." In the cases of Hawthorne, Poe and Whitman originality seems to be desirable, but not in itself essential to good art. In saying that their originality was "forced out" by the starved environment he implies that they would probably have been better off with less originality and a more fecund environment. There is, however, something unique in each artist. Influence is really only half the story. According to Eliot, the artist also has "passions" and impulses which must be satisfied and that

the ways in which the passions and desires of the creator may be satisfied in the work of art are complex and devious. In a painter they may take the form of a predilection for certain colours, tones, or lightings; in a writer the original impulse may be even more strangely transmuted.

This statement is rich with ramifications. What is relevant to the present discussion is that, for Eliot, the creative artist has "passions" which must be satisfied, and those passions again suggest the existence of a central core of identity. The artist acknowledges these passions and impulses by means of what Eliot admires in Hawthorne as

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"true cold hardness," what Eliot calls Donne's "difficult consciousness and honesty," which makes Donne so appealing to the modern audience.

Individuality and Personality

Eliot praised the "great writers" precisely because of their personality. Undoubtedly, Eliot describes the great writers—that is, the ones he thinks are great—as having "created a world," and as having "personality." Jonson and Shakespeare in particular are singled out in this way. Eliot says of Jonson's criticism, that he "not unnaturally laid down in abstract theory what is in reality a personal point of view." He goes on to say that:

It is in the end of no value to discuss Jonson's theory and practice unless we recognize and seize this point of view, which escapes the formulae, and which is what makes his plays worth reading. Jonson behaved as the great creative mind that he was: he created his own world.37 [italics mine]

For Eliot, then, to create one's own world is the work of the greatest creative mind. He reiterates this same conviction over and over, about Shakespeare, about Montaigne, about Dante. In his essay on Philip Massinger, originally titled "The Old Comedy," Eliot remarks that

"great literature" is "the transformation of a personality into a personal work of art." Since Massinger's personality "hardly exists," he does not, "out of his own personality, build a work of art as Shakespeare and Marlowe [do]." Clearly this statement gives primacy to that personality which is necessary in order to create great art.

At the same time, though, Eliot criticizes lesser writers for precisely the fault of "personality." Balzac arouses Eliot's ire because "the fantastic element" in Balzac "is not an extension of reality," as it is in Dostoevsky, but rather is "an atmosphere thrown upon reality direct from the personality of the writer." The result of this interference of personality is that "we cannot look at it [the atmosphere] as we can look at anything in Dostoevsky; we can only see things in it, we are plunged into it ourselves." In "Kipling Redivivus," Eliot accuses both Kipling and Swinburne of the defect of personality, while simultaneously revealing the solution to the apparent problem: Kipling and Swinburne, he says,

are personal: not by revelation, but by throwing themselves in and gesturing the emotion of the moment. The emotion is not 'there' simply, coldly independant of the author, of the audience."

What this statement reveals, and what "Humanist, Artist, Scientist," reiterates is that personality is a prerequisite for the artist, but that personality must be distilled or transformed in the work. Distinguishing between the humanist, the scientist and the artist, Eliot maintains that

the humanist has personality; often, we might think, more than the scientist or artist. But the humanist's personality throws out the idea, centrifugal, without so much entering into it....In the man of scientific or artistic temper the personality is distilled in the work, it loses its accidents, it becomes, as with Montaigne, a permanent point of view, a phase in the history of mind.\(^1\)

The trick, as it is formulated here, is to have personality without being personal. Somehow the artist must "enter into" the idea being expressed. "The creation of a work of art," he says, "consists in the process of transfusion of the personality, or, in a deeper sense, the life, of the author" into the work. He argues elsewhere that

The creation of a work of art is like some other forms of creation, a painful and unpleasant business; it is a sacrifice of the man to the work, it is a kind of death.\(^2\)

The "passions," the central core of self, are transformed into something coldly independent of the author. By acting

\(^2\) "Beyle and Balzac," 393.
as a "medium" as a "medium" between social influences and "passions," and by a kind of sacrifice to the work, wherein the author's own personality is both extinguished and transformed, the great artist produces a point of view. That point of view "loses its accidents," is transformed into something which is simply there, coldly independent of the author; the author has forgotten about having personality in the process of cultivating "true cold hardness," in the act of concentrating on being "honest" and "conscious of the age":

No artist produces great art by a deliberate attempt to express his personality. He expresses his personality indirectly through concentrating upon the task which is a task in the same sense as the making of an efficient engine or a turning of a jug or table leg. 

The artist must possess personality, and that personality will reveal itself in the work produced, but only "incidentally."

Eliot repeatedly insisted that a critic, to be effective, should also have personality, a point of view. He felt that Robert Lynd's greatest fault as a critic was that he did not expose "his biases, his prejudices." This would

43. This is, of course, the term Eliot uses in "Tradition and the Individual Talent," perhaps the most influential essay he ever wrote. Unfortunately, some of the qualifications and parameters of the idea in that essay have been over-looked so that the impersonal theory as presented there has been distorted and taken out of its context.
44. "Four Elizabethan Dramatists," Criterion v. ii, no. 6 (Feb. 1924): 115-23, 121.
have made him interesting if nothing else. "One must criticize from some point of view and...it is better to know what one's point of view is," Eliot said in The Criterion, and "to understand anything is to understand from a point of view." Works of art, as well as commentary and criticism of art, are only possible from some "point of view."

This relativism, which pervades all of Eliot's thinking, explicitly recognizes that the matrix of influences and passions which constitutes any given individual is unique to that individual, but the implicit recognition here is that the influences and passions are also universal. The particular configuration is unique but the materials out of which that configuration is made are general and common to everyone. This recognition is made more explicit in "The European Mind" where he remarks that "our categories of thought are largely the outcome of Greek thought; our categories of emotion are largely the outcome of Greek literature," and that "every European mind, even when untrained and uneducated" is saturated with the European tradition. This statement indicates at once his sense of the pervasiveness of influence and his grasp of how to be original in the positive sense. In another essay Eliot argues that "the study of more alien languages" could cast "into bold relief" the extent and kind of saturation to

which a mind had been subjected. The very notion of being able to cast this saturation into bold relief indicates a strategy for discovering the individual mind. And the "mind" itself that was revealed in a given piece of literature was what interested him. He felt that whatever matrix of influences produced the mind, it was the mind that he looked for in the literature.

The problem of merging originality and conventionality continually troubles Eliot. In a review of a Zoology textbook by one Professor Gamble, a very interesting essay on completely non-literary concerns in The Criterion, Eliot elaborates a complex theory of eugenics which seems, for him, to have significance in other ways. The thrust of the argument is that "highly developed control" tends to produce "exhaustion," which in turn leads to isolation and that produces a renewal of activity at a lower level of complexity. The "isolated" becomes the source of fresh individuality, but the new individual begins to dominate, and the new dominance in turn leads to diminished progress. One of the things which seems of interest to Eliot is that isolation can produce fresh individuality.

Eliot's casual acceptance of the principles of eugenics, which could be seen as rather Draconian, is mollified by his particular perspective on the matter. He is interested in what it reveals about the processes it

manipulates. More importantly, his detached, scientific curiosity, and willingness to tamper with "natural" processes suggests a recognition that even natural processes deemed sacrosanct may indeed be governed by mechanistic principles, which can be controlled and manipulated. His own discussion of it certainly focuses on its mechanistic aspects. Moreover, the process itself is one which lends itself well to Eliot and his poetics because it is, by definition, an oscillating system, in constant flux. The subject of the eugenic study achieves a kind of life, or a reality-in-relief against the backdrop of the controlling process. Although neither polar extreme in the process can be thought of as grounding the process in a concrete reality, the subject takes on a discernible shape and life when viewed against the backdrop of the process.

This mechanistic zoological analogy, then, provides a useful model both for Eliot and for a discussion of Eliot's view of the human subject. Finally, the question of whether or not Eliot believed that there is a knowable, discernible human subject—whether he anticipated Derridean thinking or not—becomes somewhat irrelevant in the same way that putative parallels with much of the material of contemporary theory does. In practice, critics need not bother their heads about such philosophical issues, because the "mechanistic world" demands its due. Eliot understood the extent to which the rhetorical universe, and the polar extremes of essential subjectivity and social inscription,
for all their apparent insubstantiality, nevertheless do their work upon us, become "material." This is not to say that speculations of the type suggested by these critics never "alimented" Eliot's thinking, but rather to reveal Eliot's solution to the problem of identity. For Eliot, the individual, and, in turn, the artist, exists in a state of flux between the purely personal and the strictly social. One of the more interesting observations Eliot makes about Donne is that it is "impossible" to "isolate what is 'conventional' in Donne from what is individual," a merging of convention and individuality that is accomplished through Donne's difficult consciousness and honesty. The problem for the artist is, first, to recognize the potency of influence, to strip away the accretions which produce only conformity rather than novelty, and second to look with honesty and hardness at the passions and the desires which must be satisfied.

We can see, then, that a close reading of all Eliot's statements about subject/object relationships, while initially appearing to reveal only more confusion, ultimately reveal his view of the individual personality as occupying the point of juxtaposition between the saturations of influence and the central core of self. The main thrust of his view is that, precisely because of the problems inherent in knowing what is the true self and what is the product of external accretions, the poet's job is extremely

difficult. His discussions of the various writers who in some way "alienated" themselves from their societies reveal his belief that this is one of the ways in which a writer can see more clearly the "essential." Writers who chose to escape the environments which bred them, like Henry James and Turgenev, as well as the poets who were isolated by the material conditions of their existence, are, in Eliot's judgement, able to see life more steadily and more whole. His own escape from the environment which spawned him can also be seen in this light. But what, then, does the early prose, in its honesty, hardness, and difficult consciousness show us about Eliot's own "saturations," influences and impulses? In order to complete our picture of Eliot, it is to these questions that we now turn.
Chapter 3

A PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST:

Early Impulses, Early Poems and the Primitive

One aspect of Eliot which cannot be made to fit neatly into a discussion of his poetics of liminality is the matter of his own influences. Paradoxically however, a close look at those influences, although an apparent detour, proves to be pivotal to a complete understanding of his poetry and poetics. As we have seen, Eliot's early prose posits the "point of view" as the intersection of all the various social, historical, and cultural influences with the central core of the self. This configuration is the individual subject and the personality. The early prose, however, also adds something to the record of Eliot's own point of view. The famous and well-documented influences--such as Dante, the Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatists, and his "possession" by Jules Laforgue--are a kind of official record of influences. And yet, a comprehensive reading of the early prose demonstrates that these do not fully account for Eliot's point of view. The well known "encrustations," or conformities, in Eliot intersect with some rather surprising, non-conformist, even radical impulses that sought expression. It is both necessary and interesting to show some of those predilections in Eliot which have gone largely un-noted.
Eliot's conception of the "point of view" provides him with a name for his conception of identity as existing in a state of ceaseless oscillation between diverse social, historical, and psychological forces, temporal yet permanent, social yet unique. The very nature of identity as described in this way is liminal, having no fixed location—spatially, temporally, psychologically or socially—yet existing within and without all of these loci. It comes as no great surprise, then, that Eliot's own point of view is itself rather liminal. That point of view consists of a number of juxtapositions: the dour seriousness and prudishness for which Eliot is renowned, with what Eliot himself called "decadence"; "an old man in a dry month" with "Priapus in the shrubbery"; an almost vicious cynicism with a kind of laughter that is submarine and profound. The gruesome, perverse, and somewhat disturbing content of some of the early poetry in particular reveals Eliot's complex response to the whole question of morality which cannot be entirely explained away with recourse to the usual reductive assessments of him as a moralizing prude. Even in allowing that the lesson of Baudelaire is that "all first rate poetry is occupied with morality," Eliot says "occupied with morality": the question of morality and how it is formed is as important as a given set of morals. Eliot's complex attitude toward morality takes on profound significance, particularly in light of the lesser-known

poems, those primitive attempts to work out what I am calling a "poetics of liminality," and their place in Eliot's oeuvre and his thinking.

Eliot seems to throb between two lives in the early writing. At times moralistic, at times decadent, at once scholarly and ribald, the early poetry in particular presents a point of view which attempts to straddle Eliot's own disparate inclinations. And even Eliot's more official and sanctioned influences can be shown to embrace the concept of liminality. His fondness for Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatists, for instance, stems from his taste for a particular aspect of this writing which straddles comedy and tragedy. His simultaneous fascination with and revulsion against the "grotesque" represents an almost schizophrenic sensibility. Also in constant flux are the contrary tendencies toward public expression of "forbidden" desires and toward preaching.

In a remarkably rich, complex and suggestive essay called "The Beating of a Drum," Eliot offers careful readers insight into the source of, and explanation for, his contrary tendencies. In that essay Eliot propounds a "theory of the development of tragedy and comedy out of a common form." The theory, plainly put, and carefully extracted from entanglements with other theories and theorists of the day is that "comedy and tragedy are late, and perhaps impermanent intellectual abstractions" and that "such
abstractions, after developing through several generations of civilization, require to be replaced or renewed." This pronouncement follows an earlier and more arbitrary one:

there must if the Fool in "Lear" be called a "comic" character, be admitted some of the same comic element in the Witches in "Macbeth." And I see no reason why, by the same extension, Caliban should not be included in the same category. I am aware that my classification of Pools may appear arbitrary. And two other inclusions may appear more arbitrary still: the Porter in Macbeth and Antony in the scene on Pompey's galley.

Eliot conceives of the fool as serving ends which are at once comic and serious, of holding these "abstractions," juxtaposed, in flux, and credits the fool with having a very ancient source, prior to the recent and arbitrary "abstractions" of comedy and tragedy. Bakhtin used historical data to contend that the Greek drama was incomplete unless the tragic trilogy was completed by its fourth part, the comedy; Eliot says the two once sprung from a common impulse and source. By extension, Eliot refutes the very validity of generic distinctions, and for these reasons, Eliot feels that the character of the fool is most effective when it acts in some way counter to the genre in which it appears: Shakespeare's most remarkable accomplishments in terms of the Fool and the comic servant.

occur in the tragedies; Marivaux's fools are both comic and tragic figures in order to attenuate the antithesis between seriousness and comedy; and it is in some genre that is neither tragedy or comedy that the Fool "is best observed."

Eliot uses "The Beating of a Drum" as a discussion of the primitive, ritualistic origins of the Fool and by consequence as a platform for discussing ritual and dance. There is "more than a suggestion of the shaman or medicine man" about the Fool in King Lear, says Eliot, and then "drama is essentially ritual and ritual is essentially a dance." The rhythmic, ritualistic and conventional aspects of literature are shown here by Eliot to be a kind of deep mimesis. Anti-mimetic in the usual sense, they nevertheless trigger a deeper level of consciousness wherein the sensibility is unified and the intellectual abstractions which differentiate between comedy and tragedy, between good and evil, between one person and another, between subject and object are partially broken down, and at some unconscious level pre-empted. Eliot saw this undercurrent as fundamental to the artistic impulse, observing of Ben Jonson that

8. Loc. Cit.
If we dig beneath the theory, beneath the observation, beneath the deliberate drawing and the theatrical and dramatic elaboration, there is discovered a kind of power, animating [Jonson's characters] which comes from below the intellect, and for which no theory of humours will account. And it is the same kind of power which vivifies Trimalchio, and Panurge, and some but not all of the "comic" characters in Dickens.\(^\text{10}\)

Elliot's conception of the artistic impulse as springing from some near involuntary, pre-rational source is further substantiated by his use of "The Beating of a Drum" as a platform for his own theorizing about poetry--a characteristic strategy of Elliot's. His own theories often sound, as he himself noted,\(^\text{11}\) like attempts to explain his own poetic practice after the fact. Elliot theorizes that art in all its forms from the primitive to the modern begins with an impulse which is prior to the rationalization of that impulse.

An unoccupied person, finding a drum, may be seized with a desire to beat it; but unless he is an imbecile he will be unable to continue beating it and thereby satisfying a need (rather than a "desire"), without finding a reason for doing so.\(^\text{12}\)

He is commenting on a study of modern dance made by W. O. E Oesterley, who, says Elliot, "falls into the common trap of interpretation" because he proposes to find "intelligible

11. C.f. "To Criticize the Critic," p. 27, where Elliot acknowledges precisely this fact. He is particularly careful to insist that the program does not come first, but is rather an attempt to explain the poetry.
reasons for the primitive dancer's dancing." What Eliot is objecting to is the notion that the reason precedes the gesture. "It is equally possible to assert," he says, "that the primitive man acted in a certain way and then found a reason for it." Action precedes explanation. What Eliot seeks in the primitive consciousness is the undissociated sensibility which knows no distinctions between comedy and tragedy, nor between the real and the ideal. For Eliot, the primitive consciousness which does not divide things up into "intellectual abstractions" constitutes, partially, both the source and the goal of modern art.

But Eliot is quick to assert in the same essay that an intelligent man will need to find reasons to go on beating the drum, and thereby satisfying a need rather than a desire. The reasons for beating the drum, in other words, are of equal importance to beating the drum itself. William Skaff ignores this important caveat when he concentrates on Eliot's fascination with the primitive. According to Skaff, Eliot admires the "unity of the primitive sensibility," and feels that "we must recover the rhythm of primitive ritual that embodies the unity of our consciousness." In its apparent assertion that Eliot seeks to crawl back into the womb of pre-linguistic, primitive consciousness, this assessment is clearly shown by the early prose to be superficial. What Eliot seeks is a way to conflate the

logical and the pre-logical. Eliot also says, elsewhere, that "the artist is, in an impersonal sense, the most conscious of men; he is therefore the most and the least civilized and civilizable; he is the most competent to understand both civilized and primitive." 15

The "drum" Eliot is beating is always already rational because it is constituted in language. Poetry, for all its ability to create stylizations of primitive consciousness through rhythm, conventions, ritual, repetitions, and spectacle, must always function within the linguistic realm. The pre-rational impulse of the writer does not automatically create a pre-rational response in the reader, though. That pre-rational impulse must function within the rational to trigger the pre-rational responses. "The idea simply comes," for Eliot, "but upon arrival it is subjected to prolonged manipulation." If "the ideas become more automatic, come more freely and are less manipulated" then "we begin to suspect their origin, to suspect that they spring from a shallower source." 16 They spring, in other words, from the discourses which have shaped the artist rather than from the deeper source of the impulses which have shaped the artist's response to those discourses; they signal ventriloquism rather than veracity.

This theory, then, is the deep source of Eliot's predilection for a particular type of comedy. Interestingly,

and despite the fact that Eliot is usually seen as humourless himself, he says in "To Criticize the Critic" that his "antipathy" toward D.H. Lawrence "remains" after many years because of Lawrence's "egotism, a strain of cruelty and a failing in common with Thomas Hardy--the lack of a sense of humour" [italics mine]. Eliot's own sense of humour, though, is not the kind he forcefully denigrates as "wholly insignificant funniness without seriousness."10 Rather, Eliot values the kind of humour he finds in the Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatists which, because of its yoking of seriousness and humour, might best be described as liminal. In reference to Ben Jonson, Eliot defined this comedy as "the comedy that is serious, even sombre."11 One might conclude from this definition of comedy, as William Skaff has done, that, for Eliot, only comedy which is ultimately serious "counts," and thus see Eliot, once again, as humourless. But that too is contradicted in the early prose. "The Beating of a Drum," the essay from which William Skaff draws precisely this conclusion,20 explicitly precludes distinguishing between seriousness and comedy, the two things which Eliot called "impermanent intellectual abstractions," and therefore precludes valuing one of these more than the other.

What Eliot considers good comedy is comedy which, by definition, is simultaneously serious and funny, yet not really either of these. Take for example Eliot's assertion that Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta* is not to be read as a "tragedy of blood," but rather as a "farce":

I say farce, but with the enfeebled humour of our times the word is a misnomer; it is a farce of the Old English humour, the terribly serious, even savage comic humour, the humour which spent its last breath on the decadent genius of Dickens.\(^{21}\)

The emphasis on a "savage comic humour" which is "terribly serious" is but one example of an ongoing and pervasive concern. This particular observation carries within it a number of tantalizing clues, among them the suggestive connection to Dickens from whom Eliot took the original title for *The Waste Land*, but its most interesting hint comes in its uniting of comedy and seriousness in a way which suggests a poetic programme to be revived. "The continued popularity of Shakespeare," says Eliot,

*has this meaning, that the appetite for poetic drama, and for a peculiarly English comedy or farce, has never disappeared.*\(^{22}\)

Wyndham Lewis also wins Eliot's approval because his work embodies the preservation, or perhaps the restoration, of this type of art. Eliot describes Lewis as wholly conscious

\(^{21}\) "Marlowe," 198.
\(^{22}\) "London Letter," (June, 1921): 687.
and deliberate in his attempt to restore "the Old English ferocity." 23

For Eliot, neither the taste for this type of humour nor the humour itself has completely disappeared. Eliot finds the modern equivalent of this kind of humour in the "low-brow" comedy of the lower classes, not in the more supposedly respectable comedies being written and produced for the middle and upper classes. Indeed Eliot feels that the "lower-class" humour of the music-hall, which is "mordant, ferocious and personal" 24 revives, or preserves, precisely the kind of serious comedy he values. The English music-hall comedian "supplies in part, and unconsciously, the defect," says Eliot, and by defect he means the aspect of modern humour which is "pitiably diminished." According to Eliot, English music-hall comedians "effect the comic purgation" with this almost mythical humour. The audience member, he says, "desires to see himself on the stage more admirable, more forceful, more villainous, more comical, more despicable--and more much else--than he actually is," and that

feeling in himself the possibility of being as funny as [music-hall comedians], is purged of unsatisfied desire, transcends himself, and unconsciously lives the myth, seeing life in the light of imagination. What is sometimes called "vulgarity" is therefore one thing that has not been vulgarised. 25

By straddling, in a way, the closed categories of humour and seriousness, the music-hall comedy allows the audience to enter into another kind of liminal state where the sharp and indestructible barriers between people are not so much broken down as blurred by this thing which allows them to be both more themselves and part of something communal.

Although the coincidence of perception has been overlooked by other critics, Eliot's way of conceiving this comedy which is serious closely parallels Mikhail Bakhtin's theories about "comic high seriousness" and its function in the kind of literature Bakhtin calls "carnivalesque." Bakhtin describes what he calls carnival laughter as having three essential components, all of which are paralleled in Eliot's discussions of comic seriousness:

It is, first of all, a festive laughter. Therefore, it is not an individual reaction to some isolated "comic" event. Carnival laughter is the laughter of all the people. Second, it is universal in scope; it is directed at all and everyone, including the carnival's participants. The entire world is seen in its droll aspect, in its gay relativity. Third, this laughter is ambivalent: it is gay, triumphant, and at the same time mocking, deriding. It asserts and denies, it buries and revives.²⁶ (italics mine)

Eliot, like Bakhtin, believes that the comic purgation entails a simultaneous degradation and exhaltation. One of the practitioners Eliot cites repeatedly as achieving this effect is, not surprisingly, Rabelais. Eliot's perspective

is somewhat different from Bakhtin's of course, and Bakhtin made much more of the material than Eliot, but the clear resemblances cannot be wholly ignored. By partially breaking down the otherwise "indestructible barriers" between people, this collaborative, serious comedy gives participants a glimpse into "the myth," but at an unconscious level, and the myth is, at its heart, both for Eliot and Bakhtin, the life principle which unites, or occupies a liminal threshold between, death and life. For Eliot, this principle is manifested in the fertility rituals. For Bakhtin it is manifested in Carnival, which is the same thing under a different guise.

In his discussions of the music-hall comedy, Eliot also calls attention to another kind of liminality when he justifies "vulgarity" as something wholly elevated because of the communion between otherwise isolated individuals that it represents. Granted, his description of the music hall comedy as "ferocious" and "mordant" would seem to belie its communal, collaborative nature. Granted, his description of the music hall comedian as "pitting himself against a suitable audience," an audience which is "quick to respond with approval or contempt" suggests a fairly "ferocious" kind of collaboration. Nevertheless, for Eliot the music-hall comedy has the comic seriousness which allows the audience member to "transcend himself" and live the myth.

And the myth too, according to Eliot, occupies a liminal

27. "Beyle and Balzac," 393.
state because "the myth is imagination, and it is also criticism, and the two are one." 28

Serious comedy also operates in a liminal state between conscious appreciation and unconscious manipulation. The audience will accept their own ideal "only unconsciously," Eliot argues. The comic purgation that is effected by the music-hall comedian would be ineffective if its full effect were consciously apprehended, because "the audience do not realize that the performance...is a compliment and a criticism of themselves," and "neither could they appreciate the compliment or swallow the criticism." A comedy of both conscious and unconscious effects, it is neither completely one or the other. Eliot believes that this kind of comedy allows audience and performer to collaborate in a kind of communal activity.

Obviously collaboration is another kind of liminality. In "The London Letter" of December 1922, Eliot reiterates his belief in the collaborative nature of this type of comedy, but broadens the ramifications of his argument:

The working-man who went to the music-hall and saw Marie Lloyd and joined in the chorus was himself performing part of the work of acting; he was engaged in that collaboration of the audience with the artist which is necessary in all art.[italics mine] 29

The fact that this article was twice reprinted within a reasonably short period of time further substantiates Eliot's conviction about its basic premise; namely that comedy in particular, and all art by extension, is a collaborative experience. Less than a year later Eliot returned to this issue, revealing again how important collaboration is to his thinking. His articulation of this insight is even more striking in "The Function of Criticism":

only the man who has so much to give that he can forget himself in his work can afford to collaborate, to exchange, to contribute.

The paradox of this situation, though, is that this collaborative artist, "who has so much to give," is able to take, to exchange; the man who can "forget himself" becomes more himself, more individual.

Eliot also saw this same paradox manifesting itself at the social and cultural level. He felt that the history of the English language and literature itself demonstrated how a willingness to collaborate and exchange, in effect to ignore distinctions could result in greater distinctiveness. In "Was There a Scottish Literature?" Eliot remarked of the English language that "the more it borrowed and imitated,"

30. Donald Gallup. T.S. Eliot: A Bibliography Gallup's citation reads: "Reprinted, with revision, as 'In Memoriam: Marie Lloyd,' Criterion, i. 2 (Jan. 1923): 192-5, and as 'Marie Lloyd.'"
the more significantly it became English."32 So too, the artist who absorbs and assimilates influences becomes more unique.

Collaboration, as Eliot saw it, is intimately tied to individuality, to the formation of personality and is therefore fundamental to art. The absorption and assimilation of influences helps define and distinguish the individual, while at the same time making the individual more representative of the commonality between people. The artist is an extension of this collaborative process. Because art helps to break down the otherwise sharp barriers between people, and because it blurs the arbitrary distinctions created by intellectual abstraction, art invites its participants to collaborate: with each other, with the work of art, with its creator, and, coming full-circle, with its creator's "influences." Eliot's well-known rejection of the distinction between thought and feeling can also be seen as a consequence of this larger rejection of arbitrary and abstract distinctions.

The liminal sensibility suggested by such a view not only accounts for, but virtually dictates, another liminality which the early writing reveals in Eliot. In unpublished poems from his letters, beginning as early as 1914, Eliot experiments with a primitive poetics which

writes across boundaries--formal and substantive. The poetry generated out of this poetics can be seen as prototypical of later, published poetry. During his early years in London, around the time of the publication of "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," a bizarre and debauched poem called "King Bolo and his Big Black Kween" begins to appear in his letters, first to Conrad Aiken, then later to Ezra Pound. References to the poem also indicate that Wyndham Lewis was aware of it, as well. Short fragmentary snatches of this poem surface occasionally for many years after its original appearance. Apart from the occasional bit of profanity, such as Eliot's telling Conrad Aiken that "if you are in with that crew, you might tell them to butter their asses and buggar themselves," or on another occasion closing a letter to Pound with the "benediction" (he frequently signed off with "benedictions") of "Good fucking brother," there is nothing else in the Eliot oeuvre quite like this poem. What is most interesting about it is its rejection of the easy distinctions of "arbitrary intellectual abstraction."

Immoral and debauched in the usual sense, "King Bolo" is nevertheless a complex study of morality and the perverse. "Vulgar" in the usual sense, the poem lampoons pedantry and polite society.

Next to *The Waste Land*, "King Bolo" is Eliot's most sustained foray into the poetics of liminality. The deep pre-logical source from which it appears to spring is subjected to complex manipulations, the affective
consequences of which are impossible to fully delineate. The fragments are full of what Wyndham Lewis called "excellent bits of scholarly ribaldry," a suggestively liminal expression, but as Eliot lamented in a letter to Ezra Pound (2 Feb. 1915),

"King Bolo and His Big Black Kween" will never burst into print. I understand that Priapism, Narcissism etc. are not approved of and even so innocent a rhyme as

"...pulled her stockings off
With a frightful cry of Hauptbahnhof!!"

is considered decadent.\textsuperscript{34}

The fact that these stanzas appeared off and on for years, and the fact they were known to a small circle of friends, suggests that they satisfied some impulse for public expression that Eliot had not the temerity to make truly public. As quasi-literary output made semi-public, they reveal Eliot's attempt both to be and not to be ribald, and conversely, scholarly. In his struggle with conflicting and even disturbing influences and impulses he creates a liminal form of expression in which he can safely lament that this "decadent" work will never "burst into print." In content, "King Bolo" shows Eliot's own savage comic humour, in form it is remarkably subtle in its liminalities.

"Hauptbahnhof" means central or main railway station, and this may well appear, without the context of the other

\textsuperscript{33} Valerie Eliot ed., Letters, 86n
\textsuperscript{34} Letters, 86.
stanzas from the poem, to be an "innocent rhyme," but within that context it hardly seems innocent. In a letter to Conrad Aiken, dated 19 July 1914, Eliot writes

Now while Columbo and his men
Were drinking ice cream soda
In burst King Bolo's big black queen
That famous old breach loader.
Just then they rang the bell for lunch
And served up--Fried Hyenas;
And Columbo said "Will you take tail?
Or just a bit of penis?"

I suggest that the connotations of an "Hauptbahnhof" as a very busy depot, a kind of "Grand Central Station" are more readily discernible when this excerpt comes into play.

But the interesting aspect of "King Bolo"'s formal liminality is that nearly every time it appears Eliot includes a commentary on it, written in very mock-serious scholarly tones. Posing as something of an intellectual historian, he observes of the passage just quoted:

The bracketed portions we owe to the restorations of the editor, Prof. Hasenpfeffer (Halle), with the assistance of his two inseparable friends, Dr. Hans Frigger (the celebrated poet) and Herr Schnitzel (Aus Wein). How much we owe to the hardwon intuition of this truly great scholar! The editor also justly observes: "There seems to be a double entendre about the last two lines, but the fine flavour of the jest has not survived the centuries."--Yet we hope that such genius as his may penetrate even this enigma.35

35. Letters, 42.
36. Loc. cit.
The form adopted, i.e. nestling the poem proper inside the commentary but being the author of both, is inherently liminal: is the commentary generated by the poem or vice versa? What is the perspective of the writer?

These and other poems, and their delightful commentaries, also show aspects of Eliot's "personality," if we may now use that term, which have, for whatever reasons, remained obscure. Yes, they show him to have a debauched side, but they also show a considerably more light-hearted, and humorous side of Eliot, and show him to be less prudish than both his detractors and his defenders have claimed him to be. The grotesque, carnivalesque ambivalence created by both the form and the content cannot be entirely ignored. The disturbing underpinnings of racism and sexism notwithstanding, these humorous and ribald fragments also cast a new light on Eliot's Sweeney poems and on much of the suppressed material of *The Waste Land*.

"Sweeney Erect" certainly bears signs of the same mixture of the scholarly and the ribald, with its epigram about rocks "groaning with continual surges," and then "look, look, wenches!" The jokes mixing 'vulgar' sexuality and erudition, like Polyphem the "one-eyed shepherd lover," and

(\textit{The lengthened shadow of a man}\n\textit{Is history, said Emerson}\n\textit{Who had not seen the silhouette}
Of Sweeney straddled in the sun.

can be seen as a very grisly and cynical condemnation of physicality, but perhaps it is just as possible that the "scholarly" is being poked fun at here. "Sweeney Erect" forces its readers to accept and recognize the close parallel between the epileptic fit, which is the subject of the poem, and orgasm. Apart from the gruesome allusion in "this oval O cropped out with teeth," the description of the "sickle motion from the thighs" begins a passage in which the woman (Nausicaa)

Jacknifes upward at the knees
Then straightens out from heel to hip
Pushing the framework of the bed
And clawing at the pillowslip (34)

The image is rather gruesome erotica, and this may be construed as a condemnation of sexuality, or, even if accepted as a joke, condemned as a tastelessly cruel one, but in light of the "King Bolo" fragments, and particularly their commentaries, it is also possible to see the Sweeney poems as a progression in Eliot's poetics of liminality. The scholarly and the ribald, the vulgar poetry and its commentary are now transmuted into, and fused in, the poem.

One of the major results of this fusion is that "Sweeney Erect" forces images upon the minds of its more prudish

37. "Sweeney Erect," Collected Poems, p. 35. Subsequent references to this poem will be to page numbers, and will be given parenthetically in the text.
readers which would scandalize them, but which cannot be
censured without a confession of having penetrated the
double entendre. To acknowledge that the poems are "base"
and "vulgar" is to admit having seen the sexual parallel,
which is itself an admission of the very baseness and
vulgarity in question. And Eliot also has the last laugh on
that public which sees the sexual parallel as intentionally
off-putting, as condemnatory of sexuality and physicality,
for they speak about it in solemn and serious tones, and
thereby fall right into its interpretive trap.

Eliot is obviously aware of the shock-value of "King
Bolo," and, in true anti-authoritarian, carnivalesque style,
seems very much inclined to use it. In a letter to Ezra
Pound he says "I have been invited by female VANDERVELDE to
contribute to a reading of POETS: big wigs, OSWALD and EDITH
Shitwell, Graves ...Nichols, and OTHERS"(sic [italics
mine]). Then he asks "shall I oblige them with our old
friend COLUMBO? or Bolo, since famous?" By writing and
"publishing" for a very select audience, and by "imagining"
himself shocking an audience of "big wigs" Eliot seems to be
satisfying an impulse for public expression of forbidden
desires and forbidden laughter—a distinctly liminal impulse
which will take on even more submarine and profound forms
later in The Waste Land. The kinds of laughter and desire
expressed are, of course, distinctly liminal in their
ambivalence, as well.

38. Letters, 206.
It is important to keep in mind Eliot's observation that "the ways in which the passions and desires of the creator may be satisfied in the work of art are complex and devious." The point of mentioning this here is to reiterate that, for Eliot, the creative artist had "passions" and "desires" which must find expression even if they must be "strangely transmuted." Surely it is impossible to ignore, therefore, these passions and desires which Eliot so clearly and repeatedly finds it necessary to express. And surely he expresses them in "transmuted" forms in his more "legitimate" poetry.

Even Eliot's very early poetry, that published in The Smith Academy Record, "A Fable for Feasters" in particular, is almost Byronic in its concentration on drinking, feasting and revelry, in its ambivalence toward common morals and the church, and in its humorous, off-hand tone that is intended to close the gap between itself and the reader. After the influence of Laforgue is felt, and after Eliot's verse becomes considerably more sophisticated, that resemblance to Byron vanishes behind other facades. But in "King Bolo," in the Sweeney poems, and, I contend, in The Waste Land, the basic impulse, although even more strangely transmuted, remains; the basic desire is satisfied.

The "question of morality," certainly, but not a simplistic defence of "good morals" is what Eliot attains to. The writers that Eliot described as "moral" most
frequently were Baudelaire, James Joyce and D.H. Lawrence. Given that all of these writers were banned at some point in their careers on grounds of obscenity, it seems safe to say that what Eliot meant by "moral" was "concerned with the issue of morality," with how and why morals are formed, rather than with a kind of didactic moralizing. In his essay on "Dante as Spiritual Leader," Eliot acknowledges that Dante is "the great master of the disgusting," but qualifies this statement with the observation that

The contemplation of the horrid or sordid or disgusting, by an artist, is the necessary and negative aspect of the impulse toward the pursuit of beauty. But not all succeed as did Dante in expressing the complete scale from negative to positive. The negative is the more importunate. 40

Even if the point of view of the Sweeney poems and their ilk is one of disgust, Eliot justifies and provides a rationale for that point of view. But in reality the poem forces its readers to exercise what Eliot referred to as "intelligence": "the discernment of exactly what and how much we feel in a given situation." 41 Without passing judgement on the reader's response, the poem sets a number of interpretive traps designed to harpoon, or perhaps lampoon, certain types of readers.

More importantly, though, it seems merely to force all these conflicting attitudes and influences together in such a way that the serious readings are no more cancelled out by the ironic reversals, than the ironies are by the seriousness. And, ironically, Eliot's prescient lampooning of scholarly pursuits in the "Big Bolo" fragments is of precisely the type that has been performed in all seriousness upon The Waste Land itself.
Chapter 4

THE LIMINAL CONDITION OF ART:

THEORY AND PRACTICE

Our examination of Eliot's early prose has been proceeding with a view to preparing a comprehensive context for reading Eliot's poems, particularly *The Waste Land*. Before such an application, however, some discussion of Eliot's comments on art in general and on the practice, the technique, of poetry in particular is necessary. A discussion of Eliot's theories about art, however, must begin with his observation that

When we try to isolate the essentially poetic we bring our pursuit...to the insignificant; our standards vary with every poet whom we consider.  

Clearly it would be both unfair and erroneous to suggest that Eliot prescribed an agenda which all artists were expected to follow. In fact, he actively cautioned against such prescriptiveness. Nevertheless, he held very firm and distinct views about what constituted art, and those views are fundamental to an understanding of what his own art attempts; in effect, they set our standards, even if only in the case of Mr. Eliot himself.

Not surprisingly, all of Eliot's discussions of art are also concerned in one way or another with liminality; they are themselves in a liminal position. They are caught up

with, and cannot be completely isolated from, his comments on, and discussions of, the many other issues with which his conception of art is alimented. Liminality is crucial to Eliot's conception of the place and the function of the work of art. In fact, his conception of the work of art is his most thoroughly liminal concept.

The essay, "Verse and Prose," one of the many essays in which Eliot discusses technique, elaborates the basic theory of poetry, and by extension, of art in general which informs all of Eliot's thinking on the subject. Referring specifically, at first, to versification, he says:

Versification, in any of the systems known to European and other cultures, brings in something that from any other point of view than that of art is a superfluity, a definite concession to the desire for "play."

Before considering the two main ideas which surface here, we need to clear up an apparent contradiction. Whereas Eliot appears to be saying that poetry, i.e. versification, is unique in terms of its concession to play, he is actually arguing that this concession to play is fundamental to art. Versification is unique to poetry, but

On the other hand, prose, not being cut off by the barrier of verse which must at the same time be affirmed and diminished, can transmute life in its own way by raising it to the condition of "play" precisely because it is not verse. [italics mine]

3. Loc. cit.
He is not singling out one form of expression over any other. Rather, the salient idea being expressed about artistic expression is that, by definition, it is predicated on some "superfluity" to life, or on the "condition of play." Furthermore, the condition of "play" is manifested in a work of art as "a definite concession to the desire for play." So then, there is something in art, which art alone does, but which "life" wants. Conversely, there is that in life which art must use: the writer of poetic drama and the creative artist in general,

must take genuine and substantial emotions, such emotions as observation can verify, typical emotions, and give them aesthetic form.  

In other words, art occupies the threshold between the real and the ideal, incorporating elements of both without merging them. "Genuine and substantial emotions" which "observation can verify" must nevertheless be given "aesthetic form." This way of describing the "function," the place, of art recurs under a number of guises in Eliot. "Art" emotions are not emotions in the usual sense, although they must of necessity be alimented by, infused by, even governed by, the emotions of lived experience. But as real and actual as the source of the emotion must be, it must

nevertheless be transmuted into art. It becomes something "peculiar to art." In Eliot's words, art is "a means of communicating those feelings peculiar to art, which range from amusement to ecstasy."

Eliot's discussion of prose and verse also calls attention to a different kind of liminality, which exemplifies the way this concept functions in his poetics. What he calls the "barrier" of verse must be, he says, simultaneously "affirmed and diminished." The simultaneous affirmation and diminution of barriers, of boundaries, of differences, is, fundamentally, what Eliot's poetics in general attains to. The dual movement here is crucial to all of Eliot's thinking. Moreover, the reference to "the barrier of verse" should not be seen as identifying some special constraint of poetry. Any art functions through affirming and diminishing barriers. Prose, which has its own ability to raise life to the condition of play, is equally subject to barriers of different types.

Eliot said "that the real failure of the mass of contemporary verse is the failure to draw anything new from life into art," and that "the labour of Mallarmé with the French language" is "something very important" because "every battle he fought with syntax represents the effort to transmute lead into gold, ordinary language into poetry."

The poetics adumbrated by such a proposition, which seems

primarily concerned with taking lived experience "up into art," with the problems of transmuting the personality into a work of art, and of "making a world," produces a combination of the real and the imagined which neither quite merges them nor keeps them separate. In fact, this mediation represents precisely the kind of straddling of the imaginative and the actual which Eliot values. "The great artists do not unite imagination and observation," he says, because "in the great artist the imagination...becomes a fine and delicate tool for an operation on the sensible world." The imagination is employed as a means of taking life up into art. And, when this delicate operation is performed on the sensible world, the artist creates a union of the actual and the "potential" in the very act of showing the unbridgeable distance between the two. "It is this intensity, precisely, and consequent discontent with the inevitable inadequacy of actual living to the passionate capacity," which "drives the great artist to art and to analysis," says Eliot:

Beyle and Flaubert...suggest unmistakably the awful separation between potential passion and any actualization possible in life. They indicate also the indestructable barriers between one human being and another."

This awful separation between potential passion and any actualization possible in life, nevertheless only tells part

8. loc. cit.
of the story. In an essay on Turgenev, written for the *Egoist* in 1917, Eliot expressed his admiration for Turgenev's ability to "correct the seriousness of life with the seriousness of art." By this formulation art functions as a corrective to life, and as such is clearly a thing unto itself.

Turgenev's technique is responsible for another type of liminality as well. In the same essay, Eliot makes what seems at first to be a contradictory observation about Turgenev, saying Turgenev demonstrates "the universal sameness of men and women," and shows the difference between people to be only "superficial differences." In light of Eliot's references to "the indestructible barriers between people" this observation would appear contradictory: how can people be universally the same with only superficial differences, and yet be divided by indestructible barriers? Significantly, the two generalizations are Eliot's, not the writer's to whom he refers. What does solve the dilemma is that Eliot says Turgenev emphasizes the importance of the "superficial variations" between one human being and another. The variations, no matter their superficiality, constitute an indestructible barrier between people. People from similar cultures are saturated with similar, even identical, myths and influences, and the part of them which is socially determined is more or less universally the same.

But the superficial differences which result from minor

variations in point of view or perspective place an unbridgeable gap between them.

Here again we see Eliot merging while keeping distinct. The work of art shows, in the very attempt (and its inevitable failure) to unite, the awful separation between actual life and passionate potential, and the superficial yet indestructible barriers between people. They are all the same, and yet they are irrevocably different. The work of art exploits, or at least explores, this disjunction between the universal and the particular, and between the real and the ideal. The work of art simultaneously bridges and opens these gaps, and consequently occupies a liminal locus. Like Derrida's difference, it highlights what both is and cannot be. The personality, and the passions must converge in the work of art itself, not to create a mere record of those things, but rather to transform them into a new experience which is both entirely its own and entirely contained within the real and the ideal--another kind of liminality.

Transformation, transmutation, distillation--these terms recur throughout the early prose. Eliot tells us again and again that the great writer transforms personality, without being personal, into a "world," or a work of art. The "passions and desires of the creator" constitute a very significant part of the equation for an art emotion, but they are satisfied in devious ways, and are "strangely transmuted." The work of art is neither simply the point of view nor yet the impulse for expression. The point of view
and the passions and desires are necessary to art, but not sufficient for art. Eliot's criteria for art include the "true cold hardness" required in order to know one's point of view, and the "having of emotions," passions, or desires from which the artist wishes to be unburdened, but art itself is fundamentally a work of transformation.

According to Eliot the strictures on the creation of a separate aesthetic experience are at once almost infinitely varied and rigidly controlled by the concept of organic unity. Eliot allowed that a poet's technique both could and should vary, seeing "no reason why a considerable variety of verse forms [could] not be employed within the limits of a single poem," but at the same time he denigrated verse which "sinned against unity." Unity, in other words, has very little to do with rigid adherence to specific formulae. Instead, unity describes the successful distillation of diverse external sources into an organically generated whole; it is an internal quality of the work which may draw from an almost infinite variety of external and structural sources. At the same time, however, Eliot was not as opposed to rhetoric and literary convention as this formula might suggest.

In "Whether Rostand Had Something About Him," Eliot argues for a way of expressing both artificial and direct speech in what he calls "a rhetoric of the stuff itself." Eliot defends the use of "rhetoric" by defining it as, essentially, the use of the most appropriate manner of expression, regardless of what rules, fashions or conventions it either breaks or adheres to. This type of rhetoric he calls "a rhetoric of content, not a rhetoric of language": a syntax and grammar of structures and verse forms rather than of words, which is 'dictated' or determined by the content. Gerard Genette has shown that the novel can be seen, at the narratological level, as a sentence; Eliot believed that each such narratological sentence could find its own grammar and syntax. He is saying that rhetoric is as useful and necessary to artistic expression as "the direct, conversational speech" which he perceives to be favoured by writers of his own day.

As far as Eliot is concerned, the problem is one of prescription rather than description. When a poetic ideal like conversational style and direct speech becomes prescriptive the very conversational style which is intended to replace the artificiality of rhetoric "may and does become a rhetoric" itself. The imposition of a manner of expression, rather than allowing the manner to be generated

out of the expression itself, is the problem. Therefore "the avoidance of the rhetorical expressions of older writers has become a form, or has separated into a variety of forms or rhetorics which impede as often as they assist the expression of feeling." The art emotion, being something other than real emotion, is thwarted by prescriptions of direct speech, or in fact by prescriptions in general.

But Eliot is not specifically opposed to "rhetorics" either. He is, partially, opposed to the idea that "the few" have control over the ideas of the many, and believes that "of messianic literature we have sufficient"; and he is, partially, convinced that the so-called artificialities in language serve a very valuable function in literature. In attempting to find a rhetoric of the stuff itself Eliot acknowledges that sometimes the conventions and the stylizations serve better than the direct speech. Stylizations and conventions are, for Eliot, a form of ritual, hence dance, and as such they can powerfully inform literature, by bridging the barrier between the conscious, rational, linguistic level of signification, and a deeper pre-rational, pre-linguistic source. Eliot searches in ritual, in tradition, in race consciousness, and in "the primitive consciousness" for the source of what is common to all humanity as a source for artistic expression and strives to find ways of triggering that primitive consciousness

within the linguistic realm. As such, art mediates between the conscious and the pre-conscious.

The importance of mediation in Eliot's thinking cannot be over-emphasized. Art mediates between the author and the audience, between the real and the ideal, between the universal and the particular, and even between the conscious and the unconscious. But to mediate is both to facilitate and inhibit. Furthermore, Eliot's important recognition that forms and rhetorics of all types can both impede and assist the expression of feelings brings us to yet another issue of mediation in Eliot's conception of the work of art. His definition of the creative artist as a "medium" in "Tradition and the Individual Talent" has been overshadowed and under-valued, but in light of all his comments emphasizing the liminal, collaborative nature of the individual subject and of the artistic enterprise, the idea of the medium takes on greater force. As a purveyor chiefly of words, Eliot is clearly conscious of the extent to which language itself has a purely mediatve function. The phenomenological world of "things" is ordered and given form by language. Language therefore makes "things" accessible. But language itself is predicated on difference, and therefore acts as a barrier between things. And of course language mediates--both impedes and assists--communication between individuals over both time and space, simultaneously closing and widening the gaps between addressee and addressee.
Contrary to the pronouncements of recent critics, and to current wisdom on the subject, Eliot held the view that writers ought to try to connect words and things. He says in his essay, "Swinburne," that "the world of words" and the "world of objects" must be made to "fit" together, and that the greatest writers are those who can dwell simultaneously in the world of words and of things, but yet "are struggling to digest and express new objects, new groups of objects, new feelings, new aspects." A purely rhetorical universe is no more desirable than a world of objects, and even making these two fit together is not enough. The artist must make something entirely new which unites all of these things while still keeping them distinct.

Eliot's predilection for serious humour also stems, in part, from his concept of the mediative nature of art. He recognizes that the type of caricature which makes this kind of humour possible allows the writer to tap pre-linguistic sources, and to dig beneath the abstractions of comedy and tragedy. We have already seen that Eliot believes the impulse for expression is pre-rational, pre-logical, that is pre-"logos," prior to language, as well. But poetry must function from within language, even though it attempts to

15. Athenaeum (Jan. 16, 1920):72-73, 73. Eliot censures Swinburne for creating what in contemporary parlance would be called a free play of signifiers, saying "Language in a healthy state presents the object, is so close to the object that they are one thing. They are one thing in Swinburne simply because the object had ceased to exist, because the meaning is merely the hallucination of meaning, because language, uprooted, has adapted itself to an independent life of atmospheric nourishment."
stimulate effects beyond, outside of, or prior to, language. The technique of caricature, but more precisely, the technique of "hesitating at the edge of caricature" provides one way of accomplishing this. From within language this type of humour, as we have seen, partakes of the common, the collaborative, the ritualistic. But because it is a technique which is itself liminal, it also unsettles or undermines the boundaries normally restricting an interchange of this kind: caricature within language is a way of breaking down the "indestructible barriers" between people without merging the separate identities of those people. Eliot expressed a vehement dislike for complete loss of selfhood, either in the pre-rational stage prior to subject/object separation or in the so-called transcendent absorption into Bradley's "absolute." The liminalities that caricature and conventions can create are crucial to Eliot's poetics, therefore, because they allow the creative

16. It will be recalled ["The Old Comedy"] that caricature, is accomplished through such devices as "a flat distortion in the drawing." Eliot praises Wyndham Lewis' use of caricature and feels that Lewis' design is at its greatest when it "approaches the border of satire and caricature." ["London Letter," May 1921, p. 689] This description of Lewis bears distinct parallels to Eliot's description of Marlowe as "hesitating at the edge of caricature." 17. Harriet Davidson's excellent study of Eliot's dissertation stresses this point and quotes the relevant passage. Speaking in terms of "immediate experience" as constituting both the beginning of our journey--the pre-conscious state--and the end of our journey--the attainment of transcendence in the Absolute--Eliot says, "if anyone assert that immediate experience, at either the beginning or end of our journey, is annihilation and utter night, I cordially agree." (Knowledge and Experience in the Philosophy of F.H. Bradley, p. 31. Quoted in Davidson, 74.)
Indeed we have seen that identity is tenuous by definition. The "honest" artist with "true cold hardness" experiences subjectivity itself as a liminal state between the central core of self and the social inscription of "influence." The Classicist is more effective because more conscious both of influence, and of the liminal state of subjectivity. It is important to recall once again that in "Tradition and the Individual Talent," Eliot describes the artist as "a medium," arguing that the more perfect the artist, "the more perfectly will the mind digest and transmute the passions which are its material," and the less affected will be the individual. The work of art is impersonal, but is nevertheless a composite of aspects of the creator's personality. The artist, like the critic, like the individual, must retain that firm sense of identity which Eliot calls the point of view.

The point of view, in turn, influences both what and how an artist will create. As has already been intimated by Eliot's "rhetoric of the stuff itself," there is no clear demarcation between what an artist is creating and the devices the artist uses to create it. Eliot unites, without completely merging, technique with content:

As for the verse of the present time, the lack of curiosity in technical matters, in the academic poets of to-day (Georgian et cetera) is only an indication of their lack of curiosity in moral matters. On the other hand, the poets who consider themselves most opposed to Georgianism, and who know a little French, are mostly such as could imagine the Last Judgement only as a lavish display of Bengal lights, Roman candles, catherine-wheels and inflammable fire-balloons. Vous, hypocrite lecteur...\(^1\)

These words, which close Eliot's (1921) essay on "The Lesson of Baudelaire" disclose both an interesting link to *The Waste Land*, published only one year later, and a fundamental dimension of Eliot's poetics: that technique is inseparable from content. Curiosity in technical matters is equivalent to curiosity about morality.

What I am calling liminality is not, for Eliot, a mere dialectic, a simple fusion of two opposites. Rather, it is a fusion, without erasing distinctions, of widely disparate things which are not necessarily parallel or opposed. In place of enforced fusion of polarities, Eliot desires a collocation of apples and oranges. As Eliot argues in "Whether Rostand Had Something About Him,"

if we are to express ourselves, our variety of thoughts and feelings, on a variety of subjects with inevitable rightness, we must adapt our manner to the moment with infinite variations.\(^2\)

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This willingness to consider infinite variations of manner, strategies if you will, and uses of language, provided they are appropriate, represents a recurring idea in Eliot. But behind the statement itself and its qualifier lies another implication: that "our variety of thoughts and feelings" will have infinite variations. "There are no new emotions," says Eliot, "only new and diverse approaches and presentations of the few old ones," but the variety of combinations which individual elements of perspective and sensibility will manifest is almost infinite.

Everyone "straddles" a particular configuration of influences and impulses, the resulting variations of which are infinite. Honesty and "cold hardness" can bring a particular configuration into relief, but infinite variations of adaptation are nevertheless required to bring them into articulation. Eliot dramatizes this situation vividly in "Portrait of a Lady":

And I must borrow every changing shape
to find expression...dance, dance
Like a dancing bear,
Cry like a parrot, chatter like an ape. 22

This image of the protean nature of accurate expression itself recurs under a number of protean guises throughout Eliot's early writing.

The very idea of "the image," too, with all its well-known importance for Eliot, functions within a complex of fusions and rapid alterations. In one of his essays on John Donne, Eliot observed that

the work of poetry is often said to be performed by the use of images; by a cumulative succession of images each fusing with the next; or by the rapid and unexpected combination of images apparently unrelated, which have their relationship enforced upon them by the mind of the author.  

Throughout his own poetry Eliot "enforces" relationship upon "apparently unrelated" images as a way of creating his effects.

One of the ways he does this is explained by him in the course of discussing Dostoevsky. Eliot admires Dostoevsky's ability to create an effect which "is due to apparent pure receptivity, lack of conscious selection, to the irrelevancies which merely happen." Eliot admires the way Dostoevsky appears to offer pure observation without censorship or interpretation. According to Eliot, Dostoevsky's form of expression is so amorphous as to appear "pure," appearing to be based on no system of selection whatever. Such a form of expression must indeed take on an almost infinite variety of shapes, and in so doing enforce unexpected combinations upon apparently unrelated images.

Eliot feels that Dostoevsky is able to use this form of

seemingly unedited yet random disclosure to pursue
observation into "quotidian extremes of torture." For all
its apparent randomness, in other words, Dostoevsky's
"method" hovers between pure disinterested journalism, and
acute analysis, without becoming one or the other; he
exploits the opportunity to divulge "extremes of torture" in
the very act of apparently uncensored disclosure. The
"natural," the unedited, merges with and serves the ends of
the "artificial," the work of art.

In "Whether Rostand Had Something About Him" Eliot also
makes a very suggestive statement about another "natural"
liminality; that between "reality" and "drama." By this he
does not simply mean the traditional concept of mimesis;
rather he is commenting on a complex and subtle interplay
between the artificial and the "real." He suggests that, in
good poetic drama, rhetoric can be used in such a way that
"characters take conscious delight in their dramatic-poetic
role," and finds that such writers as Shakespeare succeed
admirably because they allow for characters to "see
themselves in a dramatic light." 25 Eliot elaborates on this
concept:

We are given plays of realism in which the parts
are never allowed to be consciously dramatic, for
fear, perhaps, of their appearing less real. But
in actual life, or in those situations in our
actual life which we enjoy consciously and keenly
we are, at times, aware of ourselves in this
way. 26 (italics mine)

Eliot's assertion that dramatic self-reflexivity is mimetic in the very process of calling attention to itself as constructed, because life itself often seems "dramatic" and constructed, plays havoc with the boundaries between these exclusive categories. He attenuates both the convergence and divergence between art and "actual life" still further when he uses as one example of this technique a line from *Antony and Cleopatra*:

> the old captain is inspired to see Cleopatra in this dramatic light:
>
> The barge she sat in... 27

Given the interesting fact that two years later he cribbed precisely this scene for the opening of "A Game of Chess" in *The Waste Land*, this reference calls specific attention to Eliot's blurring of the boundaries between life and art. Knowing that Eliot sees the observer in that scene as "consciously and keenly enjoying" the dramatically self-conscious role, the reader will find it virtually impossible to read the silent "utterances" of the person recording the scene ("I think we are in rat's alley where the dead men lost their bones") without at least a degree of irony and humour. At the very least, the significant revelation that Eliot equates dramatic self-consciousness with the "actual life" situations which we "enjoy consciously and keenly"

must surely convince us to alter our perception of that scene.

But the blurring of boundaries accomplished here is yet more complex. Peter Ackroyd refutes the claims made by many critics that "A Game of Chess" is autobiographical, saying Eliot and Vivien were "collaborators" who enjoyed, and made a game out of, their "nervous predicament."²⁸ This sense of dramatic self-consciousness as keenly enjoyed ironically reverses Ackroyd's refutation, and implies that there may be an element of autobiography in the scene after all, but that the "attitude" of the scene is not what it has always been supposed to be. I do not suggest that it matters whether the scene is autobiographical, nor that Ackroyd misunderstands the scene's import; rather that the technique used here makes the distinctions difficult to track.

Those dramatists who are "afraid" to allow characters this sense of autonomy would appear to be acting in the interests of preserving mimesis, but for Eliot, as for Brecht and many others since Brecht, traditional mimesis is itself a greater lie than the admission of self-consciousness. The conscious exposure of artistic manipulations, merges with real-life dramatic self-consciousness, obscuring the distinctions between them. Ironically, Eliot argues for dramatic self-consciousness on the grounds that this type of awareness is an aspect of real life—that "real" life often occupies the limen between

fixed identity and role playing. By this formulation, dramatic self-consciousness is mimetic.

Such self-consciousness, however, must be seen as juxtaposed against Eliot's use and discussion of the unconscious and the pre-logical. The supposed search for a primitive consciousness, which William Skaff in particular sees as Eliot's major initiative, is no more the ultimate quest than is the search for dramatic self-consciousness. What Eliot seems ultimately to have been attempting is a way of rendering and juxtaposing the widely divergent possible ways of knowing, what he refers to, in reference to John Donne, as "a state of mind."

Donne's centrality to Eliot's thinking cannot be over-emphasized. In his meditations on Donne, and Donne's rightness for the modern age, Eliot repeatedly reveals this fact. In the process, those meditations disclose much of Eliot's own poetic ambitions. We have already seen one of Eliot's more interesting observations about Donne and Donne's own liminal state of mind: that it is "impossible" to "isolate what is 'conventional' in Donne from what is individual."29 Some of Eliot's other references to Donne also explicitly call attention to Donne's pluralistic liminality, as is the case in the following:

One of the characteristics of Donne which wins him, I fancy, his interest for the present age, is his fidelity to emotion as he finds it; his recognition of the complexity of feeling and its

rapid alterations and antitheses. A change of feeling, with Donne, is rather the regrouping of the same elements under a mood which was previously subordinate: it is not the substitution of one mood for a wholly different one.\textsuperscript{30}

Here Eliot explicitly articulates his sense of fidelity to the flux in Donne, flux which simultaneously contains the "complexity of feeling and its rapid alterations and antitheses." But Eliot was still more explicit. In a statement which comes remarkably close to summarizing, succinctly, \textit{The Waste Land}, Eliot expresses his admiration for Donne's ability to demonstrate in poetry that

\begin{quote}
any state of mind is extremely complex, and chiefly composed of odds and ends in constant flux manipulated by desire and fear.\textsuperscript{31}
\end{quote}

This highly suggestive way of interpreting Donne's poetry, written one year after \textit{The Waste Land}, seems to reveal as much about the impetus behind the writing of \textit{The Waste Land} as it does about Donne. The struggle between the unified sensibility, which ultimately cannot even know itself, and the dissociated sensibility, which knows many points of view, even all at once, but cannot know the unity of "immediate experience" wherein the self and the other are not separate--this is the struggle adumbrated in Eliot's prose and poetry.

\textsuperscript{30} Ibid., 332. 
\textsuperscript{31} loc. cit.
The protean nature of the poetic enterprise as outlined so far outstrips all attempts to confine it. This concept of "flux" is used by Eliot to grasp (because to "see" is impossible) both the unified and the dissociated sensibility at one and the same time; to comprehend the various elements from the transitional point of view wherein they are neither one nor many, yet both—understanding them as separate and unified, fragments and wholes, temporal and permanent. He seeks to put into "the rhetoric of the stuff itself," i.e. of content rather than language, that which defies language because "the moment you try to put impressions into words, you begin to analyse and construct...or you begin to create something else."\(^{32}\) Eliot seeks to do both: analyse and construct the existing data in the process of creating something else, which nevertheless leaves the traces of its own history perceptible, though not, strictly speaking, visible. And in *The Waste Land* this flux, this fusion of the linguistic and the pre-linguistic, this "rhetoric of the stuff itself," with all its infinite variations and its unexpected relationships, in short, the entire complex of liminalities, finds the only kind of expression it could find. Rather than articulating it, *The Waste Land* enacts this poetics of liminality.

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Chapter 5

THROBBING BETWEEN:

LIMINALITY, COLLABORATION, AND THE SUBJECT
OF THE WASTE LAND

The end of this journey is to arrive at its beginning; namely, a reading of The Waste Land. The context adumbrated by Eliot's early writing is one which actively subverts the categorizations implied by the very idea of context. The individual subject, the artist, and the work of art all exist in ceaseless flux between closed categories and contexts, being "neither arrest nor movement," and not accurately called "fixity."¹ We have seen the basic concern with collaboration, mediation and what I, most inclusively, am calling liminality in Eliot's early writing. These concerns become even more attenuated in The Waste Land. The complex of ideas suggested by the title, The Waste Land, alone makes this liminality clear: a "waste land" is liminal by definition because it hovers between death and rebirth, but is stuck between them. The Waste Land also suggests the grail cycle, which, in turn is virtually bursting with liminality: the Fisher King, for instance, is both (and neither) fertile and sterile, young and old; the waste land of the grail legends is, in the end, both fertile and waste; the quest is a partial success, because the fertility cycle is necessarily half success and half failure; the quester

and the Fisher King must collaborate; the quester seeks identity, but finds it when he abandons the search, becoming something between the one and the other; the Fisher King is both one and many; the fertility ritual which is allegorically represented by the grail cycle merges the many (the folk) with the one (the dying god). And this list by no means exhausts the ways in which this one source, i.e. the grail cycle, or at least Jessie Weston's treatment of it, manifests liminality. The stages of youth and age and the condition of being neither living nor dead to which the poem refers, either by allusion in the case of the Fisher King, or by direct articulation in the case of the quester, correspond to this same sense of liminality. The allusion to Dante's limbo--another liminal state--also tells half the story. And none of this begins to provide an exhaustive account of the protean ways that liminality functions both at the levels of form and content throughout The Waste Land.

The Canterbury Tales, to which the opening alludes, are explicitly collaborative. Chaucer's pilgrims collaborate, taking turns telling stories, both to create the work of art, and, within the fiction, to make their journey, their quest, more enjoyable. They are responsible for meaning-making not only as auditors of the tales, but as tellers as well. And the stories they tell are all ascribed to previous sources, to a tradition from which they borrow, and with which they collaborate. The borrowings are modified, embellished, and deliberately mis-represented by the

At the level of form also *The Waste Land* is, like *The Canterbury Tales*, pervasively collaborative. It is a collaboration between the poet and the reader. Obviously all writing is such, but in *The Waste Land* the recognition of the need for collaboration is foregrounded, obvious and pervasive. Just as "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" begins with the invitation "Let us go then, you and I," *The Waste Land* continually addresses its reader and requires the reader to collaborate in the construction of the poem. The most complex instance of this is when the poem uses an instance of collaboration--with Baudelaire--to draw the reader directly into its discourse: "You, hypocrite lecteur!--mon semblable,--mon frere!" (76) The writer of *The Waste Land* is both a reader and a "writer" of Baudelaire. Baudelaire's imaginary reader (the one Baudelaire addresses) becomes Stetson in a sense, who in turn merges with *The Waste Land*'s reader/writer of Baudelaire, and with the reader of *The Waste Land*. Every participant, or collaborator, in the poem is an "hypocrite lecteur," sharing complicity as well as the responsibility for making meaning.

This type of collaboration exactly mimics the way art is always a collaboration between the creator and the audience. We have already described Eliot's insight into commonality in his analysis of the comedy of the music-
halls but here the idea takes on greater force. The work itself is neither the creator nor the audience, and neither is it only the work. It is, simultaneously, all of these things. It merges the audience and the creator, while simultaneously coming between them. The mediator, or, to use Eliot's own term, the "medium" creates a thing which is none of these things, yet all of these things without extinguishing the differences between them. The indeterminate identity of the speaker in the opening stanza, for instance, creates this type of mediation. The absence of quotation marks makes it unclear who actually says, "In the mountains, there you feel free," and "I read, much of the night, and go south in the winter."(17-18) Either we accept that Marie speaks these words, that she is being quoted by the poet, or we understand that the poet speaks these words. The reader is required to allow both possibilities; yet the reader can only do so, however, if he or she collaborates in recognizing the indeterminacy. In all cases, the poet mediates the experience. A number of possible options exist, yet no option can exclude the other options. We are called upon to make a choice, but thwarted in our efforts to do so.

Moreover, the first-person voice closes the gap between the reader and the writer and/or speaker. When a reader reads the words "I read," there can be no doubt that this "speaks" for, and declares the reader, so that all three, writer, speaker and reader, merge. Obviously, though, there

is no sense in which the identities merge completely. Rather, the language succeeds in speaking for all the participants at once without eliminating the distinctions between them. Mediation means both to facilitate and to mitigate, both to merge and to separate—the perfect image of the work of art. We experience a kind of transportation and transcendence when we merge with a work of art, yet in no way do we break down the indestructible barriers between ourselves and others. We remain distinctly alienated while at the same time participating in a collaborative merging of identities.

The composition of The Waste Land is perhaps the most obviously and consciously collaborative aspect of the poem. Pound’s well-known “midwifery,” represents one of the most austere arts of omission imaginable: so austere in fact that the poem Pound returned to Eliot is almost a new poem altogether. For this reason, there are those who have gone so far as to give credit for the poem to Pound, but that would seem to go a bit over the mark. Nevertheless, Pound and Eliot, and even Vivien, collaborated, as the records and early drafts clearly show, to produce the poem. Even Eliot’s dedication to Pound, “il miglior fabbro” ("the better

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3. "Beyle and Balzac," Athenaeum (May 30, 1919): 392–3, 393. We have seen, in Chapter 3, that Eliot merges this concept of the "indestructible barriers" with "superficial variations."

4. Eliot said ["Turgenev," 167] that the method of Turgenev was "never unreal or abstract" and that Turgenev’s art was "vigilant but never theoretic intelligence" and an "austere art of omission."
craftsman") is an instance of collaboration, taken as it is from Dante's compliment to Arnaut Daniel. Harry Levin maintains that the dedication is a backhanded compliment at best in that both Eliot and Pound would have recognized that the poet Dante called the better craftsman is "embalmed" and immortalized by the poet who really was the better craftsman. But Eliot used this same passage elsewhere:

certainly there is no more useful criticism and no more precious praise for a poet than that of another poet:

Fu miglior fabbro del parlar materno...

What is most interesting about this recurring reference to the better craftsman is that it draws our attention to the collaborativeness and liminality of the phrase and its context. It is the praise of one poet for another. Cast in the form of an allusion to a poet that both Eliot and Pound admired, the quotation itself refers to another admired poet who is encountered in a poem.

Provided the reader is willing to collaborate actively with them, Lil's friend and the bartender in "A Game of Chess" perform yet another kind of collaborative meaning making. The story of Lil, which is paradigmatic of narrative itself, undermines and overwhelms its teller. The

5. "Israfel" Nation and Athenaeum, xli. 7. (May 27, 1927): 219. Eliot commented that Poe "embalmed a number of inferior writers with his criticism of them," and that Poe's criticism was the only thing which kept their names alive at all.

bartender's interruptions keep "signifying" and making
meaning where the narrative of Lil's friend at least did not
intend them, but which the reader cannot fail to notice. One
of the more hilarious examples is this enjambment:

"I didn't mince my words, I said to her myself
HURRY UP PLEASE ITS TIME"(140-1)

But of course she didn't, and doesn't, say "hurry up please
its time," herself. The bartender doesn't mince his words,
either, but he also has no awareness of the meaning he is
making. It is the reader, finally who witnesses the
accidental collaboration between the two of them.

"What you get married for if you don't want children?
HURRY UP PLEASE ITS TIME"(164-5).

Completely disconnected utterances "collaborate" in order to
create new meanings. That new meaning is in some sense a
merging of the literal meanings of the disconnected
utterances, but at the same time all three meanings, or
utterances remain distinct and separate. And it is only in
collaboration with the reader that the collocation of
meanings can signify.

The term "collocation" comes from Eliot's notes to the
poem, and is another clearly liminal reference. Eliot says
his "collocation" of Buddhist and Christian traditions in
the final section of "The Fire Sermon," is "not an
accident." This very curious phrase stands out even from the
general curiosity of the "Notes on The Waste Land." To
single this particular device out as not accidental implies in a curious way that everything else in the poem is accidental. But to describe it as "not an accident" still stops short of saying consciously produced. When the strange implications of this note are coupled with the very idea being expressed—that "collocation" means "to locate together"—some sense of the poem's extreme liminality begins to emerge. By making an issue of the fact that this collocation is not an accident, Eliot manages to imply that, at some level, it is not entirely volitional either. The collocation is thus "located" in a liminality between the conscious and the unconscious.

However, the more literal liminality is both more obvious and more significant. The collocation of two "alien" traditions throws them both into bold relief, and at the same time foregrounds their sameness. This liminality both masks and highlights yet another liminality, too: that existing between the "attitudes" which this section collocates. Two representative examples of radically different traditions are yoked together here by their discussions of human passions as "burnings," but it is the burnings themselves which seem to endure in the poem. In *The Waste Land* the condemnations of "burning," which both the Buddha's Fire Sermon and the Confessions of St. Augustine imply, are collocated with the burning itself. In the act of condemning in this way, *The Waste Land* leaves its readers with "burning" rather than rescue. What is most curious,
though, is that all of these disparate and conflicting sensations and perspectives are simply located together. They simultaneously converge and diverge.

This sense of simultaneous convergence and divergence becomes immediately apparent in the collocations of the poem's opening stanza. We are immediately confronted with a complex set of liminalities. "The Burial of the Dead" is clearly an act of transition. The inverted seasonal headpiece hovers at the edge of spring, calling our attention immediately to transition. And the contrary movements toward death and life are immediately thrust into co-existence. In the act of recalling Chaucer's "Whan that Aprill," the "cruellest month" does not erase the celebratory nature of that passage; rather it forces the two opposed attitudes together, and in the process of uniting them calls attention to the disparity between them. There is also, throughout the passage and beyond, a tension between roots and rootlessness, between freedom and entrapment. April is cruel because it stirs "dull roots." Yet winter feeds "a little life with dried tubers." Someone, whose identity is unclear, "stems" out of Lithuania, and someone, who may be the same person or may be somebody else "goes south for the winter" like a migratory bird. The overtone of rootlessness in going south for the winter is paralleled by the undertone of a deep connection with nature implied by the migratory birds who at least appear to follow some strict though unknown laws of nature. Marie, who stays at
the "arch-duke's," her cousin's, feels "free" in the mountains, but must hold on tight when they go down on the sled because freedom comes at the price of security. And the freedom implied is turned into rootlessness (16-18), by the sudden shift to "I read, much of the night and go south in the winter." Given that we have already experienced a number of sudden and arbitrary shifts in the poem, the poem itself seems rootless, but the image of "going south for the winter also implies an existence without roots. However, "going south" collocates this rootlessness with the deep rootedness implied by the natural migratory cycle of birds. Seasons which appear so repetitive and predictable that they mix memory and desire, are suddenly transformed into a summer which surprises us. Rain and sunlight seem to co-exist. Nature, and the natural cycle are both predictable and random. Freedom merges with, or topples over into, rootlessness; repetition and servitude merge with surprise and belonging.

What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow Out of this stony rubbish? (19-20)

Roots and branches which correspond to memory and desire clutch and grow out of the stony rubbish of the poem, conflating barrenness and fertility.

Something needs to be said about the collocations which account for the poem's unique position in relationship to the canon. Constituted out of things almost exclusively
canonical, *The Waste Land* is nevertheless the antithesis of things canonical. "Stuffed with tradition to the point of bursting,"

*The Waste Land* is nevertheless radically experimental and original. When Eliot uses the tradition he does so in an individual a way as anyone might. The point is that *The Waste Land* makes what it can out of the materials which lie at hand, but because it thereby demonstrates a Classicist's consciousness of the age, it transmutes that bric-a-brac into a work of pure individuality. That work of individuality, in turn, has itself become a centre-piece of the canon. *The Waste Land* strengthens its identity in the very process of relinquishing identity, or of acknowledging its own "saturations."

Eliot, in other words, has used *The Waste Land* to enter into a collaboration with the whole of the world's literature. Gregory S. Jay has also commented on the extent to which *The Waste Land* functions collaboratively within a complex of cultural quotations and contexts. Jay asks, for instance,

What do we think we mean if we say that Eliot wrote:

*Frisch weht der Wind*
*Der Heimat zu.*
*Mein Iririsches Kind*
*Wo weiltest du?*

These lines from Wagner were the German's property, but their properties are in Eliot's hands now."

Virtually every word of the poem is "filtered" through other speakers, which threatens simultaneously to fix, however briefly, the poem's identity (the "Quest" is, after all, a search for identity) and to submerge all identities into one. *The Waste Land* blatantly exemplifies Roland Barthes' concept of all writing as "cultural quotation," turning that apparent weakness into one of the poem's strongest virtues. Just as language itself does, the act of writing and speaking consists of improvising with old materials and putting them together in new ways, which in turn presupposes a response in kind. Eliot treats poets and their poems as individual chunks of "vocabulary" out of which he "speaks" a wholly new poetic discourse. But not without a sense of collaboration. The "original" quotations direct to some extent the directions taken, while nevertheless becoming something wholly new, and what's more, wholly dependent on the reader, an already problematized "hypocrite lecteur," to assimilate. Collaboration, complicity, in the act of cultural reception and production of meaning is fundamental to the work.

However, the various collaborators do not create something which completely erases distinctions. The original contexts of the quotations Eliot borrows are at once distinct from and submerged into *The Waste Land*. "Frisch weht der Wind" is still distinctly the property of the Germans, with whom, at least at a purely linguistic level, Wagner also was collaborating. At the same time, Eliot has given it a new constellation, and a new context. This new context absorbs to some extent the old context, and even perhaps alters readings of the original context, but the two contexts remain in a state of flux between convergence and divergence.

The most glaringly collaborative sections of the poem are those in which contemporary London collaborates with the mythic past, and, simultaneously, unites reverence and irreverence:

But at my back from time to time I hear
The sound of horns and motors, which will bring
Sweeney to Mrs. Porter in the spring.
O the moon shone bright on Mrs. Porter
And on her daughter
They wash their feet in soda water
Et O ces voix d'enfants, chantant dans la coupole!

Twit twit twit
Jug jug jug jug jug jug
So rudely forc'd
Terre

Such passages as this merge, while calling attention to, the "awful separation" between the various components of the litany. The "horns," which refer to hunting horns in the
myth of Actaeon, merge with motor horns. Sweeney merges with Actaeon, the prostitutes merge with Christ, and the popular song about "washing" merges with a more pure and clean song, sung by the children in a Medieval church. All these disparate and conflicting elements are "collocated" without completely merging. Even the "attitude" which the reader brings to this scene is not allowed to fracture into pure disgust for the contemporary and pure nostalgia for the past. The barbarism and the beauty of both past and present simply co-exist.

But as we have already heard, the pure and clean song sung by the children, as implied in the line "Et O c'est voix d'enfant chantant dans la coupole," turns to ashes in the mouth, because it comes out "Twit twit twit/ Jug jug jug jug jug jug jug." The voices are both violated and inviolate. The children's voices, in the process of turning to the gibberish-which-is-meaningful of that scene, transmute the voice of Philomel into something rich and strange, but the stumps of words they utter veer back to mock the inviolable voice. As Bakhtin stresses, mockery and satire belittle and criticize things which are held in high esteem, bringing them "down to earth," but they must also, in the very act of calling our attention to those things, call our attention to the high esteem itself. In this same way, Eliot's (and Verlaine's) children call to the mind and the imagination an inviolable voice, a voice not unlike Keats' "unheard" one.

In the process, of course, they also call attention to the "awful separation" between the imagination and actual life.

The poem's mythic element also represents a kind of collaboration. Even apart from Eliot's view of comic seriousness as mythic collaboration, *The Waste Land* makes use of the collaborative origin of myth. Eliot recognizes, and calls attention to, the extent to which myth is collaborative. Having no actual authors, myths have been formed and articulated out of the common consciousness. There exist several versions of most Greek myths and most mythic figures have a variety of names. The recording of these myths, then, is also a collaborative process, and the writers who record them give voice to something communal, beyond or outside of any one individual. The Grail legends, too, constitute an ongoing process of collaboration. As Jesse Weston demonstrated, the grail stories contained within them two separate "sources" and "interpretations," which were contained within one "story" but which voiced two separate stories. Her solution to the mystery of the legend's source was to posit a third meaning which separated

11. Jesse L. Weston, *From Ritual to Romance*. 1919. rpt. Garden City: Doubleday, 1957. Weston wrote an earlier book titled *The Quest of the Holy Grail* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1913) in which a number of these ideas, including the description of the partial success of the grail quests, the sense of the quest as a search for identity, and the process by which Christian motifs subsumed pagan ritual are much more clearly delineated, than in her later, better known book. I do not know whether Eliot was aware of this earlier book; he was, however, entirely capable of seeing this process in the later book, even though it is less obvious there.
the different sources in the process of showing how they had been united. She showed that the grail legends exhibit a state of constant flux between two disparate explanations, the so-called "Christian" and "Pagan" interpretations, both of which are simultaneous, and simultaneously wrong and right. The "three grails" she discovers correspond to three Christian symbols, but also to three stages of initiation into the fertility cults, and the poets who recorded the grail cycle simply subsumed the pagan symbols into the Christian symbolism. The way The Waste Land also subsumes diverse sources into its quest results in a similarly dynamic oscillation between convergence and divergence.

In light of Eliot's discussions of the primitive, the pre-logical consciousness, and the intellectual abstractions of tragedy and comedy, it comes as no surprise that The Waste Land subsumes within it a serious humour which stems from an equally pre-conscious source. The ghoulish humour throughout The Waste Land constitutes yet another form of mediative liminality. When the Thames Daughter raises her knees "Supine on the floor of a narrow canoe"(295) an effect is created in which tragedy is not wholly indistinct from comedy, in which the tragic is also ridiculous. The articulation itself is both evasive and direct, both euphemistic and vulgar: "I raised my knees/ Supine" creates a vivid and precise image without apparently explaining itself. The juxtaposition of humour and pathos underlying this passage is representative, and as such is responsible,
at least in part, for the elusive, enigmatic flavour of the poem's dominant tone. Admittedly, this serious humour is contrapuntal to the main motif of the poem, but the counterpoint gives shape to the main motif. Because of this ongoing hesitation at the border between comedy and tragedy, between parody and seriousness, the dominant tone of The Waste Land is itself dynamic, calling attention to itself as flux.

The sharp juxtapositions between the sacred and the profane generated by the mythic quester's encounter with contemporary London causes the poem to hover at the edge of humour and pathos, tragedy and travesty. When the quester, for instance, appears to have stopped in to have his Tarot cards read by Madame Sosostris, and she asks him to pass a message on to dear Mrs. Equitone, how can we not see the incongruity, and the resultant humour, even while we acknowledge the implicit criticism? The poem takes this everyday life up into its art, while at the same time bringing the hallowed tradition down to earth. The result is to create something peculiar to art which fluctuates between the ordinary, the actualization, and the mythic, the "passionate potential." Far from creating a middle ground in which the ordinary and the mythical have been united into something half-way between, this juxtaposition calls attention to the constant flux initiated by the attempt to close the awful separation between them.
Some scenes actually hover directly between the two extremes:

Oh City city, I can sometimes hear
Beside a public bar in Lower Thames Street,
The pleasant whining of a mandoline
And a clatter and a chatter from within
Where fishermen lounge at noon: where the walls
Of Magnus Martyr hold
Inexplicable splendour of Ionian white and gold.
(259-265)

The scene presents the actual image directly, takes life up into art, but nevertheless has an inexplicable splendour. The attitude is very difficult to glean from the words themselves for they hesitate always just at the edges of attitudes. The "pleasant whining" does not seem entirely pleasant, and yet we yearn for something ineffable being expressed in almost nostalgic or elegaic tones. The oblique backward glance at Sappho ("Notes" to line 221, p. 73) and by extension to the golden past, is collocated with a very contemporary reference to a church scheduled for demolition. These nostalgic impressions are overlaid with impressions of a humble sort, which are neither quite pleasant nor unpleasant. The fusion of a disparate whole of tangled feelings is just perfect enough (and yet not so perfect) that we almost fail to experience its subtleties.

In The Waste Land we see that Eliot has once again fused the scholarly and the ribald, but in perhaps even more devious ways than in "King Bolo" and the Sweeney poems. Is it, for instance, the quester who is propositioned by Mr.
Eugenides? If so the joke lies in the "inappropriate" sexuality of the seller of "Eugenics." After all, one would have to say that in him "is the end of breeding." Eliot tells us in his notes that the Smyrna Merchant melts into Phlebas the Phoenician sailor who in turn is "not wholly distinct from Ferdinand Prince of Naples": if these three figures "confl ate," they internally juxtapose the ridiculous and the sublime.

It is important to recognize that the "Notes," which are themselves simultaneously serious and mocking, add a significant dimension to the poem's overall effect. Like the bits of commentary which create a kind of interpretive loop in "King Bolo," the notes to The Waste Land highlight and foreground the poem's many liminalities. Their inappropriateness, for instance, cannot be disguised merely by their sincerity, so that when Eliot earnestly announces, "I do not know the origin..." we are forced into a curious kind of displacement. The whole purpose of footnotes is to establish the origins of things, yet here we are being very earnestly informed that the origin is unknown to the borrower. And then, in the note to line 402, Eliot tells us that a translation of the Upanishads is available "in Deussen's Sechzig Upanishads des Vedas." We might find it useful to be told of an English translation. The early critics who indicted the poem as a pompous parade of erudition probably did not recognize the extent to which the notes make fun of that very aspect of the poem. There is
real erudition being demonstrated here, but the erratic focus and the self-consciousness of the Notes add an ironic reversal which somehow does not invalidate the serious scholarship. The Notes, like the poem, are both scholarly and mock-scholarly, reverent and irreverent.

What Eliot does, of course, is force both the reverence and the irreverence together. Critics usually see Eliot's "debasement" of the Actaeon myth (The sound of horns and motors, which shall bring/ Sweeney to Mrs. Porter in the spring") as an indictment of the modern world, but in the process of indicting the modern, the passage also undoubtedly besmirches the myth. Eliot's note to this section provides a quote from Parliament of Bees:

When of the sudden, listening, you shall hear
A noise of horns and hunting, which shall bring
Actaeon to Diana in the spring
Where all shall see her naked skin...

In Ovid's version, to which Eliot could clearly have referred had he so chosen, the story has no connotations of

12. Once again, this mixing of the parodic and serious bears close resemblance to one focus of the interpretive theories of M.M. Bakhtin, [The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays. Holquist trans. (Austin: Texas UP, 1981): 53-4]. Bakhtin says that all Greek drama contained "the so-called 'fourth drama', that is, the satyr play. In most instances this drama, which follows upon the tragic trilogy, developed the same narrative and mythological motifs as had the trilogy that preceded it. It was, therefore, a peculiar type of parodic-travestying contre-partie to the myth that had just received a tragic treatment....It showed the myth in a different aspect." This is very analogous to what happens in The Waste Land. In no sense does The Waste Land merely venerate tradition, but the veneration is nevertheless an unavoidable reality.
voyeurism whatever. Actaeon sees Diana accidentally and there is no one else there to see her "naked skin". Eliot's mixing of reference here also mixes reverence with irreverence, and underscores the collaborative nature of the tradition in general.

More than anything, then, the notes are effective devices of collaboration. By their very nature they call specific attention to the collaborations, i.e. borrowings, that Eliot has enlisted. Their role in any piece of writing is to acknowledge sources. But the notes to *The Waste Land* mock—at once imitate and deride—the convention of footnotes, creating another subtle liminality. Eliot also collaborates in the sense that he conforms to this convention of scholarly writing. By acknowledging his sources in a poem, where convention does not require it, Eliot demonstrates the extent to which literature uses, and collaborates with, sources within the literary tradition. Eliot uses one convention, that of acknowledging sources in scholarly writing, to break with another convention, of using sources without acknowledgement in creative writing. He uses the traditional to be revolutionary, and the revolutionary to be traditional.

Very few modern critics seem to remember that *The Waste Land*, first and foremost, juxtaposes the traditional with the absolutely revolutionary. John Xiros Cooper emphasizes this aspect of the poem:
"Like all revolutionary works of art, [The Waste Land] is an assault on the language of a privileged discourse. It seeks to make visible, from inside, and thus more tellingly disrupt, the settled, even formulaic accounts of lived experience."

But the radicalism and subversiveness of The Waste Land are not wholly distinct from its conservatism and nostalgia for privilege. What makes it truly remarkable is that it embodies these "antitheses," producing a single state of mind, which, to use Eliot's extraordinary phrase in describing the mind of Donne, is "extremely complex, and chiefly composed of odds and ends in constant flux, manipulated by desire and fear."

Cleo McNelly Kearns is one critic who has argued that The Waste Land is simultaneously radical and conservative. Like Cooper, Kearns finds the poem to be radical: in her essay "Realism, Politics, and Literary Persona in The Waste Land", Kearns describes The Waste Land as "one of the most politically and culturally subversive texts of our century." But unlike Cooper, she recognizes its conservatism, citing Wyndham Lewis's assessment of Eliot as "half Marx and half status quo." Kearns' purpose is to demonstrate the extent to which perceptions about The Waste Land have changed since the poem was first published, but in so doing she unearths perhaps the first (Lewis's)

13. Cooper, 4.
15. Ibid., 137.
acknowledgment of the poem's liminality. She also seeks to demonstrate the extent to which Eliot was influenced not by Bradley and Dante, but by Bertrand Russell and Walt Whitman. Her contention is that, despite Eliot's professed dislike of Whitman, and despite Eliot's discomfort with Russell's ideas which were "new and challenging not only in philosophical but in sexual and political terms as well," Eliot was influenced by Russell's "stylistic effrontery" and had a "secret fascination" with Russell's "peculiarly radical and open point of view."\(^\text{16}\) According to Kearns, both Russell and Whitman exemplified this openly sexual politics to which Eliot was secretly attracted.

Kearns' observation concerning the influence of Whitman and Russell has interesting implications in terms of Eliot's depiction of sexuality. Kearns shows that, in both Russell and Whitman, Eliot found "direct, open, democratically accessible and sense-affirming views which were linked with an explicitly sexual politics, a politics of 'free love'...or at least of tremendous sexual affirmation, which Eliot found both disturbing and vital"(139). She goes on to say that Eliot found it necessary to "mask" in his poetry the overly "self-revealing" style of both Russell and Whitman with "an overtone of irony," and "a certain Gallic distance"(142). Kearns explains:

\[\text{we can trace in Eliot's artistic lineage not only the metaphysical and French Symbolist traditions}\]

16. Ibid., 139.
of which he so often spoke, but another, deeper line of descent, one in which the democratic, the sexually open and the philosophically realist views of his greatest mentors take on a new and potentially fruitful life. (139)

Eliot was, in other words, both attracted and repelled by sexuality, and by frank self-confession, and therefore created a style which allowed him to explore both his attraction to, and his resistance to, the carnal, sensual side of life.

It is no surprise, therefore, that sexuality in The Waste Land often seems informed by both fascination and revulsion. We have seen already that the Thames Daughter's frank, yet demure confession, "I raised my knees/ Supine on the floor of a narrow canoe" yokes a number of complex responses together. The bored typist, too, is represented ambivalently. When she says "Well now that's done: and I'm glad it's over," (252) or when the narrative tells us that "the young man carbuncular" makes advances which are "unreproved, if undesired," (238) the "attitude" toward them is by no means clear. The passage has always been seen as condemning both of them for engaging listlessly in carnality, but the humour in the scene makes light of their offence. And, by inference, their supposed offence would be eliminated, or mitigated anyway, had they engaged in that same carnality with lusty vigour. The attitude seems to be that if the young man carbuncular's advances are "undesired," then they should be "reproved," but the logical
conclusion then is that they might just as well be honestly
desired. The poem, however, hovers at the edges of all these
attitudes, never firmly coming to rest on any of them.

The sexuality in The Waste Land could also be
understood in terms of the Freudian concept of negation.
Negation allows the subject to experience the pleasure of
"the forbidden" while nevertheless expressing revulsion for
it. In this way it broaches disparate inclinations and
hovers between extreme opposites. A constant sense of these
"urges" lurks in the poem. The poem does indeed seem to take
pleasure in its symbolic expulsion of sexuality. Yet, in the
very act of denouncing sexuality, the poem "allows itself"
to revel in it. "Bogus" as the notes no doubt are, Tiresias
does in fact "see," and "foresuffer," precisely this
substance in the poem. Neither sighted nor blind, and yet
both, neither woman nor man and yet both, neither ancient
nor modern and yet both, Tiresias "throbbed between two
lives," functions as a "medium" in a number of ways.
Tiresias acts as a medium, both inhibiting and facilitating
the reader's experience of the scene he "surveys,"
"foretells," and, in a sense, participates in. It is
Tiresias who uses ridiculously puffy and pretentious
language to describe the scene for which he functions as
"peeping tom": "And I Tiresias have foresuffered all/
Enacted on this same divan or bed"(243-4); or "the time is
now propitious as he guesses...endeavors to engage her in
caresses." (234-5) The Latinate usages make the scene he
describes more ridiculous, but they also make the "dirty-old-man" voyeurism sound rather like an attempt to escape censure. Furthermore, there are versions of the Tiresias legend in which Tiresias sees Athena naked and suffers the fate he suffers for that reason.17 In that version the voyeurism is implied in the resulting punishment, and as such must inform our perspective on what Tiresias "in fact" sees. The passage, seen in this way, moves toward both revulsion and voyeuristic fascination. The tension between the two makes the scene "throb between two lives." Most interesting of all is the collaborative effect of this liminality: the reader's attitude toward these things determines what these things mean. The conflicting impressions and attractions are simply there, but the reader's own impulses and inclinations will determine how those existing elements are interpreted.

Even Eliot's free-form mingling of characters creates a sense of dynamism and flux. In the Stetson passage, as we have seen, the "consciousness" is both the "you" and the "I" being addressed. "There I saw one I knew"(69) modulates gradually into "You! hypocrite lecteur!--mon semblable,--mon frere!"(76). The consciousness of the poem is both telling and being told this passage. Because such a polymorphous consciousness "thinks" The Waste Land, it hovers between identities, between subject and object. The distinctions

17. Gregory S. Jay mentions, but does not provide a reference for, this alternate to the myth in "Discovering the Corpus."
between subject and object appear meaningless, and the reader, whose position within this exchange constantly and fluidly shifts, also "experiences" a partial breakdown of the ability to differentiate between self and other. But of course, the reader remains wholly separate from, even while merged in, the experience of the poem, and so the experience of "non-differentiation" is necessarily only a part of the complex.

Another passage wherein the difficulty of establishing identity draws attention to itself is in "What the Thunder Said." Here the quester/poet seems to have merged with the Fisher King when he says "I sat upon the shore /Fishing, with the arid plain behind me." (424-5) Moreover, after the thunder actually speaks we are told that

The sea was calm, your heart would have responded Gaily, to controlling hands.(421-2)[italics mine]

There is no clear way of knowing either who says these words, or to whom they are addressed. All participants in the narrative, including the reader and, presumably, the poet, function both as speaker and as auditor of these lines.

Notably, the poem's speaker lacks any specific or continuous gender identification. Sameness and difference co-exist. Apart even from Eliot's explicit identification in his note, that "all the women are one woman, and the two sexes meet in Tiresias," there is a breakdown of clear
gender distinctions produced by the free-associative logic of narration. The allusions in the first section give it a seemingly male voice, yet virtually the whole section seems to be spoken by a woman. "She" modulates between Marie, the hyacinth girl, and Madame Sosostris. However, since so much of what is said in "The Burial of the Dead" at least echoes the male voices of its literary progenitors (all the allusions, I think, except to Sappho, are to male writers), gender identification becomes a complex issue of collaboration. There are innumerable echoes within the voices, so that certainty is always difficult and identity is finally impossible to ascertain. But this does not simply yield confusion: rather than a meaningless babble of indeterminate tongues, The Waste Land is ultimately a ceaseless interplay between individuality and depersonalization.

The poem hovers continually between voices. The speaker of the poem simultaneously singles out new voices, and is drawn into new voices, so that one is never sure who is speaking. Even in the opening line, "April is the cruellest month, breeding/ Lilacs out of the dead land," the possibilities for who "speaks" include Geoffrey Chaucer, Marie, Walt Whitman, and Eliot as well as some persona invented by Eliot. The inverted seasonal headpiece which recalls Chaucer's "Whan that Aprill", also recalls Whitman's "When lilacs last in the dooryard bloom'd/...I mourned, and yet shall mourn with ever-returning/ spring." The person who
speaks these lines is, therefore, both of these writers, as well as a third voice whose identity is unclear. As the passage progresses, markers continually allow the reader brief glimpses of a "fixed" identity. Individual identities are continually being swallowed up by the mass but at the same time they are constantly splitting off, fragmenting, and taking on identities. Just as voices begin to be subsumed into the poem's "consciousness," new voices begin to unravel from the poem's centre. Even the functioning of "HURRY UP PLEASE ITS [sic] TIME," in spite of, or perhaps because of its collaborative nature and function, causes identity to re-emerge as quickly as it is subsumed. The voices flutter in and out of earshot much as snatches of conversation in a crowded public bar might do. They are represented as the din of the crowd, but within the linguistic space of the poem this din is pregnant with meaning. It is made up of wildly dissimilar voices all communicating something, all contributing something, and all surrendering something, to the universal hum of language.

The quest for identity, both in Eliot's prose and in *The Waste Land*, also calls for a surrender. The quester in the grail legends must abandon the quest, which is, ultimately, a quest for identity, before the quest can succeed. The work of art is also a continual surrender to the work, a kind of death. Eliot's prose, in essence, demonstrates the paradox that when the individual surrenders personal identity, identity comes into existence, or at
least into relief against the backdrop of influence and tradition. A complete consciousness and acknowledgement of the times results in a recognition of one's place within that order, and as such locates the subject.

In *The Waste Land* the penultimate "scene" exemplifies precisely this locating of the subject:

My friend, blood shaking my heart
The awful daring of a moment's surrender
Which an age of prudence can never retract
By this, and this only, we have existed
Which is not to be found in our obituaries
Or in memories draped by the beneficent spider
Or under seals broken by the lean solicitor
In our empty rooms (402-9)

The "moment's surrender" establishes the identity, and the "awful daring" is rewarded by giving both the giver and receiver "existence." None of the normal machinations of identity establishment can do it. The subject can not be fixed in death because death's very stasis prevents it from capturing the dynamism of identity. The memories which have been failing from the beginning of the poem cannot fix identity, because we are not merely the sum total of our memories; if we were, that too would be a kind of death. Neither can the law contain the identity, for the law, and the will too, are a kind of stasis like death. Only the dynamism of dying, of surrendering the will, and the memory and the desire to take and possess result in "existence" because all the other means of establishing it are "empty
rooms." Of course, the image also connotes sexual surrender, but that too represents a kind of blurring of identity distinctions, a liminality and a kind of flux.

Another intriguing locus of flux and transition in the poem is in "What the Thunder Said" where a single sound gives rise to difference, to language, and, simultaneously, to unity. When the thunder speaks the monosyllable identically three times, and the three different "listeners" (who might all be one listener) "interpret" the sound as three different "commands," a number of liminalities come into play. In a sense the scene is paradigmatic of most of the ways that the poem has given formal articulation to its concern with liminality. On the one hand all the differences of language are explicitly linked to a single monosyllabic transcendental signifier, which can stand in for, and be the final source of, all expression. Conversely, the unity of the transcendental signifier is hopelessly sundered by the interpreters. Moreover, this transcendental signifier is completely ungrounded, a completely free-playing signifier.

The scene itself contains a number of interesting conflicts which co-exist in a state of flux:

_Dayadhvam:_ I have heard the key turn in the door once and turn once only We think of the key, each in his prison Thinking of the key, each confirms a prison Only at nightfall, aethereal rumours Revive for a moment a broken Coriolanus (411-16)
The literal level of meaning, stripped of its literary associations, is helpful here. Thinking of the key confirms the prison. The prison, it would seem, could be escaped if only we could stop thinking of the key. But the key is the means of escape. What we are left with is a kind of conundrum where freedom is only possible if it is unconscious, which would make it unappreciable, and escape is only possible through a complete obliviousness to it. The indestructible barriers are the product of the most superficial differences:

Da

_Damyatta_: The boat responded
Gaily, to the hand expert with sail and oar
The sea was calm, your heart would have responded
Gaily, when invited, beating obedient
To controlling hands. (419-22)

The invitation brings, or "would have" brought, gay obedience. "Da" is not an invitation, however; it is a command. Furthermore, the command is "control," but whether this means self-control or submission to external control is unclear. All of this is still further complicated by the fact that "Da" is taken as a command even though the thunder allows that same command to be interpreted in three different ways. Volition, and submission themselves are, finally, inextricable from each other, despite being in direct conflict. As we have already seen, Eliot argues that surrender and submission can in fact strengthen identity, and by extension, volition.
Because it meant the complete obliteration of the self, transcendence into the absolute, according to Eliot, was "utter night." But *The Waste Land*, largely through extensive use of metonymy, suggests a non-totalitarian absolute. All of the allusions to other pieces of literature, aside from representing an active collaboration, also function as synecdoches, or fragments which stand in for organic wholes. "This music crept by us upon the waters" invokes the whole of *The Tempest*, as is attested to by the fact that source-hunting critics have launched into detailed explications of that and other plays to which Eliot refers metonymically. The title both invokes and evokes the entire grail cycle and the two competing traditions which that cycle subsumes. The liberal use of these allusions, which often link several texts together, allows this one poem to stand in, metonymically, for the whole of the literary tradition. But in so doing, of course, it also points to the gaps which it supposedly bridges. By shoring fragments against its ruins, the poem calls attention to, even invokes wholeness; by invoking the wholeness, however, it also invokes the holes both in the text and in the tradition. The awful separation between the whole and the part stands side by side, or even inside, the ability of the part to invoke the whole. As fragments, the allusions connote emptiness, but as allusions they create fullness. What we are left with is a text which merges and collocates both emptiness and

18. C.f. Harriet Davidson, 74.
fullness to the point of bursting. The brilliant technique developed by Eliot is to represent an organic whole, which permits and even thrives on difference, which observes similarity without being hegemonic,* and which achieves transcendence without requiring complete surrender of the self.

The final import of reading the poem in this way is also liminal. Two conflicting effects are generated simultaneously. On the one hand an "absolute" is both created and destroyed, and on the other hand a course of action is both presented and undermined. The absolute is generated metonymically, so that the poem succeeds in calling it to mind without producing a finality. The absolute itself is truly absolute in that it allows difference and contradiction. An absolute which "harmonizes" differences seeks by definition to eliminate them, but an absolute which allows difference to co-exist, and to exist in constant conflict, is not hegemonic. Nevertheless, an absolute which is called up by the fragments which stand in for the whole brings the absolute into existence even as it tears it down, because as we have seen it shows the gaps as

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19. I am thinking here of Terry Eagleton's discussion of "universalization" in his recent study, *Ideology: An Introduction* (London: Verso, 1990): 56-7. As Eagleton rightly points out, the current tendency to criticize anything which smacks of an attempt at universalization as hegemonic is slightly absurd. "Universalization," after all, is "indeed, ultimately in the interests of all individuals." (57) The point I am making is that, though impossible, a truly totalizing system which allows for all differences is by no means totalitarian, and is a consumation devoutly to be wished.
well as the connections, and the gaps overwhelm the frail and precarious connections. The resistance to finality represented by suggesting a wholeness that resists totalitarianism produces, in the end, a different kind of finality—a finality which entails an inability to decide anything or do anything.

In this sense *The Waste Land* undermines the very concept of the dialectic. The juxtaposition of opposites from the opening line onward warns us to be wary of progress. "April is the cruellest month" because it mixes memory and desire. Memory is consciousness of the past, and desire is consciousness of the future, and between them they represent consciousness of progress. But in Eliot's scheme they indicate a repetitive cycle rather than a regenerative one. April is cruel because it mixes memory and desire without fulfilling desire and therefore making memory a painful knowledge of repetition without progress.

No action, no gesture, no decision is possible in the poem because all possibilities co-exist simultaneously. What we are left with are fragments shored against ruins, both of hope and despair, of desire and of fear. That much indeterminacy produces only "aboulie,"²⁰ or "aporia" so that the quester/king sits on the shore wondering if he should

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²⁰. c.f. Gregory Jay’s "Discovering the Corpus," where he refers to Eliot’s own word, "aboulie" which had been "a lifelong affliction" with Eliot. Jay defines "aboulie" as an inability to decide anything and links this phrase of Eliot’s to "la tour aboulie" in the final stanza of the poem.
at least put his lands in order. There are several ways of reading this line. The quester/king is unable to decide on a course of action, or he has reached transcendence and is experiencing a last bit of nostalgia for earthly things, or the quest is a failure and the quester/king seeks to salvage something from that failure. In fact, all of these readings co-exist, indicating the simultaneity of success and failure, of regeneration and degeneration.

Simultaneous co-existence in the poem extends even to the poem's temporal and spatial locus. By virtue of its allusiveness, its dream-logic progression and its non-linearity, The Waste Land occupies no specific temporal or spatial locus, yet displays a deep consciousness of its age. The London locations in the poem appear to give it a locus, and locations, generally, abound—"Hofgartens" and hyacinth gardens and "Metropoles" and "Himagant" and numerous others—but none of them provides the poem with a location. At the same time though, they provide the poem with a huge variety of specificity which causes the poem to oscillate between being everywhere and nowhere.

The temporal locus is equally liminal. We have already seen such temporal displacements as the modern Sweeney's collocation with Actaeon and the medieval children in the choir loft singing "jug jug to dirty ears." We have seen the Buddha and St. Augustine collocated thematically as well as spatially, spiritually and hence temporally. A variety of seemingly specific times are jumbled together in such a way
that all time is redeemed and unredeemable at one and the same time. Specific times—"April," "the violet hour," "the final stroke of nine," "the closed car at four"—intersect with vague mergings of temporal loci to give the reader a consciousness of the passing of time, the transience of the age, and a sense of permanence. Forecasting (Madame Sosostris, Tiresias, the Sibyl) is conflated with hindsight, memory, and the cyclical nature cycle which degenerates and regenerates alternately and simultaneously in the poem. The way up is indistinguishable from the way down; the very direction of time's movement becomes ambiguous. Among all the copious allusion to myth, The Waste Land exposes the quest for progress as a myth. Decisiveness founders interminably on a shore apparently in ruins, although the attitude toward those ruins is unclear. Even here, in other words, there is ambiguity, because the ending of the poem can be read either as aporia or apotheosis, either apocalypse or apocrypha.

Remarkable as the ending is for its seemingly incoherent fragmentation—linguistical, cultural, historical, mythical, referential, reverential, and much else—the fragments at the end of the poem are even more remarkable for the ambiguities they house. Whoever it is that asks, "Shall I at least set my lands in order?" would seem to have the power to do so, yet the question can be seen both as suggesting the will to act, or as suggesting enervation. "London bridge is falling down falling down
falling down" is both trivial and tragic, both a meaningless sing-song—the source of children's amusement—and, in light of the "undone many" who were crossing that same bridge earlier in the poem, an image of disaster. "The fire which refines," too, is an ambivalent image, not only because of the pain being endured in the pursuit of refinement, but because the moment remains in flux, like Keats's figures on the urn, hovering in a state of arrested motion without progress. History is conflated with myth; linguistic and semiotic systems of meaning blend, or bleed, together, both re-inforcing and undermining each other. A babble of tongues sings all about the readers' ears, but the descent into this chaos is indistinguishable from, may even be seen as precipitating, the ascent into "shantih, shantih, shantih."

In fact, the copious discussion of these final fragments, and the indecision as to their import—whether ultimately positive or negative—is a result, precisely, of the fact that all alternatives, and all answers co-exist. It is not sufficient to say, though, that Eliot leaves the choice to the reader. Rather, he shows that all choices are hopelessly tangled. What The Waste Land enacts, ultimately, is not a particular state of mind, but the very essence of what Eliot believed a state of mind to be. The poem, like a state of mind, truly is "extremely complex, and chiefly composed of odds and ends in constant flux, manipulated by desire and fear."
These words, which Eliot wrote to describe Donne's poetry, do admirable double-duty as a description of the *The Waste Land*. In fact, we have seen that Eliot's early prose, in general, provides that necessary point of view which enables us to understand *The Waste Land* as the enactment of the liminal poetics which the early prose so dynamically develops. The "complexity of feeling," in *The Waste Land* results from this liminal poetics which Eliot, in yet another comment on Donne, referred to as a series of "rapid alterations and their antitheses," the product of which is either the ultimate impasse or the peace which passeth understanding, either the possibility of the ultimate, or the ultimate impossibility.

Readers occupying the limen between Eliot's early prose and his poetry will see that Eliot's challenge to arbitrary and impermanent intellectual abstractions goes far beyond a mere challenge to the closed categories of comedy and tragedy: it is a challenge to categorization itself. Eliot's concern is ontological as much as it is epistemological. Being itself is shown as inseparable from knowing and as dynamic, ungrounded, liminal—a condition of flux, which for all its insubstantiality, does its work upon us; is "real." *The Waste Land* gives poetic form and expression to a state of mind in which being and knowing are inextricably connected, and in which reality itself is a state of flux, of dynamic interchange, between a matrix of forces which are

themselves dynamic. The challenge is not to the tradition, or to the present age, but is rather a radical challenge to our very way of conceiving reality. Seen from Eliot's point of view, the closed categories of real and ideal, tradition and individual, conscious and unconscious are broached and blurred. This blurring, this conscious confusion, is found, most profoundly, in art.

When seen in the context of the early prose, *The Waste Land*'s confusions become understandable, inevitable even, because they are the point. The unsettling experience of the poem must be taken in the context of Eliot's views about the subject/object relationship as a dynamic state of flux, and about art as a collaborative meaning-making process which is never entirely grounded, neither in the creator nor the audience, neither in the real nor the ideal. The dynamic condition of the poem is an inevitable outcropping of this poetics. The poem's liminality precludes a comfortable context for the poem because to exist within the limen is to be without a context. This precarious and even dangerous state, which necessarily blurs the boundaries and arbitrary intellectual abstractions which are prerequisite to traditional conceptions of context, is the essence of *The Waste Land*.

Eliot performs a fine and delicate operation on the sensible world, exposes the awful separation between the actual and the ideal, and pursues his observations into quotidian extremes of torture, but the real effect he
elicits is to bring into bold relief the Modern mind. And like the state of mind it reveals with such true cold hardness, *The Waste Land* hovers in constant, self-conscious flux, somewhere between psychology and eschatology, between gutter and grail, between comic and tragic, between desire and fear. Uniting all these without merging them, it is a failure of monumental proportions and an unqualified success.
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