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T.S. Eliot's Anti-Modernism: Poetry and Tradition in the European Waste Land

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INTRODUCTION

I have shed tears twice over the course of my college career: when my dog died, and while reading *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* on a still summer night before my senior year. I had read the poem countless times before then and had always found a kindred spirit in the poem's insecure, socially paralyzed narrator. But my experience that summer evening was different, probably because I realized that Eliot was twenty-two when he wrote it- my age. I cried for Eliot himself, out of some awe or love for humanity that a man like him once lived and breathed.

A senior thesis in history may not be the proper place to record my emotional response to Eliot's poetry, yet the personal experience of reading his work, the emotions and feelings it has excited in me, the indescribable elevation of my spirit that has followed encounters with his verse are responsible for my decision to write about him.

I chose to focus on *The Waste Land* because it seemed like a challenge, and because I had a vague idea, even before reading the poem, that the issues with which it deals must be worth analyzing. While there are many passages in *The Waste Land* that I

find deeply moving, I do not relate to the narrator in the way I related to Prufrock. Eliot wrote *The Waste Land* ten years after *Prufrock.* The most personal facets of the poem stem from his difficult marriage and from his intellectual doubts, neither of which I can pretend to fully appreciate. But *The Waste Land* also raises issues of broad cultural and historical significance that constitute appropriate subjects for a senior thesis in history.

Some people might not think any justification is necessary for writing a history thesis about poetry, but I am not one of those people. Indeed, there were many times over the course of this project when I wondered if what I was doing was the work of a literature major, rather than a history major. Fortunately, Eliot himself provided the connections between poetry and the discipline of history. He advocated the examination of the interconnections between poetic composition and historical forces. He explained that poetry changes in ways attributable to external, historical forces. He posited that tracking the changes in poetry is a way of tracking major transformations in human consciousness.

I approached the study of Eliot's poetry as one method of analyzing historical consciousness in the early twentieth-century- a method that could broaden the knowledge I found in the political and diplomatic history books I had previously read. I had already concluded nineteenth-century Europe had reached a point of cultural and political domination on Earth unrivaled by, for instance, modern-day America. That global dominance collapsed with the Great War, so the Great War and the events leading up to it were more significant than events surrounding the Second World War. Part of Europe's nineteenth-century hegemony was cultural, so the artistic and intellectual ruptures that

occurred early in the twentieth-century overlapped with the military, political and economic cataclysms of the war and post-war years.

Reading for my senior thesis confirmed this hypothesis. In addition, I found that intelligent people living through the last decade of the nineteenth-century, and the first two decades of the twentieth, were very well aware of the incipient end of European global hegemony. The realization that European civilization was collapsing, or at least undergoing radical transformation, is an idea found not just in history books, but also in the words of Europeans living at the time.

The poet and novelist Thomas Hardy was a transitional figure, bridging the Victorian era and modernity. He wrote this of European civilization, in a poem originally titled "By the Century's Deathbed":

The land's sharp features seemed to be,
The Century's corpse outleant,
His crypt the cloud canopy,
The wind his death-lament.
The ancient pulse of germ and birth
Was shrunken hard and dry,
And every spirit upon earth
Seemed fervourless as I.[1]

The poet William Butler Yeats, a friend of Eliot's, was also a figure whose life spanned the Victorian and modern eras. Yeats hated modernity, as evidenced in his reflections while standing on a bridge in the center of rapidly modernizing Dublin: "When I stand… in the half-light and notice that discordant architecture, all those electric signs, where modern heterogeneity has taken physical form, a vague hatred comes up out of my own dark and I am certain that wherever in Europe there are minds strong enough

[1] Stephen Greenblatt, gen. editor, *The Norton Anthology of English Literature,* Eighth Edition, Volume 2 (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006), 1871.

to lead others, the same vague hatred rises."[2] He saw the years from 1890 to the war as a monumental transition period, near the end of "twenty centuries of stony sleep" occasioned by Christianity.

Not all of the intellectual responses to the emergence of modernity were negative. Before the Great War, there was a sense of looming cataclysm, but one that would have a rejuvenating effect on a culture seen as restrictive and stale. The classic example of this outlook is Igor Stravinsky's *Rites of Spring,* which celebrates a sacrificial death for the purpose of a future, more enlightened life. The outbreak of the Great War a year after the ballet's premier in Paris provided just such a scenario.

The Great War killed millions of Europeans. The nature of the fighting, and the role of modern technology in it, amplified the grotesque horror unfolding along the western front between 1914 and 1918. The experience of the war only exacerbated intellectuals' cynicism and hatred of traditionalism, it amplified the yearning for change articulated by the pre-war avant-garde movement. The tragedies and futilities of the war seemed to justify the avant-garde's rebellion against nineteenth-century systems.

How did Eliot fit into this historical context? That is the most basic question that my thesis attempts to answer. I realized eight months ago, that to do so, I would have to *understand* Eliot. That is no easy task. In the world of undergraduates at a liberal arts college, Eliot's reputation revolves around the ability to understand him. In my experience, if someone mentions reading his poem *The Waste Land,* the first response is always: "Did you understand it?" Not only is Eliot's poetry difficult, but he himself is enigmatic. For instance, people often fail to comprehend why the author of a "modernist

[2] Greenblatt, *Norton Anthology,* 2058.

manifesto" like *The Waste Land* would convert to Anglicanism barely five years after writing it.

After reading most of Eliot's prose and poetry, and after spending months thinking about the two, I cannot say I totally understand his mind. This is not ultimately discouraging. The difficulty of reading Eliot is what makes him such a rewarding person to study. And today I know, to a much greater extent than I did eight months ago, what I don't understand about him. And I know there are things I probably will never understand. Above all, I have learned that the difficulty of reading his poetry is not insurmountable. Editorial notes are absolutely crucial to reading a poem by T.S. Eliot, and the mystery or difficulty surrounding his reputation breaks down if you put in the effort to read those notes. But because he is genuinely hard to understand, he therefore remains widely misunderstood.

One important thing I learned from my thesis project is that Eliot is hard to understand, but not for the reasons most people think. He is hard to understand because there is a tension between his intellectual beliefs and his poetry. On the one hand, his poetry represents an obvious formal departure from virtually all the poetry that preceded him. His literary techniques and some of his subject matter were strikingly unconventional. It does not take a higher degree to recognize this. Thus, Eliot is labeled a "modernist"; his champions regard him as the quintessential figure in the modernist art movement.

"Modernism" has been defined as, above all, a revolt against the past.[3] Yet Eliot was not a political or intellectual rebel: he was genuinely religious and socially conservative, almost obsessed with history and with literary traditions. He was erudite to an extent that people today, even academics, would find hard to fathom. His ideas about literature do not reflect the desire to break conventions, or move forward, that we generally associate with modernism. His literary criticism and other prose writings all emphasize the importance of maintaining strict connections to the poetic canon. He thought that artists only create art after they have developed what he calls the "historical sense." He talks about "depersonalization" as the artist's ability to realize their individual insignificance next to the whole of what came before them.

This thesis hopes to contribute to a reconciliation of the apparent conflict between Eliot's conservative outlook and his formally innovative poetry. I do not advocate stripping Eliot of his modernist label. I would rather amend the term "modernism." This qualification is important because the modernist label carries connotations that simply do not do justice to Eliot. For example, the label implies that modernists wanted to move forward, away from the past. Eliot wanted to move backwards, partly because he felt other artists had left the past behind. In an essay introducing the early twentieth-century modernists, the *Norton Anthology of British Literature* describes T.S. Eliot's critical and creative projects as "efforts to reinvent poetry."[4] That is exactly the opposite of what he was doing. He wanted to stop people from trying to reinvent poetry, because he thought doing so would only lead to bad poems. How can the editors of the *Norton Anthology*, the

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[3] Modris Eksteins, *Rites of Spring: The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000), xiv-xvi.
[4] Greenblatt, *Norton Anthology,* 1834.

closest thing I know to a record of the academic consensus, so completely misunderstand Eliot's project? They fail to appreciate the relationship between Eliot's literary ideas and his attitude toward modernity. I believe the best way to think about Eliot's intellectual project is as an effort to save poetry from the threatening forces of modernity and modernism.

The modernist movement and Eliot's ideas are both responses to the same set of dramatic historical changes. Europe transformed itself from 1890 to 1918. In the context of drastic political, technological and social changes described by historians as "the emergence of modernity," Europe's dominant artistic and intellectual value system re-orientated itself in favor of newness and forward movement.

T.S. Eliot had a different response to historical change. He felt the ongoing historical transformations, self-perpetuated by the resultant emphasis on progress, threatened to uproot and destroy England's literary tradition. So he took it on himself to save that tradition.

CHAPTER 1

In 1923, Eliot praised James Joyce's novel *Ulysses* as "a step toward making the modern world possible for art."[5] Regardless of what Eliot thought about *Ulysses*, this remark clearly shows that he felt the modern world was so corrupted that writing literature about it was nearly impossible. This chapter uncovers why Eliot believed the modern world was so nearly antithetical to the creation of art. This chapter explores the history that Eliot lived through, his experiences of that history, and his historical approach to understanding modernity, based on a close analysis of his letters.

Eliot matured during a period of dramatic historical change, in which Europeans' obsession with newness and forward movement was punctuated by the Great War.

Eliot saw the war as an intellectual and moral threat. It was a moral threat to society because it undermined religion. What sort of faith could survive the experience of the trenches? The extent of killing and tragedy weakened social codes grounded in Christian morality. Eliot also identified the war's damage on the collective European

[5] T.S. Eliot, "Ulysses, Order, and Myth," reprinted by Yale University Modernism Lab, http://modernism.research.yale.edu/wiki/index.php/%22'Ulysses,'_Order_and_Myth%22.

psyche. He saw how the war amplified the avant-garde idea of progress. Primarily, the war engendered escapism from the past. Although initially Eliot chose to ignore the war and contemporary history, he eventually confronted both. He believed escapism from the past, a lack of order, and weakened societal morality all threatened the integrity of poetry. He was already a public intellectual in 1920, and he felt an obligation to express his views.

As he put it in 1923, *The Waste Land* and his other writings from that period were a direct counterattack to "the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history."[6]

"Modernism, which in its prewar form was a culture of hope, a vision of synthesis, would turn to a culture of nightmare and denial."[7] Eliot didn't flow with either of these currents. In a way, what he sought and achieved was a middle ground.

I.

Eliot's life until the early 1920's coincided with a period of dramatic historical change in Europe. By the time Eliot wrote *The Waste Land,* most aspects of European life were very different then they were when he was born, or even when he began his undergraduate studies. Historians describe these rapid changes, taken together, as the emergence of modernity. "Modernism," in the broadest sense, was the intellectual and artistic trend that emerged alongside modernity. This study won't try to address all the underlying causes of Europe's transformation. The purpose of providing some historical background is to highlight the fact that Eliot's world underwent deeply significant

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[6] Eliot, *Ulysses.*
[7] Eksteins, *The Great War,* 237.

changes in a short period of time. After first looking at the main changes in society underway after the turn of the century, we will focus our attention on the Great War, and its role in shaping Eliot's world.

The historian Modris Ecksteins, in his book *Rites of Spring: The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age,* frames the birth of the modern era as, above all, a revolt against nineteenth-century civilization. Eksteins describes the emergence of modernity as a definite historical event, of which Europeans were very well aware. He focuses on the themes of liberation, breaking convention, sexual emancipation, and obsession with forward movement. According to Eksteins, the turn of the century was typified by a quest for liberation- be it the emancipation of women, homosexuals, proletariat, youth, appetites, or ethnic peoples. Beginning in the 1890's and gaining steam through the 1910's, the broad cultural and intellectual trend was to question or neglect rationalism in order to "affirm life" and find meaningful experiences. There was significant technological progress, which fueled a society-wide emphasis on newness.[8] Ecksteins also identifies progress as a central theme in the early twentieth century. Progress took its most obvious form in technological change. During the birth of the modern era, progress also meant changing moral codes. A weakening of the societal pressures that reinforced those codes was responsible for the change. One of the key changes sweeping through European society during Eliot's lifetime was with regards to sexual behavior. Eroticism and a desire to break nineteenth-century sexual norms dominated the avant-garde

[8] Eksteins, *The Great War,* xiv, 31.

outlook. The desire to break stultifying norms permeated the popular consciousness, as part of the search for newness and change.[9]

With reference to Victorian and Edwardian England, Eksteins argues that it would be a distortion "to deny the existence of a prevailing social code or morality, which in one way or another involved the majority of citizens, regardless of class or station," or "to deny that experience was compartmentalized into categories and priorities of good and bad and right and wrong."[10] Victorian social codes, which broke down in the early twentieth-century, had been a foundation of England's pre-war social identity. Their weakening contributed to a reassessment of what it meant to be British, not to mention Christian, or even a decent human being.

In the early twentieth-century, there was also dramatic change in the realm of art. The modernist intellectual and artistic movement took on the quest for liberation and the act of rebellion. People "promoted experimental techniques in their work and urged rebellion against established academies." The conventions of painting and literature were systematically dismantled. For modernist artists, the reactions of the viewer or reader were important considerations, alongside the meaning of the art itself. Modernism became a culture of the sensational event. If something was new and different enough to shock, it had value. A perfect example of the shock-factor in modern art would be Stravinsky's ballet, the "Rites of Spring." The ballet was a milestone in the development

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[9] Eksteins, *The Great War,* 33-34.
[10] Eksteins, *The Great War,* 128.

of modernism, both for its breaking of convention, and its interest in a more meaningful existence.[11]

The most significant event in the development of modernity and modernism was the Great War, which broke out in August 1914. The Great War partially arose out of, and then accelerated, the modern obsession with forward movement. The war became instrumental in shaping European culture. The war impacted the individual soldier's and the population's consciousness.[12] Artists like Eliot depicted the morbidity and spiritual vacuity of post-war Europe.

First of all, the war reached astonishing levels of death and destruction. About ten million soldiers and seven million civilians died in the war. One million British soldiers and over a million French soldiers died. Nearly two-and-a-half million German soldiers died.[13] Unlike wars in the nineteenth century, The Great War was not fought for limited political aims or in defense of treaty systems. The Great Powers fought for their very survival. Despite its roots in familiar diplomatic controversy, there were no war aims except victory. No one wanted to or would end the war with a treaty.[14] This life or death struggle between the Great Powers necessitated "total war," in which countries committed every last resource to the fighting. Thus the divide between soldier and civilian was blurred.

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[11] Alan Bullock, editor, *The Harper Dictionary of Modern Thought* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1977), 396.
[12] Eksteins, *The Great War,* xiv.
[13] H.P. Willmott, *World War 1* (New York: DK Adult, 1997), 307.
[14] A.J.P. Taylor, *The Struggle for Mastery in Europe: 1848-1918* (London: Oxford University Press, 1957), 534.

The nature of the fighting intensified the war's physical and emotional destruction. Modern technological advances in weaponry were not matched by tactical adaptations, resulting in appalling death tolls. The use of new technologies gave the war a distinctly modern aspect. Because of the exponentially greater death tolls, people naturally associated modernity with mass destruction and brutality. There was something strange, unreal, and terrifying in the display of modern technology. For example, chemical weapons, and the concomitant images of gas-masked soldiers, provided particularly eerie, frightening images of battle.[15] Trench warfare, in which hundreds died for every yard gained, made the war uniquely disturbing, slow, and tragic. Ineffectual large-scale offensives, and suicidal charges "over the top" of the trenches fostered a sense of futility on both sides. People recognized the measureless human sacrifice as not only unimaginably horrific, but also pointless.[16]

Before August 1914 many Europeans thought war could smooth over social problems. They assumed war would be decisive and quick. For these reasons and a few others, the Germans, the British, and the French all cheered the declaration of war in their respective nations. In reality, war was long and socially disruptive. Rather than smooth over social problems, it dismantled three empires. What unfolded after 1914 was therefore shocking. The European populations faced the painful lesson of being both wrong and somewhat responsible.[17] Moreover, the war broke down centuries-old social

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[15] Eksteins, *The Great War,* 162-164.
[16] Eksteins, *The Great War,* 142-144.
[17] Taylor, *Mastery,* 522, 529.

hierarchies in all of the countries involved. In Britain, the privileges and distinctions of the aristocracy that had persisted through the nineteenth century finally dissolved.[18]

The war divided European peoples by pitting them against each other in mortal combat. The divisions instilled feelings of cultural alienation and antagonism among them. As the prominent twentieth-century historian A.J.P. Taylor argued, political and military leaders were, to some degree, responsible for the opinions of the population. In order to wage their total war, and frame their refusal to compromise as morally acceptable, the allies had to invent or exaggerate the brutality of German customs. Germany responded by portraying their culture as 'superior'. Both states needed these to create a 'fundamental' conflict.[19]

The overarching theme of Eliot's time period was dramatic change. The war assumed great importance in his outlook because it was responsible for so many of the disruptive transformations going on around him. The war broke apart multinational empires and centuries-old social hierarchies. It accelerated the trends of modernity, and did nothing to dampen cultural revolution. It actually intensified the existing intellectual and cultural trends, but gave them a cynical, more dejected aspect. It darkened the view of historical cataclysm, which was not necessarily a negative phenomenon according to the pre-war avant-garde artists. Consequently, the Twenties were a period of profound spiritual crisis. The mind that faced recent human history was forced to doubt itself. For many artists, the only way forward seemed to require an escape from the past.

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[18] Arno Mayer, *The Persistence of the Old Regime: Europe to the Great War* (New York: Verso Publishing, 2010), introduction.
[19] Taylor, *Mastery,* 527, 534.

Certainly, the change in moral standards continued to accelerate after the war, partly because the war weakened Christianity as a moral ideal. Indeed, how do men maintain Christian morals after slaughtering millions of there fellow men? A collective sense of guilt weakened people's moral rectitude, which formerly had fortified the societal maintenance of virtue and propriety. Additionally, women had to leave the home to work for the war effort. This meant independence from the strict moral rules of the home. The final result of all these war-related changes was the weakening of societal controls over sex. Those issues became a private matter for each individual to deal with in their own way.[20]

Although average citizens undoubtedly experienced the changes thus far discussed, the veterans of the Great War had felt their world turned upside down. Surviving soldiers returned to something they could no longer call home. Their past was destroyed, they were alienated, and there was nothing in which to find solace.[21] This thesis deals with one poet's intellectual response to the ills of postwar Europe. But for the millions who actually participated in the war, those circumstances were overwhelming. As Erich Maria Remarque said of the purpose behind his novel, *All Quiet on the Western Front*: "I merely wanted to awaken understanding for a generation that more than all others has found it difficult to make its way back from four years of death, struggle, and terror, to the peaceful fields of work and progress."[22]

II.

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[20] Eksteins, *The Great War*, 523-525.
[21] Eksteins, *The Great War*, 529.
[22] Erich Maria Remarque, "The End of War?" *Life and Letters*, 3 (1929), 405-406.

The Great War was the most important historical event of Thomas Eliot's young adult life. It was a formative event in his intellectual outlook. Eliot was twenty-five when the first German divisions marched into Belgium in 1914. He was thirty by the time Woodrow Wilson signed the Treaty of Versailles in summer 1919. Eliot's experience of the war was traumatic but somewhat atypical.

In summer 1914, in the final weeks before the European continent blew itself up, Eliot was living in Marburg, Germany as an American citizen enrolled in a few summer classes. He had recently earned his masters from Harvard and was considering whether or not to write a doctoral dissertation in philosophy. His life in Germany was calm, relaxed and happy. The letters he wrote from Germany that summer were scattered with humorous, sometimes profane verse and were illustrated by skillfully rendered cartoons of German people. One day, he reports in a letter to his cousin: "I have just been to church, and feel as good as gold."[23] He professed a real enjoyment and appreciation of Germany, even if politically he felt a vague obligation to oppose German nationalism. He considered the Germans to be "aw'f'ly good people" on the whole. If he ever commented on current events, it was to mock some political squabbling that came within earshot.[24]

Eliot was still in Marburg when Germany declared war against Russia, on 1 August 1914. Everything changed once war broke out. We have no letters from him for the month between 26 July and 22 August, because the German government cut off all communication with the outside world. During this time, Eliot was advised to avoid

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[23] T.S. Eliot, *The Letters of T.S. Eliot, Volume 1 1898-1922,* edited by Valerie Eliot, (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1988), 48.
[24] Eliot, *Letters, 39.*

speaking English or French. His Russian friends in Germany fell "miserable and silent."[25] He left Germany and the continent altogether in September 1914.

The letters he wrote from England, when he first arrived there, emphasized the chaos not just in his own life but also in London. "The noise hereabouts is like hell turned upside down," he wrote of London in fall 1914. He described the first neighborhood he settled in as "the noisiest place in the world, a neighborhood at present given over to artists, musicians, hack writers, Americans, Russians, French, Belgians, Italians, Spaniards, and Japanese." He talked about himself and everyone "acquiring a war vocabulary."[26]

Besides being chaotic, Eliot's experience was international. It was European. This is an important aspect of his outlook, to be treated in more depth later on. For now it's worth noting that, at the beginning of the war, he was sharing the experience of other Europeans, talking the way they did, reading the same newspapers and hearing the same rumors. As one friend of his from college put it, Eliot was becoming "Europeanized." In other words, the problems facing European intellectuals were the problems now facing T.S. Eliot right at the cusp of his career.

Eliot never joined the army and never experienced combat first-hand, but he had to deal with numerous tragic consequences of the war. His best friend from his year abroad in Paris, Jean Verdenal, joined the French infantry and died in the Dardanelles on 2 May 1915. At death Verdenal was twenty-three.[27] Eliot and Verdenal had maintained a close correspondence in the two years since Eliot left Paris. In the last letter he ever wrote to Eliot, Verdenal talked about his love of Richard Wagner. He pleaded with Eliot to

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[25] Eliot, *Letters,* 51-52.
[26] Eliot, *Letters,* 55, 57.
[27] Eliot, *Letters,* 18.

write him more often. Eliot later dedicated his first widely published poem, *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, to Verdenal. Many other events and experiences of the war, though less tragic than the death of Verdenal, affected Eliot's psyche. His brother-in-law, who fought in the war, subsequently suffered from serious Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Eliot related hearing his gruesome stories, and observing his dejected aspect, his hopelessness, and his morbidity.[28] For months, Eliot was prevented from turning in his doctoral dissertation because crossing the Atlantic was dangerous given hostile German naval activity. The war therefore became an overwhelming negative force on Eliot's psyche. It shaped his cynical and morbid sense of humor. Its devastating experiences account for many images found in *The Waste Land,* including rats and bones.

Eliot believed that the war destroyed the innocence of Europe, and perhaps it destroyed his own innocence as well. By studying Eliot's letters, we can trace the development of his intellectual response to the war. At first, Eliot advocated essentially ignoring the events of the outside world. He complained to professors, relatives, and friends at Oxford that the war was seriously disrupting his dissertation work.[29] Those outside distractions and intrusions brought him to focus more intently on the meaning and impact of current events. In early 1916, he admitted worrying about his ability to produce any more good poetry. He feared that his most successful poem to date, *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,* would turn out to be a "swan song." He thought the distractions and intrusions of the war on his life had forced him into a potentially permanent "unartistic mode." Sensing great changes occurring within and around him, Eliot attempted to identify their causes. In doing so, he made a significant leap. He speculated that his

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[28] Eliot, *Letters,* 183.
[29] Eliot, *Letters,* 89.

earlier poetry was possible because it had been composed during "careless years." War disrupted that carelessness. Indeed, he feared the carelessness of the past was gone forever, and not just for himself but for all of Europe.[30] Therefore the "unartistic mode" he was undergoing could likewise apply to the entire continent.

Around mid-1918, when Eliot was twenty-nine years old, his personal belief system was still incomplete. He was still trying to understand the war and keep it from destroying him. In a letter to his cousin Eleanor Hinkley (with whom he frequently shared ideas), he noted some previous remarks of hers exhibited "the effort to keep oneself unaffected by the war." He complimented her for the effort, which he attributed to an "instinctive force of character." In the same letter, Eliot argued that sticking to one's own business was a necessary prerequisite for preserving one's values. He clearly saw the outside world- meaning the war and other macro-events- as a dangerous and antagonistic force. According to him, this force threatened the intellect. People "lost in the war" became "uninteresting" and "remote."[31]

Eliot's praise of the literary journal, *The Egoist,* late in 1917, provides a telling statement on how history was shaping his literary tastes. He wrote, "[*The Egoist*] stands for something which needs to be kept going." He celebrated the fact that "[*The Egoist*] makes no reference to politics or the war and that it can keep on its way determined to assert the perpetual importance of things."[32] In these remarks, we see a clue that Eliot could no longer feign ignorance concerning historical change. He praised the magazine for avoiding any consideration of the war whatsoever, but, in identifying that avoidance as the magazine's most praiseworthy attribute, he was actually making the war the central

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[30] Eliot, *Letters,* 69.
[31] Eliot, *Letters,* 226.
[32] Eliot, *Letters,* 199.

issue in literary life. The above-quoted remarks also foreshadowed an important aspect of Eliot's eventual response to historical change. Eliot himself would later take up the task of "asserting the perpetual importance of things." His reference to the war in the fall of 1917 indicates he was already moving from an avoidance of modernity to a confrontation with it.

While he worried that contemporary history might render impossible the making of good art, Eliot did not give up literary endeavors. In fact, he committed himself to the literary life around 1918. The terrifying ideas that plagued him now found continual expression in his writing. What he did was to externalize his anxiety. From his days at Oxford during the war through at least the mid-1920's, fear and hostility towards modernity provided the very foundation for his outlook on poetry and society.

III.

Not only did Eliot identify the war as a dangerous influence on intellectual life, he came to see modern society in the same light. The two most problematic dynamics of modernity for him were urban life and sexuality. He attached great significance to the city, as the quintessential setting of modern life. However, he felt the modern urban experience could damage the human soul. He was also troubled by changing norms of sexual behavior, and by changing societal expectations surrounding sexuality. He attributed these changes to an overarching decline in modern Europeans' moral integrity. In Eliot's mind, these historical changes negatively impacted intellectual and moral life in a way that was dangerous to the health of the arts, specifically poetry.

A central aspect of modernity, not discussed in the background provided earlier in the chapter, was urban life. The city at the turn of the century was immense, loud, dark,

dirty, and suffocated by smog. The city posed an existential threat to human life, as human beings were not accustomed to dwelling in the presence of so many other human beings. Eliot's definitive biographer, Peter Ackroyd, describes the existence of the individual person in modernity's urban landscape: "…uninteresting, or unimportant in this place where everything is colossal… perhaps terrified, by the sense of desertion and utter loneliness which belongs to his situation… against the magnitude of stone, the city dwellers are like wraiths, replacing others, and in turn to be replaced."[33]

Eliot's own experience of urban life sheds light on how he came to disdain some of its underlying trends. His personal experience was fairly representative of what the average person would experience, living in a large modern city in the early twentieth century. In summer 1916, Eliot moved from Oxford to London. His poetry never generated enough income for him to live comfortably. For two years he survived by doing odd jobs and by giving evening lectures to working class people; then he started work at Lloyd's Bank, in its foreign exchange division. He worked eight to ten hours a day, gave evening lectures twice a week, and read voluminously late into the night. He came to see life in the modern city as not just tiring but in a way soul-destroying. A feeling of insignificance, a thirst for meaning, and dissatisfaction with life in general are themes of *The Waste Land* influenced by Eliot's daily routine of going to work in a big building for a big company. Eliot described pedestrians commuting across London Bridge as "dead drones."

Some of Eliot's literary interests in 1918 highlight his complex relationship with Europe and urban life. In response to a question from his cousin Eleanor Hinkely, he

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[33] Peter Ackroyd, *T.S. Eliot: A Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984), 75.

shared his favorite writers at the moment, Henry James and Ivan Turgenev. Like Eliot, both James and Turgenev embraced Europe over their specific national backgrounds. Eliot said James was "more European than most English or American [artists]." He admired Turgenev's *Sportsman's Sketches,* especially for its depiction of country life. Eliot also praised George Eliot for her "realist depiction of country life" in the short story "The Sad Fortunes of the Reverend Amos Barton."[34]

Eliot associated modern London with sexual temptation and relaxed moral standards. In contrast to quiet Oxford, London occasioned temptation and therefore quasi-religious doubt. He wrote a sort of confession to his friend Conrad Aiken while staying in London in December 1914. He said he had been going through "one of those nervous sexual attacks which I suffer from when alone in a city… this is the worst since Paris… I never have them in the country." He explored his feelings, and tried to describe the conflicts they presented: "One walks about the street with one's desires, and one's refinement rises up like a wall whenever opportunity approaches."[35] Some of Eliot's poetry from around this period helps us understand his moral outlook. Poems like *Prufrock* (1915) and the series of Sweeney poems a few years later suggest that Eliot was insecure towards women. Nagging moral doubt intensified that insecurity. It produced the range of feelings one sees in a poem like *Prufrock* or *Sweeney Among the Nightingales.*[36] Eliot was never a proponent of free love; in fact, he associated sex with depravity, with imperfection and shallowness.

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[34] Eliot, *Letters,* 227.
[35] Eliot, *Letters,* 74-75.
[36] T.S. Eliot, *Collected Poems: 1909-1935* (New York, Harcourt Brace and Company, 1936), 11-18, 65-69.

For what it's worth, Eliot was still a virgin at the time of his 1914 visit to London. He was twenty-six. Five months after his arrival in London, he married Vivienne Haigh-Wood. That summer Eliot left Oxford for good. As a letter that Ezra Pound wrote to Eliot's father shows us, Eliot had by then committed himself to the literary life. Pound praised Eliot's skill, called him the "scholar poet," and seemed assured of his success.[37] Indeed, Eliot was optimistic about his prospects. In London however, his life became more difficult than he had anticipated. He was unemployed and his literary career didn't pay anything. His letters provide testimony to the hardships he endured, both financially and with his marriage. He writes about constantly struggling for money and suffering a "very depressing" winter of 1915/1916. A year into his marriage, he wrote: "I have been living in one of Dostoevsky's novels, not Jane Austen's."[38] Apparently, Eliot's marriage was full of extreme emotional upheaval, not romantic bliss. What is crucial is that Eliot associated all these feelings with the urban experience. To him, escape to the countryside or the coast was a respite from depression. Yet the countryside and coast also provided respite from things that Eliot as a poet and thinker could never do without: intense emotionality and philosophical inquiry.

Eliot's remarks about contemporary journalism provide another example of his hostility to modernity. In 1920, he criticized "the journalistic machine" as "a quite suitable member of modern industrial society." He saw the journalistic world as a monster that "must be fed." Because there was never enough good work to feed its existence, journalism celebrated bad literature, valuing quantity over quality, and

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[37] Eliot, *Letters,* 99.
[38] Eliot, *Letters,* 164, 189

trampling over all standards in the process.[39] In its superficiality, journalism mirrored modernity. By contrast, Eliot personally correlated scarcity with value in literary criticism. He repeatedly stressed his desire to write very few articles, but to make all of them good.

In addition to journalism, Eliot wrote about how America, his country of origin, was representative of modernity. In his mind, America was moving blindly forward without historical perspective. He derided America's political involvement in Europe. He described post-war American efforts at Versailles as contributions to the "Balkanization" of Europe.[40] He associated everything American with misguided forward movement. Because American people lacked historical perspective, he said, they have no consciousness. He called progressive American lifestyles "barbarous." He told his brother that if he (his brother) had no consciousness like other Americans, he would be happier. He described Americans as exclusively interested in the present and future. He wrote to his brother: Americans lack "the intense awareness of individual personality" that Europeans have. Americans have "no curiosity about what sort of a person one is." He self-consciously attempted to cultivate the proper curiosity toward others, as a letter to a British friend demonstrates: "I want to understand all the background and tradition of you."[41] Eliot believed that, if you are curious about a person, you want to know and appreciate their heritage. The more Eliot saw Americans as lacking such curiosity, the more he expressed it himself.

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[39] Eliot, *Letters,* 356.
[40] Eliot, *Letters,* 351.
[41] Eliot, *Letters,* 310-311, 318.

Eliot's aversion to the idea of progress was partially influenced by his status as a foreigner in Europe. He struggled to fit in as an Englishmen and a European. "It is damned hard work to live with a foreign nation and cope with them- one is always coming up against differences of feeling that make one feel humiliated and lonely."[42] This alienation bothered him, for he craved acceptance. His eventual embrace of shared traditions and of historical perspective was, in part, an effort toward assimilating into British and European life. But was that effort to assimilate the driving force behind his ideas, the force giving those ideas their ultimate shape?

Another possible way to frame Eliot's intellectual project would be to label it as conservative or even reactionary. He once claimed to be "a Royalist in politics, a Classicist in literature, and an Anglo-Catholic in religion." Later in life, he said his personality "combined a Catholic cast of mind, a Calvinist heritage, and a Puritanical temperament."[43] This pronouncement was humorous, but truthful. Eliot's habits of mind betray a reactionary nature to his thinking. His personality tended to operate at the extremes, rather than between them. When Eliot realized he needed to earn a living from something other than his poetry, he sought an occupation that was in his words "most remote from the arts." He had offers to run literary magazines, and to teach full time at Harvard, both of which he rejected in favor of a 9-5 job crunching numbers at Lloyd's Bank.[44]

Was Eliot's ultimate embrace of the importance of history, specifically European traditions, merely a reaction to his discomfort with change and progress? The answer to that question is no. Eliot came to believe that the war and certain modern social currents

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[42] Eliot, *Letters,* 310.
[43] T.S. Eliot, *On Poetry and Poets* (London: Faber & Faber, 1986), 209.
[44] Eliot, *Letters, 285.*

had brought Europe into dangerous, unchartered territory. He disdained the dominant intellectual response to these changes- a response that threatened to destroy poetry and art. In late June 1918, three years into his marriage and about four months before the war ended, Eliot confessed: "The strain of life is very great and I fear it will be for the rest of the lives of anyone now on earth. I am very pessimistic about the world we're going to have to live in after the war."[45]

This pessimism instigated Eliot's project to save poetry by preserving traditions and establishing order. Eliot emerged from the war determined to write a book of prose and a long poem. His tasks were to formulate a literary theory and to search for meaning on behalf of Europeans, who he more or less eulogized in 1918 as "immeasurably and irremediably altered by the war."[46]

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[45] Eliot, *Letters, 235.*
[46] Eliot, *Letters, 228, 351.*

CHAPTER 2

In October 1921, when Eliot was thirty-three, he took three months off from his job at Lloyd's Bank to rest and focus his attention on two major projects. For the past few years he had been absorbed in his job, literary journalism, social squabbles, marital problems, financial problems and current events. During this time, however, he had formulated plans for two projects: a book of literary criticism, and a long poem. The book became *The Sacred Wood,* first published in 1920. The long poem became *The Waste Land,* first published in 1922. He regarded these two works as part of the same project. One informs the other and vice versa.

This chapter focuses on *The Sacred Wood.* In it, Eliot held that the dominant intellectual responses to modernity were misguided and dangerous. He did not respond to contemporary history in the same way as did others in the modernist movement. While he recognized the significance of historical change going on, he pointed to certain themes of modernity that were detrimental to the health of art and even to the human soul. Unlike most people, he did not embrace newness or forward progress.

He did not express a romantic belief in the revivifying powers of rebellion. In fact, he worried that art, specifically poetry, was endangered by the modernist emphasis on rebellion, newness and freedom.

The main argument presented in this chapter is simple: *The Sacred Wood* articulated Eliot's response to modernity. That response was far from simple, because it was bound up with a complex theory of poetry. In his theories of poetry, we find the response to modernity that Eliot thought others should make. Understanding his literary theory becomes much easier once we see it as a way to preserve the integrity of poetry from dangerous historical circumstances.

First and foremost, Eliot posited, artists and intellectuals must maintain a connection with their past. To ignore history is to sever oneself from the traditions that provide meaning to human life, and to literature. Poetry is a unified whole, so a failure to connect properly to the existing canon is a failure to write poetry. Thus a key term in *The Sacred Wood* is "historical sense"- that is, knowledge of tradition. In addition, Eliot supposed a poet must achieve "depersonalization," an attitude that privileged the past above present concerns. Surprisingly, *The Sacred Wood* was littered with scientific language and analogies- indications of Eliot's desire to achieve the timelessness and logic of scientific laws in the realm of literary theory.

The Sacred Wood also presented a model of poetry, whereby human history can be understood through changes in poetry. Eliot believed that human emotions and feelings never change, and thus changes in poetry are attributable to changes coming from the outside. He wrote that the book was an effort to identify "the relation of poetry

to the spiritual and social life of its time and of other times."[47] He sought to explain how poetry should face changing social and other broader circumstances, but also how poets can illustrate their historical circumstances through poetry. He argued that artists may contribute something new to the existing canon by capturing the "main current" of their historical time, and by relating that to earlier artistic monuments. So major changes in poetry only occur when the main currents of civilization change.

Finally, this chapter analyses Eliot's views regarding two of the most influential milestones of modernist art: James Joyce's *Ulysses,* and Igor Stravinsky's *The Rites of Spring.* In brief, Eliot praised *Ulysses* for its orderly connection with western literary tradition. He felt the strict parallels to ancient myth to be exactly what the modern world needed, given its feelings of distance from the past. Eliot criticized *The Rites of Spring* for treating humanity's most ancient past as distinct from modernity. Eliot embraced even these primitive expressions of art and intellect as "a revelation of that vanished mind of which our mind is a continuation."[48]

I.

In *The Sacred Wood,* Eliot assigns poetry a place alongside other intellectual responses to historical change. *The Sacred Wood* continually emphasizes the importance of the past. He goes beyond the Classicism he champions later in life, when he defines

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[47] T. S. Eliot, *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism* (London, Methuen & Co., 1932), viii.
[48] T.S. Eliot, "London Letter," *The Annotated Waste Land with Eliot's Contemporary Prose,* edited by Lawrence Rainey (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 189.

literature as primarily "the entertainment of decent people."[49] Eliot wrote that all good literature strives towards Classicism, "according to the possibilities of its place and time."[50] But he recognized that the detached, apolitical tendencies of Classicism were not appropriate in the immediate post-war years. In the early Twenties he focused on modern historical events he felt were detrimental to poetry. Modernist and avant-garde culture recklessly broke convention; the war challenged the human soul. Eliot sought to rescue poetry from these threats. He kept Classicism as the ideal, and set out to address the forces that undermined it.

"Tradition and the Individual Talent" is the essay in which Eliot most clearly presented his theory of poetry. The first point Eliot makes is to attack the emphasis on newness. The essay begins with the assertion that it is a mistake for critics to "dwell with satisfaction upon the poet's difference from his predecessors, especially his immediate predecessors." Too many literary critics and poets had paid undue attention to whether or not a modern poem sounded and looked like a nineteenth-century poem. Eliot, whose own style was nothing like his nineteenth-century forbearers, nevertheless derided the emphasis on being unique. He valued newness and originality, but he thought a poem attains those qualities by drawing on the past canon. He posited, "not only the best, but the most individual parts of [a poet's] work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously."[51]

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[49] T.S. Eliot, *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism: Studies in the Relation of Criticism to Poetry In England* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1933), 128.
[50] Eliot, "Ulysses, Order and Myth."
[51] Eliot, *Sacred Wood,* 48.

For the literary ancestors to assert their immortality, the individual poet must have "the historical sense." The historical sense might be the most important term in Eliot's philosophy of poetry. The historical sense is what a poet must cultivate to confront historical change. Having the historical sense allows the poet to write good poetry- poetry that is new and original and yet still poetry. The term occupies large dimensions for Eliot's entire intellectual outlook. If in the previous chapter we saw how he came to derive such a term, in this chapter we explore what it means. In the simplest terms, the historical sense is both a way for Eliot to frame poetry as a unified whole, and a personal attribute artists must acquire.

Having the historical sense entails knowledge of the literary canon. Eliot splits this knowledge into two parts. There is academic knowledge of the writers and the history that "one ought to know." This knowledge requires laborious study not of the things someone might like, but of the things they ought to know. But the historical sense is more than erudition, for too much book learning deadens poetic sensibility. The poet should know only as much as will not encroach upon his "necessary receptivity and necessary laziness."[52] Eliot believes poets must have a true understanding of the past. Rather than knowing all facts related to it, the poet must cultivate a consciousness of the past. This is where the second aspect of the historical sense comes in. This second type of knowledge is gained from one's personal interests in specific things. It is the type of knowledge one gets from, as Eliot puts it, making a work of literature "one's own." This second type of knowledge comes from repeatedly reading and dwelling on one's favorite writers. Both types of knowledge are equally important and form the whole.

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[52] Eliot, *Sacred Wood,* 51.

According to Eliot, the historical sense leads to a sense of the presence of the past- that is, an understanding that the past is connected in some way with modern experience. Eliot felt contemporary Europe was overly conscious of the "pastness" of its past. The tendency of Europeans to move forward, and neglect what came before, frightened him. He regarded ignorance of history as fatal to legitimate artistic creation. And so he advocated: "The historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order."[53]

Consciousness of the past enables a poet to recognize his own thoughts and feelings in the art that precedes him. This is possible because according to Eliot, human thoughts, emotions and feelings never change. If the task of poetry is to describe human thoughts, emotions and feelings, then all poetry of is unified.

The second central theme of Eliot's literary theory, as expressed in his essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent," was the idea of "depersonalization." He introduces depersonalization first as it relates specifically to poetic craftsmanship. Eventually, he connects the poet's ability to "depersonalize" his writing, with the poet's ability to relate to his ancestors.

The starting point for Eliot is recognizing the difference between the feelings and emotions that underpin a poem, and the actual process of writing that poem. In his own words, "the man who suffers is separate from the mind which creates." Eliot defines poetry as experiences forged by the poet's mind into new combinations. Those

[53] Eliot, *Sacred Wood,* 49.

experiences do not have to be especially unique. Rather, the poet's ability to forge emotional matter into poetry is what makes him or her special. It is not the poet's emotional experience that makes him interesting or remarkable, but the ability to combine those experiences in new ways.[54]

Eliot argues that the poet's job is to write a good poem, not to accurately express his or her emotions and personality. For him, the poem is far more important than the poet. Some of the material that goes into a poem can even be invented, because the end result is the significant, even immortal entity, not its author. The quality of the end result is not a function of empirical accuracy. Scholars and critics therefore need to find meaning in the poem itself, not in the circumstances of the person who wrote it.

Depersonalization hinges on the poet's understanding of the poem as more valuable than his or her life. Achieving depersonalization is a process. To successfully forge personal experiences into poetry, poets must detach themselves to an extent from those experiences. Depersonalization is that necessary act of detachment required to transform one's most personal thoughts and emotions into a work of literature. An analogy might be to the stonemason, whose muscles become an extension of the tools of the construction trade. Likewise, poets' entire experience, from their daily observations to their deepest emotions, comprises the material with which they build their monuments. Poets must essentially transform their entire lives into building material. Eliot views that transformation as a "continual self-sacrifice." Without building material, there is no

[54] Eliot, *Sacred Wood,* 58.

poem. Given that personality is the only thing standing in the way of that self-sacrifice, poetry requires "not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality."[55]

In addition, depersonalization relates to the artists' abilities to appreciate and connect with their traditions. It allows poets to place themselves within the existing canon. Just as the artist sacrifices his or her personality for the sake of creating a work of art, the artist must also give history a privileged status over the era in which he or she lives. An artist's life pales in significance next to the sum of what came before. In the first case, a poem or artwork takes precedence over the artist's personality, and then human history and the tradition of literature outweighs the poet's individual life.[56]

Depersonalization, as a value system between poem and poet, present and past, finds its perfect opposite in the ideas espoused by the modernist poets writing for the literary magazine *Blast.* The Norton Anthology of British Literature hails *Blast* as quintessentially modernist. Signatories to the manifesto printed on the first pages of every issue included Ezra Pound, the famous theorist of modernism, and T.E. Hulme, another modernist critic, among others. One of their many mottos was: "Blast presents an art of Individuals."[57] They glorified the individual as the harbinger of uniqueness.

The belief that poets must escape their personalities in order to embrace their past and thus write good poetry was best expressed when Eliot wrote: The poet "must be aware that the mind of Europe- the mind of his own country- a mind which he learns in time to be much more important than his own private mind- is a mind which changes, and that this change is a development which abandons nothing en route, which does not

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[55] Eliot, *Sacred Wood,* 53, 58.
[56] Eliot, *Sacred Wood,* 53.
[57] *Norton Anthology,* 2010.

superannuate either Shakespeare, or Homer, or the rock drawing of the Magdalenian draughstmen."[58]

Part of Eliot's task in writing *The Sacred Wood* was to insist on a connection between poetry and its historical time period. In 1920, he wrote to a friend that his goals for the book were three-fold: "I want to discuss 1) the modern public 2) the technique of poetry 3) the possible social employment of poetry."[59] So far we have discussed Eliot's ideas relating to technique, and how those ideas reflected his opinion of the modern public. The social employment of poetry Eliot vaguely described in his letter became a definitive model whereby poetry can be seen as a historical tool.

According to Eliot, Europe's literary tradition composes "a simultaneous order." This "ideal order" is the unified whole of poetry. This is not to say all poetry is the same. For art to be real, it has to be new. Thus, he argues, poets need to identify the "main current" of their time. By incorporating the main current of the era, poets can add to the existing canon. Tradition, then, can find its way into modern art only if a poet both understands the "main current" of the era and can locate those issues in the works of dead writers.[60] In this model of poetry, no writer can be understood in isolation, because the meaning of their art involves its connection to past art. In Eliot's opinion, the most enlightened form of appreciation we can have for an artist "is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists."[61] Eliot claimed that literary critics' task was to analyze similarities and differences between writers, in order to identify the "main

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[58] Eliot, *Sacred Wood,* 51.
[59] Eliot, *Letters, 355.*
[60] Eliot, *Sacred Wood,* 49-51.
[61] Eliot, *Sacred Wood,* 49.

currents" of the past. In this way studying poetry becomes a powerful tool with which to study history.

This last idea was very important to Eliot throughout his career. In his 1932 essay "The Modern Mind", he wrote that one of the few most significant motivations he had to write *The Sacred Wood* was "to elucidate the social function of poetry." That social function is found in the way poetry can be a tool to understand human history. As mentioned above, poetry is a unified whole because it deals with human thoughts and emotions that never change. Therefore, "the development and change of poetry and of the criticism of it is due to elements which enter from the outside."[62] In other words, comparing and contrasting writers of different time periods illuminates the effects that external, historical circumstances have had on the human soul. Changes in poetry are not random. Poetry changes only when the "main currents" of human experience change.

Eliot used scientific language and analogies in throughout "Tradition and the Individual Talent," which, in my opinion, reflects his desire to add order and structure to literature. Eliot's literary theory can almost be broken down into rules and laws, and into properties much like the properties of the natural elements. The scientific aspect of his prose writing reinforces his project to save poetry from the threats of modernity, because science by definition is something that transcends particular social and political vicissitudes. It also clearly differentiates him from nineteenth century literary thought. Science retains the order out of chaos that he longed for.

Eliot wrote that an offshoot of his concept of depersonalization was that "art may be said to approach the condition of science." To illustrate this intriguing claim, he

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[62] Eliot, *Use of Poetry,* 122, 127.

suggests an analogy with the action that takes place when a bit of filiated platinum is introduced into a chamber containing oxygen and sulphur dioxide. They form sulphurous acid, but the catalyst, the platinum, is unchanged. In his view, the poet is a catalyst whose task is to arrange and transform disparate elements into a whole. Those elements essentially just enter the poet's head and are outputted as poetry. Eliot later described the poet's action as "a fusion of particles," the particles being emotions and feelings and experiences. Poets store these particles continuously through their entire lives. Their minds are a "receptacle for numberless phrases, images, etc," that poets then "unite into a new compound."[63]

Eliot's literary theory could not be any farther from one aimed at breaking conventions for the sake of breaking conventions. We already saw that he described poetry as a unified entity with definitive logical relations between its various components. "The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves," he wrote. "For order to persist" after the introduction of new literature, "the *whole* existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered; and so the relations, proportions, values of each work of art toward the whole are readjusted; and this is conformity between the old and the new."[64] In this model, poetry steps forward through history with precision. It moves only with a full awareness of its traditions and internal relations. The value of poetry is the value of the whole history of poetry, not the latest trick of syntax or the most shocking presentation of human experience. The point of all Eliot's analysis is to find what is required "for order to persist."

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[63] Eliot, *Sacred Wood,* 53, 55.
[64] Eliot, *Sacred Wood,* 50.

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In 1928, Eliot decided not to change any of *The Sacred Wood* because he felt the book was more valuable as "a document of its time." The essays, written between 1917 and 1920, "represent therefore a transition between the period immediately before the war and the period since."[65] He is saying that the opinions and theories in *The Sacred Wood* were largely a result of external forces acting on him; forces that were associated with that specific time in history. He suggests studying the book in order to understand what those forces were, and thus to understand something about the world in which they were written. And he finds understanding that history even more valuable than the literary insights the book puts forward.

Yet the book's main arguments appear less than trustworthy in the light of Eliot's 1928 preface. Can we trust purportedly universal and timeless theories, when they are in fact just reactions to their creator's historical circumstances? Reinforcing these doubts are some retrospective thoughts Eliot provided in 1932 with regard to *The Sacred Wood.* He admitted that "every effort to formulate the common element is limited by the limitations of particular men in particular places and at particular times; and these limitations become manifest in the perspective of history." He wrote that critics are involved in "making particular responses to particular situations."[66]

It is not easy to make sense of Eliot's later criticisms of *The Sacred Wood.* This is because the theories contained therein, the theories he criticizes, mostly all relate to how historical circumstances influence poetry. So putting these pieces together, we find that

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[65] Eliot, *Sacred Wood,* vii.
[66] Eliot, *Use of Poetry,* 141-142.

Eliot's historical circumstances influenced him, in ways he did not understand at the time, to focus his attention on the influence of historical circumstances.

III.

The final section of this chapter analyses Eliot's views on, and relationship to, two of his contemporaries. The most influential of his contemporaries was the Irish writer James Joyce. In 1922, Sylvia Beach published Joyce's novel *Ulysses* in Paris. Joyce's novel was groundbreaking because the plot, taking place over the course of one day in Dublin, closely parallels the plot of Homer's *Odyssey.* In addition, Joyce employed experimental prose styles and stream-of-consciousness narration. Eliot found the book's most significant element to be the parallel with the *Odyssey*. In fact, after reading *Ulysses,* Eliot proclaimed that the mythical parallel "has the importance of a scientific discovery." He praised Joyce's efforts at juxtaposing contemporary history with antiquity, and he encouraged the literary community to further pursue this method of plot construction. According to Eliot, those who pursue Joyce's technique "will not be imitators, any more than the scientist who uses the discoveries of an Einstein in pursuing his own, independent, further investigations."[67] Again the language of science permeates Eliot's prose writing. And again the reason for this lies in Eliot's overarching project of establishing order in the face of historical change and chaos.

Eliot praises Joyce for showing the historical sense and for incorporating the experience of modernity without neglecting the inheritance of history. He mocked

[67] Eliot, "Ulysses, Order and Myth."

contemporary critics who failed to appreciate Joyce's constant parallel to Homer's *Odyssey*. Critics saw it, at most, as literary scaffolding with no other significance. Critics thought it was simply a tool to construct a plot. On the other hand, Eliot wrote: "I hold this book to be the most important expression which the present age has found; it is a book to which we are all indebted." He saw the mythical parallel as much more than a frame to construct an interesting plot; it was a brilliant way to incorporate modern life into the literary canon. The juxtaposition of modern experience with mythical narrative produced a work of art that was ironic, disturbing and epic.[68]

The other consideration behind Eliot's praise of *Ulysses* relates to Eliot's pursuit of order in a chaotic, constantly evolving world. Joyce was able to preserve Europe's literary traditions because he had achieved "order and clarity." In his essay "Ulysses, Order, and Myth," Eliot outlined his theory that modernity necessitates structure. He described the novel as the expression of an age where all form was not yet lost. The age of the novel, or the nineteenth century, did not feel the need for anything stricter. He says the novel ended with Gustav Flaubert (1821-1880) and with Henry James (1843-1916). On the other hand, Eliot's and Joyce's age definitely felt the need for something stricter. The methodology resulting from this outlook is to counteract a perceived lack of form with the application of strict form.

In *Ulysses,* Joyce's innovations responded to historical circumstance, by adopting a structure that had never before been necessary. Eliot coined the term "the mythical method" to apply to what Joyce did in his vast novel.

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[68] Eliot, "Ulysses, Order and Myth."

The mythical method was "simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy that is contemporary history."[69] These are some of T.S. Eliot's most famous words apart from his poetry. This remark was a definition of the mythical method- the method of *Ulysses* and *The Waste Land*. Unfortunately, scholars and critics too often focus on the second half of the statement, and miss the fact it's a definition of a literary technique. Because of its capacity to order and control, and because of its relationship to traditions, this was the literary technique that, in Eliot's words, made the modern world possible for art.

Besides *Ulysses,* Eliot also attached great significance to Igor Stravinsky's ballet, *Le Sacre du Printemps,* which premiered in 1913 at the Théâtre Champs-Élysées in Paris. Under the din of a cacophonous and dissonant musical score, the ballet portrayed a girl dancing herself to death. The ballet's choreography referenced ancient vegetation rites, involving the sacrifice of a life, in order to bring about spring's rejuvenation. Eliot stood up and cheered after seeing the ballet for the first time.[70] In 1921, he shared his opinions on *The Rites of Spring* in a short letter to the literary magazine the *Dial.*

Although he appreciated the ballet overall, Eliot criticized it for isolating the past from the present. For him, the problem with most modernist tendencies was this very rupture between the past and the present. The ballet had a musical score thoroughly modern, but its choreography was entirely primitive. The two elements did not intermingle, a fact he lamented: "In art there should be interpenetration and metamorphosis," he wrote. Therefore, the sense of the presence of the past was absent.

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[69] Eliot, "Ulysses, Order and Myth."
[70] *Norton Anthology,* 1834.

Eliot praised Stravinsky's composition for appropriating "the scream of the motor horn, the rattle of machinery, the grind of wheels, the beating of iron and steel, the roar of the underground railway, and the other barbaric cries of modern life."[71] And he found the choreography, with its reproduction of ancient spirituality, to be compelling. But the failure to interweave the two diminished the quality of the whole.

In conclusion, it is worth noting that in *The Rites of Spring* we find an embodiment of the prewar, modernist tendency to sacrifice Europe's past in the hopes of a more meaningful future existence. For Eliot, the Great War showed what happens when the past is sacrificed, and death celebrated, in the service of a progressive vision. Even though T.S. Eliot criticized *The Rites of Spring*, his own artistic masterpiece dealt with very similar material. *The Waste Land* makes frequent references to primitive human spirituality and to ritual, setting them alongside dissonant images of modern urban life. But in Eliot's poem, there is "interpenetration" between antiquity and modernity. In his poem, one element reacts with the other, and something new emerges.

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[71] Eliot, "London Letter," 189.

CHAPTER 3

The Waste Land was the longest, most intelligent, most complex, and most ambitious poem that T.S. Eliot ever wrote. Eliot began writing the poem in winter 1921 and finished it a year later, in January 1922. The poem was first published in October 1922 by the literary journal *Criterion.* A month later it came out in the journal *Dial*; in December 1922 the American publishing house Boni and Liveright published the poem in book form, with Eliot's own notes. Relative to twentieth-century British and American poetry, *The Waste Land* is extremely long. It runs to 433 lines. As Eliot's friend Ezra Pound commented in a letter to Eliot, it would be "the longest poem in the English langwidge."

The poem is divided into five parts, each titled. Part I, "The Burial of the Dead," establishes the poems two principal settings- the conscience and contemporary London. It introduces some of the themes of the Holy Grail, sexuality, religious guilt, and the aftershocks of the First World War. Part II, "A Game of Chess," includes devastating satirical portrayals of women and of marriages.

Eliot draws on his own marriage in addition to Shakespeare, Ovid, and even overheard conversations at a bar. In Part III, "The Fire Sermon," Eliot makes explicit connections between sexuality and moral deprivation. His feelings of regret, remorse and disgust reach a climax. Part IV, "Death By Water," is only ten lines long. It describes the "terrible fate" of a formerly ambitious and handsome sailor, Phlebas the Phoenician. Part V, "What the Thunder Said," is the concluding section of the poem. The beginning of Part V, according to Eliot, touches on three themes: the biblical disciples' journey to Emmaus, political chaos in Eastern Europe, and the Legend of the Holy Grail. It then incorporates a mock recital of a Buddhist Upanashid, and finally ends with a chaotic splurge of literary allusions and Sanskrit chants.

The Waste Land is a uniquely difficult poem. It is rife with allusions to such an extent that it remains largely incomprehensible to most casual readers. The reader would have to be fluent in seven languages just to understand the literal meaning of every word. Yet linguistic barriers make up just the surface layer of the poem's difficulty. Armed with editorial notes, every reader has the capacity to understand the occasional Sanskrit phrase or source the reference to obscure sixteenth-century drama. Understanding what those references mean in the context of the other lines of poetry around them is more difficult and likewise more important.

Eliot's poetic style employs two methods of expressing emotion, both difficult for the reader to appreciate. The first method is to bombard the reader with images and sounds abruptly, irregularly, and discordantly. Eliot uses this technique in theatrical scenes, quoting bits of conversation that come at the reader out of context and unexpectedly. The second method is to rely not on the literal sense of language but on the

tone and rhythmical power of words. Everything in the poem has meaning but recognizing the tone of the verse, and how and when it changes, is essential to appreciate the emotions of the narrator and his attitude toward certain subjects.

Analysis of the poem's composition reveals another problem: there are essentially two separate versions of the poem. In the manuscripts collected by Eliot's second wife, we find literally hundreds of unpublished lines of verse. The final version that became *The Waste Land* was the result of extensive editing by Ezra Pound. Pound was an internationally famous literary figure and Eliot's literary godfather. Pound helped Eliot's first poems get published, he introduced him to important figures in London's literary community, and he praised him in his own critical writing. Eliot was initially insecure about his poem, and therefore not surprisingly went along with Pound's edits.

Most scholars play down the significance of the manuscript in assessing *The Waste Land.* They focus on the poem's comprehensibility, and do not assume Eliot's meaning or style might have changed between the original and final drafts. One such scholar is Lawrence Rainey, the editor of an annotated edition of *The Waste Land* recently published by Yale University. He credits the poem's "local" and "incremental orders of coherence" that large swaths of the original could have been deleted without damaging the integrity of the whole.[72] In general, scholars see Pound and Eliot as both "modernists," and for that reason, they do not question Pound's involvement.

I on the other hand find Pound's intervention to be problematic. Eliot and Pound had different worldviews and different literary styles. Without even seeing the original manuscripts, it is hard to treat Pound's involvement with indifference. Pound was a

[72] Rainey, *The Annotated Waste Land,* 23.

fascist in the true sense of the word- he spent almost three decades working for Mussolini's political party in Italy. Moreover, Pound was involved in radical literary projects that Eliot did not associate with. Pound was a signatory of the literary journal *Blast'*s manifesto. I have already quoted that manifesto twice as examples of antitheses to Eliot's stance. Pound was not nearly the same caliber of poet that Eliot was. Pound's most famous poem, *In a Station of the Metro,* is only fourteen words long. His most ambitious poem was a many-hundreds-of-pages-long series of fragments that he never finished.

After analyzing the manuscripts, it seems that Pound deleted the sections of Eliot's poem that he saw as too conventional. Pound cut out long tracts of narrative verse that originally began parts I, III, and IV. These portions were stylistically rooted in the past. Pound removed eighty-nine lines from the beginning of Part III that described a wealthy aesthete named Fresca in rhyming couplets imitating the eighteenth-century poet Alexander Pope. Pound also took out eighty-three lines of rhyming verse at the beginning of Part IV that narrated Phlebas the sailor's final voyage.[73] With each draft the poem became more elusive and fragmentary. What Pound failed to appreciate was the blending of past and present that Eliot sought for. Pound was superficially interested in technique above meaning. Although the narrative sections Pound deleted were stylistically rooted in the past, the content matter was modern, and the tone was cynical.

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[73] T.S. Eliot, *The Waste Land: A Fascimile and Transcript of the Annotations of Ezra Pound,* edited by Valerie Eliot (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971).

In this chapter, I only mention the manuscript once or twice, when its contents shed light on elusive sections of the published version. I rely on Rainey's *The Annotated Waste Land,* which contains authoritative editorial notes to the poem.

My final chapter is a commentary on Eliot's *The Waste Land*. It builds off Chapter 2, by looking for manifestations of Eliot's literary theory and historical perspective. The first part of the chapter examines the parallels between the poem and the Legend of the Holy Grail. In the next section, I expand my commentary to include all other references and allusions, while keeping my attention on Eliot's attempts to weave the past into modernity. The title of the poem refers to the "Waste Land" found in the medieval Grail legend. The role and significance of the Grail legend in the poem is not the same as the role of *The Odyssey* in Joyce's *Ulysses,* or the role of the nature ritual in Stravinsky's *The Rites of Spring*. Eliot does not directly or consistently parallel his poem with the Grail legend, nor with any other myth or ritual. His technique is less structured but more multi-faceted. In *The Waste Land*, the past continuously encounters and reacts with the present. There is not a single narrative arc, but a dynamic combination and juxtaposition of elements. Each juxtaposition has meaning, as does their unified whole.[74]

I.

[74] Anne C. Bolgan, *What the Thunder Really Said: A Retrospective Essay on the Making of the Waste Land* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1973), 101.

Despite Eliot's non-linear version of the mythical method, we must still examine the role of the Grail legend in *The Waste Land*. The title implies this, as does the very first of the notes Eliot wrote to accompany the poem: "Not only the title, but the plan and a good deal of the incidental symbolism of the poem were suggested by Miss Jessie L. Weston's book on the Grail legend: *From Ritual to Romance*… To another work of anthropology I am indebted in general, one which has influenced our generation profoundly; I mean *The Golden Bough*…"

The Legend of the Holy Grail is a term that applies collectively to a large body of northern European stories dating from the late twelfth century into the fourteenth century. The Grail legend is one story of many that together form the genre of Arthurian romance. Eliot's interest in the Grail legend sprang from his reading of two books, *The Golden Bough* by James Frazer and *From Ritual to Romance* by Jessie Weston. Frazer's book, first published in multiple volumes in 1890, was a comparative study of world religions and mythologies. Weston revolutionized the scholarship of Arthurian romance, by connecting the Grail legend to the ancient religious cults Frazer documents.

In the Grail stories, a knight is on a quest, of which the ultimate object is to restore the health of a king. His former pastime of fishing along a presently dried-up river gives him the name of the Fisher King. He is suffering some sort of infirmity, usually due to wounds located in the groin area. His infirmity wreaks devastation on his kingdom, usually in the form of a drought. The kingdom is referred to as a Waste Land. In all the oldest cases of the Grail legend, the hero's goal is to help the king, which in turn helps the land. The loss of the king's virility correlates to the loss of Nature's reproductive

abilities. In this way the hero's job becomes rejuvenating the land, not just the king's reproductive powers.

In her book *From Ritual to Romance,* Weston argues that the Grail legend is in fact a remnant of an ancient religion. She argues that the original telling of the Grail legend was an instructive metaphor for initiates in a "nature cult," whose origins predate history. She argues that these nature cults survived in the British Isles until at least the middle ages. At that point, the spread of Christianity forced the cults to go "underground". In order to survive, at least one cult tried to spread their message by using the popular genre of Arthurian romance as a story-telling vehicle. Therefore, the original Grail legend is actually a metaphor for the task of new initiates into an ancient nature cult.[75]

Nature cults believe in a "common principle underlying all life." All life is unified. All life dies, and is reborn continuously. Nature cults worship gods who represent this principle of death and rebirth. They lament the god's annual death, and worship his coming back to life. The natural seasons and human sexuality provide the sources of humanity's continuous rejuvenation. They preach that each person's soul is likewise capable of rebirth, but only after they understand the cult's mysteries.[76] Weston suggests the Fisher King in the Grail stories is a "romantic literary version" of a god common to all nature cults, "the figure of a divine or semi-divine ruler, at once god and king, upon whose life, and unimpaired vitality, the existence of his land and people

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[75] Weston, Jessie. *From Ritual to Romance* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1941).
[76] Weston, *Ritual to Romance,* 37.

directly depends."[77] In *The Golden Bough,* Frazer offers numerous examples of this figure: the Egyptian god Osiris, the Greek god Adonis, and even Jesus Christ. Weston identifies the Grail and the Lance- two prominent symbols in the Grail legend- as "sex symbols of immemorial antiquity." The Grail represents the female reproductive energy. It is always carried by a woman; while its counterpart, the lance, is always carried by a young man.[78] In the early versions of the Grail legend, the hero must ask the right questions regarding the Grail and the Lance in order to restore the Fisher King's virility. This questioning is symbolic of the initiate's path to enlightenment- they must view sexuality in terms of the life principle. Every image in the early versions of the Grail legend is allegorical and involves the movement from sterility to fertility, from spiritual death to rebirth. [79]

When Eliot references the Grail legend in *The Waste Land*, he has its deeper meanings in mind. He uses the Grail theme primarily as a metaphor for the current situation of two things: his private soul and European society. Eliot's title immediately evokes a situation of infertility, failure, and barrenness. On one level, The Waste Land is post-war Europe. The Waste Land in the medieval legend was also symbolically related to the Fisher King's impotence; so in Eliot's poem, one of the Waste Lands is his own loveless marriage. Finally, the Waste Land is the narrator's private soul, as it looks for

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[77] Weston, *Ritual to Romance,* 58.
[78] Weston, *Ritual to Romance,* 119.

[79] Prior to Weston, scholars had spilled plenty of ink arguing that the Fisher King was part of a fundamentally Christian legend, with the fish as a symbol associated with Christ, and the Grail as a relic from Christ's last supper. Weston argues that Christian's appropriated the fish as a symbol from a more ancient cult. She points to much evidence that the fish was a "Life symbol of immemorial antiquity."

philosophical or religious answers to life's deepest questions, and struggles to fill a deeper spiritual vacuum.

Eliot uses the Grail theme in juxtapositions with modernity, to illustrate how modern social changes departed from humanity's oldest spiritual insights. In modern times, sex is not life-giving or in any way related to the themes of fertility and regeneration associated with the ancient fertility cults and vegetation ceremonies. Modern people regard childbirth as an unfortunate side-effect of intercourse, to be treated scientifically or to be avoided by means of pills. The obligation to engage in intercourse threatens women's lives, as seen in line 160 how the woman "almost died of young George" because she "had five already." In lines 138-172, Eliot cited his maid as an example of the type of modern behavior he finds most troubling. In this section the narrator shows disgust toward some popular attitudes on marriage and sexuality. The scene takes place at closing time in a pub, as the repeated interruption of "Hurry up please it's time" indicates. Sex is not sacred, but the topic of drunken banter. Almost all of the references to sexuality in the poem tie into the Grail theme. It is not worth highlighting every one here, but in general the instances of modern sexuality are all at odds with the treatment given to it by both the Grail legend, and the ancient religious beliefs that lie behind it. Eliot does not lament a more perfect past. The ancient message pervading the Grail theme is to think about sexuality in the right terms. The lesson of its historical survival is an indication of humanity's continual desire to position sexuality on a higher, almost divine plane.

Water imagery should be associated with the Grail theme. Thus in the beginning of Part III, "The Fire Sermon," the narrator is weeping for the loss of the waters, as

mourners did in the Tammuz document of 3,000 BC, as the subjects of the Fisher King had done long ago. The first two stanzas of Part III evoke sadness, even desolation. In line 175, the narrator laments the fact that "the nymphs are departed," a feeling made more subtly tragic because the narrator has so far tried to avoid or reject what they represent. In Line 182, the narrator sits by the waters of Leman and weeps. Andrew Marvell's poem *To His Coy Mistress* is maybe the most famous instance of the 'carpe diem' message in literature. The citation of Marvell's poem at the end of the first stanza in Part III flips its meaning. In Marvell's poem the speaker hears "time's winged chariot hurrying near," which motivates him to seize the most from his days. But coming at the end of a stanza lamenting the departed nymphs and the end of summer, the realization that his time is almost up is for the narrator the realization that his dreams will remain unfulfilled. Thus what he hears in line 186 is "the rattle of the bones, and chuckle spread from ear to ear."

Part III incorporates other feelings and allusions relating to the Grail theme. We again see how Eliot applies the Grail theme metaphorically both to the private world of the narrator and to the entire continent of Europe. In the second stanza, the narrator is first the Fisher King, "fishing in the dull canal," resigned to physical impotence and lifelessness. At the physical level, the Fisher King stands for the narrator's own sexual impotence, or at least dissatisfaction. On a higher level, the Grail theme is a metaphor for the condition of the narrator's soul. The metaphor suggests that the narrator suffers from spiritual emptiness and depression. This narrator blends into Prince Ferdinand from Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, sitting on the shore and hearing music that alleviates his anxieties. Ferdinand's musings on his father's shipwreck become Eliot's narrator's

musings about "white bodies naked on the low damp ground, and bones cast in a little low dry garret, rattled by the rats foot only." These images definitely conjure the trenches of the Great War. Now the Fisher King's kingdom is not one man's soul but all Europe, a land brought to physical and moral waste.

Part III ends at a low point, when the array of failures and examples of empty relationships have provoked in Eliot's narrator a deep and "burning" religious feeling of repentance. Disillusioned by ancient mythic notions of sexuality and spirituality, the narrator sees there is no longer a connection between fertility and spiritual rebirth, rather there is a connection between sexuality and moral deprivation. The moral angst adds to the narrator's longing for spiritual fulfillment.

II.

The use of the Grail theme is not the only way Eliot relates modernity to the past in order to portray modernity's true form. He employs a deluge of allusions and references in the service of this goal. The next part of this chapter discusses other elements of *The Waste Land,* where Eliot makes statements about his society.

Eliot uses his epigraph as a way of establishing a tone for the poem. The words of the Cumaen sibyl, "I want to die," establish the feeling that someone or something- Eliot himself or his civilization- seeks self-destruction. Here we are reminded of Stravinsky's *The Rites of Spring.* In the ancient ritual depicted through the ballet, sacrificial death was supposed to bring rejuvenated life. The tone of the epigraph expresses the wish to die, but

now, the prevailing sentiment in the European waste land is the wish to die to escape from modernity, rather than to transcend it.

Eliot's original epigraph, found in the manuscripts, informs an understanding of this sentiment of escapism. He first used as an epigraph the lines from Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* where Kurtz looks back on "every detail of desire, temptation, and surrender" from his life and cries out "the horror! The horror!"[80] Kurtz's exclamation also explicitly situated the poem in the perspective of someone looking back with an anguished regret on what their life has become. In societal terms, Europe looks back on the horror of its recent history, and seeks an escape from that horror, even if it comes through death.

The original themes with which the poem starts are the loss of innocence, religious guilt, and a feeling of death-in-life. In the first stanza the themes of fertility and rebirth implicitly invoked by the poem's title are turned upside-down. April is "the cruelest month" because it is a time of "breeding." It is not a harvest time and clearly not a time of ritualistic celebration in the mode of the fertility cults described in Weston's book. The first stanza begins with grand atmospheric and seasonal pronouncements juxtaposed to details of a conversation with an Austrian aristocratic woman, Marie. The line "When we were children, staying at the archduke's, my cousins" puts the passage in two contexts: childhood and pre-war Europe. The word "archduke" evokes aristocracy and things decidedly not modern. The point of this passage is to evoke a feeling of nostalgia for the past alongside the sordid realities of the present. For Marie that historical transition was sexual. As the notes show, she was an acquaintance of Eliot,

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[80] Eliot, *The Waste Land: A Facsimile,* 22.

Marie Larisch, and had been involved in various sexual scandals in the royal court of Bavaria. For society, or specifically for Europe as an entity, that transition is more vague but indeed entails something like the loss of innocence. The section's title "The Burial of the Dead" also points to Europe and its collective loss of innocence, as it buries its dead and painfully confronts the horrifying extent of destruction it had brought upon itself in the First World War.

In the third stanza we encounter the mocking portrayal of the clairvoyante Madame Sosostris. In this scene, we find an eerie, comedic and bizarre example of Eliot's all important theme- the presence of the past. The fortune teller refers to tarot cards and prophecies, whose meaning is at this point obscure: the "drowned Phoenician sailor," "the wheel" [of fortune], "the Hanged Man." Eliot's first note at the end of the poem points the reader to Jessie Weston's *From Ritual to Romance*. In Weston's book, we learn of the history and meaning of things like the suits of the tarot deck. The suits (hearts, spades, clubs, and diamonds) correspond to the cup, the sword, the lance, and the dish. These later objects are "world-wide sex symbols of immemorial antiquity," appearing in the rituals and literature of ancient nature cults across the globe.[81] But in Eliot's world, these symbols and images, laden with historical tradition and spiritual meaning, spew haphazardly from "the wisest woman in Europe," that is, a crazy fool.

The final stanza of Part I introduces us into the urban setting of the poem's drama. Wintry London is an "Unreal City." The crowd of people that "flowed over London Bridge" consists of people "undone" by death. What "undoes" these people may not literally be death but the mechanical, meaningless death-in-life of the nine-to-five job.

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[81] Weston, *Ritual to Romance,* 71.

Londoners remind us of the dead stuck in Godless Limbo in Dante's *Divine Comedy*, for "sighs short and frequent, were exhaled, and each man fixed his eyes before his feet."

The War clearly has had an effect on the Unreal City. Europe's past refuses to disappear, even if it lies beneath the surface. Veterans have corpses planted in their backyards: these corpses are hellish memories repressed and eating away at their subconscious minds. The tone of the dialogue here is worth examining. We do not need to know who the speaker is, or who Stetson is, or what happened exactly at Mylae.

"There I saw one I knew and stopped him, crying: 'Stetson!
You who were with me in the ships at Mylae!
That corpse you planted last year in your garden,
Has it begun to sprout?'"

The dialogue is ironic given the lightheartedness and joviality with which the speaker addresses Stetson. The dialogue also carries a tone of camaraderie, of shared experience. The narrator is diagnosing all of London with post-traumatic stress disorder. Continuing that feeling of shared experience, the narrator connects himself with the reader by quoting Baudelaire's poem *Au Lecteur*: "You hypocrite reader, my twin, my brother!" Not incidentally, Eliot considered himself one of the dead drones walking through the city of London described at the stanza's beginning: at the time of the poem's composition he was one of hundreds of employees at Lloyd's Bank.

In the beginning of Part II, Eliot traces sexuality through multiple time periods. He wants to depict the moral and psychological pitfalls inherent to sexuality. Seen through the lenses of different writers at different times, that sexuality has always had dangerous undertones. Sexual debasement is not something unique to modernity. For

example, we see the hypnotizing, but potentially corrupting allure of the female figure through references to Shakespeare, Ovid and the Bible. It is no accident that Eliot references three of the most important figures in the western canon. They perfectly suit his purpose of establishing the timelessness of these issues. In the literary canon we find "the vanished mind of which our mind is a continuation."[82]

Lines 103-104 conjure up the scene in Ovid's *Metamorphoses,* when Philomela transforms into a nightingale after being brutally raped by Tereus. "And still she cries, and still the world pursues, 'Jug jug' to dirty ears." This section also conveys a uniquely modern aspect of sexuality. In literature, "Jug jug" was the conventional way of expressing the nightingale's song in words. But in Eliot's time, "jug jug" was also a crude reference to sexual intercourse. Here we see how the loose moral standards of modern society correspond with a lighter, actually mocking treatment of total moral failure.

Lines 266-291 form what Eliot calls 'the song of the three Thames daughters.' The verse is patterned on Wagner's song of the three Rhine daughters from his *Götterdämmerung.* In Wagner's opera, they are nymphs who guard a lump of gold sitting in the middle of the Rhine. Only those men who overcome the lusts of the flesh can reach the treasure. Eliot packs additional allusions into their song. He refers to Queen Elizabeth, the 'barren' queen, and her hopeful suitor Leicester. Lines 292-306 are the Thames daughters speaking. Each daughter gets a stanza. Their stories make much more sense in light of the original drafts of the poem. All the daughters come across as lower-class women who became involved in exploitative sexual relationships. Suffice it to say

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[82] Eliot, *The Annotated Waste Land,* 189.

that feelings of moral depravity are associated with sexual activities. Thus the incantations referencing St. Augustine and the Buddha at the end of Part III are provoked by feelings of moral deprivation, guilt and shame. But coming from the narrator they are hopeless.

Part IV, lines 312-321, bears the title "Death By Water." The title refers back to the clairvoyant's prophecy, lines 46-47: "Here, said she, is your card, the drowned Phoenician sailor." Now we learn of the sailor:

> A current under sea
> Picked his bones in whispers. As he rose and fell
> He passed the stages of his age and youth
> Entering the whirlpool.

The fourth part amounts to a descent into self-pity. Eliot's narrator has fallen into an abyss, his body now drifting deep beneath the sea. The drowned sailor's name Phlebas may remind Latinists of the adjective *flebilis*, 'to be wept over.' Rainey notes that the lament over Phlebas' death is a "close adaptation" of a poem written by Eliot in 1916-1917 that speaks of the sailor's "terrible fate."

Part V carries the title "What the Thunder Said"- a reference to the fable on the meaning of thunder in the *Brihadaranyaka Upanashid*. In the fable, the Lord of Creation thunders three times: "Da, Da, Da,"- a message glossed as damyata (control yourselves), datta (give), and dayadhvam (be compassionate). The recital of the Upanashid is neither wholly serious nor wholly mocking. It adds to the poem a structure that feels like an ending. But we never get the closure we seek, because Eliot does not quite find the closure he seeks. His narrator answers the command "Dayadhvam," or "be

compassionate" with philosophical musings emphasizing our inability to exist or think beyond the confines of our personal selves. In The Waste Land there is no transcendence into the impersonal and universal.

The final lines of the poem are more chaotic than coherent. They resemble a grand finale, one last, fevered attempt to grasp something useful, but what Eliot's narrator finds are ruins, regrets, and longings unsatisfied. "London Bridge is falling down falling down falling down" and the Prince d'Aquitaine's tower is likewise in ruins. "Why then I'll fit you" is a step beyond that chaotic clutching of loose ends. It alludes to Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy,* in which Hieronimo writes a play where each character speaks in a different language: "Each one of us must act his part in unknown languages, that it may breed the more variety." Hieronimo promises to clear up the confusion at the very end of the play "with a strange and wondrous show besides, that I will have there behind a curtain." The fact that *The Waste Land* incorporates different voices in different languages might have made this reference irresistible to Eliot, but he in fact originally titled *The Waste Land* "He Do the Police in Different Voices." This title references Charles Dickens' *Our Mutual Friend* where a poor, socially and physically awkward but sympathetic adolescent reads the newspaper to his caretaker, who commends his talent pointing out: "He do the police in different voices." There is a self-deprecating tone in both allusions; one suggests Eliot is "mad," and the other connects him to a gangly, barely literate teenager named Sloppy. The concluding line 433- "shantih shantih shantih"- Eliot tells us should be translated as "the peace which passeth understanding." The line gestures toward a peace that neither he nor the reader feels.

CONCLUSION

In Chapter 1, I surveyed the most significant social and cultural changes concomitant with the emergence of modernity in early twentieth century Europe. I argued that the intellectual trends of the period constituted a revolt against the nineteenth century. I used the letters of T.S. Eliot to explore the issues he found most important in this period. He identified the trauma and tragedy of the Great War, changing notions of sexuality, the urban experience, and the modernist emphasis on forward movement as especially problematic. He worried that Europe's self-transformation threatened to undermine the integrity of poetry. Through its obsession with literary uniqueness and progress, the modernist program neglected the basic purpose and methods of poetry. Eliot's intellectual development over the period was a movement from denial of the ongoing changes to confrontation with them, and then toward optimism that their effects could be limited.

Chapter 2 explicated Eliot's response to modernity, as found in his prose writing. He diametrically opposed the wider modernist artistic project that had its roots in the prewar avant-garde movement. Eliot's poem *The Waste Land* (1922), and his book *The*

Sacred Wood (1920), were two methods of expressing the same message. Chapter 2 dealt with *The Sacred Wood*, focusing especially the essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent." Eliot's goal in his first published book was to identify the "relationship of poetry to the spiritual and social life of its time and other times." This objective stemmed directly from his desire to counteract misguided artistic responses to history and historical change. Unlike most modernist poets and literary critics, Eliot stressed the dire necessity to understand the past as being more significant than the present. He recommended that poets cultivate the "historical sense," in order to legitimately incorporate their experiences into the unified canon of existing poetry.

Chapter 2 also analyzed Eliot's opinions of two famous modernist pieces of art: James Joyce's novel *Ulysses* and Igor Stravinsky's ballet *The Rites of Spring*. Eliot praised *Ulysses* as "the most important expression the present age has found." He thought Joyce's continuous parallel with Homer's *Odyssey* was a brilliant technique to connect contemporary Dublin with Europe's oldest literary traditions. He praised Joyce's "mythical method" as a way of structuring and ordering modern life. While he unreservedly applauded Joyce's efforts, Eliot was more critical toward Stravinsky's *Rites of Spring*. He felt Stravinsky's error was to treat modernity as entirely distinct and remote from antiquity. Eliot believed that art needed to foster a sense of the "presence of the past."

Chapter 3 discussed Eliot's 1922 poem *The Waste Land.* In this chapter, I tried to decipher the depictions of contemporary Europe found in the poem. I used Eliot's own literary theory to assist my analysis. I also used some secondary sources to distinguish Eliot's application of Joyce's "mythical method." Rather than maintain a strict parallel

with any story or myth, Eliot juxtaposed various elements of the past and the present. He presents examples of how the recent past bedeviled contemporary European society. These examples are cynical, dark, humorous and morbid. *The Waste Land* portrays a society failing to adequately cope with both jarring historical change and with painful collective memories. He describes the individual's sense of insignificance in the modern urban environment. He uses irony to criticize a world where contemporary sexual norms diverge from ancient religious ones. A diverse set of historical and literary characters speak for Eliot's emotional status and the status of European civilization.

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My thesis uses terminology associated with early twentieth century art and historiography. As I stated in my introduction, one of my goals was to qualify the term modernism, to recognize the term's inherent complexity and contradictions, in light of the traditionalism of one famous literary modernist. Even though I wanted to confront an ambiguous academic "ism," I did not want merely to dig around a rabbit hole of scholarly controversy. I mostly wanted to describe an important figure in Europe's intellectual history and to contribute to the deeper understanding of the early twentieth-century.

Comparing and contrasting Eliot with other "modernists" would be a natural continuation of my thesis. Executing that task in a senior thesis project is impossible, but I would like to propose a comparison between Eliot and the Irish poet W.B. Yeats. Yeats was a generation older than Eliot. His career straddled the turn of the century. He was imaginative and romantic, but also morbidly cynical and passionately hateful. Yeats and Eliot were not very similar stylistically, because Yeats' poetry was firmly rooted in the

nineteenth-century. I want to compare them for two main reasons. First, the comparison will clarify the contradiction between Eliot's stylistic convention-breaking and his overall intellectual traditionalism. Second, the comparison between Yeats and Eliot may provide a forum for discussing Eliot's religious beliefs.

The two poets had basically the same response to modernity. Yeats reacted to the turn-of-the-century artistic avant-garde with suspicion and eventually disdain. He wrote in the introduction to an anthology of his poems: "Talk to me of originality and I will turn on you with rage. I am a crowd, I am a lonely man, I am nothing."[83] The later half of this remark highlights Yeats' feeling of alienation from a rapidly changing society and from fellow artists and intellectuals who seemed to be careening headlong toward an anarchic, meaningless future. Surrounded by modernist convention-breakers, Yeats became obsessed with Irish folklore and ancient mythologies. He incorporated these centuries-old legends into his poetry, just as Eliot later incorporated the Grail legend and other Arthurian romance tropes. Yeats contributed to Celtic anthropology, by retelling a vast array of Irish folk tales in his 1925 book *Mythologies.*

Yeats' literary theory shared deep commonalities with Eliot's. In an explication of his work, Yeats quoted the Prashna Upanishad: "When mind is lost in the light of the self, it dreams no more."[84] Eliot likewise appropriated these ancient Hindu philosophical texts, as evidenced by the last lines of *The Waste Land.* On another level, Yeats and Eliot both felt the need to minimize the self. This feeling is manifest in Eliot's idea of "depersonalization." Yeats advocated depersonalization in a statement pertaining to the

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[83] Yeats, *Norton Anthology,* 2056.
[84] Yeats, *Norton Anthology,* 2053.

role of the poet: "He is Lear, Romeo, Oedipus, Tiresias; he has stepped out of a play and even the woman he loves is Rosalind, Cleopatra, never The Dark Lady."[85] Yeats felt a poet should subordinate personal identity to foster a relationship with Europe's literary traditions. Yeats' might have also been referencing Eliot's *Waste Land.* A literal following of his recommendation would be practically to plagiarize T.S. Eliot.

Finally, Yeats and Eliot were both religious. Yeats embraced religion relatively late in life. Rather than challenge the Church and the social codes associated with it, as their contemporaries surely did, Yeats and Eliot sought to save their souls. I did not spend very much time addressing Eliot's religious views in my analysis of *The Waste Land*, despite the fact that religious questions comprise a major portion of the narrator's intellectual search for fulfillment. Therefore, I would like to conclude my thesis by suggesting an interpretation of Eliot's religious conversion.

Yeats and Eliot reacted against the trends of modernity. They saw religion come under attack from science: Freudian psychoanalysis, social anthropology, Einstein's theory of relativity, and rapid technological progress contributed to more and more trust being placed in science over faith. In the very first note to *The Waste Land,* Eliot references Frazer's *The Golden Bough* (1890)*,* and says the book "influenced our generation profoundly." That influence was primarily to weaken Christianity's position in the European world-view. The book treated Christianity as just one of many world religions. It likened Jesus Christ to primitive fertility gods.

Unlike the other modernists, Eliot and Yeats did not abandon their religious faith. They spent most of their lives searching for a faith adequate to the challenges of modern

[85] Yeats, *Norton Anthology,* 2053.

life. Yeats ultimately embraced the tradition of poetry as his own private religion. He combined mysticism, folklore, mythology, and the European literary canon into a "church of poetic tradition."[86] Yeats' conversion was essentially Romantic. It was a nineteenth-century answer to a twentieth-century problem.

Eliot arrived at a different solution to his deepest spiritual questions. His conversion reflects his anxiety toward modernity, just as much as it reflects his spiritual nature and belief in God. I have argued that Eliot valued order and tradition. His religious choices likewise depended on these two considerations. To illustrate my point, I propose the analogy of Eliot's opinion about novels: he felt they were suitable for the nineteenth-century, but inappropriate in the twentieth. The twentieth-century required something stricter, it required orderliness and tradition- thus his praise for the order and structure of Joyce's *Ulysses.* His other response to modernity was to emphasize history, and to warn against escapism from the past. Avoiding chaos and embracing tradition- these were Eliot's core tendencies, and these tendencies explain why, in 1927, he joined the Church of England.

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[86] *Norton Anthology,* 1829, 2019.

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