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FUSING THE VOICES: THE APPROPRIATION AND DISTILLATION OF *THE WASTE LAND*

Martin John Fletcher*

RESUMO: Apesar da obra-prima de T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*, ser um poema desafiadoramente enigmático e desconcertante, o texto ainda ocupa um lugar central no cânone literário quase um século depois de sua concepção. A ideia inicial de Eliot era publicar o trabalho como vários poemas separados, mas apesar disso, *The Waste Land* ainda é estudado como um todo unificado com uma voz unificadora e uma "mensagem" identificável. Neste artigo defendo que a reputação atual do poema repousa sobre uma massa de discurso crítico que insiste em interpretar "significado" ao invés de considerar o poder musical, alusivo e hipnótico do poema.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, *The Waste Land*, Modernismo, poesia inglesa, discurso crítico.

ABSTRACT: Although T. S. Eliot's masterpiece, *The Waste Land*, is a defiantly enigmatic and bewildering poem, the text still occupies a central place in the literary canon nearly a century after its conception. Eliot's initial idea was to publish the work as several separate poems, yet despite this, *The Waste Land* is still studied as a unified whole with a unifying voice and an identifiable "message". In this paper I argue that the poem's reputation today rests upon a mass of critical discourse which insists on interpreting "meaning" at the expense of considering the poem's musical, allusive and hypnotic power.

KEYWORDS: T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, *The Waste Land*, Modernism, English poetry, critical discourse

Although the publication of T.S. Eliot's long poem, *The Waste Land*, in 1922 represents one of the defining moments of High Modernism, the text remains defiantly complex and remote. Students' feelings of inadequacy on first reading the poem reflect a critical climate which esteems content analysis over an appreciation of form, musicality and the performative qualities of poetry. That Eliot's poem is essentially enigmatic, deliberately constructed from fragments, and reads like a confusing babel of disparate voices does not deter the critical impulse to uncover an overall message, to fuse the voices together in an act of reduction: Eliot and Pound's *montage* is always the victim of paraphrasing. This quest to capture the *truth* residing somewhere in *The Waste Land* (henceforth referred to as *TWL*) has guaranteed the canonical status of the poem, which depends upon a mass of critical discourse reproducing itself and paradoxically justifying the text's cultural centrality. All attempts to locate a contemporary message in Eliot's poem, however, lead to the same impasse: an entanglement with significance that misses the music, when you cannot see the wood for the trees. This obsession with discovering new meanings in the poem, what we might call the academic processing of *TWL*, represents a proliferation of attempts to explain something resolutely (and deliberately) inexplicable. For Maud Ellmann, "The Waste Land is a sphinx without a secret...and to force it to confession may also be a way of killing it." (NORTH, 2001, p. 258).

In this essay, I intend to contextualise *TWL* by considering a number of paradoxes which seem relevant to an understanding of the poem's reputation as a

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pioneering and highly-influential literary text. These paradoxes can be seen as a set of oppositional terms, with each term displaying a degree of mutual exclusivity. I will consider *TWL* in order to ascertain whether it is historically particular, or a text that frees itself from historical particulars by expressing “timeless” values; to what extent the poem is a personal expression of Eliot’s thoughts and feelings, or expresses something objective and impersonal; whether *TWL* is a clear example of Modernism or if its uniqueness escapes categorisation; whether Eliot’s poem is comprehensible or, as the critic Cyril Connolly says, “unintelligible”. (CONNOLLY, 1975, p. 207). By contextualising *TWL* in this way, I hope to show how an essentially enigmatic poem has become the focal point for endless interpretative strategies and critical debates which proliferate in circumspection, ideological discourses forever flawed in their attempt to explain the inexplicable rather than illuminating the poem’s sophisticated poetics. In a sense, this *overdetermination* of critical explanation on the outside, parallels the inner paradoxes generated by the poem itself: “Because the poem can only abject writing with more writing,” according to Ellmann, “it catches the infection that it tries to purge, and implodes like an obsessive ceremonial under the pressure of its own contradictions.” (NORTH, 2001, p. 273).

TWL is a poem of more than four hundred lines divided into five parts. Eliot’s original title for the poem was “He Do the Police in Different Voices” (a reference to a character in Charles Dickens’s novel *Our Mutual Friend*) as a number of noticeably different voices appear to narrate the verse. The original manuscript was more than twice the length of the published poem and Eliot even considered publishing the parts as separate poems. Fellow-American poet Ezra Pound edited the manuscript, cutting out long sections as he went along. *TWL* is constructed as a kind of montage and includes quotations in several languages. Eliot freely borrows from Shakespeare and other Elizabethans, Greek and Roman poetry, Dante, Baudelaire and other French symbolist poets, eastern religion, paganism, the music-hall and other sources. It is widely accepted that one of the underlying themes of *TWL* is the Arthurian legend of the Fisher King, the wounded king who is charged with keeping the Holy Grail. According to Eliot himself, the principal character in the poem is Tiresias, a blind and clairvoyant prophet from Greek mythology. *TWL* is unusual in that Eliot supplies a complete set of “Notes” at the end of the poem intended to explain some of the references, although the poet later claimed the notes were somewhat disingenuous and admitted to sending readers “on a wild goose chase”.¹ The notes begin with a reference to two books Eliot claimed were highly influential in the composition of *TWL*: Jessie L. Weston’s book on the grail legend, *From Ritual to Romance*, and George James Fraser’s study in comparative religion *The Golden Bough*. Many of the first readers of *TWL* presumed that a close study of these two books was necessary for a clearer understanding of the poem. Understandably, this “crowd” of ghostly voices and scholarly references has confounded interpretations of the poem since its first publication. In fact, the poem is infamous for its complexity and for the controversy surrounding the various readings and “misreadings” it has produced. David Ayers encapsulates the historical reception of the poem thus:

¹ Quoted in Frank Kermode’s introduction to the 2003 Penguin edition of *T.S. Eliot: The Waste Land and Other Poems*, London, 2003, p. 108. Eliot had written in *The Frontiers of Criticism*, 1956, “My notes stimulated the wrong kind of interest among the seekers of sources. It was just, no doubt, that I should pay my tribute to the work of Miss Jessie Weston; but I regret having sent so many enquirers off on a wild goose chase after Tarot cards and the Holy Grail.”

The general cultural claims about 'The Waste Land' in its first decades were replaced by a process of scholarly interpretation, which was then followed by a deconstructive phase in which it was possible to argue that the poem really could not be interpreted and in effect meant practically nothing at all: it was a text without an author, the sight of readerly speculative play but not of any complex, hidden or buried meaning. (AYERS, 2004, p. 27).

This would suggest that, following the "scholarly interpretation" performed by the so-called New Critics, we are now at the "deconstructive phase", a kind of postmodern *free for all* of "speculative play" when all interpretations are valid as *TWL* means "practically nothing". However, this is misleading: meaning is inscribed in language, not something we can place in parenthesis for the duration of reading a poem. Although I intend to expose the futility of *the will to paraphrase* Eliot's poem, I am not suggesting *TWL* is "meaningless". Rather that, as an aesthetic artefact first and foremost, we should listen to the voices and the music of the poetry they perform: only by experiencing and *feeling* the *TWL* in this way, can the significance of Eliot's text as *poetry* percolate through.

I want to begin my attempt to contextualise the poem by considering the complex relationship between literature and history. Terry Eagleton makes an interesting observation on this theme in his essay *Marxism and Literary Criticism*. There is a sense in which we value literature by the accuracy of its portrayal of history: the greatest literature is that which captures the moment most convincingly and inspires our historical imagination. In contrast, however, literature is also valuable, or so we are led to believe, because of its ability to capture "timeless truths"; we might still read Shakespeare plays today, for example, because of what they reveal to us about an essential and unchanging "human nature". Eagleton addresses this paradox when he writes that the aim of Marxist criticism is to grasp the forms, styles and meanings of literary works "as the products of a particular history". He then goes on to say:

The painter Henri Matisse once remarked that all art bears the imprint of its historical epoch, but that great art is that in which this imprint is most deeply marked. Most students of literature are taught otherwise: the greatest art is that which timelessly transcends its historical conditions. (EAGLETON, 1976, p. 3).

Clearly, there is an impasse here. It appears you cannot have it both ways: either great literature is recognisable as a product of its time, or it is that which transcends time.

This paradox is particularly relevant to *TWL* as the poem is often cited as a critique of the decay of civilization in the aftermath of WWI. Peter Childs writes:

Eliot's poem is representative of much modernist art produced during and after the First World War to the extent that it records an emotional aspect of a Western Crisis, characterised by despair, hopelessness, paralysis, angst and a sense of meaninglessness shown on a spiritual, cultural and personal level. (CHILDS, 2008, p. 184).

This comment is typical of many interpretations of the poem's historical vision, and yet it does not chime so accurately with what Eliot himself said about the poem in 1931:

when I wrote a poem called *The Waste Land* some of the more approving critics said that I had expressed the 'disillusionment of a generation,' which is nonsense. I may have expressed for them their own illusion of being

disillusioned, but that did not form part of my intention. (KERMODE, 2003, p. xix).

This anomaly is interesting on a number of levels. Firstly, it might preclude a certain historical reading of the *TWL* based on evidence of the author's "intention". However, this assumes that what the author is recorded as saying about *his* text limits the possible interpretations of that text; it produces what Roland Barthes refers to as a "closure" of the text. It also assumes that we can take Eliot at his word, when in fact the poet was known for his evasion and irony. Perhaps more significantly, this statement by Eliot could be seen as a particular *political* reading of *TWL*. By denying the poem reflects the post-war *zeitgeist*, Eliot is making the case for an "ahistorical" or purely "literary" reading of the poem, one which recognises the cultural significance of the classical references and of Eliot's mastery of form and gift for parody, but which obstructs any attempt at a historical analysis of the poem's ideological significance.

This is not to suggest that Eliot ignores history, but that he has a particular conception of history and its relationship to literature. Although Eliot denies that his poem expresses or encapsulates the mood of a disaffected generation in the aftermath of a global crisis, he does not rule out the possibility of literary works making statements or judgements, however oblique, about historical movements. In an essay he wrote about Joyce's novel *Ulysses* in 1923, a year after both *TWL* and *Ulysses* were published, he commends Joyce's use of Greek mythology as a means of connecting the present with the classical world of antiquity. Referring to Joyce's "parallel use of the Odyssey", Eliot writes:

[i]n using the myth, in manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity, Mr Joyce is pursuing a method which others must pursue after him...It is simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving shape and significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history. (quoted in KERMODE, 2003, p. xxii).

The two key words here, I would suggest, are "manipulating" and "controlling". Eliot appears to be claiming that, by preserving a form of classical mythology, Joyce can somehow atone for the "sins" of the post-war present; by structuring his novel as a "parallel" version of an ancient mythical journey, Joyce is able to contrast the "futility" of the present with the model of classical literature. This "manipulation" or reformulation of the ancient past into the present is, of course, precisely what Eliot attempts in *TWL*, with its proliferation of classical references and mythological figures. This deliberate preservation of classical mythology can be seen as an archly conservative reading of history.

The paradox here is that Eliot on the one hand denies *TWL* is a historical poem, one that reflects the ideological and cultural apocalypse caused by WWI, and yet he wants to preserve certain "historical" cultural references. By holding up classical literature as a model of excellence, an approach which "others must pursue", Eliot acknowledges the significance of literature in history, but avoids confronting the powerful historical and ideological forces present in 1922 which predetermined his own poetic vision. Eagleton encapsulates Eliot's poetic approach at the historical moment which produced *TWL*:

The crisis of European society – global war, severe class-conflict, failing capitalist economies – might be resolved by turning one's back on history

altogether and putting mythology in its place. Deep below finance capitalism lay the Fisher King, potent images of birth, death and resurrection in which human beings might discover a common identity. (EAGLETON, 2008, p. 35-36)².

When reality is a post-war moral chaos bereft of spiritual values, the poet can always fall back on the deep structures of classical mythology, Eastern religion, Dante and Grail legends. Admittedly, it is not necessarily the responsibility of poets to be politically engaged: poets are not obliged to write poetry as a means of representing the ideological and historical moment they find themselves in. Poetry is also a very personal mode of self-expression, one which attempts to communicate feelings and represent emotions. This poses the question of the extent to which *TWL* is more of a personal statement.

At times Eliot appeared to be surprised by the critical attention given to *TWL* and was quick to deny that he was attempting, in the poem, to make an ideological statement about the “decline of the West” or the parlous state of modern society.

Various critics have done me the honour to interpret the poem in terms of criticism of the contemporary world, have considered it, indeed, an important piece of social criticism. To me it was only the relief of a wholly insignificant grouse against life: it is just a piece of rhythmical grumbling. (KERMODE, 2003, p. xix).

Eliot’s characterization of his own poem as a form of personal “grumbling” might induce his readers to see the text as one of psychological significance, as if the anxiety of the “protagonist” (Tiresias, or Eliot himself) was emblematic of certain eternal truths about human existence. Yet this humanistic reading of the poem can also be seen as an obfuscation of history, an interpretation which *politicises* the poem in the very act of trying to deny its ideological significance. As Child explains,

In *The Waste Land*, Eliot deals predominantly with a destroyed post-war Europe but the references to war are oblique, and social change only takes place within a mythological framework. The poem represses history and politics, which is itself a significant historical effect inasmuch as it exposes a contemporary disillusionment with the possibilities for collective action and social change. (CHILDS, 2008, p. 184).

By claiming the critics had misinterpreted his “intention”, Eliot conveniently removes himself from the scene of any possible debate about the relationship between literature, politics and social change. Despite Eliot’s evasion, the treadmill of interpretative strategies all seeking ideological significance continues unabated: *TWL* must be *politicised* in some way in order to justify its inclusion on literary courses. Eliot’s conservatism, his “repression” of history and politics in *TWL*, does not devalue the poem, of course, as no artist can claim political immunity. What Adorno calls the “truth content” of a work of art needs to be recognised, irrespective of political bias: “we are concerned not with the poet as a private person, not with his psychology or his so-called social perspective, but with the poem as a philosophical sundial telling the time of history.” (RICE & WAUGH, 2001, p. 116). For Adorno, works of Modernism such as

² Eagleton’s book, *How to Read a Poem*, is, I believe, deliberately mistitled. Purportedly written for students, Eagleton warns those “less experienced” to begin at Chapter 4. The first four chapters amount to a study of poetry better encapsulated by the title, “Marxism and Form in English Poetry”.

TWL are indeed historically significant, though that significance will come to light as part of the critical act: it neither needs to be inscribed in the text nor explicitly declared by the author.

There is a sense, however, in which the personal and the historical co-exist in *TWL* at the level of “authorial intention”. Childs sees Eliot’s poem as an example of the literary establishment’s attempt to reassert its “elitism” in the wake of WWI and the beginning of mass culture. “What is revealed is a desire to break away from the idea that the artist writes about something for somebody in a literal or descriptive way. Instead, Eliot evinces a valorisation of erudition, mythology, symbol and elite culture”. (CHILDs, 2008, p. 105). It is as if Eliot constructs a poetic “wall of defence” by piling together great literary quotations and allusions; classical references to set against the onslaught of a mass, low-brow literary culture. Writing in 1932, F. R. Leavis certainly recognised a parallel between Eliot’s poem and a decline in cultural values:

What is the significance of the modern Waste Land? The answer may be read in what appears as the rich disorganization of the poem. The seeming disjointedness is intimately related to the erudition that has annoyed so many readers and to the wealth of literary borrowings and allusions. These characteristics represent the present state of civilization. The traditions and cultures have mingled, and the historical imagination makes the past contemporary; no one tradition can digest so great a variety of materials, and the result is a break-down of forms and the irrevocable loss of that sense of absoluteness which seems necessary to a robust culture.(LEAVIS, 1972, p. 71).

The “break down of forms” and the “loss of absoluteness” that Leavis laments sounds eerily like a definition of post-modernism: the techniques of *pastiche* within a melting pot of cultural relativity and indeterminate value. We can now see how Modernism was the beginning of a seismic shift in perception and representation that we are still feeling today. To try and resist this splintering of culture, as Leavis hoped to do in his conservative critical approach, was not necessarily Eliot’s intention, however.

If there is a statement lurking somewhere in *TWL*, it might be that only by preserving the past can we move forward culturally, an argument Eliot strenuously put forward about poetry in his essay *Tradition and the Individual Talent*. Although Eliot claims *TWL* is a personal poem, the foundation stones of the complex structure are impersonal, the voices are those of others. History is placed “in brackets” while historical literature is dusted off and selected examples are held up as shining ornaments of great value. If *TWL* is an example of the “Modern”, we might argue, then the modern resides in the pre-modern, and the artist’s role is to reshape the icons of the past, to valorise the classics, to re-voice the echoes of antiquity. However, it is precisely by means of this *re-voicing* that Eliot manages to “speak” to us in *TWL*: the museum pieces need a poetic voice of equal stature to introduce them and weave them together. What makes *TWL* fascinating is the shadow-play that Eliot performs within this “museum” of antiquity, and the reader’s urge to locate the poet’s identity amongst the array of disparate voices, the yearning to find *authenticity*. Frank Kermode sees a parallel between *TWL* and other emerging art forms in the first decades of the twentieth century.

The Waste Land had something in common with Cubism, which had revolutionised painting a few years earlier, and with the twelve-tone music invented by Arnold Schoenberg in place of the traditional scales; it permitted a view of history as without perspective, and a mode of composition that did

not forget the past but perceived its methods as effects of mere custom rather than law, which the artist must now, as it were, get behind. (KERMODE, 2003, p. xxi).

To conclude that Eliot was consciously and deliberately fashioning a new style, albeit one crafted from the remains of earlier relics, may be misleading. What we can deduce about *TWL*, however, is that the intention was personal, but the perception was impersonal. Eliot may have been getting some personal grievances off his chest, but *TWL* was widely interpreted as a dispassionate reading of a historical moment.

Part of the appeal of *TWL* is undoubtedly its alluring perplexity, its teasing enigmas, its babel of competing voices. It is as if the poem functions at a deeper, sub-textual level, a lower stratum of signification where Eliot managed to lay the allegorical and mythological allusions woven into the fabric of the text. For Eagleton, Eliot “was more of a primitivist than a sophisticate. He was interested in what a poem did, not what it said – in the resonance of the signifier, the lures of its music, the hauntings of its grains and textures, the subterranean workings of what one can only call the poem’s unconscious.” (EAGLETON, 2007, p. 92). This suggests another paradox: although the search for signification in *TWL* may be fundamentally thwarted by its deep, enigmatic structure, students of literature are encouraged to perform a close reading of the text in an attempt to grasp some intrinsic message. Here is a section from *The Fire Sermon* (lines 187-206):

A rat crept softly through the vegetation
 Dragging its slimy belly on the bank
 While I was fishing in the dull canal
 On a winter evening round behind the gashouse
 Musing upon the king my brother’s wreck
 And on the king my father’s death before him.
 White bodies naked on the low damp ground
 And bones cast in a little low dry garret,
 Rattled by the rat’s foot only, year to year.
 But at my back from time to time I hear
 The sound of horns and motors, which shall bring
 Sweeney to Mrs. Porter in the spring.
 O the moon shone bright on Mrs. Porter
 And on her daughter
 They wash their feet in soda water
 Et O cesvoixd’enfants, chantant dans la coupole!

Twit twittwit
 Jug jugjugjugjug
 So rudely forc’d.
 Tereu (NORTH, 2001, p. 11-12).

There is an almost music-hall, comic vitality about these lines which radically confounds the disturbing image of “White bodies naked on the low damp ground / And bones cast in a little low dry garret” contained within. The *spirit* of Eliot here is profoundly ironical, singing to himself and enjoying the inventiveness of his word play, despite the smell of death in the air. The form Eliot chooses to employ here, the ubiquitous iambic pentameter of English poetry, with its “ghostly” authority as the speaking voice we hear in Shakespeare, adds to the irony. Of the first thirteen lines quoted here, only three of them break the iambic pentameter mould, thus drawing attention to themselves. The lines are: “On a winter evening round behind the

gashouse”, which infuses an element of comedy; “Rattled by the rat’s foot only, year to year” which revels in assonance and alliteration despite the ominous enigma of the sense; and “O the moon shone bright on Mrs. Porter” which introduces a comic singing voice and indicates a shift of mood, complemented by the banality of “soda water” and “Twit twit twit”. Readers encouraged to search for profundity may be inclined to read these lines in a serious cast of mind, resisting the urge to smile in wonder at Eliot’s act of parody (it would be difficult to imagine F. R. Leavis having anything other than a very straight face while reading *TWL*). Not all of the poem is light-hearted by any means, but taken as a whole, as the poem certainly is, the overall effect of *TWL* is hardly depressing. It was Eliot himself who said, with, I believe, only a trace of irony: “Every poet would like to think that he had some direct social utility...All the better, then, if he could have at least the satisfaction of having a part to play in society as worthy as that of the music-hall comedian.” (KERMODE, 1975, p. 95).

Students of literature are routinely asked to pay close attention to the text, to study poems carefully and diligently. In the case of *TWL* however, if close reading does not produce a definable sense of the poem, but leaves the reader baffled and frustrated, we could even begin to question the efficacy of close reading as a viable approach. Rainey reminds us that the editors of *Dial* magazine, who eventually published *TWL*, didn’t feel it necessary to read Eliot’s text at the time, and this highlights the ideological particularity of the practice of close reading.

The best reading of a work may, on some occasions, be one that does not read it at all. Such an extreme formulation would doubtless be misleading. Yet it might remind us that close reading is itself a historical form of activity that appears at a precise moment in the development of professional literary studies and that other kinds of reading are and have been practised – not least among them the not-reading that was practised by the editors of the *Dial*, itself a trenchant reading of *The Waste Land*’s place in the structural logic and development of literary modernism. (RAINEY, 2007, p. 267).

What is undeniable about *TWL* is that it is safely established in the literary canon and, as such, must be given due attention. One of the problems of interpretation concerns the reader’s expectations: although the poem is long and divided into discrete sections, there is natural tendency on the reader’s part to imbue the poem with an overall message, a single voice, a meaning – however reductive – that can be taken away and repeated. This is despite the fact, as I have mentioned, that Eliot considered publishing the sections as separate poems.¹ “No doubt it is conceivable,” according to Kermode, “that we have been induced by a sort of benign propaganda to see the poem as a single whole; but even if that is so, we have now agreed to see it thus, and we do see it thus.” (KERMODE, 2003, p. xxi). Weighed down by the critical discourse already expended on it, *TWL* has been transposed into four hundred lines of continuous text that must be swallowed whole for its significance to be fully grasped. This holistic interpretation is encouraged by the ghostly “presence” of a principal speaker and onlooker in the form of Tiresias, who, “although a mere spectator and not indeed a ‘character’”, as Eliot tells us in the notes, “is yet the most important personage in the poem, uniting all the rest.” (ELIOT, 1967, p. 70). Here we have the voice of the most

¹In his section *Synoptic Bibliographical Descriptions*, Lawrence Rainey produces a chronological listing of Eliot’s letters and prose which reveals that certain parts of *TWL*’s manuscripts were written as early as 1913 when Eliot was at Harvard. These findings highlight the arbitrariness of holistic readings of the poem as a unified entity. See RAINEY, 2005, p. 13

reliable authority, the poet himself, asserting that readers should focus on the blind prophet of Greek mythology, as this voice or “personage” is the one “uniting all the rest”. With the presence of this “protagonist”, Eliot is directing the reader to see *TWL* as a unified whole. And yet, according to Vincent Sherry, it was Ezra Pound who first realised the importance of Tiresias and elevated his significance in the process of editing the original manuscript. In reducing the manuscript by hundreds of lines, Pound manages to exhort a “unifying” voice which can give the disparate sections a holistic vitality. “With the entrance of Tiresias”, writes Sherry, “the vocal medley evident in the earlier sections begins to achieve the focal intensity and definition of a single speaking character.” (SHERRY, 2003, p. 217). Eliot’s original conception, *He Do the Police in Different Voices*, has become, with the help of Pound, something akin to “The Vision and Prophecy of Tiresias”, as “Tiresias is established as the dominant consciousness of the poem” (SHERRY, 2003, p. 218).

Pound’s influence on *TWL* is, of course, well known – Eliot dedicates the poem to his editor, calling him “il miglior fabbro” (the better craftsman), a reference drawn from Dante’s *Divine Comedy*. Sherry, however, suggests the extent to which Pound not only gave shape and a unifying voice to the poem, but also affected the subsequent interpretations of the poem is not widely understood. Eliot’s deference to Pound allowed the “better craftsman” to change the *form* of the poem, to alter the tone, to bring order and consistency to what was previously a “babel” of incongruent voices.

Pound’s editing [...] breaks up the multifarious command of Eliot’s quatrain form, replaces its changing cadences and motley vocabulary with a much more consistent rhythm and diction, rinsing away the note of suburban bitchiness and lifting the vocal character into a single idiom of calmly solemn, ritual dignity. (SHERRY, 2003, p. 220).

And it is precisely this “consistency” which encourages holistic interpretations. The dominant critical approach to *TWL* has been to yoke the five sections together into an integrated semantic whole and draw parallels with the apparent “decay of Western civilization” and similar portentous judgements about the poem’s significance. “The fiction of consistence that Pound managed to inscribe in the sequence, however, proved to be the main point of hermeneutic appeal in the literary criticism of the next fifty or so years” (SHERRY, 2003, p. 224). The “deeper” structures of significance we have seen – the grail legend, the Fisher King, the anthropology of *The Golden Bough* – also contribute towards the possibility of reader “consumption”, of making sense of the poem, offering thematic consistency. Sherry argues that many readers of *TWL* use

the grail quest narrative just to organize their experience of an insistently bewildering poem, just to go on reading. A significance of loosely strung, provisional logical quality serves to appease the needs one’s conditioned sensibility brings to literature, but it has little relation in the end to what the poem is ‘about’. (SHERRY, 2003, p. 224).

The paradox of an “insistently bewildering” poem, a text that is “unintelligible” and yet one that invites endless interpretation is at the core of *TWL*. The poem is a site where all discourses which attempt to reproduce the text clash together in a void. The discursive practice of interpretation based on close reading is not deterred by enigma or incoherence: the search for meaning continues regardless. This moral quest for significance represents a kind of deafness: instead of listening to Eliot’s rhythms, cadences and subtle shifts of register (which bring comedy to the performance), readers

knit their brows in the hope of deeper enlightenment. Consider the rich variety of five short extracts from *The Burial of the Dead* (lines 17-63):

In the mountains, there you feel free.
 I read, much of the night, and go south in the winter.
 (...)

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

 "You gave me hyacinths first a year ago;
 "They called me the hyacinth girl."
 (...)

 Thank you. If you see dear Mrs. Equitone,
 Tell her I bring the horoscope myself:
 One must be so careful these days.
 (...)

 A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,
 I had not thought death had undone so many. (NORTH, 2001, p. 5-7).

In attempting to identify a semantic thread linking these phrases, one misses the irony implicit in Eliot's switching of tone, his gift for ventriloquizing and mastery of the idiomatic phrase ("One must be so careful these days."). The "I" who reads, the "I" who brings the telescope, the "I" who watches the crowd and "me the hyacinth girl" are personas, none of which are clearly identifiable as the poet himself. Distilling *truth* from an array of disparate voices, some comic, others prophetic, some singing, others chatting in pubs, might be considered incongruous, tantamount to allotting a single opinion to a group of people. Eliot may have had an overall *design* for *TWL*, a dominant and passionately-held idea to communicate to his readers, but there is scant evidence for such a theory. When Eliot says, in the Notes which accompany *TWL*, "What Tiresias sees, in fact, is the substance of the poem", we might ask ourselves, as Ellmann does, what does Tiresias see, exactly? "Blind as he is, the prophet has a single walk-on part, when he spies on the typist and her lover indulging in carbuncular caresses." (NORTH, 2001, p. 264).

Hugh Kenner calls *TWL* "a parody of a modern poem". This begins to make sense if we consider the ventriloquism, the evasiveness and ironic distancing of Eliot himself, the pub scene, the music hall references, the clash of registers: taken together, these elements do not auger well for a poem widely considered to be a statement of serious intent.

The Waste Land presupposes that there is something called Poetry, which has come to us from many lands and periods, and consorts with certain elevations of style, and no longer has much meaning. It is packaged like the official Poetry of a time when poetry is dead, complete with numbered lines and footnotes. (KENNER, 1991, p. 439).

Kenner appears to presuppose that Eliot and Pound's production was in some way irresponsible, or deliberately facetious. However, I would argue that *TWL* was never intended to be "understood"; it is a poetic performance, layers of half-meanings and overheard conversations all signifying something but not leading to any grand narrative or reducible message. The purpose of the poem, if there is one, is to provoke readers into asking questions,

questions we are sure to address to the poem itself – what on earth does it mean? – though the force of such a question ought to strike back to the hallowed materials themselves: what can that song from *The Tempest* mean? [...] What did Ophelia mean when she bade the ladies goodnight? The poem is a grotesquerie, often nearly a parody; Eliot even told Arnold Bennett that yes, the notes were a skit, but no more so than some of the poem itself. (KENNER, 1991, p. 443).

Words like “skit” and “parody” point towards something that is tongue-in-cheek, something not meant to be taken too seriously. However, if *TWL* is a “parody of a modern poem” and yet it is firmly positioned at the pinnacle of High Modernism, then we have a conundrum. Either Modernism itself is essentially parodic in style, or *TWL* is the caricature of a poetic style we should be able to identify as Modern. Perhaps more importantly, if we agree to view *TWL* as a form of poetic burlesque, this compromises the widely held interpretation of the poem as emblematic of a spiritual crisis which followed WWI. Adorno’s description of a poem as “a philosophical sundial telling the time of history” is useful here: Eliot may not have intended to write an allegory of post-war spiritual decay, but *TWL* remains, nevertheless, a valuable cultural document that offers insights into what Eagleton calls the “ideologico-aesthetic” moment of its first publication. This is not to suggest *TWL* carries a profound, underlying *message*, but that its complexity, its array of poetic styles, its shifting idioms and competing voices all work together to illuminate the state of poetry in England in 1922.

Although Eliot, as we have seen, could be dismissive about ideological parallels or historical interpretations of *TWL*, this does not mean the construction of the poem was somehow a haphazard affair. In fact, Eliot was impatient with critics who concerned themselves with the possible meaning or significance of the poem, prioritising content over form. As Eagleton reminds us, “It was form – the material stuff of language itself, its archaic resonances and tentacular roots – which mattered most to him.” (EAGLETON, 2007, p. 92). Eliot believed poetic language carried with it a deeper, more “primitive” resonance that affected the reader at a deeper level, a place beyond logical “meaning” and explanation. This explains the concentration of myth and symbolism in *TWL*, but it also suggests the poem should not be plundered for “meaning” at the level of logical consciousness. For Eliot, “Poetry was not to engage the reader’s mind: it did not really matter what a poem actually *meant*, [...] Meaning was no more than a sop thrown to the reader to keep him distracted, while the poem went to work on him in more physical and unconscious ways.” (EAGLETON, 2008, p. 35). As Eliot is firmly established as a central figure in the emergence of Modernism, we can extrapolate from this that one of the principle facets of the new movement in poetry was opacity; the reader is not intended to make much sense of a Modern poem. “This kind of writing is surely *meant* to baffle us. [...] The esoteric diction and arcane allusions deliberately prevent us from reading for ‘content’.” (EAGLETON, 2007, p. 91). At this point, we reach another possible paradox: either *TWL* is clearly classifiable as an example of Modernism – something “baffling”, formally dense, littered with allusion – or it is a unique text which defies categorisation. If we opt for the former, and suggest that *TWL* is an essentially Modern text, then we must be able to define “Modernist poetry”. Yet, as we have seen, the whole ethos of Modernism is to be “difficult”, “opaque” and “baffling”. If Modernist poetry is essentially enigmatic, then it surely defies the categories that try to contain it. For Eagleton, what Eliot’s poetry “says”, among other things, is “This is modernism. It proclaims itself as a type of literature which is impossible to consume.” (EAGLETON, 2007, p. 91).

If the sheer inscrutability of *TWL* is its main feature, then the problem arises of how best to define Modernism. In fact, it could be argued that no two definitions of Modernism are the same, or, as Perry Anderson has said, “what is concealed beneath the label is a wide variety of very diverse – indeed incompatible – aesthetic practices: symbolism, constructivism, expressionism, surrealism”. (ANDERSON, 1984, p. 112). It appears we do not have a reliable category – Modernism – by which *TWL* can be defined.

For Lawrence Rainey, Modernism in literature announced itself as a high-cultural movement, complete with with arcane texts, which unwittingly alienated the ordinary reading public. The critical establishment was similarly intimidated by the erudite complexity of *TWL* and of Eliot’s formidable reputation as an intellectual poet. Few had the courage to admit they did not understand the poem. According to Rainey, “*The Waste Land* was represented as the verse equivalent of Ulysses, a work that epitomized not just the experiences of an individual...but the modernist claim to a hegemonic position in the institution of ‘literature’”. (RAINEY, 2007, p. 252). Rainey is particularly critical of the American New Critics who helped to elevate *TWL* to iconic status by performing a series of clinical and detailed readings of the poem, embracing its complexity and attempting to elaborate its deeper significance by careful examination of Eliot’s notes. The New Critical approaches were aiming to extrapolate *meaning* from the *TWL*, establishing what we might call contemporary thematic relevance. Rainey is impatient with this hallowed reverence for *TWL* and appeals to readers to be *open* to the poem as a lyric performance: by doing so,

we can remain open to the pleasure of amazement and the sense of wonder that a reading of *The Waste Land* inevitably brings, attentive to the poem’s vertiginous twists and turns of language, responsive to its richly varied ironic and climactic moments, receptive to its lacerating wildness and stubborn refusal to accommodate expectations.” (RAINEY, 2005, p. 128).

Rainey, however, may have more sympathy than he realises for this openness. Cleanth Brooks, one of the leading lights of New Criticism, admits that the daunting scholarship necessary to perform a thorough examination of *TWL* can obscure more immediate pathways of access to the poem:

I prefer not to raise...here the question of how important it is for the reader to have an explicit intellectual account of the various symbols and a logical account of their relationships. It may well be that such rationalization is no more than a scaffolding to be got out of the way before we contemplate the poem itself as a poem. (BROOKS, 1939, p. 136).

Brooks, like many critics, is reluctant to let go of the idea of a *unity* of meaning in *TWL*, despite evidence of the fractured nature of the poem’s construction and of Pound’s wholesale editing of the manuscripts and subjective selection of parts for inclusion. As Frank Kermode says, quoted above, we are left with no alternative but to consume *TWL* whole because that is what we have resolved to do as arbiters of culture. Brooks even admits the apparent randomness of images and voices in *TWL*, but believes that doesn’t detract from grasping the poem as a unified whole:

With the characters as with the other symbols, the surface relationships may be accidental and apparently trivial and they may be made either ironically or through random association or in hallucination, but in the total context of the

poem the deeper relationships are revealed. The effect is a sense of the oneness of experience, and of the unity of all periods, and with this, a sense that the general theme of the poem is true. But the theme has not been imposed—it has been revealed. (BROOKS, 1939, p. 169).

It is undeniable that *TWL* had a profound effect on the reception of poetry in England at the time of its publication. Cyril Connolly remembered how he and his colleagues at Oxford in the 1920s were so overwhelmed by *TWL* and Eliot's exalted image that they immediately dispensed with other contemporary poets.

We were like new-born goslings forever imprinted with the image of an alien and indifferent foster-parent, infatuated with his erudition, his sophistication, yet sapped and ruined by the contagion of his despair. Housman, Flecker and the Georgians all melted away overnight. (CONNOLLY, 1975, p. 207).

Connolly, who later became a renowned literary critic in England and champion of Modernism, characterises the image of Eliot and his poem here with the words “erudition”, “sophistication” and “despair”. *TWL* was a testament to literary scholarship, to the mastery of poetic form displayed with the confidence of the urbane intellectual, one who could afford to be ironical. The “despair” was in the tone, the “rhythmical grumbling” Eliot admitted. Consider these famous lines from *The Fire Sermon* (lines 300-306):

“On Margate Sands.
I can connect
Nothing with nothing.
The broken fingernails of dirty hands.
My people humble people who expect
Nothing.”

la la (NORTH, 2001, p. 15).

We are surely shooting in the dark here, only able to guess at the possible significance residing somewhere in this juxtaposition of sounds and images. There is clearly pathos in “I can connect /Nothing with nothing”, but it is sandwiched between “Margate Sands” (a seaside resort for working class Londoners) and “The broken fingernails of dirty hands”; and though “My people humble people who expect / Nothing” sounds prophetic (especially if we knew who “my people” might be) the line is compromised in its seriousness by that final “la la”. The “despair” Connolly identifies may indeed be apparent, but it doesn't reveal itself by careful examination of the words and their context. For Ellmann, *TWL* “lures the reader into hermeneutics...but there is no secret under its hugger-muggery” (NORTH, 2001, p. 259). Yes, the poem speaks to us, but not if we struggle with definitions, for “it is in the silences *between* the words that meaning flickers, local, evanescent – in the very ‘wastes’ that stretch across the page.” (NORTH, 2001, p. 259).

In June 1922, a few months before *TWL* was published, Virginia Woolf wrote in her diary:

Eliot dined last Sunday & read his poem. He sang it and chanted it, rhythmized it. It has great beauty and force of phrase: symmetry; & tensivity. What connects it together, I'm not so sure...One was left, however, with some strong emotion. *The Waste Land*, it is called...Tom's autobiography – a melancholy one. (WOOLF, 1980, p. 178).

Eliot's reading of the poem was, of course, a *performance*. In giving several voices to the poem, in chanting it, *TWL* became less of a text and more of a dramatic eulogy. It was the performance of a personal lament; a long, melancholy song. The editor of the poem, Ezra Pound, was absent, though his role in the production cannot be over-estimated. Together Eliot and Pound produced a kind of modern "mantra": a magical poem full of symbolism that should be read aloud, preferably "in different voices". These formal qualities – sound, rhythm, rhyme, register – give poetry its particular strength. They are physical, visceral qualities, which "humanise" the poem in an anthropological sense. The desire to interpret the poem as a single entity may be natural, but it forces content-heavy, ideological interpretations that overlook the musicality of *TWL*. Much like Virginia Woolf, Eliot was not a writer with a politically engaged social vision; he was not attempting to represent a post-war mood of despondency and cultural decay. He was more of an aesthete, a poet who wanted to mount an exhibition of literary ornaments, and then play the part of the curator who writes the catalogue for the show, singing it aloud for the gallery audience. What connects the five parts together, as Woolf suggests, is not something we can determine with any certainty. However, Woolf's view of the poem as having "beauty and force" is something I, and many others, would agree with, though as we have seen, such terms are difficult to define. *TWL* undoubtedly rewards repeated readings, though not to tease out more "meaning", but to enjoy its musical, allusive, hypnotic power.

In the winter of 1923, Cyril Connolly, then an undergraduate at Oxford, described *TWL* in a letter to a friend at Cambridge as a very "Alexandrian" poem.

Whatever happens read 'The Waste Land' by T. S. Eliot – only read it twice. It is quite short and has the most marvellous things in it – though the 'message' is almost unintelligible and it is a very Alexandrian poem – sterility disguised by superb use of quotation and obscure symbolism – thoroughly decadent. It will ruin your style (CONNOLLY, 1975, p. 207).

This is an enlightening observation about Eliot's poem; one corroborated by the following definition offered by a Greek classicist and I believe worth quoting at length:

The Alexandrian poets are all in some way or other, directly or indirectly, *hampered and fettered by the weight of classical Greek poetry*. They looked at the Greek poetic tradition with awe mingled with despair; they were spellbound by the rich and beautiful language, the perfection of form and the grandeur of the classical creative imagination from Homer to Menander, but the more they studied those works the more deeply were they convinced of the utter impossibility of creating anything of equal originality; they realized that they were incapable of freeing themselves completely from the classical tradition or of breaking it and creating new types of great poetry, as the Ionians had created the epic, or the Athenians drama. The furthest they dared venture was to *mix and to mingle* the old pure and clearly defined types of poetry. The result, neither the same nor completely new, flattered their vanity by persuading them that they were creating, without breaking way from the spell of tradition. (TRYPANIS, 1947, p. 1-7).

It seems to me that this is an almost uncanny description of Eliot's view of poetry and of his approach to the writing of *TWL*. "Immature poets imitate," writes Eliot, "mature poets steal: bad poets deface what they take, and good poets make it into

something better, or at least something different.”³ Eliot looked at the tradition “with awe” and felt “hampered” by its weight: the best he could hope for was to “mix and mingle” some of the old “pure” poetry with something new. The result, *TWL*, is a fascinating document, not only as a homage to classical, romantic and symbolist poetry, however, but as a unique *performance* only made possible by the ghostly voices that emerge and vanish. Indeed, Eliot’s original title *He Do The Police in Different Voices*, is fruitful to bear in mind when reading the poem, with all the irony of the original quotation. The phrase, from Dickens’ novel *Our Mutual Friend*, appears when the widow Betty Higden says (ungrammatically) of her young adopted son Sloppy, “You mightn’t think it, but Sloppy is a beautiful reader of a newspaper. He do the Police in different voices.” The comedy of this exchange is an indication of the spirit of *TWL*. In a complimentary letter to Cleanth Brooks after reading the critic’s essay on *TWL*, Eliot made an illuminating comment:

[“Critique of the Myth”] seems to me on the whole excellent. I think that this kind of analysis is perfectly justified so long as it does not profess to be a reconstruction of the author’s method of writing. Reading your essay made me feel, for instance, that I had been much more ingenious than I had been aware of, because the conscious problems with which one is concerned in the actual writing are more those of a quasi-musical nature, the arrangement of metric and pattern, than of a conscious exposition of ideas. (BROOKS, 1995, p. 99-100).

Whatever we, as students and critics of literature, have decided to *read into* Eliot’s poem highlights the complexity of modern, critical theory and the academic *processing* of literature, more than it exposes the hidden depths of *TWL*. As a poet, Eliot was mostly concerned with technique, with rhythm, rhyme and the wit of his word-play; the credibility of his social commentary or of his exposition of cultural decay, if they existed, were secondary to him at best. Perhaps the most fruitful reading of *TWL* would not be a reading at all: it would be the opportunity to listen to the poem performed by a company of actors in a variety of registers and accents. Only after this entertaining initiation should the poem be tackled on the page, notes and all, to marvel at Pound and Eliot’s inventiveness.

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³ The famous quotation of Eliot’s comes from his essay on Philip Massinger in *The Sacred Wood*, 1932. Eliot writes: “One of the surest tests [of the superiority or inferiority of a poet] is the way in which a poet borrows. Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal; bad poets deface what they take, and good poets make it into something better, or at least something different. The good poet welds his theft into a whole of feeling which is unique, utterly different than that from which it is torn; the bad poet throws it into something which has no cohesion.” Of course, the composition of *The Waste Land*, could be seen (holistically) as one in which, as Eliot says “the good poet welds his theft into a whole of feeling which is unique, utterly different than that from which it is torn”. (my italics)

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