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This charm of vacant lots!
The helpless fields that lie.
Sinister, sterile and blind –
Entreat the eye and rack the mind,
Demand your pity.
With ashes and tins in piles,
Shattered bricks and tiles
And the débris of a city.

T. S. Eliot, “Second Caprice
in North Cambridge,” 1909

Easing the thing
Into spurts of activity
Before the emptiness of late afternoon
Is a kind of will power
Blaring back its received vision
From a thousand tenement windows
Just before night
Its signal fading

John Ashbery, “Tarpaulin”

In *The Poetics of Indeterminacy* (1981) I drew a sharp distinction between Eliot’s symbolist mode and the more “literalist” indeterminacy of John Ashbery. Twenty years later, in the context of recent

poetic developments, I would qualify my earlier reading by noting that the comparison was to the later Eliot, not to the poet, then largely unknown, made familiar by Christopher Ricks's superb edition of the hitherto unpublished poems written between 1909 and 1917. The Eliot of 1909 was still using rhymed stanzas, but the mood of "Second Caprice" certainly paves the way for "Tarpaulin," although Ashbery's referents are more oblique: witness his refusal to spell out what sort of "received vision" or "signal fading" the act of "easing" (lowering) the tarpaulin window canopy might produce. In both poems, at any rate, there is ambivalence to what Eliot calls, in the second stanza of "Caprice," the "unexpected charm" and "unexplained repose" of the blighted urban landscape, Ashbery's "thousand tenement windows" recalling, of course, the "thousand furnished rooms" of Eliot's second "Prelude."

"Tarpaulin" appeared in Ashbery's 1975 collection *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*. What about more recent poets? Here is a set of statements of poetics that come out of the Language movement:

There are no thoughts except through language. . . . The look of the natural [is] constructed, programmatic – artful . . . there is no natural look or sound to a poem. Every element is intended, chosen. That is what makes a thing a poem. . . . Fundamentally, construction is at the heart of writing. (Charles Bernstein 1986: 49)

Nothing is given. Everything remains to be constructed. . . . As I begin working, far from having an "epiphany" to express, I have only a vague nucleus of energy running to words. As soon as I start *listening* to the words they reveal their own vectors and affinities, pull the poem into their own field of force, often in unforeseen directions. (Rosmarie Waldrop 1996: 74)

Unlike most political poetry of the last twenty years, Language writing bases its analysis of authority not on the author's particular politics but in the verbal means by which any statement

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claims its status as truth. Moreover, by foregrounding the abstract features of the speech act rather than the authenticity of its expressive moment, the poet acknowledges the contingency of utterances in social interchange. (Michael Davidson 1995: 70)

By emphasizing its writtenness, its literariness, the poem calls attention to the complexity of its constructedness. (Lyn Hejinian 2000: 329)

The key concept for each of these poets is that of *constructivism* – an understanding of poetry in its classical Greek meaning as *poiesis* or *making*, with the specific understanding that language, far from being a *vehicle* or conduit for thoughts and feelings outside and prior to it, is itself the site of meaning-making. When, for example, Bernstein declares that “There are no thoughts except through language,” he is echoing Wittgenstein’s famous aphorism in the *Tractatus* (5.62): “*The limits of my language . . . mean the limits of my world,*” or again, his admonition in *Zettel* (160): “Do not forget that a poem, even though it is composed in the language of information, is not used in the language-game of giving information.” But the emphasis on language construction also recalls the following dicta:

It is not the “greatness,” the intensity, of the emotions, the components, but the intensity of the artistic process, the pressure, so to speak, under which the fusion takes place, that counts . . . the difference between art and the event is always absolute.

Or again:

The point of view which I am struggling to attack is perhaps related to the metaphysical theory of the substantial unity of the soul: for my meaning is, that the poet has, not a “personality” to express, but a particular medium, which is only a medium.

Or this one:

When a poet's mind is perfectly equipped for its work, it is constantly amalgamating disparate experience; the ordinary man's experience is chaotic, irregular, fragmentary. The latter falls in love, or reads Spinoza, and these two experiences have nothing to do with each other, or with the noise of the typewriter or the smell of cooking; in the mind of the poet these experiences are always forming new wholes.

These citations will be readily recognized as drawn from the critical writings of Eliot: the first two (SE: 19–20) come from “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1919), the third (ibid.: 287) from “The Metaphysical Poets” (1921). The new poetics of suspicion would no doubt balk at the notion of “forming new wholes,” but otherwise there is nothing Eliot says here that is at odds with the statements cited above by Bernstein and Davidson, Waldrop and Hejinian. For them, as for Eliot, art is inherently a form of *transformation*, which means that, in his words, *the difference between art and the event is always absolute*. Indeed, what Steve McCaffery has called a “concern with the incidentality of the signifier rather than the transcendality of the referent” (McCaffery 1986: 19) has less affinity with the expressivist paradigm of the 1960s – a model still dominant today – than with the poetics of Eliot or Pound or James Joyce. Like the poems of Waldrop and Hejinian, Davidson and Bernstein, whose critical statements are cited above, such McCaffery poems as “Teachable Texts” and “Critique of Cynical Poesis” (both of them in *The Cheat of Words*) are surely closer to *Finnegans Wake* than to Elizabeth Bishop’s “Crusoe in England” or even Allen Ginsberg’s “Sun Flower Sutra.”

Any consideration of the deferral of modernism, which has produced this curious poetic lag (*Lag* happens to be one of McCaffery’s most interesting long poems), will have to come to terms with the still-vexed case of T. S. Eliot, the American avant-gardist of 1910–11, who had, by the late 1920s, transformed himself into the

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self-proclaimed “classical,” Anglo-Catholic, Royalist poet and the conservative critic and editor of the *Criterion* we know from the textbooks. It is this “figure” that Cynthia Ozick (1989), in a well-known essay for the *New Yorker*, declared to be a dead duck – a poet nearly forgotten and, in her eyes, deservedly so. “It may be embarrassing,” Ozick wrote, “for us now to look back at [the] nearly universal obeisance to an autocratic, inhibited, depressed, rather narrow-minded, and considerably bigoted fake Englishman. . . . In his person, if not in his poetry, Eliot was, after all, false coinage” (ibid.: 121). And Ozick concludes:

Whether postmodernism is genuinely a successor or merely an updated variant of modernism remains unresolved. Yet whichever it turns out to be, *we do know for certain that we no longer live in the literary shadow of T. S. Eliot. . . .* High art is dead. The passion for inheritance is dead. Tradition is equated with obscurantism. The wall that divided serious high culture from the popular arts is breached. . . . The newest generation in the line of descent from Williams, though hardly aware of its own ancestry, follows Williams in repudiating Eliot. . . . As Eliot in his time spurned Milton’s exalted epic line as too sublime for his need, so now Eliot’s elegiac fragments appear too arcane, too aristocratic, and too difficult for contemporary ambition. (Ibid.: 152, 154; my emphasis)

I recall reading these words when they first appeared and finding them harsh but not entirely inaccurate. Who, in those post-1960s liberationist times, could readily admire an overtly anti-Semitic, politically reactionary poet, who seemed to be obsessed with original sin, feared his own sexuality, and displayed an obvious contempt for women? “Lord! spare us from any more Fisher Kings!” quipped Frank O’Hara (1977: 163); indeed, for O’Hara’s generation Eliot was a sort of joke – the prim and proper Englishman with bowler hat and umbrella, who referred to himself in “Ash Wednesday,” written when he was just over forty, as “the agèd eagle,” no longer willing

to “stretch its wings.” And – yes – in 1989, “advanced” American poetry did seem to be firmly in the Williams camp: Williams, after all, was democratic, colloquial, populist, his short “verbal snapshots” accessible, unassertive, anti-closural, and, in the words of Blaise Cendrars (1919: 146), “wide open onto the boulevards.” As for Eliot, even Donald Davie, hardly an admirer of the poet known in Britain as Carlos Williams, declared that Eliot had had no lasting influence on English poetry, which was, Davie claimed, written under the sign of Thomas Hardy (Davie 1972: 3). Davie thus joined forces with his otherwise antithetical critic Harold Bloom, who had gone on record in 1970 to say that “Eliot and Pound might prove to be the Cowley and Cleveland of this age” (Bloom 1970: v–vi). In *The Poetics of Indeterminacy*, as I noted above, I myself subordinated Eliot’s *Symboliste* modernism to what I called, citing a John Ashbery title, “the Other Tradition” (Perloff 1999b: 11–19). And in his important reappraisal called *Modernisms*, Peter Nicholls writes that in Eliot’s early Laforguean poems, “allusion and pastiche work to create a curiously empty poetic voice for which irony is a constant reminder of the self’s instability” (Nicholls 1995: 181).

“When we think of the world’s future, we always mean the destination it will reach if it keeps going in the direction we can see it going in now,” wrote Wittgenstein on one of the note cards collected in *Culture and Value*; “it does not occur to us that its path is not a straight line but a curve, constantly changing direction” (Wittgenstein 1980: 3). In the same year (1989) that witnessed Cynthia Ozick’s *New Yorker* essay – and of course it was the year the Berlin Wall came down and the Soviet empire ceased to be – Charles Bernstein published a manifesto called “Artifice of Absorption” committed to the notion that indirection, resistance, and *difficulty* must be central to poetry. “The obvious problem,” writes Bernstein, with reference to the “natural look” then dominant, “is that the poem said in any other way is not the poem.” In this sense, poetry is nothing if not “artifice,” demanding a language of “impermeability,” involving, in a purposely Gargantuan and ungrammatical catalogue:

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exaggeration, attention scattering, distraction,
digression, interruptive, transgressive,
undecorous, anticonventional, unintegrated, fractured,
fragmented, fanciful, ornately stylized, rococo,
baroque, structural, mannered, fanciful, ironic,
iconic, schtick, camp, diffuse, decorative,
repellent, inchoate, programmatic, didactic,
theatrical, background muzak, amusing: skepticism,
doubt, noise, resistance.

(Bernstein 1992: 29–30)

“Artifice of Absorption” takes its exemplars of “resistance” from poets as varied as Gertrude Stein, Michel Leiris, Steve McCaffery, and Clark Coolidge. Eliot, unsurprisingly, is not in evidence. But it is interesting to note that Bernstein’s discussion of the “anti-absorptive” is not unlike Eliot’s famous account in “The Metaphysical Poets” (1919) of the way Donne and his circle “possessed a mechanism of sensibility which could devour any kind of experience,” as well as Eliot’s conclusion that “poets in our civilization, as it exists at present, must be *difficult*” (Eliot 1953: 287, 289). And by 1998, in a reevaluation of the career of Allen Ginsberg in the wake of that poet’s recent death, Bernstein speculated on the negative impact a poet’s public persona can have on audience reaction to that poet’s actual work and surprised his audience with the following:

The twentieth-century poet [Ginsberg] ends up most resembling is not Bill Williams of Paterson but Tommy Eliot of St. Louis. Resembles but only in the sense of a reverse or polarized image; for Eliot became the poet as symbol of the closed, the repressed, the xenophobic, the authoritative, in short, of high culture in the worst sense, while Ginsberg became the symbol of the open, the uncloseted, the anti-authoritarian; indeed of low culture in the best sense. Ginsberg’s move from ethnically particularized Jewishness (Al from Jersey) to small b buddhism . . . is correlative to Eliot’s move from Christian-

American to High Church Anglican – both cases an assumption of a new religion as vehicle for universal identification that gets you high or anyway higher. Ginsberg, after all, is an anarchist in politics, a libertine in lifestyle, a buddhist [*sic*] in religion – the virtual inverse of Eliot’s monarchist in politics, uptight in lifestyle, Anglican in religion. . . . [Ginsberg’s] poetry was obscured by his public stature while that stature provided an important, and relatively rare, platform for an admirable form of liberationist politics. The dynamic is not unrelated to the case of Eliot, for insofar as he became a symbol of poetry as the antithesis of adolescence, the greatest achievements of his own poems were also obscured; indeed, this is the central obscurity of Eliot’s poetry . . . after all “Prufrock” is also a great work of the adolescent sublime. . . .

So today I call [Ginsberg and Eliot] back from the nether world of cultural representatives to the practice, their practice, still largely obscured, of the writing and performance of poems. (Bernstein 2000: 271–2)

A surprising statement, this, from a poet who, according to the usual narrative of poetic filiation, should be indifferent, if not hostile, to Eliot. In what follows I want to take up Bernstein’s challenge and look at Eliot, not as the cultural representative he has been all too long, but with regard to his actual *practice*, specifically his early practice of which “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” completed in the summer of 1911,¹ is the key exemplar.

Prufrock Among the Edwardians

In his later years, when asked about his formative influences, Eliot repeatedly insisted that there were no poets, British *or* American, who meant anything to the 22-year-old poet who wrote “Prufrock.” For example:

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Whatever may have been the literary scene in America between the beginning of the century and the year 1914, it remains in my mind a complete blank. I cannot remember the name of a single poet of that period whose work I read: it was only in 1915, after I came to England, that I heard the name of Robert Frost. Undergraduates at Harvard in my time read the English poets of the '90s who were dead: that was as near as we could get to any living tradition. Certainly I cannot remember any English poet then alive who contributed to my own education. Yeats was well known, of course, but to me, at least, Yeats did not appear, until after 1917, to be anything but a minor survivor of the '90s. (Eliot 1996: 388)

And again: "There was no poet, in either country, who could have been of use to a beginner in 1908. The only recourse was to poetry of another age and to poetry of another language" (*ibid.*).

That language was, of course, French, and the poetry in question was primarily that of Jules Laforgue, whose decisive influence on Eliot has been extensively discussed (see Knowles and Leonard 1991). Ronald Schuchard (1999) argues that, despite his protests to the contrary, the "deepest emotional affinity" of the young Eliot was with the English poets of the Yellow Nineties, especially Lionel Johnson, who paved the way for his reading of Baudelaire and Verlaine, Laforgue and Corbière (*ibid.*: 3–24, 70–101). "The primary importance of Laforgue to Eliot," writes Schuchard, "was the sudden discovery of his own poetic voice." "But," Schuchard cautions, "[Eliot] turned the ironic technique of deflating the emotional sentimentalism in the poem against Laforgue by further mocking the philosophical sentimentalism underlying Laforgue's lunar symbolism" (*ibid.*: 77). Indeed, on closer inspection, those would-be Laforguean ironies mask what is a sharp break, not only with the Rhymers' Club, but also with the delicately ironic self-deprecation of Laforgue and Corbière. "The kind of verse which began to be written about 1910," Eliot was to say, "made the same break with

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tradition that we find in that of Wordsworth and Coleridge” (Eliot 1996: 388). If this claim sounds excessive, we might remind ourselves of what that immediate tradition actually looked like.

In *The New Poetic* C. K. Stead performed a great service to students of literary history by tracking the actual poems popular in England in the decade 1900–10: chiefly “versified Imperialist sentiments, the public school spirit, or patriotic fervour” (Stead 1987: 49). One of the most admired figures was William Watson:

You in high places; you that drive the steeds
Of empire; you that say unto your hosts;
‘Go thither’, and they go; and from our coasts
Bid sail the squadrons, and they sail, their deeds
Shaking the world . . .

(Ibid.: 52)

Another was the bestselling young Patrick MacGill, whose *Songs of the Dead End* (1912) features “poetry of the people” like the following:

He is the drainer –
 Out on the moorland bleak and grey,
Using his spade in a primitive way, through
Chilling evening and searing day. Call him a
Fool and well you may –

He is the drainer.

(Stead 1987: 64)

The lowest point, according to Stead, was reached in 1909: “The ‘aesthetic’ movement of the nineties had long since collapsed with the trial of Wilde when, as F. M. Ford puts it, ‘Poets died or fled to other climes, publishers also fled’” (ibid.: 53). In April 1909 Swinburne died and in May, George Meredith. That left Yeats and Hardy, but the former wrote almost no poetry during the decade, while the latter, so Eliot told Pound in a letter, was a poet to whose

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“merits” he himself was utterly “blind” (Eliot 1996: 394–5).² Again, I don’t think Eliot is merely being coy here: Hardy was a great poet, but no one, I think, would argue that a poem like “The Convergence of the Twain: Lines on the Loss of the Titanic” (1912), which opens with the tercet:

In a solitude of the sea
Deep from human vanity
And the Pride of Life that planned her, stilly couches she . . .

represents a marked break with nineteenth-century poetic tradition.

The situation in the US, at least from the perspective of a rebellious young man in love with French literary culture, was not much better. In 1910–11, when “Prufrock,” “Portrait of a Lady,” and “Preludes” were written, mainstream American poetry looked like this:

Buildings above the leafless trees
Loom high as castles in a dream,
While one by one the lamps come out
To thread the twilight with a gleam.

There is no sign of leaf or bud,
A hush is over everything –
Silent as women wait for love,
The world is waiting for the spring.

(Sara Teasdale,
“Central Park at Dusk”)

And the most distinguished American poet of 1910, Edward Arlington Robinson, couched his ironies in conventionalized language and flowing tetrameter rhyming stanzas, as in “For a Dead Lady”:

No more with overflowing light
Shall fill the eyes that now are faded,
Nor shall another’s fringe with night
Their woman-hidden world as they did.

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No more shall quiver down the days
The flowing wonder of her ways,
Whereof no language may requite
The shifting and the many shaded.

Here the poet typically uses Pre-Raphaelite locutions (“overflowing light,” “eyes that now are faded,” “quiver down the days,” “flowing wonder of her ways”), as well as the inversions (“No more shall”), and archaisms (“Whereof”). So pervasive were these poetic norms that even the young Ezra Pound, writing in 1910, was producing dramatic monologues like “Paracelsus in Excelcis”:

‘Being no longer human why should I
Pretend humanity or don the frail attire?
Men have I known, and men, but never one
Was grown so free an essence, or become
So simply elements as what I am
The mist goes from the mirror and I see!
Behold! The world of forms is swept beneath –
Turmoil grown visible beneath our peace,
And we, that are grown formless, rise above –
Fluids intangible that have been men,
We seem as statues round whose high-risen base
Some overflowing river is run mad,
In us alone the element of calm!

(Pound 1990: 30)

“*Personae*,” quipped David Antin, “is a period piece full of *fin de siècle* language and poses, the work of an Anglicized schoolboy wearing Provençal, French, Roman and Chinese costumes and writing ‘verse’” (Antin 1974: 9). Certainly “Paracelsus” is a far cry from the Imagist manifesto produced by Pound just a few years later, with its three famous principles: “Direct treatment of the thing, whether subjective or objective,” “Use no word that does not contribute to the presentation,” and “Compose in the sequence of the musical phrase,

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not in sequence of a metronome” (Pound 1954: 3). “Paracelsus” is replete with vague and conventional phrasing, as in “don the frail attire” or “Turmoil grown visible beneath our peace”; the syntax is inverted (“Men have I known”; “never one / Was grown so free an essence”; “Fluids intangible”), and, as is the case in Robinson’s “For a Dead Lady” and Teasdale’s “Central Park at Dusk,” imagery is largely conventional: the mist covering the mirror signifies blindness, and the speaker’s inner calm is predictably opposed to the external turmoil of the “overflowing river.”

Now let us try to imagine what it must have been like, in the poetic milieu discussed thus far, to read a poem that goes like this:

Let us go then, you and I
When the evening is spread out against the sky
Like a patient etherized upon a table;
Let us go, through certain half-deserted streets,
The muttering retreats
Of restless nights in one-night cheap hotels
And sawdust restaurants with oyster-shells:
Streets that follow like a tedious argument
Of insidious intent
To lead you to an overwhelming question . . .
Oh, do not ask, ‘What is it?’
Let us go and make our visit.

(Eliot CP: 3)

What would have struck a reader of 1911 about these lines? First and foremost, I would posit, their *sound*. For the pervasive rhymed stanzas, blank verse, or, on rare occasions, complex Provençal or Renaissance verse forms, as in Pound’s “Sestina: Altaforte” of 1909, Eliot substituted a sound structure that, far from being some sort of container for the matter to be conveyed, actually produces that matter.

Lét ùs gó thên || yóu ând Í

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where the seven monosyllables, each one demanding some stress, and with a caesura after “thên,” create a note of torpor, an inability to move, that is further accentuated by its pairing, via rhyme, with a second line, this time eleven syllables long and carrying at least six primary stresses –

Whên the évenîng ís spreád out agáinst the ský –

the line dragging along in a catatonic manner that extends into line 3, which is even longer (twelve syllables):

Like a pátient étherized upón a táble

The speaker’s frozen state is further emphasized by the awkward shift from falling to rising and back to falling rhythm in “etherized upon a table.”

These delicate adjustments are not ones that Eliot could have derived from Laforgue, if for no other reason than that French prosody, dependent as it is on quantity rather than stress, cannot produce such marked shifts in intensity and pitch. We might also note the effect created by the internal rhyme of “then” / “When,” and “against,” and the eye rhyme “then” and “when” have with “evening.” For the Eliot of “Prufrock,” *sound* is never just an accompaniment to something to say. In lines 4–5, for example, “The mútterîng retréáts” (six syllables) literally provides an echo, as in a dark passageway, to the preceding representation, in an eleven-syllable, six-stress line, of the “half-deserted streets” – an echo, incidentally, that is visual as well as aural, the fifth line being a short response to its rhyming partner. The *s*’s and *t*’s coalesce in what seems to be a whispered proposition coming from a doorway: *ssstt!* And now the poem shifts ground and moves into the iambic pentameter couplet:

Of réstless níghts in óne-nîght cheáp hotéls
And sáwdûst réstauránts with óyster shélls

“The limit of language,” wrote Wittgenstein, “is shown by its being impossible to describe the fact which corresponds to (is the translation of) a sentence, without simply repeating the sentence” (C & V: 5). Suppose, in Eliot’s couplet, the word “restless” were replaced by “troubled” or “anxious.” The loss of the *st* sound, the chiasmic chiming of the *le* with the *el* of “hotels” and “shells,” of the sound echo of the first syllable of “restless” in “sawdust” and “oyster” and especially the loss of the morphemic link between “restless” and “restaurants,” would do much to undercut the poem’s spell. Then, too, the repetition of the word “night” works both phonemically and semantically. We can hear the echo of footsteps making their way down the “half-deserted streets.” And that echo is heightened by the insistent repetition. If the phrasing were, say, “Of restless nights in crummy flophouses,” the aural excitement of the passage would be largely undercut.

The lines, in any case, are followed by another, quite uneven couplet:

Streets that follow like a tedious argument
Of insidious intent

where the first twelve-syllable line is almost syncopated by containing only four strong stresses that produce a heavy falling rhythm, whereas the echo in the second short seven-syllable line has only two. Syntactically, the couplet creates suspension, for “streets” is grammatically in apposition to the “streets” of line 4 rather than the nouns that immediately precede it. Again the *s*’s and *t*’s coalesce to produce an unpleasant hiss – a hiss that paves the way for the non-rhyming and non-chiming line “To lead you to an overwhelming question . . .,” where the “question” is drawn out by the extra syllable in an otherwise iambic pentameter line and the three spaced dots. And then comes the incongruously jingling couplet,

Oh, do not ask, ‘What is it?’
Let us go and make our visit.

A standard tetrameter couplet? Even here, it seems something is wrong, for the first line is a syllable short, thus demanding a stress, so to speak, on the question mark. The look of the stanza contributes to this impression: the juxtaposition of long and short lines creates a diagonal crossing, as in “streets”–“retreats”–“hotels” or “argument”–“intent”–“question.” The diagonals, in turn, contradict what should be the circular movement from the first “Let us go” to the second.

Now consider the figural construction of the passage. We are so used to the famous metaphysical conceit in which the evening sky is seen as an etherized patient, that we tend to forget how strange these lines actually are. For to take an abstraction like “the evening” and have it be “spread out against the sky” gives the surreal sense that time can actually occupy space – a proto-Einsteinian notion – and also a notion that becomes a central motif in this poem in which time has such powerful agency. As for “etherized,” it was Stephen Spender who noted that the adjective connotes not only anaesthetic (ether) but also “ethereal,” a favorite adjective in Romantic and Pre-Raphaelite poetry. “The combination of the clinical and the romantic connotations,” writes Spender, “suggests the state of suspended consciousness of the ‘patient’ and the head of the dreamer full of the night sky and stars” (Spender 1975: 41–2). The resonance of the line would thus be lost if it read, say, “Like a patient anaesthetized upon a table,” or “numb upon a table.”

Eliot’s insistence on finding precisely the right word can be traced back to Flaubert’s *mot juste*, whose role in literature both Eliot and Pound may well have first come across in Walter Pater’s seminal essay on “Style” (1889), which ecstatically defines *le mot juste* as “the one word for the one thing, the one thought, amid the multitude of words, terms, that might just do: the problem of style was there! – the unique word, phrase, sentence, paragraph, essay or song” (Pater 1925: 29). Pound, as Richard Sieburth points out, construed the *mot juste* as an ethical rather than a merely aesthetic precept; for him, the “just word . . . was merely an aspect of that larger ethic of

precise definition which Pound would later define politically as Confucian *chéng míng*" (Sieburth 1978: 102). The potential identity of word and thing, which is the basis of Pound's understanding of the ideogram, has been shown to be fallacious by poststructuralist theorists, as by Wittgenstein before them; an excellent critique of the Pound–Fenollosa doctrine of the ideogram has also been made by the Brazilian Concrete poet Haroldo de Campos in his book *Ideograma*. But for all practical purposes what matters here is that the language of "Prufrock" epitomizes, in Pound's words, "language charged with meaning to the utmost possible degree" (LE: 3). Consciously or not, Eliot recognized early in his career that the words and phrases making up a given poem must function relationally within the verbal construct. Thus *restless* points, in quasi-Oulipean form, not only to its referent outside the poem, but also to the *restaurants* of the next line.

Flaubert is apposite to "Prufrock" in another way. In a discussion of character in *L'Education sentimentale* Eliot comments:

Frédéric Moreau . . . is constructed partly by negative definition, built up by a great number of observations. We cannot isolate him from the environment in which we find him; it may be an environment which is or can be universalized: nevertheless it, and the figure in it, consist of very many observed particular facts, the actual world. Without the world the figure dissolves. (SE: 152)

This is, as Spender (1975: 36) notes, a perfect description of "Prufrock" itself. For, as has often been observed, Eliot's is the most curious of dramatic monologues. It is spoken by an identifiable "persona," as we used to call the dramatized subject, and yet its affect is hardly that of an aging man ("I grow old . . . I grow old"), and whenever the reader thinks she/he can attribute a statement to a prissy and prudish man of a certain age named J. Alfred Prufrock, a passage intervenes that sounds like the voice of the poet himself, a poet who was 23 in 1911. For example:

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Shall I say, I have gone at dusk through narrow streets
And watched the smoke that rises from the pipes
Of lonely men in shirt-sleeves, leaning out of windows?
(CP: 5)

Charles Altieri has put the matter well in an essay on Eliot's "Symboliste subject": "There is far too much of the author in the character to sustain the distance, yet far too much of the fool in the character for the author to be content with the identification." Thus, "we find ourselves entering a sensibility so fluid and evasive that it makes classical distance necessary, but at the same time renders it impotent" (Altieri 1989: 149). Here is the "negative definition, built up by a great number of observations" Eliot speaks of with regard to *L'Education sentimentale*. Prufrock cannot be separated from the poet who has invented him, nor from his environment, from those "Streets that follow like a tedious argument / Of insidious intent." The pronouns "you and I," in this scheme of things, are not just self and mask, id and ego, or whatever other binaries have been proposed over the years as central to the poem. For the poem's perspective, like the Cubist paintings Eliot later claimed not to like, is always unstable, repeatedly shifting, giving us multiple and conflicting views of the subject. Even without the epigraph from *Inferno* XXVII,³ the mode of "Prufrock" is one of instability and dislocation – an instability as notable on the aural and visual as on the semantic level – and yet not, strictly speaking, free verse either. In Eliot's own words, "The ghost of some simple metre [in this case, iambic pentameter] lurks behind the arras in even the 'freest' verse; to advance menacingly as we doze, and withdraw as we rouse" (Eliot 1965: 187).

The syntax of "Prufrock," as we can see immediately from its opening, is as distinctive as its sound structure. For if "Prufrock" is not a psychologically coherent Browningsque monologue, neither is it a collage like *The Waste Land*, in which radical parataxis governs the structure. Nor again does the poem's language represent its speaker's "stream of consciousness," for that term, like its alternate

name “interior monologue,” can only refer to the free associations made by someone specific – think of Joyce’s Stephen Dedalus or Leopold Bloom – whereas Prufrock is no more than what Hugh Kenner called a “zone of consciousness” (Kenner 1959: 40), and even this term doesn’t quite convey the illogic whereby the neurotic questions “Shall I part my hair behind? Do I dare to eat a peach?” give way to the profoundly ironic insight of the final tercet, “We have lingered in the chambers of the sea / By sea-girls wreathed with sea-weed red and brown / Till human voices wake us, and we drown.” The closural effect of this ending is marked, but since, in the poem itself, human voices never do “wake us,” since the “chambers of the sea” point back metonymically to those rooms where “the women come and go” as well as to the “music from a farther room” that muffles the “voices dying with a dying fall,” the act of “drowning” is curiously suspended.

The syntax of “Prufrock” is characterized by what Brian Reed, writing about Hart Crane’s syntax, aptly calls “attenuated hypotaxis,” that is a sequence of “tenuously interconnected” clauses and phrases “possessing some relation of subordination to another element,” but with the connections blurred, “inhibit[ing] the formation of clear, neat, larger units” (Reed 2000: 387). Such *faux*-hypotaxis, Reed argues, was to become, in its more extreme forms, the characteristic mode of John Ashbery and Robert Creeley, Tom Raworth and Lyn Hejinian – none of whom, we might add, has claimed Eliot as a precursor. “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” thus emerges as a curious anomaly. Its complex perspectivism has more in common with Cubism and Surrealism than with the ironic, still essentially naturalist poetic mode of Hardy or Robinson that precedes it; then again, it has little in common with the more orderly sequential–associative mode of late modernist poets like Randall Jarrell or Elizabeth Bishop. What J. C. Mays aptly calls the poem’s “counterpointed pronouns” – *I, you, we* – coupled with “the tendency of images, such as the fog, imaged as a cat, to balloon away from their referents and assume an uncontrollable life of their own” (Mays 1994: 111), the abrupt tense and mood shifts, the

juxtapositions of ordinary speech rhythms with passages in foreign languages, and especially the foregrounding of sounds and silences (represented by the poem's visual layout), relate "Prufrock" to Constructivist notions of "laying bare the device," of using material form – in this case, language – as an active compositional agent, impelling the reader to participate in the process of construction.

Finally, there is Eliot's particular brand of urbanism, an awareness of proletarian life, derived, no doubt, at least in part from Baudelaire, but quite new on the Anglo-American scene. "Will I have to explain to young readers," George Oppen asked his daughter in a letter of 1962, "that the first shock of Eliot's 'damp souls of housemaids' and similar lines was not the rather perfunctory dismissal of housemaids as people, *but the fact that he saw them at all?*" (Oppen 1992: 58). The reference is to Eliot's "Morning at the Window" (CP: 19): what Oppen means is that the dismissal, at least on the part of his own left-wing circle, of Eliot's metaphor as a snobbish putdown of the lower classes, ignores the fact that the very act of writing about the "damp souls of housemaids / Sprouting despondently at area gates" was something of a revolution in his time and place. And since Oppen (b. 1908) would not have read "Prufrock" much before the later 1920s, think of how startling the metaphor must have been when the poem was first published.

Oppen, in any case, reminds us that Eliot's precise but surreal urban images look ahead to the poetic cityscapes of Frank O'Hara and Ron Silliman, as well as to Oppen's own great poem of 1968, "Of Being Numerous." "Sawdust restaurants with oyster-shells," for example, is nothing if not graphic, and yet the reduction of the sexually charged oyster to mere shell is complicated by the paragram on "sawdust," "saw" raising issues of sight and rupture that permeate this poem where even a "smile" is figured as an act of *biting* the other. As is the case with Oppen's dislocated city-dweller, the Prufrock poet never stands *outside* the poetic discourse itself. Unlike the unnamed woman who, "settling a pillow by her head," insists "That is not what I meant at all. That is not it, at all" (CP: 6), Prufrock seems unable to assert anything or to generalize as to what

he “means.” The poet cannot, in other words, *interpret* the situations he portrays so graphically. “To come to self-consciousness,” Altieri notes, “is to find oneself irreducibly in dialogue with one’s projections of an other, equally part of one’s subjective life, and equally destabilized” (Altieri 1994: 196). “Are these ideas right or wrong?” asks the young man in “Portrait of a Lady,” having just noted “the smell of hyacinths across the garden / Recalling things that other people have desired” (CP: 11). And in this radically modernist lyric, the question, like its follow-up, “And should I have the right to smile?” is left hanging.

Eliot was to invent the term *objective correlative* to describe the poetic containment of the contradictory questions and vocal registers that come into play in a poem like “Prufrock.” But in his early work these dialogic units remain in suspension in ways that mark a clear-cut break with the dominant poetics of Eliot’s day. Indeed, when, in the spring of 1914, Conrad Aiken took “Prufrock” to a “poetry squash” in London, Harold Monro, the editor of the “advanced” journal *Poetry and Drama*, pronounced it “absolutely insane” (Gordon 1999: 68), and when “Prufrock” finally appeared in book form in 1917, the anonymous *Times Literary Supplement* reviewer declared: “Mr. Eliot’s notion of poetry – he calls the “observations” poems – seems to be a purely analytic treatment . . . un-inspired by any glimpse beyond them and untouched by any genuine rush of feeling. As, even on this basis, he remains frequently inarticulate, his ‘poems’ will hardly be read by many with enjoyment” (Dalton 1917: 73). Even Harriet Monroe, the editor of *Poetry* in the early war years, stalled for fifteen months before running “Prufrock” in 1915 – this despite Pound’s constant badgering (Pound 1950: 40–1, 66–7).

Of course “Prufrock” was soon to become a celebrated modern poem, but the New Critical classic of the 1950s, when “Prufrock” was studied in college classrooms across the country, is not ours. What was once praised as a searing self-portrait of an over-refined young man, prudish, self-conscious, and impotent in the face of his hidden desires, is now more admired for its verbal than its

psychological configurations, underscoring the faith of our own moment that, in Bernstein's words, "the poem said in any other way is not the poem," that "'artifice' is the contradiction of 'realism,' with its insistence on presenting an unmediated (immediate) experience of facts, either of the 'external' world of nature or the 'internal' world of the mind" (Bernstein 1992: 16, 9), and that "the unreflected reliance on the conceit of the sincerity of the personal voice of the poet" must be rejected (Bernstein 2000: 65). This recalls Eliot's famous pronouncement that "The poet has not a 'personality' to express, but a particular medium, which is only a medium and not a personality, in which impressions and experiences combine in peculiar and unexpected ways."

But – and this is the conundrum that has so clouded the issue – how did the poet of "Prufrock" and "Tradition and the Individual Talent" become, in just a few short years, the conservative editor of the *Criterion*, and then the Elder Statesman of the Eliot legend? Here we must take up that still neglected issue: the role the Great War played (and didn't play) in the poet's consciousness.

"Looking into the Heart of Light, the Silence"

In October 1910, following his graduation from Harvard, Eliot went to Paris for the academic year. He planned to attend the Sorbonne and hear Henri Bergson's weekly philosophical lectures at the Collège de France. At his *pension*, 151 bis rue St. Jacques, he met a young medical student who wrote poetry named Jean Verdenal and they became close friends. By November, Eliot had written Part I of "Portrait of a Lady." The following April he paid his first short visit to London. In July he left for a holiday in Munich and northern Italy; here he completed the third "Prelude" and the final version of "Prufrock." By mid-September he had returned to America, planning to work for his Ph.D. in philosophy at Harvard (L: xx–xxi).

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This chronology is familiar but its subtext has been largely ignored. The edition of Eliot's correspondence includes no more than seven letters from this period: four, with witty cartoons, from the poet to his nieces (Theodora Eliot Smith and Eleanor Hinkley), three in French from Jean Verdenal, and one from Alain-Fournier. It is thus difficult to describe Eliot's state of mind in this *annus mirabilis*, but nearly fifty years later he recalled, "I had at that time the idea of giving up English and trying to settle down and scrape along in Paris and gradually write French" (L: 15). And indeed it seems to have been an unusually happy time for the poet, despite his mother's misgivings. "I can not bear," she wrote a few months before his departure, "to think of you being alone in Paris, the very words give me a chill. English speaking countries seem so different from foreign. I do not admire the French nation, and have less confidence in individuals of that race than in English" (L: 13).

Eliot obviously felt otherwise about "that race." Here is a snatch from a letter written to Eleanor, then 20 years old, on his return from his first trip (two weeks) to London:

I just came back from London last night, and found a pile of letters waiting for me, with yours sitting on the top. I mounted to my room to read them; then my friend the *femme de chambre* burst in to see me. . . . She tells me I am getting fat. Also she had a store of news about everyone else in the house. Monsieur Dana has gone to the école Normale, where he has to rise every day at seven. This is a prime joke, and lasted for ten or twelve minutes. Monsieur Verdenal has taken his room, because it is bigger than M. Verdenal's room, and gives upon the garden. Had I been out into the garden to see how the trees *poussent*? So then I had to go into M. Verdenal's room to see how the garden did. Byplay at this point, because M. Verdenal was in the garden, and because I threw a lump of sugar at him. And a Monsieur *américain* named Ladd has taken M. Verdenal's room. He does not speak French very well yet.

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He speaks as Monsieur spoke in November. (And I shortly heard Monsieur Ladd bawling through the hall “A-vous monté mes trunks à l’attique?” – I settle the affair by crying out “les malles au grenier!”). (L: 17–18)

Even if we take into account that Eliot is trying to amuse his niece, this is a very exuberant letter, the poet comically imitating the chambermaid’s speech patterns. In contrast to Prufrock, reproached for his thin arms and legs, Eliot is told he’s getting fat. He has fun correcting the new American boarder. And most surprisingly, he playfully throws a lump of sugar at his friend Verdenal. One cannot quite imagine the poet of *The Waste Land* doing this.

Paris, he goes on to tell Eleanor,

has burst out, during my absence, into full spring; and it is such a revelation that I feel that I ought to make it one. At London, one pretended that it was spring . . . but one continued to hibernate among the bricks. And one looked through the windows, and the waiter brought in eggs and coffee, and the *Graphic* (which I conscientiously tried to read, to please them) . . . and all was very wintry and sedate. But here! – . . . (L: 18)

When the “prim but nice English lady at the *pension* asks him what famous sites he has visited, he tries to one-up her with the names of obscure churches and the Camberwell Work House. “She knew none of these. ‘I have it on you!’ I cried (for I know her well enough for that). But she does not understand the American dialect” (L: 19).

That last comment reminds us that Eliot was not, when he wrote “Prufrock,” the self-conscious Englishman we know from various recordings, a poet who even speaks French with what he takes to be the proper accent. Indeed, at this stage he is hardly enthusiastic about anything English, Paris being the poetic center of his universe. And here the important relationship with Jean Verdenal comes in. There is no evidence that Verdenal and Eliot were lovers: Verdenal’s letters make no allusion to any sexual relationship and Eliot’s own

letters were destroyed.⁴ What is clear, however, is that the two were close and fond friends, that they shared an interest in music, theater, philosophy, poetry – and Paris street life. Both disliked positivism and materialism, searching for some kind of spiritual truth. “My dear friend,” writes Verdenal in February 1912 to Eliot back at Harvard, “we are not very far, you and I from the point beyond which people lose that indefinable influence and emotive power over each other, which is reborn when they come together again. It is not only time which causes forgetfulness – distance (space) is an important factor” (L: 32). But the assumption is always that once distance is erased, their friendship will inevitably be what it was.

Between 1912 and 1914 Eliot was working on his philosophy degree and wrote almost no poetry.⁵ In July 1914 he returned to Europe, but this time to Marburg to improve his German and read German philosophy; in the fall he was to take up residence at Merton College, Oxford, to continue his studies. On the Atlantic crossing Eliot wrote one of his witty letters to Eleanor, this time mimicking the speech patterns and foibles of his fellow travellers: “Well I never should have said you came from St. Louis. . . . When I look at the water, heven, it ’eaves my stomach ’orrible. . . . My but you do have *grand* thoughts! . . . why aren’t you dancing?” (L: 39). The poet seems to be in high spirits: on July 19 he writes Conrad Aiken an amusing letter describing his new life in Marburg, enclosing caricatures of various Herr Professors and Marburg ladies, a few of his scatological Bolo poems, and a draft of “St. Sebastian.” “I think,” he remarks, “that this will be a very pleasant exile (L: 41).”

Eliot’s “very pleasant exile” lasted no more than a few weeks: it was abruptly cut off by the outbreak of World War I. At first the poet accepted what his hosts and new friends evidently told him, declaring that Germany was “quite right” in its claim on Belgium (L: 52); he was soon to take the other side, but not without regretting his having to leave Marburg and move on, prematurely, to London. When, a month later in London, he made the acquaintance of Ezra Pound, he expressed his concern to Aiken: “Pound

wants me to bring out a Vol. after the War. The devil of it is that I have done nothing good since J. A[lfred] P[rufrock] and writhe in impotence. . . . Sometimes I think – if I could only get back to Paris. But I know I never will for long. I must learn to talk English” (L: 58).

If I could only get back to Paris. The motif runs through the early letters, coupled with the sense of resignation that it won't happen. On the contrary, the war has created a new arena of “petty worries”:

In America we worry all the time. That, in fact, is I think the great use of suffering, if it's *tragic* suffering – it takes you away from yourself – and petty suffering does exactly the reverse, and kills your inspiration. *I think now that all my good stuff was done before I had begun to worry – three years ago.* (L: 58; my emphasis)

The candor of the young Eliot is remarkable. But what does he mean about “petty suffering” and having “begun to worry?” The sexual problem (Eliot admits to Aiken, around this time, that he is still a virgin!) is acute; it was never, of course, resolved in a satisfactory way, Eliot never seeming to have had a satisfying sexual relationship with a woman and, so far as we know, never daring to have one with a man. “Nervous sexual attacks,” as Eliot refers to them (L: 75), are, in any case, exacerbated by the constraints of war and the guilt, later expressed in “Gerontion,” of having fought, neither at the “hot gates” (a reference to Thermopylae) nor “in the warm rain.” There follows one of Eliot's most brilliant jagged couplets, its accents, underscored by heavy alliteration and assonance, and concluding with the harsh fricative, diphthong and voiceless stop of “fought”:

Nor knée déep in the sált mársh, héaving a cútlass,
Bíttén by fliés, || foúght

(CP: 29)

What has never been quite understood, I think, is to what degree the war transformed, not only the lives of the so-called “war poets,” but those that stayed home as well. The war meant that Eliot did not go to the Continent for five years; more important, once submarine warfare posed problems for Atlantic crossings, Eliot couldn’t travel to the US either. Thus, as in the case of other avant-gardists like Pound and Marinetti, Stravinsky and Kandinsky, the cosmopolitanism of the *avant guerre* gave way to an imposed nationalism, cutting off, literally in midstream, the revolutionary possibilities that the early century had seemed to offer (see Perloff 1986: 2–43). True, there was the Dada interregnum at the Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich. But this couldn’t (and didn’t) last, and in the postwar period “avant-garde” came to mean something rather different.

Eliot, in any case, spent the war years in a curious form of exile. “I don’t think,” Tom writes Eleanor from Oxford, a town he detested, “that I should ever feel at home in England, as I do for instance in France. Perhaps I admire the English more in some ways but find the French more congenial. I should always, I think, be aware of a certain sense of confinement in England, and repression; one puts up with it in one’s native land, and is simply more conscious of it in a country in which one does not *have* to live” (L: 61). The poet’s avant-garde writing is thus understood to stem from a time “before I had begun to worry” – his more carefree French time. And even after he moved to London, a city he found much more congenial than Oxford, he repeatedly refers to himself as “very foreign” (L: 65) – indeed, a *metic*, as he was to put it as late as 1919 in a letter to Mary Hutchinson (L: 318). The term *metic*, Jean-Michel Rabaté notes in an important essay on Eliot’s “in-between” status, “designates not a total foreigner, but a stranger who is admitted to the city (originally Athens) because of his utility: he pays certain taxes . . . and is granted rights and franchises although rarely admitted fully into the communal mysteries” (Rabaté 1994: 212).

This describes Eliot perfectly. In the Paris of 1910 – or, for that matter, the Marburg of 1914 – he had not expected to be “admitted to the city,” and could hence enjoy it as a student of a

challenging alien culture; but the forced exile of war – a war at once meaningless and one in which he couldn't himself participate, not being an English citizen – was quite different. “The War suffocates me,” he writes Aiken, again from Oxford in February 1915, “and I do not think that I should ever come to like England – a people which is satisfied with such disgusting food is *not* civilized” (L: 88). Just three months later, on May 2, Jean Verdenal, sent with his infantry regiment to the Dardanelles as a medical orderly, was killed while attending a wounded soldier on the battlefield (see L: 20).

Eliot's first book, *Prufrock and Other Observations* (1917), has the dedication “To Jean Verdenal 1889–1915.” Eliot later enlarged this epigraph as follows:

FOR
JEAN VERDENAL
1889–1915
MORT AUX DARDANELLES

... LA QUANTITATE
COMPRENDER DEL AMOR C'A TE MI SCALDA
QUANDO DISMENTO NOSTRA VANITATE
TRATTANDO L'OMBRE COME COSA SALDA.

These words are spoken by Statius at the climax of *Purgatorio* XXI, when Dante reveals to the Roman poet that the figure he is addressing is none other than his beloved Virgil and that Virgil too is dead: “[Now you may] comprehend the measure of the love that burns in me for you, when I forget our vanity and treat a shade as a solid thing.”⁶

For a poet as reserved, oblique, and self-protective as was the poet of *The Waste Land*, this is a remarkable declaration of love. No doubt, Eliot could not talk about the extent of his pain to his relatives or even his friends. A month later, in any case, he married Vivienne

Haigh-Wood, whom he had met at a dance a few months earlier, with the disastrous consequences that are well known. “Everyone’s individual lives are so swallowed up in the one great tragedy,” Eliot writes his father in 1917 (after the US entered the war and after he had tried –and failed – to enlist), “that one almost ceases to have personal experiences or emotions, and such as one has seem so unimportant!” (L: 214).

The distancing use of “one” here is revealing, as is Eliot’s increasing use, even in letters to good friends like Richard Aldington and Wyndham Lewis, of the signature TSE rather than “Tom.” Publication, never uppermost in the mind of the prewar poet, who let “Prufrock” and “Portrait of a Lady” languish in his drawer for years, now becomes paramount. “You see,” he writes to John Quinn, “I settled over here in the face of strong family opposition, on the claim that I found the environment more favourable to the production of literature. This book [the forthcoming *Poems 1920*] is all I have to show for my claim” (L: 266). This “show,” it turns out, couldn’t be made because a week after Eliot wrote Quinn, his father, who had never forgiven him, was dead.

Now we begin to notice a gradual but decisive change in Eliot’s outlook. By 1921 the poet who felt he had to get back to France if he were to be a real poet, who mourned “Jean Verdenal, mort aux Dardanelles” with the words of Dante’s Statius, is writing to Wyndham Lewis: “Now as to Paris. I can’t feel that there is a great deal of hope in your going there permanently. Painting being so much more important in Paris, there are a great many more clever second-rate men there . . . to distinguish oneself from. Then you know what ruthless and indefatigable sharpers Frenchmen are” (L: 446).

“Gerontion” (1920) and *The Waste Land* (1922) testify to Eliot’s turn away from a Paris that was the proud capital of the avant-garde, with the concomitant move, conscious or otherwise, toward suppressing his status as *metic*, as the foreigner of the *avant guerre*, who could never feel quite at home in London. If the Prufrock poet

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longs to make contact with “lonely men in shirt-sleeves, leaning out of windows,” if he admits to having “lingered in the chambers of the sea / By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown,” Gerontion has thoroughly internalized sexual references, the threat now coming overtly from those Others who don’t “belong,” beginning with the Jew who “squats on the window sill, the owner / Spawned in some estaminet of Antwerp.” In this poem, “Christ the tiger” comes “In depraved May, dogwood and chestnut, flowering judas” to be treated to a kind of Black Mass:

To be eaten, to be divided, to be drunk
Among whispers; by Mr. Silvero
With caressing hands, at Limoges
Who walked all night in the next room;
By Hakagawa bowing among the Titians;
By Madame de Tornquist, in the dark room
Shifting the candles; Fräulein von Kulp
Who turned in the hall, one hand on the door.
(CP: 29–30)

This passage is justly celebrated for its mysterious resonance: who are these sinister art collectors with their mongrelized names (Portuguese? Japanese? German?), their “caressing hands” and secret movements? For the quasi-Cubist perspective of “Prufrock” Eliot has now substituted a Gothic *frisson*: the precision here is no longer the paragrammatic language of “sawdust restaurants with oyster shells,” but a nightmare vision in which those undesirable Others with composite names like De Bailhache, Fresca, and Mrs. Cammel (the double *m* pointing to suspicious Jewish origin) are “whirled / Beyond the circuit of the shuddering Bear / in fractured atoms.” The poet, now standing outside this “circuit” as benumbed observer, can do no more than witness their destruction.

Originally intended to be a prologue to *The Waste Land* (see L: 504–5), “Gerontion” is Eliot’s first exercise with Jacobean blank verse, although the iambic pentameter is only the base rhythm (as

in “Excíte the mémbrane, whén the sénse has coóled”) and there is brilliant variation throughout, as in the fifteen-syllable broken line, “The tíger spríngs in the néw yéar. || Ús he devoúrs. || Thínk at lást.” But as that “Us he devours” testifies, the curious directness of “Do I dare? Do I dare?” now gives way to a ritualized discourse: the Jacobean imitation, one might say, is almost too good. Then, too, “Gerontion” is visually more conservative than the early work, the blank verse, however varied, forming, in places, a neat verse column.

“Gerontion,” with its stark meditation on the “great refusal” of the Word (“After such knowledge, what forgiveness?”) and the resultant inability to escape the “cunning passages” and “contrived corridors” which is the labyrinth of history, is a great modernist poem but not a poem, I think, anyone has claimed for the avant-garde. For if, in 1911, “Prufrock” created a new poetic field, by 1920, after all, Gertrude Stein had already published *Tender Buttons* and composed such major portraits as “Marry Nettie,” Blaise Cendrars had taken the implications of Prufrockian monologue to the extremes of *Le Panama ou les aventures de mes sept oncles*, Mina Loy had written her outrageous “Songs for Johannes,” and Duchamp had produced his first readymades. In this context, Gerontion’s emphasis on the need for *knowledge* marks an interesting departure from Eliot’s early poetry. “Are these ideas right or wrong?” asks the poet of “Portrait of a Lady,” unable to formulate an answer. Gerontion, by contrast, knows what’s wrong, knows that “I that was near your heart was removed therefrom.”

The addressee of these lines is evidently Christ – both as the infant Jesus (“The word within a word, unable to speak a word”) and Christ the Tiger, the “sign” of whose “coming” Gerontion has rejected. But what is especially interesting here is that “you and I” are no longer interchangeable pronouns, that “you” is now *outside* the poet’s own circle of fragments, the poem’s technique thus looking ahead to Eliot’s famous “mythic method” in *The Waste Land*, which, despite its distinct dramatis personae – Marie, Ezekiel, the Hyacinth Girl, Madame Sosostriis, the society woman in “The Game of Chess,” Tiresias – is by no means a “dialogic” poem in the

Bakhtinian sense, the narrator's final question, "Shall I at least set my lands in order?" moving him somewhere outside and above the fray those others are caught in, into the realm of the final refrain "Shantih. Shantih. Shantih." The appeal, however oblique, to an outside source of authority makes for more authorial control (the third item in the Sanskrit triad, "Da, Dayadhvam, Damyata," "Give, sympathize, control") than the fragmentation, parataxis, and collage structure of *The Waste Land* would suggest – a structure, that as the poem's consecutive drafts reveal (see Eliot 1971), is largely the product of Pound's severe cuts. The deference to traditional and external authority ("your heart would have responded / Gaily, when invited, beating obedient / To controlling hands"), in any case, goes against the iconoclasm we associate with an oppositional poetics.

There is a passage in *The Waste Land* that is highly revealing in this connection, namely the episode in the Hyacinth Garden, which is framed by the promise and then tragedy of the Tristan and Isolde story, as told by Wagner:

You gave me hyacinths first a year ago;
'They called me the hyacinth girl.'
– Yet when we came back, late, from the hyacinth garden,
Your arms full, and your hair wet, I could not
Speak, and my eyes failed, I was neither
Living nor dead, and I knew nothing,
Looking into the heart of light, the silence.

(CP: 54)

Much ink has been expended in deciphering these lines, with their transformation of the slain fertility god Hyacinthus into the Hyacinth girl as bearer of the sexually charged spiked blossoms.⁷ The moment described is one of being taken wholly out of oneself ("neither / Living nor dead"), most probably a moment after intense love-making ("your arms full and your hair wet"), beyond speech and clearly beyond the poet's usual corrosive irony.

Avant-Garde Eliot

In a 1934 issue of the *Criterion* Eliot reviewed a book about the prewar Paris of 1910–11. “I am willing to admit,” he wrote, “that my own retrospect is touched by a sentimental sunset, the memory of a friend coming across the Luxembourg Gardens in the late afternoon, waving a branch of lilac, a friend who was later (so far as I could find out) to be mixed with the mud of Gallipoli” (see Miller 1990: 222). That friend was of course Jean Verdenal and although the hyacinth is here replaced by the Whitmanian lilac, it is hard not to read the Hyacinth Garden episode in the light of Eliot’s “retrospect” as “The awful daring of a moment’s surrender / Which an age of prudence can never retract.” “By this, and this only,” says the poet, “we have existed” (CP: 68).

I do not want to suggest anything as vulgar or simplistic as that Eliot’s own avant-garde writing died in Gallipoli with Jean Verdenal; obviously, there are many other factors, including the daily trauma of the poet’s marriage, his financial difficulties, his new literary affiliations, and his increasing alienation from the public sphere and the political life of Europe. I am merely suggesting that between Eliot’s radical poetry of the *avant guerre* and its postwar reincarnation, a decisive change had taken place. *The Waste Land*, in this scheme of things, emerges as the brilliant culmination of the poetic revolution that began with “Prufrock” in 1911 rather than as itself a revolutionary breakthrough or rupture. Indeed, after *The Waste Land*, what we know as modernism was to lose its utopian edge and become much darker, its face no longer turned toward the “new” in the same way. And here Eliot’s editorship of the *Criterion*, which began with the October 1922 issue in which *The Waste Land* itself was published,⁸ is emblematic.

Volume 1, no. 1 (October 1922) opens with a curious throwback: George Saintsbury’s essay called “Dullness,” discussing such writers as Thomas Carlyle, who presumably avoided it. And *The Waste Land* itself is placed between T. Sturge Moore’s essay “The Story of Tristram and Iseult in Modern Poetry,” with its focus on Swinburne and Laurence Binyon, and a fairly conventional short story by May Sinclair called “The Victim,” which concerns a

chauffeur, haunted by a phantom, who finally married his sweetheart. More significant is the “foreign” material included. The issue features Dostoievsky’s “Plan of a Novel” (“The Great Sinner”), translated by S. S. Koteliansky and Virginia Woolf – nice literary material but hardly news by this date. And the review essay on recent German poetry is written by Herman Hesse, who describes “Dadaism” as a literary group that “wants at least to have a little fun at the expense of the philistines and to laugh a while and to make merry before the ground collapses beneath them” (p. 90). The fatuousness of this statement cannot be redeemed by the genteel essay on *Ulysses* by Valery Larbaud, which argues – nicely but not very interestingly – that Leopold Bloom cannot simply be equated with his creator.

Ezra Pound makes his appearance in no. 2 with a feisty piece called “On Criticism in General, *Et qu’on me laisse tranquille.*” After the Napoleonic wars, Pound announces, “England fell back into the tenebrosities of the counterreformation, and has remained there ever since” (p. 143). But Pound, when included at all, as he is with the Malatesta Cantos in July 1923, seems to be there for friendship’s sake rather than for any significant relationship with the other poets included or, for that matter, with Eliot himself.

The third issue (April 1923) introduces such emerging conservatives as Julien Benda and François Mauriac. The foreign periodicals reviewed are hardly the Dada or new Surrealist little magazines but the *Nouvelle Revue Française* (which was featuring the work of the future Fascist Drieu La Rochelle) and *Die Neue Rundschau*. Eliot himself contributes a eulogy for Sarah Bernhardt. The death of the great actress, mourns Eliot, represents the “decay of theatre, the chaos of the modern stage.” “In the cinema,” he notes, “which has perpetuated and exaggerated the most threadbare devices of stage expression, the failure is most apparent” (p. 306). So much for the art form generally held – for example, by Walter Benjamin – to constitute the new cutting edge.

Indeed, it is interesting to consider what is *not* included in the *Criterion*’s first year of publication: no Dada, no Surrealism, no

discussion of the visual arts, no Gertrude Stein or William Carlos Williams, no Picasso or Picabia. Indeed, 1922, the year of Joyce's *Ulysses*, Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, and Duchamp's *Large Glass*, becomes the year (at best) of Paul Valéry and Virginia Woolf, and at worst of Stefan Zweig and Charles Whibley. The contrast to the earlier *Egoist* (1914–17), whose editor Dora Marsden deferred (at least at the beginning) to Pound, is telling. The *Egoist* contained the serialization of Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist* and Pound's own *Gaudier Brzeska*, poems by H. D., William Carlos Williams, and D. H. Lawrence, an essay by Remy de Gourmont on Lautréamont and another essay on Pratella and Futurist music. The very last issue of the *Egoist* (June 1917) contains Pound's spirited defense of Eliot, "Drunken Helots and Mr. Eliot" (pp. 72–5), as well as a portion of Eliot's own "Tradition and the Individual Talent."

Between the demise of the *Egoist* and the birth of the *Criterion*, five years passed. The new journal gives little hint that there had been, on both sides of the Channel and in Dada New York, a vibrant utopian avant-garde. In the context of the *Criterion* it is all too easy to overlook the revolutionary force of Eliot's early poetry, its uncompromising drive to break the vessels, to jumpstart and recharge poetic idiom. *Prufrock and Other Observations* (1917), declared Ezra Pound (LE: 422), "is the best thing in poetry since . . . (for the sake of peace I will leave that date to the imagination)." And indeed the imagination continues to be startled by the sheer inventiveness of the early poems, in which metonymy, pun, paragram, and the semantic possibilities of sound structure are exploited to create verbal artifacts, characterized by a curious mix of immediacy and complexity, of colloquial idiom and found text in the form of foreign borrowings. Not linearity or consistency of speaking voice or spatial realism, but a force-field of resonating words – this is the key to Eliot's early poetic. Thus the "sea-girls" of *Prufrock's* final tercet, are described as singing their siren song "in the chambers of the sea." Why "chambers," not caves or depths or coral reefs? Because the mermaids are no more than the fantasy version of those women "in the room," who "come and

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go / Talking of Michelangelo.” Such juxtapositions produce what is the poem’s *aura*.

Some eighty years later, in his witty essay in criticism “The Marginalization of Poetry,” written in mock-Popean couplets (with six words to a line), Bob Perelman notes:

Strikingly original language

is not the point; the degree
to which a phrase or sentence

fits into a multiplicity of contexts
determines how influential it will be.

(Perelman 1999: 140)

Not much of the poetry published in the *Criterion* could claim such multiplicity of contexts for its “phrases or sentences”; indeed, in Eliot’s own later poetry, context would appreciably narrow. But “Prufrock” itself, with its mysterious “Arms . . . braceleted and white and bare / (But in the lamplight, downed with light brown hair)” looks ahead to the “language charged with meaning” of our own moment. I close with Karen Mac Cormack’s 1997 poem intriguingly called “French Tom”:

it is often in the nineteenth despair export alone
has been famine its youth said of
the enormity
including vivid to many
in late blur and who came sad fleeing
to be almost forgotten went where more is
the fact found still
close ties since unbroken arrival
always established trading
prominent but by formidable says among others
even so in once kept ancient

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in another ahead of advancing persuaded into neutral
here survives between neither owns

(Mac Cormack 1997: 45)

Here radical ellipsis takes the “Prufrock” mode to its extreme. But the “nineteenth despair export alone,” whose “enormity” is processed only as a “late blur . . . to be almost forgotten,” is one that that other French Tom would have understood only too well.

The avant-garde are people or works that are experimental, radical, or unorthodox with respect to art, culture, or society. It is frequently characterized by aesthetic innovation and initial unacceptability. The avant-garde pushes the boundaries of what is accepted as the norm or the status quo, primarily in the cultural realm. The avant-garde is considered by some to be a hallmark of modernism, as distinct from postmodernism. Many artists have aligned themselves with the avant-garde movement and