

Basic Features of Modernist Poetry

Adapted from Marjorie Perloff's *Modernist Studies* (courtesy of Brett Baldwin)

- 1) The use of myth as an organizing structure.
- 2) The superiority of art to nature.
- 3) New concentration on the relationship between language and meaning.
- 4) A new impulse toward formalism and artifice, rather than traditional narrative subjects or plots.
- 5) Emphasis on the fluidity of consciousness.
- 6) Poetic or imaginative time of poet *versus* the chronological or progressive time of modern life.
- 7) Emphasis on alienated individuals wandering around the lonely crowds of modern, urban, industrialized world.
- 8) Emphasis on divided self or the dissolution of the rationally autonomous ego.
- 9) Rejection of Romanticism and the Victorians: modernists must "make it new."
- 10) Introduction of multi-media techniques (jumpcut, montage, cross-cut, etc.) into the field of the poem.
- 11) Fear of the "masses," "mass-culture" and the rise of newer technologies of representation such as newsprint and the photograph.

1) The Use of Myth as an Organizing Structure:

—Modernist poets searched for alternative systems or conceptual frameworks that could resist or supplant the dominant decadence of modern life.

Myth: A system of hereditary stories which were once believed to be true by a particular cultural group, and which served to explain why the world is as it is and things happen as they do, as well as to establish the rationale for social customs and observances, and the sanctions for the rules by which people conduct their lives.

In short, many modernists believed that the world had just lost touch with life-giving with many of the world's myths, life-giving myths from life-giving cultures . . . from the Greeks to the Hindus to those studied in Dante and Shakespeare and Frazer and Weston.

Frazer and Weston: Alternative Mythological Systems:

—Frazer's *Golden Bough* and Jessie Weston's *From Ritual to Romance* are anthropological studies of sacrificial practices that were viewed by many civilizations as key to cultural survival and future growth.

"Not only the title," Eliot writes, "but the plan and a good deal of the incidental symbolism of the poem were suggested by Miss Jessie L. Weston's book on the Grail legend: *From Ritual to Romance*. Indeed, so deeply am I indebted that Miss Weston's book will elucidate the difficulties of the poem much better than my notes can do. I recommend it to any who think such elucidation

of the poem worth the trouble. To another work of anthropology I am indebted in general: *The Golden Bough*. Anyone who is acquainted with these works will immediately recognize in the poem certain references to vegetation ceremonies.

a) In *The Golden Bough*, James Frazer traced as far back as Egypt how various cultures used vegetation myths and rituals as an expression of hope for man's future.

For the Egyptians and the Greeks, the passing of the seasons could be explained by way of the death and rebirth of a god.

The god usually died in the winter with the death of the vegetation and was reborn in the spring with the rebirth of the crops and the land.

The spring, the season for farming and planting, was often accompanied by religious ceremonies and rituals which would symbolize the "planting" of the dead god in the soil along with the seed for the new crops.

In more primitive tribes, these rituals often involved either sexual rituals (cult of Dionysus) and/or human sacrifice. The death of the year, then, was associated sometimes with the actual death of a god, sometimes with the sexual maiming of the god, or of a person or thing which could represent the god. *Pharmakos*: "I do not find the hanged man." "Phlebas the Phoenician."

Just as the dead body of Christ ensured the resurrection of the dead, the sacrificial victim should provide or create a healthy form of cultural reproduction.

In place of the *Pharmakos*, we have Eiron, Irony. The Point is that Eliot ends the section entitled "The Burial of the Dead" showing how in the modern age fertility gods are ritually slaughtered for money and commercial reasons and therefore are not "healthy sacrifices": the dead do not reinsure life; death no longer springs from life in the waste land world.

What Exactly is a Pharmakos?

—A figure chosen by a community to act as a sacrificial victim: a victim who will undergo a ritualized series of violent act until killed. Why? The sacrificial death of the pharmakos ensures the regeneration of the land in the spring.

—He/she/it is a surrogate victim, and is considered a polluted object that contaminates the land and the people.

—With the death of the pharmakos, the community is purged of its ills, its guilt, violence, and hatred.

—Like a sponge, the pharmakos wipes away the sins/hatred of mankind so that the community can grow again.

—The pharmakos, therefore, is seen as somewhat of a deity even though he is violently sacrificed.

—The word "pharmakon" means both "poison" and "antidote" in ancient Greek.

Re: Start of Section I:

a) Traditional month of Easter and Christ's resurrection.

b) Also symbolized the rebirth of the vegetation god for many ancient cultures . . . Osiris recovered his penis, for example.

c) Time for pilgrimages . . . Dante, Chaucer, trips towards regeneration.

d) Also the traditional season of love: another aspect of natural regeneration.

At the end of the first section, the speaker of *The Wasteland* reduces the need for regeneration to a kind of joke: “‘Stetson!’ ‘You who were with me in the ships at Mylae/That corpse you planted last year in your garden,/ Has it begun to sprout? Will it bloom this year?’” (l.70)

The ritual sacrifice of fertility gods (promised to the reader at the start of the poem) was not only meant to ensure the revival of vegetation, it was followed by the resurrection of those same gods.

*This is a central characteristic of *The Wasteland*: The reader feels as if he/she is promised something (regeneration, love, faith, a new start, etc.) only to have that hope smashed by the Waste Land world—here by use of irony.

“What makes the waste land waste,” Calvin Benident writes, “is this hysterical inability simply to let matter go to waste!” We have forgotten how to let go of the living in a proper and appropriate way and, as a result, we “do not hope to turn again”

A Second Example of an Alternative Mythological System that Eliot Uses in *The Wasteland* is the “Fisher King.”

In *Ritual to Romance*, Jessie Weston links the work of Frazer to the narratives about the quest for the Holy Grail. In most of these legends, a noble knight goes on a quest to a country which is completely devoid of life. The knight discovers that the barrenness of the land is associated with the wounding of the king.

The knight has to restore the wounded king to health (often, there is something wrong with the king sexually) by undergoing some kind of crusade or trial which usually ends with the regeneration of the king and therefore of the land.

In both Frazer and Weston, then, the land is considered the feminine counterpart of the king. A waste land, in mythic terms, usually implies an unhealthy, barren, or infertile woman and an impotent king.

Actually, the king most often becomes impotent or suffers from guilt because of some crime he committed against the laws of the land, generally *incest* (Oedipus sleeps with his mother, Arthur with his sister, and so on). The land then follows the king’s decay into disease and barrenness. The king is usually responsible for both his own sin and the catastrophe he inflicts upon the land.

In fact, there is a sense in both Weston and Frazer that the king and the land are married as husband and wife and that his sin usually ends up in separation or divorce. The mythic pattern in Weston and Frazer usually assigns all the blame to the male figures, and treats the female land as an object which the king must somehow come along and put in order.

2) The Superiority of Art to Nature.

—This is certainly not a new idea. Spencer, Dryden, Shelley, and others all thought the same thing.

—The difference is that modernist poets in general turn up the volume to the concept: art is *vastly* superior to nature.

—In fact, sometimes “nature” or “reality” merely reduces to art; the earth is conceived as one giant poem.

The landscape, that is, becomes wholly textual or aesthetic. “Physical reality” turns out to be subordinate to the reality of a poem. This is a strange claim—a poem has more ontological validity

that physical objects in physical space. Poetry is seen as more real than anything else, and there are no ideas except in textual things.

In sum, the modernist subscribes to the replacement of the exterior world by the imaginative construction of the poet's inner world.

Example: When Eliot writes about a tree in *The Wasteland*, he is usually writing about what Dante said about a tree, what Dante wrote about a tree in a poem a long time ago. The poetic image from Dante or Shakespeare refers to other texts which refer to other texts *ad infinitum*. These poems are, therefore, more real, more valuable, than the ground we walk on. If there are no poems, there will be either no ground for reality or, at best, a meaningless, valueless ground.

Even a natural-sounding phrase like "April is the cruelest month . . ." is full of literary allusions—Chaucer, Egypt, the Bible, and so on.

3) New Concentration on the Relationship between Language and Meaning.

The modernists concentrate in particular on "poetic" language:

- Poetry has a nearly mystical power for them.
- Words are not simply tools.
- Words are not instruments of communication.
- Language is not a picture of reality; reality is a picture of language.

The *Fear*: The "word" has been degraded. Degraded, that is, by "mass man," by the newspapers, dime-store novels, magazines, advertising, cinema, photograph, phonograph, etc.

OOOO That Shakespearean Rag

The Wasteland appears to be in part the nightmare of a culture that has forgotten how to take care of its literature and language. A world that cannot control words has no authority over men, no values for the young, no meaningful plan for cultural survival.

—Hence the Irony: One brings noble lines of poetry into the waste land world and watches them "degrade" in our modern, decadent time: Cleopatra.

4) A New Impulse toward Formalism and Artifice, rather than Traditional Narrative Subjects or Plots.

For most high modernist poets, the "plot" or "story" takes a back seat to poetic technique, formal experimentation, and what not.

—For many, verbal ambiguity and complexity of language is superior to the traditional narrative: there is something dead about ordinary prose.

—Modernists dump transition sentences, quotation marks, adjectives, descriptions of place and fixed points of view. Such devices are *too* traditional and therefore make us lazy, television-watching, passive types rather than active grail-knight reader-warriors.

5) Emphasis on the Fluidity of Consciousness.

—Things float in and out of the mind somewhat at random, as if in a dream.

- Sequences of events have an order, but they are the order and significance of a dream.
- Some situations are both desired and feared at the same time.
- Generally, no individual voice, person, character, or subject controls all of the poem's ideas.
- Characters float in and out without much warning.
- Different historical periods blend together.
- Time past and time present are pushed together into the present of the poem; this reminds one of cubism.

6) Poetic or Imaginative Time of Poet *versus* the Chronological or Progressive Time of Modern Life.

In *The Wasteland*, the mechanical clock controls the very movements of characters' bodies. They live for the clock; the clock does not exist to serve them.

- Mechanical clocks remind us that we must produce more industrial products for the waste land world by such and such a time.
- Our bodies are servants of machines; we are not the masters of technology or time.
- Our bodies have become Taylorized: that is, analytically fragmented and refitted according to various models of industrial efficiency.
- The clock helps instrumentalize our bodies as efficient workers, workers who do not think about history, reading, or poetic alternatives to anything.

"Hurry Up Please It's Time":

Time to leave the quest for the grail?

Time to bury another corpse?

Time to treat the body as a corpse, as a receptacle of mere living death?

Time to commit meaningless suicide?

Time to have poetic suicides reduced to meaningless drowning without baptism, rebirth, or poetic regeneration? (Notice the possible hint of sacrificial crises with the mention of Ophelia.)

For the modernist poet, time is "associative"/"imaginative," not progressive or causal. The task of the poet and poetry is to break out of the monotony and repetitiveness of the waste land's waste of time.

—In *The Wasteland*, we don't control technology; technology controls us. We live for the clock, by the clock, as slaves to the clock.

—For Eliot, the clock reminds us that we, as cogs in the machine, must produce more industrial products for the sake of more industrial products for the sake of producing more waste for the waste land. Take, for example, Eliot's description of a typical workday in London:

And each man fixed his eyes before his feet.
 Flowed up the hill and down King William Street
 To where Saint Mary Woolnoth kept the hours
 With a dead sound on the final stroke of nine.
 (1.64-70).

—The workers flow in and out of apparently meaningless jobs: following “dead sound,” they have become thoroughly “Taylorized”: their bodies are analytically fragmented and reified according to various models of industrial efficiency.

To counter the hegemony of clock time, many modernists turned to the work of Henri Bergson, who, along with Weston and Frazer, served them as an alternative source of knowledge.

—A philosopher, Bergson argued for the existence of non-conventional forms of time.

—He exposed the illusion that our fascination with the mechanical clock is a product of fallacies in our way of thinking of time in spatial terms. In Bergson’s view, time is not spatial.

—Events, according to Bergson, are imaginary spatial points in the uninterrupted, indistinguishable flow of time.

—Our mistake is to identify our selves with the external images of the clock, rather than with the internal experience of individually endured time, the private reality of time as a “flow” of experience, a “stream of consciousness.”

Point #1:

Bergson gave Eliot philosophical backing for the use of free association in *The Wasteland* and for the idea that time is a relative construct, something for the poetic imagination to use creatively.

—Large chunks of history, for example, are presented together as in I.70. Time present and time past are shoved together as in cubism.

Point #2:

The fundamental point is that for many of the writers we have studied this quarter, the inherited mode of ordering a literary work, which assumed a relatively stable social order, could not accord with “the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history. In *The Wasteland*, Eliot replaces the standard flow of poetic language with fragmented utterances, and substitutes for the traditional coherence of poetic structure a dislocation of parts, in which remote components are related by connections which are left to the reader to discover, invent, or connect.”

—*The Wasteland* can be read as an early example of cubism: the principles of an artistic technique can be applied to the medium of print.

—Time past and time present are foreshortened on the same divan or bed/canvas.

—Or, as in cubism, time can become fragmented. It has no dominion in the unconscious, and all is equal.

—Early twentieth-century artists knew that no single perspective is privilege, and they responded by presenting many perspectives at once.

—*The Wasteland* is a continuous instability in which images dissolve, form, melt, and overlap.

—As in cubism, perspective is multiple and destabilized.

7) Emphasis on Alienated Individuals Wandering around the Lonely Crowds of the Modern, Urban, Industrialized World.

—This emphasis is different than that found in Gertrude Stein’s work.

—The city, for Eliot, is “unreal.”

—The city may even be surreal.

—Does Stein think Paris “unreal”?

—Grail knights have few places to go even though the cities are filled with people.

—A strange irony: the more people crowd around, the more lonely one feels.

—In *The Wasteland*, there is nothing to turn to, no one to talk to, no purpose behind our behavior, no meaning, no control, no direction, no connection with anyone or anything. There is no real human contact, no love in particular.

“The maelstrom of modern life,” Marshall Berman writes, “has been fed from many sources: the industrialization of production, which transforms scientific knowledge into technology, creates new human environments and destroys old ones, immense demographic upheavals, severing millions of people from their ancestral habitats, hurtling them halfway across the world into new and unfamiliar lives; rapid and cataclysmic urban growth, systems of mass communication, mass movements of people and peoples . . . bearing and driving along, an ever-expanding, drastically fluctuating capitalist world market.”

—In *The Wasteland*, the fall of the city is another example of the fall of the religious and artistic testament to god on earth.

—Cities are not places where we all go to have fun.

—For Eliot, *The Wasteland* is a testament to the fall of the great city, of the death of the great centers of learning: Alexandria, Jerusalem, Byzantium, etc.

—In *The Wasteland*, cities are spiritually, culturally, and historically sterile.

—For Eliot, cities are now centers for the production of waste and of the cultural logic of the waste land world: repetition, decay, death without rebirth, etc.

—l.59 is noteworthy: “A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many I had not thought death had undone so many” or

—V.370. “Who are those hooded hordes swarming/ Over endless plains, stumbling in cracked earth/ Ringed by the flat horizon only/ What is the city over the MountainsFalling towers/ Jerusalem, Athens Alexandria. Vienna London. Unreal.”

8) Emphasis on Divided Self or the Dissolution of the Rationally Autonomous Ego. (Breakdown of the Self.)

For the majority of the writers we shall study this quarter, the rationally autonomous “subject” or “self,” the human being who acts according to rational, enlightened ideals and principles, is more of a *problem* than a *solution*.

—In fact, we see more dehumanization than humanity in *The Wasteland*.

—In *The Wasteland*, we see the progressive elimination of the human, all too human, elements predominant in romantic and naturalistic productions.

—A sense prevails of disorientation and nightmare, of an immense panorama of futility and anarchy

—Part of *The Wasteland's* tragedy comes from the death of the Enlightenment: the death of reason, of belief in the scientific method as a way to solve society's problems.

—Include in this tragedy would be the death of the belief in the scientific and rational man and his ability to control the ego.

—A new emphasis on Freud and what underlies that rational ego: the subconscious, the id, unconscious drives, etc.

—In fact, Eliot concentrates more on the irrational aspects of our mental behavior, on mental lapses and breakdowns, than on the validity of science to help us solve our problems.

—Mythology appears far more valuable than science, at least to Eliot. (See Mr. Eugenides, abortion-pushing chemists, etc.)

—No rational, autonomous voice controls the entire poem.

—*The Wasteland*, in other words, is the death of authorial intentionality or the omniscient narrator.

—Out goes the author, in comes the scholar/critic/poet.

9) Rejection of Romanticism and the Victorians: Modernists Must "Make It New."

—Modernism is an attack on almost everything romantic or anything that could be included under the category of "romanticism" (a philosophical and literary movement, by the way, of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries which attacked the neoclassicism of the earlier century.) Eliot and the modernists attacked the romantic cult of originality, the cult of personality, and the cult of genius.

—A poem, for Eliot, is the expression of the poet's personality. A poem is not, as Wordsworth would have it, "the spontaneous overflow of powerful of powerful emotions."

Eliot's "Tradition and the Individual Talent" argues that:

—The best poets are impersonal.

—They use a poetics of impersonality when they write.

—Great poets liquidate their personality, set aside their feelings and let the literary tradition speak through them.

—In other words, a great poem must assert some relation to the dead poets, to the poems and artists that came before it.

What does all this mean?

—According to Eliot, modern poetry must bring dead poets alive: "What happens is a continual surrender of himself as he is at the moment to something which is more valuable. The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality."

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—{pets, as impersonal *media*, allow the monuments or high points of the literary tradition to speak through them: “No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to dead poets and artists.”

—A modernist poet, therefore, becomes more of a medium than a voice, a technician or ventriloquist than an individual person.

—In fact, theoretically, individuality or personality is the biggest problem facing really good poets.

—The more personality is put into a poem, the less respect the author has for the tradition of past poets who have said everything much better than he could.

What effects does this emphasis on impersonality and tradition have upon our study of literature?

—It forms the basis of the New Criticism.

—It is the basis for an ahistorical criticism of literature.

—It posits literature as autotelic.

—It is the basis of the way professional English Departments have looked at poetry for a long time: the death of the author results in the birth of the critic. Moreover, the poem is seen as an autonomous, formal, coherent whole that experts can figure out by way of irony, tension, contrast, imagery, symbolism, etc. Forget about the author’s intentions, forget about the historical moment or political, racial, or gender issues; the critic is supposed to stick to the text itself.

Two quick questions:

a) Can a poetics of impersonality ever escape a poetics of personality? Is Eliot nowhere to be found in his poem?

b) What are the socio-political questions at stake in such a notion as the poetics of impersonality?

10) Introduction of Multi-Media Techniques (Jumpcut, Montage, Cross-Cut, etc.) into the Field of the Poem.

For the modernist poet, a poem can accommodate a wide variety of different media: different songs, ballads, elements of opera, street talk, pub talk, religious sermons, jazz rhythms, urban conversations, city noises, anthropology, nursery rhymes, Baudelaire, Dante, Ovid, Clairvoyants, mythic chants, elements of epic, lyric, romance, mock-heroic, religious conversion, Buddhist sermons, Egyptian vegetation festivals, grail quests, sex, rape, incest, mutilation, cannibalism, advertising, etc.

What is the point of this broad range? It provides poetry with new authority. Poetry becomes the medium capable of mediating the media. The poet can place in print elements of song, dance, sculpture, painting, nursery rhyme, and so on. The poet can also use elements of lyric, autobiography, the novel, epic, etc.

The second point is that *The Wasteland* reveals the breakdown of the traditional poem as such. It constitutes the last gasp of poetry as we normally expect it. Indeed, many of Eliot's first readers of *The Wasteland* did not believe the text was poetry at all. Many considered the poem lewd, others thought it insulting, while still others found it revolutionary and addictive.

Is The Wasteland a poem?

—It is a poem, but a different kind of poem: It is a multi-generic or multi-media poem. The text absorbs, mediates and combines many different forms of art or "media" into the space of the poem, into the printed page we read.

—The poem makes room for everyone and almost everything. Gertrude Stein and John Dos Passos are very similar to Eliot in this respect.

Again: In a *multi-generic* or *multi-media* poem you do not have to write poetry about poetic subjects. In fact, the distinction between poetic and non-poetic subjects appears absolutely irrelevant. Poetry can focus upon all aspects of life, not just on an established decorum of idealized topics and values. Even the most sordid and "dirty" aspects of our lives (abortion, sex without love, urban sprawl, and industrial decadence, psychological breakdown, incest, etc.) are the stuff that modern poems are made of.

In fact, the notion that poetry only applies to certain subjects (romantic love, beautiful hillsides, pastoral escapes, etc.) automatically places the poet in a position of social irrelevance.

11) Fear of the "Masses," "Mass-Culture" and the Rise of Newer Technologies of Representation such as Newsprint and the Photograph.

For the high modernist poets, we see a fear of the masses, of mass culture, of popular culture and the rise of newer technologies of mass-mediated representation such as the newspaper, photograph and cinema.

That is, critics have begun to examine the ways in which a high cultural literary production like *The Wasteland* is not as much a solution to our cultural problems as a symptom of those very same difficulties.

Perloff: "Modernism constituted itself through a strategy of exclusion: an anxiety of contamination by its other; an increasing and engulfing mass culture. In this respect, mass culture is modernism's other: a chaotic set of signifying practices which threatened the sanctity and purity of poetry."

—The point of this quotation is that much of the energy of high modernism grew out of a hostile relationship towards mass culture (and still does). According to modernists, newspapers degrade the linguistic sanctity of the poetic sign.

—Advertising degrades the poetic image in favor of images of commodification.

—The cinema and photography remove the important poetic traditions and cultural heritages of our monumental history.

The point here is that mass culture serves as modernism's other: a set of practices that try to lay waste to traditional authority and hierarchy. The waste land is a land of dissolved boundaries, smashed hierarchies, ignored traditions.

Modernists show a fear of the loss of power, of being devoured by the mass through commodification and urbanization. They fear the mob, women, and women's power to erase the "natural" superiority of men; they also fear the Jew, people of color, homosexuals, communists, the Mafia, etc.

High modernist poetry, then, is adversarial; it is anxious about contamination, pollution, waste. Who can save us from this contamination, from this loss of tradition? Who can put us back in touch with our mythic roots?

The *poet*. In modernism, the poet is the key to our cultural salvation. Poets know words, and words are everything.

The Possum and the Midwife: Pound and Eliot's Interaction Concerning *The Wasteland*.

1919—Pound leaves for Paris and becomes involved with the Paris Dadaists under the tutelage of Francis Picabia. Wyndham Lewis leaves for Germany and momentarily becomes a Nazi.

1920—Eliot has a nervous breakdown. He goes first to Margate Sands and then to Lausanne, Switzerland.

1921—Eliot begins work on the poem. It is written in several different parts at several different times, incorporating lines from poems written much earlier for different purposes. Eliot mails the poem to Pound in Paris in December of 1921 for suggestions. Pound says he can hear the real music of the poem screaming within the body of the manuscript that Eliot has given him, so he decides to perform what he calls a “cesarean operation” to get the real poem out: “These are the poems of Eliot/ By the Uranium Muse begot; . . . / If you must needs enquire/ Know diligent Reader/ That on each Occasion/ Ezra performed a Cesarean Operation . . .”

Pound's “operation” eventually ended up cutting out over one half of the original text. (Modernists don't like “fat” or excess in a poem—it indicates too much repetition, which is the problem of the modern age.

Four major changes in *The Wasteland* are worth noting:

a) Pound first hacked a fifty-four-line lyric interlude which was to begin the poem. It was essentially a reminiscence about one debauched night Eliot and a group of friends spent while at Harvard. Pound, in fact, generally hacked away at a host of the “lyrical” elements of the poem, claiming that they lightened the mood that the poem was trying to convey. He also was afraid that the poem was getting too long: “You have 19 pages here, and let us say the longest poem in the English language. Don't try to bust all the records by prolonging it another three.”

b) Pound also insisted that Eliot leave “Gerontion” out as a prelude. Eliot claimed that he wanted to leave “Gerontion” in at the beginning to suggest that work was merely “Thoughts of a dry brain in a dry season.” Pound obviously thought that this was undercutting the seriousness of *The Wasteland*. For him, the poem was to be cultural and ontological therapy for a society without roots, purpose, history, tradition, etc.

c) Pound influenced Eliot into changing the title. Originally, the title of *The Wasteland* was to be “He do the police in different voices.” This line from Dickens' *Our Mutual Friend*, is spoken by Betty Hidgen about the character Sloppy and his ability to imitate the different voices in the newspaper: “I do love a newspaper. You mightn't think it, but Sloppy is a beautiful reader of the newspaper. He do the police in different voices.” Pound most likely had Eliot change the title because it implies that the myriad of voices that we hear in the poem could be coming from one dramatic center, one consciousness, or a single voice which was just acting out dramatic roles publicly. Pound also hated newspapers; he thought that in them words became cheap and leisurely, not poetic.

d) Pound also made Eliot change the preface to *The Wasteland*. Eliot had planned to preface the poem with an epigraph from Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, “The horror, the horror.” Instead, Pound

insisted that Eliot begin his work with an epigraph from Petronius' Satyricon: "What do you want, Sibyl?" "I want to die."

To summarize: Pound hacked at material that either looked overly biographical, too sentimental in the romantic sense, or anything that represented a specific controlling voice or center to the poem. He sought the death of a fixed point of view. In Pound's suggestions, we can see the influence of Dadaism, Tzara's cut-up poems, and imagism and vorticism.

Publication: *The Wasteland* was originally published in five separate parts in The Criterion and The Dial. The fact that each section was published separately is interesting because it calls to mind the fact that Eliot was not truly convinced that the poem worked as a coherent whole. He changes his mind once everyone told him how great it was.

Notes: The notes were not part of the original publication of the poem. They were added afterwards, as an afterthought. Eliot said that he appended the notes "with a view of spiking the guns of critics of my earlier poems who had accused my of plagiarism."

Eliot also added the notes for technical reasons: "When it came to print *The Wasteland*, as a book—it was discovered that the poem was inconveniently short, so I set to work to expand the notes, in order to provide a few more pages of printed matter, with the result that they became the remarkable exposition of bogus scholarship that still occurs today. I have sometimes thought of getting rid of the notes, but now they can never be unstuck. I regret having sent so many inquirers off on a wild goose chase."

The notes were obviously written quickly and with a tone of irony. One the notes on Tiresias seem to help. Also, Eliot's notes were written around the time the university began to study literature as a specific discipline. The notes gave scholars something to chew on. What is literature and the study of literature? *The Wasteland* is the study, comprehension, and canonization of important works of literature.

Strategies for Reading *The Wasteland*:

First, we might ask, what is so strange about Eliot's poem? What would have struck readers at the time as odd?

First Confusion: One of the most striking features of *The Wasteland* is that the confusion about *what* is being said is not as great as the confusion over *who* is speaking.

We generally understand the words as they appear on the page, but we almost need cue cards to signal who is delivering which monologue at which specific moment in the text. *Are* all these lines coming from one person? One location? One nation or city, at least?

Second Confusion: The notes in the back give us many of those cue cards. Eliot tells us who *x* is, or where the words come from. Once we know that this person is Dante or Baudelaire or Ezekiel or Weston, we feel slightly reassured: perhaps the poem is just a treasure hunt for the puzzled reader, a reference-tracking game like Jeopardy.

However, does the confusion we experience in reading the poem end once we have the cue cards? Will we understand the work's point once we have tracked down every possible reference to every possible line? And how do we know when Dante is speaking and not someone else—say Baudelaire?

One strategy for overcoming this second confusion is to try reading the poem as a film. That is, think of *The Wasteland* less as a straightforward narrative proceeding one line after the next and more as a large-scale film using various camera techniques. Read the first twenty lines in terms of montage, collage, cross-fade, jump-cut, fade-ins, fade-outs, pan shots, close-ups, etc.

Lines 1-7: Possible series of close-ups or wide-angle shots of natural landscape.

Lines 8-11: Abrupt jump-cut of camera to new speaker, series of wide-angle action shots which cross-fade into close-ups at the Hofgarten.

Line 12: Jump-cut and a cross-fade plus a zoom-in to a series of close-ups on the German speaker.

Line 13: Jump-cut again back to the same voice as in 8-11? Or is Marie a new voice? In any case, the camera zooms in on Marie and follows her—down we went.

Lines 19-30: Clean jump-cut, no cross-fade from last scene.

Lines 30-34: Clean jump-cut to the sailor's song from Tristan and Isolde.

Third Confusion: Now that we know who's who, and have some feeling for the way the poem switches around like a film does, the question becomes, "how does speaker X relate to speaker Y?" How does one piece of fragmented speech relate to another heap of broken images? Do the German voices understand the English ones? Are the voices listening to each other at all?

Do they speak to one another or with one another, or, more often, at one another? Do the characters even hear one another? Alternatively, do they simply feel like responding to themselves, to no one? Do they speak for the sake of speaking and nothing else? Why doesn't so and so introduce him or herself with so much as a quotation mark? Is everyone plain rude? Or is the impossibility of actual communication between human beings one of the features of the waste land condition?

Fourth Confusion: First we wonder who's who, then we wonder how the first voice relates to the second voice and whether the two voices know who's who? If the two speakers do know who the other is, then what do they have in common? Does either know that it is in a poem surrounded by a myriad of other voices?

Before we can answer these questions, however, *The Wasteland* confuses us yet again (as if the poem has teased our desire for answers or made us want something we cannot have immediately, something we *could* have if this were a normal narrative poem—answers). To which medium or genre does a given voice belong? Does the voice belong in a poem at all? Aren't some of the voices characters from different texts written a long time ago? How did Ezekiel get out of the Bible and into *The Wasteland*? How does Christ come back to Emmaus only to find Emmaus is Antarctica and that his disciples are really nineteenth-century explorers? How did Tiresias end up here from classical Greek drama? And would Tiresias or Ezekiel, for that matter, enjoy the ragtime jigs in the background? Or do they prefer the songs of the three Thames sisters before they are rudely cut off by Augustine and his need to burn all desire out of his sin-filled body?

Eliot says that we should not merely rehearse tired and outworn conventions for their own sake. We should "make it new" as Ezra Pound says and not let "women come and go, talking of Michaelangelo." Poetry must throw off comfort and dare the awful feeling of a moment's surrender, which an age of prudence can never retract, dare to eat that peach and part the hair behind the ear in order to hear the mermaids singing each to each, rise above that pair of shiny claws scuttling along the floors of silent seas

The point is that poetry is an act of cultural work, not a leisurely pastime or means for escape from the day noise of the city street.

Unlike the language of the marketplace, poetry brings together images in a new and imaginative construct—opening minds towards the possibility of a world beyond the waste land. Reading a complex poem like *The Wasteland* is the first step in fighting the waste land condition, the first step in recharging the broken images floating amidst the decayed language of the marketplace.

***The Wasteland* as Cultural Retraining of the Reader.**

Eliot's claim is that the images of the waste land are designed in a way that is supposed to change us, to reawaken us out of this hell as repetition of the same endless insomnia of waste; to transform completely our understanding of culture, values, tradition and history. The aim is to transform our habitual customs of reading so as to recreate the lost tale of the tribe—a common language and bond that will lift diverse cultures out of their nationalistic war-hunger, past their naive systems of prejudice against other European neighbors towards a global village sanctified by an international poetics, a global poetics of cultural and historical preservation.

The obvious question about Eliot's modernist vision is, "will everyone be included in this utopian vision? Is the whole world invited to clean up the waste land in a collective act of reading for culture?"

Read and be healed, implies Eliot. But healed of what? *The Wasteland* is designed to knock us out of the moral and spiritual decay handed down from the Victorians and so eloquently expressed in the mass destruction of World War One.

All cultural therapist-readers become the Fisher King of the grail romances as described by Jessie Weston in *From Ritual to Romance*.

Readers become poetic knights of purity and daring, devoid of fleshly desire, who after a long quest are able to cure the sick king or, in this instance, the sick body of European culture. How will this be done?

By reading more actively than ever before. Eliot would advise us to make more people read poetry and stop listening to the radio or perusing advertisements in the daily paper. The threading together of apparently disparate fragments into a whole *via* an act of the imagination, linking the images and themes, acts in defiance of the waste land world. We must realize why we need to wade through the waste land world; find out why everything is sick, who is lost, who decadent; and then figure out why the once flowing life someone has become wasted, eroded, decayed into a mere withered stump of time.

The act of reading, the ability to reconstruct imaginatively the narrative connections between "broken images" is in a sense the first line of defense against the waste land condition. *The Wasteland* is a sufficient mythic cosmos whose readers (and the readers of whom) will be regenerated because of their hard cultural work. Eliot sees reading as regeneration rather than as waste of time.

Poetry, then, is not—as Wordsworth would have it—the overflowing of powerful emotions; it is instead created by a conscious act intended to discover a relation to the past as a way of constructing the future, a future produced from deep acts of cultural work. Modernism view reading as a synthesis of tradition, history, and myth.

Eliot's warning about Europe's problems is that to fail to discover your own historical relation to the fragments of the poem, to fail to put together these broken images into some creative whole by an act of imagination is to fail in the quest to get out of the waste land and the waste land condition. It is to accept a life of meaningless repetition, of purposeless death, of nothing again nothing, waste that grows for the sake of engendering more waste, more pollution, more erosion of the self. The body is thereby replicated as a mere machine or commodity that in turn produces nothing more than waste for further production, not for *reproduction* in the genuine sense. To accept the waste land world is to perpetuate the waste land world.

Once we can connect the heaps of broken nothings with some of the other heaps of broken nothings throughout *The Wasteland*, thinks Eliot, we have made a mythopoetic something of that fragmentary nothing. The fragments we shore against our ruin become a cultural net to safeguard the diamonds plunged in mud; our cultural work (a new technical skill) stands as a new model of

cultural participation or a new form of community, one base upon monumental truths of history, ethics, and politics—all realms protected by the poetic-reader-knight-fisher-king.

The poem itself should become a model, or a game plan for the reader, a way out of the waste land. In other words, *The Wasteland* is a complex kind of cultural map, depending upon a complex set of mythic religious and literary references that at first appear unrelated but which upon closer examination reveal shared concerns, thematic relations that are themselves part of the solution to the waste land world.

Characters:

One of the primary sources for the alienation of all the characters in *The Wasteland* is just this refusal to acknowledge the sources that they come from, the sources that are indicated in the notes themselves. They live cut off, seeming to have forgotten history except as mere personal memory or reverie.

In a sense, the characters do not know, neither do they want to acknowledge, that they are participating in a poem. We, the readers, need to reconstruct the characters' identities for them and place them into something like a coherent whole *via* imagination.

The Cumaean Sibyl:

The epigraph is from Petronius' work The Satyricon. The Sibyl was granted one wish from Apollo, and so she asked for as many years of life as there are grains in a handful of sand. She got her wish, but unfortunately neglected to ask for prolonged youth as well. She lived so long and continued to decay until she was so small that she could live in a bottle, a cage or cave.

Why is the Sibyl important? Like a host of other characters in *The Wasteland*, the Sibyl is a prophet of sorts; she can glimpse into reality and into the world beyond, seek into the truth in the future. She is a seer like Tiresias and Madame Sesostris.

One of her most famous stories is that she carried to Tarquinius Superbus, the last king of Rome, the famous Sibylline books which outlined the future of the fall of the Roman Empire in detail. Tarquinius saw the books but refused to pay the original price that both of them had agreed upon, so the Sibyl burned nine of the twelve books until the king agreed to pay.

However, the seers throughout *The Wasteland* almost always pay a heavy price of some sort for their gift of prophecy. This price is sometimes physical—Tiresias and Cassandra are blinded, the Sibyl cannot die, and so forth. Tiresias and the Sibyl also have constantly to watch life pass by with all its monotonous redundancy because the span of their years encompasses generations, generations that enact before their eyes the same rituals over and over again. Notice how Tiresias has “foresuffered all enacted on this same divan or bed.”

Moreover, and perhaps more importantly, both Tiresias and the Sibyl are important guides for heroes who go off on quests for the search for truth. In the Odyssey, for example, Odysseus consults Tiresias in Hades as to what rituals must be performed for the dead in order to get them to come.

Aeneas also asks the Sibyl to come out of her cave and conduct him across the river Lethe or Styx into Hades, where he first meets Dido, whom he betrayed, and then his father, who shows him how his current epic journey will lead to the rise of the Roman Empire.

These classical facts lead us to think of a host of guides in literature: Virgil and Beatrice, for example, lead Dante through hell and purgatory.

The Sibyl obviously relates to the first speaker in *The Wasteland*.

“The Burial of the Dead” refers directly to the Anglican service for the newly deceased; it refers to the resurrection of Christ and to the subsequent resurrection of the baptized dead. The burial of the dead body, then, is like the sowing of a seed. The body’s death should ensure the healthy rotation of crops in the spring. The title of the “burial” section sets the scene by raising our hopes for new birth, new life.

However, the first voice sets up *The Wasteland’s* central conflict between spiritual death and the ambivalent agony of rebirth and enlightenment. April is cruel because it threatens us with new life, something which is both desired and feared. Three facts about April are worth mentioning here:

Firstly, April is the traditional month of Easter, the time of Christ’s resurrection, and, in still more ancient cultures, the time of the vegetation god’s rebirth.

Secondly, April is the traditional time for pilgrimages. For example, Dante strayed into the forest to meet Virgil in April, and Chaucer’s pilgrims set out for the shrine of Saint Thomas a Becket in that month.

Thirdly, April is a time for love, another aspect or form of regeneration.

In *The Wasteland*, though, all three senses of April are presented ambivalently as desire and as a threat. The first voice sounds as if it has been through too much, as if it does not want to experience the pain of birth and, therefore, of life, again.

Now Examine the beginning of Section Two: “The Game of Chess.”

“The Chair she sat in like a burnished throne, Glowed on the marble.” This quotation is derived from Shakespeare’s description of Cleopatra in *Antony and Cleopatra*: “The barge she sat in like a burnished throne, / Burnt on the water.” Eliot’s treatment of the quotation is characteristic. First, he substitutes the word “chair” for “barge,” ironically undermining the fact that the passage is supposed to be about a queen coming to meet king Antony over the water.

Then, too, Eliot’s use of the phrase, “Glowed on the marble” in place of “Burnt on the water” displaces a queen—in fact one of the most well-known, most beautiful queens of antiquity—from the natural world that bends to her will and into a middle-class dressing room.

The Wasteland hems the female figure inside and makes her one object amongst others. In Shakespeare’s play, Cleopatra gave meaning to every object she encountered.

How, then, does Eliot view or envision women in his poem? There are three types of women in *The Wasteland*:

1) We have a cluster of female characters who have all been violated by men either by rape or by some other act of violence, such as abandonment. Cleopatra is abandoned by Antony, and ends up committing suicide. Dido is abandoned by Aeneas, and she, too, commits suicide. Ophelia, abandon by Hamlet, does the same. Then there is the Philomel and Procne myth: Philomel was raped by her sister Procne’s husband, King Tereus. He cut out her tongue to ensure her silence, but she depicted his crime on a piece of needle-work and sent it to Procne. Procne, to avenge her, killed her own son Itys and served up his flesh to her husband. (Her only possibility of taking revenge is to destroy her own progeny.) Thereafter, Philomel was changed into a nightingale, and her sister into a swallow.

2) We also see a cluster of contemporary women who, in a sense, live completely meaningless and mundane lives. (Again, Eliot may be fairly criticized for this depiction.) In “A Game of Chess,” women brush their hair, complain of bad nerves, have nervous breakdowns, gossip about abortion or engage in completely loveless sex acts just to get an extra record to play on the gramophone.

One figure “Allows one half-formed thought to pass and then declares, now I’m glad that’s over.” Marie, Mrs. Equitone, Lil in the pub, the typist—all of these women are isolated by convention, by lococentrism, by phallogocentrism if you will.

“A Game of Chess” begins with thirty-three lines of description. This amounts to the longest descriptive passage in the entirety of *The Wasteland*. The scene consists of a woman (a perversion of Cleopatra) seated before a mirror at her dressing table, evidently brushing her hair. Her own body is not described, but all the aspects of the room she is sitting in are described in detail.

The remarkable thing about this “dressing-room” passage is that Eliot manages to create a powerful awareness of a woman without ever actually describing her directly. She is a clear presence at the center of her environment, but we have no idea what she looks like.

The point of Eliot’s non-physical description is to provide a somewhat cubist or multi-perspectival portrait of a woman in *The Wasteland* who is nothing more than the sum of her accessories, nothing more than the objects which surround her. Indeed, she seems less “real” than the objects themselves.

3) The third cluster of women in *The Wasteland* consists of females who are associated with necromancy, with the black arts. Sibyl and Madame Sesostris both pose a threat because of their special powers. They are like Medusa lying in wait, this time to turn the Grail Knight to stone.

Central Questions for Today’s Reader of *The Wasteland*:

Most of us would agree that decadence, greed, alienation, and loneliness still exist today. In this respect, Eliot’s problems are very much like our own. However, is our waste land the waste land world of Eliot’s poem? How much of *The Wasteland* do you personally identify with, and how much of the poem strikes you as an antidote to the problems that western society faces today?

What kind of tradition does Eliot want to save or create? Is this tradition inclusive or exclusive? Authoritative or democratic? Do you feel “lost in the wilderness” when you don’t fully understand Dante or Plato or Augustine or Shakespeare? Is there “nothing in our heads”? Are we “alive or dead” when it comes to our pooled knowledge of The Inferno? Is all political action doomed from the start unless we collectively realize that we are “uneducated” in the great works of the Western tradition?

What, in fact, is Eliot’s notion of tradition? Who are the enemies of the great works? Who perpetuates the waste land world, makes the waste grow, fragments society further and further? Who are the enemies?

Who are *The Wasteland’s* others? A whole catalog is applicable here: women, Jews, homosexuals, blacks, the middle class, the uneducated, the ordinary man, the masses, communists, socialists, Marxists, atheists, agnostics, advertising, rhetoric, radios, record players, the modern city, urbanization, industrialization, romanticism, fat, noise, etc.

Indeed, the only force that does not perpetuate the waste land condition appears to be that of Eliot and a few privileged male poets. Eliot is part of a powerful tradition of European white male aristocrats and artists. Decay, for him, is the decay of a specific type of power system—a white (and Anglophile) patriarchy. The waste of *The Wasteland* is a challenge to the natural authority of males and to a noble upper-class group of educated men.

There is a totalitarian dimension to *The Wasteland*. Some scholars suggest that Eliot’s poem appeals to the fascist politics of Mussolini and Hitler. They say that the poem shows a desire for authority, for discipline, for the fascist ax to cut through the babble of Europe and reestablish its “real” cultural heritage.

In other words, say these scholars, “waste” is a form of pollution, and it must, therefore, be cleaned. Jews, according to *The Wasteland*, are also a type of pollution, so they must be “showered.”

If high modernism does have some kind of link with fascism, does our university system (the system that has privileged Eliot and Pound for so long) also have some sort of underlying totalitarian features?

“Literary tradition is like any other conventionalized social behavior in that it is closely tied to elements of ideological dominance and cultural hegemony” (COM 73).

What does Brett Baldwin think? Read *The Wasteland*; it legitimized an entirely new paradigm for poetry, literary study, and purpose for the humanities. If you hate Eliot’s poem, remember: Do not repeat Eliot’s mistakes or let him reassert his authority just because you don’t understand what he said in the first place. Whether you think it is the greatest poem of the twentieth century or the most racist and sexist text ever written, it is nevertheless important as a formative work. The poem cannot be avoided, no matter what you think about the author’s ideology, politics, or preferences.