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INTRODUCTION

By the time T. S. Eliot's poem *The Waste Land* entered public domain in the United States in 1998, it had been a staple of higher education for half a century. No teaching anthology could afford to omit it. Because Eliot succeeded in making the case that modern poetry had to be difficult, *The Waste Land* served as the paradigm of difficulty. More recently it has settled into its role as modernist icon, as every passing year brings a new round of centenaries commemorating modernism. Long canonized, Eliot's poem has acquired the demeanor of a scenic viewpoint, with its park service plaque and swivel mounted telescope.

Eliot's eminence as preeminent among poets ("king of the cats," as W. B. Yeats put it when he ascended to that role after Swinburne died in 1909) is not what it used to be. Yet because Eliot is no longer contemporary, his work is unencumbered by the reception accorded it on publication. And after a century of collage, of Dada and Surrealism, its disjunctive surface is less alarming. If it initially seemed a response to the late Great War, in its centennial year the poem's themes of drought and drabness sound immediate and foreboding to a generation facing climate disaster and the moral bankruptcy of the political class. The poem, straddling past and future, applies pressure on the present.

The Waste Land has a double legacy. It's the milestone that vaulted its author to considerable fame and influence, culminating with the Nobel Prize in 1948. It has held a permanent place in the pantheon of modern poetry since its publication in 1922. It has been an intimidating lump in the syllabus for generations of undergraduates, and a chastening puzzle to graduate students. But *The Waste Land* is not only a poem; it names an event, like a tornado or an earthquake. Its publication was a watershed, marking a before and after. It was a poem unequivocal in its declaration that the ancient art of poetry had become modern.

It's time to take *The Waste Land* out of the classroom, out of the textbooks, to recover its force as explosive event, one that continues to emit an uncanny relevance a century later. In the centenary of its publication, *The Waste Land* merits recognition not as a poem—there's a mountain of

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scholarship on that—but as a phenomenon. Eliot’s poem is a component in a broader cultural revolution that led to abstraction in art, atonality in music, and an overall flouting of conventions by the international avant-gardes. *The Waste Land* partakes of collage as compositional principle in the arts; and it shares with Marcel Duchamp and others the notion that modernism convened a space in which every artwork could be a conceptual gambit, a wager like a throw of the dice, but in a game for which there’s no table, and no croupier.

From Arthur Rimbaud’s adamant exhortation in 1871 that one must be absolutely modern, to the international impact of *The Waste Land* half a century later, poetry was instrumental in making the modern an *ism*. But what was it about poetry prompting the thought that it needed to *become* modern? Was it something about modern life that seemed ripe for poetic treatment? And why poetry? Did poetry possess some symbolic currency unique among the arts? Or was it, rather, that modernist trends evident in other arts were felt to be lacking in poetry? Was it regressive? Did poetry need a makeover? And why did an art often associated with the adjective *timeless* feel the need to keep up with the times?

These are questions I asked myself a number of years ago and put to students in seminars. This book ruminates on the questions by tracing a line of poetry, spun out by Wagnerism and encompassing Symbolism, then given a differently ambitious torque as it was aligned with other arts in modernism. This is evident in the way *The Waste Land* is served up in lists of cultural bombshells from the early twentieth century. *The Rite of Spring* by Igor Stravinsky, Pablo Picasso’s painting *Les Femmes d’Alger*, Sergei Eisenstein’s film *Potemkin*, and the architecture of Le Corbusier often fill out the roster. It might also include Joyce’s *Ulysses*, Duchamp’s *Fountain*, Kafka’s story “Metamorphosis,” Chaplin’s tramp, the foxtrot, pictorial collage, the Bauhaus, Cubism, Tatlin’s tower, Dada, quantum mechanics, and chance operations, and even Irving Berlin’s best-selling “White Christmas.” Because such lists have become familiar in part through *Time* magazine’s curatorial relation to the twentieth century (*The Waste Land* was reviewed in *Time*’s first issue), it takes an effort to realize it’s a triumphal parade of white men.

The Waste Land is Exhibit A of modernism in poetry, with its portentous use of the Grail legend and its generous helping of quotations and allusions from a range of historical sources. But Eliot’s career began rather differently, with Prufrock, the mordantly comic figure introduced in the pages of *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse* in 1915. You know the guy: afraid to eat a peach. “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” with its varying moods and rhythms, had affinities with Charlie Chaplin’s tramp, who combined a jaunty esprit

with the down-and-out. It shared with the tramp certain characteristics of slapstick. The term *slapstick* comes from the clapper commonly used in the old commedia dell'arte with its stylized buffoonery. If the pratfall induces the belly laugh, there's also the chastened grin of the onlooker, not sure what will happen next. This was registered by Louis Untermeyer's first encounter with Prufrock. It was "the first piece of the English language that utterly stumped me," he reflected. "The other Sunday night there was a group at the house—a few poets, a lawyer, a couple of musicians and one psychoanalyst. I read it to them quite seriously—and no one," he recounts, "could keep a straight face."

As an undergraduate, even as he was studying philosophy and writing poems, Eliot reveled in American slang, the antic contraptions of Rube Goldberg, *Mutt and Jeff* comics, and the animal dances coming into vogue with ragtime, like the foxtrot, the bunny hug, the grizzly bear. He was inclined to combine *Krazy Kat* comics with Elizabethan revenge tragedies, merging highbrow with lowbrow the way Cockney pub talk concludes a Shakespearean episode in *The Waste Land*. Such passions and interests shape the person from whom a poem emerges, and poems are personal even if they refrain from personal declarations. As *The Waste Land* reveals, even the most abstruse phraseology and recondite references can be saturated with undisclosed privacy. It's also the case that a deep well of personal misery can provoke compositional adventures far removed from mere reportage. Poems can surreptitiously sustain a double focus, in which public and private imperceptibly change places, even in the flicker of an image. This enables readers to find themselves rather than the author entangled in a poem's words, rhythms, and images—even as they warily surmise a crafty magician at work behind the curtain.

The Waste Land spoke to a postwar generation, whispering its secret code into receptive ears of readers who found themselves awaiting it not only in England and America but around the world. It was a world contending with emergent mass entertainment industries, while an elite cultural consensus was beginning to dissolve. High and low, culturally speaking, were all mixed up, and Eliot had just the touch to make the confusion palpable, and the consequences appetizing. Although met with equal portions of dismay and enthusiasm, *The Waste Land* was recognizable as poetry's calling card to the twentieth century.

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The Waste Land is not so much the subject of this book as its center of gravity. Because a number of topics are in its gravitational field, the poem's

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author (caveat emptor) does not make an appearance until halfway through. My approach to Eliot's poem is less that of a literary scholar than a cultural historian's. I'm more interested in how and why it made an impact than in what it "says." Like many cultural events, *The Waste Land* seemed unprecedented even as it had an aura of déjà vu. Its intimidating unfamiliarity seemed eerily familiar.

To approach Eliot's poem from this perspective means going back in time, tracing a foreground of instigations and influences, provocations and cultural resonances that contributed to its uncanny intimacy. It will take us back to the grandiose phenomenon of Wagnerism, which dominated Western culture for the second half of the nineteenth century, and still held sway into the twentieth. *The Waste Land* is a Wagnerian poem in that it shares Richard Wagner's vision of the remote past as a template for the future. Eliot, like Wagner, regarded modernity as the nightmare of history from which one could awaken only by baptism in the waters of myth. But Wagner revealed that the artist could not achieve this by simply adopting myth as subject matter. Method was as important as myth. Wagner sought to blend the separate arts into a collective enterprise, the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, or total artwork. This aspiration had enormous influence on practitioners in all the arts well into the twentieth century. It was a pipe dream, but it sanctioned dreaming as artistic prerogative.

Eliot, like most poets, found his calling in the provocations of his predecessors. In 1910, when he was a Harvard undergraduate, the state of English-language poetry was at a low point. It offered him nothing to work with, so he found what he needed, instead, in French Symbolist poetry of the nineteenth century. French Symbolism is Wagnerism through and through. It's easy to claim Wagner influenced the Symbolists, who in turn influenced Eliot. But there's no influence without receptivity, and receptivity arises in the creative spirit even before contact with any alleged influence. This is where it gets interesting, because that incipient creative wick is looking for a spark, not seeking a genealogy. *Wagnerism* is a term that speaks to the convulsiveness aroused by Wagner's operas. It was a swoon of almost debilitating identification, as Wagnerites discovered themselves in the mirror of the composer's work. Wagnerism was a kind of mania, and in fact it prompted the term *melomania* for an excessive idolatry of music.

In 1877 the English writer Walter Pater observed that music had become the art to which all the other arts aspired. In subsequent decades, artists were intent on incorporating musical sensations into their canvases. For a painter engrossed in Wagner, like Wassily Kandinsky, this was achieved through a turning away from mimetic representation by means of abstraction. For

Symbolist poets, it meant expanding the verbal resources of evocation to bypass naming altogether. “I say: a flower!” said Stéphane Mallarmé, who thought that out of “something other than the known bloom, there arises, musically, the very idea in its mellowness; in other words, what is absent from every bouquet.” The poem would summon the vacant bouquet in all its paradoxical plenitude.

The lure of melomania was fading around the time Eliot was finding his way as a poet. He did not aspire to write the poetic equivalent of music, though he often made reference to the music of poetry. He didn’t mean musicality, or anything like the mellifluous touches often presumed to provide the musical characteristics of versification. He was a Wagnerian in that he assigned to music a cognitive as well as a sensory dimension. A poem, for him, summoned a mood, a kind of mental sonority, in which one could think differently.

Another through line in my account goes back to melomania to trace a different order of mania. Modernism has often been linked to Freud’s exposition of the unconscious. From the stream of consciousness pioneered by James Joyce to the dark peregrinations of the Surrealists, modernism has frequently tapped the limits of consciousness and explored the twilight zones of psychological affliction. The melomania stirred up by Wagnerism has an intriguing biographical profile in the case of the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche.

Nietzsche composed music in addition to writing the incendiary works that made him a commanding force in modern thought. He was also devoted to Wagner. Their friendship was built on mutual admiration and lasted until Wagner’s festival theater at Bayreuth became a posh tourist destination rather than the site for reviving mythic spectacle the composer had sought to create. Nietzsche then realized that Wagnerism was a kind of disease, diagnosing himself as one of the afflicted. During his remaining years he repeatedly wrote about Wagnerism as the characteristic affliction of decadence. He ended by succumbing to a syphilitic infection that left him nearly catatonic for his final decade. This terminal plight marked his own books in the public eye with an air of both clairvoyance and lunacy. Even the titles of *Beyond Good and Evil* and *The Anti-Christ* were enough to align Nietzsche with the dark side.

Around the time Wagner’s cultural supremacy was peaking, a new diagnostic category began to circulate. It was named *neurasthenia* by Charles Beard, an American who thought it was a characteristic malady of America in that America embodied modernity, with its raw hustle and its social anxieties. It was concentrated in what he called “brain workers.” It’s no

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surprise that Eliot, suffering the repercussions of an ill-considered marriage and constant overwork, regarded himself as a neurasthenic. He completed *The Waste Land* while he was undergoing psychiatric treatment after a nervous breakdown. The poem itself can't be judged a product of mental illness, but it was written by a man who suffered years of trauma and despondency. Even earlier, however, Eliot had envisioned in a poem a madman shaking a dead geranium, scorching image of a mind adrift.

The Waste Land was not, in a technical sense, completed by its author. As its later dedication to Ezra Pound attests, a “finer craftsman” was needed to take a motley heap of drafts in hand, prune away, and envision a shape. Pound had pledged unquestioned support for Eliot since their first meeting in 1914, and regarded *The Waste Land* not only as Eliot's greatest work but as justification for what he called the “modern movement” in general. He eagerly gave Eliot's draft a thorough red-pencil treatment and, congratulating his friend on the result, confessed to being wracked with jealousy.

Pound was a passionate advocate for many others besides Eliot; but as years went by, he became obsessed with economics and politics. These obsessions affected his judgment, and he lost his way during World War II when he made broadcasts in support of the Fascist government in Italy. Filled with rancor directed at Roosevelt and the Allied war effort, smeared with anti-Semitism, the broadcasts resulted in the US government charging Pound with treason. He spent a dozen years in a mental hospital, a legal recourse designed to save the nation the ignominy of hanging a famous poet. If not certifiably “mad,” he was manic and unrestrained.

The narrative arc of *What the Thunder Said* traverses the cultural complex indicated above, along with the various manias and debilities germane to the major characters. Part One begins with Wagner and Nietzsche, moving on to trace the impact of Wagnerism on modern poetry, particularly as pioneered by the French Symbolists. Ezra Pound then comes into the picture as a young American poet trying to make his mark in literary London, belatedly realizing that being modern entailed the effort to *become* modern.

Part Two concerns the challenge of becoming modern—personally, for Pound, then programmatically, as he embarked on the vanguard programs of Imagism and Vorticism. These initiatives reflect the post-Symbolist impact of Futurism, which flamboyantly sought to dispense with the burden of the past altogether. Futurism thrived on a martial rhetoric instructive to Pound and others emboldened by the cause of cultural revolution. Futurism jolted English artist Mina Loy into new life as a poet who became a much-respected ally of Pound. He was fortified in his commitment to “the

modern movement” when he met T. S. Eliot, astonished that this fellow American had somehow modernized himself on his own.

Part Three brings Eliot into full view, chronicling his impetuous marriage in 1915 up to the publication of *The Waste Land* in 1922. These were years of hardship. The marriage was difficult, as Eliot’s wife Vivien was ravaged by poor health, and his own health faltered as well. His literary ambitions—urged by both Vivien and Pound—were arduously pursued even as he worked full-time in a bank. Eliot was making a reputation, and by the end of the war he felt poised for a major statement. But he suffered a nervous breakdown, and only during convalescence did he manage to focus a heap of drafts into what emerged as *The Waste Land*. Pound helped finalize the poem, as well as strategizing the transatlantic publications that made it an international cause célèbre in 1922.

Part Three focuses not only on Eliot but on the ways his poem took on a life of its own. Translations into many languages parlayed its influence far beyond the usual contours of Anglo-American letters. Another element less evident at the time, but documented in recent years, has to do with women poets who responded favorably to Eliot’s poem in similarly ambitious works. Without intending to, Eliot enfranchised the unorthodox, and it was certainly unorthodox for women of highly intellectual temperament and training to write book-length poems. These are vital artifacts in their own right and shed new light on possibilities convened by *The Waste Land*.

Part Four takes us to another postwar in the 1940s, when Eliot’s eminence was figuratively crowned by the award of the Nobel Prize in Literature. This distinction was contemporaneous with the controversial award of the Bollingen Prize to Pound’s *Pisan Cantos* while he was still facing the charge of treason. The famous line from *The Waste Land* about fragments shored against ruins is uncannily resurrected in this episode involving Eliot’s ardent supporter and longtime friend, embroiled in the collapse of his own life and, to some extent, his mental faculties. The final chapter tracks *The Waste Land* undergoing pastiche, adaptation, and a legacy of overexposure as cultural icon.

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For its author, a mood of despondency continued after publication of *The Waste Land*. He regarded it as the end of a phase going back to his early undergraduate poems: “To me it was only the relief of a personal and wholly insignificant grouse against life; it is just a piece of rhythmical grumbling.”

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This is probably the most dismissive remark a writer has ever made about a signal achievement, but in a way it was accurate, for it was an intensely personal poem, the relic of a troubled marriage and psychological distress. The poem was regarded as unusually erudite, but in fact the purportedly universal themes of the poem were the stuff of a sensibility formed by prep school and Harvard, engaging to those with similar backgrounds. But *The Waste Land's* slipstream of haunting images (“bats with baby faces,” “fear in a handful of dust”) spoke even to those without an education in the classics. Its atmosphere of ruination resonated with many after the war, but Eliot’s method also compelled attention, for his was the first major accomplishment in English-language poetry of a practice well established in the visual arts—namely, collage.

Thanks to its method—“fragments I have shored against my ruins,” the poem famously indicates—*The Waste Land* was effectively *sui generis*, at least in English. It was a poem that fell afoul of framing categories like lyric, ode, epithalamium, elegy, epic. It was a collage poem, similar to the “simultanism” developed a decade earlier by certain French poets. The possibilities of collage were worked out by visual artists, but it was a German contemporary of Eliot’s, Kurt Schwitters, who doubled as artist and author. His collages suggest something of what a poem like *The Waste Land* harbored.

Schwitters roamed the streets of his native Hannover as well as those in Prague, Berlin, or wherever he traveled, gathering litter from gutter and street. It was not all cut-and-paste like Cubist and Dada collages. Schwitters even mounted the big wooden wheel of a dray cart on one assembly. Trolley tickets, magazine advertisements, newspapers and wrapping paper, calendar pages, subway maps, playing cards, banknotes, even clippings from his own publications could be found in a milieu nudged into tactility with buttons and strips of wood, a bit of string, a coin, a piece of lace, a wire grid, chess pieces, even bowling pins. Schwitters’s exorbitant spectrum of collage constructions proffers an urban tide pool of the early twentieth century. You can lean over one of his horizontal assemblages and feel a vertigo, realizing you’re literally bending over a piece of 1922.

The Waste Land is, in a different register, itself such a window. Eliot, like Schwitters, rounded up a potpourri of raw materials, some of which he had written himself but was now handling like rubble. The rubble consisted of a growing heap of pages, refuse of an abortive effort to conjure a long poem (he initially imagined something more than twice the length of *The Waste Land*). These drafts sputtered to a halt, cradling one or two images so compelling that Eliot held on to them. The challenge was bringing them

together in a poem of consecutive focus and forward momentum. How could they fit together?

Collage was the unintended but handy solution. It was a medium in which there need not be a mutual or transactional relation between one fragment and another. Two distinct items conjoined by their proximity did not have to combine. Instead, they could cohabit the space like people passing each other on a sidewalk. Seen from above, a flurry of movement would become evident, as if the streets were filled with pulsating arrows on a flow chart. Everything contributes. It's the overall prospect that convenes a unity. The principle of unity in collage is *multum in parvo*, much in little, a lot crammed into a small space. Add to this method an overlying thematic, "waste land," with scenes of sterility in both environment and human volition. For its first readers *The Waste Land* summed up the postwar ennui of 1919–1921, the years Eliot wrote the bulk of it.

The Waste Land has invariably been paired with *Ulysses*, both published the same year. James Joyce's novel belabored a single day in Dublin into a behemoth of nearly eight hundred pages, much of it certain to stump the most adept readers of the daily press, the intellectual weeklies, and the pretentious assumptions paraded as received opinion in such venues. Scarcely two pages into the text the reader is treated to the vision of "a new art color for our Irish poets: snotgreen." Polite society was being told to step aside, and those subjected to this treatment naturally felt the sting.

Being impolite was far from Eliot's character and demeanor. He wrote *The Waste Land* while working in a bank, assessing foreign assets during and after the cataclysm of the Great War (a time when no one yet thought of it as the First). He wore a suit and sported a bowler hat and a cane. He was associated with some



FIG. 0.1. T. S. Eliot at the publishing house Faber & Gwyer, a year after he started working there in 1925.

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of the most flamboyant members of the London avant-garde, but did not adopt the manners or attitudes of the Bohemian demimonde. He published reviews and essays in prominent periodicals, and his views were respected. His poetry was known to be peculiar, but not offensive. Nobody anticipated *The Waste Land*. Or, to put it another way, no one anticipated that poetry could move to the forefront of modernism as a signal artistic phenomenon. Nor was it imagined that poetry could threaten polite decorum by so emphatically raising the artistic stakes.

As shorthand for the impact of modernism, the year 1922 encompasses a decade or more leading up to it. It was a threshold, revealing that modernism (1) was international in scope, (2) spanning all the arts; and (3) it was decisive in addressing modernity on its own terms. Previous and even prevailing practices in the arts were about to expire or had already become anachronisms. Crucially, this meant that one could no longer expect a poem, a ballet, or a painting to serve up a timeworn subject in a transparently accessible manner.

Until around 1910 (the date assigned by Virginia Woolf to mark a definitive change), the adjective *modern* could be a casual reference. We're modern, anyone could think, meaning we're at the latest stage of whatever human enterprise has yielded until now. The term *modern* was a modifier. Talking on a telephone or riding in a motorcar was modern. These were modern conveniences—and sometimes inconveniences, sources of novelty and indignation alike. But what did it mean to *be modern*, to emphatically adopt a program or belief about such a thing? The verb *to modernize* was an acknowledged claim of politicians and city planners. Did artists feel compelled to modernize their equipment, their outlook?

A word not much in use in Eliot's time but which has grown long theoretical legs ever since is *modernity*. It names the big picture, the agglomerative piling up and piling on of all the characteristics and consequences of the modern. It encompasses the haplessly modern—side effects of technology, like the way we're wrangling in the early 2020s with the impact of social media—as well as the determinedly modern, like the programmatic antiornamental claims of modern architecture, or the alienation effect in Brecht's theater. Then there's the broad mixture of the two, as in the music of Igor Stravinsky, who continued to compose ballets, but imposed motor rhythms on the dancers. Eliot heard his music bring “the rhythm of the steppes into the scream of the motor horn, the rattle of machinery, the grind of wheels, the beating of iron and steel, the roar of the underground railway, and the other barbaric cries of modern life.” He was writing about *The Rite of Spring*, in which ultramodern music revisits

the oldest of primitive rituals, the fertility rite. A dialectic of fertility and sterility runs through *The Waste Land*, and Stravinsky's ballet was like Eliot's poem enacted in another art form.

Modern, modernism, and modernity constitute an operative shorthand for explanatory books and articles on How We Got This Way. That prospect, however, is retrospective. It was not the case for the figures profiled in this book. For Wagner and Nietzsche, Baudelaire and Mallarmé, Loy, Pound, Eliot, and others who make an appearance, the modern was an experiential inevitability. It was challenging to ordinary citizens adjusting to a changing world, but it provided a more acute challenge to artists, for they had to figure out how to make art that took modernity into account. Was it enough to acknowledge the existence of a petrol pump? Or did one need to consider what the artistic equivalent of aviation might be?

T. S. Eliot was deeply attuned to the past, but he didn't want to replicate it. His idiom was, in its way, akin to scientific observation. He sets a scene and conjures a mood as recognizable now as it was a century ago:

The winter evening settles down
With smells of steaks in passageways.
Six o'clock.
The burnt-out ends of smoky days.
And now a gusty shower wraps
The grimy scraps
Of withered leaves about your feet
And newspapers from vacant lots

These lines are from the poem "Preludes," first published in the aggressively avant-garde journal *Blast*, with its taunting pink cover, published a month before the "guns of August" turned the world upside down in 1914.

The term *avant-garde* is generally used to refer to those artistic movements agitating for drastic overhaul of the arts. A military term for an advance scouting operation, it became shorthand for breakaway units in art. But modernism can't be conflated with the avant-garde. For many artists, the simple business of living in 1895, 1910, or 1922 could be exhilarating and dispiriting at the same time. They were the ones who couldn't ignore what each day heaved up. They resisted the nostalgia of those content to chirp bucolic themes out of ancient Greece, or paint idylls befitting a Roman villa. What confounded the general public in 1922 was that Eliot could somehow combine a "burnished throne" festooned in classical regalia with a vision of "rats' alley" and the blare of motorcars.

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The prevailing figure in *The Waste Land* is Tiresias, “the most important personage in the poem,” Eliot said, “uniting all the rest.” In Greek myth, the prophet Tiresias is transformed into a woman for seven years, giving him a rare perspective on sexual difference. But with respect to modernity, such a figure imparts a bifocal Janus-like gaze on past and present. Inasmuch as he unites the other characters, he brings past and present together in a single vision that is the poem. This was not a theme, but a deeply held belief that Eliot articulated in 1919 in his essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent.” In it, he offered a vision of European literature as a simultaneity of past and present, with every contemporary contribution affecting past works. From that perspective, *The Waste Land* is a poem that not only makes use of the past but is keenly aware of how its own originality flickers across the seemingly completed monuments of yore.

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The trajectory of this book goes from a preliminary pair (Wagner, Nietzsche) to a later pair (Pound, Eliot), who get the most attention. Each pair is irrevocably bound by their alliance. They were cultural crusaders. Wagner and Pound were the most explicit, articulating outsized programs to restart civilization, as Pound put it. Eliot’s aspirations were similar, but he was less demonstrative. In the end, he wielded far more influence in literary and cultural affairs than Pound, who was increasingly seen as a crackpot. Nietzsche proved to be a commanding figure in the early twentieth century. Wagner’s megalomania became an institution in the form of his Bayreuth Festival Theatre. Nietzsche denounced the institution, even as he recognized himself as its victim. He took upon himself, he thought, the sins of the father—meaning Wagner—fancying himself crucified by the blight of decadence, which he saw in the Wagnerism to which he had once dedicated himself. Nietzsche’s presentation of himself as a sacrificial figure was rhetorical, whereas Pound’s manic righteousness literally put him in harm’s way.

Wagner and Nietzsche were disposed to issuing dicta, spewing judgments from a rhetorical firehose, and presenting themselves—as persons and personalities—as inescapable agents of and in their works. Their rhetoric provided them with all the theatricality they needed. With T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound it was different. They were men of masks and personae, the traditional equipment of the theater. In fact, Eliot spent much of his career from 1930 to 1960 writing plays, beginning with *Murder in the Cathedral*. (His greatest stage success was posthumous, with the Broadway adaptation of his book of light verse, *Old Possum’s Book of Practical Cats*.) The mask—in

an expansive, not exclusively thespian sense—is a topic that goes to the heart of modernism and modernity.

An actor borrows a persona and fabricates another person. But just as masks have always been with us, identity too has a history. In traditional status hierarchies, identity was social, not psychological. Our very names tell us not who we are but who we were consigned to be, once upon a time. Miller, Baker, Carter, Smith, Taylor, or Müller, Becker, Schneider, Meunier, Boulanger, and so on. But we have long since regarded psychology rather than social position to be a determining factor. The mask can be self-applied.

An early register of this psychological alignment can be found in the essays of Michel de Montaigne (1533–1592). Credited with inventing the essay as we’ve come to know it (*essayer* in French means to attempt, to try out), Montaigne said of his enterprise: “These are *my* humours, *my* opinions: I give them as things which *I* believe, not as things to be believed. My aim is to reveal my own self, which may well be different tomorrow if I can be initiated into some new business which changes me.” The shift so crucial for modernity is from doctrine to experience, what *I* believe, not some dogma to be followed. Montaigne gives credence to identity as variable—self not only changeable but precariously weathering the inevitable pressure of change, the historical condition that has prevailed for centuries.

Another weathervane, closer to our time, is the author of *The Education of Henry Adams* (1907), whose forebears had been the second and the sixth presidents of the United States. In this autobiography, written at the dawn of the twentieth century, Henry Adams (1838–1918) speaks of himself in the third person to register the disorientation he felt confronting “a new universe which had no common scale of measurement with the old.” The expectation of change as normative unsettled him. Human identity, he was dismayed to find, was the abiding trace of what does not abide.

Many generations have now lived lifetimes within the conditions so distressing to Adams. Most recently, the internet and the cell phone have transformed human enterprise across the planet. For modernists like Pound and Eliot, change was registered in the airplane, the automobile, cinema, electric lights, indoor plumbing, radio, recording technology, and much more, including two world wars. But even earlier, with the legacy of democratic revolutions, change insistently hung in the air.

Wagnerism was one response to the historical condition of constant change. But Wagner’s vision did not engage the future. His own revolutionary political hopes of 1848 having been dashed, Wagner dreamed of resurrecting the past, a halcyon vision of ancient Greece. A very different

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prospect was envisioned by a French teenager, for whom weathering the maelstrom of change was not imposed by society but was the vision quest of poetic vocation. Being modern meant more than being born in such and such a year. This was the discovery made by Arthur Rimbaud.

At sixteen, after running away from home to Paris, Rimbaud had seen enough to envision a magisterial transformation demanded of the poet. A letter of May 15, 1871, lays it out. Poets of antiquity are not what we assume; they lack the disjunctive realization of the modern poet, for whom “*I* is someone else (*Je est une autre*).” The daunting task is to make oneself into a seer (*voyant*), and “the soul must be made monstrous: in the fashion of the comprachicos, if you will! Imagine a man implanting and cultivating warts on his face.” The comprachicos were thought to kidnap and mutilate children to exhibit them as monsters, so Rimbaud’s poet is a comprachico who exhibits the freak of himself. He saw it as a Promethean vocation: “The poet is truly the thief of fire.” To this end, “the poet would define the amount of the unknown awakening in his time in the universal soul.” The unknown, manifested in individual souls, would come under scrutiny by Freud, who called it the unconscious.

Rimbaud’s discovery has borne consequences for many subsequent poets. He seems to have come upon the outlook of existentialism nearly a century before Jean-Paul Sartre launched it as an operative philosophy for the Cold War. Sartre’s famous formula, existence precedes essence, is the natural philosophy for those not born into station, yet psychologically disposed to realize themselves in their actions. It was just the ticket for a generation that survived the Second World War, or so it seemed. But it was really a diagnostic reckoning with what had been common enough among modernists of the early twentieth century, grappling with an earlier calamity.

For Eliot’s generation, the situation was described by E. M. Forster in 1920. “Our ‘own’ times,” the novelist observed, “are anything but ours; it is as though a dead object, huge and incomprehensible, had fallen across the page, which no historical arts can arrange, and which bewilders us as much by its shapelessness as by its size.” Eliot’s friend and ally Wyndham Lewis took stock of the situation when he was in combat in the First World War. “I was present—I dimly recognized—at the passage of an entire people out of one system into another.” German artist Franz Marc wrote, shortly before hostilities broke out: “The world is giving birth to a new time; there is only one question: has the time now come to separate ourselves from the old world? Are we ready for the *vita nuova*? This is the terrifying question of our age.”

The years of the Great War were like a slow earthquake, grinding the previous system into rubble. Lewis's autobiography, *Blasting and Bombardiering*, is "about the war, with a bit of pre-war and post-war sticking to it, fore and aft." Or, as he elaborates, "This book is Art—War—Art, in three panels." From his perspective, "prewar" does not refer to a period of happy ignorance. The *blasting* of his title was personal, for Lewis was one of those artists exasperated with civilization even before 1914, for whom art was "waged" like war. "You will be astonished to find how like art is to war," Lewis confides; "I mean 'modernist' art."

Lewis was a truculent personality, like his friend Ezra Pound. Eliot was the opposite. When he turned to Rimbaud and the French Symbolists as poetic compass, he was not repudiating English poetry, but simply recognizing it offered no way forward. Eliot was an unwitting revolutionary. *The Waste Land* was incendiary, to be sure, but it was not meant to be. It was simply all that Eliot could muster at the time—and the time was ripe. The same poem, published in 1910, would have passed without notice because it would scarcely have qualified as a poem at all.

In 1922, the same year *The Waste Land* was published, Walter Lippmann's influential book *Public Opinion* also appeared. The late war was decisive for him in revealing how, at its outset in 1914, everyone was "still adjusted to an environment that no longer existed." He proposed that even in unexceptional everyday circumstances we create a pseudoenvironment, consisting of our own assumptions, expectations, and fabrications. This was the basis of personal opinions, which when shared swell into public opinion. We cannot individually process everything going on in the world around us, but nonetheless "we have to describe and judge more people, more actions, more things than we can ever count, or vividly imagine. We have to summarize and generalize. We have to pick-out samples, and treat them as typical."

The idiom that Eliot had forged in poems written before the war took on a different relevance after 1919, as if they were Lippmann's typical samples. The fleeting moods Eliot evoked in poems like "Preludes" and "Rhapsody on a Windy Night" could now be integrated in a more encompassing form—not by narrative or expository means, but as building blocks of what Lippmann identified as "opinion." In 1910, Eliot had found an idiom that worked for him, borrowing some of the insouciance of French Symbolism to liven up the drab scenarios he sketched. His favorite among the French, Jules Laforgue, cheekily wrote of the cosmic themes so pervasive in nineteenth-century poetry: "Infinity, show us your papers!" That sort of touch enabled Eliot to ruminate, in the person of

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Prufrock: “I have seen the eternal Footman hold my coat, and snicker, / And in short, I was afraid.”

For the most part, Eliot’s early poems are descriptive, synthesizing disparate cities—Cambridge, Massachusetts, Paris, Munich, London—into the generic one that makes an appearance as Unreal City in *The Waste Land*, consisting of a “thousand sordid images.” The setting can be nocturnal:

Every street lamp that I pass
Beats like a fatalistic drum,
And through the spaces of the dark
Midnight shakes the memory
As a madman shakes a dead geranium.

—or it may be dawn, when

The morning comes to consciousness
Of faint stale smells of beer
From the sawdust-trampled street
With all its muddy feet that press
To early coffee-stands.

Rare is the interceding sentiment, the observational nudge—so rare that when it occurs, it seems a final judgment:

I am moved by fancies that are curled
Around these images, and cling:
the notion of some infinitely gentle
Infinitely suffering thing.

Such first-person statement is rare in Eliot’s early poems, unless ventured by a mask like Prufrock. They are dispassionate observations, registrations of scenic particulars closer to the descriptive realism of the novel.

So what animates such poems? What is it that comes across despite the air of neutrality and restraint? This may be best answered with a surprising but relevant comparison. Charlie Chaplin’s film sets resemble the milieu of Eliot’s early poems. Chaplin animated them with his acrobatic physical comedy, while Eliot’s scenes are mostly devoid of human presence except by inference. But the inferences convey the familiar aura of low-level doom. They don’t aspire to the grimness of a predecessor like “City of Dreadful Night,” by James Thomson (1874), but Eliot sustains an air of menace.

The Waste Land compounds the menace even as it steers clear of anything menacing. The poem drifts through a series of locations—the Alps, a garden, the visiting chamber of a fortune-teller, London streets, a deluxe interior, a pub, the Thames embankment, a cheap apartment, a bone-dry netherworld, and the recurring Unreal City—but instead of being backdrops to stirring scenes of human action and emotion, they enlist the reader’s suppositions and expectations.

As the movies developed (around the time Eliot began writing poetry), filmmakers used locations to establish atmospheric potential. A rainy street, like a windswept mesa, instantly summons narrative possibilities. Commercially driven film, however, rarely lingered in these settings, anxious as it was to hustle people into the frame. Eliot is resolutely cinematic in setting scenes, but then pans away, as it were, before the bustle makes itself known. This is not to say his scenes are vacant. Rather, they are meticulously prepared slices of cinematic *mise-en-scène*, into which readers project what a movie would otherwise provide. *The Waste Land* was like a Rorschach test, capable of harboring whatever was projected onto it. As the abundance of reviews greeting its publication attest, it accommodated a considerable variety of projections.

Such diversity is intrinsic to collage. *The Waste Land* abounds in snippets and glimpses. This was evident in the working title of the poem, “He Do the Police in Different Voices.” It’s from Charles Dickens’s novel *Our Mutual Friend*, in which a widow says of her adopted son, “You mightn’t think it, but Sloppy is a beautiful reader of a newspaper. He do the Police in different voices.” Eliot’s draft was heavily edited and rearranged by Pound, who specialized in donning the voices of historical figures. An early title was *Personae*, which he reprised for *Personae: The Collected Shorter Poems* in 1926. His most successful venture was *Cathay* (1915), in which he intuitively found his way into the heart of ancient Chinese lyrics.

Pound’s *personae* ranged from the Roman poet Sextus Propertius to medieval troubadours. Even his most autobiographical poem has a fictive persona, Hugh Selwyn Mauberley. Eliot started out with Prufrock and went on to Sweeney, Gerontion, and the slipstream of voices in *The Waste Land*. These could be called speaking roles, as both poets repeatedly donned verbal masks. The mask was a prerogative of many other modern poets, of course, but *The Waste Land* was a decisive intervention, because it revealed that readers would likewise need to adapt to mercurial identities and shifting perspectives. They would have to become different readers to read *The Waste Land*. Being conversant with poets popular at the time, like John Masefield or Carl Sandburg, was no help.

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The new outlook demanded of the reader is suggested by a brief prose poem by an Eliot contemporary, French poet Pierre Reverdy:

Without a Mask

The non-speaking roles in this play or drama are among the audience—there are no wings. The makeup is in your eyes and your expression. What a role!

The Waste Land's first readers found themselves in such a role. But only the most astute among them realized it was the form of the poem that imposed the role, not the subject matter. Readers in 1922, regardless of their estimation of the poem's worth, thought it reflected "the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history"—a phrase Eliot used, writing about James Joyce's *Ulysses*. Subsequent generations have had occasion to find the same panorama unfolding in their own time. In any case, there was no particular urgency after the war to have news of the calamity issued in a poem. *Ulysses*, for that matter, was set in Dublin on a summer day in 1904. A year after his poem was published, Eliot sized up the issue of contemporaneity: "The present consists of a great deal of the past and a little of the future; it contains a majority of people who are echoing the past, and a very small number of writers who will represent this time fifty years hence, but who are, at the moment, rather a part of the future." Eliot surely sensed himself one of the latter.

What made *The Waste Land* matter is what it enabled readers to do. It activated them, vaulting them beyond armchair consumers into coconspirators, as it were. "The makeup is in your eyes and your expression," it seemed to suggest. They were emboldened by Eliot's poem to embark on their own unorthodox literary ventures. It emancipated certain women in particular from the steady beat of traditional versification established by untold generations of men. *The Waste Land*, for them, was not intimidating; it was liberating.

*

In his amusing novel *The Anthologist*, Nicholson Baker remarks on the role poetry has often played in general publications like the *Nation* and the *New Yorker*:

if you hunt around for a while in some of those periodicals you'll find that most of the poetry in them is just there as a decoration. It's a form of ornament, like a printer's dingbat. A little acorn with a curlicue. Or the

scrollwork on a beaux-arts capital. It's just a way of creating a different look on the page, and creating the sense on the part of the reader that he's holding something that is a real Kellogg's variety pack.

The practice continues apace, although the very thought of *The Waste Land* defies such use, not only because of its length. Eliot's poem invested poetry with a different potential, life beyond the dingbat. What his poem did is best approached by way of Richard Wagner.

Wagner recognized that melody in opera was concentrated in arias, leaving vast expanses of musical composition of no interest to the audience, who seized on these extended passages between arias as opportunities to socialize. Incensed, Wagner determined to write music that would compel attention all the way through. No filler. This was what came to be known as endless melody. One of the practical incentives that Wagner provided to all the arts was his conviction that endless melody was natural speech, not cultural artifice. The aria was a socially imposed limitation on the free speech of music.

Wagner wrote not only the music for his operas but the librettos as well. As both composer and poet, he imagined the two arts working together to achieve the full measure of what that adjective *endless* suggests. Pragmatically, it meant extending a melodic continuum across the entire composition. Formal repetitions would be eliminated (refrains, repeated couplets, the periodic phrase), but it wouldn't be a free fall. This was ensured by Wagner's use of leitmotifs, miniature melodic cues that he lavishly applied in his Ring cycle. Often heard recessed in the orchestral mix, leitmotifs are sonic reminders of particular people, events, and themes—diminutive cue cards, as it were, reminding the audience of the bigger picture.

Wagner drew inspiration from Beethoven, who he thought had consecrated the orchestra as a kind of Greek chorus, possessing a "faculty of speech" (*Sprachvermögen*). The orchestra "speaks" without saying anything in particular. Its speech is the stuff not of meaning but of meaningfulness. Wagner also sees the orchestra as bearing the potential to rediscover or reanimate primal speech. Endless melody, says Wagner, is the natural expression of endless yearning (*unendlichen Sehnsens*). It is the musical speech of speechlessness.

For Wagner, the poet contributes to the speechless by refraining from speaking or writing: it is "that which he does not say in order to let what is inexpressible speak to us for itself."

It is the musician who brings the great Unsaid to sounding life, and the unmistakable form of his resounding silence is *endless melody*. [In

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Wahrheit ist die Große des Dichters am meisten danach zu ermessen, was er verschweigt, um uns das Unaussprechliche selbst schweigend uns sagen zu lassen; der Musiker ist es nun, der dieses Verschwiegene zum hellen Ertönen bringt, und die untrügliche Form seines laut erklingenden Schweigens ist die *unendliche Melodie*.]

Eliot is unlikely to have read much in Wagner’s voluminous writings, but he, like many of his generation, sat through multiple performances of the operas. He experienced endless melody. And he intuitively grasped Wagner’s directive that the poet keep clear of the domain of the speechless. He well knew the arduous yearning of nineteenth-century English poets to transcend speech in and by means of poetry. In one of them, Swinburne, Eliot thought “the meaning is merely the hallucination of meaning.” Such was the plight of an urge to express the inexpressible. In a 1924 novel by Maurice Baring, a character attending a Wagner opera “felt he was witnessing a poem of Swinburne’s in action.”

But there would still need to be continuity in a poem, some rhythm that would span the discrete units. Eliot appreciated the way Joyce deployed leitmotifs throughout *Ulysses*. He also recognized a narrative solution Joyce had derived from one of the French Wagnerians, Édouard Dujardin, editor of *La Revue Wagnérienne*. Dujardin had pioneered interior monologue as a technical resource in his novel *Les lauriers sont coupés* (1887). In Joyce’s hands, this meant that a continuous fabrication of words filled page upon page, while not being strictly attributable to a speaker. It’s hard to find a passage in *Ulysses* one could identify as coming from a narrator. It is, to use a term of musical theorist Lawrence Kramer, a kind of “omnianonymous” expressivity.

If a whole city could speak all at once, it would be omnianonymous—or so we learn by reading Joyce, and even more distinctly by reading *The Waste Land*. The poem took on a life of its own, and it continues to emit what its first readers recognized as an uncanny music. For many, it was like hearing their own minds refracted in strange new patterns of sound and image. The overfamiliarity of Eliot’s poem may make it harder now to access that first response, but my aim is to make the poem strange again, to reclaim its drama as a high-wire act, not a tourist destination. Selfies abound in the presence of the *Mona Lisa*, but what do you do with a poem? “The makeup is in your eyes and your expression. What a role!”

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