

CHAPTER 6

Mimetic desire and the return to origins in The Waste Land

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Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*, published in 1859, was recognized within a year of its appearance as a monument in natural philosophy. But it was much more than an event in the history of science. It effected a revolution in the social sciences, with enormous consequences for the arts, especially naturalism and modernism. Although sometimes associated with notions of discontinuity, Darwin's work was in fact a vindication of the great Newtonian principle of continuity. He succeeded where his predecessors failed in part because his hypothesis included the "missing link" that connected present to past and contemporary humans to their remotest ancestors. Throughout the rest of the nineteenth century and the early part of the twentieth, scholars in the human sciences attempted to follow through on Darwin's claim that lost origins could be reconstructed through the use of surviving fragments. As Darwin claimed to have discovered the origin of species, they tried to find the origins of religion, society, and mind. In *Religion of the Semites* (1889), William Robertson Smith attempted to trace the evolution of the Jewish religion; in *The Golden Bough* (1890–1915), James G. Frazer tried to reconstruct the original all-encompassing myth; in *Themis*, Jane Harrison tried to track Greek religion to its roots; and in *From Ritual to Romance* (1920), Jessie Weston traced the Grail romances to primitive rituals. In sociology, Emile Durkheim in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1915) and Lucien Lévy-Bruhl in *Les Fonctions mentales dans les sociétés inférieures* (1910) tracked primitive society and the primitive mind.¹ In fact, what T. S. Eliot said of *The Golden Bough* can be said of all these works: they should be read "as a revelation of that vanished mind of which our own is a continuation."²

The late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century flowering of the social sciences is part of the context of the rise of modernism in the arts. Most of the modernists assimilated the obsession with origins from the general culture or from Frazer. T. S. Eliot, however, absorbed it from his superb education in philosophy and the social sciences. Between 1911 and 1914, as

a student in Harvard University's doctoral program, he took a number of seminars in myth, philosophy, and religion, and it is clear from his papers in the Eliot Collection at Harvard that he not only absorbed, but also criticized the work of such masters as Frazer, Tylor, Durkheim, and Lévy-Bruhl.³ A few years later, as a struggling young writer in London, he wrote a series of sometimes brilliant book reviews of major works in the human sciences. Eliot also integrated his knowledge of the social sciences into his reviews of artistic works, including Wyndham Lewis's *Tarr*, Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*, and Joyce's *Ulysses*. He argued that an understanding of primitive man is a prerequisite for understanding civilized man, adding, in one review, "The maxim, Return to the sources, is a good one."⁴ Eliot recommended this return not only for poets, but also for critics: "If literary critics, instead of perpetually perusing the writings of other critics, would study the content and criticize the methods of such books as *The Origin of Species* itself . . . and *Primitive Culture*, they might learn the difference between a history and a chronicle, and the difference between an interpretation and a fact."⁵ *Primitive Culture* is E. B. Tylor's landmark study of the origins of mythology, religion, language, and art.⁶

Even before his formal studies in the social sciences, Eliot was aware of the thin line separating cultured contemporaries from their primitive ancestors. In 1910, for example, in "Portrait of a Lady," the lady's voice and her desires are associated with violins, but the gentleman caller's silence and his desires with a "tom-tom" (surely a pun): "Among the windings of the violins / . . . inside my brain a dull tom-tom begins / Absurdly hammering a prelude of its own." The speaker's malaise in these early poems is vague ("Are these ideas right or wrong?"), approximating the angst found in Baudelaire, Kierkegaard, and Edvard Munch. Once Eliot begins his graduate studies, however, the vagueness disappears. First, he draws a line between the artist and everybody else, the distinction being that the artist is in touch with primitive life; he is a sort of missing link in the consciousness of the race. In a review of Wyndham Lewis's *Tarr*, for example, Eliot argues that "The artist . . . is more primitive, as well as more civilized, than his contemporaries; . . . Primitive instincts and the acquired habits of ages are confounded in the ordinary man. In the work of Mr. Lewis, we recognize the thought of the modern and the energy of the cave-man."⁷ In retrospect, we can see that the portrait of the narrator in "Portrait of a Lady" is a portrait of the artist as a young man. Second, Eliot begins to feel that artists have a responsibility to reconnect the primitive mind to the modern mind, part of his emerging argument on "unified sensibility," most fully articulated in his essay on the Metaphysical poets and in

his 1926 Clark Lectures at Cambridge.⁸ Third, Eliot begins to highlight the connection between religion, sexuality, and violence. He censored the poems in which the connection is most graphic (for example, "The Love Song of St. Sebastian" [1914]),⁹ but published many pieces (for example, "Sweeney Erect," *The Waste Land*) in which the connection is only lightly veiled. Fourth, he begins to focus his interest in origins on "survivals," i.e., fragments of behavior and ritual which survive in contemporary culture long after their function is lost or forgotten. The survivals are crucial because, once recognized, they become part of the link between primitive and modern. Fifth, although Eliot does not drop his assumption of continuity ("that vanished mind of which ours is a continuation"), he increasingly emphasizes stratification and simultaneity.¹⁰ His best-known discussions of simultaneity are in "Tradition and the Individual Talent" and his review of *Ulysses*.¹¹ But his reviews are replete with references to "stratifications" of primitive and modern life. In "War Paint and Feathers," for example, he argues that the artist "should be aware of all the metamorphoses of poetry that illustrate the stratifications of history that cover savagery."¹² In "Sweeney Among the Nightingales," Eliot creates a textbook example of stratification in which Tereus, Agamemnon, Christ, and Sweeney are seen not only as a temporal sequence, but as a spatial construct, simultaneously, in the present moment.

Eliot's writings, not least *The Waste Land*, bear ample testimony to his concern with origins, with the nexus of religion/sexuality/violence, with the conscious use of survivals, with stratification as an element of form, and with the artist as an essential link between primitive and modern. The poem, as Joseph Bentley and I argued in *Reading The Waste Land*, can be seen as a probe sent in search of lost unity, a probe which both accelerates and disintegrates in the closing lines of the poem.¹³ The surface is littered with fragments of contemporary life (including fragments of primitive ritual unrecognized by the poem's characters), and the allusions provide a running commentary linking religion, sexuality, and violence. Especially important in *The Waste Land* is the role of the artist as a mediator between primitive and modern, part of Eliot's larger argument that the mind of the artist resolves binaries such as present and past, feeling and thought, personal and impersonal.¹⁴ *The Waste Land* is at once impersonal, a reflection of a crisis in culture in postwar Europe, and personal, a reflection of Eliot's own life. While Eliot famously argued that art is impersonal,¹⁵ he also admitted that it is personal. *The Waste Land*, he conceded, is the "relief of a personal . . . grouse against life."¹⁶ The ostensible contradiction disappears when one looks beyond proof texts to the whole of his criticism. In a

number of essays, including his review of *Ulysses*, he distinguished between the "material" of art, which is real life, and its "method," which involves the use of myth to effect a metamorphosis into something rich and strange.¹⁷ Eliot's poetry, like all great art, is personal in that it begins in what Yeats calls the "foul rag and bone shop of the heart."¹⁸ Moreover, it is personal in that his choice of mythic fragments was guided by desire, much of which must have been subconscious. In 1921, as he was writing *The Waste Land*, Eliot explained that the selection of a myth is not random, but, rather, directed by one's point of view, one's self-image, and one's desires. "The myth that a man makes has transformations according as he sees himself as hero or villain . . . Man desires to see himself . . . as more admirable, more forceful, more villainous, more comical, more despicable . . . than he actually is. [A myth] is not composed of abstract qualities; it is a point of view, transmitted to importance."¹⁹ The conscious use of fragments of myth, then, is not only a means of achieving impersonality, but also a means of expressing a point of view, "transmitted to importance." In 1917, Eliot approvingly quoted Stanley Cook's view that "The doctrine of survivals is entirely inadequate when it forgets that we are human beings and do not accept beliefs merely because they happen to lie within our reach." Eliot added "Survivals are . . . subconsciously selected."²⁰

The following analysis pursues Eliot into the labyrinth of mimetic desire.²¹ First, I will look briefly at two of the elements which guided his choice of "material" – his life in the city and his marriage. The contemporary characters and the survivals in *The Waste Land* were not chosen simply because they happened to be at hand; they were "subconsciously selected" from his experience, from his desires. Second, I will look at the boudoir scene in "A Game of Chess," with emphasis on the allusion to Philomel from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. "A Game of Chess" and the Philomel allusion are particularly interesting for my purposes, because they invite consideration of the distinction between life and art, and also because they illustrate the importance of desire in the subconscious selection of material for the poem. My argument is grounded in what Eliot consciously brought from his studies, but more importantly in what he "subconsciously selected," in the interest of which I will use the theoretical work of René Girard, a critic whose main insights came from psychologically/sociologically informed readings of ancient and modern literature, including biblical texts, Greek drama, and nineteenth-century French and Russian novels.

Girard's work is an extension of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century advances in the social sciences studied by Eliot. Like Tylor, Frazer, Durkheim, Weston, and Eliot himself, Girard returns to origins by studying

survivals in contemporary culture, especially in modern literature. Like them, he focuses on the ancient connection of religion, violence, and sexuality in culture, particularly discussed in *Violence and the Sacred* (1972) and *The Scapegoat* (1982). Girard goes beyond his predecessors, however, in his understanding of the nature of desire and in the connection he makes between desire and the return to origins.

Girard's understanding of desire, first outlined in *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel* (1961), is particularly helpful in understanding Eliot. In Girard's view, desire is more psychological than biological. It comprehends sexuality, but is not restricted to it, involving rather "the dynamics of the entire personality."²² Desire is usually understood as a spontaneous response to a desirable object, but according to Girard desire arises less as a response to an object than as part of a nonconscious imitation of another desiring subject. People tend to think of their desires as unique, but in fact they desire what others desire, and the awareness that another desires the same object feeds not only desire but rivalry with the other desiring subject. Desire, then, is mimetic. Girard also claims that desire is triangular, involving not only a subject and an object, but a mediator, with the primary psychological bond being between the subject and the mediator. Desire is thus mediated rather than direct and secondhand rather than original or spontaneous. It is part of an infinite chain without origin and, because its object is constantly being displaced by a mediator, without end. Girard sees this serial displacement as an indication that the ultimate object of desire is metaphysical; that is, the real object is not *having* but *being*, not acquiring an object, but constructing and protecting a self. On the subconscious level, desire is part of infinite longing, longing that involves a desire to return to origins. The mimetic nature of desire and its association with infinite longing are evident in the nineteenth-century novels Girard uses in his analysis. The heroine of Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, for example, appropriates her desires from models. The premium Emma places on objects is not related to their intrinsic value, but to the value attached to them by others. And the ultimate object of her desire is existence itself.²³

Girard distinguishes between two types of mediation. In "external mediation," the mediator between the subject and the object is temporally or spiritually or intellectually remote from the subject and superior in status, or at least perceived to be so. The subject tends to admire the mediator from afar. In "internal mediation," conversely, the model is at hand, and he is an equal or inferior. In this situation, the subject perceives the mediator as a rival and tends to despise him. Moreover, in external mediation, the subject feels proud of himself for imitating his model; in internal mediation, the

subject experiences shame and self-disgust in his desire. Classic examples of external and internal mediation can be seen in *Don Quixote* and *Notes from Underground*, respectively. Both the Don and the Underground Man take their desires from others, but the first from esteemed superiors and the second from despised equals or inferiors. In external mediation, with its focus on remote mediators, the impulse to return to origins is strong. In internal mediation, with its focus on equality, the impulse to return is obscured or absent. In internal mediation, desire feeds resentment and leads through rivalry to violence.²⁴ Internal mediation is characteristic of democratic societies, especially modern industrial democracies.

Girard's distinction between "external" and "internal" mediation is helpful in understanding desire in *The Waste Land*. Desire entering the poem through the mediation of cultural memory could be thought of as "external" – that is, involving mediators who are remote in time and high in stature – lovers such as Aeneas or spiritual leaders such as Augustine. In external mediation, the subject admires the model and does not consciously enter into rivalry with him. Desire related to personal memory and contemporary history, on the other hand, could be thought of as internal – that is, involving mediators who are within the speaker's own circle and roughly equal in class and prestige. Certainly, in the contemporary world of the poem, hierarchies and distinctions are minimal. For the crowd flowing over London Bridge in the morning and the office workers having intercourse after work, internal mediation is the only possibility, for everyone is a clone of everyone else. For instance, the narrator in the "Unreal City" section of "The Burial of the Dead" is part of the crowd flowing over London Bridge and down King William Street. One source of his anguish is the realization of identity ("mon semblable, – mon frère"), the awareness that his desires are not original, but preexistent in the reader and in those others whose eyes are fixed before their feet on London's dirty pavements. As Girard points out, this sort of mediation leads to resentment and self-contempt, and, not surprisingly, such feelings are pervasive in this poem. But it must be noted that the distinction between external and internal is fluid in *The Waste Land*. As Eliot's note on Tiresias says, the characters melt into each other – the men are "not wholly distinct," the women "are one woman," and the "two sexes meet in Tiresias." This melting not only transgresses boundaries of chronology, class, and gender, but also crosses the bright line between myth and history. For example, a contemporary woman suffering from "nerves" melts into Cleopatra; both melt into Philomel, a purely mythical character; and Philomel is our contemporary, our double. Collapsing external mediators into internal ones creates

an overall effect of crisis which remains unresolved after the poem's final "shantih."

Girard also connects mimetic desire with violence. The prelude to violence, of course, is conflict, usually seen as the result of aggression. He argues, conversely, that conflict proceeds from "appropriative mimicry," by which he means secondhand desire that involves an impulse of acquisition or appropriation. If the impulse to mimesis is present in both desiring subjects, the situation leads to reciprocal violence. Reciprocal violence involves the back and forth of revenge, and thus by its very nature tends to accelerate toward crisis. From earliest times, people have partially understood the tendency of violence to spread and accelerate in terms of contagion. To avoid being pulled into violence, one must avoid contact with people who are or have been involved in violence and must avoid contact with blood, known to be impure because of its unquestionable connection to violence. "When violence is unloosed, blood appears everywhere . . . and stains everything it touches."²⁵ This means, for example, that warriors returning from battle must be decontaminated and that women must be segregated during menstruation and after childbirth. "The fact that the sexual organs of women periodically emit a flow of blood . . . seems to confirm an affinity between sexuality and those diverse forms of violence that invariably lead to bloodshed."²⁶ The association between sexuality and violence is firmly rooted in religion, where the two meet in agricultural/fertility rituals; it is also rooted in social reality, where they meet in rape, defloration, sadism, and other situations. There are many other connections between sexuality and violence. Both, for example, tend to fasten upon surrogates, and both are associated with explosive emotions.²⁷

Almost from the moment *The Waste Land* appeared in October 1922, knowledgeable readers associated "A Game of Chess" and its allusions with Eliot's marriage. Within weeks of its publication in London, Ezra Pound, who had served as midwife for the poem, had dinner with John Peale Bishop. Immediately afterward, Bishop wrote to Edmund Wilson that according to Pound the first part of "A Game of Chess" was an account of Eliot's marriage – "Eliot's version . . . is contained in 'The Chair she sat in like a burnished throne.'" Bishop added his own interpretation, presumably deduced from Pound's comments – "The Nightingale passage is, I believe, important: Eliot being Tereus and Mrs E., Philomel."²⁸ Bishop's equation is too simple, of course, but it is not entirely wrong. In 1923, Eliot said in his *Ulysses* review that the material of art includes "the emotions and feelings of the writer himself . . . The question, then, about Mr. Joyce, is: how much living material does he deal with, and how does he deal with

it?"²⁹ The two main subjects in the Philomel sections of *The Waste Land*, sexual violence and the struggle to speak/sing, are clearly weighted with "the emotions and feelings of the writer." Without going into great detail and without claiming any one-to-one correspondence, I wish to comment on two clusters of emotion and feeling which involve violence and sexuality – Eliot's response to the city and his marriage. Both are part of the reservoir of "living material" which guided his selection of mythic fragments in the poem, and both are richly illustrative of mimetic desire.

Eliot was at once attracted to and repelled by life in the city. His ambivalence stems in part from a simultaneous attraction toward and fear of violence in the city at night, in part from a quickening of sexual desire combined with a need to check that desire. "Rhapsody on a Windy Night," written in Paris in 1911, was born of this ambivalence. A young man walking through the red-light district of a big city in the middle of the night senses danger and observes ("remarks") prostitutes and other creatures of the night. He is pushed to the edge of madness by simultaneous attraction and disgust as stained women hesitate toward him in open doorways.³⁰ On New Year's Eve, 1914, Eliot wrote from London to his college friend Conrad Aiken to complain of having "nervous sexual attacks which I suffer from when alone in a city . . . [T]his is the worst since Paris. I never have them in the country . . . One walks the streets with one's desires, and one's refinement rises up like a wall whenever opportunity approaches. I should be better off . . . if I had disposed of my virginity . . . years ago."³¹ A few months later, in April, he met Vivienne Haigh-Wood, and in late June, with nudging from Ezra Pound, he married her. In so doing, he disposed of his virginity and of whatever innocence he might have had. The honeymoon was a disaster. Vivienne confided in Bertrand Russell (never a good idea), who confided in his mistress that the Eliots' "pseudo-honeymoon at Eastbourne [was] a ghastly failure. She is quite tired of him . . . [and] in the lowest depths of despair."³² Eliot's version is preserved in "Ode": "When the bridegroom smoothed his hair / There was blood upon the bed."³³ These lines clearly point to "living material," for it is now known that Vivienne suffered from a disorder which caused profuse vaginal bleeding. Soon after their marriage, he learned that she was ill, that she suffered from problems associated fairly or unfairly with female sexuality, problems such as "nerves" and hysteria.³⁴

Even this thumbnail sketch reveals the strong presence of mimetic desire. Eliot's desire was stimulated by being in the city because of what was happening there – what others were doing – and by his ambivalence about imitating them. His desire to be married was mediated not only by the

presence of prostitutes in London, but also by Pound, who urged him to marry an English girl and remain in London. Eliot was evidently virginal when he married, and thus the bloody honeymoon must have underscored for him the primal connection between blood and female sexuality. And no matter how devoted Eliot may have been to his wife, he could not but have been impressed (consciously or subconsciously) by the fact that sex always resulted in blood upon the bed. If Girard is right, Eliot (again, consciously or not) must have associated female sexuality with violence, with pollution, and with contagion. It is easy in retrospect to see that the marriage was doomed from the start, and indeed, within a month or so, Vivienne was involved in an adulterous relationship with Bertrand Russell. In Girardian terms, the squalid affair with Russell can be seen in terms of mimetic desire, contagion, and an acceleration of psychological violence. Eliot, with some reservations, admired Russell, and his admiration was appropriated by Vivienne. Her unwitting husband, then, served as a mediator in the emerging sexual triangle. In addition, her friends acted as mediators between her and Russell, for he was a famous man and an intellectual icon. In admiring him, she was admiring a man others admired and envied. Russell's admiration for Vivienne, however, was mixed with disgust for her and, because he was intellectually and socially her superior (like Dostoevsky's underground man with the prostitute), with contempt for himself. He described one of his trysts with her in terms that open a window on Eliot's marital situation. The night with Vivienne, Russell complained, was "*utter hell*. There was a quality of loathsomeness about it which I can't describe." He grumbled that sex with Vivienne left him with "nausea" and "horrible nightmares."³⁵ Eliot himself did not comment on his sexual life, but if Vivienne had this effect upon a seasoned philanderer, one can only imagine the effect she had upon a shy and sexually inhibited puritan.³⁶

There is one other observation I would make regarding the "living material" behind "A Game of Chess," the marriage section of *The Waste Land*. Although the Eliots, in their fashion, remained devoted to each other, it is clear that very early in their marriage the relationship changed. To use Girard's terminology, the desire changed from the desire *to have* to the desire *to be*. In my view, they became rivals in a psychological battle for being, and each seems to have considered his or her own existence threatened by the existence of the other. That Eliot considered her a rival for being is evident in his poems. In the honeymoon poem already quoted, the bridegroom describes the bride as "*succuba eviscerate*," and in an even earlier poem, "Hysteria," the male speaker reveals a fear of literally being engorged.

Eliot's anxiety over sexuality could not have created these problems *de nilo*, but must have compounded them.³⁷ That Vivienne considered Eliot a rival in some fierce psychodrama is clear from the comments of their friends. Russell, for example, told Ottoline Morrell that Vivienne "has impulses of cruelty to him . . . It is a Dostoevsky type of cruelty, not a straight-forward every-day kind."³⁸ Eliot's defense in this psychological battle of attrition seems to have been melancholy silence and measured coldness. Like all reciprocal violence, the hostility between the Eliots fed upon itself and generated fear. By the time he was writing *The Waste Land*, the crisis was full-blown, with loss of distinctions in his psychological life and his marital life echoing those in the postwar culture around him. The tragic cluster including his wife's illness and their increasing rivalry, Eliot feared, might have blocked his poetic efforts. He felt that he, like Philomel, had been silenced. A year after his marriage, he confided in his brother Henry that he was afraid that "Prufrock" would turn out to have been his "swan-song."³⁹

The stress of city life and the miserable marriage did not silence him, however, but gave him more "living material" for poetry, a gift on full display in "A Game of Chess." This part of *The Waste Land* consists of a two-part exploration of contemporary sexual relationships, the first in a lady's dressing room, the second in a pub. The dressing room scene, at issue in this paper, features characters resembling Eliot and his wife. He invited both his wife and Ezra Pound to comment on the typescript, and both noted the parallel. Vivienne clearly approved. Beside the lines "'My nerves are bad tonight. Yes, bad. Stay with me. / Speak to me'" she wrote "WONDERFUL." Pound, however, disapproved of such obvious realism, writing "photography" in the margin beside the same lines and "photo" beside the line "'Are you alive, or not? Is there nothing in your head?'"⁴⁰

The dressing room section is itself divided into two parts, the first a description of the room and the second a "dialogue" between a man and (presumably) his wife. In the first part, the wife is alone. In the second, her husband is present and the point of view shifts from the unnamed narrator to him. The room is filled with "withered stumps of time," survivals such as the sevenbranched candelabra and fruited vines, the significance of which are probably lost on the woman. The centerpiece in the room is a *trompe l'oeil* painting of Philomel:

Above the antique mantel was displayed
As though a window gave upon the sylvan scene
The change of Philomel.

Through the window thus opened, the woman could glimpse, if she looked, a flowering woodland ironically described in language taken from Milton's description of Eden in *Paradise Lost* and, in the center, Philomel at the moment of her change into the nightingale. For the narrator, the painting suggests not only metamorphosis, but its antecedent violence. He is aware, as the description makes clear, that Philomel has been "So rudely forced" by a "barbarous king," that the "change" is the last in a series that includes betrayal, rape, and mutilation. He is also aware that in compensation she has been given a voice that cannot be violated.

The most complete account of Philomel is contained in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, and it is to *Metamorphoses* that Eliot directs us.⁴¹ As Ovid tells the story, Tereus, King of Thrace, comes to the aid of the King of Athens, whose city is under siege. The siege is lifted, and as a reward the King of Athens gives his elder daughter Procne to Tereus in marriage. The marriage begins under a cloud, attended not by the marriage deities but by the Furies, spirits of vengeance for blood spilt within families. Tereus takes his bride to his kingdom, and they have a son, Itys. Procne misses her sister Philomel, and Tereus volunteers to go to Athens and bring her to Thrace for a visit. But on the return trip, overwhelmed by lust, he rapes her in the woods. When she threatens to tell what he has done, he cuts out her tongue and leaves her to die, later telling Procne that she has been killed by animals. With the help of a maidservant, Philomel survives and weaves her story into a tapestry which is delivered to her sister the Queen. Procne finds Philomel, brings her to the palace, and tends her wounds.

The rape and mutilation of Philomel, however, is only half of the story; the other half recounts the revenge taken by the sisters and the metamorphosis of the three principals into birds. Procne's first impulse is an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth: for mutilation, she would mutilate; for rape, she would castrate. "I would cut out his tongue . . . / cut off the parts which brought you shame." But such revenge against a warrior king would be impossible, and so she turns to a substitute, killing their beloved son Itys and serving him to his father for dinner. Once Tereus has enjoyed his cannibalistic feast, Procne calls Philomel, who hurls the child's bloody head at the father. Reciprocal violence escalates to an incredibly high pitch here and would have continued, except that it is interrupted by gods who turn the fleeing women and their sword-drawn pursuer into birds – the red-breasted swallow, the sonorous nightingale, and the hoopoe bird with its sword-like beak.⁴²

The painting of Philomel in "A Game of Chess" shows Eliot's preoccupation with "all the metamorphoses of poetry that illustrate the stratifications

of history that cover savagery.”⁴³ The painting displays a paradisaical scene sketched over a dark wood of horror. Its prominence and detailed description point to the Ovidian/Eliotic themes of sexuality, violence, and metamorphosis. For example, the link between sexual desire and violence can be seen in the various shadings of “Jug jug” – at once a parody of sounds of sexual intercourse, a slang expression for prostitution, the sound of a mutilated singer, and the dark undersong of the nightingale, itself a figure for the poet. Each of these shadings points to stratification from the shadowy woods of prehistory through the nineteenth century, and the sudden change of verb tense in the line “And still she cried, and still the world pursues” brings the story into the twentieth-century urban bedroom, bridging past and present, myth and history.

The presentation of desire is continued in the second part of this section of “A Game of Chess.” With the entry of the woman’s husband into the room, a pseudo-dialogue ensues in which the desires of both parties become more evident. The woman is loquacious and nervous, a cauldron of human wishes. Her desire is unfocused, lacking an object – “What shall I do now? What shall I do?” She wants something but nothing in particular; she wants to do something, but doesn’t have any idea what to do. The man is silent and repressed; his less visible desire is not articulated to the woman, but for the reader of the poem it is mediated through language – in part through Shakespeare, in part through personal memory. When she asks him “Do you remember / ‘Nothing?’”, he reflects “I remember / Those are pearls that were his eyes,” suggesting that he too is thinking of metamorphosis.

One might expect that an encounter between a man and his wife in her dressing room would deal at least peripherally (even if ironically) with sexual desire. The desire in this scene, however, is not biological but psychological. Desire is clearly revealed in the woman’s hysteria and the man’s cynicism, but the desire lacks a specific object. This absence of the object is evident in the repetition of the word “nothing” – “Do / ‘You know nothing? Do you see nothing? Do you remember / ‘Nothing?’ . . . ‘Is there nothing in your head?’” I would argue, based on my reading of René Girard, that the presence of unattached desire represents the endless deferral of the objects of desire. In this reading, desire in “A Game of Chess” turns out to be primarily metaphysical in that it is not a desire *to have* but a desire *to be*. The woman’s insistent questions – “What shall I do now?” – can be read as expressions of desire for desire, of desire that another human subject, her husband, acknowledge her existence. In withholding the recognition she craves, he is trying to protect himself from absorption by her, trying to shore up the boundaries that support his own existence. Their memories

may include the self-transcendence involved in sexual love, but their present attention is on self-preservation. They have become rivals in a struggle for being, and the tone suggests that it cannot end happily for both.

A striking feature of Eliot's use of the myth is his unambiguous sympathy with Philomel. Ovid's story is objective, carefully balancing an action and a counteraction – male aggression followed by female revenge, rape/mutilation followed by murder/cannibalism. Dante's version, which Eliot knew well, is unsympathetic to the sisters. In the *Purgatorio*, he points to them as examples of wrath, but ignores Tereus' crimes against them. Eliot's version moves in the opposite direction, lingering on Philomel as victim – “So rudely forc'd. / Tereu” – while entirely omitting the second half of the tale in which she takes disproportionate revenge. Dante's motive for skewing the narrative is straightforward and didactic; Eliot's is less clear. It is evident from the pseudo-dialogue that follows that the woman is obsessed with her own suffering and her status as the victim of a male; at the same time, she is oblivious of her own vengeful acts. She is acutely aware of her need to escape and in desperation considers running out in the street in her dressing gown with her hair down. She suffers from paranoia and seems to feel that the world is pursuing her; she also seems to intuit that she is trapped and will not be rescued by the gods. The poem's sympathy with Philomel, however, is not limited to lines revealing that the woman thinks of herself as a victim; it remains constant across the shifting voices, male and female. This sympathy with the female and lack of sympathy with the male seem to be related to the overarching focus on the suffering land, a strongly feminine symbol, and one which colors point of view throughout the poem.

The structure of the boudoir scene is elegant in its careful balance of linguistic and narrative elements. It is a dance of opposites that conveys mutual suspicion but also facilitates reciprocal imitation, evident in the way the man's thoughts echo and reshape the woman's words and in the way her words correspond to his thoughts. The choreographed mimicry and controlled conflict are evident in the analogy between their actions and movements in a chess game. In the allusion to Middleton's play *A Game of Chess*, chess provides cover for sexual politics and sexual violence. In Eliot's poem, the male contemplates a game of chess as a way of giving structure to their meaningless lives; at the same time, he conveys by gesture and thought that the chess game would be a way of managing the continuation of psychological violence.

The boudoir scene in “A Game of Chess” illustrates Girard's notion of mimetic desire and infinite longing. More important, it connects desire and

the endless deferral of desire to memory and a return to origins. This scene also shows the literary effects of Eliot's immersion in the social sciences. First, there is the return to origins, moving backward from a postwar scene roughly contemporary with the composition of the poem through centuries of recorded history to the earliest prehistoric myths. Less important than the journey, however, is the destination, for all of the allusions, all of the women from Philomel to Cleopatra, lead back to monomyth which Frazer claims encompasses all history, all religion, and all art. Second, there is the clear attempt to access the original by the use of its surviving fragments. As noted above, "A Game of Chess" is littered with "withered stumps of time" appropriated by contemporaries for personal use. Third, the dressing room survivals link religion, sexuality, and violence. Most of the survivals are part of ancient religious rites (for example, the fruited vines), most include sexuality (tragic lovers such as Dido and Aeneas), and most are streaked with violence (above all, the story of Philomel). And fourth, stratification is a basic element of form in the scene, for the characters are organized not only in time but also in space, simultaneously.

The allusion to Philomel is the most important in "A Game of Chess." Compared to Philomel, the other women (Cleopatra, Dido, and Eve) are only supporting players. They are unnamed and barely present. Eve, for example, comes in through the phrase "the sylvan scene" from Milton's description of Eden, a phrase most readers would miss without a guidebook. Philomel, on the other hand, is named and is given seven consecutive lines. Moreover, she is given four lines in "The Fire Sermon" and one in "What the Thunder Said." As the archetypal violated and silenced female, she takes her place beside the land itself as one of the great symbols in the poem as a whole. As a figure of mimetic desire, she is our contemporary, but as one of our oldest ancestors she provides a link between mimetic desire and a return to origins. Her story was old by the time of Homer, in fact, and sufficiently familiar for use as an allusion in *The Odyssey*.⁴⁴ To use a phrase Eliot used of Frazer's *Golden Bough*, her story extends human consciousness as far into the dark and "backward . . . abysm of time" as it can go.⁴⁵

The second Philomel passage in *The Waste Land* appears in the middle of "The Fire Sermon," which also happens to be the center of the entire poem. Although Eliot superimposes many times and places in this poem and deals with all at once, he makes postwar London the primary location in this middle section. He carefully places most of its incidents on London's streets or on London's river, and mentions pubs, fish markets, and the Thames-side church of Magnus Martyr. He names the streets running beside the river and remembers the empty bottles, sandwich papers, and

cigarette butts left on the riverbanks by summer's departed lovers. Most of the characters are Londoners – office workers, city directors, prostitutes, and royals. The opening and closing scenes are set beside or on the Thames. The emphasis on London is even stronger in the manuscript. A long section, omitted before Eliot shared the poem with Pound, begins “London, the swarming life you kill and breed” and describes London as “responsive to the momentary need,” as “vibrat[ing] unconscious to its destiny,” and Londoners as “bound upon the wheel.”⁴⁶

The city, as suggested earlier, is for Eliot the scene of mimetic desire, pollution, and violence. These Ovidian themes dominate “The Fire Sermon,” with the main action consisting of tawdry and mechanical sexual encounters. Thus it is not surprising to hear the voice of Philomel in the “Unreal City”:

Twit twit twit
Jug jug jug jug jug
So rudely forc'd.
Tereu

In “A Game of Chess,” the focus was on the “change” of Philomel, but here it is on her violation. Gone are the painting's positive elements – the Edenic woodland, the metamorphosis, and the reference to the “inviolable voice,” but the rapist, the rape, the mutilated victim, and the mocking sounds of dirty sex remain. The intrusion of the Philomel motif at this point associates sexual relations in “The Fire Sermon” with rape and the humiliation of women. In this part of the poem, arguably, all of the women, like the land itself, have been “rudely forc'd.” The Philomel reprise is followed immediately by a return of the “Unreal City” theme. In *The Waste Land* drafts, the link between Philomel and the city is more pronounced. The “Unreal City” scene appears twice, the two almost identical passages constituting a frame enclosing Philomel's violation and emphasizing the interplay between sex, violence, and the city.⁴⁷

Pollution and contagion, ubiquitous in cities ancient and modern, are major motifs in this part of the poem. The air is brown at noon; the river sweats oil and tar; the riverbanks are littered with the detritus of desire – sandwich papers, empty bottles, cigarette butts, and “other testimony of summer nights.” The vignettes of contemporary characters – loitering prostitutes, Sweeney and Mrs. Porter, Mr. Eugenides, the typist and clerk, and the various Thames maidens – indicate that the pollution is moral as well as environmental. The central event in this poem of crisis is rape, and as both violence and desire are contagious, the effects of Philomel's violation

have spread from the center to the periphery in all directions. Contagion is evident in the presence of disease-carrying rats, in the movement of the polluted river, and in the air circulating in and out of unwholesome lungs.

In Ovid's version of Philomel, the emphasis is primarily on the link between violence and desire, but in postclassical versions, particularly in Romantic and modern traditions, the emphasis is on music and desire. The connection between music and desire is foregrounded in "The Fire Sermon," for everything in this section, including rape, is performed to music. The section opens with a river minstrel singing "Sweet Thames, run softly, till I end my song." In quick succession, he is followed by the crooner of a bawdy ballad from Australia, by children "*chantant dans la coupole*," by Philomel's plaintive song, by the mechanical music of the gramophone and the "pleasant whining" of the mandoline, and finally by the songs of the Rhine maidens reincarnated as Thames maidens. The typist and clerk scene ends with the lovely lady putting a "record on the gramophone," and the next paragraph begins, "This music crept by me upon the waters." In all these passages, the disturbing effect of music upon a listener is highlighted. The association of mimetic desire and music goes back to Eliot's Harvard poems. In "Portrait of a Lady," for example, the narrator remains self-possessed "Except when a street piano, mechanical and tired / Reiterates some worn-out common song . . . Recalling things that other people have desired."

The final references to the Philomel story appear in "What the Thunder Said," the last section of *The Waste Land*. The final paragraph begins with a question, "Shall I at least set my lands in order?" which is answered with a cascade of fragments from various times and cultures and in several languages. Two fragments, contained in a single line, refer to Philomel – "*Quando fiam ceu chelidon* – O swallow swallow." The first (translation: "When shall I be as the swallow?") comes from the anonymous Latin poem *Pervigilium Veneris*, celebrating the return of spring. The second – "O swallow swallow" – is from a song in Tennyson's *The Princess*. That Eliot wanted the reader to recognize the allusions in this paragraph is clear from the fact that he cross-referenced this line to the Philomel references in "A Game of Chess" and "The Fire Sermon." There is also a reminder of Philomel in the snippets from Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* – "Why then Ile fit you. Hieronymo's mad againe." In this drama of revenge and blood (that is, reciprocal violence), Hieronymo, like Tereus, has been driven mad by the slaughter of his son, and he arranges that the murderers be killed in the performance of a play. He then avoids speech under torture by biting off his tongue and spitting it at his tormentors. He is both torturer and

tortured, and thus, in this desperate self-mutilation, he echoes Tereus and Philomel at once.

The line from the *Pervigilium Veneris* – “*Quando fiam ceu chelidon*” – is a reminder of the connection between mimetic desire and music. This second-century Latin poem describes the “Vigil of Venus” – that is, the eve of the festival of the goddess of love. This ancient springtime fertility festival is launched with a night of feverish foreplay during which sexual desire in humans and animals reaches a crescendo in anticipation of release on the morrow. Such desire is richly mimetic, in that it is related more to the desires of other subjects than to the desirability of any object. Human beings join in the lovemaking in spring, one might say, because the birds and bees are doing so. The spirit is perfectly caught in the refrain – “tomorrow let loveless, let lover tomorrow make love.”⁴⁸ Such festivals, in which the participants wear disguises, are characterized by loss of individual identity and violation of norms related to sexual behavior. Of the twenty-two stanzas in the *Pervigilium*, the first twenty describe sexual foreplay. Then suddenly, from the dark wood, the music of the nightingale is heard over the amorous sounds of the creatures below. The discordant song undercuts the rest of the *Pervigilium* with a reminder of a connection between mimetic desire and violence, but, as Allen Tate suggests, something new is introduced into poetry here. That is “the poet’s sudden consciousness of his own feeble powers. When shall I, he says, like Philomel . . . , suffer violence and be moved to sing?” This unexpected shift from narrative to lyric, from desire in nature to desire in the poet, gives this otherwise conventional poem enormous power.⁴⁹

The richness and complexity of Eliot’s poetry owes much to his early work in the social sciences. His increasingly comprehensive understanding of the implications of Darwin’s work as it was absorbed by Frazer, Durkheim, and others provided the context in which he worked out his poetics. Of the principles he derived from Darwin and Frazer, none is more important than the maxim that wisdom requires a return to origins. Eliot’s poetry, however, is much more than the versification of social theories; it is a continuing meditation on desire, a meditation informed by his own experience in the city, in his marriage, and in other contexts. His understanding of desire, as Maud Ellmann suggests, must have been influenced by Freud. She associates *The Waste Land* with Freud’s theory of repetition, which maintains that human beings have a compulsion to repeat, and with his notion of the uncanny, which is “whatever reminds us of this inner compulsion to repeat.”⁵⁰ Freud’s theory of repetition, a component of his own attempt to reconstitute origins, is part of the theoretical background of

Girard's understanding of mimetic desire, explored at length in this paper. *The Waste Land* is a study in mimetic desire, highlighted in the famous opening lines of the poem. April is cruel because she mixes "memory and desire." Memory not only *looks* backward, searching for what might have happened last week, but also *repeats* backward toward origins. Desire looks forward but is continuously fed by memory and imagination. Eliot's continuing meditation on the intersection of memory and desire culminates in the beautiful closing paragraph of "Little Gidding" which reveals that "the end of all our exploring / Will be to arrive where we started / And know the place for the first time."

NOTES

1. For a discussion of the emphasis on returning to origins, see Jeffrey M. Perl, *The Tradition of Return: The Implicit History of Modern Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 3–57, and Jewel Spears Brooker, *Mastery and Escape: T. S. Eliot and the Dialectic of Modernism* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1994), 1–22.
2. T. S. Eliot, "London Letter," *Dial* 71, no. 4 (October 1921): 453.
3. There is a substantial body of criticism on Eliot's studies in the social sciences. See especially Piers Gray's *T. S. Eliot's Intellectual and Poetic Development, 1909–1922* (Brighton, Sussex: Harvester Press, 1982). Gray's book includes long excerpts from Eliot's important 1914 essay "The Interpretation of Primitive Ritual." Other excellent books include Robert Crawford's *The Savage and the City in the Work of T. S. Eliot* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), indispensable for relating Eliot's childhood and college readings to his early poems; and William Skaff's *The Philosophy of T. S. Eliot 1909–1927* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987).
4. Eliot, "War-Paint and Feathers," *Athenaeum* (October 17, 1919): 1036.
5. Eliot, "The Beating of a Drum," *Nation & Athenaeum* 34, no. 1 (October 6, 1923): 11.
6. E. B. Tylor, *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Language, Art, and Custom*, 2 vols., 3rd edn. (London: John Murray, 1891).
7. Eliot, "Tarr," *Egoist* 5, no. 8 (September 1918): 106.
8. Eliot, "The Metaphysical Poets," in *Selected Essays* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1950), 241–50; and Eliot, *The Varieties of Metaphysical Poetry*, ed. Ronald Schuchard (London: Faber and Faber, 1993).
9. The censored poems are now available in *Inventions of the March Hare: Poems 1909–1917*, ed. Christopher Ricks (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1996).
10. In Joseph Frank's terminology, Eliot's interest expands to include spatial form. See Frank, "Spatial Form in Modern Literature," in *The Widening Gyre: Crisis and Mastery in Modern Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1963), 3–62.

11. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," in *Selected Essays*, 3–11; "Ulysses, Order and Myth," *Dial* 75, no. 5 (November 1923): 480–3.
12. Eliot, "War-Paint and Feathers," 1036.
13. Jewel Spears Brooker and Joseph Bentley, *Reading The Waste Land: Modernism and the Limits of Interpretation* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1990).
14. Eliot, "The Metaphysical Poets," in *Selected Essays*, 241–50.
15. See, for example, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," 3–12.
16. *The Waste Land: A Facsimile and Transcript of the Original Drafts*, ed. Valerie Eliot (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1971), xxxiii.
17. For a discussion of the important distinction between material and method in Eliot's work, see Jewel Spears Brooker, "The Case of the Missing Abstraction," in *Mastery and Escape*, 110–22.
18. W. B. Yeats, "The Circus Animals' Desertion," in *The Poems of W. B. Yeats*, ed. Richard Finneran (New York: Macmillan, 1983), 348.
19. "The Romantic Englishman, the Comic Spirit, and the Function of Criticism," *Tyrol* 1 (Spring 1921): 4.
20. Review of *The Study of Religions* by Stanley Cook, *Monist* 26, no. 3 (1917): 480.
21. For a linguistically based reading of Eliot and desire, see Harriet Davidson, "The Logic of Desire: The Lacanian Subject of *The Waste Land*," in *The Waste Land: Theory in Practice*, ed. Tony Davies and Nigel Wood (Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1994), 55–82. For a Freudian perspective, see Maud Ellmann, *The Poetics of Impersonality: T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987). For a feminist perspective, see Colleen Lamos, *Deviant Modernism: Sexual and Textual Errancy in T. S. Eliot, James Joyce, and Marcel Proust* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998).
22. *The Girard Reader*, ed. James G. Williams (New York: Crossroad, 1996), 268. Girard's notion of desire can be profitably compared/contrasted to that of Jacques Lacan. Both see desire as fundamentally psychological and as related to insufficiency, and both see desire as intersubjective. In Lacan, the focus is on desire and language; in Girard, on desire and cultural mechanisms for controlling violence. See Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits: A Selection* (New York: Norton, 1977).
23. See René Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, trans. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1965), chapter 1.
24. See Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, chapter 1.
25. René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), 34.
26. *Ibid.*, 35.
27. *Ibid.*, 34–6.
28. Quoted in *T. S. Eliot: The Modernist in History*, ed. Ronald Bush (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 193.
29. Eliot, "Ulysses, Order and Myth," in *Selected Prose*, ed. Frank Kermode (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1975), 177.

30. Such ambivalence, of course, is not unique; it can be found in Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist*, in *Ulysses*, and in many poems of the night from James Thomson to Robert Lowell.
31. *The Letters of T. S. Eliot*, ed. Valerie Eliot (London: Faber and Faber, 1988), vol. 1: 75.
32. Quoted in Ray Monk, *Bertrand Russell* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1996), 440.
33. Eliot, *Inventions of the March Hare*, ed. Christopher Ricks (London: Faber and Faber, 1996), 383.
34. Peter Ackroyd, *T. S. Eliot* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984), 67–8.
35. Quoted in Lyndall Gordon, *T. S. Eliot: An Imperfect Life* (New York: Vintage, 1998), 126.
36. For an interesting account of the triangular relationship between Eliot, his wife, and his former teacher, see Ronald Schuchard, *Eliot's Dark Angel: Intersections of Art and Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 57–8.
37. For a more antagonist feminist reading of "Hysteria" and "Ode," see Colleen Lamos, *Deviant Modernism*, 82–8; 96–108.
38. Bertrand Russell, *Autobiography* (Boston: Little Brown, 1951), vol. 11: 64.
39. Eliot, *Letters*, vol. 1: 151.
40. *The Waste Land: Facsimile and Transcript*, 11, 13.
41. Quotations from Ovid are from *Metamorphoses*, trans. Rolfe Humphries (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1955), Book VI.413–678.
42. In the earliest versions of the myth, Philomela becomes the swallow and Procne becomes the nightingale. See for example *Odyssey* XIX.518–24 and Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*, lines 1142–50 (*Oresteia*, trans. Robert Fagles [New York: Penguin, 1977]). Ovid, in *Metamorphoses* VI, is unclear about which woman becomes which bird. Later writers, confused by Ovid's obscurity and depending on a dubious etymology for Philomela ("song-lover" instead of the far more probable "song-less"), made her the nightingale. It is thus Philomela who enters English literary history as the nightingale.
43. Eliot, "War-Paint and Feathers," 1036.
44. *Odyssey* XIX.518. Aristotle in *Poetics* XVI.41 refers to a lost play by Sophocles on Tereus and Philomela. See also Ovid, *Metamorphoses* VI.412 ff.; Dante, *Purgatorio* IX.13–15, XVII.19–21; Shakespeare, *The Rape of Lucrece*, ll. 1128 ff.; *Cymbeline* II. ii. 18–21, 44–6; Milton, "Il Penseroso"; Keats, "Ode to a Nightingale"; Coleridge, "The Nightingale"; Arnold, "Philomel"; and Swinburne, "Itylus."
45. Eliot, "A Prediction in Regard to Three English Authors," *Vanity Fair* 21, no. 6 (February 1924): 29.
46. Eliot, *The Waste Land: Facsimile and Transcript*, 37.
47. *Ibid.*, 43.
48. "Pervigilium Veneris," trans. Allen Tate, in Tate, *Collected Poems 1919–1976* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1977), 151–61.
49. *Ibid.*, 148.
50. Ellmann, *The Poetics of Impersonality*, 59.