

*The love song of T. S. Eliot: elegiac homoeroticism
in the early poetry*

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T. S. Eliot presents the dilemma of an avowedly heterosexual, homophobic writer whose work is obliquely yet significantly marked by homoerotic investments. How is one to understand such libidinal investments? Given the homophobic cultural climate of the twentieth century, what are the conditions under which a man's love for men could be articulated? Same-sex desires, like those for the other sex, are diverse phenomena; they do not spring from a fundamental essence, whose literary representations either obscure or reveal one's true self, but have multiple constituents and diverse manifestations. Moreover, same-sex desires are complexly interwoven with masculine and feminine identifications. Uncovering homoerotic impulses does not unlock the enigma of Eliot's personality, nor are they the hidden truth of his work. Instead of operating as the scandalous key to Eliot's writings, those desires are woven into its fabric and displayed on its most innocent surfaces. Paradoxically, I will argue, the conditions of possibility for Eliot's representation of homoeroticism are precisely the conditions for their disavowal.

The challenge of understanding the homoeroticism of Eliot's work is compounded by the fact that he actively suppressed public discussion of the issue. Although he almost never commented upon interpretations of his work, Eliot censored the only essay to appear in his lifetime that ventured a homosexual reading of *The Waste Land*. When John Peter published "A New Interpretation of *The Waste Land*" in 1952 – an essay in which the word "homosexual" is never mentioned – Eliot threatened a libel suit against him and demanded the destruction of all extant copies of the issue of *Essays in Criticism* in which the offending article appeared. Peter understands *The Waste Land* as an elegy whose subtext is as follows: "At some previous time the speaker has fallen completely – perhaps the right word is 'irretrievably' in love. The object of this love was a young man who soon afterwards met his death, it would seem by drowning."¹ In a 1969 "Postscript" to the essay, Peter is more explicit, asserting that "one can hardly avoid the

conclusion that in his youth [Eliot] had a close romantic attachment to another young man, and that this far from uncommon type of friendship was rudely cut short when the other was drowned,” adding that the young man was likely Jean Verdenal, Eliot’s intimate friend during his years in Paris, who was killed in World War I (166). Although Peter does not pursue the psychological ramifications of same-sex mourning and employs only textual evidence to support a tentative biographical thesis, his claim that *The Waste Land* is an elegy on “the order of *In Memoriam*” was the impetus for the present study.² Unlike Peter, however, I argue that the elegiac mode was a means for Eliot *simultaneously* to affirm and to repudiate same-sex affection. In short, the literary register that enabled him to articulate homoeroticism is the same that permitted his – and his critics’ – denial of it. The intertwining of homophilia and homophobia in the same gesture attests to the productivity of the homosexual prohibition, which feeds upon the desire that it constrains.

Peter’s 1952 essay was reprinted in *Essays in Criticism* in 1969, accompanied by a bizarre “Postscript” in which he volubly denies any knowledge of homosexuality and clears Eliot of any carnal knowledge of it as well. After mentioning how upset his wife was over his contretemps with Eliot, Peter says that he wrote him “a full apology for causing the poet pain and annoyance, offering . . . to withdraw my interpretation by publishing [a] . . . retraction” (165). He seems to have regarded the matter as “a breach of manners” by raising improper suggestions concerning Eliot’s private life. “Discretion failed me,” he confesses (169), but he nevertheless offers further evidence for his original thesis. Peter concludes his double-voiced defense, on the one hand, by asserting that Eliot’s mask of impersonal classicism was “romanticism running scared,” and, on the other hand, by repudiating his own argument. Maybe he leapt to conclusions and, besides, such a “recondite and labyrinthine modern poem” as *The Waste Land* cannot bear “pat answers” like his (172). Above all, Peter denies what he obscurely calls the “further meanings” that his un-named homosexual interpretation implied, claiming “incomprehension” of them (173). Citing Eliot’s drama *The Elder Statesman*, Peter casts himself as Gomez, the false accuser of Lord Claverton, played by Eliot, who must “vindicate himself against the unfounded extensions” of Peter’s essay. Eliot, like Claverton, is guilty of no “actual misconduct,” his play “disavowing once and for all what my essay may have seemed to imply about the genesis of *The Waste Land*” (174–5). Peter’s mea culpa, with its equivocations – I didn’t know what I was doing; I’m sorry, but I was right anyway; it’s only a private matter, although *The Waste Land* is a public poem; Eliot might have had a

“romantic attachment,” but he didn’t commit sodomy – enacts the painful equivocations and denials that have marked discussions of the embarrassing problem of homoeroticism in Eliot’s work. E. W. F. Tomlin is typical in his complaint against what he calls the “favourite charge” of homosexuality: “The difficulty with the present liberal attitude to homosexuality . . . is that all male friendships of sufficient closeness become automatically the subject of raised eyebrows.”³

Eliot’s denial of homosexuality and his suppression of queer readings of his work have been remarkably successful. Just as critics have been content for nearly a century to accept (or to reject, but often on the same grounds) the guidelines that Eliot laid out in his critical essays for the interpretation of his poetry, so, too, they have almost without exception followed his repudiation of homoeroticism. Critical obeisance to Eliot’s dicta during the mid-years of the twentieth century was mirrored by the wholesale rejection of Eliot’s authority in its closing decades, so that Cynthia Ozick, for instance, claimed in a 1989 essay that “*we no longer live in the literary shadow of T. S. Eliot* . . . The passion for inheritance is dead.” No longer relevant for literary study, she claims, “now Eliot’s elegiac fragments appear too arcane, too aristocratic, and too difficult.”⁴ In a sense, we as 21st-century readers of Eliot stand in a post-elegiac relationship to his texts.

Queer theorists have rarely taken a glance at Eliot, and what gay scholarship exists has been driven into the narrow channel of biographical speculation. Eliot’s censorship of Peter’s essay resulted in total silence on the subject for twenty-five years. James E. Miller’s 1977 landmark study, *T. S. Eliot’s Personal Waste Land*, takes up Peter’s claim that *The Waste Land* was motivated by Eliot’s grief over the death of Verdenal, supporting it by a detailed and insightful interpretation of the poem that links the latter with the figures of Phlebas the Phoenician and the “hyacinth girl” via the oft-quoted line from Ariel’s song in *The Tempest* (1. 2. 398): “Those are pearls that were his eyes.”⁵ Miller’s scholarship remains necessary for understanding the gay subtext of *The Waste Land*, but his work is limited by its biographical focus; lacking the tools of queer theory, Miller falls back on the Verdenal thesis to ground his argument.

Miller’s book was largely ignored or dismissed. Scholars such as Ronald Bush and A. D. Moody simply disregarded it in their influential studies of Eliot.⁶ Those more sensitive to the gender politics of Eliot’s poetry and personal life have argued defensively that his misogyny does *not* imply a latent homosexuality. Peter Ackroyd, for example, claims that “it would be the tritest form of reductionism to assume that Eliot, because he could not adequately deal with female sexuality, was therefore homosexual . . . When

he allowed his sexuality free access, . . . it was of a heterosexual kind." Ackroyd decries the search for a hidden scandal in Eliot's life: "The suggestions of homosexuality are . . . one aspect of the attempt to discover some 'mystery' which he wished to conceal."⁷ What Ackroyd does not envision is that homoeroticism, far from being a guilty secret, might be constitutive of the *least* shameful aspects of Eliot's poetry. His defense of Eliot against the imputation of homosexuality assumes that it is fundamentally incongruent with heterosexual desires. Instead, one might argue that Eliot had no "free access" to either same- or other-sex desires but that both impulses were locked in conflict with his sense of masculinity and with his embattled relation to femininity. To grasp the significance of the homoerotic energies in Eliot's texts requires that we go beyond the limited homo/hetero binary and examine the *productivity* of the homosexual prohibition upon his writings – that is, the ways in which that taboo, in conjunction with his sense of masculine affiliation and his troubled relation to femininity, generated the most remarkable poetry of the early twentieth century.

Until recently, critics have taken a hesitant, noncommittal attitude toward the issue of Eliot's homoeroticism, which is typically framed in terms of his friendship to Verdenal. In her 1998 biography, *T. S. Eliot: An Imperfect Life*, Lyndall Gordon cautiously leaves the issue suspended in a question: "Who can now determine the exact ways people of the past bent their inclinations in order to construct gender according to absurd models of masculinity or femininity? Verdenal was easy with Eliot," helping him to unbend his usually stiff personality. "The Frenchman's most important legacy for Eliot was to offer a blend of sensibility and intellect."⁸ In contrast to her detailed investigation of Eliot's relationships with women, Gordon avoids any analysis of his relationships with men and fails to explore the homoerotic aspects either of his friendship with Verdenal or of his poetry, preferring to read the latter in terms of his spiritual vocation as a Christian. She throws up her hands at the possibility of grasping the intricacies of same-sex affection, revealing a willful ignorance of gay historical scholarship.

John T. Mayer offers a more ample account of what he calls Eliot's "very special relationship" with Verdenal in his 1989 book, *T. S. Eliot's Silent Voices*. Mayer places the love between Verdenal and Eliot in an obfuscating and exculpatory foreign context: "The nature of this love is ambiguous, but European traditions of male friendship recognized various kinds of male bonding, as well as different ways of expressing affection between males unknown to the inhibiting codes that governed male-to-male behavior in the United States."⁹ Mayer's sympathetic but confusing and unsupported

explanation of Eliot's relationship to Verdenal seems to be that, in France, anything goes. More persuasively, he argues that Eliot's unhappy marriage to Vivien Haigh-Wood "altered . . . his appreciation of his friendship with Verdenal . . . The relationship was transformed in Eliot's mind: a friendship that had died was resurrected in memory and charged with an imaginative power quite beyond the living experience."¹⁰ Verdenal's death enabled Eliot, in his poems of the late 1910s and early 1920s, to transform him into an object of love. Despite the shortcomings of Mayer's argument, it frames Eliotic homoeroticism in an elegiac context. In contrast to the murderous aesthetic transfiguration performed in, for instance, "La Figlia" and the "marriage" monologues of this period, such as "Exequy," "Elegy," and "The Death of the Duchess," same-sex mourning in Eliot renders the lost object of desire beautiful after death.

Carole Seymour-Jones's *Painted Shadow*, a recently published, groundbreaking biography of Vivien, makes the strongest case to date for the significance and scope of Eliot's homoerotic experience. In addition to providing a detailed description of his friendship with Verdenal, she examines the erotic triangle between Eliot, his wife, and Bertrand Russell, arguing that "there was an element of homosexuality by proxy in the way in which Eliot offered Vivien to Russell."¹¹ Although Seymour-Jones neglects to explore the psychological ramifications of such triangulated desire, which fits the pattern first analyzed by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick,¹² she offers a wealth of hitherto unknown information concerning Eliot's relationships with numerous young men throughout the 1920s and 30s, including Léonide Massine, a dancer with the Ballets Russes, and a German youth named Jack, who shared a cottage with the Eliots for six months. She concludes that "there is little doubt that [Jack] was, in fact, romantically and sexually involved with Tom" (368). Her extensive research turns up others, such as Philip Ritchie, a gay young man who occasionally stayed at Eliot's private rooms in Burleigh Mansions – a hideaway that enabled him to lead a double life. Eliot's obsessive interest in sodomy is evident in his pornographic verses, which shocked even Ezra Pound, who urged him to "try to normalfy your vices" (535). While some of Seymour-Jones's speculations are controversial, the breadth of her archival discoveries confirms the range and importance of both Eliot's homoeroticism and his homophobia.

In general, romantic love is represented as elegiac in Eliot's poetry. When the lost one is female, as in "Elegy," she is almost invariably execrated, but when the lost one is male, as in the "Death by Water" section of *The Waste Land*, he is venerated. As he wrote of John Webster in "Whispers of Immortality," Eliot was himself a man "much possessed by death." While nearly

all forms of human passion – both hetero and homo – are represented in his early poems as in some sense morbid, that morbidity possesses distinctively different valences when the dead object is male rather than female. Only when the latter is male do Eliot's texts frame the loss in tender, memorial tones. By contrast, when the latter is female, his texts typically represent the departed in an aggressive or guilty manner. In both cases, death is the condition of the possibility for (or the outcome of) the expression of passion, whether affectionate or hostile.

Generically and emotionally, homoeroticism in Eliot's early poetry is elegiac inasmuch as it commemorates a love for the dead. Regardless of its biographical sources, the structure of this desire is indicative of the configuration of melancholic homoeroticism between men characteristic of the early twentieth century. Indeed, Eliotic melancholia seems expressive of a cast of mind characteristic of modern masculinity as a whole. With the advent of the sharp division between heterosexuality and homosexuality in this period, love between men was rendered pathological, resulting in the phenomenon that Sedgwick has called "homosexual panic." Eliot's disgust at and suppression of the Peter article is ample evidence of such a panic, yet his repudiation of homosexuality renders all the more compelling an examination of the conditions of an avowal of love between men in the early twentieth century. Eliot's strategy for affirming a denied or refused love appears to be one of displacement through the elegiac mode. More than an individual strategy, though, Eliot's poetry exemplifies what Judith Butler has described as a general "heterosexual melancholia" common to modern Western culture, in which normative gender and sexual identities are the products of the disavowal of homosexual attachments.

"Elegiac love" operates on several levels in Eliot's texts. The term, as I use it, embraces the many representations of love for dead men in his early poetry, so frequent as to constitute one of its most powerful themes. On the psychological level, these representations, taken together with the pervasive morbidity of his poetry, suggests that such love is structured as melancholic. This psychosexual dynamic is historically and culturally produced rather than a timeless truth of the unconscious or merely a peculiarity of Eliot's personal psyche. Finally, the homoerotic elegiacism of Eliot's poetry parallels the citational practice of his literary criticism, which memorializes a set of poetic forefathers with whom Eliot passionately identified and who, though dead, breathed life into his poetry. On each of these three levels – the thematic, the psychosexual, and the citational or intertextual – the elegiac mode enables the expression of affection but also permits the disavowal of a dangerous homosexuality. In short, in the elegy, the conditions

of possibility for the expression of love are also the conditions for its denial. This is not to say that Eliot was latently homosexual but rather that he found a way of articulating same-gender desire that eluded the narrow terms of homosexual definition in his day and that affirmed his masculine identity. Such a strategy, which relies upon a poetic patrimony, was available to other male modernist writers but not to women. While the implications of Eliot's strategy for modernist literature call for further exploration, in the remainder of this essay I will examine the aforementioned aspects of elegiac love in Eliot's early poetry and offer readings of two poems, "The Love Song of St. Sebastian" and "The Death of Saint Narcissus," that exemplify such a love.

Eliot's mourning possesses the "emotional intensity and violence" that he sympathetically observed in Tennyson's lament for Arthur Hallam – in Eliot's words, an "emotion so deeply suppressed, even from himself, as to tend . . . toward the blackest melancholia" and reaching "no ultimate clear purgation."¹³ In one sense, mourning the loss of a friend afforded Eliot, like Tennyson, freedom from homophobic self-censorship; death is the condition of possibility for giving breath to a love that, in life, has fatal consequences. The "pearls that were his eyes" of *The Waste Land* are beautiful only beneath the waves. In a more profound sense, Eliot constitutes himself, as an authorial subject, as already mortified. The personae in his early poetry typically speak as though they were entombed, and Eliot seems to have envisioned himself as enduring a living death. His "mortuary eroticism," in Frank Kermode's phrase, serves less as a legitimation for a denigrated homosexual passion than as a way of achieving imaginary union with the lost one.¹⁴ Embracing in death like Dickens's mutual friends, Eliot's speakers identify with the deceased in a gesture that commingles desire and resemblance. Like Phlebas and the other drowned young men whom they tenderly describe, Eliot's speakers seem to wish to *become* them as well as to touch and possess them. Such an identificatory wish is characteristic of mourning.

An example of this recurrent pattern of postmortem love and an important intertextual site of homoeroticism in Eliot's early poetry is Statius's speech to Virgil in Dante's *Purgatorio*.¹⁵ Addressing Virgil, his poetic mentor and dear friend, Statius says,

So may you find
the measure of the love that warms me to you
when for it I lose all else from my mind,
forgetting we are empty semblances
and taking shadows to be substances.

(Canto xxi, ll. 133–6)¹⁶

Eliot cited these lines as the epigraph to *Ara Vos Prec* (1920) and subsequently placed them at the head of the Prufrock section of *Poems: 1909–1925*. The shadowy voice of Statius in Purgatory resonated for Eliot with that of the late Verdenal. In the 1925 edition of *Poems* he brought together the earlier dedication to Verdenal of *Prufrock and Other Observations* (1917) with the quotation from Dante, affirming the posthumous significance of his friendship with Verdenal.¹⁷ In subsequent editions, the Prufrock section (“Prufrock and Other Observations”) remains headed by the double epigraph, “For Jean Verdenal, 1889–1915/mort aux Dardanelles,” followed by Statius’s speech, quoted in Italian.

Eliot’s citation of Statius’s speech, like his more frequent quotation of that of Arnaut Daniel, another penitent, is representative of a common rhetorical structure in his early poetry, what I call “the voice from the dead.” The speaker of “Exequy,” for example, addresses the reader from the grave and concludes by reciting Daniel’s line “be mindful in due time of my pain” (*Purgatorio*, Canto xxvi, l. 147). The “dead jew eyes” of “Dirge,” another unpublished poem from 1915, stare up luridly from under water. “Dirge” is a parodic version of Ariel’s song, opening with the line “Full fathom five your Bleistein lies.” Similarly, “Elegy” – a third unpublished poem that appeared in the *Facsimile* edition of *The Waste Land* – is, as Miller puts it, an “anti-elegy” in which the speaker, “as in a tale by Poe,” tries to stifle the return of the ghost of his dead wife, the “wrong’d Aspatia,” who refuses to remain in her “charnel vault.”¹⁸ Finally, one of the most interesting but overlooked poems of this period is “Ode,” in which the author surrogate in the poem – a young bridegroom and failed poet – seems to write his own elegy from beneath the waves, his corpse a narcissistic reflection of his creator’s morbid life. The motif of drowning is relentlessly reiterated in Eliot’s texts, from “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” “Hysteria,” and *The Waste Land* through *Four Quartets* and *The Family Reunion*. I have argued elsewhere that this motif of “death by water” reflects the rather obvious threat of female sexuality as well as Eliot’s erotic idealization of the “Phlebas” figure.¹⁹ The elegiac plangency and doomed narcissism of this figure is also reminiscent of Ezra Pound’s self-memorialization in the first section of “Hugh Selwyn Mauberley.”

The elegiac aspect of Eliot’s poetry has been noted by a number of critics besides Peter, most recently by Jahan Ramazani, who, paraphrasing Eliot, observes that “his ‘thought clings round dead limbs,’ betraying a strong affinity for the elegy,” and that “the elegy is one of the most important genres in [his] poetry.”²⁰ Like Miller and Gregory Jay, Ramazani points out the presence of formal and stylistic elements of the genre of the elegy in

The Waste Land as well as the poem's well-known allusions to Whitman's "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloomed" and Milton's "Lycidas."²¹ In keeping with the revisionist tendency of modern elegies, according to Ramazani, *The Waste Land* rejects the consolations of the traditional elegy in favor of an ironic and irredeemptive stance toward death.

Most critics who regard *The Waste Land* as elegiac ask, understandably, for what or whom did Eliot mourn? What loss or whose death prompted Eliot's grief? The list of candidates is often rehearsed: Verdenal, in Eliot's words, "mixed with the mud of Gallipoli"²²; Western literature, whose demise is recorded in the poem's allusive fragmentation; or, most broadly, Western civilization itself, ravaged by the Great War and modernity in general. Each of these candidates is in various ways an unsatisfactory answer to the question "Who died?" The poet's profound mourning seems motivated less by the death of someone or something than by an obscure yet pervasive sense of loss. Eliot would not and *could not* name his grief, I argue, because it is primarily not for a person or an object exterior to himself but is constitutive of himself as a subject. This is not to say that Eliot did not mourn the death of Verdenal or the decline of Western culture, but rather that the extent and structure of his melancholia suggests that it is fundamental to his subjective constitution and poetic practice. At bottom, Eliot's melancholia is not for a particular person but for a kind of love – that is, for an erotic aim, not an object.

In "Mourning and Melancholia," Freud argues that the melancholic responds to grief by incorporating the lost beloved within his ego.²³ Unwilling to give up his commitment to the beloved, he identifies with the latter in a regressively narcissistic move. The mingling of identification and desire in Eliot's elegiac references to dead young men, the mirroring relation between his speakers and those whom they mourn, and, finally, the echolalic effect of Eliot's poetic ventriloquism and his citational practice in general support a reading of homoeroticism in his texts as an imaginary incorporation of the dead. Such an identificatory union dissolves the distinction between mourner and corpse, thus threatening the dissolution of the elegist himself and the collapse of generic form, resulting in poems that, like Edgar Allan Poe's tales, feature a self-doubled, consciously dead speaker who gazes upon his own, ghostly self.²⁴

The identificatory impulse in Eliot's early poems runs the risk of feminizing – and homosexualizing – their speakers. Rejecting the Victorian convention of sentimental, "womanly" grief (the Emmeline Grangerford tradition), modernist male elegists adopted a tough, satiric posture toward mourning that, while remasculinizing the genre, nonetheless betrayed the

homoeroticism that lurks within expressions of longing for and identification with dead friends or dead authors.²⁵ One recalls Eliot's essay on *In Memoriam* and his 1919 article "Reflections on Contemporary Poetry," in which he discusses his "passionate" "feeling of profound kinship or . . . peculiar personal intimacy with . . . a dead author."²⁶ Moreover, the remasculinization of the genre of the elegy points to the repudiation, by male modernist writers, of feminine identifications, a repudiation that is a prerequisite of the heterosexualization of male desire, a process that is nonetheless haunted by the residue of its forgotten losses.

According to Freud, the melancholic refuses to abandon his erotic cathexis on a person whom he has loved and lost, unlike the mourner, who eventually accepts his bereavement.²⁷ This refusal of abandonment consists of two conflicting processes: first, the melancholic internalizes the beloved within his ego, thus identifying with and preserving the lost person. Second, he splits off a part of the ego (a part that Freud later calls the super-ego), which, bearing his denied anger at his loss, torments the other part of the ego that identifies with and preserves the beloved, thereby generating a psychic battle that leads to an impasse. Freud assumed that melancholia is an aberrant response to deprivation – an experience that befalls an already constituted subject who refuses to come to grips with reality – but Judith Butler argues that melancholia is the founding moment of subjectivation.

Butler's influential concept of "heterosexual melancholia" offers a useful conceptual paradigm for understanding the elegiac character of Eliot's poetry, including his "elegiac" citational practice, and so warrants a cursory account. In *The Psychic Life of Power*, she argues that, in a heteronormative society, subjects can achieve proper masculinity and femininity only by abandoning early homosexual attachments. The child's renunciation of the parent of the same sex as an object of love requires that both the homosexual aim and the homosexual object be foreclosed, not transferred onto a substitute. Instead of simply giving up one's love for the same-sex parent, the very possibility of such a love must be forsworn and forgotten, resulting in what Butler calls the "never-never" of homosexual disavowal: for the heterosexualized subject, same-sex love never happened and was never lost. That negated love is preserved through "melancholic incorporation" in the form of *identification* with the parent of the same sex. As a consequence, "melancholic identification is central to the process whereby the ego assumes a gendered character."²⁸

Butler seizes upon Freud's concept of melancholia, first, because foreclosure, as she sees it, is an original, "preemptive loss" that precedes and forms the self-reflexive subject and, second, because particular, socially regulated

foreclosures are constitutive of normal subjectivity. Specifically, the barring of homosexuality is "foundational" to what she terms "a certain heterosexual version of the subject" (23). Melancholia is the typical condition of heterosexual subjectivation in twentieth-century Western, heteronormative culture, while homosexual desire is the unconscious, disavowed object of the normal, straight person's psychic constitution. Instead of an extreme version of mourning, as Freud saw it, melancholia is characteristic of the way in which subjects in general are formed. More than a psychological process of bereavement, melancholia, in Butler's final formulation in *The Psychic Life of Power*, is a decisive and apparently universal event in the prehistory of the ego, an originary moment that happens once and for all, and of which the subject is necessarily unaware. It is certainly not an affective state. For Butler, melancholia lies at the source of the psyche itself, denoting the primordial turn that "divide[s] . . . the ego and object" (170) and that generates the ego as its own, self-reflexive object. "The [melancholic] turn from the [lost] object to the ego produces the ego" as a "*psychic object*" (168; emphasis Butler's), so that "there can be no ego without melancholia" (171). In short, the ontological distinction between subject and object is the aftereffect of an "opaque" primal scene in which what will become the subject defends itself against the deprivation of the beloved, same-sex object by withdrawing the latter into itself. The ego "is the retroactive product" of this melancholic infolding (177). In Butler's scenario of the genesis of the reflexive subject, the object preexists the subject, which emerges as such only upon the withdrawal and subsequent incorporation of the lost object into itself, the subject thus becoming, in part, that object.

Among the problems and possibilities of Butler's scheme, it is noteworthy that, paradoxically, her attempt to denaturalize heterosexuality makes it difficult to understand how anyone could *not* become heterosexual. By situating homosexual foreclosure at the inaugural moment of the ego, Butler implies that the disavowal of same-sex love is structural to the very creation of the ego. In short, the ego is heterosexualized at birth. Although one might subsequently refuse heterosexual interpellation (as she argues), the process of subjectivation in a society such as ours is ineluctably heterosexual. As critics have observed, her model of subject formation requires a voluntaristic understanding of an human agent who is capable of bucking the very forces by which she has been constituted. Eliot was not such a resistant subject, however; indeed, he is a textbook illustration of her theory.

In Butler's terms, the elegiac mourning and the sadomasochistic violence of Eliot's early poetry are manifestations of heterosexual melancholia, in

which disavowed same-sex love is partly incorporated within the self, and partly split off and debased through the torments of a sadistic conscience. Refusing to grieve his unacknowledged losses, Eliot wrote that disavowal into his texts. In a letter to Conrad Aiken in which he enclosed "The Love Song of St. Sebastian," Eliot wrote, "I have studied S. Sebastians – why would anyone paint a beautiful youth and stick him full of pins (or arrows) unless he felt a little as the hero of my verse? Only there's nothing homosexual about this."²⁹ Eliot continued to claim that there was "nothing homosexual" about his poetry, notably in his successful suppression of Peter's essay. His attack on Peter enacts the "never-never" of homosexual disavowal, as Butler describes it: I never loved a man, and I never lost him.

Eliot's remarks in the letter to Aiken reveal his identification with those who have painted Saint Sebastians and stuck him with arrows, murdering the beautiful youth who is also the object of their love, just as the speaker of "The Love Song of St. Sebastian" murders his female love object.³⁰ Confessing that "I would flog myself until I bled," the speaker revels in the "torture and delight" of self-flagellation. His nocturnal ritual is a form of religious devotion, performed in "hour on hour of prayer," strongly suggesting his deeper identification with Saint Sebastian himself, who was, according to legend, erotically tortured on account of his Christian faith. Moreover, his masochism acquires a certain beauty, as his blood "ring[s] the lamp / And glisten[s] in the light." As persecutor and persecuted, the speaker of Eliot's poem enacts the roles of *both* sadist and masochist or, in the imagery of arrows that is strikingly absent from the poem, the penetrator and the penetrated. At the psychic level, "The Love Song of St. Sebastian" stages the internal, homoerotic conflict of melancholia that Butler outlines while, at the textual level, it preserves the heterosexuality of its hero by rendering the object of desire female. As Richard A. Kaye observes, however, the only indication of the gender of the beloved is a single reference to her breasts.³¹

Kaye has provided an extensive and valuable survey of the literary sources and the historical context of Eliot's poem in the fin-de-siècle "homosexual cult" of Saint Sebastian. Building on the scholarship of Christopher Ricks and Harvey Gross, he reviews the numerous poems, novels, stories, monographs, and plays produced on Saint Sebastian – "the suffering Bacchus of Christianity," as he is described in Anatole France's novel *The Red Lily* (1894) – in the period immediately preceding Eliot's composition of his poem in 1914.³² Despite the ample evidence he adduces for the "homoerotic import" of the figure of Saint Sebastian in decadent literature, Kaye argues

that Eliot “sought to erase St. Sebastian’s implications as a feminized male” and to refashion him for “nonhomosexual ends,” a gesture typical, he claims, of modernist poets who “mined material” from fin-de-siècle aestheticism yet cleansed it of its homosexuality.³³ In short, Kaye is faced with the dilemma of interpreting a poem that should be homoerotic yet which, on its face, is not. This dilemma arises, however, from Kaye’s neglect of the psychosexual dynamics of the poem, in which melancholia, sadomasochism, and disavowed same-sex desire are potently conjoined.

This conjunction is spelled out in Freud’s essay “A Child Is Being Beaten,” which serves as a script for the first half of “The Love Song of St. Sebastian” and which clarifies the link between the theme of mourning in Eliot’s poetry and the poem’s sadomasochistic scene. According to Freud, the prototypical male masochistic fantasy is one of being beaten by the mother, yet behind it is another, displaced fantasy in which the son is beaten by the father. The mother is a stand-in, meant to screen the son from the ultimate wish expressed by the fantasy: that he is loved by the father.³⁴ The beating fantasy, in Freud’s view, originates in the son’s desire for the father and preserves that desire by disguising its object yet maintaining its aim, insofar as the son is in a “feminine” relation to him. In Eliot’s poem, the speaker’s self-flagellation is performed in subservience to a woman (Freud’s mother figure) whom, in the second stanza, he proceeds to throttle. The climax of his devotion to her is her strangulation: “I should love you the more because I had mangled you.” Far from being a “nonhomosexual” poem, “St. Sebastian” is charged with a veiled homoeroticism, while the switch from masochism to sadism in its second half may be driven by the speaker’s (and Eliot’s) disavowal that “there’s [anything] homosexual about this.” Moreover, Grover Smith observes that the poem features an “alter ego of the poet” much like the mad speaker of Poe’s “For Annie,” who, entombed alive, “speaks as one dead.”³⁵

“The Death of Saint Narcissus,” a contemporary companion to “The Love Song of St. Sebastian,” features a fiery rather than a watery death, for which Dante’s *Purgatorio* is the primary locus. The chief difference between the voices from the flames and those from beneath the water is that the former are consumed by a refining fire seemingly intended to burn away the lusts of the flesh. Although some critics, notably Gordon,³⁶ interpret the former as admonitions to Eliot on his way to a Christian “new life,” her redemptive reading fails to account for the pleasure with which these “singèd reveller[s] of the fire” (“The Burnt Dancer”) indulge their passions. These two voices from the tomb – the voice from beneath the water and the sadomasochistic one from the fire – are complementary components of

Eliotic melancholia, self-elegies in which the speaker takes himself as the lost object of love.

Although no arrows appear in "The Love Song of St. Sebastian," there are plenty in "The Death of Saint Narcissus." The latter is absorbed in his bodily sensations, of the wind, of his own legs passing each other, and of his crossed arms. He becomes so enamored of his own beauty that "He could not live mens' ways, but became a dancer before God." The narcissistic saint indulges in a series of fantasies: that he was sure he had been a tree, that he knew he had been a fish held in his own fingers, and finally that he had been a young girl caught by a drunken old man. His visions entail the same sort of merging of the masculine subject and feminine object of desire that we have seen in Eliot's elegiac poems. Saint Narcissus is ultimately "struck down" by his "self-knowledge" in a death that enacts the martyrdom of St. Sebastian. Like the latter, "his flesh was in love with the burning arrows," and so he danced "Until the arrows came." The orgasmic "coming" of the arrows mimes his own orgasm in another intertwining of subject and object, sadist and masochist, or penetrator and penetrated. The phallic arrows (described as "penetrant" in the first draft of the poem) imply the homoeroticism that coincides with the autoeroticism of the text, confirming the link between male same-sex desire, self-love, and masochism that characterizes Eliot's elegiac poetry. Moreover, the opening lines of the poem, with the image of the shadow of a grey rock – recognizable from their subsequent insertion, in revised form, in the first part of *The Waste Land* – conclude with the speaker's direct address to the reader: "I will show you his bloody cloth and limbs / And the grey shadow on his lips." Displaying to us the livid corpse of Saint Narcissus, Eliot's speaker eulogizes not only a death that prefigures his own but also an affection that he can only affirm through the demise of its object.

We turn, finally and briefly, to the third aspect of Eliotic elegiacism, what I call his citational practice, by which I refer to the operation of quoting, alluding, borrowing, imitating, footnoting, and other forms of referring to other literary texts. Not only are Eliot's early poems preoccupied, thematically and psychologically, with men whose deaths they mourn and with whom the speakers of his poems identify, but Eliot's relation to the literary tradition in general is also melancholic. As I argue in *Deviant Modernism*, the profusion of allusions in his poetry constitutes an elegy for the literary tradition it evokes, which, in Eliot's case, refers to a distinctly paternal heritage.³⁷ Likewise, Ramazani notes that the fragmentary discourse employed by Eliot "implicitly functions as a mode of inscription – an epitaph," so that quotations, such as the repetition of Spenser's line

"Sweet Thames, run softly till I end my song" in *The Waste Land*, become "an elegiac device."³⁸ Eliot's citational practice manifests his identification with his self-designated literary forebears, concomitant with a guilty sense of failure at falling short of their standard and, more broadly, a feeling of loss. This is precisely the dilemma of the masochist hounded by his sadistic conscience. Indeed, Eliot's citational practice enacts an erotics of submission to the demands of paternal authority. The poet's "continual surrender of himself," as he writes in "Tradition and the Individual Talent," is a surrender to literary fathers.³⁹ The many allusions woven into the fabric of his poems point away from a Bloomian Oedipal scenario toward a masochistic one in which the father is the object of identification and, at bottom, of love. Eliot allied himself with his chosen literary patriarchs, internalized them as ideals, and wanted to accede to their ranks, yet suffered, in Bush's words, from "a perpetual feeling of unworthiness."⁴⁰ Eliot's citational practice placed him in a "feminine" position of subordination to literary authority, one in which his own mastery as a poet devolved from his devotion to his precursors – in a word, from the dead.

The cruelties of the conscience evident throughout Eliot's work attest to the internal aggression of melancholia, in which one part of the self makes war on the other, as well as, perhaps, to the self-annihilating desire for death. Freud observed that "in melancholia the super-ego . . . becomes a gathering place for the death instincts."⁴¹ Should we thus understand the suppressed homoeroticism of Eliot's poetry as a manifestation of an impulse to die?

The drive toward death in Eliot's poems is indistinguishable from their disavowed homoeroticism inasmuch as, for Eliot, as for most heterosexual men of his time, the rectum is, so to speak, the grave. Leo Bersani describes "the jouissance of exploded limits, [and the] ecstasy of suffering" that comes from acquiescing to the "strong yet terrifying appeal of powerlessness."⁴² Such a loss of control – or what Eliot describes in *The Waste Land* as "the awful daring of a moment's surrender" and, tellingly, in "Saint Narcissus," as becoming like "a young girl / Caught in the woods by a drunken old man" – was powerfully attractive to him. Eliot appears to have been drawn to self-abasement, even to the disintegration of the self. I disagree with Bersani that this "self-shattering" is "wholly alien" to "the melancholy of the post-Oedipal super-ego's moral masochism," yet his description of erotic asceticism in some respects aptly delineates Eliot's situation.⁴³ The punishments exacted by Eliot's conscience, and the annihilating pleasures of the escape that he envisioned from them, are continuous with what Freud called "erotogenic masochism," which he aligned with a fundamental striving

toward organic equilibrium – in a word, with a yearning for death.⁴⁴ Bersani offers his theory as an account of male homosexual pleasure in which the latter, bound up with mastery and subordination, entails, in George Bataille's words, "a radical disintegration and humiliation of the self."⁴⁵ However, Bersani's theory expressly discounts the distinctly "moral" aspect of Eliot's self-torture, and what he calls "solipsistic jouissance" cannot be construed, as he claims, as "our primary hygienic practice of nonviolence."⁴⁶ While Eliot evidently imagined same-sex love as fatal – emotionally and socially, if not otherwise – that imagination does not necessitate positing an instinctual death drive; on the contrary, the powerful cultural prohibition against homosexuality amply accounts for his sense that to love another man was ruinous.

We may never know if Eliot loved Jean Verdenal, nor need we. It is clear, though, that most expressions of love in his early poetry are homo-elegiac. Not only are the gestures of affection in these poems phrased as grief over a "bewildering minute" of passion for a lost beloved, but they lament the deceased young men with whom the speakers of his poems identify, so that Eliotic melancholia embraces the narcissistic, masochistic death of the self together with the death of the beloved. Moreover, Eliot's oeuvre mourns a past masculine poetic tradition through his practice of citing. Despite his claim never to have loved, much less to have lost, a man, queer desires leak out of his poetry.

Eliot's elegies for drowned sailors, together with the perverse ecstasies of Saints Sebastian and Narcissus as well as his devotion to demanding literary fathers, portray a melancholia that has no discernable object, for Eliot's texts eloquently evoke the death of a love that they cannot affirm and thus cannot explicitly name. Indeed, the melancholia that pervades his early work need not and cannot be attributed to an individual bereavement but, given the general character of his homosexual disavowal, are better ascribed to a kind of love or erotic aim. Eliot's poetry demonstrates not simply his repression of homoerotic desire but the productivity of that repression in his profuse and moving expressions of fondness for dead men.

Inasmuch as the elegiac mode enabled Eliot to articulate an affection that he also denied, it is fitting to conclude by remarking on a handwritten scrap of verse that he left with the manuscript of *The Waste Land*. Beginning with the oft-quoted line from *The Tempest* referring to a drowned sailor ("Those are pearls that were his eyes. See!"), Eliot describes how "the crab clambers through his stomach, the eel grows big / And the torn algae drift above him," concluding with the tender words, "Still and quiet brother are you still and quiet."⁴⁷ Portions of this discarded scrap were subsequently

incorporated into lines 48 and 401–4 of the published version of the poem. In the course of their transformation, these lines underwent a sea-change that silently buried their homoeroticism. Eliot's early draft of Part V of *The Waste Land* reads: "we brother, what have we given? / My friend, my blood, shaking my heart." The second line was revised to "My friend, my friend, beating in my heart," followed by the famous lines describing an instant of unforgettable passion: "The awful daring of a moment's surrender / Which an age of prudence can never retract."⁴⁸ Working on the draft, Eliot crossed out the Tennysonian reference to "brother" in the first line and further altered the second line, references that link the "brother" with "pearls that were his eyes" in the previous fragment. Instead, he prudently omitted any indication of a drowned blood-brother, retracting that expression of love while announcing his refusal to do so in ambiguous words cleansed of perversion. Edited out of *The Waste Land*, the "still and quiet brother" nevertheless haunts it as its disavowed ghost.

NOTES

1. John Peter, "A New Interpretation of *The Waste Land*," *Essays in Criticism* 19, no. 2 (1969): 143; further page references are included in the text.
2. A more distant but effectual inspiration for this essay is Christopher Craft's chapter on *In Memoriam*, "'Descend, Touch, and Enter': Tennyson's Strange Manner of Address," in *Another Kind of Love: Male Homosexual Desire in English Discourse, 1850–1920* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 44–70. Craft observes that Eliot, in his essay on *In Memoriam*, obliquely notices "the homoerotic basis of the elegy's extensive yearning" (53–4). Eliot "clearly recognizes that the elegy's desire for Christ is [in Eliot's words] 'at best but a continuance, or a substitute for the joys of friendship on earth,'" and "chastens" Tennyson for "the startling clarity of his longing" for Arthur Hallam (59). Craft claims that Eliot "inherits" Tennyson's "tactful" expression of homoeroticism but "reproves" his "passionate failure" to sublimate it sufficiently (59).
3. E. W. F. Tomlin, "T. S. Eliot: An Expostulation by Way of a Memoir," *Agenda* 23, nos. 1–2 (1985): 141.
4. Cynthia Ozick, "T. S. Eliot at 101," *New Yorker*, November 20, 1989, 152, 154 (emphasis Ozick's).
5. James E. Miller, Jr., *T. S. Eliot's Personal Waste Land: Exorcism of the Demons* (University Park: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1977). According to Miller, the line from Ariel's song is "a kind of refrain sounding throughout *The Waste Land*" (40) where it is associated with the Phoenician sailor (ll. 47–8). The latter, in turn, is linked to the hyacinth garden in the manuscript version of Part II of the poem. For the masculinity of the hyacinth "girl" see G. Wilson Knight, "Thoughts on *The Waste Land*," *Denver Quarterly* 7, no. 2 (Summer 1972): 1–13, whom Miller cites.

6. Ronald Bush, *T. S. Eliot: A Study in Character and Style* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), and A. David Moody, *Thomas Stearns Eliot: Poet* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).
7. Peter Ackroyd, *T. S. Eliot: A Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984), 310.
8. Lyndall Gordon, *T. S. Eliot: An Imperfect Life* (New York: Norton, 1998), 53. Gordon scarcely mentions Verdenal in her earlier biography, *Eliot's Early Years* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1977), and does not refer to the question of the homosexual valence of his friendship with Eliot.
9. John T. Mayer, *T. S. Eliot's Silent Voices* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 199.
10. Mayer, *Eliot's Silent Voices*, 201.
11. Carole Seymour-Jones, *Painted Shadow: The Life of Vivienne Eliot, First Wife of T. S. Eliot, and the Long-Suppressed Truth about Her Influence on Eliot* (New York: Doubleday, 2002), 200; further page references are included in the text.
12. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).
13. T. S. Eliot, "In Memoriam," in *Selected Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1951; rpt. 1991), 332.
14. Frank Kermode, introduction to T. S. Eliot, *Selected Prose*, ed. Frank Kermode (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975), 13.
15. The relevance to a queer reading of Eliot's poetry of his references to the *Purgatorio* and the *Inferno* calls for clarification. Although the sodomites in Hell (Canto XV) occupy the last ring and are compelled to tread on an arid and barren plain reminiscent of *The Waste Land*, Dante is surprised to discover there his beloved teacher, Brunetto Latini, in a recognition scene that Eliot openly imitates in the "dead patrol" section of *Little Gidding* (see Miller, *Eliot's Personal Waste Land*, 144–51). In the *Purgatorio*, sodomy is no longer a sin of violence against nature but one of excessive love. The circle of the lustful in Canto XXVI is occupied by both sodomites and *ermafrodito*, which is sometimes translated as *hermaphrodites* but which here is equivalent to "heterosexuals." (See Joseph Pequigney, "Sodomy in Dante's *Inferno* and *Purgatorio*," *Representations* 36 [Fall 1991]: 22–42). As one of the latter, Arnaut Daniel, like the sodomites, is guilty of sensual indulgence. Pequigney also points out that Virgil, Dante's guide and the dear friend whom Statius addresses in Canto XXV, was known to have been attracted to boys.
16. Dante Alighieri, *The Purgatorio*, trans. John Ciardi (New York: New American Library, 1957), 219–20.
17. See Mayer, *Eliot's Silent Voices*, 199–201, and Miller, *Eliot's Personal Waste Land*, 17–18, for the shifting position of this epigraph from Dante in the early editions of Eliot's poetry.
18. Miller, *Eliot's Personal Waste Land*, 83, 140.
19. See Colleen Lamos, *Deviant Modernism: Sexual and Textual Errancy in T. S. Eliot, James Joyce, and Marcel Proust* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 108, 112–13.
20. Jahan Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 25.

21. For Milton's and, especially, Whitman's presence in *The Waste Land*, see Gregory Jay, *T. S. Eliot and the Poetics of Literary History* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1983), 170f. Jay observes the "recurrent fascination with watery death" in Eliot's poems from 1918 to 1921, which he understands in terms of Whitman's evocation of the ocean as a "Dark Mother." In a subsequent essay, Jay remarks briefly on *The Waste Land* as a homoerotic elegy and asks, suggestively, "What if, following Sedgwick, one reads the poem . . . as the internal crisis of the social construction of heterosexuality?" "Postmodernism in *The Waste Land*: Women, Mass Culture, and Others," in *Rereading the New: A Backward Glance at Modernism*, ed. Kevin Dettmar (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), 236.
22. T. S. Eliot, "A Commentary," *Criterion* 13 (April 1934): 452. Peter Sacks argues that "Verdenal's death was certainly part of the private and public devastation mourned in *The Waste Land*." *The English Elegy: Studies in the Genre from Spenser to Yeats* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), 261.
23. Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," in *General Psychological Theory*, ed. Philip Rieff (New York: Collier, 1963), 170.
24. See Grover Smith, "Eliot and the Ghost of Poe," in *T. S. Eliot: A Voice Descending*, ed. Shyamal Bagchee (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990), 149–63. Smith observes the similarity between Poe's "encoffined" speakers and Dante's damned.
25. Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning*, 21. Ramazani neglects the homoerotic aspects of the elegy and deliberately conflates Freud's distinction between mourning and melancholia, which is crucial to understanding the link between desire and identification at work in the latter.
26. T. S. Eliot, "Reflections on Contemporary Poetry," *Egoist* 6, no. 3 (July 1919): 39.
27. Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," 164–79.
28. Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 132–3; further page references are included in the text.
29. T. S. Eliot, *The Letters of T. S. Eliot*, vol. 1: 1898–1922, ed. Valerie Eliot (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1988), 44.
30. The Wildean echoes in "The Love Song of St. Sebastian" are noted by Christopher Ricks in T. S. Eliot, *Inventions of the March Hare: Poems 1909–1917*, ed. Christopher Ricks (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1996), 267–73.
31. Richard A. Kaye, "'A Splendid Readiness for Death': T. S. Eliot, the Homosexual Cult of St. Sebastian, and World War I," *Modernism/Modernity* 6, no. 2 (1999): 110.
32. Quoted in Kaye, "Splendid Readiness," 114; see Harvey Gross, "The Figure of Saint Sebastian," *Southern Review* 21, no. 4 (1985): 974–84, for an account of d'Annunzio's play "Le Martyre de Saint Sebastien," performed by Ida Rubinstein in Paris (1911), likely an influence on Eliot's poem.
33. Kaye, "Splendid Readiness," 109–10.
34. Sigmund Freud, "A Child Is Being Beaten," in *Sexuality and the Psychology of Love*, ed. Philip Rieff (New York: Collier, 1963), 126–7.

35. Smith, "Ghost of Poe," 153, 155.
36. Gordon, *Eliot's Early Years* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 58–63.
37. Lamos, *Deviant Modernism*, 61–78.
38. Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning*, 28.
39. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," in *Selected Essays*, 17.
40. Bush, *Eliot*, 7.
41. Sigmund Freud, *The Ego and the Id*, ed. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1962), 44.
42. Leo Bersani, "Is the Rectum a Grave?" in *AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism*, ed. Douglas Crimp (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1988), 217.
43. Bersani, "Rectum," 217–18.
44. Sigmund Freud, "The Economic Problem of Masochism," in *General Psychological Theory*, ed. Philip Rieff (New York: Collier, 1963), 194. Without going into the details of Freud's or Bersani's theories of masochism and the death drive, it is worth noting the continuity (pace Bersani) between the death drive and erotogenic, feminine, and moral masochism in Freud's *The Ego and the Id*. Bersani's reasons for distinguishing among them as he does lie beyond the limits of this essay; however, in Eliot's case, these versions of masochism appear closely aligned.
45. Quoted in Bersani, "Rectum," 217.
46. Bersani, "Rectum," 222.
47. T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land: A Facsimile and Transcript of the Original Drafts*, ed. Valerie Eliot (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971), 123. The draft version contains some cross-outs and substitutions.
48. *Facsimile*, 77. Seymour-Jones also discusses Eliot's and Pound's revisions of this passage and their erasure of its homoerotic implications (304).