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The Waste Land: The Last Minstrel Show?

OF THE TERMS frequently repeated in T. S. Eliot's criticism, *voice*¹ is surely one of the more familiar; and it goes without saying that—whether remarking the sporting page, lamenting wrinkled female dugs, gossiping in a pub, or greeting one's alter ego on the pre-dawn streets of London in World War II—Eliot is eminently the "invisible poet"² assuming the various dialects of the tribe. The same poet who wrote "I have measured out my life with coffee spoons"³ also wrote "Inexplicable splendour of Ionian white and gold" (CP, 63) and "That was a way of putting it—not very satisfactory" (CP, 184) and "Any man has to, needs to, wants to / Once in a lifetime, do a girl in" (CP, 122). But let me not catalogue. Eliot, a richly endowed singer, was possessed, like the native Mississippi River he characterized, of "many voices," all of which, incompatible as they might first appear, he colored for emotional effect at will, and all of which, when at his best, he joined into unified wholes, disguising his internal gear changes with a cunning craft. The essential tension of Eliot's effects may be likened to that of a *bel canto* voice, which without warning can suddenly snatch from the *verismo* repertoire. In his non-theatrical work, Eliot was, paradoxically, a lyricist seeking, and often succeeding, to be a dramatist.

That drama was like a second heartbeat to Eliot is obvious. "Reviewing my critical output for the last thirty-odd years," he said, "I am

¹ Eliot's considerations of *voice* in relation to poets and poetry are scattered throughout his criticism. His longest-sustained and most comprehensive discussion appears in "The Three Voices of Poetry," *On Poetry and Poets* (Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1957), pp. 96–112; hereafter, *OPP*.

² Hugh Kenner, *The Invisible Poet: T. S. Eliot* (Ivan Obolensky, Inc., 1959). My grateful debt to this work, particularly for its insight into Eliot's "ventriloquism," affects the entire present essay.

³ *Collected Poems 1909–1962* (Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1962), p. 4; hereafter, *CP*.

surprised to find how constantly I have returned to the drama . . ." (*OPP*, 75). And indeed his criticism attests to his absorption especially in the plays of the Greeks and Romans, the Elizabethans, and the moderns, not to mention speculation on drama's future. His own ventures into the theatre—admittedly, Eliot at his second, and sometimes even third, best—also testify. But perhaps there are two occasions, so exquisitely telling, that they may be echoed here without trying the reader's patience. One is certainly that recurring moment when, not without a tinge of envy, Eliot judges Shakespeare fortunate to have inherited the flexible form of blank verse in the traditional mode of a public entertainment, accessible to an audience on many levels (*OPP*, 75–81). (Whether the judgment is accurate or not does not matter here so much as the fact that Eliot believed it.) The second occurs in that intriguing tribute to the dead queen of the British music-hall, "Marie Lloyd," a moment so moving to Eliot he candidly confesses at the outset, without sentimentality but with some bewilderment, "I certainly did not realize that her death would strike me as the important event it was."⁴ At the conclusion of the same essay he is less unsentimental, more bewildered, bitter, anguished, prompted to reflect stridently on the state of bourgeois civilization in tones reminiscent of the projected hysteria in *The Waste Land*. Marie Lloyd was the "expressive figure of the lower classes," Eliot maintains; "the middle classes have no such idol: the middle classes are morally corrupt" (*SE*, 407). And with the decay of the music-hall, "the lower classes will tend to drop into the same state of protoplasm as the bourgeoisie." They are like the natives of Melanesia who are dying from the boredom of the "Civilization" forced upon them; and "when every theatre has been replaced by 100 cinemas, when every musical instrument has been replaced by 100 gramophones, when every horse has been replaced by 100 cheap motor-cars, when electrical ingenuity has made it possible for every child to hear its bedtime stories from a loud speaker, when applied science has done everything possible with the materials on this earth to make life as interesting as possible, it will not be surprising if the population of the entire civilized world rapidly follows the fate of the Melanesians" (*SE*, 407–8).

Emotion in excess of the facts? What was Marie Lloyd to Eliot? From his description of her elsewhere in the essay, she was clearly too real to be merely a symbol, although he could re-create her in his peculiar image. For perhaps more than any other subject on which Eliot wrote

⁴ *Selected Essays: New Edition* (Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1950), p. 405; hereafter, *SE*.

familiar essays or with whom he carried on imaginary conversations, Lloyd was the one for whom, for at least an instant, he felt the closest affinity, all the more illuminating for the possibility that the identification may have been partially unconscious. Marie Lloyd, in Eliot's own words, expressed "the soul of the people," and giving expression to the life of her audience, raised it, in dignity, "to a kind of art." That "kind of art"—not unlike a poet's of the Imagists' or Eliot's dreams—was "all a matter of selection and concentration" (SE, 406). Selection and concentration revealed an "understanding of the people and sympathy with them" so that Marie Lloyd achieved a "moral superiority" over all competing performers. Those who watched her perform were enchanted into collaboration with the artist, "which is necessary in all art and most obviously in dramatic art" (SE, 407). Eliot's tribute to Marie Lloyd is no less a paradigm for his art than "Tradition and the Individual Talent": in his sympathy for the public entertainer who sympathized with the multitudes, in the explanation of her superiority, he defines his aspirations, as for a moment, if only in his imagination, he projects himself into her person; or to paraphrase from the essay preceding the tribute and on which basis he erects her memory, Marie Lloyd is as present in Eliot's bones as Virgil, Dante, or Shakespeare and, with that constellation, asserts her immortality.

If Lloyd's presence is as deeply felt as Eliot shows us it was, then the mode of public entertainment she represented is no less so. The music-hall and its close cousin the minstrel show are like backdrops for the long poem gestating within him between 1920 and 1922 and which he composed under the working title "He Do the Police in Different Voices"⁵ but ultimately called *The Waste Land*. The poet seeking his own voice to portray the voices of others had his inheritance, too, as much as the envied Shakespeare. To be sure, it was of a different nature, in a different time, but no less significant for that. *The Waste Land*, we may demonstrate, owes much to the British music-hall and the American showboat and minstrel show, and in their concatenation, presents us with further evidence of Eliot's seminal genius for restructuring traditions, clarifications of his aesthetics and artistic sympathies, and a dramatization of the archetypal Image as Ezra Pound defined it: "an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time"⁶ or the com-

⁵ T. S. Eliot, "The Waste Land": *A Facsimile and Transcript of the Original Drafts Including the Annotations of Ezra Pound*, ed. Valerie Eliot (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1971), pp. 5; 125, n. 1.

⁶ "A Retrospect," *Literary Essays*, ed. T. S. Eliot (New Directions, 1968), p. 4.

plication of Imagism by "superposition," setting one idea on top of another.

II

There is an anecdote that on receiving both the Order of Merit and the Nobel Prize in 1948, Eliot also received a cable from some young Harvard undergraduates. It read, "You've Come a Long Way from St. Louis."

Touché. And yet after reading the poetry of Harvard alumnus T. S. Eliot, and even more on reflecting upon it, does not this witty barb serve valuably, by contrast, to remind us that despite physical, geographical separation the spiritual distance may not be very great?⁷ that St. Louis, the great river on which it rests, and its rich historical culture never left Eliot, who even as late as in "The Dry Salvages" found on that "raid on the inarticulate" haunted feelings running so deep their expression could be interpreted by Donald Davie⁸ to be self-parodic? And well that might be.

Is it sheer coincidence that Eliot should have paid tribute to Marie Lloyd in 1923, that the remaining showboats that were not merely tourist attractions or curiosities should have sailed down the Middle Western Rivers in the late 1920s,⁹ and that, before both events, Eliot metamorphosed "He Do the Police in Different Voices" into *The Waste Land*? It may simply be a case of fate and genius coalescing as they sometimes significantly do, and we, now the heirs of fortune and Eliot, are richer in hindsight. But this thing is sure: as the showboats and minstrel shows were ceasing to function as popular entertainment, paralleling the decay of the British music-hall (and much for the same reasons—radios, gramophones, cinemas, motor cars), Eliot was, like his own beloved Marie Lloyd, raising that mode of popular entertainment "to a kind of art."

Small wonder, then, he should have been so moved by her death, and even less wonder that his attention should have been drawn more and more away from private to public verse, recited upon a stage. The first attempt Eliot collected for us to ponder, the Sweeney fragments, fails

⁷ Eliot, in an interview with Donald Hall, attested to the American, if not specifically Midwestern, sources of his poetry: "But in its sources, in its emotional springs, it comes from America," *Writers at Work: The "Paris Review" Interviews—Second Series* (Viking Press, 1965), p. 110. See also Herbert Howarth, *Notes on Some Figures Behind T. S. Eliot* (Houghton Mifflin, 1964), pp. 1–63.

⁸ "T. S. Eliot: The End of an Era," *The Twentieth Century*, CLIX (April 1956), 350–62.

⁹ Philip Graham, *Showboats: The History of an American Institution* (University of Texas Press, 1951), p. 184.

because of self-consciousness, because their beginning is too flamboyant to be long sustained, but more importantly because Eliot had more or less accomplished their dramatic expression as a lyricist in *The Waste Land*. Marie Lloyd's death must have touched Eliot to recognize, at least in painful, partial shadow if not in substance, one source of the inspiration behind the series of vignettes he had successfully articulated and which, now behind him, pointed to a new beginning, a precarious future, historic as well as personal and artistic.

At any rate, the American minstrel show and the British music-hall, decaying almost simultaneously, form, I believe, a "familiar compound ghost" behind the many-textured arras of *The Waste Land*. In making this assertion I do not put much reliance upon the interpolation of a ballad like "O the moon shone bright on Mrs. Porter / And on her daughter / They wash their feet in soda water" (CP, 60–61). Nor would I lean heavily upon that emulative piece of tin-pan-alley razzmatazz, "O O O that Shakespeherian Rag— / It's so elegant / So intelligent" (CP, 57). These are contentual episodes obvious enough, and no matter how much multiplied, do not in and of themselves an entire show, or poem for that matter, make.¹⁰ Rather I am thinking of certain conventions common to minstrel shows and music-hall entertainment alike, conventions which inform the context, the structural techniques, and the conceptual scheme of Eliot's poem, and which, allowing for placement of one idea on top of another, lead us back through history to the ambiguous archetypal image of the minstrel who "heals" by magical incantation.

A minstrel, we will immediately recognize, is a performer who may sing, dance, tell jokes, execute acrobatic feats. The root of the word is the same as that of *administrator* or *ministry*. It can mean both *official* and *servant*. I need not mention its long-standing application to poets, especially a punning poet like T. S. Eliot, who exchanged photographs with Groucho Marx,¹¹ who loved practical jokes and practical cats, the Old Possum who would "Do the Police in Different Voices" on the contemporary arid plains that hold only a heap of broken images but wait for water, whose famous clairvoyante Madame Thrice-Lucky has a bad cold, can only see crowds of people walking in rings but warns

¹⁰ A strong, if easy, case for popular music's inspiration on Eliot in *The Waste Land* can be made by examining the canceled fifty-four lines which preceded what is now the poem's beginning and which contained adaptations of or allusions to at least five other ballads. See "*The Waste Land*": A Facsimile, pp. 5; 125, nn. 2, 3, 5, 7, 9.

¹¹ Robert Sencourt, *T. S. Eliot: A Memoir*, ed. Donald Adamson (London: Garstone Press Limited, 1971), p. 178.

against death by water. Ministry for a mind or minds diseased? Let us see.

If we need evidence that Eliot saw the narrator of *The Waste Land* as a minstrel who both sings with a lovely voice and executes "joking" verbal acrobatics at the same time, we may settle on the first utterance of the thunder, which is small enough: "DA."¹² It is, of course, onomatopoeic; but the echoism here is not that of the thunder alone so much as the binding together of the entire poem, since it is also a musical transposition of the drunken pubsters of the poem's second part, "Ta ta. Goonight. Goonight" (and note the omission of the middle "d," which Ophelia's next utterance only underscores); and it is a further transposition of the Thames' daughters' "la la" in Part III. Musical transposition reminds us of *dō*, stemming perhaps from the first word of a Latin hymn, *dominus*, but certainly the syllable representing the first and last tones of the diatonic scale. Obviously, "DA" is the root of the thunder's Sanskrit utterances: *Datta*, *Dayadhvam*, *Damyata*; indeed, it is a basic "root" binding together into "one family" the languages called Indo-European. Our word *dō*, or Eliot's of his former title, "He Do the Police," is its descendant. It is, then, a "root" that clutches and branches. It is the Son of man's first infant Word, The Son of man who could not originally "say or guess." It is a piece of incantatory *non-sense*. But, then, "Hieronymo's mad againe": he devised a multilingual play to trap the murderer of his son; he bit off his own "tongue."

III

It is not advisable, nor would it be desirable, to point to one show-boat, minstrel, or music-hall presentation as a model for all others that fall under the species. They were variety shows incorporating individual acts of entertainment, ranging from the absurdly comic to the patently melodramatic to the occasionally tragic; and for their variety, their preposterous combinations, their rapid succession, they should have appealed to a generation obsessed by "fragmentation," an age that "demanded an image / Of its accelerated grimace, / . . . Made with no loss of time, . . .";¹³ a poet, who found that when his mind, like Donne's, was "perfectly equipped for its work, . . . is constantly amalgamating disparate experience; the ordinary man's experience is chaotic, irregular,

¹² Much of my analysis here has been triggered by Hugh Kenner, *The Pound Era* (University of California Press, 1971), p. 439.

¹³ Ezra Pound, *Selected Poems* (New Directions, 1957), pp. 61–62.

fragmentary. The latter falls in love, or reads Spinoza, and these two experiences have nothing to do with each other, or with the noise of the typewriter or the smell of cooking; in the mind of the poet these experiences are always forming new wholes" (SE, 247).

Of disparate experiences leading to a personal sense of rootlessness or multiplying "a wilderness of mirrors," Eliot would qualify as one of the masters: in St. Louis, thought to be a New Englander; at Harvard, made conscious of his Southern drawl; in England, viewed as being more fastidious than the English, and so, identifiably American.¹⁴ Did not W. H. Auden observe that only an American could write that tradition "cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labour"?¹⁵ The national character¹⁶ we know too well to have been composed of a sense of naiveté, submergence, inferiority, especially before other cultures actually experienced or imagined. Was there not still real wilderness enough to surround one so that a floating theatre or a movable, makeshift crude theatre's erection here or there could make a difference felt?

And yet beneath the variety within one's available public entertainment, there were certain solid givens or conventions that made connections, and in making them, telescoped the globe into one community. The showboat, after all, was a family enterprise. The minstrel shows began in songs of work, nature, and legends by a people uprooted and transported and, when ultimately ritualized, came to resemble, physically, the "walking round in a ring" of fertility ceremonials, the very semicircle of Greek drama, or the chorus of grand opera. And in the family reunions as in the ritualizations, world traditions were asserting their vigor whether those through whom traditions were being communicated were aware of them or not. Eliot is not to be excluded; he may have later dismissed *The Waste Land* as a "personal and wholly insignificant grouse against life,"¹⁷ but the "new whole" he formed for his "rhythmical grumbling" attests once more to the surrender of himself to something larger than mere personality.

Certainly Eliot surrendered himself to the possibilities of participation and collaboration these modes afforded and frequently shared. His American interests were transferred to the British music-hall. There was

¹⁴ Sencourt, p. 24. Also, Wyndham Lewis, "Early London Environment," *T. S. Eliot: A Symposium*, eds. Richard March and M. J. Tambimuttu (H. Regnery Co., 1949), p. 25.

¹⁵ "American Poetry," *The Dyer's Hand and Other Essays* (Random House, 1962), p. 366.

¹⁶ Constance Rourke, *American Humor: A Study of the National Character* (Doubleday, 1953), pp. 233-34.

¹⁷ "The Waste Land": A Facsimile, p. 1.

the division of the performance into its acts, announced orally or by placards allowing the audience to read. We may initially doubt of anyone's ever reading on those placards titles such as "The Burial of the Dead," "A Game of Chess," "The Fire Sermon," "Death by Water," or "What the Thunder Said." But, then, if we recall Eliot's working title as well as "In the Cage" (his Jamesian original for "A Game of Chess"), and remove the titles from the now-familiar text, we may also restore some of their sensational or melodramatic luster. Even the text affords us examples of "Footsteps shuffled on the stair" (CP, 57), "The rattle of the bones, and chuckle spread from ear to ear" (CP, 60), "my heart / Under my feet" (CP, 64), and not only "bats with baby faces" but "tumbled graves" and "Dry bones [that] can harm no one" (CP, 68). As Eliot said in "Wilkie Collins and Dickens," the essay he teasingly placed after "Marie Lloyd" in the *Selected Essays*, "melodrama is perennial and the craving for it is perennial and must be satisfied. If we cannot get this satisfaction out of what publishers present as 'literature,' then we will read—with less and less pretence of concealment—what we call 'thrillers'" (409). If anyone would know, Eliot should: as an undergraduate of Harvard, he regularly attended melodrama at the Grand Opera House in Washington Street, Boston; and we doubt that he was excluding himself from the "many living who are not too young to remember the melodramatic stage before the cinema replaced it; who have sat entranced, in the front stalls of local or provincial theatres, before some representation of *East Lynne*, or *The White Slave*, or *No Mother to Guide Her*" (SE, 409).

And naturally the production of a currently popular melodrama, comedy, or tragedy—in parts or as a whole, seriously or in burlesque or parody—was a specialty of the floating or stationary theatres here under discussion. In *The Waste Land*, by allusion or direct quotation, we may take our choice of plays within the "play." If none of them was "currently popular" in the strictest sense, we need simply recall that we are under the spell of an artist for whom all tradition is eternally present. And so in the world of *The Waste Land* we hear, but to cite only a few, echoes of Wagner's *Tristan* or a parody of *Götterdämmerung*, lines from Middleton's *Women Beware Women*, Webster's *White Devil*, Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy*, and Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Coriolanus*, and especially *The Tempest*. And indeed the last-named play—with its brave new world of young lovers (who actually play a game of chess), its exiled sorcerer-king on a mini-waste land in the midst of an old ocean, its death and life by water, its shipwreck, storm, family and social reunions—this late romance of Shakespeare's serenity,

neither tragedy nor comedy, becomes, by its new cultivation, reinterpreted as a fertility rite, and as such, no less than a form of synecdoche for Eliot's entire poem of individual and corporate regeneration.

But let us, as Eliot so frequently and suddenly asks us to do, "send in the clowns." For there was the opportunity here for the kind of slapstick, satire, and irony a voice-conscious poet or "ventriloquist" like Eliot enjoyed—for the stage-page or bouncer (here in the guise of a pub-tender) frequently to interrupt a routine (HURRY UP PLEASE ITS TIME); for the "nightingale" with that "voice of gold" to launch into "Sweet Thames, run softly" and suddenly strain beneath "empty bottles, sandwich papers, / Silk handkerchiefs, cardboard boxes, cigarette ends" (CP, 60); for every kind of "bird," indeed, to "do" its "Co co rico," "Drip drop," "Tereu," "Twit twit," or "Jug Jug."

The aside was always strongly attractive to Eliot. Admittedly, this dramatic device is universal, but in the theatre of the music-hall and the showboat or minstrel show its use was more obvious, prominent, and frequent since the goal of such entertainment was transparently to gain audience participation not only in the motions conveyed, but in the stage actions themselves. Those moments when actors drop out of character, or maintaining their character still, walk to the stage's edge, down its stairs, or among its rows of seats, and communicate with the audience itself, transforming the latter into members of the action—those moments Eliot was simulating in his earliest verse as well as in his latest, and demonstrating his increasing skill in their manipulation. Initially, Eliot experimented with them in the epigraphs to his poems and through his use of an ambiguous second-person pronoun. Granted, the *you* may represent the silent partner of a dramatic monologue, the vocal respondent of a dialogue, or an alter ego; but usually, without canceling one another out—rather, dovetailing—the *you* does not exclude the reader. Here are but a few examples, randomly selected, as I flip the pages of *Prufrock* or *Poems* (1920): "Let us go then, you and I" (CP 3), "You have the scene arrange itself—as it will seem to do" (CP, 8), "Wipe your hand across your mouth, and laugh" (CP, 15), or "I would meet you upon this honestly" (CP, 31).

Almost two decades later, *The Waste Land* having intervened, we find the asides more prominent, more direct, more startling as in "Burnt Norton," when after the haunting lines,

Footfalls echo in the memory
Down the passage which we did not take
Towards the door we never opened
Into the rose-garden,

we are made more aware of the spell Eliot has placed upon us by his interrupting it with the sudden familiarity of "My words echo / Thus, in your mind" (CP, 175).

The same device is duplicated, indeed deliberately echoed, in "East Coker":

Whisper of running streams, and winter lightning.
The wild thyme unseen and the wild strawberry,
The laughter in the garden, echoed ecstasy
Not lost, but requiring, pointing to the agony
Of death and birth.

You say I am repeating
Something I have said before. I shall say it again.
Shall I say it again? (CP, 187)

The process is reversed in "The Dry Salvages"; we begin with the direct involvement to achieve the full impact of the next line's cruelty: "You cannot face it steadily, but this thing is sure, / That time is no healer: the patient is no longer here" (CP, 196).

In "Little Gidding," Eliot's dramatic manipulations of the device combine and reach perhaps their zenith in the lyrical section of Part I, "If you came this way" (CP, 200), and the otherwise flat beginning of Part III: "History may be servitude, / History may be freedom. See, now they vanish, / The faces and places, with the self which, as it could, loved them" (CP, 205). Or finally and consummately, in the resonant peroration of Part V:

We die with the dying:
See, they depart, and we go with them.
We are born with the dead:
See, they return, and bring us with them. (CP, 208)

Perhaps all of the examples cited above are surer in their control and do less violence to the overall texture of the composition than, let us say, the actions of the four knights in Part II of Eliot's play, *Murder in the Cathedral*, when, having accomplished the assassination of Thomas, they turn to the audience and justify their deed in contrasting prose, riddled with a cheeky contemporary idiom. But Eliot the dramatist, employing here something of a sensational title, was simply continuing with effects he had experimented with in his nontheatrical verse, effects which cry out for oral performance with success as much as, if not more than, any in the plays. But, of course, Eliot's excursion into the theater sharpened his instrument.

Certainly there are few rivals in the area of asides that could surpass those of *The Waste Land*. To cite but two examples: we may recall the

end of Part I, as the *persona* greets "Stetson" among the Dantesque living dead on London Bridge (and, incidentally, echoes the "What-did-you-do-in-the-war" routine of minstrel or later vaudeville endmen portraying peacetime buddies meeting once again after a war):

'That corpse you planted last year in your garden,
'Has it begun to sprout? Will it bloom this year?
'Or has the sudden frost disturbed its bed?
'O keep the Dog far hence, that's friend to men,
'Or with his nails he'll dig it up again!
'You! hypocrite lecteur! —mon semblable, —mon frère!
(CP, 55)

Or let us move back about fifty lines preceding this moment, when the narrator, heard now as the Voice of the Prophet in the Wilderness, addresses us directly with "What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow / Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man, / You cannot say, or guess, . . ." Descending momentarily into tones reminiscent of some side-show barker, he promises to "show you something different" (CP, 53). "You" are taken in. It is not some monstrous fetus (or frail sibyl) in a jar. It is something more terrifying. It is quite simply "fear in a handful of dust" (CP, 54). And, unquestionably, "you" are involved.

In their effects these asides are more shocking and quicksilver than any we may find in the plays. Yet, what accounts for their credibility here more readily than in the plays? There is no one final answer, but the framework of the variety show, allowing for "doing" characters in the security of some central ghostlike, archetypal figure who searches for the syncretizing universal voice and word, may simply be more comfortable for the essentially lyrical Eliot to work within.

The *personae* of *The Waste Land*, while strongly realized, are not so much characters or caricatures as they are voices or even elements. (Indeed, the facsimile of the original draft shows us that the poem was divided, like a classic minstrel show, into two parts, the first a larger version of "The Burial of the Dead," the second comprised of four subdivisions, each focusing more or less on one of the four elements—air ["In the Cage" or "A Game of Chess"], "The Fire Sermon," "Death by Water," and earth ["What the Thunder Said"]—a process Eliot was to interpolate in that grand sequence of elemental "beginnings" and "ends," *Four Quartets*.) Who is it, after all, who says "I read much of the night, and go south in the winter"? Marie? Or the person to whom she is speaking? Or someone totally uninvolved with either? Obviously, each is a candidate, and each provides a possible interpretation, without violating our sense of the general mood or theme.

In perhaps one of the more informative of his footnotes Eliot tells us that Tiresias, "although a mere spectator and not indeed a 'character,' is yet the most important personage in the poem, uniting all the rest." The single quotations around *character*, and the choices of *personage* and *spectator* are wise, for in a special sense, there are no characters in the poem at all. Eliot further tells us that "just as the one-eyed merchant . . . melts into the Phoenician Sailor, and the latter is not wholly distinct from Ferdinand Prince of Naples, so all the women are one woman, and the two sexes meet in Tiresias. What Tiresias sees, in fact, is the substance of the poem" (CP, 72). The italicized *sees* is no less well-judged than Eliot's earlier single questions and word choice. He is guilty of no overstatement, as I am almost forced to be in asserting that Tiresias functions, in addition to what other duties Eliot has assigned him, as a grand comic conceit.

To justify such a remark we must go back and digress once more. Before the American minstrel show had begun to journey beyond its national boundaries to England, Europe, and Asia, it had crystalized certain conventions and rituals.¹⁸ As almost everybody knows, the performers were seated in a semicircle on stage, with a tambourine player (Mr. Tambo) on one end and a performer on bone castanets (Mr. Bones) at the other. At the center of the ring sat Mr. Interlocutor, central not only in physical presence, but in interchange of words and deeds as well. Mr. Interlocutor, usually a large man with a voice large enough to be heard above that of all others, introduced all members of the company. "Uniformed" to establish his authority and superior intelligence, or else pompously and sumptuously attired in contrast to his endmen, he was the "feeder" to them, the master of ceremonies who strove to "play it straight," who was charged with the burden of carrying most of the show in his memory, whose task it was to make the show unfold smoothly and successfully, and yet, unfortunately, who had to suffer indignities of the "intellectual" beset and frequently bested by his sometimes half-wit, sometimes gyrating company.

Typically, a show was divided into two parts. The first was composed of rapid-fire comic stories, jokes and interruptions, songs by Tambo or Bones, sentimental ballads by famous writers, and the walk-around, in which, one at a time, each performer walked around the inside of the semicircle several times and finished by doing his specialty in the center

¹⁸ Most of the information in this paragraph and the next is culled from Carl Wittke, *Tambo and Bones: A History of the American Minstrel Show* (Duke University Press, 1930), pp. 135-41.

of the stage, initially and generally appropriated for Mr. Interlocutor. The olio, or second part of the variety show, consisted of specialty acts, particularly female impersonations and the burlesque of some serious drama currently popular.

While Eliot would never have made a wholesale translation of some existing tradition without stamping it with his individual talent, and while such a step-by-step translation would have too neatly arranged the simulated shards of his poem or arrested its emotional irresistibility, more than a suggestion of the traditions of popular entertainment is (at least subconsciously) echoed not only in the examples I have cited earlier, but in the assemblage of Tiresias, who is both figuratively and *literally* Mr. Interlocutor. His was no mere female impersonation but the "real" thing. Needless to say, he is beset and almost bested. Struck blind in a former incarnation, his "female breasts" are transformed in this to bestial "wrinkled dugs" as, telling us that he had "foresuffered all" and "walked among the lowest of the dead," he awaits the "young man carbuncular," who is "One of the low on whom assurance sits / As a silk hat on a Bradford millionaire" (CP, 62). And with almost mathematical precision Tiresias has uttered his name for the first time in v. 218, the center of the 434-verse poem. (And perhaps his utterance is a musical transposition of the earlier barely-utterable because tongueless "Tereu"?) His explicit first appearance was preceded by that of the ambiguous Mr. Eugenides, the wellborn seller of currants, who may stand in Eliot's mind for those who transported the eastern legends deprived of their ritualistic contexts to westerners.

Mr. Interlocutor of the American minstrel show or showboat becomes, I suggest, the master of ceremonies in the otherwise structureless music-hall, saloon entertainment that more or less featured a series of discrete routines caricaturing—in song, dance, gags, and acting—"weddings" or assignations (the hyacinth girl, Belladonna, Lil, the typist, Elizabeth and Leicester, Mr. Eugenides?), funerals (Phlebas, the Hanged Man, Stetson and his corpse), seaside holidays ("a weekend at the Metropole" or Margate Sands), or simply "wash days" (Parsifal and Mrs. Porter and her daughter); or as Sweeney Agonistes was to put it later in that fragment of an "Aristophanic melodrama" originally entitled "Wanna Go Home, Baby?"—"Birth, and copulation, and death" (CP, 119).

Tiresias becomes Mr. Interlocutor, however, in the Age of Relativity: in him not only do the sexes merge, but all artists of the past as well as Eliot, the present minstrel with his parodying of their rituals and modes of communication. And with Tiresias, unlike Sweeney Agonistes, there

is more than "birth, and copulation, and death": there is a "resurrection," of sorts, when taking part in the ritual, we are liberated and can give, sympathize, and control.

And so, in the minstrel semicircle which assimilates the music-hall, and through our Tiresias-Mr. Interlocutor—in the snatches of our *meistersinger* Wagner's operas echoed by Thames-maidens; in "doing" the "authorities" (Virgil, Dante, Shakespeare, as well as Marie Lloyd) "in different voices" of different lands, their national boundaries no less blurred than the corporeal-sexual boundaries that define and isolate all individuals—we are transported back to the choral semi-circle of Greek drama and beyond to echoes of rituals and ceremonies existing perhaps before records outside of the archetypal images of a collective unconscious came to be and crystalized into specialties known as "arts." In sum, we are reminded of a common humanity, continued subconsciously in forms of public entertainment and thriving in the very bones of us all. "What Tiresias sees, in fact" is *not* only the substance of Eliot's poem, but in a symbolic sense the substance of all human effort, artistic or not. Are we not all striving to say DA?

IV

This brings me to my point for today. You recall
An essay by Mr. Eliot some time ago
On minor poetry. What is it? he asked, and with all
The solemnity of the pope said he didn't know.
I know even less (of course anyone knows even less
Than T. S.). . . .

So Reed Whittemore wrote delectably in "A Week of Doodle."¹⁹ It, along with the young Harvard students', is one of the kinder barbs directed against a man first-rank enough to be lampooned, who relished a good *flyting* (*OPP*, 238-39) or parody of himself²⁰ and others, and who did not carry a mean club for slapstick himself. Perhaps Eliot's tone can be unctuous; certainly his political, religious, even cultural pronouncements—too Serbonian a bog to tempt me to wade it, blood shaking my heart, here—appear at times to contradict his actual practice as an artist. Complex he said modern art must be to satisfy a sensibility ineradicably altered in rhythmic impressions by the internal

¹⁹ *New Poets of England and America*, eds. Donald Hall, Robert Pack, and Louis Simpson (World Publishing Company, 1957), p. 318.

²⁰ See *Parodies: An Anthology from Chaucer to Beerbohm—and After*, ed. Dwight Macdonald (Random House, 1960), pp. 218-19.

combustion machine, and he admired Stravinsky for suggesting the cacophony of horns and motors within the primaeval jungles and ruptured steppes of *The Rites of Spring*,²¹ James Joyce for having hybridized Odysseus in dear dirty Dublin's Bloom.²² Erudite he felt a poet could and must be, but thinking consequent to reading a Jessie Weston or a Frazer could be syncretized, no less than heady Spinoza, with love, the detonation of a typewriter, the aroma of cooking; or registered like the distillation of a rose on our sensibility. The distillation might only be appreciated at first by an *élite*, a faithful remnant or fit audience if few; but its expression in emotions and feelings was best "in the common language of the people—that is, in the language common to all classes" (*OPP*, 8). If an "elitist"—I cringe at the change the suffix *-ist* makes—is he who assembled the many tongues of humanity and, unsexing its skeleton, shrank bodily and community boundaries into the unified, "uniformed" One seeking a common heritage, link or voice, then Eliot can survive the kick any fullfed beast gives his still generous pail. The whole world is his village; in the quiescence of his art, but especially in *The Waste Land*, East and West meet. Eliot has earned his place among the minstrel-troubadours disseminating the universal songs of memorable actions and sufferings of all times and of all places, in time and place that are constantly shifting, still. If he had not existed, Mr. McLuhan would have had to add him to his long impressive list of inventions. In Eliot's global village, is not the Medium compellingly the Message? Is the dry-docked minstrel show with all of its serious absurdity not more than just a metaphor for that part of modern consciousness which rues less the banana peel than the spectacle it may formulate of us "in a phrase," which fears lost boundaries; becoming automatons as time crumbles and mental space vanishes; being suspended among "worlds," none of which we fear we may inhabit in emotional integrity again?

The American minstrel show, with its city-slicker tough "smart"-talk and its self-conscious, satiric barbs of social, racial, and emotional one-upmanship, solidified out of a society's fears that its celebrated "melting pot" could not comfortably accommodate all the alien elements pouring in, not only from the country to the town but also from state to state and nation to nation. By February 14, 1912, America had become forty-eight contiguous states; after 1919-20 the fear had be-

²¹ "London Letter," *Dial*, LXXI (October 1921), 453.

²² "Ulysses, Order and Myth," *Dial*, LXXV (November 1923), 480-83.

come, on the contrary, a question of how to keep its inhabitants “down on the farm after they’d seen Paree.”

Or London, for that matter, as Eliot, by a stroke as comic as it proved to be prophetic, would illustrate in “Fragment of an Agon” when he explicitly directed his characters Swarts and Snow to become Tambo and Bones to the North Americans, Klipstein and Krumpacker’s song of living “all at sea,” on one isle; indeed, under one tree:

*Under the bamboo
Bamboo bamboo
Under the bamboo tree
Two live as one
One live as two
Two live as three
Under the bam
Under the boo
Under the bamboo tree. (CP, 119–20)*

Both “bammed” and “boo-ed,” Swarts and Snow—our modern “innocents abroad” for whom “London’s a slick place, London’s a swell place, / London’s a fine place to come on a visit”—play out their final Tambo-Bones routine significantly in an imaginative “fragment” of a “contest” World War I achieved historically and culturally for Eliot in fact. Exeunt—or was it *dissolve*?—Tambo, Bones, and Mr. Interlocutor, 1927?

I put down my pen, return to my title page, and, as an afterthought, append a question mark to “The Last Minstrel Show.” With a poet like Eliot, who said “In my end is my beginning,” perhaps that is not unwise. For one thing, *The Waste Land* does not close with a final period. For another, it invites active collaboration and continuing performance. And if we perform it, the ritual will communicate feelings before we can understand or explicate the words. Mr. Eliot, now as then, clearly demonstrates he knew of what he spoke when he wrote: “And what the dead had no speech for, when living, / They can tell you, being dead: the communication / Of the dead is tongued with fire beyond the language of the living” (CP, 201).