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Discovering the Corpus

Then I—I shall begin again. I shall not cease until I bring the truth to light. Apollo has shown, and you have shown, the duty which we owe the dead. You have my gratitude. You will find me a firm ally, and together we shall exact vengeance for our land and for the god. I shall not rest till I dispel this defilement—not just for another man’s sake, but for my own as well. For whoever the assassin—he might turn his hand against me too. Yes, I shall be serving Laius and myself.

Oedipus Tyrannus

The detective and the literary critic are often compared. Each undertakes to solve a mystery, working from scattered clues to piece together the meaning of disparate events. This is a hermeneutic quest, as the detective-critic discloses at last the surprising truths behind apparently random appearances. Ideally, a “totalization” or systematic comprehension of fragments is the result. The figure of the sleuth appeals to every reader’s desire to detect a pattern in life’s haphazard flow of things; our interest is more intensely fixed when there has been a crime, since the violation of the law stands metaphorically for the negation of meaning in general, for an outbreak of transgression that threatens to bring down the orders of significance established by the law’s logos. So it is that many critics take special interest (at least of late) in texts that disobey laws, genres, or

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conventions. Theoretical critics tend to pursue these literary felonies after the formal or aesthetic case is closed, inquiring at the doors of philosophy, linguistics, psychoanalysis, and history, and throughout the neighborhood of the human sciences for the agents of disharmony.

But who has been slain in *The Waste Land*? The intrigue deepens when we realize that the victim, the assailant, and the detective are interchangeable metaphors. The predicament of Oedipus dramatizes this tragic condensation of roles, the entanglements of which will preoccupy much of Eliot's poem. We have seen in an earlier chapter the similar case of the Quester and the Fisher King. The disturbing indistinction between, or identification of, Oedipus and Laius or Quester and King repeats the "peculiar personal intimacy" of poetic sons and fathers. The addition of the detective (a vocation thrust upon both Oedipus and the Quester) to this relation figures the desire to resolve its paradoxes and to reinstitute the power of the law. The poem enacts this effort to unravel the mystery and restore order. Yet simultaneously, in form and conception, it compulsively repeats the crime, transgresses the inherited rules of writing, and dismembers the unity of the fathers' words. Adding another turn of the screw, the poem presents this fragmentation of truth as the death of the speaker or author himself. We are asked to mourn his life as well, though self-murder is the planned escape from "personality" back to the soul's eternal life. The stylistic subordination of personal voice to borrowings, echoes, and allusions performs an askesis that violates the unity of self and tradition. "What happens" to the poet, wrote Eliot in 1919, "is a continual surrender of himself as he is at the moment to something which is more valuable. The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality" (SE, 7). The body of tradition and the poet himself suffer willingly, or by the will of the poet, the ritual of the *sparagmos*. This is part of the relevance of the vegetation god ceremonies, as they too dramatize an identification of the god with the life of the people who recurrently slay him in the name of fertility. The god's resurrection and the nation's rejuvenation culminate another restricted economy of the *Aufhebung*, in which castration and death are the *via negativa* of potency and life. As I will argue later, this pattern informs *The Waste Land's* modernist revision of the pastoral elegy, the genre whose laws the poem subjects to uncanny interpretations.

It would be nothing new simply to observe that *The Waste Land* violates literary (and other) laws or that like many such texts it places the reader quite self-consciously in the occupation of the hermeneutic detective. The criminal themes of murder and adultery serve this function and provide self-consuming models for the resolution of the poem as a whole. An avid fan of Conan Doyle and founding member of a Sherlock Holmes fan club, Eliot

presents us with a puzzling array of remains that increase our suspicion that a coherent, though horror-filled, story lies behind the “heap of broken images.” Dead men turn up everywhere in this unreal city, or their words float to its allusive surface. The story begins like a good melodrama at the victim’s burial service and proceeds in disjointed flashbacks to piece together the tale of his loves and losses. But the victim is protean, as are his assailants, and hermaphrodite and polysemous. The corpse’s casket is a library, his obituary everyman’s. The poem’s criminal atmosphere filches much of its scenery from Eliot’s reading of Shakespearean and Jacobean tragedy, through numerous allusions to adultery and murder in Webster, Middleton, and others. Eliot’s voyeuristic involvement with the sordid had also prompted his earlier verse on urban horrors, his taste for Baudelaire and for *Bubu of Montparnasse*, the story of a Parisian whore for which he wrote a preface. He was fascinated by that English tradition of popular tabloid gossip about the criminal, which seemed to be a modern Jacobeanism. With similar motives Eliot consistently ranks Poe, elegist of dead beauties and inventor of detective fictions, among the three or four American writers worthy of his attention.

The poem’s origin in this tradition of low crime, sordid mystery, and dark artistry is evidenced in the manuscripts, where the original title, “He Do the Police in Different Voices,” is taken from Dickens’ *Our Mutual Friend*. In the passage Eliot has in mind, Sloppy performs a kind of ventriloquism as he reads the newspaper text that tells of ghastly doings, providing an obvious source for *The Waste Land*’s polyvocal method (WLFS, 125). *Our Mutual Friend* contains not only a model for Eliot’s revoicings, but a protagonist come back from the dead. John Harmon rises from the waters of the Thames to inhabit London in the disguise of John Rokesmith, covertly observing the fate of his own entailed inheritance, concretely symbolized by the mounds of waste that are the novel’s thematic and ironic narrative centers. In erasing his own identity, Harmon, like the Duke in Shakespeare’s *Measure for Measure*, compounds and perpetuates the disharmony of his realm. Eliot may also have been thinking of Dickens’ *Bleak House*, whose Detective Bucket is one of the first great English comic sleuths. That novel, as J. Hillis Miller has written, brilliantly examines the problems of wills, testaments, and legacies lost in a hopeless mire of documents and interpretations disputed interminably.¹ The novel’s characters find themselves bewildered by a mountain of wastepaper. Esther Hawdon, one of the novel’s two narrators, tells her tale in an effort to uncover, detective fashion, the truth of her own parentage. Her mother, Lady Dedlock, is an “exhausted deity,” an artist of deceptive self-representation. Her dead father, the shadowy Captain Hawdon, was, we are not surprised to learn, a legal

copyist—a textual nobody like Melville's *Bartleby*. His death parallels in implication the farcical court case of *Jarndyce and Jarndyce*: both represent the breakdown of lawful, authoritative, ordered scripts. The revelations of the novel lead in the end to Esther's marriage and the construction of another *Bleak House*, an edifice not unlike Dickens' book, which problematically hopes to restore what has been wasted. Eliot agreed that it was Dickens' "best novel" and "finest piece of construction" (SE, 410–11).

The motifs of detection, scattered writings, adulteries, and sacred mysteries may be traced in a second deleted title. Part 2, "A Game of Chess," first bore the designation "In the Cage," the title of Henry James's tale of a young woman whose job in a telegraph-office cage makes her privy to the cryptic secrets of high-society lovers. Valerie Eliot ascribes this title instead to the passage from Petronius that provided Eliot with his epigraph of the Cumaen sibyl (WLFS, 126). Grover Smith concludes that this explanation "does not hold up," though he declares that James's story "has no particular relevance to Part II of the poem." On the contrary, it strikingly prefigures Eliot's formal and thematic concerns. James uses the figure of the sibyl ironically in his portrait of the girl whose function is "to dole out stamps and postal orders, weigh letters, answer stupid questions, give difficult change and, more than anything else, count words as numberless as the sands of time."² She occupies a vortex of writings, exercising her "instinct of observation and detection" in guessing "the high reality, the bristling truth" of the fragmentary messages that pass before her. Although she "was perfectly aware that her imaginative life was the life in which she spent most of her time," supplemented by "greasy" novels "all about fine folks," the girl scarcely perceives the disparity between her projections of sublime Romantic love and the seedier reality of her clients' adulterous liaisons. She finds her ladies and gentlemen "always in communication," and "she read into the immensity of their intercourse stories and meanings without end." Her folly in so mistaking her own wish fulfillment—that Romantic love might sweep her transcendently out of the plebeian world of her intended Mr. Mudge and into the aristocratic sublime—informs Eliot's placement before his readers of the cryptic evidence of so many sordid or tragic liaisons contemporary and antique. James's tale illustrates a point Eliot would insist upon, that Romanticism looks to relations in this world for a Truth that lies beyond it. James's social point—that her sublime is a trick that cheap romantic novels play on the hearts of the lower class—becomes in Eliot the conviction that he has been seduced by his precursors' imaginative achievement of an erotic union of the mind with the world it reads.

The girl in the cage concentrates her powers upon a single case, that of the adulterous communication between Lady Bradeen and Captain Everard.

(James was shameless in his names!) Like the chess game's king, Everard is the weakest player in James's complicated love game: "he only fidgeted and floundered in his want of power." In this society, like that of *The Waste Land*, "it was much more the women, on the whole, who were after the men than the men who were after the women." Perhaps it was this underscoring of the castration thematic so recurrent in James that led Eliot to decoy his readers with a change of title. Moreover, the figure of the girl as sibyl and decoder would have been assimilated to that of Eliot himself, identifying her Romanticism as the cause of interpretative impotence, since in the end she gets it all quite muddled: "what our heroine saw and felt for in the whole business was the vivid reflexion of her own dreams and delusions and her own return to reality." This acceptance of the reality principle represents the girl's askesis. Her biological femininity does not preclude, but underlies, her participation in a castration psychology that has shaped her search for the missing truth from the start.

James's tale links Eros, truth, writing, and the phallus in the girl's pursuit of Everard's mystery. "It came to her there, with her eyes on his face, that she held the whole thing in her hand, held it as she held her pencil, which might have broken at that instant in her tightened grip. This made her feel like the fountain of fate."³ Poor Everard! When she grasps the "truth" of his letters and affairs, she purloins the phallus and restores it to her own incomplete self. In this she, as much as any of James's bachelor epistemologists, figures the Romantic author as castrated/castrating in the quest for a condensed logos of sex, writing, and knowledge. At the end, however, she learns that her salvation of Everard through recollection of the lovers' letters only dooms him to Lady Bradeen's clutches. In the economy of phallogocentrism, the truth of the letter always requires the dispossession of its former owner: the girl has unwittingly emasculated Everard in knowing him. The truth she is left with is the "truth" of his castration, as we are left with the uncanny notion that "truth" in writing "castrates" life. Renouncing her sibyl's job and marrying Mr. Mudge, the girl gives up the Romantic and phallogocentric vocations for a less metaphysical career. Eliot's poem takes up her career once more in deciphering the logos of scattered parts. It restages the drama of James's tale, expressing once more the Romantic longing to find Truth through the incarnations of Eros, discovering once more that the truth of sexuality is loss, difference, and the adulteration of identity. In its negative theology, *The Waste Land* repeatedly returns to castration as truth, sublimating the deconstruction of Romantic Eros into another quest for the divine love that can fulfill the desires human life seems to imitate with its carnal appetites. The fragmentation of truth in the poem operates, according to such logic, to spur our critical desire to locate and

regenerate what has been lost, and it represses, by its very hyperbole and lamentation, the prerequisite of castration as the “original” scene of the crime. Only in aspects of its conclusion does the poem come round to a reconciliation with the dissemination of the father’s word.

Correspondences with James’s tale shed light on at least the first two parts of “A Game of Chess,” with its evocations of insufferable women, male fear, and marital discord. At the heart of these mournful mysteries lies the retelling of paradise lost. As his footnote tells us, Eliot borrows his “sylvan scene” from Milton (and, quite tellingly behind that, from Spenser’s accounts of Venus and Adonis and of the Bower of Bliss) for his own revisionary display of “The change of Philomel, by the barbarous king / So rudely forced.” She becomes the genius loci of a “romantic” transmutation of loss into a redemptive, artful song. What Eliot adds to our hearing, literally so in the manuscript, is “lust,” the unsublimated drive that violates the virgin garden of woman and man’s identity. The element of incest in the rape of Philomel by Tereus may appear irrelevant here unless we understand desire’s threat to kinship systems and thus by extension to the structuring of a stable and meaningful economy of differences. Philomel represents woman as an object of prohibited desire, and we are left wondering whether that prohibition originates in genealogy (in which case she would be a metaphor of the mother) or in a “classical” deconstruction of a “romantic” metaphysics of art and Eros.

These complex associations may be further detected, if not resolved, by reference to a clue overheard by that exceptional aural sleuth, John Hollander. He notices that the second reference to Philomel’s song, in “The Fire Sermon,” reads “So rudely forc’d,” and he argues that “there is nothing to explain the peculiar spelling ‘forc’d’ at this point, except a Miltonic echo,” from “Lycidas”: “And with forc’d fingers, rude.” What correlation can there be, beyond the general “milieu of the drowned poet,” between the king’s rape of Philomel and Milton’s untimely plucking of the berries? The answer, I think, lies in the elegiac strategy of poetic resurrection intrinsic to Milton’s transumption of the genre in “Lycidas,” that is, in his rebirth as a poet after this “violation” of Mother Nature and the Muse. Milton’s “inviolable voice” haunts new poets with its power to create a highly individual beauty out of its “Babylonish” troping of the language and inheritance. Eliot’s king is called “barbarous,” meaning he literally speaks an unacceptable language, an eccentric tongue. The speaker of “Lycidas” presumes to grasp the laurel crown before his time, pressured into it, he says, by the death of Edward King. To tradition he says he must “Shatter your leaves before the mellowing year,” where “Shatter” connotes not only the traditional ritual scattering of leaves but a destructive shattering as well.⁴ The song of Philomel, then, once

more inscribes the poet's ambivalence toward beginning again his attempt upon the sublime and condenses the problems involved with those of sexuality. Thus, the passage expresses 1) a fear of the father-precursor's prohibition, 2) a desire to scatter the words of the father by violating his Muse, 3) a dread that he may not have the power to regather the leaves in a new volume of love, and 4) a transfiguring urge to reject the whole "romantic" problematic as delusory compared to a complete askesis and retheologization of desires poetic and sexual.

The section had opened, in fact, with a revision of a precursor. Eliot twists Shakespeare's lines on Cleopatra into an elegantly suffocating portrait of the lady, thus contradicting all his warnings about Shakespeare's bad influence in the sense that his defensive parody both confirms Shakespeare's stylistic preeminence in its absence and improves upon it with additions from other dead masters. Frequently cited in Eliot's criticism, *Antony and Cleopatra* holds a high station in his canon. The play's theme of a hero led astray by his infatuation with a beautiful woman illustrates one of Eliot's key obsessions, vacillating as it does between adoration and condemnation. He had given the lines "she looks like sleep, / As she would catch another Antony / In her strong toil of grace" as an example of Shakespeare's "complicated" metaphors, remarking that the trope's additive quality was "a reminder of that fascination of Cleopatra which shaped her history and that of the world, and of that fascination being so strong that it prevails even in death" (SE, 205). The fascination of Cleopatra stands for the fascination of Shakespearean metaphor: both exceed, add, tempt one beyond confirmed identity, whereas Dante's "visual" metaphors reveal truth. Cleopatra seduces as Shakespeare's poetic style can seduce, turning her victims into predecessors of James's deluded romantic girl. Antony's fate echoes Captain Everard's, while Enobarbus is made into yet another blinded prophet. Sifting through Shakespeare's leaves, Eliot is lured but suspicious, and he mocks the folly of Enobarbus and of misreaders who have failed to hear Shakespeare's irony as he dramatically presents yet another victim of Cleopatra's self-representations. Revising Shakespeare's style, Eliot overloads the imagery of his lines to create a dissociation of sensibility. He compounds the Jacobean, the eighteenth-century baroque, and *fin de siècle* aestheticism in a hyperbolic illustration of the snares of sensual imaginings. He brings to the surface the purport of Shakespeare's speech with the aid of its setting in his own poem, among the fearful females, deluded men, and parodied styles.

The failure of romanticism to find in human experiences the sublime it projects as lost also pervades the disharmony of the nervous couple in the subsequent lines of "A Game of Chess." As the opening section dwelled upon the femme fatale, this conversation, or lack of one, indicates the concurrent

absence of the saving woman who provides access to life, creation, presence, and the Absolute. While “nothing” occurs between these two, all the action takes place offstage. The section’s title and Eliot’s note refer us to Middleton’s *Women Beware Women* and Bianca’s forced seduction, which occurs while her mother-in-law is distracted by a chess game with the procuress. “The wind under the door” sends us to Webster’s *The Devil’s Law Case*, in which it brings news of a man’s wounding.⁵ Another primal scene, then, of woman’s violation and man’s vital loss takes place within earshot of this couple and within an imagistic and allusive context of reiterated blindness. It was also, Grover Smith notes, “with a noise and shaking, and with a blast of wind, that the dead in Ezekiel’s valley of dry bones received the breath of life and stood upon their feet.”⁶ In the manuscript, what the wind was doing was “Carrying / Away the little light dead people” (WLFS, 13), a theft from the Paolo and Francesca episode in *Inferno*, canto 5. Of them Eliot wrote: “To have lost all recollected delight would have been, for Francesca, either loss of humanity or relief from damnation. The ecstasy, with the present thrill at the remembrance of it, is a part of the torture. Francesca is neither stupefied nor reformed; she is merely damned; and it is part of damnation to experience desires that we can no longer gratify” (SW, 165–66). The speaker in Eliot’s poem either cannot gratify his desires or gratifies them at the cost of a greater damnation. Eliot’s couple, in Dantean fashion, seem eternally damned to the condition of unsatisfied longing. Intercourse of any kind appears impossible in this “rat’s alley / Where the dead men lost their bones.”

What obstacle prevents speech, thought, or action here? The “loss” of “bones” imaged in the man’s words voices a connection between present impotence and past losses or glories. He is hardly present at all, in fact, as his mind is usurped by repetitive memories that possess him. The significance of this haunting may be seen in a look at Eliot’s revisions. The printed draft reads, “I remember / Those are pearls that were his eyes.” The manuscript reads: “I remember / The hyacinth garden. Those are pearls that were his eyes, yes!” (WLFS, 13). Pound left these lines unaltered, except to suggest cutting the allusion to Molly’s soliloquy in *Ulysses* (a relevant tale of adulteries and wandering paternities). Vivienne Eliot inexplicably penned “Yes & wonderful wonderful” in the margin. The decision to drop this reference to the hyacinth garden was evidently Eliot’s own. Perhaps he felt that having his speaker recall that former ecstasy here would be too obvious an irony. He may also have been uncomfortable with the conjunction of a lover’s tryst with a father’s death or of the loss of love and the loss of eyes. Some have even argued that the excision covers up a reference to Jean Verdenal and Eliot’s attraction to him, a sensational and untenable speculation.⁷ A more viable

biographical reading would be that the passage implies that the man's memory of a former love makes his disillusionment with a present wife crippling and that Eliot, would not have thrown such a message at Vivienne in public, whatever her perception of the lines' import. He was too caring and solicitous toward her feelings for that, even if the lines were simply intended to express impersonally the difference between an ideal regenerative love and a spiritless communication. The juxtaposition of hyacinth garden and Ariel's song would have been helpful, however, in pointing out the links between these two scenes of love, loss, and metamorphosis. They emerge from a "romantic" desire for translation into a beatified state, transfiguring loss into pearls as precious as Molly's final, loving *affirmation* of her moment as Bloom's flower of the mountain. Incoherence plagues the speaker of the scene because, by measure of past or figurally constructed images, his emotions cannot find any available or adequate object. A poetic coherence, however, holds these lines and themes and allusions in a paratactic assemblage that puts the techniques of imagism and symbolism to their best use: a vital tension stays suspended between the incoherence of the represented and the skill with which Eliot draws us on to read his articulations of its origins and ends as we play sibyl to the poem's leaves.

The foregoing investigations of a few intertextual case histories in *The Waste Land* demonstrate how quickly the poem eludes interpretative or aesthetic closure. At the risk of scattering an already shattering poem, these forays seemed strategically prerequisite to theoretical questions about how to read or name this text, since criticism and canon formation have already so tamed its uncanniness for us. It might be healthy to restore our sense of how aberrant the poem is, as any undergraduate would gladly tell us.

Reviewing Eliot's experiment after its initial publication, Louis Untermeyer wrote, "It is doubtful whether 'The Waste Land' is anything but a set of separate poems, a piece of literary carpentry, a scholarly joiner's work, the flotsam and jetsam of desiccated culture," or simply a "pompous parade of erudition."⁸ These are pertinent insights, though not in the derogatory sense that Untermeyer intends. Inspection of the published manuscripts now confirms that Eliot did indeed assemble his poem from myriad jottings, some nearly ten years in the keeping. Most of the poem as we have it was set down in 1921 and 1922, undergoing a famous series of revisions at the hands of Eliot, his wife, and Ezra Pound. At the literal level this history exhibits processes ordinarily disguised in the presentation of supposedly unitary, orderly texts ascribable to a single authorial consciousness. Untermeyer's critical *a priori* posits the existence and privilege of a metaphysically conceived writing, set down instantaneously and forever by a voice speaking

an isolable truth. This formalist object would above all things be “separate,” individually differentiated, whole, and free of the past. Eliot’s “poem,” however, is an intertextual phenomenon, conspicuously a process of allusive appropriation. *The Waste Land* demonstrates Eliot’s theory of tradition and Harold Bloom’s insistence on intertextuality. There are no individual, self-contained poems. The “poem” lies in the relations between poems, in the troping of an ancestor. Has Eliot allowed us to say who “wrote” *The Waste Land*? What do we think we mean if we say that Eliot wrote:

Frisch weht der Wind
Der Heimat zu.
Mein Irisch Kind,
Wo weilest du?

These lines from Wagner were the German’s property, but their properties are in Eliot’s hands now.

Untermeyer’s metaphors for the poem (“literary carpentry, a scholarly joiner’s work”) point again to Lévi-Strauss’s notion of *bricolage* and to an idea of poetry as the opportune arrangement of whatever happens to be at hand rather than as the mimesis of an organic or transcendent architecture. Yet, before endorsing *bricolage* as a master metaphor of the text, we should recall Derrida’s argument that “if the difference between *bricoleur* and engineer is basically theological, the very concept of *bricolage* implies a fall and an accidental finitude.”⁹ *Bricolage*, like belatedness and other mythologies of lost Golden Ages, retrospectively invests an absent figure with the status of an Origin. Ironically, the bricoleur’s technique in *The Waste Land* rebuilds, albeit through lament and eulogy, the value of metaliterary and metaphysical constructs that writing might mirror rather than piece together: “What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow / Out of this stony rubbish?” The possibility of an organic logos springing up out of all this textual rubbish is suggested by the figural language here, but in its contextual allusion to the resurrection of the bones in Ezekiel the passage looks instead to a transcendent power for salvation. The use of *bricolage*, or the allusive method, in *The Waste Land* does transgress the conventions of poetry, but like any transgression it simultaneously re-marks the place of the law.

Bricolage and engineering, like the artificial and the organic or the chaotic and the orderly, fall into a binary opposition of the kind that Hegel puts to work in the following relevant passage.

The encyclopaedia of philosophy must not be confounded with ordinary encyclopaedias. An ordinary encyclopaedia does not

pretend to be more than an aggregation of sciences, regulated by no principle, and merely as experience offers them. Sometimes it even includes what merely bear the name of sciences, while they are nothing more than a collection of bits of information. In an aggregate like this, the several branches of knowledge owe their place in the encyclopaedia to extrinsic reasons, and their unity is therefore artificial: they are *arranged*, but we cannot say that they form a *system*. For the same reason, especially as the materials to be combined also depend upon no one rule or principle, the arrangement is at best an experiment, and will always exhibit inequalities.¹⁰

The distinction between the “ordinary encyclopaedia” and the “encyclopaedia of philosophy” seems to parallel the one between the nineteenth-century poem of organic unity and the twentieth-century poem of fragments. “On Margate Sands / I can connect / Nothing with nothing.” How many readers of *The Waste Land* or Pound’s *Cantos* have come away thinking that “they are *arranged*, but we cannot say that they form a *system*”? This is not quite the case, however, as with Eliot we have any number of systems alluded to as possible keys—myth, anthropology, mysticism, religion, the tarot, and even literary criticism. The poem experiments with these systems of interpretation by inviting the detective-critic to try them out on the aggregation of entries stolen from other encyclopedias. Eliot’s famous dictum bears repeating: “The good poet welds his theft into a whole of feeling which is unique, utterly different from that from which it was torn; the bad throws it into something which has no cohesion” (SE, 182). “Torn” implicitly plays upon the metaphor of the dismembered body, utilizing the traditional aesthetic description of a work as “shapely” or “monstrous,” as in the opening of Horace’s *Arc Poetica*. Only if the purloined goods are remembered in a coherent new body, “whole” and “unique,” is theft pardonable.

What is this “cohesion”? In contrast to Hegel’s “system,” Eliot gives us an emotion rather than an epistemology. “I cannot make it cohere,” wrote Pound in Canto 116, after a lifetime’s work at a poem that, one could argue, never strayed from the method Eliot advanced and then abandoned in *The Waste Land*. Cohesion stems from the Latin *haerere*, to stick together. Its cognates include adherence, adhesion, and hesitation. The principle of connection in each is paratactic: discontinuous elements are held together but not integrally so, their relations being not so much of interiors coordinated as of exteriors juxtaposed in tension or suspension. This sticking may also lead to hesitation, an occupation of the adherent ground between

oppositions. In fact, in “Prufrock” and *The Waste Land*, it is this condition of hesitation that is the “whole of feeling.” In a letter to Richard Aldington on the eve of his journey to Margate, Lausanne, and the completion of the poem, Eliot writes, “I am satisfied, since being here, that my ‘nerves’ are a very mild affair, due not to overwork but to an aboulie and emotional derangement which has been a lifelong affliction. Nothing wrong with my mind” (WLFS, xxii). *Aboulie* is a variant of *abulia*, a psychiatric term for the loss or impairment of the ability to decide or act independently. This emotional state pervades and unites the poem, though ironically, for it is a unity of inability, indeterminacy, indecision. Overcompensating, Eliot fills his poem with a clutter of “objective correlatives” for the state of feeling first dramatized by *Hamlet*. Eliot’s spelling also significantly recalls his citation of Nerval’s “la tour abolie” from “The Disinherited,” in which the tower also figures in an Orphic tale that condenses the lover’s and the artist’s inconsolable fates in a shuttling between two worlds. Orpheus and Eurydice, by way of Hades and Persephone, cast a dark shadow across the mythic revivification of unity presided over by the poet-priest.

According to Eliot, the disinheritance of the modern poets occurred when feeling and intellect split, as they do in the “ordinary” mind. “When a poet’s mind is perfectly equipped for its work, it is constantly amalgamating disparate experience; the ordinary man’s experience is chaotic, irregular, 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). J. Hillis Miller observes that these “*are* a miscellaneous lot,” betraying Eliot’s “feeling that experience is in fact chaotic” and harmonized only by “ironic conjunction.”¹¹ This miscellany, however, is no random choice, for it represents just those experiences that *The Waste Land* tries to set in order. In his essays on Leibniz (1916), Eliot’s passing references to Spinoza are in the context of debates over the connections between mind and matter or body and soul. “Spinoza represents a definite emotional attitude,” he asserts, leaving this attitude undefined, though we may infer a reference again to “Spinoza’s naturalism ... his disbelief in free-will and immortality” and the “materialistic epiphenomenalism” of his “view of the relation of mind and body” (KE, 198, 194). Reading Spinoza plunges one into a deterministic “naturalism” that leaves little room for the soul to govern its responses to sensory influences. The doctrines of this heretical, exiled philosopher question the modality of a soul that would transcend, yet still involve, sensation—a doubt Eliot attempts to resolve by recourse to Aristotle and Bradley (KE, 194–95, 205–206). Falling in love and the smell of cooking awaken the natural

emotions and senses that lead to these dilemmas. From the “Preludes” to “Burbank with a Baedeker” and “Gerontion,” Eliot explores the disturbing effects of sensory life on the orders of consciousness. Of course, it is up to the “noise of the typewriter” to write these feelings into a satisfying accord.

In *The Waste Land*, “whole of feeling” turns out to be an oxymoron since the emotions stirred in the various scenes of sterility, adultery, rape, lust, and purgation are decidedly unwholesome and destructive of harmony or coherence. When we examine the published poem alongside the manuscript drafts, such as the dirges and the portraits of ladies like Fresca and the duchess, we see more clearly than ever that the poem’s many voices speak obsessively of the feelings inspired by sex and death, those two main enemies of the fortress of identity. As in Eliot’s previous poetry, speakers and readers are made to suffer a morbid acuteness of the senses in scene after scene—the lilacs “breeding ... out of the dead land”; “the brown fog of a winter dawn”; “her strange synthetic perfumes, / Unguent, powdered, or liquid—troubled, confused / And drowned the sense in odours”; “It’s them pills I took, to bring it off”; “Silk handkerchiefs, cardboard boxes, cigarette ends / Or other testimony of summer nights”; “White bodies naked on the low damp ground”; “And bats with baby faces in the violet light.” Eliot’s fragments cohere chiefly in their physicality, in the music of their borrowed sounds and in the kinds of sensual experiences they represent. *The Waste Land*’s “symbols are not mystical, but emotional,” wrote I. A. Richards, who called the poem “radically naturalistic.”¹² It composes a body, we might say, of sensory and poetic life, if indeed the two can be distinguished. The fragmentation of parts reenacts the *sparagmos* of the physical body of desire, torn by its conflicting responses to the excitements it tries to lift into the wholeness of meaning. Corresponding to these fractures is the poetic *sparagmos* of the body of the literary fathers—“And other withered stumps of time ... told upon the walls”—toward whose sounds and feelings the poet reacts with a neurosis of the poetic libido, so to speak. Philomel’s rape and dismemberment are supplemented by their change into “inviolable voice,” but that sublation is now “‘Jug Jug’ to dirty ears.” Were we to clean up our response, what would we hear but the painful truth that her voice sings of the violence at its origin? Philomel’s change and the metamorphosis of the father in Ariel’s song figure the work of art as a transformation of loss into something rich and strange. While it seems to lament our incapacity to realize again such sublimations of the material into the spiritual, Eliot’s poem also demonstrates that no “voice” is “inviolable.” Even the play of syllables between those two words articulates the work of difference and interpenetration in language, and the location of identity in the rupture between things.

The “dissociation of sensibility” cataloged by Eliot’s imagery traces the dissociation of individual senses from each other in the absence of any intellectual *Aufhebung* into a logos. There is a great irony, for example, in Eliot’s assertion that “what Tiresias *sees*, in fact, is the substance of the poem.” Tiresias’ blindness should, according to myth, grant him a vision of the truth. What he “sees” in Eliot’s poem is a troping of the primal scene in the mechanical copulation of the typist and the young man carbuncular. The metric, the rhyme scheme, and the ending sight of the “automatic hand” that “puts a record on the gramophone” enforce a feeling of remorseless repetition of a scene “foresuffered” a thousand times in memory and desire. Tiresias endlessly sees the scene of the crime, the origin of his own “blinding” or castration in witnessing the difference between men and women. What Tiresias sees is “substance” itself, physical life (or signifiers) unredeemed by spirit (or a transcendental signified). Eliot’s note plays on the philosophic sense of “substance” as essence and tacitly reminds us of its declension into mere matter (see KE, 182–88). In some legends, Tiresias loses his eyes in retaliation for looking upon the naked body of the bathing Athena, goddess of wisdom. In the version from Ovid that Eliot quotes as “of great anthropological interest,” we have the tale of the coupling snakes, Tiresias’ bisexuality, and his blinding by Hera/Juno for answering that women enjoy sex nine times more than men. Of course, he is also the prophet of the dead in Hades, guide to sailors like Odysseus and Aeneas, and the seer who knows the fatal story of Oedipus. According to Eliot, he is “the most important personage in the poem, uniting all the rest.” This unity will not cohere, however; Tiresias figures the mobility of sexual identity and the negative relation of what we see to what we know. To know the body of truth repeats the crime. Tiresias stands for the dissociation of sensibility in “all the rest” and everyone’s participation in his pagan version of negative theology. What we see through his eyes is the involvement of transgression in the genesis of the logos. (Eliot’s gramma-phone replays the old song recently rewritten by Derrida’s grammatology.) A dissociation of sensibility sets in as the new prophet’s “inviolable voice” sings out its reading of the writing of the oracular dead.

If we switch from mythological to other allegorical registers or codes of reference, we note that erection and resurrection also figure the *Aufhebung*, or blindness-made-vision, that achieves the “relevé,” the raising of the dead or the return of what was invested in a threatening abyss. A castration logic, whereby loss is made the agency or origin of the logos, is the “system” that arranges Eliot’s “bits of information.” The dissemination of any single lyric speaker amid these babbling tongues seems to denote the final demise of the Romantic subject, but in fact the ventriloquial

appropriation of dismembered parts remembered from other authors composes the new poet as an intertextual force. In these acts of loving violence toward the body of tradition, the poet resurfaces not as the origin of the poem but as the poetic principle (principal), the deconstructed genius loci of a textual waste land. The *sparagmos* as theme and method both expresses his dissociation by the daemons inhabiting his poetic landscape and exorcises those daemons by a ritual incorporation of their torn parts. Resemblance, correspondence, and other modes of identification predominate in the “cohesion” of the fragments, and they follow the practice of Lacan’s “imaginary,” or “mirror stage,” discourse. The Father’s No, Name, and Law have not been acceded to, the Oedipus complex (as the structure or language of the unconscious) has not dissolved, and a regression to the strategy of narcissism, doubling, identification, competition, and aggression has taken place. *The Waste Land* exhausts, and then will relinquish, the conceptual responses to sexual, philosophical, and poetic indeterminacy already introduced in “Prufrock,” “Narcissus,” and “Gerontion.”

Translating Lacan’s terms into poetics, we find that the “specific prematurity of birth,” the child’s “primordial Discord” and “motor-uncoordination” become the young poet’s incoherence. The mirror stage next provides cohesion through speculation. Recognizing his own image in that of others, the subject enters a drama “which manufactures for the subject, caught up in the lure of spatial identification, the succession of fantasies that extends from a fragmented body-image to a form of its totality.” Images of the fragmented body recur when the symbolic systems of totalization give way, opening up a return to aggressive rivalry with the other for what both, because of their similarity, desire, so that such images connote at once a violence toward the other and a disintegration of self-identity: “These are the images of castration, mutilation, dismemberment, dislocation, evisceration, devouring, bursting open the body, in short, the *imago*s that I have grouped together under the apparently structural term of *imago*s of the fragmented body.” In contrast, “the formation of the *I* is symbolized in dreams by a fortress, or a stadium—its inner arena and enclosure, surrounded by marshes and rubbish-tips, dividing it into two opposed fields of contest where the subject flounders in quest of the lofty, remote inner castle whose form ... symbolizes the id in a quite startling way.”¹³ The Quester’s journey to the Chapel Perilous marks the transition from the *sparagmos* of the God/king to the ritual decipherment of original mysteries, worked out by Eliot in his commentaries on the “Da” of the thunder.

The vocations of the Quester, detective, and critic merge in the attempt to solve once more the riddle of the sphinx or to recapture the sibyl’s

power to gather the scattering leaves into a logos—a power denied to Dante as he sought to express the vision of the Eternal Light and compared himself to the sibyl. The poem hesitates, like Hamlet, in the face of re-membering, torn between the idea of logos as the recollection of a lost absolute and logos as the emergence, in unauthorized directions, of beings gathered in their difference. The Heideggerian sense comes closer, I think, to Dante's single volume bound by love than Eliot's search for the Word of the Father, as a comparison to the end of "Little Gidding" will suggest. Love, as the call of being, remains open to the life that logocentrism forecloses. What we see with Tiresias throughout the poem is dead people, like scattered leaves, whirled beyond the bounds of love.

For the reader, the question becomes that of whether any interpretative ritual can, or should, reunite the leaves of this *sparagmos* in a transcendental image of harmony. The trace of guilt that marks Oedipus and the Quester suggests that acts of interpretation or divination are also acts of violence, that transgression may not be fully integrated when the truth is finally told. Unless we repeat it word for word, our critical account of the poem must always leave out something, must choose and select to form our solution to its riddle. Reading *The Waste Land* requires an interpretation that will also figure the tension between the desire to totalize and the need to criticize. One figure for the poem, then, is that of a corpus. The various definitions of corpus include 1) a physical body, especially when dead; 2) a structure constituting the main part of an organ; 3) the principal, or capital, as distinguished from the interest, or income, of a fund, estate, investment, or the like; 4) a large collection of writings of a specific kind or on a specific subject. As a critical metaphor, corpus makes the connection between a body of writing and a writing of or about the body. The representations of literature and sexuality in *The Waste Land* join in overdetermined settings, as Eliot draws upon the capital of a certain body of texts for his poetic treatment of failed passions, violent conquests, mechanical copulations, and purgative fires. In the strange logic of condensation, literary potency and sexual potency become a single problem, their result a common issue. The literary surrender of self that negatively produces an authorizing tradition coincides with images of emasculation that negatively body forth a sensation of the sexual sublime. In the metaphor of the corpus we may avoid imposing an a priori discrimination between sexuality and textuality, resist totalizing the poem's vital differences of detail in some metacritical order, and point toward the relations of crisis—between the body and writing, nature and culture, women and men, sons and fathers, talents and traditions—that sound throughout *The Waste Land*.

The critical detective discovers, then, that the corpus itself is a sphinx, an enigmatic collection of texts whose particular puzzle is the bond that joins the animal and the human and by extension the human and the divine. When we look into the corpus of *The Waste Land*, we do not find the identity of its owner, but instead the bric-a-brac from other writers' estates, or from the poet's past texts and memories. And the question those purloined letters pose is most often a variant of the sphinx's: What is man, if he should have such animal desires? What is the logos, that it can raise man's nature to its truth? What is a poet, that he presumes to place himself at such crossroads? The lines that open "The Burial of the Dead" place us before such oracular mysteries.

April is the cruellest month, breeding
 Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
 Memory and desire, stirring
 Dull roots with spring rain.

We can sketch with little difficulty the "self-reflexive" allegory of poetic beginnings in this overture. Though Eliot first intended a now-excised Boston night-town scene for his opener, the poem as published fortuitously contrasts with the beginning of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, thus making English poetry new by turning the original celebration of fertility into an ode to dejection. "After great pain, a formal feeling comes," wrote Emily Dickinson, and in Eliot's lines a similar necessity of hurt seems involved in committing his feelings to form. "Winter kept us warm, covering / Earth in forgetful snow," a secure oblivion that seduces and comforts those who do not presume to begin writing again, who do not dare force the moment to its crisis. The meager quantity and the sorrowful content of so much of Eliot's poetry testify, as do his critical statements on daemonic possession, that writing was for him an anguish second only to the "acute discomfort" of feeling like a haunted house. Certainly one of the strongest of the obscure impulses behind *The Waste Land* is Eliot's recurring dread that his poetic springs have run dry. April stands for a new season of poetic creation, "breeding" poems out of the detritus of his literary inheritance and notebook drafts. His memory of past glories (his own and others, for as signs of poetic achievement they come to the same thing) obsesses him, cruelly blocking his desire to engender some new flowering. As a rendition of the Anglican burial service, Eliot's opening inters the corpus of the fathers, buries them to sprout according to his own pronouncements. While it tropes against the poets and metaphors of natural regeneration, it also laments (and so in a sense denies)

its own impotence. "Dull roots" characterizes the literary ancestry and the poet's own instrument of creation.

In these lines and throughout the poem, we encounter the same overdetermination of Eliot's rhetoric seen in his critical accounts of poetic genesis. The foregoing poetic allegory already employs terms that lead into an interpretation of the passage as an allegory of sexuality. April denotes the awakening of passion, the surge of desire to break out of the cold forgetfulness of repression. Memories cruelly block the fulfillment of desire, as the dead hand of past experiences—formed by the history of the unconscious—reaches out to obstruct present feelings. Prufrock had invoked the figure of Lazarus, come back from the dead to tell us all, to signify an intercourse he never dares begin. In *The Waste Land*, resurre(re)ction is no "friend to men," since it draws them out of the winter warmth of indifference and into the world of nature, woman, and history. Corresponding with the refinement of the poet's nature by his surrender to the voices of the dead, desire seeks a fiery sublimation that also takes its cue from the figure of Arnaut Daniel, one of Dante's tongues of flame who undergoes a transfiguration into Buddha and Saint Augustine at the end of "The Fire Sermon."

The analysis could be further extended, with appropriate precautions, by invoking the Dantean model, explicated in the letter to Can Grande, of the "polysemous" text so influential in Eliot's method. At the literal level is the poetic exodus from anxiety; at the moral level is the salvation from the death of the soul in lust; at the allegorical level is the soul's ascension from earth to heaven; at the anagogical level is the union of logos and nature in the Corpus Mysticum, or celestial church body, that regathers the saved in the volume of the Word. If there has been a murder here, if author, reader, and Quester join in a single detective adventure, it concerns the discovery of a Corpus Mysticum resolving these various levels in a single thunderous apocalypse that crosses the aporia between nature and the logos.

Eliot's attraction to Catholicism as it emerges in the poem may well turn on the transcendental poetics its theology offers. In contrast to the iconoclasm of Hebrew, Protestant, and Puritan theories of the sign, Catholicism reunites the letter and the spirit, signifier and signified, nature and culture, human and divine in the dogmas of the Incarnation, Passion, and Resurrection. The fertility rituals would be a type to the antitype of the Sacrament, as indeed the Grail legends imply. Following traditional theological exegesis, the waters of *The Waste Land* are both the baptismal river and the blood of the Eucharist. Echoing Dante, these waters mark the entrance to a regenerated Earthly Paradise at the end of purgatory. The first three sections of the poem constitute a kind of preparation of the soul and

heart for reception of the Word, adopting from mystic literature their climactic call for a prerequisite purification or celibacy before the final approach to the mystery. The final two sections, written at the last and chiefly at Lausanne, move away from the vegetation ritual schema into two related models—those of the quest and the elegy—to resolve the puzzle. What is achieved thereby is a powerful revision of the precursors as Eliot thinks poetically through the structures of negative theology, but he never finds his Beatrice. The poem leaves us at the edge of purgatory but still far distant from paradise, lacking that loving logos that moved the constellations of Dante and that returns in the brightest moments of the *Quartets*.

NOTES

1. J. Hillis Miller, Introduction to Charles Dickens, *Bleak House*, ed. Norman Page (Baltimore, 1971). Eliot taught *Bleak House* in 1916, and in a 1918 letter to his mother he compared his experience with wartime bureaucracy to “a chancery suit—dragging on and on, and always apparently about to end” (WLFS, xv).

2. Grover Smith, *T. S. Eliot's Poetry and Plays: A Study in Sources and Meaning* (2nd ed.; Chicago, 1974), 303; Henry James, “In the Cage,” in James, *Eight Tales from the Major Phase*, ed. Morton D. Zabel (New York, 1958), 174.

3. James, “In the Cage,” 247.

4. John Hollander, *The Figure of Echo: A Mode of Allusion in Milton and After* (Berkeley, 1981), 104; Ellen Z. Lambert, *Placing Sorrow: A Study of the Pastoral Elegy Convention from Theocritus to Milton* (Chapel Hill, 1976), 155.

5. Eliot later denied the relevance of the phrase's context in Webster. See B. C. Southam, *A Guide to the Selected Poems of T. S. Eliot* (New York, 1968), 79.

6. Smith, *T. S. Eliot's Poetry and Plays*, 81.

7. I refer to James E. Miller, Jr., *T. S. Eliot's Personal Waste Land* (University Park, Pa., 1977), which revives the thesis of John Peter's notorious “A New Interpretation of *The Waste Land*,” *Essays in Criticism*, II (July, 1952), suppressed by Eliot and reprinted after his death by the same journal in April, 1969.

8. Quoted in Jay Martin (ed.), *Twentieth Century Views of “The Waste Land”* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1968), 5.

9. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Spivak (Baltimore, 1976), 139.

10. William Wallace (trans.), *Hegel's Logic* (Oxford, 1975), 21.

11. J. Hillis Miller, *Poets of Reality* (New York, 1969), 155.

12. I. A. Richards, *Principles of Literary Criticism* (New York, 1928), 292.

13. Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York, 1977), 4, 11, 5. The fragmentation in modern art can also be read according to the theory of reification developed by George Lukács in *History and Class Consciousness*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, Mass., 1971), 83–222. See also Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, 1981), 206–57.