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The poet as oracle: T.S. Eliot and his quest for the immortal

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The Poet as Oracle:

T.S. Eliot and his Quest for the Immortal

My name is Ozymandias King of Kings;
 Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!
 Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
 Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare
 The lone and level sands stretch far away.
 -Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Ozymandias*

What we call the beginning is often the end
 And to make an end is to make a beginning.
 The end is where we start from.
 -T.S. Eliot, "Burnt Norton" *Four Quartets*

The study of Classics is often critiqued for its elitism and its focus on the past, a critique that presupposes that the field makes no contribution to the advancement of present society. However, many Classicists are working to change this narrative. Notably, the scholars of classical reception bring the classics into the present by responding to the ways in which people perceived Classics throughout history and in modernity. One such Classicist, though not commonly recognized for this facet of his work, was T.S. Eliot. This work of his was evident not only through his poetry, but also through his active participation in the academic field itself. The critical eye finds Eliot's poetry in particular to be laden with allusions to classical myth and literature, though these often fly under the radar of the modern reader. Unfortunately, this lack of recognition is just what Eliot feared would come to pass. His work depends upon a knowledge of the past that he believes is being lost with the passing of time. Eliot makes sense of his world through his understanding of Classics, viewing the modern West as an incarnation of the Classical world. Through carefully placed allusions to antiquity, Eliot combines a glowing world

of myth and magic with his own current dystopia, finding that only with the Classics can life be pumped into the war-torn society in which he lives. Without understanding this, the reader loses the most important messages in Eliot's poetry, which warns of just this lack of understanding. His work reflects the importance of understanding the past so as to understand the present. Both being published in the aftermath of WWI and the leadup to WWII, "Tradition and the Individual Talent" and *The Waste Land* both reflect this belief and carry a sense of impending doom. "Classics and the Man of Letters" and *Four Quartets* were both published during WWII and in those works, a certain acceptance of destruction can be felt. Through this poetry, Eliot attempts to change the tradition of Western literature forever by building his work upon the strong foundation of classical literature as well as improving upon it. Literary progress and human progress go hand in hand—one necessitates the other. Eliot seems to take it upon himself to serve as an oracle to humanity—the vessel through which mere mortals receive divine advice. He intends for his poetry to save not only literature but also modern civilization, and in doing so, his own name from oblivion.

I

In his critical works, T.S. Eliot denounces the simple-mindedness of modern poets and poetry critics alike. The artists of his day, he believes, too often consider their works to stand out from that which has already been created rather than to embrace tradition. In "Tradition and the Individual Talent," which was published in 1919 in London in a literary magazine called *The Egoist*, he writes of his contemporaries, "We dwell with satisfaction upon the poet's difference from his predecessors, especially his immediate predecessors; we endeavor to find something that can be isolated in order to be enjoyed" (36). Eliot is a firm believer in the inescapable

presence of the past in everything humans think, do, and create. “No poet,” he maintains, “no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone” (37). No poetry, modern or ancient, can truly stand alone. The very language a poem is written in is in itself a borrowed history—the words of the English language come from a long tradition and a *mélange* of older languages picked up along the way. Additionally, the connotations of words, phrases, and certain motifs are laced into each sentence one writes. Even without intentionally referencing the works and events of the past, the very act of writing out one’s thoughts invokes an entire tradition of academia. There is a history within each letter.

Eliot conceives of this tradition as “a living whole of all the poetry that has ever been written” (39). Considering this, it would be doing the artists of the past a disservice to ignore the essential role they play in the world of modern art. A poet must understand the living whole of all poetry in order to be able to expand upon it. Moreover, ignoring the poetic tradition robs the reader of fully understanding the work in conversation with the historical tradition of all poetry. Regarding this, Eliot asserts:

[I]f we approach a poet without this prejudice we shall often find that not only the best, but the most individual parts of his work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously. And I do not mean the impressionable period of adolescence, but the period of full maturity (37).

This “period of maturity” can only exist in the present moment, at which time any given work is able to be viewed as a piece of the “living whole of all poetry.” Eliot writes, “the difference between the present and the past is that the conscious present is an awareness of the past in a way and to an extent which the past’s awareness cannot show” (38). It is this which provides the “maturity” he references.

Given that this “living whole of all poetry ever written” is constantly expanding, with new works being added all the time, the dynamic of the conversation in which these works (and all of the works that came before them) participate is thus changed. This “maturity” is elusive and deeply paradoxical—how can something be “mature” if it is eternally in the process of new maturity? The immortality of the dead poets which Eliot refers to is unique in that it does not consist of mere adolescence, but a simultaneous state of maturity and (re)birth. While new works allow the other parts of the poetic “whole” to mature, they also provide the necessary rebirth of the tradition. This rebirth is what continues to pull the past into the present, just as the present is pulled into the past:

[Tradition] cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labour. It involves, in the first place, the historical sense, which... involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence... [which] compels a man to write with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order (37).

The past demands reverence. This reverence, according to Eliot, is something the poet is to strive for and to attain in a novel way: “there has to be a fusion of elements” (40). If this goal is achieved, the poem will take a place in the living tradition of poetry throughout the ages. To earn this place is to maintain the conversation of the literary tradition while bringing new insight and revealing new truths within the works of the ages. Moreover, “traditional” works of poetry are not only inspired, but inspire new works in response.

Eliot’s technique, which he explains in terms of his theatrical works, is “to take merely the situation of a Greek play as a starting point, with wholly modern characters, and develop it

according to the workings of my own mind” (*Proceedings of the Classical Association*, 1 (1953), 12–14). Though perhaps leaning a bit more heavily on “the dead poets” than his contemporaries, he does this in a way which rebirths the concerns and truths of the past in a modern context, thus making the work he honors more accessible to the readers of the modern era.

It is the poet’s work, however, not the poet, which is to be revered. In spite of Eliot’s ego as a poet, he firmly believes that a poet must be totally separate from his work, not just in understanding his work, but also in composing it. He emphasizes the necessity of this separation during the creative process as essential to evoking pure emotion. In this way, Eliot believes a poet’s work can channel timeless truth, unsullied by the poet’s mind which is absorbed by the immediacy of the present. In “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” he writes, “The business of the poet is not to find new emotions but to use the ordinary ones and, in working them up into poetry to express feelings which are not in actual emotions at all. And emotions he has never experienced will serve his turn as well as those familiar to him” (42). In isolating his own emotions and personality from his poetry, the poet enables his work to more directly connect to the emotions of the reader. Without the fog of his own awareness, the poet can create in the reader feelings that the poet himself cannot understand. He writes, “experiences which are important for the man may take no place in the poetry, and those which become important in the poetry may play quite negligible part in the man, the personality” (41). The poem, Eliot implies, is more about the reader, and a piety to the tradition of the many “dead poets” of Western literature.

Eliot considers this severance from emotion to be a liberating experience, an unclouding of the human mind so as to see its own nature more clearly. A biased mind cannot possibly understand the greater workings of the human mind, since it knows only its own biases. While

escaping this reality seems to be troublesome, or perhaps impossible, Eliot sees it as an enlightenment: “Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality” (42). The poet’s own distance from the emotion of the subject allows his poetry to better encapsulate the desired product, but also, it frees him from the confines of his own mind. This idea bears an uncanny resemblance to the structure of the Ancient Greek play; the inhabitants of the world are the actors, trapped in a story they cannot escape and cannot see from the outside, while the playwright functions as an unseen chorus, which sees the play in its entirety and reflects upon it—able to understand what the characters cannot and reflecting upon it with ultimate wisdom. The plight of the poet, however, is that he is a character who understands himself to be a part of the great play of existence, one who desperately strives to be the chorus, a body entirely separate from his own. Moreover, the actor has one body, while the chorus is simultaneously one body and many bodies. Like the “living whole of all poetry,” the chorus is a collective body that, as a whole, is ambivalent to suffering. The poet, therefore, must view himself in his entirety if he is to become a part of the living whole. The poet is merely a vessel, a means by which divine knowledge can reach an end—a poem which expresses the elusive elements of human existence, expanding the “living whole of all poetry ever written.” Poetry comes from the past and is contingent upon its reception—it is temporally fluid; the poet’s job is to shape a work which conveys an out-of-body experience to those who cannot truly experience it.

In order to enter its tradition, Eliot believes that a poet must possess an awareness of “the living whole of all poetry” and wield it in novel ways. One cannot simply stumble into this sacred body of work. If the poet successfully does his job, Eliot notes, “the whole existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered; and so the relations, proportions, values of each work of art

toward the whole are readjusted; and this is conformity between the old and the new” (37).

While all the works in this body of literature must adjust to accommodate a new addition, the new work must still be able to fit in seamlessly, as one of the many bodies that make up the body of poetry—the chorus of human existence. A poet must understand the whole of poetry as if he were on the outside of time and space, thus understanding the architecture of the stage that is the world, the continuity of the acts which are time, and the place his body currently occupies within it. Eliot writes, “This... sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional. And it is at the same time what makes a writer more acutely conscious of his place in time, of his own contemporaneity” (37). In this way, a true poet must immerse himself in an extensive range of works and from this understand and reflect the multitude of manifestations of the human experience. This must include not just the works produced within his lifetime, but also those produced before, which no doubt contributed to the very conception of modern works. Thus, the poet must supersede his time and place in order to fully understand the experience demonstrated by the works of the ages. Eliot remarks, “the poet cannot reach this impersonality without surrendering himself wholly to the work to be done. And he is not likely to know what is to be done unless he lives in what is not merely the present, but the present moment of the past, unless he is conscious, not of what is dead, but of what is already living” (42). Thus, the poet’s ultimate goal is to become at once ephemeral and eternal.

All of the points revealed by Eliot by the end of his composition can be found before the work even begins. His ideas spring from those expressed by previous poets. However, this knowledge is not rendered obsolete by Eliot, nor is it a knowledge that overshadows the knowledge which he supplies. As an epigraph to the final section of his essay, he uses a quote

from Aristotle's *De Anima* : “ὁ δὲ νοῦς ἴσως θεϊότερόν τι καὶ ἀπαθές ἐστιν,” “The mind is perhaps¹ more divine and unaffected” (408b). As opposed to the body which has needs in order to survive and will eventually rot away if these needs are not met, the mind is truly apathetic. It does not have needs to be filled in order to continue thinking, aside from those of the body, and thus, it is possible that the mind may supersede the afflictions of its mortal cage. The mind may reflect upon its body's suffering and yearning, but it does not decay alongside it. Though the mind departs from the dead body, it does not die itself, for it was never alive but rather existing within a living body. Emotions and affections are a product of the body and the mind combined; they are a function of the body through which the mind vicariously suffers. In other words, thinking can make one feel bad but the thoughts themselves cannot hurt the mind, which remains unaffected. This presents the possibility that if man could prevent his thoughts from being tainted with the corruption of mortality, these thoughts would be entirely apathetic, and the raw essence of them could be unshakable (i.e. divine). While ἀπαθές can be translated as “unchanging” (unlike the body which ages), it can also mean “free from emotion”. This is clear throughout the text, in which Eliot writes about the power of thought as “an escape from emotion” (42). It is impossible for the mortal being to separate his mind from his body entirely, since the mind cannot be free from the body without the body itself perishing, thus losing all contact with the mortal world; Eliot strives toward this ideal state of being. Though the mind may dissipate with no body, losing its place in the physical world, it does not perish as the body does. For the poet, the mind exists in his poetry which, should it be accepted, may live on within the “living whole of all poetry.” this is like an afterlife earned by only the greatest poets. In the same way that a man's essence might live on through his biological children, the poet's essence can live on

¹ This can also mean “equal” which carries the implication of “equal in possibility,” essentially meaning “perhaps” or “maybe.”

through his poetry. Since the body restricts the mind not only in time and space but also in experience and emotion, Eliot believes that if he can somehow lessen these consequences of mortality, his mind will be able to preoccupy itself with more divine knowledge.

In an attempt to put distance between himself and the workings of his mind, Eliot weaves ancient allusions into his work, separating the subject matter from his own self entirely. Using works from another time separates him from the world in which they were written as well as from the individual lived experiences of the poets. Moreover, his knowledge of these works was passed down to him through generations of men, which allowed him the insights that transcend those of the individual. In order to draw a modern conclusion based on these works, he must be able to see some eternal thread of knowledge throughout time—something beyond the physical text and his physical world. As a result of his isolation from his work, Eliot believes himself better equipped to create poetry which accurately encapsulates his subject—something that will resonate throughout the present, regardless of how far it may be in the past, to create more divine poetry. Such poetry must also, therefore, resonate with a meaning incomprehensible to those whose minds are trapped in the present. He hopes to enlighten the world that does not seek such enlightenment—a problem whose solution he will struggle to find for years to come.

In the arduous times in which he lived, his world shaken by war, Eliot sought to be the poet who could come the closest to this unrealizable poet, so as to understand how his own place in time fit within the entirety of time and space. He postulates, “the more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates; the more perfectly will the mind digest and transmute the passions which are its material” (40). Thus, Eliot strives toward the impossible, both for the sake of poetry, and for the sake of his readers and every poet ever to write or have written. As a Classicist himself, he must have felt as

if he were trying to supersede the physical realm and to see into Plato's realm of forms without fully existing in this realm—a prophet in his modern dystopia. Indeed, in spite of a desire to be detached from his work, Eliot must consider himself akin to his prophet of *The Waste Land*, Tiresias, in that he blinds himself to the needs of the body—to present attachments and emotions—and trades his physical sight for spiritual sight. Just as the perfect poet must completely separate his person from his poetry, so too one who wishes for inhuman sight must lose his human eyes. Just as Tiresias predicts an inevitable ruin in the works of the ancients, Eliot preaches doom in his poetry. He suggests an inevitable collapse of individuals, of empires, of life as it was. He must understand the pain of Tiresias, the recipients of whose warnings fought in vain to avoid their inevitable doom.

However, in spite of his dire predictions, Eliot hopes that he can awaken the sleeping minds of his readers, minds which are not yet conscious of the fact that they are part of a larger mind belonging to humanity itself. He points the world toward the eternal *voũç* of humanity, which must not only be protected as it expands through generations, but improved upon for the sake of the future of humanity. If people can fully understand the roots of their own knowledge and utilize this knowledge to improve upon the postulations of their predecessors, perhaps they can change the cycles of history so that humanity as a whole, rather than chasing the tail of history, spirals towards a better existence.

II

In *The Waste Land*,² which was published in 1922, just after *Tradition and the Individual Talent*, Eliot imagines the collective mind of humanity as a land full of ghosts and ancient treasures in decay. This land is wasting away, not necessarily from age but from the neglect of humanity to fulfill its duty of maintaining the greatness of its collective mind. The ghosts who wander the land profess their knowledge, but there is no audience to hear it, since the knowledge was abandoned long ago. The spirit of Tiresias utters prophecies which fall on empty ears, mirroring Eliot's struggle to find an engaged audience. No one wanders this land besides the speaker and ghosts, which implies that the living have abandoned tradition both by forgetting the knowledge it holds and by failing to use the substance of it to make something new. *The Waste Land* expresses Eliot's despair as both a poet and a historian. It begs the question: What good is immortal wisdom if the living refuse to listen?

Eliot strongly believed that the languages of classical antiquity allowed for layers of meaning to be perfectly assembled. Charles Martindale notes that this belief is reflected in Eliot's poetic style, "Eliot's theory of poetic language is also in part an 'archaeological' one, in terms of recessive layers of meaning" ("Ruins of Rome: T. S. Eliot and the Presence of the Past" 116). Of course, then, the epigraph at the beginning of his magnum opus, *The Waste Land*, is not in English but rather is written in Latin and Greek. It comes from the Petronius' *Satyricon*, a Roman satire from the late first century.³

In the particular passage which constitutes Eliot's epigraph, the protagonist is at a feast with a rich former-slave named Trimalchio. As part of his attempt to impress his guests, he tells the story of the Sibyl, a priestess who asked Apollo to grant her eternal life. This he gave her,

² Eliot separates "waste" and "land" so as to differentiate between a wasteland which is waste by nature and the Waste Land which is simply a land that has come to be filled with waste.

³ The title refers not to satire but to the mythical satyr, a part man, part goat/horse forest spirit. The satyr is typically depicted with a comically large phallus, and involved in bawdy stories filled with obscene humor.

though not eternal youth. So she began to waste away and by the time Trimalchio's story takes place, she is nothing but a tourist attraction:

'Nam Sibyllam quidem Cumis ego ipse oculis meis vidi
in ampulla pendere, et cum illi pueri dicerent: Σιβυλλα
τι θελεις; respondebat illa: αποθανειν θελω,'

"For indeed I saw with my own eyes the Sibyl at Cumae
hanging in a jar and when those boys said to her: Sibyl,
'what do you want?' She responded, 'I want to die.'"

Although here shrouded in myth, a desire for the relief of death in the face of suffering is one that resonates throughout history. This particular quotation alerts the reader to Eliot's esteem for classical mythology, as well as his perspective on death, both of which will influence the poem. This makes it clear that he sees death as a necessity to the human experience, whether in individual lives as with the Sibyl or in terms of empires. The physical decay of the Sibyl is mirrored by her decline in power, to the point where she is merely a tourist attraction, dust hanging in a jar. Her longing for death drives home the point that everything must come to an end, lest the cycle of life and death be disrupted, rendering the consequences dire. Although great, the Sibyl refused to relinquish her greatness, imagining that she could simply live forever and thus be eternally great. Unfortunately, her eternal life condemns her to a slow decline in physicality and in name, diminishing her influence. Should she have died great, her greatness would have lived on in the collective memory of humanity. However, as long as she lives, her name is tied to her body, thus decaying into dust just as she does. Her name ultimately comes to represent the jar in which she hangs, in voice if not in body. Her eternal greatness requires her mortal death. All great things, the story of the Sibyl reminds us, must die.

Among the most prominent allusions to classical antiquity featured in *The Waste Land* are those regarding Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. The first major reference to Ovid in the poem, is a small

passage about the Rape of Philomela, featured in part VI of the *Metamorphoses*. The allusion is established in section two of Eliot's poem, entitled "A Game of Chess," when Eliot describes a painting of the rape of Philomela by king Tereus which is among the luxuries in Cleopatra's chamber:

Above the antique mantel was displayed
 As though a window gave upon the sylvan scene
 The change of Philomel, by the barbarous king
 So rudely forced; yet there the nightingale
 Filled all the desert with inviolable voice
 And still she cried, and still the world pursues,
 "Jug Jug" to dirty ears (97-103).

The rape of Philomela is a tale of great suffering followed by salvation, as well as a lesson on the importance of humanity's ability to pass on knowledge. Though the story is old, the human experience and the lesson are still pertinent. The story of Philomela begins when she is raped by her sister Procne's husband, "the barbarous king" Tereus. In a seemingly callous choice of words, Eliot describes her assault as her being "so rudely forced." This description, however, highlights the way in which this crime is an appalling attempt both to force Philomela into copulation and to sully that which is sacred. The sacred referred to here is sex as an act of love and an act of reproduction. It seems that Eliot finds Ovid's tale to be symbolic of the defiling of the natural cycles that he believes is plaguing Western society.

In order to keep Philomela from divulging this atrocity to her sister, Tereus cuts out her tongue and imprisons her. In spite of this obstacle, Philomela informs her sister of Tereus's infidelity by weaving a tapestry which depicts the scene. Once the sisters enact their revenge on the king by killing, cooking and feeding him his own son, the gods step in to protect them from his wrath, transforming Procne into a swallow, Philomela into a nightingale, and Tereus into a hoopoe. While Tereus disrespected nature and the sacred process of reproduction, he received his

retribution twice over. First, his disrespect for the sanctity of life, particularly reproduction, is punished appropriately by the sisters who force him to eat his own son. Secondly, he was punished by the gods in being turned into a bird of prey,⁴ suspended in his predatory state, forced to attack and eviscerate other birds till he killed himself because of his suffering. Procne and Philomela, however, face their disgrace with strength and honor. Philomela passes her knowledge on to Procne, in spite of her lost tongue.

Just as important as Philomela's conveying of the information of her rape to Procne is the fact that Procne uses this information to her advantage, destroying that which has turned rotten in order to gain salvation in the form of rebirth. Even reborn as a nightingale, Philomela strives eternally to convey her painful knowledge to any who will listen, "fill[ing] the desert with inviable voice," and crying "'Jug Jug' to dirty ears" (101-103). Tragically, the "jug jug" of Philomela is an almost silent cry, as the female nightingale has no song. One must pay close attention, must strain to hear the message of Philomela. With this allusion, Eliot highlights the importance of an active attempt at both passing on and receiving *logos*, and suggests that only by receiving, improving upon, and passing down knowledge, can modern civilization attain salvation from suffering. Should the knowledge of the ages continue to pile up, rundown and bereft of any new innovation, society will continue to suffer as the rotten waste of disrespected tradition.

Onomatopoeic bird calls are included throughout the poem, invoking the idea of unheard knowledge and untapped potential; the use of onomatopoeia in conveying these calls, attempting to corrupt the sound itself as little as possible, further invokes the role of the poet in conveying unadulterated reality. Moreover, birds often connect the spiritual and the mundane: the phoenix

⁴ Hoopoes are known to beat their small prey lifeless. The hoopoe bears a crown-like crest which symbolizes his nobility and has a spear-like beak which suggests violence.

is a mythical bird that seems to transcend death, Zeus copulated with Leda as a swan, and both biblically and classically, birds were used as vehicles to messages.⁵ The concept of augury was particularly prevalent in the classical world in both myth and practice, serving as a major influence to oracles.⁶ Even today, humans imitate bird calls in order to convey various messages. Different types of birds, different formations, and different numbers can indicate different things. This significance is not lost on Eliot in his use of the story of Philomela, which he returns to in “The Fire Sermon,” part III of *The Waste Land*. Now Eliot only repeats the silent “jug jug” of the nightingale among other bird calls. The only other indication of Philomela is at line 205: “So rudely forc’d.” The dissolving of the meaning of the words into a few convoluted phrases reinforces how *logos* is gradually lost with time. With no one to hear her cries, Philomela’s story is forgotten, and so too is the *logos* of the ages. This sets the scene for Tiresias to enter and to preach his forgotten knowledge to the empty waste land.

Among all of the characters who come in and out of the poem, however, Eliot himself considers Tiresias the single most important. In his notes on the poem, he writes, “Tiresias, although a mere spectator and not indeed a 'character', is yet the most important personage in the poem, uniting all the rest” (218). Not surprisingly, he calls upon classical mythology to deliver his most imperative message. Tiresias the great seer appears exclusively in the third section of the poem, “The Fire Sermon,” and delivers a long monologue describing one of his visions. What is so significant about Tiresias in the poem, however, is not in just the speech he gives, but rather what his personage represents. Tiresias is a character presented in Book III of Ovid’s

⁵ This practice dates back over 2000 years and was notably used by the Romans during times of war and by the Greeks to declare the results of the Olympic Games to various cities.

⁶ Augury was integral in the mythological founding of Rome. Romulus and Remus initially planned to settle their dispute over the foundation of the city through a contest of augury to determine which of them had divine approval. Ultimately, this contest did determine a victor, though not as intended, when Romulus killed Remus over their disagreement on the results of the contest.

Metamorphoses. He appears throughout several myths, typically as the bearer of bad news. Given the power of his clairvoyance, Tiresias takes it upon himself to warn those without his divine sight of approaching disaster. His visions are quintessential to the narratives of many mythical heroes, including Narcissus, Oedipus, and Odysseus. He is the one whom Eliot has chosen to convey to the masses his visions of doom.

Notably, for Eliot, Tiresias is a literary figure who has experienced life both as a woman and a man, due to a series of curses. In a quote from Ovid, which Eliot points out in his notes is written of Tiresias, we learn, “Venus huic erat utraque nota,” “Either side of Venus was known to him.” In Eliot’s eyes—and in the eyes of Jove and Saturnia (as he establishes in his notes, again quoting Ovid), Tiresias is more apt than any to speak to the general human experience. Additionally, his clairvoyance allows him to see from every perspective. Throughout his existence in myth, Tiresias is seen, and sees, as one who walks the line between humans and gods, man and woman, blindness and sight, present and future, and the earth and the underworld. This makes him the perfect one to bespeak the corrupting elements devastating Western society.

Moreover, his story gets at another layer of the poem’s meaning: in spite of the destruction, there is a narrative of transformation and rebirth. In his transformation into a woman and back again, Tiresias is twice reborn. In being cursed with blindness and then given clairvoyance, he is reborn a third time in his understanding of the world around him. These transformations, furthermore, demonstrate a pattern of punishment followed by salvation. In both cases, Tiresias is first cursed as a punishment for upsetting either the gods or the natural cycle of birth and death (e.g., for striking snakes that are mating). Following his punishment for each disturbance, Tiresias is rewarded with knowledge in one form or another. As an omniscient being, Tiresias has a wealth of knowledge that grows with each metaphorical death and rebirth.

In this way he comes to represent the ever-expanding *logos*, common to all man, though forgotten by most.

As this all-knowing manifestation of the trials of mankind, carrying with him all the ancient knowledge that has been abandoned, Tiresias describes a vision, and therein passes his judgement on modern Western society. He speaks:

I Tiresias, though blind, throbbing between two lives,
Old man with wrinkled female breasts, can see
At the violet hour, the evening hour that strives
Homeward, and brings the sailor home from sea,
The typist home at teatime, clears her breakfast, lights
Her stove, and lays out food in tins (218-223).

The importance of Tiresias's duality and his age—and therein his wisdom—is declared immediately within the first two lines of this passage, as if to prove his qualification to be a prophet. The next four lines begin the narrative of Tiresias's vision. In his notes, Eliot claims that he had Sappho's poetry in mind when he wrote this—specifically, “the idea of ‘longshore’ or ‘dory’ fisherman, who returns at nightfall” (221). Though this fisherman trope is ageless, Eliot still associates his lines with those of Sappho, effectively juxtaposing the beauty of Sappho's love poetry with the banality of this modern love story. He proceeds to describe the couple having boring, perfunctory sex, a symbol of society's overall loss of spirituality and a grotesque disregard for the sanctity of the process of reproduction, representing the larger cycle of death and rebirth. The story of Tiresias, Eliot believes, demonstrates the significance of the rebirth of society and human knowledge. However, the fact that he is a specter, wandering the waste land with seemingly no audience but the speaker to heed his warning, expresses a fear that in modern carelessness, society has lost this *logos* completely. *The Waste Land* serves as a warning against such a tragedy as well as an admission that humanity has already begun to slip down the road to destruction.

Toward the end of the poem, in section four, entitled “What the Thunder Said,” the allusion to Philomela resurfaces, if only for one line. This line is actually a reference to a poem, usually attributed to Tiberianus, which references Ovid’s story of Philomela. Among a series of quotes in various languages, Eliot inserts this quote from the poem *Pervigilum Veneris* alongside his own addition in English: “Quando fiam uti chelidon—O swallow swallow” (428). This phrase translates to “When will I come to be as the swallow?” and provides a hopeful, if morbid, message. In this way, Eliot welcomes the destruction of the already crumbling Western world. The only way for humanity to move on from its own decaying greatness and from the *logos* of all history is to create something new, something better in its rebirth.

III

When Tiresias appears in “The Fire Sermon,” preaches his sermon to the vast emptiness of the waste land itself. Just as Tiresias wanders a deserted land as a spirit, Eliot worries that he too preaches to a nonexistent audience, and that society has no care for his prophecies. This presents a major issue for the revolutionary poet: he may attempt to preach to all, though none will truly hear his words in all their intent. He returns to this problem years later in his presidential address to The Classical Association in an attempt to progress toward a solution which lies both in the poet and in his audience. He fixates on the juxtaposition of mortality and immortality as well as their codependence. In contrast to his previous work, Eliot preaches to a smaller audience as opposed to the world at large. He asserts that the maintenance of knowledge is not just the duty of the poet, nor is it solely the duty of his would-be audience, but rather the poet and his audience must both put in work.

Eliot's speech, *The Classics and the Man of Letters*, which he delivered to The Classical Association in April of 1942, both specifies and expands upon the content of "Tradition and the Individual Talent" by professing the importance of the study of Classics. While he covers in greater detail the qualifications of the ideal poet, he focuses on the importance of all "men of letters" as writers and as critics in their contribution to the living whole of literature.⁷ Regarding his choice of the term "man of letters," Eliot remarks, "If I were more specific, and spoke of 'the poet', 'the novelist', 'the dramatist', or 'the critic', I should suggest to your minds a number of particular considerations which would distract your attention from the view of literature as a whole which I wish to keep before us in the present context" (6). Considering that the introduction of the speech and even the title itself profess the significance of individuals with all levels of knowledge and prestige, it is ironic that this speech was delivered to a small and specialized audience. Though he seems to address an audience of all standings, of recognized talent and soi-disant poets, he only delivers it directly to the academic elite. Immediately, Eliot's speech seems to be at odds with itself.

In acknowledgement of this inconsistency, Eliot notes, "The serious writer [is placed] in a dilemma: either to write for too large a public or to write for too small a public. And the curious result of either choice, is to place a premium on the ephemeral" (15). Thus, maintaining his conviction of the impossibility of the truly perfect poet, Eliot excuses the dissonance between his claims and his actions. Although addressing an Association of specialists, of whom he is president, he disparages this condition: "Nobody suffers more from being limited to the society of his own profession than does the writer: it is still worse when his audience is composed chiefly of other writers or would-be writers" (23). Eliot seems to affront his own position, and

⁷ Previously I have mentioned this as the "living whole of all poetry." To Eliot, this includes all literary works, poetry being created by a poet which, Eliot notes, can mean many things.

that of his audience, criticizing the way in which academia is structured while simultaneously accepting positions of leadership within this structure. Eliot is figuratively preaching to the choir; he is giving a speech about the importance of a classical education to classically educated people who have devoted their lives to the subject. Moreover, his message regarding the preservation of knowledge is being passed on only to those who already value tradition.

However, in regard to the tradition of literature as a whole, Eliot observes, “Among the great, even some of the most formal and correct have been also innovators and even rebels, and that even some of the most revolutionary have carried on the work of those from whose influence they rebelled” (8). In the same way that he is relying upon the members of the Classical Association to pass on the content of this speech to those who may not be so closely involved in the study of the Classics or literature, he suggests that the influence of novel ideas often relies upon the author’s ability to appear as if he follows the rules. Though he is following the rules of secular academic societies, bestowing his wisdom unto the ears of those who are devoted academics and elites within their field, it is necessary that he do so in order to assure that his work is recognized and digested. He writes, “My appeal can only address itself to those who already accept the contention that the preservation of living literature is more than a matter of interest only to amateurs of verse and readers of novels; and who see in it the preservation of developed speech, and of civilization against barbarism” (26). More specifically, since he can only address his appeal to the importance of a classical literary education to those who are already devoted, his refined audience must prove their devotion by taking up his cause and passing on that which he professes. These people are the necessary bridge between his influence and the larger public.

The writer who wants to succeed must be able to balance his message with his intended audience, and to do this must understand what will captivate a larger amount of people for a longer time. This writer must work himself into the continuity of the living whole of literature, serving as a bridge between literary tradition and modernity. Of the nature of tradition, Eliot writes, “This continuity is largely unconscious, and only visible in historical retrospect...” (8). He suggests that the poet who wishes to become a part of this “continuity” must intellectually transcend his physical limitations, those of space and time, to really connect with the living whole of literature and understand how it all fits together. The poet must at least be aware of the trends of the past, and must be conscious of the continuity of tradition so that he might better understand his place in the present. In order to perfect this ability, Eliot believes there are certain subjects a “man of letters” should be knowledgeable of—“notably history, for you cannot understand the literature of the past without some knowledge of the conditions under which it was written, and the sort of people who wrote it; of logic, for that is an investigation of the anatomy of thought in language; of philosophy for that is the attempt to use the language in the most abstract way possible” (21). By this, Eliot means that no individual can join the eternal conversation of literature as a whole, if he does not understand the contributions of those who have spoken before him. It is thus necessary that this conversation be preserved through continual education, both within and across generations.

Eliot makes the distinction, however, that his mission is not merely to educate the masses, but to educate the masses in an attempt to foster more influential work. He claims, “I am not here concerned with the teaching of literature, but with teaching only in relation to those who are going to write it” (12). A key component of the maintenance of a growing literary tradition is an understanding that greatness does not stand alone, but requires valuable influence. That which

is tradition was once novel, and the new work which that tradition inspires will one day become tradition, too. The maintenance of this tradition is necessary for the production of a new masterpiece, and thus the creation of and influence of new works is dependent upon that which is taught, not only in schools, but also by society. Though only those who are truly interested might take in literature in its initial form, if they deem it worthy, they will convey their interest to others who may or may not find inspiration in it. This process is stifled by those who shrug off the matter of education, thinking that a genius will arise regardless of his teaching and will discover brilliance on his own. Eliot underscores the importance that those who are educated pass on their knowledge to others. As one scatters seeds in hopes that a few will sprout, knowledge must be scattered so that it may produce works from a few individuals of exceptional talent. He declares,

We are commonly inclined to assume that the creation of literature, and poetry especially depends simply upon the unpredictable appearance from time to time of writers of genius;...Taking this view we look at each great writer by himself; and looking at him by himself, we are unlikely to believe that he would have been a greater writer, or an inferior, writer, if he had had a different kind of education (6–7).

This is a major fallacy, according to Eliot, in that it suggests that the individual exists separately from the living whole of literature. While only some achieve greatness, their success depends upon a working knowledge of literature that is affected by the way in which society yields this knowledge. That which is treasured by society, and thus passed on through the education of generations, has a stronger influence on society as a whole. Ultimately, this means that no matter where genius pops up, a conscious maintenance of general education should result in the talented individual being influenced by such knowledge, if not directly, then through its effects on society. Should academia depend upon the individual genius to move the great tradition of literature forward, less importance will be focused upon that which is taught to society at large

and, resultingly, the process by which a work leaves a mark on society. Furthermore, without a common knowledge of literary tradition, many a genius will have his potential stifled before even realizing it, finding it impossible to take a place in a tradition of which he is ignorant.

While an ambitious poet may become a part of the literary tradition, he can only become immortal once he sheds his mortality. The status which he desires can only be granted through the continuity of knowledge which is “visible in historical retrospect,” after the poet’s own time. This is strikingly reminiscent of the allegory of the Sibyl, whose status was lost as she attempted to breach her mortal cage. Even after her body completely decays, her spirit is trapped in a jar, unable to exist without some kind of container. True immortality requires absolute mortality. In other words, to become immortal through the literary tradition, a poet must first die. While a poet can achieve a version of immortality, the nature of this immortality is linked entirely to his work, the reception of his work, and thus the influence he has had on society through this work. The poet’s habits, personality, and individual traits must die to make way for this immortal version of the poet. Mortality is elusory until that point, death being the defining element of mortality. To achieve immortality, the poet must relinquish his own mortality and so his identity by thus completing it; there is no other way to surpass mortality unless through some kind of death, without which it has really been immortality all along. The mortal self cannot ever truly coexist with the immortal self.

As Eliot discusses in “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” the great poet must be able to sacrifice himself entirely to his work, losing his identity so as to produce a work that conveys universal, timeless truth. According to his further speculations, as presented in *Classics and the Man of Letters*, this sacrifice is necessary not only for the production of great work, but for the acquisition of immortality. A poet who gains immortality in the living whole of literature only

does so through shedding his mortal self, the living person that he is, and replacing that with his works, so as to crystalize his actuality as a mortal being. This is evident in that the name of any great immortal poet invokes the thought of his works rather than of the man he was. In the collective mind of humanity, he becomes his work. Until the poet himself dies, he is still creating a name for himself, one that he changes up until the point of his death. At this point he sacrifices his control, and his immortal name is at the mercy of those who receive and critique it. Like a soldier sacrifices his life for the betterment of his country, the poet must give his for and to the living whole of literature. He must commit to live posthumously, as defined by those still living, who are responsible for how his name is presented, and what his name invokes in the common imagination. Should we fail our job as critics, the sacrifice of the poet would be in vain.

The spread of knowledge is refined as it passes between individuals and generations, being sculpted by their experience and their own knowledge. This process is essential to maintaining the genius of significant literary works via those which they inspire, if not through the continual study of the works themselves. While it is geniuses who produce incredible works, their work depends upon the incorporation of a tradition of greatness into society as a whole. Eliot claims, "The continuity of a literature is essential to its greatness; it is very largely the function of secondary writers to preserve this continuity, and to provide a body of writing which is not necessarily read by posterity, but which plays a great part in forming the link between those writers who continue to be read" (8). Thus, not only is a work's influence contingent upon its reception, it is also contingent upon the reception of past works, and the influence of those works upon the reception of those before them. Though not everyone is a genius who will earn an immortal place in literary tradition, everyone serves as a judge of what deserves to be a part of tradition. That which is received well will spark interest and influence thought even after its

novelty wears off. While such a work may not directly contribute to the production of additional masterpieces, the reactions that it ignites may eventually lead to something great.

While the difference between the “man of letters” and his critics is essential for the critical process, Eliot notes that one should be careful not to divide these parties so sharply: “...you cannot draw a sharp line between the man of letters and his audience, between the critic in print and the critic in conversation” (23). This comment underscores the idea that the “man of letters” must sacrifice himself to become part of the living whole of literature (which encompasses the eternal conversation of works both among each other and among their critiques). On another level, however, the man of letters is the same as his audience in that he, too, serves as his own critic. The critical process is mimicked within the writing process in the form of critique. The more a work is critiqued, the better it can be tailored to be universally fitting. If both the poet and his critics are qualified, the result remains a work of genius while still becoming more accessible to all audiences. Even within his own writing process, the great poet serves as his own critic, crafting his work by comparing his wealth of knowledge (based upon the human experience of other people at other times) with his own experience.

Eliot establishes the disciplined critic as necessarily devout: “A *disciple*, at any rate, is surely a willing pupil, and one who attaches himself to a master voluntarily, because he believes in the value of the subject which the master professes and believes that the master is qualified to give him the initiation he wants” (20). Not only does Eliot reveal that the pupil must be devoted to his subject, but also that it is the pupil who bestows upon the master the right to pass on information; it is the pupil who must deem the master “qualified” as both a teacher and a critic of traditional knowledge. The critic—even the unaware critic that exists in every person—serves as both pupil and master. He devotes himself to that which he studies in full faith, and then, in turn,

teaches what he deems valuable to any pupil who considers him to be a qualified teacher. In this way, literary influence reaches much farther than its firsthand readership. Moreover, no one should ever consider himself to be the end of the line in terms of any information, inasmuch as the influence of that which he passes on is always to be considered.

In contemporary times, Facebook serves as a small-scale example of this. When people post something, they either post something original, or they share something. While a user's post might be original, its content is no doubt influenced by that which already exists, and the individual who posts is like the "man of letters." Each post, even if original, is influenced by something experienced by the individual user. This post is seen by the user's "friends" who serve as the initial, "specialized" audience. In choosing friends, an individual chooses not only those whose content he considers to be valuable, but also those whom he would like in his audience. He chooses his students and his teachers. By accepting a friend request, he essentially verifies that he considers this person qualified as a teacher. On the other hand, when he reacts to, comments on, or shares a post, he is acting as a critic. Others will see these reactions and use them to form their own opinions. Moreover, the ability to share a post allows the passing on of information to different circles. Not only does the act of "sharing" a post pass the content beyond its original audience, it also represents the student accepting the master's content (i.e. affirming that the master is qualified) and the transformation of the student into a master of his own audience. While these "shares" serve to disperse knowledge, they also increase the amount of critique it can receive; a larger audience is able to engage with both the post and each other. It is not just those who post, in other words, who make the overall content of Facebook "good quality" or "bad quality," but also every user of Facebook as each decides what is and is not worth passing on.

This responsibility as a critic is one that each of us bears, not only on social media but in the real world as well. Eliot explains that issues arise when the job is done poorly. In an attempt to clarify, he describes the living whole of literature as a machine: “When the cog sticks, and reviewers remain fast in the taste of a previous generation, the machine needs to be ruthlessly dismantled and reassembled; when it slips, and the reviewer accepts novelty as a sufficient criterion of excellence, the machine needs to be stopped and tightened up” (14–15). This is what he calls “critical decay,” which results in the deterioration not only of the role of the critic, but also of the tradition of knowledge which the critic is tasked to uphold. Ultimately, critical decay leads to a loss of both tradition and novel excellence, as one cannot exist without the other.

As an example of the influence of the common knowledge maintained by the critic, Eliot uses perhaps the most well-known English playwright: Shakespeare. Not only does he serve as an example of a name that has become immortal, one with its works and influence, but also as a man of letters whose success was built upon common knowledge as a source of inspiration. He notes,

[Shakespeare] lived in a world in which the wisdom of the ancients was respected, and their poetry admired and enjoyed; he was less well educated than many of his colleagues, but his was education of the same kind—and it is almost more important, for a man of letters, that his associates should be well educated than that he should be well educated himself (10).

Not only did the collective knowledge of humanity allow Shakespeare familiarity with historical knowledge without an extensive education, but it was essential to his ability to succeed. While his success was contingent upon the work of society to maintain a working knowledge of previous traditions and literatures, he also had an incredible influence on literature to come.

Should Shakespeare either have failed to gain a reputation, or not had common knowledge that

was of value to his genius, not only would the tradition of literature lack his name, it would also lack all the works that were inspired by him. Literary progress would be drastically slowed.

Thus, Eliot calls his audience to action. He demands that they work to maintain and improve the state of education so as to enable a brighter future:

The problem of the survival of English literature... is a spiritual problem, because its solution involves not merely planning, but *growing* a pattern of values, is so vast a problem that it is not one for the educational specialist alone, but for all who are concerned with the structure of society. It is one with which I have no more to do here than to show my awareness of it. My only contribution is to proclaim that the future of English Literature will be deeply affected by the way in which we solve, or fail to solve this problem” (23–24).

It is clear that this problem is not a job that any one writer can fix single-handedly. His words suggest that we are all invested in this tradition, by spirit if not by conscious choice. Eliot addresses his audience: “You have the option of welcoming the change [of literature] as the dawn of emancipation, or of deploring it as the twilight of literature...” (13). Having already addressed the importance of maintaining the literary tradition, he pleads with his audience here to embrace changes within that tradition so as to allow progress. There is a fine line between honoring the past and becoming stuck in it. For any major change, however, it is necessary for many to “welcome” it, allowing the change to truly revolutionize the *logos* of humanity.

Eliot confirms this notion by saying that, “I am quite aware that an educational system cannot of itself bring about either great faith or great literature: it is truer to say that our education is not so much the generator of our culture as the offspring of it” (27). This reveals civilization to be cyclical, a notion which he fully embraces in *Four Quartets*. The work was published over the course of six years, between 1935–41, and was published in its entirety one year before giving his presidential address. While *The Waste Land* sees the past as isolated from the present and time as a linear stretch, *Four Quartets* imagines time as a constant cycle of death

and rebirth, calling to mind Yeats' gyres.⁸ It is as if the past is recycled over and over again, with small alterations occurring each time. In the same way, knowledge moves in cycles; it is professed and digested over and over again, between different academic and social circles, and even different generations. It is this cyclical nature of human history that Eliot focuses on in each section of *Four Quartets*.

IV

Eliot begins *Four Quartets* with an epigraph—actually with two epigraphs—both of which are fragments of Heraclitus. The first, Fragment 2, reads “τοῦ λόγου δὲ ἐόντος ξυνοῦ ζώουσιν οἱ πολλοί / ὡς ἰδίαν ἔχοντες φρόνησιν ,” “although *logos* is common to all, most people live as if they had a wisdom⁹ of their own.” This choice of quote speaks to both Eliot's views on the modern world, and more importantly, the importance of Classics therein. He expresses his own version of this fragment in his essay, “Tradition and the Individual Talent”: “Someone said: 'The dead writers are remote from us because we know so much more than they did.' Precisely, and they are that which we know” (Eliot 38). In essence, Eliot stresses the importance of what one might call his “academic predecessors” in his own modern work. While he values this knowledge, he warns against mistaking that knowledge for personal wisdom by reminding us that “[the dead writers] are that which we know.” This sentiment amplifies the significance of his quote from Heraclitus, as a tribute to those great dead writers who have contributed to the

⁸ Yeats most notably refers to gyres in “The Second Coming,” though they serve as a central aspect of his theory of the cyclical nature of history as put forth in *A Vision*. The gyre is different from a typical cycle in that it gets larger and smaller as it circles, almost like a conical slinky. This is how Yeats believes that time moves and it is remarkable in that each cycle is not merely a repetition of the last, but rather a slight change. It is a cycle that actually goes somewhere.

⁹ Technically, this word (*phronêsis*) should be translated, “sensitivity,” though wisdom serves as a better representation of the fragment's meaning to the contemporary ear. To us, wisdom has come to mean a sort of knowledge that is private and built upon individual experience. As opposed to common knowledge, wisdom must be earned.

immortal common knowledge (or *logos* for Heraclitus). While Eliot was incredibly influenced by classical thought and classical themes within his work, he also saw the past as a kind of roadmap to the present and thus the future. Within the stories of the Greeks and Romans lies a truth about human experience, and this is the value Eliot saw in Classics with regards to his modern poetry. Like his example of Shakespeare in *Classics and the Man of Letters*, Eliot hopes that rooting his work in Classics will allow his work, and thus himself as a poet, a greatness of its own.

The second epigraph is Heraclitus's Fragment 60: "ὁδὸς ἄνω κάτω μία καὶ ὡστὴ," "The way upward and the way downward are the same." Again, the reference to Heraclitus invokes Greek antiquity, making the classical world fundamentally present throughout the following book of poetry. Writing with a past poet's words, Eliot links the past to the present and enforces the concept that time moves cyclically rather than linearly. Moreover, if up and down are taken in terms of future and past, this invites the thought that "in [the] beginning is [the] end" ("East Coker" 1). The best way to progress, Eliot believes, is through a firm understanding of the past. This further underscores the importance of Classics to Eliot's work as well as in the modern world. As Charles Martindale explains, "In 1928 Eliot argued that Britain was the 'mediating part' of Europe, 'the connection between Europe and the rest of the world,' 'the only member of the European community that has established a genuine empire that is to say, a world-wide empire as was the Roman empire'" ("Ruins of Rome: T. S. Eliot and the Presence of the Past" 114). It is essential to mention here that, though American, Eliot moved to Britain and fully integrated into society there, even, as afore mentioned, becoming the president of The Classical Association of Great Britain. In connecting his time and place to classical antiquity, Eliot both inflates the grandeur of the modern West and inflates the importance of classical antiquity to his world specifically. Throughout the early 20th century, classical literature continued to be a staple

of childhood education in the West, which made allusions to Classics accessible both to the mind of the writer and his readers. Moreover, Martindale notes, “Rome continued to be seen as the model for understanding modern Europe and the likely outcome of events there” (103). In Eliot’s eyes, by understanding the past and by maintaining the knowledge given to man by the forefathers of Western civilization, one will be able to more completely understand the present. By maintaining and understanding the history and scholarship of classical antiquity, modern man can improve upon that ancient knowledge with wisdom of his own and mankind as a whole can progress.

In concurrence with his changing opinion on the role of the audience, the sections of *Four Quartets* are named for locations in Britain, as opposed to the sections of *The Waste Land* which portray a much wider tradition. In this way, he appeals to a more specific audience. These specific titles give way to poetry which embraces nearly everything, mimicking the spread of knowledge from specialized individuals to the whole of the population.

Eliot suggests that time exists as a cycle of deaths and rebirths of the same empires and the same problems. Eliot refers over and over to the established connection of beginnings and endings and their cyclical relationship; in “Burnt Norton,” he writes: “Time present and time past / Are both perhaps present in time future, / And time future contained in time past” (1-3). In intertwining the past, present, and future, Eliot portrays time as a series of images overlaying each other, all blending into one ghostly image. This unification allows Eliot to begin drawing parallels between the past and the present.. Not only does it support his mapping of ancient Rome onto modern day Britain, but it also explains the feeling of helplessness faced by his generation in the time of WWII. Again, he suggests that the knowledge of the future is tied to the knowledge of the past.

In “East Coker,” the apposition of life and death throughout cycles plays a central role, and is characteristically classical in theme. This theme is ever-present in the myth, the literature, and the cultures of the ancient Greeks and Romans. Among many subtler allusions throughout this poem, a few stand out in particular to the classically-trained eye. Firstly, the image of the yew tree is invoked. This tree is considered sacred to Hecate and used in Hades to purify the dead. Another symbol laden with classical meaning, the kingfisher, is named as well. A popular myth tells of Halcyon and Ceyx who upset the gods and, as a result, are turned into kingfishers. This again references the connection of birds to transcendence and oracles. The story tells that Halcyon’s mother, Aeolus, goddess of the winds, made the sea calm so that her transformed daughter could lay her eggs and raise her young. Later on in the poem, Eliot describes an ancient funeral ritual, juxtaposing the sun and the moon as well as the darkness and the fire. Just as in the symbol of the yew tree and the kingfisher, this allusion indicates some kind of rebirth.

The juxtaposition of death and new life is reinforced by classical allusions throughout the book, as Eliot believes the truths these allusions reveal maintain their relevance throughout the cycles of time. Overall, this constructs an image of time as a series of overlaid images, each being one incarnation of the world. As a whole, they create roughly the same picture, though each time there are small deviations. In repeating these themes throughout the entire work, both through his own conceptions and in reiterations of classical stories and themes, Eliot emulates the cycle he describes. This cycle, he believes, can be understood through history (again supporting his theory that his Britain is the Roman Empire reincarnate) and can project the issues humanity will come to face again and again.

In the fourth poem of *Four Quartets*, “Little Gidding,” Eliot confronts the death of civilization and considers the rebirth that awaits, wondering if it is truly fated that empires

expand and grow powerful only to be completely destroyed again. Classical themes reemerge here in the idea of fate, *fatum*, which plays a quintessential role in the myths, tragedies, and literature of antiquity. Wrestling with this concept, he writes, “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,” (lines 162–164). In these lines, the speaker accepts his own inability to determine the point of history; the only certainty is that of downfall. This downfall seemed particularly imminent to Eliot in the aftermath of the World Wars. To make sense of this impending doom, Eliot turns again to the classical tradition. He draws parallels not only to the fall of Rome, but also to ancient myth. The poem essentially becomes a reminder of the imminence of death, *memento mori*.

Eliot begins “East Coker” by describing the river as a merciless god, which would invoke pagan religion in the minds of his readers, given the popularity of a classical education at the time that he was writing. The river god he describes is one that thrashes at the minds of men who think themselves too high above such a primal force to be concerned with it. He writes:

The problem once solved, the brown god is almost forgotten
By the dwellers in cities—ever, however, implacable,
Keeping his seasons and rages, destroyer, reminder
Of what men choose to forget (lines 6–9).

Until this point in the book, Eliot has focused mostly on the positive side of the *logos* of humanity, though it may be flawed or incomplete. He has made it clear that the ancients’ contributions to modern knowledge is not to be overlooked, nor to be appropriated as one’s own intelligence. However, he now looks at the darker side of this knowledge. Worse than misattributing *logos*, according to Eliot, is allowing all of that knowledge to be forgotten. As men progress, they are wont to forget where they came from. The older world—wilder, more dangerous, not yet conquered by men—is long gone, and the knowledge that goes with it, the

scholarship and the lessons learned, is easily forgotten as well. Modern men want to feel as if they are better than they were before, as if the troubles which plagued the men of the past are no longer threatening them. In “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” Eliot warns, “Tradition... cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labor” (37). As the mighty river god of the “East Coker” demonstrates, the old troubles are just as present, regardless of whether or not men believe them to be. Like fools, the men of each rebirth think themselves beyond the ancient *logos* and each generation falls to its inevitable doom by thinking its empire immortal. More specifically, if men forget the knowledge of the classical world, they still face impending doom, even though they are less cognizant of their own imminent fall. Eliot goes on to say, “The difference between the present and the past is that the conscious present is an awareness of the past in a way and to an extent which the past's awareness of itself cannot show” (38). Eliot imagines that society stands the best chance throughout its cycles of destruction and rebirth only if individuals seek out and protect the tradition of classical antiquity. Moreover, this *logos* must be acknowledged as shared by all of humanity and supported by all in the hope that new talents will be able to expand upon that knowledge.

Eliot’s classical allusions force the reader to draw from the collective *logos* left to us by the ancients, and so to enforce the importance of ancient knowledge, even in reading modern poetry. Despite rebirth, knowledge and power remain, continually transcending the cycle. In section II of “East Coker,” Eliot writes:

It was not (to start again) what one had expected.
 What was to be the value of the long looked forward to,
 Long hoped for calm, the autumnal serenity
 And the wisdom of age? Had they deceived us
 Or deceived themselves, the quiet-voiced elders,
 Bequeathing us merely a receipt for deceit? (lines 72–77).

This “wisdom of age” is the *logos* mentioned in the first epigraph, reaching through the ages from classical antiquity to 20th century Britain. While asserting the durability of this sacred knowledge, Eliot also questions the power therein by asking, “Had they deceived us / Or deceived themselves?” Though this knowledge is foundational to modern life as Eliot knows it, it is also dangerous. This, after all, is the knowledge of fallen empires. If time is cyclical, as Eliot indicates, this would suggest an imminent downfall of which there is no collective knowledge of how to avoid. Moreover, the knowledge of the ancients must be paired with modern insight in order to discover how to avoid the same downfall. Martindale explains, “Both classic and empire exist within history but also transcend history, evincing both permanence and change and enabling us to grasp, or at least to experience in practice, the relationship between them” (“Ruins of Rome: T. S. Eliot and the Presence of the Past” 107). The “empire” (power), founded upon the “classic” (knowledge), may transcend time, however, as begins to become clear throughout this section, it may not be enough for salvation. Thus, the symbols of destruction and rebirth are all the more significant, representing the only hope one might hold out in a world destined for collapse.

In “Burnt Norton,” Eliot writes, “If all time is eternally present / All time is unredeemable” (1–5). Lines 4–5 echo the ancient theme of *fatum*, that all paths are predetermined. In calling the future “unredeemable” (5), Eliot proclaims even the future to be unable to be changed. The idea of being a slave to one’s destiny resonates with Eliot immensely. Eliot maintains this theme in part II of the poem, where he writes, “Time past and time future / Allow but a little consciousness. / To be conscious is not to be in time” (82–84). We move, he insinuates, through life blindly following fate’s path. Again, the idea of being a slave to *fatum* is invoked. Just as one’s destiny in classical literature cannot be altered, neither, so it seems, can

the destiny of any being in time. However, Eliot finishes this section of the poem with the line “Only through time time is conquered” (89). Essentially, Eliot ensures that although man cannot change the fate of the world, he can at least, if anything, “conquer” it. This conquering is less of a shift in power than it is an understanding. To understand one’s time, one must understand all time; “the way upward and the way downward are the same.” If Britain is merely an incarnation of the Roman Empire, it stands to reason, according to Eliot, that one can understand the additional obstacles of the present through examining the ancient world. The ancient world is the key to the modern world and the map to the future.

To illustrate the destruction of culture and tradition, and its rebirth therein, Eliot brings the myth of Heracles into play in “Little Gidding.” The two stanzas of section IV of this poem are laden with fiery imagery, swirling damnation and grace into one inferno. Fire here signifies several things. Firstly, fire represents destruction and death. Particularly in this section, fire is often referred to as a pyre, implying a funeral or fiery death. Secondly, in classical myth, fire was stolen by Prometheus and given as a gift to humanity. Prometheus was punished by Zeus for eternity for betraying the gods and helping humans. However, humans benefitted greatly from this gift, growing more and more powerful. In this way, fire represents a birth and the power of knowledge. Fire is also indicative of the fires of Hephaestus or Vulcan, god of blacksmiths, metalworkers, and craftsmen. This is the fire which enables creation. In nature, it is fire that cleanses a forest for new growth, fire from volcanoes which form luscious islands, teeming with life, and ultimately, fire from which the earth was created. The passing of the flame from Prometheus to humanity is the passing down of this knowledge, which here represents the Greeks passing down their wisdom to the modern West.

The section begins by clearly depicting firebombing, which is a representation of the modern threat of war in Europe. Initially, the myth of Heracles is invoked only by an allusion to its tragic end in the closing of the first stanza: “The only hope or else despair / Lies in the choice of pyre or pyre— / to be redeemed from fire by fire” (204–206). The word “pyre” invokes an ancient funeral rite but the full context of these words is not clear until the second stanza, which provides further explanation:

Who then devised the torment? Love.
 Love is the unfamiliar Name
 Behind the hands that wove
 The intolerable shirt of flame
 Which human power cannot remove. (207–211)

This stanza is a more direct reference to the shirt of Nessus, a gift from Deianeira, which ultimately kills Heracles in classical myth, as written in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* (book 9, lines 98–272). Nessus, in love with Heracles’ wife Deianeria, attempts to abduct her, resulting in his death at the hands of Heracles. Nessus gives her his bloodstained shirt with which she intends to magically ensure the loyalty of her adulterous husband, not knowing that the blood is laced with the venom of the Hydra (with which Heracles’ arrow was poisoned). Ultimately, she gives the shirt to Heracles and when he puts it on, the poison causes him to feel as if he is being burned alive. Unable to take off the shirt, he builds a funeral pyre and casts himself upon it. Although Deianeria, driven out of love, only intended to ensure that her husband would remain loyal to her, she was tricked by the vengeful Nessus in orchestrating her husband’s death.

This myth, while conveying Eliot’s main point, serves as an example of the importance of carrying knowledge through the ages. By recycling old knowledge, Eliot is able to express something particular and ageless about the human experience. As Heracles is essentially “redeemed from fire by fire” (206), so too can humans be redeemed from the fires of destruction

by the fires of wisdom and rebirth. The reference brings the poem into the broader context of time and history. Initially, the poem seems to be only about war: “The dove descending breaks the air / With flame of incandescent terror” (200–201). The narrative of the shirt of Nessus displays the destruction humans wreak upon the world, all in the name of attaining happiness, peace, and love. This brings into question both a motive for violence and its ultimate result. This serves as a bittersweet consolation—society may be fated to collapse, but in the destruction of one society lies the birth of another, and possibly, this new society will be better suited to face its tragic fate, and perhaps to change it.

V

The task which Eliot bestows on humanity is proposed in his poetry in its most dramatic and frightening form. Though it may be daunting, this task can only be accomplished by those who devote themselves fully to life while they have it, since to fear death and the loss of knowledge only serves to increase suffering. In spite of the unavailability of death, one must consider the impact that one’s choices will have on those who live beyond them. In other words, man cannot simply cultivate knowledge only for himself as it will die with him and he will leave the world the same as it was when he entered it. This type of scholarship serves no one and ultimately prevents humanity from overcoming the same obstacles which plagued it in the past. We can read and understand the literature from the past, but this does not mean we should live like those who lived then or who wrote about it. Nor must one live as if independent from the past, for in this way human progress cannot exist. Each of us must take it upon ourselves to both pursue preexisting knowledge and to build from it. Eliot calls upon his reader to do the same in order to overcome the hardships of life, not just for himself, but for humankind itself.

Although his work seems to encapsulate the struggles of mankind, the actual subject of Eliot's poetry is poetry itself. Poetry is man's creation that mimics the more divine creation, life itself. Thus, in writing about poetry, Eliot is actually writing about everything. Moreover, if the poem itself represents all of creation, the poet must be a sort of god. Considering that the immortal poet is one with his work, it seems that this poetry is Eliot's attempt to manifest his own status as a part of the literary tradition. The poet may die, but should he be deemed worthy by mankind, he will be reborn, and so, trade his physical body for his body of work. The topic of his work is life itself; however, if this is the case, then death too is the topic. Through his life, Eliot hopes to solidify the implications of his name so that death can render him immortal therein. Only through living can one earn a satisfactory death.

One thing that is clear, however, is that life inevitably leads to death. The fear of death is the greatest cause of human suffering, as well as the greatest source of human inspiration; it is, in a sense, the oldest tradition of humankind. Death and life are inseparable, as it is death which defines life itself. Something cannot die without first living. This torments the human mind, causing many to waste their lives mourning their inevitable death. It is death, and thus life, which inspires Eliot to write something essential to the salvation of literature, and to the salvation of humankind. As a poet, he is an oracle that bridges the world of humans and the world of the gods; it is his job to deliver the divine truth to those who cannot see it. He serves both as humanity's servant and its savior. Like an oracle, he offers divine advice to those who will listen, and, in turn, his advice depends upon how the recipient reacts. Eliot thus faces the same predicament of the classical oracle: to be understood and remembered or to be ignored and lost in the sands of time.

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