

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Patrick Query for the degree of Master of Arts in English presented on May 2 2001.

Title: "They Called Me the Hyacinth Girl": T.S. Eliot, Masculinity, and the Great War.

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Neil R. Davison

This thesis traces the relationship between the First World War, constructions of masculinity, and the life and poetry of T.S. Eliot. Central to this relationship is a study of homoeroticism, which the author characterizes as different from homosexuality but not exclusive of it, in late 19th and early 20th century poetic traditions. The argument begins by establishing a critical framework that draws on contemporary paradigms of Modernist literary gender studies but also seeks to revise them by shifting the focus to issues surrounding masculinity. With this framework in place, the thesis goes on to discuss the tradition of male homoeroticism in artistic movements preceding World War I, including Symbolism, Uranianism, and Aestheticism, then moves on to an examination of the war itself, its effect on soldiers' notions of masculinity, and the intensification of the homoerotic element in the poetry composed by soldier poets. I then reexamine the relationship between Eliot's poems, *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* and *The Waste Land*, arguing that both are significantly inflected by the changing masculine consciousness of the war era and that both are largely personal in nature despite their author's insistence on the impersonality of poetry. An explication follows of *Prufrock* and Eliot's other verse written between 1914 and c.1920, focusing on passages that

suggest the homoerotic. The bridge between this and the section on *The Waste Land* is a commentary on the relationship of Eliot and his friend Jean Verdenal, a Frenchman who was killed in the war, and the import of this friendship to Eliot's work. The possibility of their homosexual involvement is entertained but not insisted upon, the point being reemphasized that homoeroticism, not homosexuality, has the more meaningful impact on the masculine artistic consciousness. All of these ideas culminate in the *Waste Land* chapter, which highlights passages of the poem dealing with a range of human possibilities for intimacy—male and female, sexual and non-sexual. The study concludes that the poem ought to be read as a representation of an embattled masculine consciousness drawn to the homoerotic but uncomfortable with changing 20th century sexual mores.

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“They called me the hyacinth girl”: T.S. Eliot, Masculinity, and the Great War

**by
Patrick Query**

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APPROVED:

Redacted for privacy

Major Professor, representing English

Redacted for privacy

Chair of Department of English

Redacted for privacy

Dean of the Graduate School

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Patrick Query, Author

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>Page</u>
1. Introduction.....	1
2. The Homoerotic Tradition.....	11
3. Sitting Out the War.....	17
4. "Giving Himself Away".....	30
5. Prufrock Through the War.....	38
6. Verdenal.....	46
7. <i>The Waste Land</i>	54
8. Conclusion.....	63
Works Cited / Consulted.....	68

for Michelle

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1

Introduction

And then this evening, on the stroke of ten (all the bells in the area are ringing and, almost at the same time, comes a tinkling of fairly distant chimes, soon blotted out by the measured pealing of a deeper bell, do you remember?) suddenly I think of you as ten o'clock is striking. And your image is there in front of me, and so I am writing you this little note. But now, a hurried, very hurried good night...because I must get back to work. Jean Verdenal

(from letter to Eliot, 26 August 1912)

Two very distinct emotional sensibilities resonate in these lines from Jean Verdenal to his friend, T.S. Eliot. The first is an intense passion bodied forth in images, the second a blushing reserve that precludes the passion from enjoying further, fuller expression. Verdenal was, of course, the dedicatee of Prufrock and Other Observations (1917), was at one time T.S. Eliot's house mate in France, became a military doctor in the First World War, and died, in Eliot's words, “mixed with the mud of Gallipoli” (qtd. in Miller 21). The intensely warm emotional response to the sound of the bells in the passage is tempered by the nervous propriety behind the abrupt ending, a combination of sentiments quite characteristic of the surviving correspondence between these two friends, a tone of communication that seems at once to evince a unique intimacy between the two men and a tension about the utterance of their feelings. None of Eliot's letters to Verdenal have survived, but it seems likely that in those writings, given what is known of the former's cherished adopted

English decorum, modesty and restraint would even further overshadow the expression of emotional ardor, and even without the benefit of the letters, the same tension is observable in much of Eliot's poetry, early and late. Such reticence, however, is not only typically "English" but has long been expected in the Western tradition of men in particular. It represents but one of the socially sanctioned demands of masculinity that gained their fullest sway in what is now often called the "hyper-masculine" ideal of Victorian-Edwardian England and which characterize the writings of many male writers from the *fin de siècle* to at least the end of World War I. As it is manifested in the works of male artists of early and High Modernism, this cultural code of male suppression of emotion, especially of feelings of intimacy between men, provides one means by which we can effectively observe the implications of culturally imposed gender constructs.

In spite of affirmations like Marianne Dekoven's that "it is no longer necessary to think exclusively about women in the feminist study of gender and modernism," (192) the majority of recent publications on the subject have continued to do just that. Bonnie Kime Scott attributes "the predominance of women theorists and women's writing in gender studies" to the notion that, even though

"both men and women participate in the social and cultural systems of gender,...women write about it more, perhaps because gender is more imposed upon them, more disqualifying, or more intriguing and stimulating to their creativity" (3).

Perhaps so, but certainly Kime Scott would agree that the truly interesting questions in gender studies deal not necessarily with male and female but with *masculinity* and

femininity, that gender constructions have not so much to do with biology as with *sensibilities*, and that they therefore disqualify, intrigue, and stimulate on a basis less obvious than that of sex. Even so, most contemporary studies of the gender issues during the modernist period have had it in mind, as Lynne Hanley does in Writing War, “to break up the monopoly on culture worth preserving exercised by white Anglo-Saxon men” (20). As a result, any notion we may have had that Modernism was not the domain of women has by now been thoroughly shaken. In the process of having our attention thus directed, though, it seems we have forgotten to ask some very important questions about the male figures we had hitherto recognized as pillars of the movement. Gender questions have as much to do with masculinity, after all, as femininity, and in the case of the early 20th century, cultural assumptions about male gender characteristics were as prevalent in the West as those of femininity and, as we shall see, at least as suffocating to certain individuals.

We do well to remember that gender, as a critical term, is not synonymous with womanhood and that, though it tends to call to mind women, it does so “only insofar as in its absence they are essentially invisible. And it brings them up not only for their own interest but to signal the sexed nature of men as well” (Jehlen 265). A more important feature of literary gender studies than simply recognizing the works of female writers is interpreting the ways gender has operated as a cultural force on women and men, manifesting itself in their notions of self, their behaviors and relationships, and not merely their anatomies, since

the sexed nature of men and women is not natural but cultural. In this sense, gender may be opposed to sex as culture is to nature so that its relation to sexual nature is unknown and probably unknowable: how, after all, do we speak of human beings outside of culture? (265)

Certainly issues of gender are revealed as often and as powerfully in the works of men as women, as gender operates through the cultural imposition of behavioral expectations for both sexes. Eminent male Modernist writers have often been excluded from discussions of gender, but there is ample material in these quarters to complicate and challenge traditional notions of Modernist sex and gender and to heighten our sensitivity to issues of difference; indeed, many of Modernism's canonical works written by men have a great deal more to say about these issues than those who wish to leave them behind may have thought.

Discussions of sexuality are not new to the study of T.S. Eliot's life and work. Scholars have long struggled with the puzzling use of gender in much of Eliot's poetry. Referring alternately to its hesitancy, ambiguity, homoeroticism, or even misogyny, readers have found it difficult to satisfactorily address the questions raised by the ambivalent sexuality and gender inversions the work presents. Several passages, including but not limited to key moments of *The Waste Land* and *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, suggest at once an intensity of male-male relations and a dispassion—indeed at times a revulsion—toward male-female relations, the combination of which necessarily gives rise to questions regarding, among other things, the poet's own sexual orientation. More importantly, though, due in part to Eliot's generally accepted position as both a product of and a key spokesperson for

the Modernist poetic consciousness, the question follows, or ought to follow, as to the gender issues at work in the larger artistic and cultural movement of Modernism itself. New Historicist paradigms of literary inquiry have, of course, revealed the degree to which “the perspective (or world-view) of any individual is not only biographically constructed, but also the personal mediation of a group consciousness” (Wolff 119). The gesture or assertion made by the artist or author in the work of art, theorists like Foucault and Barthes have persuasively argued, “is actually (or perhaps one should say *also*) the statement of a social group and its world view” (119). It is left, then, to see with what social group, or groups, we should associate Eliot. Obviously, he was born into a wealthy and respected white American family and enjoyed in full the privileges of a turn-of-the-century bourgeois gentleman, both in the United States and Europe. This fact alone, though, should not form the limit of our understanding of his artistic range or appeal. As a poet *qua* poet, I would argue, his meaningful affinities are expanded considerably, and his own experience broadened to merge with that of men, especially other artists, of perhaps less socio-economic or educational privilege but some also with a remarkably compatible creative and imagistic framework. The imaginative and experiential ties that exist between Eliot and slightly less eminent, or at least less privileged and empowered men of his generation have been, I think, vastly underestimated, a claim that brings us, perhaps somewhat unexpectedly, to the war poets. Although Eliot himself was not a combatant, it makes sense to take a close look at the war poets themselves, since it

is in them, presumably, that we can best see the origins and effects of the poetic notions that shaped the war era of which Eliot *was* undeniably a part.

Eliot's mythic sensibility, particularly as it is evidenced in the organization of *The Waste Land*, has long been one of the most salient features of his poetry. His appreciation of the power of myth was, in part, the product of a classical education but also, and perhaps more importantly, characteristic of a wider tendency of High Modernism. One need look no further than Joyce's *Ulysses* or Pound's *Cantos* for two prominent examples in support of this mythic ideal. Less well understood, though Paul Fussell's chapter on the subject has laid out the main ideas, is the mythic consciousness of the soldiers of the Great War. The world of Siegfried Sassoon, Wilfred Owen, David Jones, and others was one "of reinvigorated myth" (115), owing to the dubiousness of available "official" information at the front lines, the accompanying resurgence of oral traditions, not to mention the plain and understandable desire to attach meaningful frameworks to the otherwise incomprehensible existence of trench soldiers. In this way myths, ancient and modern, rose to a place of unique importance in the soldier's life, achieved a stature and a utility matched only by the use and appreciation of myth in the most sophisticated and complex high modernist artistic works and treatises, especially Eliot's. This is but one example of the meaningful propinquity that seems to exist between Eliot and his soldier-poet counterparts; their worlds were, ironically, not altogether dissimilar.

Even with such a cultural approach in place, this kind of study, for obvious reasons, is one in which biography inevitably becomes involved with interpretation.

The biographical work on the subject of gender in Eliot's work generally falls into two categories: that which characterizes Eliot as actively repressing strong homosexual desires for most of his life, and the more dominant view that Eliot never, in any meaningful sense, considered homosexuality a viable option. These kinds of questions that, at base, desire to "out" Eliot or defend him as a depressed, repressed, but ultimately heterosexual male writer seem to me reductive. I would like to propose a third possibility, namely, that the presence of the homoerotic in Eliot's verse is in many ways characteristic of the revision of traditional discourse and cultural assumptions about masculinity brought about in an entire generation of writers by the Great War and perhaps even earlier in Eliot's case—for the poet, the Romantic assumption goes, is often able to anticipate, even to prefigure, what will become dominant themes of his era. "Like the 'individual talent,'" the poet's consciousness "surrenders to a larger collective entity" even as it helps determine it (McDiarmid 105). This essay hopes to suggest a kind of circular relationship between the First World War, the war poets, Eliot, and formalist Modernism itself, by which some of the most fundamental nineteenth century cultural assumptions surrounding masculinity were transformed and expressed poetically. These changes were often neither welcome nor even consciously perceived; the homoerotic impulse is one example of a change that met with no small degree of confusion and resistance in many men of this generation, particularly a writer as temperamentally conservative as Eliot.

A prevalent homoerotic presence in the art of the era speaks to an intensified male poetic sensibility for the twentieth century, a new pitch of male creativity for a

post-war world, and is, of course, diametrically opposed to Victorian models of the hyper-masculine. George L. Mosse has demonstrated the prevalence of “certain normative standards of appearance, behavior, and comportment” for men that arose with the Enlightenment and reached an apex in late 19th century Europe (8). Prior to the First World War, this Victorian stereotype of masculinity, including the “so-called manly virtues such as will power, honor, and courage” (4) as well as action, agency, and physical prowess, had already begun to be undercut by, for instance, such avant-garde movements as Decadence and Aestheticism (Felski 91). Included in this category should be Uranianism, another artistic-intellectual movement that sought to challenge what was to “those alienated and disaffected from the dominant norms of middle-class masculinity” an oppressive and exclusionary cultural code, by positing an

aestheticized and feminized modernity...Such a scenario offered the hope of a radical alternative to prevailing forces of positivism, progress ideology, and the sovereignty of the reality principle. Thus an imaginary identification with the feminine emerged as a key stragem in the literary avant-garde’s subversion of sexual and textual norms (91).

As Rita Felski notes, however, such “transgressive gestures...were by definition limited to a small, if visible and influential, group that was by no means representative of writers as a whole, let alone of the broader cultivated public.” In fact, historical evidence suggests the greatest blows to Victorian conceptions of gender were yet to come, by way of the Great War and organized women’s rights movements, but already by the fin de siècle “masculinity...could no longer be taken for

granted as a stable, unitary, and self-evident reality” (92). With the onset of the war, of course, the hyper-masculine stereotype met its ultimate challenge in the form of dehumanizing, emasculating, mechanized warfare. For soldiers who yet held to the Victorian ideal of masculinity, their illusions about the key masculine traits of honor, bravery, individual will and duty were shattered in the trenches under an onslaught almost as violent as that suffered by the men themselves.

Nor did these changes fail to impact society beyond the battlefields. Stereotypes of all kinds, after all, including those of masculinity, are “closely tied to the fears and hopes of modern society” (Mosse 4). Prevailing notions of male gender roles simply failed to do justice to the complex creative powers of the emergent masculine consciousness shared by Eliot and other male artists of his era. These men were forced to search for new images, new paradigms, to replace the traditional codes of masculinity that had resulted in, and been destroyed by, the transformations of cultural gender consciousness that culminated with World War I. Perhaps the most trenchant example of this during the *fin de siècle* is the repeated poetic use of the martyr, St. Sebastian, a traditionally homoerotically charged iconic figure—an adoption that proved to be peculiarly appropriate for a number of poets in the years surrounding the Great War, a time when the image of Sebastian, riddled with arrows, found resonance in the “willing receptivity to death in battle” exhibited by millions of young soldiers (Kaye 109-10). The discussion will not go far, though, if we insist on viewing such maneuvers as either explicitly homosexual or completely void of homoerotic energy; neither is this essay concerned, as I have previously

stated, with outing T.S. Eliot for purposes of political solidarity without confronting the complexity of his literary products' engagement with the gender controversies of his era.

The most rewarding study of these issues, I think, will take its lead from those who have ventured to discuss sexuality not as a purely physical phenomenon but as a complex of behaviors, ideas, and images. The poetic homoerotic, as we will treat it, fits very well under the now popular identification put forth by Foucault, that sexuality in the truly modern sense is "characterized...less by a type of sexual relations than by a certain quality of sexual sensibility, a certain way of inverting the masculine and feminine in oneself" (1:43). Indeed, the matter of male poetic homoeroticism, as opposed to nineteenth century definitions of "clinical" homosexuality, refers not very much to "the practice of sodomy" but rather to "a kind of interior androgyny, a hermaphrodisism of the soul," or, in this case, of the poetic consciousness. It is for reasons such as this that the term *gender*, with its greater flexibility of application and implied emphasis on "behavioral, cultural...epistemological expectations," will be particularly useful here (Smith 251).

Since at least the Romantic period, all that is aesthetic has been tacitly assigned something of an effeminate character. Goethe attributed the mysterious power of the aesthetic to “draw us upward” beyond the limits of our realist-materialist minds to *Das Ewig Weibliche*, “the eternally feminine,” and emotional, spirit of art (Bergstraesser 165). That aesthetic concerns are by definition placed in opposition to that which is utilitarian, productive, imperialist, capitalist, etc.—forces that have traditionally been coded as masculine—suggests the foundation of this interpretation. The feminine character of art, meanwhile, has been both embraced and denied by male artists depending on, among a host of other considerations, the artist’s individual temperament and the artistic framework or tenets with which he identifies himself, but for a male artist to espouse the femininity of the aesthetic has usually meant to open himself up to any number of accompanying cultural associations, the most obvious of which is homosexuality. T.S. Eliot’s own determination to protect himself from such inferences is evident in his violent dismissal of the first suggestion—made by John Peter in *Essays in Criticism* (July 1952) and greeted “with amazement and disgust” by Eliot—that *The Waste Land* was a personal and homosexually coded poem (Miller 13). There appears, moreover, to be in this reaction something of the “nervous disposition” and political conservatism that led him also in his lifetime to make notorious derogatory pronouncements regarding women

and Jews (Ackroyd 304). Even so, some of the poets who are known to have had the greatest influence on his poetic formation were openly homosexual, and some of the most important poetry—including French Symbolism—from which he admitted that his own work descended was more than subtly implicated in homoerotic themes.

As for his conservatism, Eliot, while universally recognized as a poetic innovator, is also frequently perceived as representing the persistence of Victorian bourgeois traditionalism into the 20th Century. His fondness for propriety and custom of a social kind is well documented, and his lifelong search for a controlling and unified vision of art is often cited along with his conversion to Anglo-Catholicism as evidence of his essential conservatism. However, in the early Modernist period one did not cast one's lot, as Eliot did, with the insurgent spirit of a Symbolist like Jules Laforgue out of complacency or any sense of satisfaction with the artistic status quo, and it would be a mistake to forget that the era into which Eliot was born was one of pointed artistic reaction against Victorianism, or to overestimate the degree to which he could keep this rebellious tenor from pervading his poetic sensibility from its early development to its most mature realization.

One of the earliest fronts on which the battle against "Victorianism" as a cultural force was fought was that of sexual expression. As early as the mid 19th Century Walter Pater was stirring up a revival of interest in Hellenic culture and even proposing a return to Hellenic ideals of love and beauty dominated by homoeroticism between men. As Alan Sinfield reminds us, though, "Hellenic art is un-

aware of sex in a Freudian sense ... Hellenic art *is* the ground of same-sex passion, but also of an aesthetic, asexual serenity” (89-90). It is for reasons like this that an interest in Hellenism could do more than mask otherwise inexpressible homosexual longings—it could also lift aesthetic endeavors out of the realm of ordinary sexual discourse almost altogether. Still, the neo-Hellenism of a movement such as Aestheticism sought not very much to distance itself from homosexual codes, and, in the hands of Pater’s protégé Oscar Wilde, the homoerotic energy of Hellenism became all but inextricable from the Aestheticist program of artistic rebellion embodied in the credo of *art for art’s sake*. Indeed, Wilde and his circle of Oxfordian esthetes often made sexual deviancy their primary means of resistance to rigid Victorian bourgeois codes of conduct.

Any revolutionary movement needs its martyrs and symbols, and for the homoerotically minded esthetes, as well as any number of artistic dissidents of the fin de siècle, the figure of Saint Sebastian provided both. “The favorite saint among homosexuals” has, in fact, nothing explicitly homosexual about him, but it is not difficult to recognize the potential iconographic resonance—on a number of levels—of an image of a beautiful young man pierced through with arrows (Ellmann 71n). One of Wilde’s favorite paintings was Guido Reni’s *San Sebastian*, the boy depicted in which Wilde was moved to call “a Priest of Beauty slain before his time,” and he even adopted Sebastian as his pseudonym while in France (Ellmann 74n, 71n).

It is doubtful that, as Richard Kaye argues, Eliot’s own early poem, “The Love Song of Saint Sebastian,” fully “emptied St. Sebastian of homoerotic import,”

in spite of the poet's obvious efforts to do so (109). While Eliot's social conservatism had, at the time of "Sebastian"'s composition, not yet reached anything resembling its peak, it certainly put at least as much distance between Eliot and "a homosexually inflected decadent movement" as an "attitude...of self-conscious disengagement" could provide (109). The strangeness and perversity of "Sebastian" seem, rather, to be of an unconscious kind such that a whole cluster of anxieties—heterosexual, homosexual, male, female, androgynous, psychological, spiritual—converges around the charged image of the tortured saint, and, while it does not result in an artistic triumph, such an arrangement does provide a rare occasion to witness the strained erotic workings of the poet's consciousness before it has achieved mature objectivity and control. Many of the same anxieties are at work in Eliot's first masterpiece, *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* which was published only shortly after the composition of "Sebastian"; in *Prufrock*, however, the anxiety is brought more fully under the controlling hand of ironic detachment. It is easy, for instance, to see this increased command and restraint in the juxtaposition of these lines from "Sebastian":

You should love me because I should have strangled you
And because of my infamy;
And I should love you the more because I had mangled you...

with these from *Prufrock*:

Is it perfume from a dress
That makes me so digress?
Arms that lie along a table, or wrap about a shawl.
And should I then presume?
And how should I begin?

The sexual unease remains—specifically the discomfiture with natural male-female sexual relations—but the poet of *Prufrock* and later *The Waste Land* is careful to disclose this tension in terms of an ironic contemplation rather than a perverse participation, the same choice that would be made by a host of soldier poets writing lyric verse.

It begins to become clear that the resurgence of homoeroticism in Great War poetry, while certainly profound, was not unprecedented. Fussell speaks of the significance of the “almost immediate historical proximity” of the war to the homoerotically charged artistic movements that preceded it, the sexual content of which ranged from the overtly homosexual art and propaganda of the Uranians and their official organization, the British Society of Sex Psychology, to the more subtle and proprietary homoerotic verse of A.E. Housman and Gerard Manley Hopkins. Indeed, due to the popularity of Housman’s *A Shropshire Lad* (1896) and the Uranian elegies on dead boys that were so fashionable in turn-of-the-century England, the British soldier had, by the onset of the war, grown quite accustomed to homoerotic images in verse. At their finest these images came in the spirit of an ideal male “Greek love” suggested by Pater, Wilde, Lord Alfred Douglas and their circle, but at times things deteriorated into something less refined and more like pederasty. Owing to the acceptance of the former, less overtly homosexual strain of verse, though, a widespread fondness for and appreciation of subtly homoerotic poetry had

pervaded late Victorian British society from the artistic elite to even the casual reader of verse.

The deaths by the thousands of British “lads” during the war years occasioned, of course, the production of many more elegies for young men, but the homoerotic spirit did more than just persevere in the Great War lyric. The brutality and immediacy of death on the front quickly drove out most of the sentimentality, idealism, abstraction, and even optimism that had for so long characterized this kind of writing, and in the hands of the grieving soldier poet they were replaced by a gravity, a specificity, a determined frankness and a fierce realism that refused to ennoble the slaughter. Just as fierce was the irony employed both to insulate the soldier and to criticize the atrocious injustices of the war, and, as will be discussed below, this ironic mode links Eliot to the war lyric in more ways than one.

World War I has been characterized by Fussell as necessitating, demanding even, the emergence of the “essentially ironic” as the operative sensibility among men of Eliot’s generation (3). The horrible disproportion of loss, death, and suffering to their purported causes during World War I necessarily gave rise to a new perspective, a protective detachment from events, “establishing a terrible irony as the appropriate interpretative means...the dominant form of modern understanding” for the millions affected by the war (34). Eliot, of course, had his own intimate attachment to the war in the loss of his friend, Verdenal, who died heroically at the battle of Gallipoli (Fleissner ’90). This friendship and Verdenal’s death were to have a profound impact on Eliot’s poetic sensibility, notions of love, and conception of masculinity, as will be discussed. We know, however, that Eliot already had a predisposition, years before World War I, to the kind of ironic detachment Fussell describes. It is an inclination evidenced in Eliot’s early and excited attraction to the verse of Jules Laforgue, the influence of which on Eliot’s own poetry has been well documented, especially in terms of the “denial of conventional feeling,” the unyielding “ironic scepticism about romantic passion” (Ackroyd 34). However, there is an additional significance in Eliot’s use of irony that has not been discussed, as a vehicle for the expression of a homoerotic impulse.

The ironic speaker is distanced from the world of events and objects; his natural relation to that world is severed as he retreats into himself. Indeed, the whole of Prufrock's monologue has the effect of denying the mutuality between the world he observes and his own consciousness, just as Laforgue's lines, "I spat upon love, and I have killed the flesh / ...I challenged the Instinct with a bitter laugh," serve, in a more resolute manner, to isolate the subject of the speaker from all things physical or romantically emotional (*Pour le Livre d'amour*). Prufrock's rejections of the world confronting him and of uninhibited relations with others are more tentative, more questioning than this, but no less ironic. The employment of irony in this case is a good example of the effect of "an absence of coherence...an inability to escape from a situation that has become unbearable" on the speaker, who adopts a position of aloofness and disdain as a means of protection (Van O'Connor 635).

This "inability to escape" from an unbearable situation was also the experience, intensified many fold, of the soldier poets in the trenches; in their case, however, maintaining any kind of safe distance from the horrors of reality was all but impossible. With shells and sniper bullets whizzing overhead, the soldier was confined out of necessity to the narrow spaces of the trenches, unable to undertake even a Prufrockian exploration and contemplation of his surroundings, by which he might gain perspective. He was, in every sense, stuck. The powerlessness and loss of individual agency of this kind of existence proved to be incredibly psychologically destructive and was only intensified by the soldier's realization that neither myth, literature, nor popular imagination provided anything resembling an adequate frame of

reference from which to conceive of what was happening in the trenches. The “masculinist fantasies” of Victorian Britain provided no effective referent for such an experience, and ideals of courage and calm in the face of danger simply had nothing to do with the reality of trench warfare, where individual action was most often not only futile but also fatal and where mythical notions of male bravery proved to be as vulnerable as the flesh of men to prolonged mechanized bombardment (Showalter 63).

Siegfried Sassoon, in *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer*, describes a time in his training when he and his fellows were instructed to “think in terms of mobility” and “always do your utmost” (8,9). Having come from the front line, however, he recognizes the absurdity of such encouragements. Elaine Showalter, in her essay on Royal Army Medical Corps psychiatrist William H.R. Rivers’s treatment of Sassoon for shell shock at Craiglockhart War Hospital in 1917, points out that “when technological warfare deprived men of their sense of agency, they lost their natural defenses against fear and regressed towards neurosis” (62). Rivers himself concluded that the occurrence of war neuroses, including shell shock, was determined primarily by the soldier’s “degree of...immobility” and not by any predilection on his part to mental instability (qtd. in Showalter 62). Shell shock provided, then, a means, albeit often involuntary, of emotional escape from an otherwise inescapable predicament, and the physical symptoms it entailed—blindness, deafness, mutism, paralyses—often brought a physical respite from the front line. Though the kind of paralysis employed by Eliot in *Prufrock* and *The Waste Land* is of a more psychic than physi-

cal nature, his choice undoubtedly owes something to the prevalence of paralysis, in all its forms, in wartime Europe. Importantly, the widespread occurrence of shell shock during the war, accounting for as many as 40 percent of combat casualties in 1916, represented what Showalter calls “the first large-scale epidemic of male hysteria,” the most significant and concrete challenge to the “heroic visions” of masculinity that had dominated Western society since at least the Enlightenment, as well as a complete cultural reversal of the gendered nature of the concept of *hysteria* itself, with its origin in the Greek *hysterā*, or uterus (63, Gatens 25).

Wilfred Owen was another war poet treated for shell shock at Craiglockhart. It was there, in 1917, that he met Sassoon, who encouraged him to turn away from the Georgian pastoral poetry he had been writing and attempt some poems about his war experiences (Stallworthy 204). It was not an easy move for Owen to make, initially, as he was still influenced too much by the Georgian-Edwardian poetic ideals of nostalgia and escapism—ideals that served some poets well in the uncertain years between Queen Victoria’s death in 1901 and the onset of the Great War but eventually resulted in the fatal “loss of contact with contemporary reality” that doomed most of the poetry of the age to a secondary place in literary memory (Johnston 5). The war poems Owen and other British soldiers did eventually compose, though, came to represent one of the most effective means of dealing with the otherwise incomprehensible experience of war and sometimes even provided an operable alternative to neurosis: a new kind of highly subjective, immediate, and emotional lyric poetry that, rather than shying away from the ultra violent material at hand on the

front lines, sought to establish “a means of contact” with it (9). Poets who tried to apply Georgian pastoral-idyllic formulas to their front line experience soon realized the need for a new approach, and the brutal, personal war lyric was the answer. The best of Owen’s war lyrics exemplify one of the most successful strategies for writing the war. They most often deal with very specific subjects—one soldier or a small group of soldiers, isolated moments of time, particular body parts—all portrayed lovingly but unflinchingly, as in the following passage from “Dulce et Decorum Est”:

Gas! Gas! Quick boys! — An ecstasy of fumbling,
Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time,
But someone still was yelling out and stumbling
And flound’ring like a man in fire or lime...
Dim through the misty panes and thick green light,
As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.

In all my dreams before my helpless sight,
He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.

The most compelling Great War poems are usually the most personal and subjective. Those that fail, as Fussell argues, are often those that try to attach “traditional meanings to the unprecedented actualities of the war” (146). Such efforts fail in that what was experienced by the individual soldier as an incomprehensible, certainly unjustifiable atrocity could not very convincingly be validated through grand mythical-religious reference.

As John J. Johnston points out in his classic study, English Poetry of the First World War, the trench poet was deprived of any kind of aesthetic or temporal distance from his subject (11,12). Epic poets, as well as some of the more detached

Georgian lyricists, could handle material from the distant past, organized and shaped according to their own imaginative vision, but the war poet was not really at liberty to make such poetic excursions. The present reality was simply too insistent to be ignored and, as previously explained, too bizarre, too unprecedented to be attached to any organizing myth. Classical ideals of positivity, restraint, and objectivity in poetry were replaced in the war lyric by a sanctioned release—of anger, pity, disillusionment, bitterness, acute sadness. The intensity of experience and response that had defined the lyric poem for centuries was heightened in the Great War lyric, and departure from this immediacy, from the honest depiction of the common man's reality, came to be viewed among soldier poets as almost a treasonable act. Any attempts to achieve poetic distance from the front line experience were made more often through the defensive employment of irony, as witnessed especially in the war poems and satires of Sassoon, than in the use of distant mythic or idyllic material. In a world devoid of "temporal, moral, and physical proportion," irony often proved to be the only appropriate, the only bearable, response (Johnston 16).

The use of irony as a distancing measure in *Prufrock*, then, appears in this context to anticipate the desire of the soldier poet to escape—a desire that, prohibited physically, is expressed through ironic detachment. While the London streets of *Prufrock* are by no means the battlefields of Flanders, the two scenes are equally repugnant to their respective observers. To participate in such a world is, to Prufrock, commensurate to death ("Till human voices wake us, and we drown"), just as to act is, for the trench soldier, a virtual guarantee of death or injury. We notice

how few Great War poems convey a sense of action—movement or confrontation, for example—as something undertaken meaningfully or effectually. The poet is more often an observer, sometimes ironically detached, sometimes not, but very rarely is he an actor of any consequence in the events surrounding him. Isaac Rosenberg, in “Break of Day in the Trenches,” provides a striking image of the soldier’s retreat into himself in the speaker who, standing-to in his trench, contemplates the solitary rat that joins him at his watch as he sticks a single “parapet’s poppy” behind his ear (Rosenberg 13). Both his friendship with Pound and his training and success as a painter before the war likely heightened Rosenberg’s sensitivity to the isolated visual image (Johnston 223; Powell 350).

Though such compression of image is not always characteristic of his poetry, the influence of Imagism is certainly present in some of his best lyrics, as it is in much of the best, sparest verse of other soldier poets like Herbert Read (Johnston 253). This fact, combined with the Symbolist irony that found its way into so much Great War poetry, suggests that such poetic movements preceding the war were influential in preparing the soon-to-be soldier poets for the kind of verse they would be writing. The stage had been set, as it were, prior to the war for a radical change in the poetic vision, so that the experience of combat served to concretize the lessons learned from movements like Imagism and Symbolism. As Read himself reflected in 1939, “We were in revolt, just before the War, against certain tame conventions [of] poetry derived from poetry...this literary stuffiness” against which they fought “by means of precision of expression and vitality of image...sincerity of feel-

ing...and the consequent virtues of precision, economy and vividness” (Johnston 255). All such efforts had the effect of privileging the individual consciousness, of reclaiming the virtue of the narrow, subjective perception.

The inward, self-referencing, or ironic gesture comes close to suggesting an autoerotic function, which in a man is not all that far, in essence, from homoeroticism. Freud demonstrated the association, “incessantly reiterated in psychoanalytic and popular literature, between Narcissism and homosexuality” (Lamos 36, Freud 246, 546), and we see the same connection in Eliot’s own “The Death of Saint Narcissus,” who “had been a young girl / Caught in the woods by a drunken old man” and whose “flesh was in love with the burning arrows” (Poems). Irony is a stance of turning away from what is external and *other*, and toward the solace and pleasure offered by the *self* and that which is same. To hold the world critically apart is to do the opposite of participating in it reciprocally, and the recurrence in war poetry of this kind of protective stance represents a propensity in men of the Great War era that had not been necessary a generation earlier.

Fussell describes a generation of men who, in the summer of 1914, “believed in Progress and Art and in no way doubted the benignity even of technology. The word *machine* was not yet invariably coupled with the word *gun*” (24). It was a generation of men who also had little reason to doubt the validity and efficacy of traditional definitions of masculinity, which included a high propensity to action, a high degree of agency and confidence, and a thoroughly capable, brave, and steadfast bearing. The world these men knew, after all, was “a [relatively] static world,

where the values appeared to be stable and where the meanings of abstractions seemed permanent and reliable” (24). Young men felt yet no reason to need to protect themselves from such a world, but such complacency was to be blasted apart in its turn by the slaughters of the first global, mechanized war, and traditional masculinity was to fail utterly in the face of the war’s “primal scene” (21, 35).

Working to compound this dissolution of traditional notions of masculinity is the plain fact that millions of young men—“half the British infantry were...younger than nineteen”—felt for the first time and with undreamed of frequency the loss of a close friend to violent death. It seems no wonder that the predominant male understanding of friendship should undergo a major change when the men of a whole generation were having to reevaluate the meaning of their relationships to one another under the perpetual specter of death. A higher and more profound level of closeness and of grief by men for the loss of their brothers and friends emerged out of the Great War, and even those, like Eliot, who did not participate in battle could not escape its reach.

Against this slaughter, protective and profound ties between men had to be formed. It ought to be understood, furthermore, that British traditions of male affection are quite a different thing from American ones, and it is the former that, in the trenches, provided the model from which the homoerotic could flourish. Indeed, public school “crushes,” the “‘idealistic,’ passionate but non-physical” variety based in “mutual affection, protection, and admiration” and common among boys in England, formed what was often the basis for relations between officers and men during

the War (Fussell 272). The ideals in these arrangements were very much the same as they were in the Uranian elegies on young boys, with “faunlike good looks, innocence, vulnerability, and ‘charm’” prized above all. Such a tradition of camaraderie and affection lent itself very naturally to the kind of bonds that were forged in the all-male world of the War: “a wholly masculine way of life uncomplicated by Woman,” as J.B. Priestly puts it, to which young men were often at first eager to join, then confined to out of terrible necessity (Fussell 273-4).

In the imagination of “everyone who has experienced both war and love,” Fussell points out, “there is a curious intercourse between [the two]” (270). W.H. Auden put it thus:

In times of war even the crudest kind of positive affection between persons seems extraordinarily beautiful, a noble symbol of the peace and forgiveness of which the whole world stands so desperately in need (Auden 111).

Even more succinctly, Richard Fein has claimed that “war poetry has the subversive tendency to be our age’s love poetry” (qtd. in Fussell 280). It is not surprising that any “positive affection” that existed between World War I soldiers took on an increased significance imaginatively, poetically, and in the course of their everyday existence—both during the War and upon returning home from the battlefields. As these bonds grew in importance, it often became impossible, even undesirable, to maintain a commensurate closeness with women. A legion of men who had previously enjoyed easy and natural communion with women found themselves, even after the guns had ceased, unable and often unwilling to allow females access to the

all-male imagination into which they had been forced to withdraw for security during the War—a withdrawal at times celebrated, as in these lines from “Absolution,” an early war poem by Sassoon:

There was an hour when we were loth to part
From life we longed to share no less than others.
Now, having claimed this heritage of heart,
What need we more, my comrades and my brothers?

and bemoaned in such phrases as, “I lived my days apart” and “I walk the secret way / With anger in my brain” from Sassoon’s “A Mystic as Soldier.” Thor Goote’s Captain Berthold is even more forthcoming:

How can women understand us, when they gave nothing, when they
shared nothing of our experience during those years of torment?
... We soldiers are in the habit of respecting only those who have
stood their ground under fire. That is why many of us inwardly turn
away from women, even when outwardly we can’t do without them
(qtd. in Theweleit 1: 61-62).

Viewed in this light, Prufrock’s virtual incommunicado with women, coupled with his painful sense of possessing a deeply felt but inexpressible mystery arising from personal experience, seems strangely prescient:

Would it have been worthwhile,
To have bitten off the matter with a smile,
To have squeezed the universe into a ball
To roll it towards some overwhelming question,
To say: “I am Lazarus, come from the dead,
Come back to tell you all, I shall tell you all”—
If one, settling a pillow by her head,
Should say: “That is not what I meant at all.
That is not it, at all.”

...

It is impossible to say just what I mean! (90-98, 104)

It is now quite common to speak of the reluctance of men returning from war to open up their experience to the naïve ears of those who have not fought. This attitude appears due in equal parts to a sense that it would represent a kind of betrayal to allow noncombatants vicarious access to that violent world, and the notion, probably justified, that attempting to relate such an ordeal is utterly futile because true understanding can only have come from direct experience of it. So, as often as men withdrew into the tightened male world the War had created, they pushed the women in their lives farther away, thus doubly altering the character of postwar male-female relations and further cultivating an environment ripe for homoerotically tinged works of art.

The invigoration of male-male affection obviously does lend itself to expression in the homoerotic; still, our understanding of the situation should not be limited to the explicitly homosexual. Dr. Magnus Hirschfeld, himself a groundbreaking homosexual scientist and theorist, in his Sexual History of the World War (1941), entertains the notion, held by other social scientists of the day, that in times of war homosexual men, due to an “increased sense, interest and absorption in the general or social welfare,” exhibit a greater willingness to enlist than do heterosexual men—a phenomenon that is further attributable, Hirschfeld explains, to the fact that “homosexuals are less rooted to their family than heterosexuals” (130). Such a contention would obviously not hold up under critical analysis today, and it need not in order to give credence to the present argument. Hirschfeld remains useful to illustrate that, while indeed some of the most important surviving Great War poetry

was written by homosexual men—including, of course, Owen and Sassoon—the question of whether a disproportionate number of homosexuals served in British armies in the First World War is not of ultimate importance. It is undeniable that the homoerotic spirit is one of the great poetic legacies of the war, a phenomenon that owes much less, in any case, to the actual presence of homosexual men in the trenches than to the unique closeness of soldiers to one another and to the unprecedented pressures exerted on their relationships during those years, as well as to the *fin de siècle* breakdown of Victorian hyper-masculinity that preceded the war. With this sketch of the homoerotic poetic legacy in place, I now turn to Eliot's two masterworks that seem most imbricated in this cultural nexus.

"Giving Himself Away"

In many ways *The Waste Land* represents an intensification, a fuller realization, of the anxieties of *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*. The First World War, which began and ended between the publication of the two poems, has taken and refined as though by fire the emotional material of the earlier poem and broadened its scope while at the same time hardening its images. Acts of intimacy between men and women are presented with greater detachment and disgust, even as such instances increase in frequency. The reader observes a further disordering of memory and desire, and a more intensified disillusionment with male-female sexuality, next to which even the confusion and frustration of *Prufrock* seem relatively innocent.

Critics have traditionally chosen to view *Prufrock* and *The Waste Land* as fundamentally different kinds of poems—the former as a personal, and dramatic, monologue; and the latter as a more public, impersonal argument about the fate of an entire civilization. There is validity in each of these positions; naturally the poems are different in several essential ways. There is also, I believe, considerable continuity between the two, even in terms of voice. As John Peter first pointed out in his controversial 1952 article in *Essays in Criticism*, “A New Interpretation of *The Waste Land*,” there is a good deal that is *personal*, even autobiographical, in the poem—much more, in any case, than the majority of scholars had decided, prefer-

ring instead, as Eliot himself would probably have advocated, an essentially New Critical reading of the poem as a kind of collage of disembodied voices. In terms of sexuality and male-female and male-male relations, though, once one has understood the substance of J. Alfred Prufrock's consciousness, it is difficult not to trace something of its continuation into the complexity of *The Waste Land*, especially in light of the information added by an awareness of Jean Verdenal's importance.

That Verdenal is the primary figure behind the "drowned Phoenician sailor" of "The Burial of the Dead," was first explicitly suggested in 1969 by Peter in the "Postscript" to his 1952 essay—Verdenal having himself drowned, like thousands of others, at Gallipoli. In the notes to "The Fire Sermon," Eliot tells the reader that the Phoenician Sailor "is not wholly distinct from Ferdinand Prince of Naples" and "melts" into "the one-eyed merchant seller of currants," forming "the most important personage in the poem, uniting all the rest. [...] All the women are one woman, and the two sexes meet in Tiresias" (note to line 218). Through these suggestions, a sense is created of the ways the poet's mind is capable of transfiguring and combining image and memory. Peter's interpretation presumes the personal nature of *The Waste Land*, that it is, indeed, a "variation in kind of 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock'—a dramatic meditation" (Miller 12). It is a reading with which those who have a detailed knowledge, not only of Eliot's biography, but of the ways in which he was disposed to transfigure memory and experience imaginatively, will be more inclined to agree.

It is a peculiarly uncomfortable task to try to connect Eliot's poetry with his biography. One feels always that one is betraying the poet, who was explicit in his commandments that nothing of the poet's biography, personality, or emotion ever be brought to bear on a work of poetry, a position famously put forth in *Tradition and the Individual Talent* (1920):

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. ...There are many people who appreciate the expression of sincere emotion in verse, and there is a smaller number of people who can appreciate technical excellence. But very few know when there is expression of *significant* emotion, emotion that has its life in the poem and not in the history of the poet. The emotion of art is impersonal (*The Sacred Wood* 58-59).

Ironically, no other poet has been allowed to determine so clearly the grounds on which his own poetry is to be evaluated; in other words, despite Eliot's best intentions, his own poetry has come to be understood primarily according to the critical aims of its creator, a practice he unequivocally denounced in his theories of criticism. New Historical and cultural criticism, though, have reemphasized the importance of biographical material to social context, and in the case of Jean Verdenal, I believe we have a case where a good understanding of Eliot's *imaginative* biography provides too much illumination to be dismissed. It seems justifiable that, in grappling with the work of a poet so immersed in the dynamics of memory and desire, we might use an example from the poet's own life in which memory and desire seem to take on a special, even transformative significance.

There is a good deal more biographical information relevant to the study of masculine sexuality in Eliot's poetry, not least of which are the strange details of his first marriage, to Vivien Haigh-Wood. The ceremony came shortly after Verdenal's death, and the marriage itself "was unhappy, as everyone within miles of it was aware" (Matthews 45). Vivien's subsequent affair with Bertrand Russell, in the arrangement of which Eliot may have been complicit, provides just one example of the kind of bizarre instability to which the marriage was prone. The specifics and ramifications of this relationship, however, have been thoroughly discussed in the recent biographies, while very little attention has been paid to the significance of the friendship with Verdenal.

Perhaps the most interesting additional piece of the picture comes from the source, Eliot himself. His often quoted line referring to *The Waste Land* as "a piece of rhythmical grumbling" becomes more interesting viewed in light of another comment, from his 1951 lecture, "Virgil and the Christian World":

A poet may believe that he is expressing only his private experience; his lines may be for him only a means of talking about himself without giving himself away (qtd. in Miller 10).

This idea of not giving oneself away, of hiding information, is one that has for decades kept students of Eliot desirous to see behind the screen it represents. He does not mention *The Waste Land* by name here, but it is highly likely that he had it in mind, considering his further point that what is personal for the poet may become for readers "the expression both of their own secret feelings and of the exultation and despair of a generation." Though we should perhaps be wary about taking his

word for it, he even went so far as to say, in the statement used by Valerie Eliot as epigraph to the manuscript edition of *The Waste Land*, “To me it was only the relief of a personal and wholly insignificant grouse against life” and, in a 1959 *Paris Review* interview about his intentions in the poem,

I wonder what an ‘intention’ means! One wants to get something off one’s chest. One doesn’t know quite what it is that one wants to get off the chest until one’s got it off (qtd. in Miller 9).

One must understand that Eliot was not, in his public statements or his public life, at all ambiguous about his sexuality. I have already mentioned how he took pains to disavow the influence of any poet who may have had homosexual inclinations, or any movement that may have been perceived as homosexually coded, such as *l’art pour l’art* aestheticism (Kaye 110). Finally, Eliot’s reaction to Peter’s 1952 essay, conveyed through his solicitors, provides the clearest example of the poet’s “amazement and disgust” at attempts to identify homosexual themes in his work, calling the essay “absurd” and “completely erroneous” (Miller 13, Ackroyd 309).

Eliot’s “amazement and disgust” at such implications as this, and also at notions of deviancy in general, is a theme Colleen Lamos traces very closely. Her argument’s “unifying thread” is the occurrence of “error” as an important theme in the work of Eliot, Joyce, and Proust (15). The forms of error with which Eliot is chiefly concerned are, according to Lamos:

(1) perverse egotism or “emotionalism,” as opposed to the properly “impersonal” character of poetry; (2) inversions of a literary or natural order, including linguistic, poetic, social, and sexual hierarchies; (3) the impure mingling of categories, especially epistemological and

aesthetic ones; and (4) the dispersion of what should be a unified whole...(17, 18).

I quote the outline of her chapter on Eliot to call attention to another theme with which many Eliot scholars have concerned themselves, especially those who wish to understand the nature of the *limiting* aspects of the poetry—its misogyny, its racism, its anti-Semitism. Tied up with these concerns is the “innate secretiveness” of Eliot’s temperament, which has prompted many to wonder just what it was, if anything, that Eliot did not want the public to know about him (Ackroyd 310). “His own horror of self-revelation has led to the assumption that there are such revelations to be made,” says Ackroyd, an assumption that he feels “obscures the true nature of Eliot’s life, just as it diminishes the poetry.” I disagree. Ackroyd is speaking here of the sordid and scandalous, the desire to discover “a guilty incident or relationship,” but I believe that not all interest in the “mysteries” behind a poet need be equated with a kind of prurient voyeurism. There are truths, especially for poets, which exist in the imagination as surely as facts but are not limited to the facts. As Eliot himself said of Dante,

Let us entertain the theory that Dante, meditating on the astonishment of an experience... which no subsequent experience abolished or exceeded, found meanings in it which we should not be likely to find ourselves (*Essays* 234-5).

Ackroyd is correct that Eliot was horrified by the thought of revealing himself too much. Anthony Julius adds that, by exploring “the limits of the dramatic monologue as a poetic form” in *Prufrock*, Eliot “resists self-revelation” (3). Even the poetry that is not explicitly dramatic, including *Gerontion* and *The Waste Land*,

“emerges...from [the] tension between the dramatic and the confessional,” a tension which, no doubt, forms part of the structure of deviation described by Lamos. Eliot argued against such a possibility, but it seems that, in this case, the poet’s acts of repression and denial may point, however indirectly, to “the source from which poetry springs.” Such might be the case in a passage like this one from “Tradition and the Individual Talent”:

...the poet has, not a “personality” to express, but a particular medium, which is only a medium and not a personality, in which impressions and experiences combine in peculiar and unexpected ways. Impressions and 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 a negligible part in the man, the personality (*Sacred Wood* 56).

By insisting so vehemently on impersonality, could not the author of these lines be “giving himself away,” implicating himself too much in that against which he is trying to revolt? Together, all of these perspectives suggest that what is most revealing about Eliot is not what he claims and what he supports, but what he denies and what he represses, what he excludes from his public paradigms. At stake is not necessarily a *verdict* about Eliot’s mysteries; in fact, the only danger in this approach of “obscuring” or “diminishing” the poetry would be if the search for truth became too much limited by the search for fact. As Eliot himself said,

It is not in his personal emotions, the emotions provoked by particular events in his life, that the poet is in any way remarkable or interesting. His particular emotions may be simple, or crude, or flat. The emotion in his poetry will be a very complex thing, but not with the complexity of the emotions of people who have very complex or unusual emotions in life (*Sacred Wood* 57).

An interpretation of the poetry based on the facts of the poet's life can generate interesting possibilities for added depth, but the facts can never adequately account for the emotional truth of the poetry. Regardless of the actual significance in life Verdenal had for Eliot, though the facts suggest it was considerable, the emotion attached to him has become *significant* in the poetry.

Finally, I would like to object to Lyndall Gordon's summary dismissal, in one of the passages of her biography of Eliot, of Verdenal's importance. Of the dedication of Prufrock and Other Observations, "For Jean Verdenal, 1889-1915 mort aux Dardanelles," she says it "does not acknowledge Eliot's indebtedness to Verdenal; it is a gesture towards the war and its sacrifice—with which Eliot personally had little to do" (137). This is a perfect example of a reading concerned too much with "fact" that pays little or no attention to the obvious imaginative impact of a close male-male relationship on the sensitive poetic mind, an impact that is infinitely heightened in a time of war. Gordon's haste comes close to revealing a fear of such ideas, a fear that, as long as it continues to exist, will go the farthest toward diminishing the poetry.

Prufrock Through the War

Once one has read Eliot's early poem, *The Love Song of St. Sebastian*, it becomes difficult to avoid noticing the points of convergence, besides the titles, between it and *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, in spite of the former's poetic deficiencies and the latter's excellence. Like *Prufrock*, *Sebastian* is a dramatic monologue in the voice of a male struggling with a nervous sexuality, or even a pointed neurosis. Richard Kaye has gone into great detail laying out the significance of Eliot's choice of the martyr as a poetic image, which goes "beyond anticipating [*Prufrock*] in its lurid thematics of self-mutilation" (109). What is most important for the present discussion is the significant degree to which *Sebastian* reveals, in a rougher, less mature form, some of the same sexual anxieties that were to be given fuller expression in *Prufrock*. Many Modernist writers, including Eliot, Yeats, and Stevens, were drawn to the image of St. Sebastian but were eager to empty it of the homosexual content it had carried in the hands of 1890's esthetes such as Wilde, Proust, and Pater. Eliot has made the object of the male speaker's desire in his *Sebastian* a woman, a point made only by the "single detail of her breasts," though the heterosexualization of the image has not minimized its power to symbolize, as Kaye says, "perverse eros, solitary extremity, and paralyzed consciousness," all of which, of course, would provide a good deal of the makeup of J. Alfred Prufrock (Kaye 110).

As mentioned earlier, even at the time of *Prufrock's* composition (1911), Eliot had begun to represent poetically what were to become important characteristics of troubled masculinity after World War I: paralysis, sexual hesitancy, and ambivalence. The Victorian masculine certainty of sexual conquest and a focus on action gives way to the contemplative indecision of "And should I then presume? / And how should I begin?" (68-69) The distance between the introspective male and the female object in "Rhapsody on a Windy Night":

"...Regard that woman
Who hesitates toward you in the light of the door
Which opens on her like a grin.
You see the border of her dress
Is torn and stained with sand,
And you see the corner of her eye
Twists like a crooked pin" (16-22)

is echoed in the "one, settling a pillow by her head," of *Prufrock*, who says "That is not what I meant at all; / That is not it, at all" (107-109). All the "clear relations" (6) in *Rhapsody* are dissolved, replaced by "a crowd of twisted things" (24) which must serve to orient the doubtful male to the world. In another poem from the same collection, *Portrait of a Lady*, the "velleities and carefully caught regrets...in a life composed so much, so much of odds and ends" (15, 21) become for the male speaker the tenuous and enigmatic means of relating to a female presence he can not comprehend:

"I smile, of course,
And go on drinking tea.
...
I take my hat: how can I make a cowardly amends
For what she has said to me? (49-50, 69-70)

Uncertainty can easily become paranoia, as it does for Prufrock, for whom the unknown takes on a more menacing meaning, manifested in “Streets that follow like a tedious argument / Of insidious intent” or “The eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase” (8-9, 56). Thus the mutilation and paralysis of *Sebastian* are recreated in the lines,

And when I am formulated, sprawling on a pin,
When I am pinned and wriggling on the wall,
Then how should I begin (57-59),

illustrating, among other things, the painful loss of direction in a male mind that no longer finds reassurance in the certainty of abstractions in Victorian, positivist notions of the hyper-masculine.

And for every step that Prufrock does not make toward the women who so intimidate and befuddle him, his own self-consciousness increases. His awareness of his own body intensifies almost to the point of total paralysis:

And indeed there will be time
To wonder, “Do I dare?” and, “Do I dare?”
Time to turn back and descend the stair,
With a bald spot in the middle of my hair—
(They will say: “How his hair is growing thin!”)
My morning coat, my collar mounting firmly to the chin,
My necktie rich and modest, but asserted by a simple pin—
(They will say: “But how his arms and legs are thin!”)
...
Shall I part my hair behind? Do I dare to eat a peach?
I shall wear white flannel trousers, and walk upon the beach.
I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each.
I do not think that they will sing to me. (37-44, 121-4)

This heightened self-consciousness of the male body is evocative, albeit in a cooler, more gentrified manner, of the objectification of the male body in so many Great War poems. Unmanned men, the victims of wounds varying from the not necessarily slight “blighty” to every kind of deformation and loss of limb, populate the work of virtually every major poet who fought in the trenches. Sassoon’s “The One-Legged Man” and Owen’s “Mental Cases” suggest something of the range of afflictions by which the integrity of the male body and/or mind were compromised during the war.

Modern psychological and gender studies have, of course, made much of the connection between the integrity of the body and the sense of the self. The connection is based in the visual: to view a whole body is to have a sense of its existence as an independent being. One of the first ways a child, for instance, comes to understand what it means to be a *self* is by observation of the mother’s body in its entirety; it recognizes the mother’s wholeness as well as its own separateness from that mother. “The child *sees* its wholeness before it *feels* its wholeness,” Moira Gatens explains, “and this seeing is actually constituent of its future identity as a distinct and whole being” (33). The world of trench warfare, then, with its inescapable *visual* experience of the breaking apart of bodies, tended to have the opposite effect on humans and their sense of self. One could not go a few yards on the front lines without *seeing* a body in some state of disintegration, and, surrounded by visual challenges to the integrity and autonomy of the body, it became more and more difficult for soldiers to find reassurance of the constitution of the self.

These themes are played out in a host of other poems in Prufrock and Other Observations (1917), dedicated to Jean Verdenal. Male voyeuristic shyness permeates *Mr. Appollinax*:

I thought of Fragilion, that shy figure among the birch-trees,
And of Priapus in the shrubbery
Gaping at the lady in the swing (3-5),

and the prose poem *Hysteria* takes discomfort at female sexuality to the level of a fear of being physically consumed:

I was drawn in by short gasps, inhaled at each momentary recovery,
lost finally in the dark caverns of her throat, bruised by the ripple of
unseen muscles. ...I decided that if the shaking of her breasts could
be stopped, some of the fragments of the afternoon might be collected.

This terror takes the form of a cold withdrawal from passion in *The "Boston Evening Transcript"*:

When evening quickens faintly in the street,
Wakening the appetites of life in some
...
I mount the steps and ring the bell, turning
Wearily (3-7).

It seems hardly the attitude of a young man at all, the weariness instead suggesting one who has seen a great deal more of life and pain than, say, the Eliot in his twenties who composed these lines. The same is very much the case in *Gerontion*, the title of which means literally "little old man" in Greek. The speaker acknowledges the impotence of his existence:

Here I am, an old man in a dry month,
Being read to by a boy, waiting for rain.
I was neither at the hot gates

Nor fought in the warm rain (1-2),
describes a sense of guilt at certain passions of his past, and bemoans the way memory corrupts feeling over time:

After such knowledge, what forgiveness?
...
In memory only, reconsidered passion. Gives too soon
Into weak hands
...
Unnatural vices
Are fathered by our heroism.
...
I have lost my passion: why should I need keep it
Since what is kept must be adulterated?
I have lost my sight, smell, hearing, taste and touch:
How should I use them for your closer contact? (33-60)

All of this, the “Thoughts of a dry brain in a dry season” (75), begs the question of why Eliot repeatedly spoke with the voice of an impotent old man. The adoption of such a persona by a relatively vital young man seems curious, but less so when considered in light of the impact of World War I on a man’s sense of self and the cultural image of active, aggressive, physically firm masculinity.

Impotence, temporary or permanent, was one of the most common injuries suffered by soldiers in the war. Shell shock could bring it about in a psychological way, but even more often men were physically “undone” by bullets or shrapnel (Hirschfeld 211), a condition Ernest Hemingway made the fundamental problem of the protagonist Jake Barnes in The Sun Also Rises (1926). Dr. Hirschfeld saw the connection between impotence and a poetry like Eliot’s very clearly:

Injuries of this sort were not uncommon during the war which explains their frequent occurrence in literature. ...It appears that poetry

gave much more attention to this problem of emasculation...than did science. ...The sensations of the unfortunate eunuchs of the World War and their conduct of life which entailed a total reorganization of their life-pattern, offered poets and writers elaborate material for literary treatment (211, 213).

The physical dysfunction effected by such injuries was often accompanied by "loss of libido and psychic indifferentism," both of which could easily characterize a host of males in Eliot's poetry. As a noncombatant he was of course not subjected to such an injury himself, but an awareness of the emasculating character of the war was everywhere in Europe. "Everybody knows," said Hirschfeld, "the type of man afflicted with war-palsy or tremors induced by the war. Those living documents of the criminal insanity of war can still be found on the street corners...of...European cities" (219). The unmanned men that populate Prufrock and Other Observations seem, by the time of *Gerontion*'s publication in 1920, to have become a recognizable cultural phenomenon rather than merely the workings of one conflicted poet's imagination. "At mating time the hippo's voice," go the lines in *The Hippopotamus*, "Betrays inflexions hoarse and odd" (17-18), and whereas a reader of Prufrock might be inclined to conclude that so, in effect, does Eliot's, the tenor of 1920's Poems suggests that the same is now true of a much larger group of males.

Of the poems written prior to *The Waste Land*, the feeling of male impotence, anxiety, and ineffectuality in *Gerontion* most nearly approaches the same quality of complexity. Indeed, feeling that Ezra Pound's revisions and excisions had too much obscured *The Waste Land*'s "consciousness or persona," Eliot had intended to use *Gerontion* as an introductory section, "to indicate that the conscious-

ness of *that* poem lay behind the entire *Waste Land*,” but Pound, acting as editor and advisor, dissuaded him (Miller 61). James E. Miller, Jr. offers that the rejection of Gerontion as a narrative presence in *The Waste Land* is what led to the elevation of Tiresias “into the position of the poem’s consciousness,” a place affirmed by Eliot’s notes to the poem (62). Formally, *Gerontion* unveils something of the same patchwork mythological organization as *The Waste Land* and, like its grander counterpart, is highly allusive and oblique. This allusiveness, however, should not be confused with the kind of classical referentialism that was described in an earlier section as being fatal to Great War poetry. Rather, the variety and range of allusions in *Gerontion* and *The Waste Land*—Christian, classical, popular, Eastern—suggest a consciousness desperately in search of a unifying vision of experience, an organizing structure unequivocally denied the soldier poet but remaining on the edge of the realm of possibilities for a poet like Eliot who, spared the immediate experience of battle, had the advantage of at least a semblance of objective distance. As will be explained in a moment, *The Waste Land* does not betray the subjective ideal of the war lyric, yet time and distance allow for an attempted mythologization. For all its apparent mythological structures, *The Waste Land* retains something of the personal nature of *Prufrock* and the best Great War lyrics, and the primary link to subjectivity is in the person of one dead soldier.

6
Verdenal

The friendship between Eliot and Verdenal was intense but short; little less than four years elapsed between their first meeting in the fall of 1911 and Verdenal's death in the spring of 1915, and less than a year of that time was actually spent in close proximity. But regardless of how much or little actually transpired during their time together in Paris, Eliot and Verdenal are undeniably bound in the imaginative effect their relationship had on Eliot's poetry. As John T. Mayer has rightly pointed out, "It is not so much the living Verdenal whom Eliot knew in Paris but the transmuted Verdenal, the Verdenal of memory and desire, who haunts Eliot as he approached *The Waste Land*." Their friendship

was transformed in Eliot's mind...resurrected in memory and charged with imaginative power quite beyond the living experience. Verdenal became for a time one of the obsessive figures commanding Eliot's inner life, and, with his mother and perhaps with Emily Hale, a main component of the persistent "third" figure ("Who is the third who walks always beside you?") that is the "familiar compound ghost" of the early poetry ("I do not know whether a man or a woman"), which gives special dimension and intensity to Eliot's personal experience as it is transmuted into art (201).

It is further important to understand the relationship in the context of "European traditions of male friendship," which allowed "different ways of expressing affection between males unknown to the inhibiting codes that governed male-to-male behavior in the United States" (199). Based on the available letters from Verdenal to

Eliot¹ it is clear that there was a deep, perhaps uncommon, understanding between the two, based around shared interests in music, art, and poetry—a kind of friendship Eliot had never had in the States. The two were, in Peter Ackroyd's words, "in close intellectual and imaginative sympathy," and their affection was allowed to form itself around other centers than the jocular posturings typical of American young men (42). In Verdenal, Eliot had found for the first time a truly sympathetic consciousness with which he could explore and refine his own. Beyond this, critical readings of the nature of their friendship continue to disagree.

Though the "Verdenal of memory and desire," and the imaginative significance of their time together may indeed be what came to dominate the poet's recollection of their relationship, a small amount of reliable historical information about Jean Verdenal does, however, exist. In particular, an interview conducted by Claudio Perinot with the nephew of Jean Verdenal reveals some small but telling details about Eliot's friend that are helpful in imagining the kinds of ground on which the two found themselves so compatible.

All the Verdenals, it seems, "had a special interest in literature and the arts," and, though Jean's special field eventually became medicine, he also showed "noteworthy linguistic abilities ... a natural inclination for languages," scoring higher in English on one exam than even the native English speakers (Perinot 266-8). A man of diverse interests, Jean Verdenal "in particular, loved poetry...[and] even knew Dante, in French, off by heart ... He found an enduring satisfaction in Mal-

¹ None of Eliot's to Verdenal have, apparently, survived.

larmé” as well (269). Eliot’s own use of and affinity for Dante was prolific, as evidenced in, for example, the Dantean allusions and imitations in *Ash Wednesday*, *The Waste Land*, *Prufrock and Other Poems*, and *Little Gidding*, and little more needs to be said about his fascination with French Symbolism. The two appear, furthermore, to have shared an interest in such French writers as Laforgue, Baudelaire, Claudel, and Phillippe—whose *Bubu de Montparnasse* is known to have influenced *The Waste Land*—and, in music, a taste for Wagner (272-3, Letters 23, 28). In Paris they “visited galleries together [and] discussed the latest books” (Ackroyd 42). The conversations between the two friends, whether in their shared boarding house, in the streets of Paris, or via written correspondence, appear to have had ample material of an aesthetic nature to give them life, and the noticeable similarities in their artistic interests do at the very least suggest a kind of sympathy of minds.

Interestingly, Verdenal is also described by his nephew as having been, during his short life, strikingly similar to Eliot in disposition, having all the characteristics of the esthete. “Jean, as a boy, was a bit delicate, you might say. He was rather an introvert and rarely easy-going,” and despite being a capable sportsman, “he was more a man of study at heart” (267, 269). He was also, as witnessed in the excerpt at the opening of this essay, capable of voicing great sentiment and personal affection, which must have been, to someone of Eliot’s innate conservatism and reticence, something of a new experience. Indeed, Eliot’s famous reference in *The Criterion* (April 1934) to Verdenal—the “friend coming across the Luxembourg Gardens in the late afternoon, waving a branch of lilac” under a “sentimental sun-

set”—sounds in its emotionality more like Verdenal’s passage about the memory of the bells than the words of a staunchly conservative Anglican classicist and royalist, as though something of the dead soldier’s tenderness has survived and surfaced from behind Eliot’s dignified and impassive exterior.

Besides being Eliot’s dear friend, Verdenal would seem to have presented an ideal figure for an elegy on a fallen-soldier. He died, in fact, quite heroically, tending under heavy fire to a fallen comrade on the battlefield (Miller 21). Even his features seem to have been of the mold so often idealized in elegies for young men before, during, and after World War I: “tall, well-built” with “the long nose and the well-cut lips” and “eyes...that attracted rather than repelled” (Perinot 273). If we take seriously, as I believe we should, the above suggestions that certain sections of *The Waste Land* do elegize a dead soldier of the First World War, it is not difficult at all to conjecture that Verdenal is probably the figure lurking behind those passages.

One final piece of biographical information remains that bears mentioning here. For all that has been said and written by critics and biographers about Eliot’s disastrous first marriage to Vivien Haigh-Wood, few if any have commented on the suddenness with which the marriage came on the heels of Verdenal’s death. No more than a few weeks could have elapsed between the time Eliot received word of his friend’s death and the time he and Vivien decided to marry. The wedding, a quick civil ceremony without either set of parents having been notified, took place on 26 June, 1915 with a spontaneity altogether uncharacteristic of the groom

(though, in fairness, quite typical of the bride). One cannot help but wonder at the emotional and mental strain to which Eliot must have been subjected by the quick succession of the loss of perhaps his dearest friend and the decision to wed a woman whom he had known for only a few months (they had met earlier that same year). The sequence of events can also be read as an indication of the “quantitate dell’amor” that existed between Eliot and Verdenal, the hurried marriage appearing as the act of a deeply lonely and desperate man trying to fill a void. Judging not only by the almost total debacle that became of the marriage but also by Eliot’s frequent poetic returns throughout his career to themes suggestive of the memory of Verdenal, it seems more than justifiable to conclude that the void was not adequately filled.²

The first such invocation of Verdenal came in the form of the dedication of *Prufrock and Other Observations* (1917): “For Jean Verdenal, 1889-1915, mort aux Dardanelles.” The epigraph which follows: “Now you are able to comprehend the quantity of love that warms me toward you,/ When I forget our emptiness / Treating shades as if they were solid,” from Canto XXI, 133-6, of Dante’s *Purgatorio*, was not joined with the dedication until 1925, when Eliot’s *Poems: 1909-1925* was published, and the combination of the two only heighten one’s sense of the continuing import of Verdenal to the poetry (trans., Miller 18). Eliot’s only other public refer-

² There is, however, a moving suggestion of closure in Eliot’s last major work, *The Four Quartets*. In “Little Gidding” the speaker encounters “a familiar compound ghost / Both intimate and unidentifiable” who speaks consolingly, “These things have served their purpose: let them be,” and leaves “with a kind of valediction.” (95-6, 113, 148).

ence to Verdenal came in 1934, in the April issue of *The Criterion*. Speaking of his time in Paris (1910-11), Eliot says, with uncharacteristic emotion:

I am willing to admit that my own retrospect is touched by a sentimental sunset, the memory of a friend coming across the Luxembourg Gardens in the late afternoon, waving a branch of lilac, a friend who was later (so far as I could find out) to be mixed with the mud of Gallipoli (Miller 19).

It is a highly romantic scene, which should get the attention of the careful student of Eliot, who took pains to characterize himself as an anti-romantic. So it is not difficult to see that the image he describes here carries an exceptional significance for him. Needless to say, lilacs figured in Eliot's poetic imagery even until *Ash-Wednesday*, published in 1930 ("Lilac and brown hair"). This reference to Verdenal gives additional resonance to the passage from "Portrait of a Lady" in which the speaker is able to "remain self-possessed / Except when a street-piano" conjures a memory of

...the smell of hyacinths across the garden
Recalling things that other people have desired.
Are these ideas right or wrong?

There is another occurrence of lilacs in the same poem ("Now that lilacs are in bloom / She has a bowl of lilacs in her room..."), and the most famous of Eliot's uses of lilacs comes in the opening lines of *The Waste Land*:

April is the cruellest month, breeding
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
Memory and desire... .

Unfortunately, relatively few critics have been willing to entertain suggestions of the presence of Verdenal behind such references. The reason for this hesitancy seems to

stem from the prevailing assumption that to acknowledge a meaningful emotional closeness between two men implies too much the homosexual, a notion not without some basis in reality. Indeed, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick posits the “unbrokenness of a continuum between homosocial and homosexual,” where the homosocial includes all kinds of male-male heterosexual engagements such as “male bonding” (1). Critical reluctance to explore more fully the ramifications of the Verdenal experience owes a great deal to the fear that admitting much male-male intimacy will necessarily lead to implications of homosexuality, like descending a slippery slope, and has resulted in an insistence on what Sedgwick calls the radical disruption of the continuum, the tidy segregation in critical readings of homosocial and homosexual spheres of activity (2). The point of all this information in the present study about Eliot’s and Verdenal’s intimacy is primarily to establish the presence of the *homosocial* in their relationship, but in Sedgwick’s sense of the term, by which no possibility of interpretation is excluded. There would seem to be sufficient evidence to justify at least the supposition that the relationship was also homosexual, but the “facts” in this regard need not be known and likely never will be. The truly meaningful evidence is to be found in the images that survived in the poet’s recollection, as they are revealed in his public utterances and especially in the poetry. One of the first and only scholars to deal with these ideas, avoided by so many others, is Miller, who says,

When in his 1934 recollection of his student days, Eliot summoned up, in what seems like an almost involuntary outburst of personal anguish, the image of Jean Verdenal with the branch of lilac, he was

surely recalling more than a city, more than a historic moment. That branch of lilac evidently bore a heavy weight of association, “mixing / Memory and desire” (25).

Indeed, in one of his final letters to Eliot, Verdenal wrote, “Goodbye, my dear fellow...I hope you are doing splendid things in America, and that radiant blooms are germinating” (*Letters* 35). There can be little doubt that the imaginative blooms born of their friendship did eventually germinate in Eliot’s poetry.

7
The Waste Land

The effects of World War I are everywhere visible in *The Waste Land*. Perhaps the most prominent is the presence of death. Only alluded to in “Prufrock” (“I am Lazarus, come from the dead”; “Till human voices wake us, and we drown”), death forms a much more immediate and imposing presence in *The Waste Land*, even from the opening lines of “The Burial of the Dead”:

April is the cruellest month, breeding
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
Memory and desire, stirring
Dull roots with spring rain.
Winter kept us warm, covering
Earth in forgetful snow, feeding
A little life with dried tubers.

What is interesting about this passage is how it blurs the lines between life and death; spring, normally associated with life and possibility is associated with death, and winter, which ought to be the “cruellest,” is instead comforting and generative, “feeding / A little life.” A similar irony is maintained in what Allyson Booth calls the poem’s “potentially sprouting corpses”:

“That corpse you planted last year in your garden,
“Has it begun to sprout? Will it bloom this year? (71-72)

This confusion of life and death mirrors that experienced by soldiers in the trenches of the First World War. “Trench soldiers in the Great War inhabited worlds constructed, literally, of corpses,” says Booth (50). The living were often lucky to be separated by a few feet from their dead counterparts, as “dead horses and dead

men—and parts of both—were sometimes not buried for months and often simply became an element of parapets and trench walls,” creating a disturbingly close proximity of the living and the dead (Fussell 49). This situation, in which “live soldiers found themselves buried in falling dirt while shells disinterred their dead companions from shallow graves,” had profound effects on soldiers’ conceptions of selfhood (Booth 50). Without a clear boundary between life and death, trench soldiers experienced physically what would be felt by a host of modernist artists, “the dissolution of boundaries around the self” (Levenson 175).

Michael Levenson actually argues that the opening lines of *The Waste Land* are written from the point of view of “someone (or some thing) that is buried,” for “in what other circumstances would snow act as cover?” (172) He continues:

The opening of *The Waste Land* looks at spring from the point of view of a corpse. ...Only here is a corpse that has not yet died, that retains a little life. We recall that the title of the opening section is “The Burial of the Dead” and already we have a fierce irony. These buried are not yet dead.

And, referring to lines 71-72, “if a corpse can sprout, then no boundaries are secure” (175). Evidence of the disturbance of a familiar and solid boundary between life and death is frequent in the poem, and the effects of the disturbance are far reaching. The “hyacinth girl” in the first section highlights one instance of this dissolution of boundaries while introducing one of its most interesting ramifications: an intensification of male-male relationships.

“You gave me Hyacinths first a year ago;
“They called me the hyacinth girl.”
—Yet when we came back, late, from the hyacinth garden,

Your arms full, and your hair wet, I could not
 Speak, and my eyes failed, I was neither
 Living nor dead, and I knew nothing,

says the voice that narrates lines 35-42. The hyacinth flower, like the lilac, is subtly evocative of the Verdenal relationship, and plays a critical part in Eliot's presentation of male-male affection. The hyacinth surely carries as much of the weight of "memory and desire" as does the lilac in *The Waste Land*. Eliot makes use of both the flower ("hyacinth") and the myth ("Hyacinths"), and in his *Notes* to the poem points out to the reader the intended connection between this episode and the paralyzed husband in "A Game of Chess" and also with the metamorphosis in line 48, from *The Tempest*, "Those are pearls that were his eyes" (*Tempest* 1.2.401; see *Notes* 126). The common link is Verdenal, whose connection to the Hyacinth myth, depicting "a love between males that ends in tragic loss," is certainly reasonable (Mayer 255). There is both grief and a hint at rebirth here; in the myth, Apollo laments the death of Hyacinthus and resolves to give him life in memory, poetry, and in the new flower which is to be born with the same name. Countering the images of rebirth, though, is the ironic recurrence of death and sterility. The fertility connoted in the "hyacinth girl" scene—the wet hair, the "arms full"—is defeated by the paralysis and sterility of the speaker, who "could not / Speak," whose "eyes failed," who "was neither / Living nor dead, and [...] knew nothing, / Looking into the heart of light, the silence. / *Oed' und leer das Meer.*" All of this is foreshadowed by the emphasis on "—Yet," signifying negation and reversal, immediately following what

Mayer calls the “romantic promise” of the lines, “You gave me Hyacinths first a year ago; / “They called me the hyacinth girl” (255).

Two crucial observations about this scene have been made, and made all but unavoidable to the attentive reader of Eliot, by G. Wilson Knight. The first is that “A precise memory is indicated rather than a vague allusion,” a conclusion given support by the comments of Valerie Eliot in her notes to the manuscript facsimile (Knight 3). The second, that the “hyacinth girl” is male, is arrived at fairly easily by a close following of Eliot’s intended associations, made available in his *Notes*, and by the most basic understanding of the myth of Hyacinthus (Gr. *Hyakinthos*). Interestingly, the myth was a favorite of the Uranians; Wilde and Lord Douglas both produced works based on it. Knight has even argued that the Uranian movement itself began with the publication in *The Artist* of “Hyacinthus,” a poem by Charles Kains Jackson (Knight 3). The story of Hyacinthus not only obviously concerns the love between two males, but it had a history of homoerotic usage, and Eliot did not undertake to diminish this significance in his evocation of the myth.

Homosexual reference is almost totally unmasked in the episode involving “Mr. Eugenides, the Smyrna merchant” (209). The Metropole hotel at Brighton, to which Eugenides invites the speaker, was, especially among homosexual men, “famous for weekend assignations,” as Frank Kermode states in his explanatory note (103). The invitation, “in demotic French,” by the “Unshaven” Eugenides implies the same kind of purely physical, mechanical sexual encounter, so repugnant to the poet, as in the scene between “The typist” and “A small house agent’s clerk” that

immediately follows (212, 210; 222, 232). The negativity of the homosexual proposition is further suggested by the “pocket full of currants” (210) which, as Kermode notes, “are shriveled grapes, hence dried-up fertility symbols” (102). Like the hyacinth girl passage, this scene illustrates the impossibility, in a relationship between men, of a true fullness of being; biological productivity is automatically precluded, and a shallow physical sexual encounter like the one proposed by the Smyrna merchant offers only emotional hollowness. In combination these two scenes suggest that, although it may be between men that spiritual communion is attainable, a homosexual union commits a crime against the fecundity of the body. Viewed in light of the abortive and mechanical heterosexual encounters in the poem, the condemnation is extended to any relationship that is merely physical and therefore also in violation of the full realization of fecundity—this time of mind and spirit.

The other critical passage dealing with a male-male relationship comes in “What the Thunder Said,” lines 400-409:

DA

Datta: what have we given?

My friend, blood shaking in my heart

The awful daring of a moment's surrender

Which an age of prudence can never retract

By this, and this only, we have existed

Which is not to be found in our obituaries

Or in memories draped by the beneficent spider

Or under the seals broken by the lean solicitor

In our empty rooms.

The call-and-response begins a feverish recollection of “a moment's surrender” that, while it will never be known to those who come looking after the participants'

deaths, is impossible to erase from memory. What is more, the experience has done more than persist in the memory of the speaker and his friend, it has been, as Miller states, “the essence of their existence, this memory shaping their very selves, giving them their essential, their emotional identity” (128). That the “friend” in these lines is a man is not made explicit in the published version, though both the seeming equality between the speaker and his friend and the anxiety the poet feels about what has been “given” suggest a same sex situation. The manuscript version makes it abundantly clear that the friend is indeed a man:

DATTA. we brother, what have we given?
My friend, my friend, beating in my heart

Miller has called this scene “a confrontation that is also a confession,” and it does contain an unmistakable sense of guilt (128). There is terror in the recollection,

... I have heard the key
Turn in the door once and once only
We think of the key, each in his prison
Thinking of the key, each confirms a prison
Only at nightfall, aethereal rumours
Revive for a moment a broken Coriolanus (411-416).

At the same time, the significance with which the experience is endowed in memory—“By this, and this only, we have existed”—suggests something of value and hope, something altogether uncharacteristic of the various abortive male-female relations found throughout much of the rest of the poem. It is not difficult to imagine Verdenal behind this memory, the friend with whom Eliot had shared so much and without whose company he now feels himself very alone. “Our empty rooms” then takes on an added significance, as the two did spend a great deal of time in each

others' rooms during their time in Paris. Judging by the frequency and tenderness with which they are mentioned in the letters, their rooms in the French *pension* seemed to occupy a place of special importance in their friendship:

I now occupy the little room that was yours last year, and I like having the bed in a little recess, but the pattern of the wallpaper (do you remember it?) often gets on my nerves. Damn. It occurred to me a moment ago to send you a little piece of wallpaper—then I immediately realized that the idea was not mine but that I had got it from a letter by J. Laforgue, so I will abstain

...

Excuse the handwriting—the spelling, the style and the crossings out—but I was in the habit of sometimes coming down to your room in an old jacket, collarless and in slippers (Letters 32).

Even without such insights into the shared life of Eliot and Verdenal, the sense of loss—in particular, the loss of a dear friend—is palpable in *The Waste Land*. The friend and the speaker have shared something, certainly homosocial and perhaps homosexual, of immeasurable importance; something, the importance of which was perhaps not originally realized, has been “given” that cannot be retracted and is not easily reclaimed. An autobiographical reading would see Eliot coming to terms with an experience of youth that can no longer be comfortably reconciled to the life of a married public man of letters. In any case, in this passage memory and desire seem to converge and come to an emotional head, the speaker striving to reconcile them to a present that is equally bewildering, and the thunder’s “DA,” interpreted “Datta. Dayadhvam. Damyata” (Give, Sympathize, Control), frames the poet’s recollection in a kind of tripartite benediction.

The suggestiveness of male-male relations in the poem is surpassed only by the repulsive and defeating heterosexual scenes. In "The Fire Sermon," the "young man carbuncular" who guesses "The time is now propitious" and whose "vanity requires no response" represents the nadir of empty physical sexual relations (231, 235, 241). The encounter with his female partner, who is "glad it's over" is barren of any trace of affection, fertility, or even passion (252). Significantly, the speaker of this episode is not a participant at all, but an impotent observer. Tiresias is the consummate embodiment of male sterility, a blind old man, and presents something as well of the hermaphroditic in his "wrinkled female breasts" (219). His androgyny is further suggested by his appearance "At the violet hour" between day and night and by his self-characterization as "throbbing between two lives" (215, 218). Being both male and female, Tiresias becomes the ironic, objective eye that transcends and blurs rigid male/female divisions. His third-sex status, then, is not unlike the psyche of the poet, whose own "hermaphroditism of the soul" has led him to an exploration of the homoerotic. The details of the scene itself provide a telling example of the kind of repugnance with which Eliot often described male-female sexual relations in his poems. Remembering the aloofness and fine perception of Prufrock, the scene seems to depict a similar voyeuristic detachment.

Another kind of heterosexual discomfort is explored in the scene of a man and wife in bed in "A Game of Chess." The mood is strange and delusional, and considering her host of nervous disorders and the way Eliot tried to distance himself

from her, especially later in their marriage, as a result of these episodes, it is hard not to imagine Vivienne Eliot's being the voice of the lines,

“My nerves are bad to-night. Yes, bad. Stay with me.
 Speak to me. Why do you never speak? Speak.
 What are you thinking of? What thinking?
 What?
 I never know what you are thinking. Think” (111-114).

There is nothing in this passage of easy affection between two lovers, and, viewed in light of the rape, “by the barbarous king / So rudely forced,” of Philomel in “A Game of Chess,” the pattern suggests the generally abhorrent, brutal, dispassionate, and futile nature of participatory sex between men and women (99-100). Once again, the distant, observant stance implies, like *Prufrock*, an autoerotic sexuality, and the obvious distaste, on the part of the speaker, for what is viewed as an unproductive set of possibilities for male-female intercourse cannot help hinting at the homoerotic.

8

Conclusion

The kinds of observations that have heretofore been made about discrete sections in *The Waste Land* have but limited significance unless they also influence the way we approach the poem as a whole. That the points of emphasis have thus far been rather isolated passages makes some formal sense, considering the poem's heterogeneous construction, but Eliot did not fashion his great piece as merely the random arrangement, collage-like, of random and unrelated snatches of life. On the contrary, if he could be said to ever have "intended" anything in his life's work, it was the formulation of a unified vision of experience, an aim testified to in these lines from *Four Quartets*:

Words move, music moves
 Only in time; but that which is only living
 Can only die. Words, after speech, reach
 Into the silence. Only by the form, the pattern,
 Can words or music reach
 The stillness (*Burnt Norton* 137-41).

Late in his career, and especially after his conversion to Anglo-Catholicism, the central theme of Eliot's poetry became the redemption of the temporal by the eternal, of the fleeting by the form, in art as in life. Most often, scholars have chosen to view this later vision as a departure from that of the early work, a conservative turning away from the radical aesthetic of *Prufrock* and *The Waste Land*. Relatively few have noticed that throughout his career, even well before his Christian conver-

sion, Eliot was operating with very deliberate notions of the “unified sensibility.”

The 1921 essay, “The Metaphysical Poets,” makes this abundantly clear:

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 (*Selected Prose* 64).

Such a position does not jibe well with readings of *The Waste Land* as an exercise in *disassociative* perception, but it makes startlingly good sense if considered as part of what Charles Moorman in 1960 called Eliot’s “sacramental” point of view.

In Eliot’s case, though, sacramentalism constitutes more than just a point of view; it describes the type of *mind* that could—and had to—create both *The Waste Land* and *Four Quartets*, and it is the reconciling factor in a poetry so seemingly disparate as that of his early and late career. Moorman’s excellent, but often overlooked, chapter on the significance of myth in all of Eliot’s poetry describes the sacramental mindset—to which the conversion to Anglicanism is attributable, not vice-versa—as that of both the mythmaker and the primitive. The sacramentalist does not distinguish self from nature, subject from object, seen from unseen, symbol from object, or present from past. To a sacramentalist, says Moorman, “the word is made flesh at all times and on an infinite number of levels” (130). It is to this mindset that both the “disparate experience” and the sexual sterility which serves as *The Waste Land*’s “central image” and “underlying foundation” may be ascribed (135). The Fisher King-waste land myth “provides a kind of matrix” around which “all of

Eliot's images, drawn from wherever and whenever, may evolve and cluster" and in which, most importantly, image and idea may be fused (136).

This is precisely the stuff of Eliot's theory of the "objective correlative," which holds that emotional content is conveyed not through poetic abstractions but through the employment of very specific, and perhaps disparate, concretions capable of evoking similar emotion in the reader. The problem with many current readings of *The Waste Land* is that they fail to see how this formula works both ways, to identify the emotional content that the strange concretions of the poem are trying to transmit. Sexual sterility does provide the "underlying foundation," but the loss of a dear male friend carries only slightly less of the poem's thematic weight, and both of these themes cannot be said to be other than laden with emotional import. Moreover, the particular emotions evoked by the scenes of male-female and male-male intimacy are quite different—disillusion and disgust on the one hand, and a combination of revelry and regret on the other—and one would be making a mistake not to take seriously the deliberation with which Eliot set down these scenes in juxtaposition to one another. Whether the result of doing so is to make inferences about the poet's biography or the emotional climate of, for instance, his era and social group, *significant emotion* regarding male-male intimacy is undeniably implicit in the arrangement. And, while Eliot stated that significant emotion "has its life in the poem and not in the history of the poet," literary study has long since ceased to make such rigid distinctions.

Regardless of where we choose to locate the source of the emotional material of *The Waste Land*, the idea implied by the specific images of the poem seems to be the same, and it is stated here by Moorman:

Sexual intercourse, which in past time has driven men to war, murder, and poetry and for which men once lost the world and thought the world well lost, has become, in the contemporary waste land, a matter of routine, as mechanical as combing one's hair or placing a record on the phonograph. In short, the waste land itself is by implication devoid of meaning (Moorman 132).

He is correct, to a point, omitting the crucial observation that the only scenes of human intimacy that hint at significant meaning, hope, or in a manner of no small irony, even fecundity, are those between men. "By this, and this only, we have existed," proclaims the narrator as the poem draws to a close, and although the "this" is tinged with regret, its importance is nevertheless upheld against a bleak panorama of male-female relations. These could very well be the words of a man, feeling a torturous mixture of shame and affection, coming to terms with his memory of an isolated homosexual encounter. The other man is now dead, unable to assist his friend in the process of reclamation. Death, perhaps in war, has removed the possibility of further communion between them, and the remaining set of alternatives for human closeness is discouraging, to say the least. The speaker, a man who might be characterized as only fleetingly and in the distant past having experienced a rich level of male-male intimacy, has had that door closed and yearns for an opportunity to reconcile that "moment's surrender" to life, without the reassurance of the only one who might truly understand him.

The idea that Eliot would return with such frequency and intensity to the Verdenal relationship has always met with skepticism. However, it is Eliot's conception of time that makes such a reading feasible. The persistence in the present of that which happened in the past is everywhere in his philosophy. Central to "Tradition and the Individual Talent" is the perpetual reciprocity between past and present:

No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists...; what happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it (*Sacred Wood* 50).

It is a concept on which he insists, regardless of who might "find it preposterous that the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past." He is talking specifically about art, of course, but the sacramental mind insists on a lack of boundaries between spheres of existence. That which is read, felt, or experienced bodily in the present has just as much power to affect memory as does the reality of history. The revisiting and reworking of memory in poetry can accomplish the same thing, and it is within reason to suspect that that is what *The Waste Land* attempts to do. Its fragmented surface does indeed reflect the unsettled consciousness of a postwar world, and especially that of an embattled masculinity, but its emotional impact derives from the tumultuous machinations of an individual mind attempting to reconcile its own memories and desires.

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