

ANALYSIS

THE STYLE OF T. S. ELIOT

(1888-1964)

“I was jolly well right about Eliot. He has sent in the best poem I have yet had or seen from an American. PRAY GOD IT MAY BE NOT A SINGLE AND UNIQUE SUCCESS. He has taken it back to get it ready for the press and you shall have it in a few days....He is the only American I know of who has made what I can call adequate preparation for writing. He has actually trained himself and modernized himself *on his own*.”

Ezra Pound
Letter to Harriet Monroe, Editor of *Poetry*
(30 September 1914)

“The most exciting of those early introductions, after Lindsay and Sandburg, was that of a young Missourian in London, T. S. Eliot, whose ‘Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,’ printed in June, 1915, although an extraordinarily finished product to begin with, was his first appearance as a poet. The previous September Eliot had called on Pound, who wrote me (enthusiastically for him)...When ‘Prufrock’ reached us via our Foreign Correspondent [Pound], its opening lines...nearly took our breath away. Here indeed was modern sophistication dealing with the tag ends of overworldly cosmopolitanism.”

Harriet Monroe
Editor, *Poetry*
recalling 1914 in *Autobiography*

“By technique we...mean one thing: the alert hatred of normality which, through the lips of a tactile and cohesive adventure, asserts that nobody in general and some one in particular is incorrigibly and actually alive. This some one is, it would seem, the extremely great artist: or, he who prefers above everything the unique dimension of intensity, which it amuses him to substitute in us for the comforting and comfortable furniture of reality. If we examine the means through which this substitution is allowed by Mr. Eliot to happen in his reader, we find that they include: a vocabulary almost brutally tuned to attain distinction; an extraordinarily tight orchestration of the shapes of sound; the delicate and careful murderings—almost invariably interpreted, internally as well as terminally, through near-rhyme and rhyme—of established tempos by oral rhythms.”

e. e. cummings
Dial
(June 1920) 783

“It is true his poems seem the products of a constricted emotional experience and that he appears to have drawn rather heavily on books for the heat he could not derive from life. There is a certain grudging margin, to be sure, about all that Mr. Eliot writes—as if he were compensating himself for his limitations by a peevish assumption of superiority. But it is the very acuteness of his suffering from this starvation which gives such poignancy to his art. And, as I say, Mr. Eliot is a poet—that is, he feels intensely and with distinction and speaks naturally in beautiful verse—so that, no matter within what walls he lives, he belongs to the divine company....These drops, though they be wrung from flint, are none the less authentic crystals.”

Edmund Wilson
Dial
(December 1922) 615

“The writer of ‘The Waste Land’ and the other poems of that period appeals to us as one struck to the heart by the confusion and purposelessness and wastefulness of the world about him....And to that world his verse will be held up as a ruthlessly faithful mirror. The confusion of life will be reflected in the obscurity of language....And now against this lyric prophet of chaos must be set the critic who will judge the world from the creed of the classicist, the royalist, and the Anglo-Catholic....I think...that a sensitive

mind cannot read 'Ash Wednesday' without an uneasy perception of something fundamentally amiss in employing for an experience born of Anglo-Catholic faith a metrical form and a freakishness of punctuation suitable for the presentation of life regarded as without form and void....He is a leader and a very influential leader. Our difficulty is that he seems to be leading us in two directions at once."

Paul Elmer More
Saturday Review
(12 November 1932) 235

"In *Ulysses* [1922] we have, in many ways, a resemblance less to other novels than to contemporary poems—Ezra Pound's *Cantos*, Hart Crane's *The Bridge*, and Eliot's 'Ash Wednesday' and 'The Waste Land.'...In America too, even before the war, Mr. Eliot was making a most effective use of this mingling of tones, a la Jules Laforgue, this pointing of the mean and the futile with allusions to the fine and the classic; for example, in 'Sweeney and the Nightingales' and 'Portrait of a Lady.' In 'The Waste Land' he has erected it into a system."

Joseph Warren Beach
The Twentieth Century Novel: Studies in Technique
(Appleton-Century-Crofts 1932) 423, 528

"Eliot not only follows the classical dogma because he cherishes classicism; he follows it also because he cherishes dogma....He loses much by being fastidious. He loses much by having no humor whatever, but he is capable of something else by having splendid wit. And the presence of wit and the absence of humor in Eliot argue his possession of great intellect and egoism, his lack of humanity, his lack of modesty and unself-consciousness. He rests with those men who have chosen to see life distantly, from a single vantage-point; and had he, in the absence of warmth and sinew, a great intensity, he might possess permanent value for us....But he is not intense, he is merely correct."

Louis Kronenberger
Nation
(17 April 1935) 453

"When Eliot stood isolated and dispossessed amid the ruins of a familiar universe, every nerve and sensation quivered with its own life. The antennae of his intelligence were alive with nervous vitality. This resulted in images and allegories of great focal sharpness. In more recent years, approaching a stranger territory, this grip on identity is no longer held, and with its relaxation the nervous sensibility of his diction and cadence has lessened. He writes either a more relaxed and speculative verse, or a sort of argument which attempts to extend his intellectual problems beyond their own limits. He has become a poet of more public qualities, of religious responsibilities, and even (in 'The Rock') of social concerns. These have entailed a change from a style of cryptic historical reference and erudition to one of dialectic lucidity, or even of popular simplification."

Morton Dauwen Zabel
Southern Review
(Summer 1936) 170

"Eliot's own opinions are not merely related to his poetry. They qualify his whole critical attitude, and they make him to some extent a preacher. His aim as a writer has been to be a traditionalist: the tradition which he has adopted, being derived from the Church, has also sociological and educative implications. It is his object to show that the application of these principles in social life is as just as it is correct to apply them to literature. He seems to feel that unless he can prove this, he is, in his work, an individualist: not a traditionalist radically connected with the historic process: but isolated, original, personal, in the same sense that he is writing about his own beliefs, which are 'home-made,' and so make him eccentric and different from the people around him."

Stephen Spender
The Destructive Element
(Houghton 1936) 164-65

“If there is a metaphysical distinction between the poetry and the prose of T. S. Eliot, it is this: that in the former he is skeptical of his own knowledge of truth, and in the latter he is indicating the path along which he hopes to find it. In his poetry he sees things through a glass darkly; in the prose he is proclaiming the truth that will make us free. Both these activities, however, are offshoots of a unified intelligence, of a man who is singularly whole in his conception of the dignity and importance of his art. There is no real divergence between his theory and practice, no matter how lucid he may contrive to make his criticism, or how obscure his poetry.”

A. C. Patridge
T. S. Eliot
(Pretoria 1937) 3

“T. S. Eliot is probably the most widely respected literary figure of our time; he is known primarily as the leader of the intellectual reaction against the romanticism of which he began his career as a disciple.... Eliot is a theorist who has repeatedly contradicted himself on every important issue that he has touched, and he has dealt in some fashion with most of the important literary issues of our time....

Pound’s *Cantos* are poems of reverie and so likewise are most of Eliot’s poems: reverie proceeds by the random association of daydream, and possesses a minimum of rational coherence; in fact, in the form it takes in the stream-of-consciousness novel, it is frequently defended because of the sense of immediacy it produces, the assumption being that this is the way people really think....The theory and influence of Eliot...seem to me the most dangerous and nearly the least defensible of our time.”

Yvor Winters
In Defense of Reason
(Alan Swallow 1937-47) 460, 491, 501

“It is to him, together with Ezra Pound, that we can trace the awareness of the urban scene, the employment of anti-poetic imagery, conversational rhythms, cinematic transitions and close-ups, which make contemporary verse deserve the adjective. And even the most vigorous and provocative of the younger men have not shown an ‘auditory imagination’ equal to Eliot’s....What his ‘feeling for syllable and rhythm’ has brought back, in its curious workings, has been chiefly a sense of disorder, of frustration and waste, an intimate and horrifying vision of death.”

Babette Deutsch
American Scholar
(Winter 1939) 30

“Thomas Stearns Eliot...was to define better than any other single poet the period between the wars... With ‘The Waste Land’ (1922) Eliot became the leading poet of his generation. The work won him the two-thousand dollar *Dial* prize, and when it was reprinted in America the critics recognized Eliot as the poet who best summed up the disillusionment of a postwar generation and, what is more, made clear in his social symbols the sterility of our civilization. Although the more conservative critics objected to the voluminous footnotes, the psychoanalysis, and the use of mythology, Eliot in this poem—even in the title—named and mapped the emotional geography of most of the writers between the two world wars. “The Waste Land’ was soon widely translated and has influenced French and Spanish literature...”

In keeping with his naturalization as a British subject in 1927, Eliot became a professed, ardent Anglo-Catholic....Already he had disappointed those who had seen in him the leader of the lost generation; a close reading of ‘The Waste Land’ itself indicated his horror of a skeptical and commercial world. Once again he led the way, this time away from the Waste Land and toward religion. His later poetry is devoted entirely to the theme of repentance, in which one sees the intellectual man reaching toward, if never quite achieving, spiritual rest in a traditional faith.

It was clear that Eliot meant seriously his declaration of classicism in literature; but this was scarcely a new stand. He had always shown an interest in the classical models of form, balance, symmetry, intellectuality, and restraint, and even in college had been strongly sympathetic toward the ideals of Harvard’s Irving Babbitt....Despite his devoted interpretation of the neoclassical in English literature, it

could nevertheless be argued that there is much of romanticism in Eliot's nostalgia for the past, since for him the past, at least as it is to be found in libraries, is the Golden Age."

George K. Anderson & Eda Lou Walton

This Generation: A Selection of British and American Literature from 1914 to the Present
(Scott, Foresman 1939-49) 228-29

"He will soon make ordinary drama look cheap because of its lack of metaphysical interest, just as he had part in making the ordinary shallow poetry of twenty years ago look the same way, and for the same reason....On the realistic level, Mr. Eliot is superb in his mastery of characterization (both the satiric and the sympathetic), handling of plot sequence, exposition of background through dialogue, and, I imagine, such other techniques as belong to an oral form like drama. It is comforting to think that an intellectual, so strict and unconceding that he has been accused of living in a tower, has picked up without any fuss the knack for close structural effects of drama."

John Crowe Ransom

Poetry

(August 1939) 264-66

"Not only was his poetry in harmony with his critical standards, but it also showed his understanding and skillful use of the works of earlier authors in the presentation of his ideas....His first volume of verse, *Prufrock and Other Observations* (1917) had a tone of flippant despair, but he employed the rhythms and technique of ironic contrast of some of the French Symbolists in 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' and other poems. A second volume, *Poems* (1920), contained a brilliant series of quatrains, including 'Sweeney Among the Nightingales,' 'Sweeney Erect,' 'The Hippopotamus,' and 'Mr. Eliot's Sunday Morning Service,' in which he further indicated that he felt life to be ignoble, sordid, or stultifying, while it had once been otherwise, using the figure of Sweeney, among others, to show this. In this volume he also displayed the inanity of modern life in 'Gerontion,' and he reached the fullness of his poetic expression during this period of despair in 'The Waste Land' (1922)."

James D. Hart

The Oxford Companion to American Literature, 5th edition
(Oxford 1941-83)

"Eliot seldom involves himself steadily with the world about him. Instead he makes brief and startling sallies into the world and hence his poetry sometimes strikes us either as a discontinuous anthology of images or as an imitation of involuted psychological or biological processes which remain purely verbal.... Another result of this nervous intermittence is that Eliot's criticism of other poets—such as Donne, Marvell, or Dryden—makes the excellence of their poetry depend too much on their surprising success in image-making and too little on their steady sense of life. Eliot tends to give us what is occasional and spasmodic in a poet, rather than the poet's normal excellence."

Richard Chase

Kenyon Review

(Spring 1945) 220-21

"His first book, *Prufrock and Other Observations* (1917), displayed a poetic orientation all his own. His chief masters were the Jacobean metaphysical poets and the French symbolists, not so unlikely a starting point for an American poet as might appear, since a taste for Donne and Herbert had been deeply rooted in New England from Emerson through Emily Dickinson, and Baudelaire and his followers had been inspired by Poe. The witty and ironic conversational tones of Eliot's earliest poems are most akin, among the symbolists, to Laforgue, but a graver spirit than Laforgue's can already be discerned beneath the surface of what seemed to most of its first readers to be a mocking *vers de societie*....

A much firmer critic than Pound, Eliot was to teach, through both his verse and his prose, a way of seeing and feeling to a younger generation. Pound may first have stimulated him to realize that the authors of the past and present should be judged with equal eyes, that a sense of the past is not 'of what is dead, but of what is already living.' But Eliot's ethical values gave him far more insight into the meaning of history, just as his projection of spiritual struggles endowed his monologues with a dramatic tension quite missing

in Pound. As a result his Prufrock, Sweeney, and Gerontion, sparsely drawn as they were, became some of the most living characters of their time. Prufrock, the fastidious and futile middle-aged product of the genteel tradition, and Sweeney, the tough Irishman 'assured of certain certainties,' are Eliot's chief response to the decadent Boston he knew as a young man."

F. O. Matthiessen
Literary History of the United States, 3rd edition
(Macmillan 1946-63) 1340-41

"With Eliot, the emphasis is on form. His essays on various Elizabethan dramatists, for example, are not concerned with the full-length rounded estimate, but with close technical annotation of detail....It must not be forgotten that the symbolist movement has its roots in the work of the most thoroughly conscious artist in American poetry before Eliot, Edgar Poe; and that, therefore, Eliot's taste for Baudelaire and Laforgue as well as for Poe, the wheel has simply come full circle....He once remarked to me both of his sustained distaste for Emerson, and of the fact that he had never read Miss Dickinson....

It would be glib to say that in 'The Waste Land' and 'The Hollow Men' Eliot wrote his *Inferno*, and that since then his poems represent various stages of passing through a *Purgatorio*; still such a remark may possibly illuminate both his aims and achievement....Similarities between Eliot's technical devices and those of Donne have been observed: the conversational rone, the vocabulary at once colloquial and surprisingly strange—both of these a product of Eliot's belief in the relation of poetry to actual speech, and paralleling his use of 'non-poetic' material; the rapid association of ideas which demands alert agility from the reader; the irregular verse and difficult sentence structure as a part of fidelity to thought and feeling; and, especially, the flash of wit which results from the shock of such unexpected contrasts. But actually the manner in which sudden transitions are made in Eliot's verse owes much more to the method of the French symbolists. I. A. Richards has spoken of 'The Waste Land' as 'a music of ideas,' a phrase which suggests Eliot's particular attraction to Laforgue....Eliot wants to suggest in the rhythms of his verse the movement of thought in a living mind, and thus to communicate the exact pattern of his meaning not so much by logical structure as by emotional suggestion....

Use of such widely divergent details in a single poem indicates the special problem of the contemporary artist. Faced with so great a range of knowledge as a part of the modern consciousness, he can bring it to satisfactory expression in one of two ways, either by expansion or compression....Joyce chose the first alternative for *Ulysses* and devoted more than a quarter of a million words to revealing the complexity involved in the passage of a single ordinary day....Eliot concentrated an interpretation of a whole condition of society into slightly over four hundred lines....

The reconciliation of opposites is as fundamental to Eliot as it was to Heraclitus. Only thus can he envisage a resolution of man's whole being. The 'heart of light' that he glimpsed in the opening movement of 'Burnt Norton' is at the opposite pole from the *Heart of Darkness* from which he took the epigraph for 'The Hollow Men.' Essential evil still constitutes more of Eliot's subject matter than essential good, but the magnificent orchestration of his themes has prepared for that paradisaical glimpse at the close, and thereby makes it no decorative allusion, but an integrated climax to the content no less than to the form. Such spiritual release and reconciliation are the chief reality for which he strives in a world that has seemed to him increasingly threatened with new dark ages."

F. O. Matthiessen
The Achievement of T. S. Eliot
(Oxford 1947) 195

"The barrenness of the present is contrasted with the fruitfulness of the past. There is an apparent casualness in weaving together banal modern allusions and literary references which widen the vista and embrace tradition. With a boldness that at once attracted attention, imagery was drawn from things hitherto regarded as 'unpoetic'—coffee-spoons, and trouser-cuffs, and an etherized patient; but recourse was also had to allusive quotations that demanded for their comprehension a certain amount of specialized scholarship. In style the modern and the traditional were fused into a new synthesis: on the one hand, there is an indebtedness to Ezra Pound and the Imagists and to certain French poets, particularly Tristan Corbiere

and Jules Laforgue; and on the other, there is the use of simple, inherited verse forms, especially the quatrain, and blank verse modeled upon that of Webster and Middleton.

The contemporary is set in the frame of a long tradition...In a bare, dry, satiric tone he makes his statements without qualification, expressing with seeming flippancy his contempt for vulgarity. Modern types are characterized, or rather caricatured, in such poems as the 'Portrait of a Lady'; and the vulgarity of *l'homme sensuel moyen* is exposed in the poems on Prufrock, Sweeney, and the tourists in Venice. Eliot's early success was not the reward of his occasional profundities but of his witty and blasé unmasking of shallowness. His essential qualities of austerity and precision in the use of words, of novelty in rhythms and cadences, and of intensity of observation were present in these first poems. But already there was an attempt to generalize about life on the basis of a narrow, academic, almost cloistered existence. The poem 'Gerontion'—'thoughts of a dry brain in a dry season'—is the connecting link between the early poems and 'The Waste Land' (1922). This most famous of modern poems is not merely, as is sometimes said, a picture of the spiritual and moral vacuity of the post-war period....The present fades into the past and the past into the present. The remote is near. The 'Waste Land' is the fallen nature of humanity."

Samuel C. Chew
A Literary History of England
ed. Albert C. Baugh
(Appleton-Century-Crofts 1948) 1585-87

"As in Eliot's 'Preludes,' the images do more than accumulate or cluster; they move qualitatively and suggestively, in implicit order....A companion effort to define the terrors and responsibilities of secularization is that of James Joyce, whose *Ulysses* appeared in the year of 'The Waste Land' (1922). But Joyce and Eliot move in quite different directions: Eliot toward a re-assertion and a recharging of the traditional dogmas, Joyce toward a secular replacement of them. These extremes of difference can be seen in the last major works of the two men: Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* and Eliot's *Four Quartets*."

Frederick J. Hoffman
The Twenties: American Writing in the Postwar Decade
(Viking/Crowell-Collier 1949-62) 203, 343

"Eliot sees the happiest future for art under the influence of a new controlling factor. He calls this 'the mythical method' and he sees it as a way by which the artist can give shape and significance to the chaotic material of contemporary life. He can set the 'immense panorama of futility and anarchy' in opposition to the pattern of a different vision; he can 'manipulate a parallel' with the world of myth....Myth...leads us back to ultimate mysteries...The mythical method is the presentation of experience in symbolic form, the earliest and still the most direct and immediate form of human expression....

There was an anonymous source of vitality diffused throughout the universe and in himself, which he objectified in dramatic symbols and so made operative in human experience. His myths were fabulous fictions which revealed psychic facts...The myth vouched for the 'magic' that was alive in the universe... Modern anthropology sees all religion and all art springing and growing from this primitive root of symbolic transformation....Just as tradition is the inherited wisdom of the race consciously expressed, so [Carl] Jung envisages the collective unconscious as the *unconscious* inherited wisdom of the race....

To get back to Eliot's review of *Ulysses* [*The Dial*, November 1923], it was not any special symbolic *content* that he was discussing there, but the mythical *method*; myth as illustrating the direct presentation of experience in symbolic form. He was emphasizing Joyce's use of this to manipulate a parallel between past and present. Eliot himself does that specifically in 'The Waste Land,' but he had been using the method in its general meaning long before. The recognition of sensuous symbolism as the richest form of human perception, and its ordering into pattern as the basis of poetic technique, had been from the beginning his whole theory and practice of poetry."

Elizabeth Drew
T. S. Eliot: The Design of His Poetry
(Scribner's 1949) 2-5, 9, 14-15

“What is it that marks these plays off from the commercial drama, and from previous plays in verse or even in prose, and forces us to classify them as poetic drama? There is, first, their mixture of high seriousness in poetry and human colloquial speech, both in prose and verse. There is the tone of liveliness and intensity. There is the action on more than one level, the perpetual parable or allegory, and there is, finally, the startling variety of elements derived from every conceivable theatrical activity past and present. In short, there is a wider theatrical equipment harnessed to a deeper poetical purpose.”

J. Isaacs

An Assessment of Twentieth-Century Literature
(Secker 1951) 142-43

“Eliot’s mind, let us say, is a mind of contrasts which sharpen rather than soften the longer they are weighed. It is the last mind which, in this century, one would have expected to enter the Church in a lay capacity. The worldliness of its prose weapons, its security of posture, its wit, its ability for penetrating doubt and destructive definition, its eye for startling fact and talent for nailing it down in flight, hardly go with what we think of today as English or American religious feeling....However that may be, within the Church or not, Mr. Eliot’s mind has preserved its worldly qualities. His prose reflections remain elegant, hard (and in a sense easy—as in manners), controlled, urbane (without the dissimulation associated with ecclesiastical urbanity), and fool-proof.”

R. P. Blackmur

Language as Gesture
(Harcourt 1952) 176-77

“The rich store of childhood treasure which is contained within Eliot’s poetry, and more particularly, within his imagery, is obvious to any reader. The repetition of the same small group of images in poem after poem, from the early Jamesian ironies to the time of the later ‘Quartets,’ the recurrence of the curling smoke of evening, of stairs and windows and doors, of the hidden bird and the pool, the children’s voices and the garden, the music and the thunder: these things by themselves argue that such images have a personal origin and a deep personal significance. It is this habitual use of optical ‘constants,’ that imparts to Eliot’s work its characteristic quality of seeming to be less a collection of single pieces than one continuing poem in permanent process of revision.”

S. Musgrove

T. S. Eliot and Walt Whitman
(New Zealand 1952) 11

“During the 1920’s and early 1930’s, Eliot was more influential than any other poet or critic writing in English. His ‘The Waste Land’ (1922) set the style for a whole generation of younger poets. His essays—especially ‘The Metaphysical Poets’ (1921), ‘Andrew Marvell’ (1921), and ‘John Dryden’ (1922)—altered the current of literary criticism. At a time when the influence of the nineteenth century was still dominant, Eliot brushed that century aside, a little contemptuously, and sought standards in an earlier tradition, particularly that of the seventeenth century...[He] wrought a revolution in critical taste....

Owing largely to Eliot’s influence, the ‘metaphysical’ became a mark of excellence, and English and American poets were reappraised in the light of this new standard. Many idols were shattered: Tennyson and even Keats suffered. John Donne became the pattern of the perfect poet; almost everyone could quote Marvell’s ‘To His Coy Mistress’; Gerard Manley Hopkins and Emily Dickinson—nineteenth-century poets who wrote ‘metaphysical’ poetry—were raised to a new eminence. In the essays of Eliot and others (notably John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, Cleanth Brooks, R. P. Blackmur, and Yvor Winters), the metaphysical produced a body of criticism which is remarkable for its close analysis of the relation of structure and style to content [New Criticism]....In poetry, he strived for, and achieved, the utmost condensation.”

Walter Blair

The Literature of the United States 2, 3rd edition
(Scott, Foresman 1953-66) 1039-40

“T. S. Eliot, like other poets, has suffered as much from his admirers as from his detractors. But the consequence for him has been an extraordinary ambiguity of opinion. As poet and critic he has been

divided between novelty and tradition, both hailed and damned as exotic or academic. Indeed, these effects have not been exempt from confusion, for he has been thought to be at once too traditional and too novel, expressing trite matter in eccentric form....

The common reader, however, will be wiser to regard Eliot as a poet who makes demands upon his audience similar to those made by some older English poets, modified indeed by other influences and another age. To place his poetry beside Browning's *Men and Women* is to understand Ezra Pound's remark that 'the form of these poems is the most vital form of that period'....His literary background is perhaps best summarized by the three periods of 'metaphysical' poetry which he has distinguished: Medieval school of Cavalcanti or Dante; Renaissance school of Donne; Modern school of Baudelaire or Laforgue....

On the basis of imagery the poems of the first volume [*Prufrock and Other Observations*] fall into two groups: that of commonplace imagery worked up to uncommon intensity, intensified by emotional selection; and that of esoteric imagery transforming common life, again under the compulsion of feeling. Or one might divide them into imagist poems, and poems of dramatic imagism, which develop complicated rather than simple feelings. Another way of putting it is to say that in one group we find static perception; no change of feeling in the perceiver, though his feeling may be emphasized by an opposite feeling; in the other we find dynamic perception: change of feeling or conflict of feeling in the perceiver. The latter type produces the more difficult poems....

Eliot from the first draws upon musical analogy...He leaves out connections and transitions, but this is true only in a grammatical sense. If he omits the grammatical signs of connection and order, he preserves the psychological or poetic signs....His 'logic of imagery' does not mean incoherence but connection by a common principle or a series of probable associations; that is, associations which involve inference of some kind or belong to a pattern of experience. It means connecting by analogy, implicit relations, or a frame of allusion."

George Williamson

A Reader's Guide to T. S. Eliot: A Poem-by-Poem Analysis
(Farrar, Straus/Noonday 1953) 13-14, 25, 54, 78

"More than one critic has remarked that in Eliot the over-all organization of the poem as a whole is not lyrical in any recognizable and traditional way; nor is the poem organized in terms of narrative; nor is it dramatic in the literal theatrical sense; and it is certainly not logical, argumentative, or expository.... Where poets in the past would have used a logical, emotional, dramatic, or narrative basis for the transition from part to part, Eliot uses some one of these kinds of transition freely and alternatively and without committing himself to any one of them or to any systematic succession of them; or he omits the connection between one passage and the next, one part and the part which succeeds it....The characteristic over-all organization of the poem—of which 'The Waste Land' is the vividest example—can be called, for lack of a better phrase, that of sibilant (or subliminal) listening."

Delmore Schwartz

Poetry

(January 1955) 236-37

"Thomas Stearns Eliot is almost universally considered the most important poet to appear since the First World War in either his native United States or his adopted land of England. In attitude, technique, and statement his poems have established themselves as the most subtle and searching evocations of the harsh dissonances in modern life and of the need for a revitalized tradition....Eliot was interested in posing sharp antitheses, in placing in juxtaposition the most disparate experiences. Like the conceits of the metaphysical poets, the bold and sudden contrasts in Eliot's images were intended to afford what he calls a direct sensuous apprehension of thought.' Even more than most poets, Eliot stresses the 'auditory imagination,' demanding of his readers what he describes as a 'feeling for syllable and rhythm, penetrating far below the conscious levels of thought.' The major employment of these beliefs and techniques is in 'The Waste Land,' which was edited by Ezra Pound before it was published in 1922."

James D. Hart & Clarence Gohdes, eds.

America's Literature

“An exponent of conservatism and tradition in literature, politics and religion, he has been anything but traditional in his technical innovations and his experiments with the uses of language and form in his poetry. The frame of his thought is conservative; but the picture within the frame can be said to come close, sometimes, to the art experiments of painters as different as Dali and Picasso. Indeed, there are paintings by Dali of timeless bent clock faces against waste desert spaces that remind one of Eliot’s principal symbols—time that merges past and present in a world that is a waste land.

Eliot, however, considers himself as ‘classicist in literature’ and this he is to the extent that he is a 20th-century rational man whose intellect presides over his emotions. Moreover, his inner world is policed by a New England heritage, retransplanted to Old England, where Eliot has developed a firm belief in an aristocratic order of society and in Anglo-Catholicism. Behind these seeming paradoxes is a man who has renovated poetry and redirected criticism to fundamentals and notably to a close and searching reading of a given text. As a poet, Eliot was deeply influenced by French symbolism, by James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, and by his friend Ezra Pound. His most celebrated poem, ‘The Waste Land,’ which marked a veritable revolution in modern English poetry, derives much from the Joycean experiments in rendering consciousness—particularly in the way in which the mind latches on to seemingly unrelated observations, an object, a sensation, a series of experiences, and pulls them together into a whole.

Eliot’s poetry is generally considered ‘difficult’ in its use of sequences of images and symbols that the reader must himself try to bring into some essential relationship in his own mind. It is, moreover, filled with borrowings of lines and phrases from poets and prose writers past and present. Much criticism of Eliot has been of the ‘hunt the quotation’ kind—attempts to run down the source of the lines or phrases of other poets he has integrated into his poems.

To understand Eliot’s poetry two fundamental concepts must be grasped: the first is that his poetry is a kind of continuous and complex stream of thought, a conglomeration of memories in which what we have experienced in the past is constantly merging with our experience of the moment. Once we have read any poet, some of his lines may become part of our personal experience. We often quote him to ourselves, we derive a repeated emotion or series of emotions from the sequence of words he has set down. And so Eliot quotes writers to himself in his poetry, mulls over their images and phrases, like so many possessions in the jewel box—or some will say the cluttered attic—of his mind. This leads to the second concept: we must grasp Eliot’s obsession with the problem of time, which characterizes the work of so many contemporary writers, among them Joyce, Proust, Mann, and...Faulkner."

Lillian Herlands Hornstein, Ed.
The Reader’s Companion to World Literature
(New American Library-Mentor/Dryden 1956) 145-47

“His excellence has been generally recognized ever since his first major poem, ‘The Waste Land,’ appeared in 1922. However, he always remained a controversial figure. He was regarded almost with reverence by a coterie of critics; his own literary criticism has been influential, especially in its support of that form of poetry which employs intellectual discipline and cultural memory in preference to more accessible and more sensuous images and emotional suggestions. Eliot has been criticized for ‘unnecessary obscurity’ or for ‘authoritarian severity’; but numerous other genuine poets of ideas are instrumentally more complex, and his intellectual severity draws interest by its systematic traditionalism. Of his craftsmanship, his integrity, and his power, however, there has been little doubt....

The degree to which fusion and concentration of intellect, feeling, and experience were achieved was Eliot’s criterion for judging a poem. Such ideas he developed in other essays which have been influential in promoting the intrinsic analysis of poetry....His later poetry took a positive turn toward faith in life, in strong contrast with the desperation of ‘The Waste Land.’ This was demonstrated by ‘Ash Wednesday,’ a poem of mystical conflict between faith and doubt, beautiful in its language if difficult in its symbolism."

Sculley Bradley, Richmond Croom Beatty, E. Hudson Long, eds.
The American Tradition in Literature 2, 3rd edition

"That poets and critics so diverse in personality as Pound, Hulme, Yeats and Eliot, should all have made such similar incursions into Symbolist historiography is testimony to the great pressure the idea of the Image has exerted in the formative phase of modern poetics....The essays in which he proposed his theory represent a most fruitful and effective refinement of the Symbolist doctrine, yielding far more than Symons's, for instance, similar though they are in essentials. To attack his position has usually seemed to mean an assault on what most people are content to regard as the main tradition of modern verse....It is no use saying that Mr. [Yvor] Winters has simply misunderstood; he knows very well what Eliot means, as he shows when he traces Eliot's theory of necessary disorder in modern art to Romantic doctrines of organic form, and speaks of 'The Waste Land' and *The Cantos* as belonging to the art of reverie. He understands the roots of these poems, and even goes so far as to call Pound 'a sensibility without a mind'....At the linguistic level Mr. Eliot has that precision of strange outline that all Symbolists require; nothing is more memorable in his verse than the immediate sense of exactness communicated, the impression of great resources of language delicately employed, and infinite flexibility of rhythm."

Frank Kermode

The Romantic Image

(1957; Random House/Vintage 1964) 44, 120, 145, 150-51, 163

"Beginning around 1909 as an avant-garde poet whose esoteric work was read only by a small circle of cognoscenti, Eliot has through the years acquired popular prestige until a 1954 *Life* article could describe him as 'the world's most distinguished living poet.' His acceptance parallels the gradual acceptance of modern poetry by the public...His poetry, beginning with 'Prufrock and Other Observations' (1917) and continuing through the dramas of the post-1945 era, shows a definite progression in content as well as in technique. Four periods may be roughly distinguished in this long poetic career.

Eliot's first published poems (1909-17), while not lacking in originality, were strongly derivative; they were influenced in technique by Imagism, by the dramatic monologue of Browning, by Elizabethan drama, and by the work of the French impressionist poet Jules Laforgue (1860-87)...With "the Waste Land" (1922) a new period begins; Eliot, still influenced by Pound in technique, now began to develop a more personal religious and ethical system, marked by an increasing interest in the English metaphysical poets...and Oriental religions, and a fascination with anthropological mythology...The trend from dramatic to philosophical poetry continues in the third period (1930-40), which is dominated by the serious and theological 'Ash Wednesday'; and it finds its climax in the fourth period, beginning with *Four Quartets* in 1943 and continuing through the two dramas *The Cocktail Party* and *The Confidential Clerk*....

By 1950 Eliot had arrived at a philosophical position comparable to that of his contemporaries Huxley and Waugh: rejection of Western materialism combined with an eclectic spiritualism including elements of Oriental and Occidental religions. Eliot himself, in an unpublished lecture, has distinguished three periods of 'metaphysical poetry' in world literature which have produced work of superlative quality: the Medieval (school of Dante and Cavalcanti); the Renaissance (school of Donne); and the Modern (school of Baudelaire and Laforgue). To these might be added the Contemporary: the school of Eliot and the younger poets who have taken him as their model....Examining his work as a whole, a number of dominant characteristics or tendencies may be described:

- (1) Eliot has a strong feeling for the PAST, especially for the literary and religious traditions of the past. It is probably this attitude which has led him to abandon the relatively new American culture for the more traditional society of Britain. In his poetry the tendency takes the form of an interest in myths and ancient religions, as well as a preoccupation with obscure and difficult literary allusions. To Eliot the past is not something dead which is studied in books, but a memory vigorously manifested in present events; in his view mythology transcends time. He is fond of introducing figures from ancient Greece, such as Tiresias, into modern settings, or of drawing parallels between contemporary and archetypal situations. His interest in the work of Jung and Frazer is connected to this tendency.

- (2) Eliot is fascinated with SYMBOLS, especially the mental symbols the psychiatrist and anthropologist Carl Jung calls archetypes. Archetypes or primordial images are symbolic concepts common to all mankind which relate to problems of man's natural or social environment; they are frequently concerned with fertility fetishes or with man's erotic nature. Much of Eliot's poetry presupposes a knowledge of these theories, and is therefore fully meaningful only after reading Jung, Frazer, and other authors.
- (3) A political conservative, Eliot is anti-democratic on intellectual grounds; i.e., he feels little kinship with the unlettered masses and believes the important forces of society to lie in the educated, the talented, and the aristocratic. His apotheosis of heroism...has led his critics to accuse him of a sort of proto-fascism, but this is unfair. A more judicious statement is Eliot's own in the 1928 introduction to 'For Lancelot Andrews,' where he describes himself as 'an Anglo-Catholic in religion, a classicist in literature, and a royalist in politics.'
- (4) Eliot, especially in his earlier poems (before 1930), often portrays inadequate characters who feel a sense of their own impotence and the banality of their lives, who seek to rebel in an heroic fashion against their situations, but who generally fail through half-measures. This recurring theme is sometimes called the PRUFROCK motif...but it occurs frequently elsewhere. Eliot finds this personality symptomatic of the plight of modern man in the broader sense; in "the Waste Land" the concept is depersonalized and pervades the entire poem.
- (5) In his poetic technique Eliot takes his departure from the Imagists and from Ezra Pound, although from this starting point he evolved constantly toward a more personal and more original style. His use of free verse, his snatches of conversation, and the generally disjointed appearance of his verse resemble Imagism, while his copious allusions, his juxtapositions of ancient and modern, and the fact that he writes consciously for a small group of erudite readers show his kinship to Pound.... A...review well summarized the character of his earlier poetry when it described it as having "two marks of "modernist" work, the liveliness that comes from topicality and the difficulty that comes from intellectual abstruseness."

Donald Heiney
Recent American Literature 4
 (Barron's Educational Series 1958) 479-82

"What most critics of Mr. Eliot's plays seem to ignore is that he is writing a new kind of drama. Whereas most plays appeal to the passions—pity, terror, the glamour of love—or to the intellect, or would stir our zeal for political reform, his plays are based on an appeal to the conscience, or the consciousness of self. Here in this person, he says in effect, guilty of this or that; how far are you, dear spectator, in the like case? Our response comes from a different center. That is why some people do not applaud his plays; nobody likes to be made to think about his weakness, his failures, or his sins. Not that many of us have committed crimes: but then crimes, as we are told in this play (*The Elder Statesman*) are in relation to the law, sins in relation to the sinner....In all the plays about conscience, from Sophocles to Ibsen, we are detached spectators...Here, however, we are forced to ask ourselves: 'Have I never run away from myself? Have I never tried to blot out incidents from my past?'"

Bonamy Dobree
Sewanee Review
 (Winter 1959) 109-10

"The name of Joyce is as inextricably associated with modern prose as is the name of Eliot with modern verse, or that of Picasso with modern art...The imagery of 'The Waste Land'...suited Joyce's mood, and he sent Miss Weaver a parody...He defended its technique or form [*Finnegans Wake*] in terms of music, insisting not on the union of the arts—although that seems to be implied—but on the importance of sound and rhythm, and the indivisibility of meaning from form, an idea which has become a commonplace in the critical assessment of Eliot's later verse."

Richard Ellmann
James Joyce
 (1959; Oxford 1965) 2, 456, 528, 583, 716

“While Eliot sprang, as it were, a full-fledged modern from the halls of Harvard, Pound remained for many years in a dim pre-Raphaelite realm...The first meeting of the new brotherhood, which was never given a name, took place on March 25th [1909]. Hulme expounded his ideas: romanticism was dying, if not already dead. ‘We shall not get any new efflorescence of verse until we get a new technique, a new convention, to turn ourselves loose in.’ He foretold Eliot: ‘I prophesy that a period of dry, hard, classical verse is coming.’ He distinguished between vague Victorian emotions and the transference of experience from poet to reader: ‘Images in verse are not merely decorations, but the very essence of an intuitive language.’...1910...‘As for the future [Pound wrote], Les Imagistes, the descendents of the forgotten school of 1909, have that in their keeping.’

They had it for almost a decade, even after the classicist Eliot came along. The real future—the future that was to count—was to belong to Eliot and his followers. It was, of course, an Eliot profoundly influenced by Pound... The fact is that the basic English line, which is an iambic line, cannot be changed; it can only be varied, and this all the good poets have done, from Chaucer to Eliot.”

Charles Norman
Ezra Pound
(Macmillan 1960) 40, 47, 83, 94

“The history of Eliot’s poetry before his major achievement, ‘The Waste Land’ (1922) is the history of a technique, a technique which would make possible the restoration of the idea of man as the creature, not the creator of his world....[Neoclassicism replaces Romanticism]. Most important here are the Sweeney poems and the kind they exemplify: hyperallusive, written in a quatrain imitated from Gautier, with a diction modeled after Laforgue’s; in a tone recalling Donne’s; and intended to carry over some of the disciplined rigor and inclusiveness of sensibility of all the poets whose work they echo. The Eliot of the Sweeney poems...is the poet of the unification (following upon the dissociation) of the modern sensibility.”

Roy Harvey Pearce
The Continuity of American Poetry
(Princeton 1961) 298-99

“The importance of Eliot’s poetry in shaping the development of 20th-century Anglo-American literature can scarcely be exaggerated, especially that of ‘The Waste Land,’ which is thought by many critics to be his best poem. His influence spread quickly in the 1920’s and has not diminished; his best poems have been the chief instruments in popularizing among writers the techniques of symbolism, the desiderata of control and precision in the use of language, the notion of poetic form as a dynamically mobile structure; even Eliot’s personal style—a concise diction, a dry irony, the use of descending cadences—has been widely imitated and occasionally parodied.

The early poems, including ‘The Waste Land’ and ‘The Hollow Men,’ may be broadly characterized as negative, *i.e.*, deriving their chief motifs from a critical and sharply ironic appraisal of the positivistic elements in modern western culture, although this is countered by a steadily deepening emphasis on the values to be sought in tradition, spiritual awareness, conservatism, and responsibility to history. Beginning with ‘Ash Wednesday’ Eliot’s poetry has been more pointedly affirmative and appears to have been intended as a conscious contribution to the Anglo-Catholic literature of faith. Throughout all the poetry certain recurrent symbolic themes are apparent: sexuality, childhood, the rose and other tokens of Christianity, and—rather surprisingly in a poetry whose total impression is of an almost exclusive urbanity—images of nature, especially birds...

Eliot’s interest in the theater has been active lifelong, and has proceeded chiefly in the direction of restoring the verse drama to a place of practical esteem in the modern stage repertoire....Eliot has said...that he believes the chief problem of the verse drama today is the proper adaptation of verse technique to the modern naturalistic stage: verse drama must acquire the same ‘realism’ as prose drama in the presentation of scenes from ordinary life. His later plays have moved progressively in this direction, retaining a loosely metrical verse pattern but venturing into essentially Ibsenian modes of dealing with contemporary society....

Although Eliot's poems and critical theories were among the foremost instruments in discrediting the shallow gentility of post-Victorianism, Eliot himself, in both his writing and his public character, has affected an older and perhaps in some respects sterner gentility which has deeply colored intellectual life in the 20th century....Actually, although in general Eliot has been the most admired Anglo-American writer of the 20th century, from the beginning he has provoked strong opposition, and historians may eventually conclude that the most important responses to his work have been the counteractions—not only of the men of his own generation (*e.g.*, William Carlos Williams) who have chosen different paths, but of leading poets in succeeding generations who have sought, usually in a friendly way, to reverse the force of his influence: the names of W. H. Auden and Dylan Thomas come prominently to mind....

His whole work is a poetic fiction with deep historical roots, devoted to establishing a poetic character, or *persona*, of great but definable complexity—the man of spirit in an antagonistic world. Undoubtedly Eliot's public manner of comportment is an extension of this mask. The mass of printed discussion surrounding Eliot and his work is enormous."

Max J. Herzberg & staff
The Reader's Encyclopedia of American Literature
(Crowell 1962)

"Eliot derives from the French symbolists and the British metaphysicals...To the extent that he liked earlier American writers, he most admired Hawthorne, with 'the hard coldness of the genuine artist,' and James, whom he once called 'a metaphysical novelist.'...In Eliot's first book, *Prufrock and Other Observations* (1917), the tone is satirical....One catches the deeply paradoxical sense of the late Elizabethans and metaphysicals, with great concern for the 'dissociation of sensibility' that the neoclassical and romantic moods had brought. Also, there is an element of Poundian imagism, though some of this anticipated the meeting with Pound. In 'Portrait of a Lady' (by its title alone) and in 'Prufrock' (which Harriet Monroe thought too Jamesian) appear the ranging sensibility of Henry James with its careful strategy in point of view....

Impressive as 'Gerontion' is, 'The Waste Land' constitutes Eliot's great work, the culmination of his poems of the previous three volumes, and the poem that permeated the culture of the period between the two wars as no other work of literature. It remains Eliot's supreme statement and his most triumphant display of method. 'I wrote "The Waste Land" simply to relieve my own feelings," he commented retrospectively in 1947. But the poem voiced the feelings of an entire generation as well. In the seven years between 'Prufrock' and 'The Waste Land' Eliot had emerged from the obscurity of a graduate student, teacher...and employee at Lloyd's Bank, to become the most talked about poet in the 1920's...

The differences between the earlier and the later poetry are difficult to attribute to Eliot's conversion. *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats* (1939) makes public humorous verse that Eliot had been writing for a long time. But in the serious poetry there is a marked change of style that may owe to the shift in allegiance from Donne to Dante. 'The language after "Ash Wednesday," Hugh Kenner has written, 'is characteristically open, even tranquil, its aim a ritual translucency, its lapses into facility and small talk.' Certainly the idiom and rhythm of *The Four Quartets* (published separately, 1936-1942) belongs to a different order from that of the earlier Eliot. But these four poems, more broadly philosophical than the insistent dogmatism of the poems immediately preceding, show Eliot at a point when he was preparing to suggest that poetry 'might have much to learn from Milton's extended verse structure' and should begin to 'avoid the danger of a servitude to colloquial speech and to current jargon.'....

Under one term or another criticism in the twentieth century, whether the New Criticism or not, has used this testing of a work of literature by the total effect of its action and objects. 'Dissociation of sensibility' has also had significance insofar as the metaphysical poets have replaced the romantic poets as the literary standard. In 1920 Eliot first used the term when he wrote about Donne and his contemporaries...Thus this concept points to the intense awareness of the need for unity in a work of art—a unity that arises out of discordance and comprehends polarities but that ultimately assumes the identity of feeling and thought as the metaphysical poets realized it."

William M. Gibson & George Arms, eds.
Twelve American Writers

“In the attenuated romantic tradition of the Georgian poets who were active when he settled in London, in their quietly meditative pastoralism, faded exoticism, or self-consciously realistic descriptions of urban life, he saw an exhausted poetic mode being employed, with no verbal excitement or original craftsmanship. He sought to make poetry more subtle, more suggestive, and at the same time more precise. He had learned from the Imagists the necessity of clear and precise images, and he learned, too, from T. E. Hulme and from his early supporter and adviser Ezra Pound to fear romantic softness and to regard the poetic medium rather than the poet’s personality as the important factor.

At the same time, the ‘hard, dry’ images advocated by Hulme were not enough for him; he wanted wit, allusiveness, irony. He saw in the metaphysical poets how wit and passion could be combined, and he saw in the French Symbolists how an image could be both absolutely precise in what it referred to physically and at the same time endlessly suggestive in the meanings it set up because of its relationship to other images. The combination of precision, symbolic suggestion, and ironic mockery in the poetry of the late 19th-century poet Jules Laforgue attracted and influenced him...

One side of Eliot’s poetic genius is, in one sense of the word, romantic. The Symbolist influence on his imagery, his interest in evocative and the suggestive...and such recurring images as the hyacinth girl and the rose garden, all show what could be called a romantic element in his poetry. But it is combined with a dry ironic allusiveness, a play of wit, and a colloquial element, which are not normally found in poets of the romantic tradition. Eliot’s real novelty—and the cause of much bewilderment when his poems first appeared—was his deliberate elimination of all merely connective and transitional passages, his building up of the total pattern of meaning through the immediate juxtaposition of images without overt explanation of what they are doing, together with his use of oblique references to other works of literature (some of them quite obscure to most contemporary readers).

‘Prufrock’ presents a symbolic landscape where the meaning emerges from the mutual interaction of the images, and that meaning is enlarged by echoes, often ironic, of Hesiod and Dante and Shakespeare. ‘The Waste Land’ is a series of scenes and images with no author’s voice intervening to tell us where we are, but with the implications developed through multiple contrasts and through analogies with older literary works often referred to in a distorted quotation or half-concealed allusion....

In a culture where there is no longer any assurance on the part of the poet that his public has a common cultural heritage, a common knowledge of works of the past, Eliot felt it necessary to build up his own body of references. It is this which marks the difference between Eliot’s use of earlier literature and, say, Milton’s. Both poets are difficult to the modern reader, who needs editorial assistance in recognizing and understanding many of the allusions—but Milton was drawing on a body of knowledge common to educated men in his day. Nevertheless, this aspect of Eliot can be exaggerated...Even a reader ignorant of most of the literary allusions can often get the ‘feel’ of the poem and achieve some understanding of what it says....After his formal acceptance of Anglican Christianity we find a penitential note in much of his verse, a state of quiet searching for spiritual peace, with considerable allusion to Biblical, liturgical, and mystical religious literature and to Dante...The mocking irony, the savage humor, the deliberately startling juxtaposition of the sordid and the romantic, give way in these later poems to a quieter poetic idiom, often still completely allusive but never deliberately shocking....

His conservative and even authoritarian habit of mind has alienated some who admire—and some whose own poetry has been much influenced by—his poetry....But there is no disagreement on his importance as one of the great renovators of the English poetic dialect, whose influence on a whole generation of poets, critics, and intellectuals generally was enormous.”

David Daiches
The Norton Anthology of English Literature 2, 4th edition
(Norton 1962-79) 2256-58

“Discussions of the two poets [Pound and Eliot] usually center on what they share—their common rejection of the trend of our culture toward religious and cultural pluralism, secularism, and technology;

their common nostalgia for apparently more heroic and ordered ages; their search for moral or religious authority. Eliot's description of contemporary Europe in his early review of Joyce's *Ulysses* might well have been written by Pound—the present scene, Eliot thought, presented only an 'immense panorama of futility and anarchy.'...

The purpose of the poet's search was to find a way out of the same 'spiritual darkness of the modern mind' that had oppressed Robinson and Frost....Yeats created a spiritualistic myth of his own, Pound sought an accommodation with naturalism in the Tao, Stevens tried to be content with a merely 'fictive' order; Eliot accepted the religion of his forefathers....American poetry has room for an Eliot and a Williams too. Late Williams and late Eliot approached each other, coming from opposite directions.... Eliot's career exhibits continual re-formations of the poet, and so of the poetry, continual efforts to 'raise himself above himself,' using poetry as the 'purchase' by which he could move his life; and that Pound's career exhibits nothing of the kind....The shape of his career as a whole begins to look more like a journey-quest than like a pilgrimage....He announced with an air of bravado that he was a Classicist in literature, a Royalist in politics, and an Anglo-Catholic in religion. To most of his friends and associates, and to even more of the intellectuals of the time who were neither poets nor expatriates, all three positions seemed equally 'impossible.'...

Eliot's journey-quest—"the quest for salvation"—is not simply to be *inferred* from the poems; a good deal of the time it is the subject of them. Once we have noticed how visible the poet is behind the *personae*, it becomes clear that describing the poet's journey in metaphysical terms...gives us only about half the truth. The other half is the personal search for integration and fulfillment, the search for a new self to hold the new beliefs and experience the believed-in-values. From this point of view the word 'redemption' is more appropriate than 'salvation'; for the old self cannot be 'saved' so long as it cannot love. And it cannot love so long as it objectifies all his experience. How can this self be re-formed, redeemed? That question, and not the revealed emptiness of the lady, is the real subject of 'Portrait of a Lady,' the earliest of the major poems....

He may have gotten the idea for writing this way [using the "mythic method"] when he read the early chapters of *Ulysses* in 1917. If so—and it seems probable—then those like [Karl] Shapiro who are now so angrily damning Eliot for his 'method of the library' should damn Joyce instead....Eliot was a master craftsman, but those who don't like his ideas and attitudes and don't share his emotions feel that they must resist him all the harder for this, much as one would resist the very eloquent spokesman for racism or war....Or as Williams once said, in the discussion after a talk, 'Unfortunately, Eliot is a great master of technique, but I can't read him with any pleasure.' For Williams, Eliot's craftsmanship was unfortunate because it was dedicated to purposes Williams did not like and expressed ideas and emotions he could not share....

There is generally a wide discrepancy between Eliot's prose and his verse. There is nothing even remotely 'classic' about the verse, for example, in any of that word's several possible meanings, even in the early years in which Eliot was recommending 'classic' poetry in his essays and calling himself a 'classicist.'...The doctrines 'behind' *Four Quartets* are Anglo-Catholic, which is to say, in philosophic terms, essentialist; but the poem itself can be better explicated in the terms provided by the religious Existentialists than it can be by Catholic dogma, which it does not contradict, but does not depend on for its effect, either. Eliot's dogmas are in his prose, not in his poetry.

The poems helped to bring an age to self-awareness—and so in a sense, to create the age they reflected and expressed. But they also transcend the age, as they transcend the dogmas of Eliot's prose. They named what had been nameless—and so only dimly known—and what they named, they brought to consciousness. Only by misreading could Karl Shapiro turn 'Portrait of a Lady' to his purposes, to bolster his case against a poet he admittedly hates. Less angry and biased readers—readers who have no reason to feel threatened by Eliot—will continue to see that poem for the magnificent achievement in testing points of view it is. A bored and weary sophistication is no longer a fashionable pose among young intellectuals, but so long as there remains any reason for a thoughtful and sensitive person to feel emptiness and alienation, 'Prufrock' will continue to speak to us. Every age is in some degree, when we look at it from the vantage point of high

expectation, a waste land, where love fails and hope dwindles, and the springs of growth seem to have dried up.

The best poems of any period survive radical shifts in taste and point of view, but criticism is more vulnerable. Eliot was the period's most influential critic by far; whole schools of practicing critics took their cue from his most undeveloped metaphors, his off-handed observations, his hinted preferences. But a new generation is irritated and throw off by the tone, which combines the pontifical and the casual; and the opinions and points of view themselves now seem wrong a good deal of the time, as indeed Eliot confessed they did to *him* in his later years. The critical pieces most likely to last...are the early essays...like 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' and 'The Music of Poetry'...The later essays are wiser but less original....

In the aftermath of a poetic period in which from Imagist theory on through the Ideogramic method and the Impersonal and Autotelic theory of art, the poet as *person* was denied any responsible role in his poetry....Eliot's early theory and early manner caught on and helped to create an age in poetry, but he himself left early Modernism behind to turn to other manners, other theories, other tasks. His own personality did develop, and, despite his theory, it is the 'informing principle' of his work at all times. 'Self-criticism and endless experiment' characterize his career. Behind the masks of the early work, and in the undisguised personal voice of the later poems, we sense a man who was not always wise, or always charitable, and who felt impelled to react against the spirit of the age in many ways that no longer seem necessary, but who was immensely intelligent, very sensitive, and continuously self-critical."

Hyatt H. Waggoner
American Poets: From the Puritans to the Present
(Houghton 1968) 409-10, 414-18, 422-27

"Although Eliot deferred to Yeats as 'the greatest poet' of his time, he was himself the most famous. A man of keen intellect, capable of developing a philosophical position as well as a new rhythm and intonation, trained in classics, fluent in French and German, Eliot was better equipped than any other poet to bring verse fully into the twentieth century. As James Joyce remarked of him in a notebook, he abolished the idea of poetry for ladies. In discrediting many of his predecessors, in choosing with the utmost fastidiousness what he needed and wanted from the literary tradition in several languages, Eliot gave modern literature one of its most distinctive idioms....

When ['The Waste Land'] was published in 1922, it gave Eliot his central position in modern poetry. No one has been able to encompass so much material with so much dexterity, or to express the ennui and the horror of so many aspects of the modern world. Though the poem was made up of fragments, they were like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle which might be joined if certain spiritual conditions were met. In this way, Eliot's attitude towards fragmentation was different from Pound's—Eliot saw a necessity for recomposing the world, while Pound thought it might remain in fragments and still have a paradisaical aspect which the poet could elicit. In other words, Pound accepted discontinuity as the only way in which the world could be regarded, while Eliot rejected it and looked for a seamless world. He began to find it in Christianity...

He [believed] poetry could carry considerable intellectual as well as emotional content, and that it might be, and, as he thought, in the modern world had to be, exceedingly complex in expression. In his early work Eliot heaped ironies upon each other, yoking—as Dr. Johnson said metaphysical poets in the seventeenth century did—heterogeneous ideas together by violence. His principal models were Laforgue and Corbiere. He dealt almost exclusively with decadent enervated people, yet in all his technical devices revealed a violent, innovative energy. He combined a precise and often formal outward manner with an inner writhing, bound together by wit. The theme which pervades all his work is...love."

Richard Ellmann & Robert O'Clair, eds.
The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry
(Norton 1973) 445-49

“T. S. Eliot was arguably the most important English poet and critic of the twentieth century...His long poem ‘The Waste Land’ (1922) helped to crystallize the sense of spiritual desolation, social chaos and failure of linguistic nerve that became widespread in the West, especially in the aftermath of the First World War, and thus to define some fundamental aspects of literary modernism’s pervasive negativity and pessimism. Certain phrases from his essays—‘dissociation of sensibility’ (to define the seventeenth-century break he alleged had occurred in ‘the English mind’), ‘objective correlative’ (coined to help explain *Hamlet*’s failure)—quickly passed (to Eliot’s embarrassment) into the common stock of critical phraseology....It was to Eliot as editor and publisher, as much as to his work as poet and critic, that the definition of modernist poetry in English is owed....He deplores the dissociation of sensibility, the breaking of the tradition, and yet pronounces the likelihood ‘that poets in our civilization as it exists at present, must be difficult.’”

Valentine Cunningham
Makers of Modern Culture
ed. Justin Wintle

(Facts on File/Routledge & Kegan Paul 1981) 153-54

“‘The Waste Land,’ its couplets so cavalierly slashed by Pound, and ‘Prufrock’ before it, showed the effectiveness of rhyme that comes and goes, like a ghost behind the arras, as Eliot said of metre—‘to advance menacingly as we doze, and withdraw as we rouse.’ Formal correctness has so long ceased to be required of poets that those who adhere to it are viewed as eccentrics...Like T. S. Eliot, [Isaiah] Berlin is a master of what Barthes designates as ‘paralypse’—‘the rhetorical figure that consists in stating what one is not going to say.’”

John Updike
Hugging the Shore: Essays and Criticism
(Random House/Vintage 1984) 468, 534, 587, 592, 780

“The young Eliot never wrote better than in ‘Prufrock,’ ‘Gerontion,’ ‘The Waste Land,’ ‘The Hollow Men.’ He was to show himself sublimely eloquent in the poem leading to his conversion, ‘Ash Wednesday,’ and in the *Four Quartets* that closed his career with so many golden utterances....Like Stravinsky, Eliot knew how to jar the reader with a force that made connection with the reader’s own life....Eliot grasped, and was appalled by, [Henry] Adams’s preoccupation with self. This preoccupation haunted Eliot emotionally: the prisoner in his cell was to declare the highest aim of literature an escape from emotions and personality; escape from the self became the great theme of a religious striving that was more striving and cultural piety than it was belief.”

Alfred Kazin
An American Procession
(Random House/Vintage 1985) 17-18,15

“T. S. Eliot’s ‘The Waste Land,’ like Walt Whitman’s ‘Song of Myself,’ changed the course of American literary history. Eliot’s long poem, published in 1922, consolidated the despair felt throughout Europe after World War I and thus spoke for the collapse of a whole culture. Its fragments of civilization seemed like the rubbish heap of history. But it was the exquisite musicality of the poem, its instantly memorable lines, that made it haunt the literary imagination....”

Eliot’s sensibility sometimes seems, to use Ezra Pound’s term, a ‘vortex’ into which the whole of modern culture was absorbed. Even as an undergraduate, Eliot adopted the irony and ennui of the French poets Charles Baudelaire and Jules Laforgue, whom he had discovered through Arthur Symons’s influential book, *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*. In ‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock’ the French influence is brilliantly crossed with a Tennysonian music and a Browningsque dramatic monologue. Eliot’s surrealism, combining the etherized patient, the catlike fog, the butt-ends of days, and the impaled Prufrock wriggling on the wall, a something altogether new in American poetry, far from the inert Imagism of Amy Lowell and equally far from the pieties of the nineteenth-century ‘fireside poets.’

Prufrock and Other Observations (1917) is, like Wallace Stevens’s *Harmonium* (1923) and Marianne Moore’s *Observations* (1924), one of the landmarks of American modernism. It was followed rapidly by *Gerontion* (1919), *Poems* (1920), and *Poems 1909-1925*, which contained ‘The Waste Land.’ These books

remain Eliot's chief poetic achievement. In them we see Eliot's most striking lyric invention, a play of voices deployed almost as instruments in an orchestra, as he drew into lyric the vocal theatricality he had found in Elizabethan and Jacobean drama....Escaping from 'personality' (the lyric self of the conventional lyric speaker), Eliot found freedom in multiplying his poetic voices, both in 'The Waste Land' and in his later plays. At the same time, Eliot was becoming the most brilliant literary critic in English since Coleridge....

Eliot's essays took up polemical positions in the service of his own theory of poetry, projecting his own 'dissociation of sensibility' back into the post-metaphysical poets, defending the macabre extremes of tension in the Jacobeans, and (after his conversion to Anglicanism in 1927) arguing for the glories of Anglican literature (Lancelot Andrewes, George Herbert). Eliot's most influential essay, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent,' published in *The Sacred Wood*, repudiates both the avant-garde conviction that modern poetry should break utterly from the past and the Wordsworthian definition of poetry as 'emotion recollected in tranquility.' It argues that the modern poet cannot succeed without a profound incorporation of the literature of the past. It argues as well that the poet must therefore escape from individual personality and emotion in composing poetry. In turning away from biographical and historical information and toward language and style in his essays on individual poets (Milton, Herbert), Eliot gave new direction to the practice of literary criticism. The so-called New Criticism, advocated in England by I. A. Richards and in the United States by such followers of Eliot as Allen Tate and John Crowe Ransom, brought a new sophistication, after the manner of Eliot, to the analysis of poetry.

Eliot's valuing of complexity, irony, and paradox, his powerful sense of the unity of a literary work, and his conviction that the work provided an 'objective correlative' for the state of mind of its creator pervaded his critical writing in the 1920s....[He] remained in many ways a Victorian intellectual preoccupied with the dissolution of social consensus and Christian belief, was pained by the increasing democratization of society and the increasing secularism of education. Both of these, he thought, entailed the loss of the fabric of common culture he believed indispensable to literature and government alike....

He is indubitably the greatest writer of modern free verse in America and the greatest of our literary critics, a man whose taste set the taste of his era. Eliot's conviction that he was witnessing the death of culture, conveyed most powerfully in his myths of historical decline, gripped his first auditors. More skeptical readers may believe his later ironic statement that 'The Waste Land' represented merely 'a personal grudge,' a catastrophe of the inner life rather than of the life of civilization. Those readers will see it as one of the great lyrics of a crisis in consciousness, an American long poem to be ranked with Milton's 'Lycidas' and Wordsworth's 'Ode: On the Intimations of Immortality' as a comprehensive account of the human predicament."

Helen Vendler
The Harper American Literature 2
(Harper & Row 1987) 1635-38

"With the publication of 'The Waste Land' in 1922, he achieved the status he was to hold for the next two decades as the most influential poet and critic writing in English....Although some early readers were confused, even outraged, by Eliot's fracture of accepted poetic conventions, 'Prufrock' is now recognized as the first full-fledged modernist poem, adding to the traditions of symbolism and imagism the principle of aggregation of images, thus freeing the reader's imagination within the space of the poem. 'Prufrock' is remarkable not only as an individual imaginative experience expressed with 'magical rightness,' but also for its historical significance. In it, Eliot may be said to have invented modernism [Gertrude Stein and Ezra Pound would protest]. The poem is also noteworthy in foreshadowing the principal elements of the figure in the tapestry of Eliot's total work...These themes and techniques are even more superbly evident in 'The Waste Land'...one of the greatest, if not the greatest achievement of the modernist movement."

Sam S. Baskett
The Heath Anthology of American Literature 2
(D. C. Heath 1990) 1299-1300

“The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” (1915)

“‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,’ written in 1910-11, is...characteristic of Eliot’s new vision... For Mr. Prufrock is an unromantic and unprincipally Hamlet in a ‘tragical-comical-historical’ urban drama where ‘Denmark’s a prison’—the prison of a divided self in the tortures of neurotic conflict. His ‘love song,’ as the epigraph implies, will never be uttered outside the inferno of his own mind, and the ‘you and I’ of his soliloquy are the impulses within him ‘to murder and create’ or ‘to be or not to be,’ concluding neither in suicide nor in the release of chosen action, but in the death-in-life of the abdication of the will....The method of presentation is that of dramatic opposition, but here it is expanded and subtletized and demands more literary background and imaginative agility on the part of the reader.

The social environment in which Mr. Prufrock is ‘drowned’ is as inane and stifling and self-satisfied as that which Mr. Apollinax dominates so easily, and it is evoked with the same brilliant sensuous embodiment in image, word, and rhythm. But it is the ‘universe’ of Mr. Prufrock himself which is the centre of interest. And in creating that, Eliot is already expanding the possibilities of the ‘mythical method’ as a way of ordering and controlling his material. Mr. Prufrock’s retreat into the world of despairing introspective day-dream, and his mingled self-pity and self-disgust, are not only brought home to us through the images of the tortuous streets and the fog-cat, the pictures of his life as measured out with coffee spoons, and the symbols of his terror of social and sexual failure.

The shrunken universe of his own nature and will is set beside a series of suggestions and allusions which take us to worlds of action and expression which are very different. John the Baptist, Lazarus, Hesiod’s *Works and Days*, Michelangelo and Shakespeare all ‘disturb’ Mr. Prufrock’s pitifully enclosed universe. Most of all, the sustained parallel with the concepts of time and space and love in Marvell’s ‘To His Coy Mistress’ provides a melody in counterpoint to his own ‘dying fall.’ They haunt his own dickerings with his ‘world’ and ‘time,’ and mock ironically his own impotence to ‘force the moment to its crisis.’ Finally his psychological plight reveals itself in the identification of both the positive and negative elements of his conflict with images of the sea, primordial symbol of both creation and destruction. At the end of the poem, he hears the mermaids singing and has a vision of them ‘riding seaward on the waves’.

Elizabeth Drew
T. S. Eliot: The Design of His Poetry
(Scribner’s 1949) 34-36

“The style is free verse broken by occasional rhymes, the medium of most of Eliot’s early poems. The epigraph from Dante, translated, reads, ‘If I thought my answer were to one who could ever return to the world, this flame should shake no more; but since none ever did return alive from this abyss (*Inferno*), if what I hear be true, without fear of infamy I answer you.’ In a parallel manner Prufrock, the ‘I’ of the poem, speaks his thoughts within the abyss of his own soul; he lacks the courage to rebel, and his love song is one he never voices aloud.

Prufrock (his name suggests a dull and slightly pretentious respectability) is an ineffectual gentleman, no longer young, who is growing weary of the artificial London society in which he monotonously passes his days. He yearns for a more vital and adventurous existence, but lacks the courage to embark upon it. Since he is living in a puritanical Anglo-Saxon society, his rebellious thoughts turn first to erotic adventure. The first section...is an invitation to an unknown and perhaps as yet unchosen partner to embark upon such an adventure: an expedition into the less savory quarters of the city is implied. The refrain...ironically typifies the shallow aestheticism of tea-party society, the life Prufrock wishes to escape. Lines 15-34 extend the image of urban squalor, suggesting a clandestine adventure, and end with a temporizing compromise. Afraid of ridicule, from line 36 onward Prufrock seems to grow increasingly uncertain; he asks, ‘Do I dare disturb the universe?’...

In the closing lines (119-130) his abortive revolt against convention is symbolized in several sea-images: the mermaids, who sing ‘each to each’ are uninhibited creatures luxuriating in their natural setting and producing exquisite unpremeditated song. Prufrock overhears the beckoning song of the mermaids, but

realizes this invitation to adventure is not meant for him. The final three lines reveal the reason: although escape into the nirvana of sensualism, both physical and intellectual, is temporarily successful, 'human voices wake us, and we drown'—mundane affairs press in upon us and we are recalled to conventional life. This closing passage, like the previous descriptions of fog and slums, is typical of the Imagist technique and if taken out of context might well be treated as a short Imagist poem complete in itself."

Donald Heiney
Recent American Literature 4
(Barron's Educational Series 1958) 483-84

"The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' brought into union Eliot's ironic attitude with all the stimulus that he had received from his initial reading of Laforgue. As a result it possesses a finished mastery both of the material and of the form into which it is cast that puts it far beyond any of the other poems in his first volume of 1917—with the exception of 'Portrait of a Lady'...

In the movement of its verse, its repetitions, and echoes, and even in its choice of theme, seems of all Eliot's poems to have been written most immediately under Laforgue's stimulus (though brought to a finished perfection of form which Laforgue's more impromptu verse scarcely attained); just as the verse of 'Gerontion' reveals the fullest impression of Eliot's mastery of the Jacobean dramatists...Eliot's own kind of witty surprise is created in such a line as 'I have measured out my life with coffee spoons.' 'I have measured out my life'—the general, platitudinous reflection is suddenly punctured with an electric shock which flashes into the mind of the reader, in a single, concrete, ironic picture, Prufrock's whole futile way of existence....

Pound also defined the nature of an image in such a way as to stress the union of sense and thought, the presence of the idea *in* the image: 'An "Image" is that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time.' That definition would seem to be in the direction of the 'objective correlative,' and would certainly apply directly to what Eliot was trying to do, for instance, in such a line as 'I have measured out my life with coffee spoons.' But the trouble is that Pound virtually stopped short with the definition of details; and it remained for Eliot to bring such technical discoveries to their full fruition by building them into an architectural whole....

What renders the character of Prufrock not just grotesque or absurd but poignantly real is that as a result of a gradual accumulation of undertones and especially of the final dramatic lines, one can glimpse, beneath the banal surfaces and futile indecisions of his life, his perception of beauty, his understanding of the meaning of love and sympathy, if an utter inability to gain them....The source of some of the wittiest irony in 'Prufrock' would seem to spring from Eliot's detached ability to mock also the super cultivated fastidious young man from Harvard. But the point is that the hero of the poem is not such a figure; and that, as a result, Eliot's rapier thrusts have full play with no risk of becoming clumsily involved in purely personal associations. By choosing a character apart from his immediate experience he has been able to concentrate entirely, not on his own feelings, but on the creation of the poem....[C. Day Lewis 'tried to argue seriously, in *A Hope for Poetry*, that "Prufrock" should be read as an allegory of Eliot's own life, not only up to the time of the composition of that poem, but also since.]

Prufrock can give utterance in soliloquy to his debate within himself only because he knows that no one will overhear him. The point of calling this poem a 'Love Song' lies in the irony that it will ever be sung; that Prufrock will never dare to voice what he feels."

F. O. Matthiessen
The Achievement of T. S. Eliot
(Oxford 1958) 132, 17-18, 53, 59, 61, 72, 99, 104-05

"The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock'—this is probably Eliot's best poem and is a little masterpiece of its kind. It is highly unoriginal in content and in style, based as it is on the rhythms, the attitudes, and sometimes the very lines of minor Symbolist poets like Corbiere and Laforgue. Rhythmically it is the most successful of Eliot's poems, possibly because it was conceived as a dramatic unit. The meter is varied within the conventional English line, and the rhyming is superb. There is every indication that at the time of composition (age twenty-three) Eliot still took seriously the customs of English prosody and was trying in

earnest (i.e., without irony) to develop this technical side of our poetry. The general tone of the poem is that of polite sophisticated ennui, an essay in self-mockery....

The epigraph from Dante purportedly throws a special light on the meaning of the poem; it is the epigraph which critics talk about most and which teachers teach. This quotation is gratuitous, a meaningless decoration; later it becomes the actual method of the Eliot poem... 'Prufrock' is a poem *about* self-consciousness. The split personality of Prufrock creates the chief obstacle to a first understanding of the poem. The other primary difficulty is imagistic, but this is also the main virtue of the poem. The famous opening image of the evening prostrate 'like a patient etherized upon a table' is one of the most brilliant examples of the poetry of exhaustion; very possibly it is a variation of Baudelaire's statement that the sexual act is like a surgical operation. Eliot's poem, however, is humorous rather than vicious and develops a kindly pathos to the very end. The imagery of the poem is all related to suggestion, a watering-down of the extreme suggestiveness of 'effect' of poets like Mallarmé and Poe, and is, in fact, a retreat from official Symbolism. (Eliot would already be conscious of all the 'historical' possibilities of his 'position.')

'Prufrock' is a masterpiece of a 'period,' the high point of Eliot's poetry. It is a true poem and also an experiment in criticism. It is a true poem by virtue of a personal content, which we can only guess at, for Eliot is always more sensitive about the autobiographical than any other writer I know of. But many things in the poem point to the so-called objectification of experience; even after Eliot airs to the public his problem of the personal and the impersonal, Life versus Art. The figure of Hamlet in 'Prufrock' he finds particularly expressive of his own dilemma, even though Prufrock disclaims a true identity with the Prince. But Hamlet is the figure who makes an art of indecision. Indecision leads to thinking things over, soliloquizing, becoming an intellectual. Eliot's poetry all turns to talk.

As it goes on through the years it becomes nothing but talk, and talk about the kind of poetry that comes closer and closer to talk. Technically, the poem prefigures all the criticism, with its debates about the personal and the impersonal, the more and more 'objective,' the great struggle toward 'unified sensibility' and what not. Eliot's failure as a poet is his success as a critic. Prufrock as a character is of no intrinsic interest but he is of high *literary* interest to all. In this poem Eliot has remained close enough to a human footing to make poetry out of a personal complex of crises, private, social, and intellectual. Had he written nothing else he would be remembered for this masterly little poem."

Karl Shapiro
In Defense of Ignorance
(Random House 1960) 45-46

"The epigraph from Dante defines the limiting situation of the poem. From the beginning we are given the self-portrait of a man who knows his own inadequacy [enough] to draw it and suffers accordingly. The 'metaphysical' conceits in the poem are appropriate to this man for whom formal ratiocination must take the place of simple, spontaneous thought, analysis the place of the exercise of the sensibility. Prufrock's is yet another exhausted ego, able to celebrate, in pathetic irony, only his own exhaustion. Choosing such a one for his protagonist, Eliot can in bitter pity reveal to us Prufrock's abject inferiority to even 'the women [who] come and go / Talking of Michelangelo,' not to say the Hamlet who, in so far as he can bring himself to have one, is his ego ideal.

The poet surely is not Prufrock; yet Prufrock is surely an aspect of the poet's sensibility, one which must carry its self-exhaustion to the end, so that there will be achieved that spiritual vacuum which only a greater spirit can fill. The formal achievement of this poem, since it has come to be archetypal for the formal achievement of so many other poems, is one which we too easily fail to see: In 'Prufrock' Eliot measures the failure of a modern sensibility in the very terms which, so he believes, will, after the failure has been measured and faced up to, constitute its means to success."

Roy Harvey Pearce
The Continuity of American Poetry
(Princeton 1961) 297-98

"It is a dramatic monologue which presents, with somewhat Browningsque irony, the musings of a young man whose youth is beginning to slip away from him and who is still unable to bring himself to the

point of speaking frankly to the lady of his choice. The poem can be read as a study in neurotic impotence and at the same time as a contrived specimen of the cultural decay which Eliot ascribed to the controlling bourgeois classes of the Edwardian period. Except for a few scraps of juvenalia, this was Eliot's first published work, and it is doubtful that any other poet in modern times has won such admiration with his first poem. In it Eliot used many of the devices—associative progressions, precisely controlled free verse, indirect allusions, etc.—which he developed more fully in his later work. It is a brilliant example of symbolist technique and remains one of Eliot's most effective poems."

Max J. Herzberg & staff
The Reader's Encyclopedia of American Literature
(Crowell 1962)

"The title, which splits up the middle, warns us what to expect. Its first half suggests something traditional, romantic. Then we are brought up short by the respectable, 'proper' name. The two halves seem incongruous—as indeed they are. Prufrock's name offers an ironic comment on the nature of the 'love song' with which the poem will be concerned.

The poem presents the internal struggle involved in a near-declaration of love by a timid, self-conscious, middle-aged man. Prufrock is talking, or thinking, to himself. The 'you' and 'I' of the first line are the divided parts of his nature, one part wishing to make the declaration, the other reluctant to do so....He doesn't know how to go about it. And so he keeps postponing the decision to make the declaration—postpones it until he knows he won't. The climax of the poem comes when Prufrock thinks, 'I should have been a pair of ragged claws / Scuttling across the floors of silent seas.'"

The rest of the poem, except for one brief recrudescence of the impulse of the impulse to speak out, is mostly rationalization ('would it have been worth it, after all'), acceptance of his failure, and relaxation of tension. The mermaids at the end of the poem are symbols of romance and vitality, which, he realizes, will not belong to him. In the scene with sea-girls 'in the chambers of the sea' he has retreated into dreams, until brought back by the voices around him to a consciousness of social reality in which he 'drowns.'

Few poems have made a greater impact on the modern imagination than this one. When first published in 1917, it seemed in its method, its images, its symbols, its use of allusion, and its subject matter something entirely new. The simile in lines 2-3, less descriptive of the sunset than of Prufrock's own paralyzed will, struck a new note in English poetry. Throughout the poem, in fact, descriptive of the outer world is used to symbolize the condition of Prufrock's inner world. The circuitous streets which Prufrock follows are like the circuitous nature of his own thoughts. The yellow fog that curls itself around the house is the image of Prufrock's spiritual lethargy. The light brown hair on the woman's arms, the disturbing perfume from a dress suggest the erotic component of Prufrock's yearnings. He thoughts about the smoke arising from the pipes of lonely men in shirt sleeves reflect his own loneliness as well as show his ignorance of a suitable way to begin his declaration.

Literary allusions, of which the poem is full, are also used in a new and striking way. The epigraph, an excerpt from Dante's *Inferno*, reveals to us that Prufrock is in hell, a living hell. The references to John the Baptist, Lazarus, and Hamlet, though used to exploit fleeting resemblances, are mainly expressions by Prufrock of his inadequacy. He is not in the heroic tradition. Though he shares Prince Hamlet's indecision and habit of self-scrutiny, he is not a tragic hero, and knows he is not. He is more like Polonius, 'Public, cautious, and meticulous; / Full of high sentence, but a bit obtuse; / At times, indeed, almost ridiculous—' Seeing himself in this image, he is indeed ridiculous, but also pitiable. For Prufrock, unlike Polonius, has insight into his own futility. 'I have measured out my life,' he says, 'with coffee spoons.' Though not a tragic hero, he is more tragic than comic.

'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' is a dramatic revelation of character, utilizing a stream-of-consciousness technique. For many readers it is also something more. They see Prufrock not just as an individual but as the representative of a culture. In the superficial and sterile quality of his life, in his vacillation and inertia, in the exhaustion of his energy on self-analysis, he is the modern antihero, the representative of modern man. The 'overwhelming question' which he wishes to ask would expose to his

society its emptiness. But he doesn't. Prufrock's problem, says one critic, Hyatt Waggoner, is not to save his soul but to find it. Some readers see this as the problem of modern man."

Laurence Perrine
100 American Poems of the Twentieth Century
(Harcourt 1966) 110-12
with James M. Reid

"The Waste Land" (1922)

"[The essential meaning of the poem is reducible to four Sanskrit words, three of which are] so implied in the surrounding text that one can pass them by...without losing the general tone or the main emotion of the passage. They are so obviously the words of some ritual or other. [The reader can infer that "shantih" means peace.] For the rest, I saw the poem in typescript, and I did not see the notes till 6 or 8 months afterward; and they have not increased my enjoyment of the poem one atom. The poem seems to me an emotional unit...I have not read Miss Weston's *Ritual to Romance*, and do not at present intend to. As to the citations, I do not think it matters a damn which is from Day, which from Milton, Middleton, Webster, or Augustine. I mean so far as the functioning of the poem is concerned...This demand for clarity in every particular of a work, whether essential or not, reminds me of the Pre-Raphaelite painter who was doing a twilight scene but rowed across the river in day time to see the shape of the leaves on the farther bank, which he then drew in with full detail."

Ezra Pound (1924)
quoted by Hugh Kenner
The Invisible Poet, T. S. Eliot
(Obolensky 1959) 152

"[Eliot's] trick of cutting his corners and his curves makes him seem obscure when he is clear as daylight. His thoughts move very rapidly and by astounding cuts. They move not by logical stages and majestic roundings of the full literary curve, but as live thoughts move in live brains."

May Sinclair
quoted by Edmund Wilson
Axel's Castle
(New York 1931) 108

"When all qualifications have been urged, 'The Waste Land' remains a great positive achievement, and one of the first importance for English poetry. In it a mind fully alive in the age compels a poetic triumph out of the peculiar difficulties facing a poet in the age. And in solving his own problem as a poet Mr. Eliot did more than solve the problem for himself. Even if 'The Waste Land' had been, as used to be said, a 'dead end' for him, it would still have been a new start for English poetry."

F. R. Leavis
New Bearings in English Poetry
(1932; Chatto & Windus 1950) 114

"What he learned especially from [*From Ritual to Romance*] was the recurring pattern of similarity in various myths, the basic resemblance, for example, between the vegetation myths of the rebirth of the year, the fertility myths of the rebirth of the potency of man, the Christian story of the Resurrection, and the Grail legend of purification. The common source of all these myths lay in the fundamental rhythm of nature—that of the death and rebirth of the year; and their varying symbolism was an effort to explain the origin of life. Such knowledge, along with the researches of psychology, pointed to the close union in all these myths of the physical and the spiritual, to the fact that their symbolism was basically sexual—in the Cup and Lance of the Grail legend as well as in the Orpheus cults; pointed, in brief, to the fundamental relation between the well-springs of sex and religion....

In such a perception of the nature of myths, of 'a common principle underlying all manifestations of life,' Eliot found a scaffold for his poem, a background of reference that made possible something in the nature of a musical organization....The poem thus embodies simultaneously several different planes of experience, for it suggests the likenesses between various waste lands. Its quest for salvation in

contemporary London is given greater volume and urgency by the additional presence of the haunted realm of medieval legend....Thus he who 'is now dead' is not Christ alone, but the slain Vegetation God; he is Adonis and Osiris and Orpheus....

As a result of this method of compressing into a single moment both the memory and the sameness of other moments, it becomes apparent that in 'The Fire Sermon,' the section of the poem which deals in particular with the present and the past of London, no sharply separating contrast is made between them. Squalor pollutes the modern river as it did not in Spenser's 'Prothalamion'; but there are also glimpses of beauty...although mention of Elizabeth and Leicester brings an illusion of glamour, closer thought reveals that the stale pretense of their relationship left it quite as essentially empty as that between the typist and the clerk....

To convey in poetry the feeling of the actual passage of life, to bring to expression the varied range and volume of awareness which exists in a full moment of consciousness, demanded, in Eliot's view, the strictest condensation. Above all, the impression of a fully packed content should not be weakened through the relaxed connectives of the usual narrative structure....Poetry alone, through its resources of rhythm and sound, can articulate the concentrated essence of experience, and thus come closest to the universal and permanent; but it can do so only through the mastery of a concentrated form....

If, in severest analysis, the kind of poetry Eliot is writing gives evidence of social disintegration, he has expressed that fact precisely as the poet should, not by rhetorical proclamation, but by the very feeling of contemporary life which he has presented to the sensitive reader of his lines....And in case there should be some feeling that either Joyce or Eliot has revealed a kind of bookish weakness in turning for the structure to literature rather than to life, it should be recollected that Shakespeare himself created hardly any of his plots, and that by the very fact of taking ready-made the pattern of his characters' actions, he was able to devote his full attention to endowing them with life. It is only an uninformed prejudice which holds that literature must start from actual personal experience....The poet's imagination can work equally well on his reading as on the raw material of his senses. In fact, it is a mark of full human maturity, as Eliot has revealed in his discussion of the metaphysical poets, that there should not be a separation in an individual's sensibility between reading and experience any more than between emotion and thought...

I had been enjoying "the Waste Land" for several years before an interest in exploring the effect of Eliot's reading upon his development brought me to *From Ritual to Romance*. As a result of having read that book I can now follow more distinctly the logical steps by which Eliot was led to compose his structure, and can also perceive in detail the kind of stimulus and release that the book gave to his mind.... I had never seen a Tarot pack (and, if I had to bet, my money would say that neither had Eliot himself). But Miss Weston mentions that its four suits are Cup, Lance, Sword, and Dish, which thus correspond to the sexual symbolism of the Grail; and that the original use of these cards was 'not to foretell the Future in general, but to predict the rise and fall of the waters which brought fertility to the land.' Through such knowledge the exact emotional relevance to the poem of this 'wicked pack' is obviously brought into new focus....'The Waste Land' does not require recourse to the poet's reading in order to become comprehensible. Its structure is pre-eminently self-contained....

His Notes are simply a consequence of his desire to strip the form of his poem to its barest essentials in order to secure his concentrated effect. Such reading as an integral part of his experience, demanded certain sign-posts of elucidation if the reader was to follow the exact course...It is obviously necessary, for *full* understanding of some of his passages, to be aware of the special context of his allusions to other poets. In all cases when Eliot thinks that context essential to the reader of 'The Waste Land' he has given the reference, as...to the *Inferno*, *The White Devil*, and *Les Fleurs du Mal*...The self-consuming burning of sterile passion which is the theme of 'The Fire Sermon' receives added emphasis from the pertinent reminder of the exact expression of that theme by Buddha and St. Augustine, though no reading of their work is required for understanding the poem....

Some of the notes which struck me at first as useless pedantry or deliberate mystification of the reader, particularly the one on Tiresias, I now recognize as very useful to the interpretation of the poem.... Comparable to Eliot's use of Notes in 'The Waste Land' is the frequent presence, throughout his work, of

epigraphs for individual poems...Again the intention is to enable the poet to secure a condensed expression in the poem itself, as well as to induce the reader to realize, even from the moment before the poem begins, that in reading poetry every word should be paid full attention. In each case the epigraph is designed to form an integral part of the effect of the poem.”

F. O. Matthiessen
The Achievement of T. S. Eliot
(Houghton 1935) 33-44

“A portrait of a society from which grace has been withdrawn and which is dying of its own triviality and ugliness....The matter of ‘The Waste Land’ is Baudelairian. It is no accident that the last line of the introductory poem of ‘The Waste Land’ is also the last line of the preface of *Les Fleurs du Mal*. That preface details the sins of the modern world as they appeared to Baudelaire, and it names as the most horrible of them all the sin of Ennui. Now Ennui, as it appears in much romantic literature is very much the same sin as the Christian sin of acedia, or spiritual torpor, and it might well be regarded as the most deadly of sins because it leads to all the others and interferes with one’s struggling against them: it would be above all other sins the one most likely to appear, if we accept Christian postulates, in a man or a society deprived of grace....

The subject matter of ‘The Waste Land’ is in general similar to that of *Les Fleurs du Mal*. Yet if one will compare let us say *Le Jeu* with ‘A Game of Chess,’ one may perhaps note what Eliot overlooked. Eliot, in dealing with debased and stupid material, felt himself obliged to seek his form in his matter: the result is confusion and journalistic reproduction of detail. Baudelaire, in dealing with similar matter, sought to evaluate it in terms of eternal verity: he sought his form and his point of view in tradition, and from that point of view and in that form he judged his material, and the result is a profound evaluation of evil. The difference is the difference between triviality and greatness....

The meter of ‘The Waste Land’ is not the suave meter of *The Cantos* or of ‘Gerontion’: it is a broken blank verse interspersed with bad free verse and rimed doggerel. And what is one to say of the last eight lines of ‘The Waste Land,’ which are composed, as nearly as I can determine with the aid of the notes, of unaltered passages from seven sources? A sequence of such quotations cannot by any stretch of the imagination achieve unity, and its disunity can be justified on no grounds...The method is that of a man who is unable to deal with his subject, and resorts to the rough approximation of quotation; it is the method of the New England farmer who meets every situation in life with a saw from *Poor Richard*; it betokens the death of the mind and of the sensibility alike.”

Yvor Winters
In Defense of Reason
(Alan Swallow 1937-47) 497, 499-500

ELIOT’S METHOD

“Such misinterpretations involve also misconceptions of Eliot’s technique. Eliot’s basic method may be said to have passed relatively unnoticed. The popular view of the method used in ‘The Waste Land’ may be described as follows: Eliot makes use of ironic contrasts between the glorious past and the sordid present—the crashing irony of ‘But at my back from time to time I hear / The sound of horns and motors, which shall bring / Sweeney to Mrs. Porter in the spring.’ But this is to take the irony of the poem at the most superficial level, and to neglect the other dimensions in which it operates. And it is to neglect what are essentially more important aspects of his method. Moreover, it is to overemphasize the difference between the method employed by Eliot in this poem and that employed by him in later poems.

The basic method used in ‘The Waste Land’ may be described as the application of the principle of *complexity*. The poet works in terms of surface *parallelisms* which in reality make *ironical contrasts*, and in terms of surface contrasts which in reality constitute parallelisms. (The second group sets up effects which may be described as the *obverse of irony*.) The two aspects taken together give the effect of *chaotic experience ordered into a new whole*, though the realistic surface of experience is faithfully retained. The complexity of the experience is not violated by the apparent forcing upon it of a predetermined scheme....

ALL CHARACTERS ONE

The melting of the characters into each other is, of course, an aspect of this general process...The effect is a sense of the oneness of experience, and of the unity of all periods, and with this, a sense that the general theme of the poem is true. But the theme has not been imposed—it has been revealed...The poem would undoubtedly be 'clearer' if every symbol had a single, unequivocal meaning; but the poem would be thinner, and less honest. For the poet has not been content to develop a didactic allegory in which the symbols are two-dimensional items adding up directly to the sum of the general scheme. They represent dramatized instances of the theme...

EXAMPLE OF METHOD

The fortune-telling of 'The Burial of the Dead' will illustrate the general method very satisfactorily. On the surface of the poem the poet reproduces the patter of the charlatan, Madame Sosostris, and there is the [1] *surface irony*: the contrast between the original use of the Tarot cards and the use made by Madame Sosostris. But each of the details (justified realistically in the palaver of the fortune-teller) assumes a new meaning in the general context of the poem. There is then, in addition to the surface irony, something of a [2] *Sophoclean irony* too, and the 'fortune-telling,' which is taken ironically by a twentieth-century audience, becomes true as the poem develops—true in a sense in which Madame Sosostris herself does not think it true. The surface irony is thus reversed and becomes an irony on a deeper level. The items of her speech have only one reference in terms of the context of her speech: the 'man with three staves,' the 'one-eyed merchant,' the 'crowds of people, walking round in a ring,' etc. But transferred to other contexts they become loaded with special meanings....I have called the effect the [3] *obverse of irony*, for the method, like that of irony, is indirect, though the effect is positive rather than negative....To sum up, all the central symbols of the poem head up here; but here, in the only section in which they are explicitly bound together, the binding is slight and accidental. The deeper lines of association only emerge in terms of the total context as the poem develops—and this is, of course, exactly the effect which the poet intends.

TECHNIQUE OF ALLUSIONS

The transference of items from an 'innocent' context into a context in which they become charged and transformed in meaning will account for many of the literary allusions in the poem. For example, the 'change of Philomel' is merely one of the items in the decorative detail in the room in the opening of 'A Game of Chess.' But the violent change of tense—'And still she cried, and still the world pursues'—makes it a comment upon, and a symbol of, the modern world. And further allusions to it through the course of the poem gradually equate it with the general theme of the poem. The allusions to *The Tempest* display the same method. The parallelism between Dante's Hell and the waste land of the Grail legends is fairly close; even the equation of Baudleaire's Paris to the waste land is fairly obvious. But the parallelism between the death by drowning in *The Tempest* and the death of the fertility god is, on the surface, merely accidental, and the first allusion to Ariel's song is merely an irrelevant and random association of the steam-of-consciousness....

BASIC SYMBOL

The basic symbol used, that of the waste land, is taken of course from Miss Jessie Weston's *From Ritual to Romance*. In the legends which she treats there, the land has been blighted by a curse. The crops do not grow and the animals cannot reproduce. The plight of the land is summed up by, and connected with, the plight of the lord of the land, the Fisher King, who has been rendered impotent by maiming or sickness. The curse can be removed only by the appearance of a knight who will ask the meanings of the various symbols which are displayed to him in the castle. The shift in meaning from physical to spiritual sterility is easily made, and was, as a matter of fact, made in certain of the legends. As Eliot has pointed out, a knowledge of this symbolism is essential for an understanding of the poem....

STRUCTURE OF CONTRASTS

'The Waste Land' is built on a major contrast...between two kinds of life and two kinds of death. Life devoid of meaning is death; sacrifice, even the sacrificial death, may be lifegiving, an awakening to life.

The poem occupies itself to a great extent with this paradox, and with a number of variations upon it.... The fact that men have lost the knowledge of good and evil, keeps them from being alive, and is the justification for viewing the modern waste land as a realm in which the inhabitants do not even exist. This theme is stated in the quotation which prefaces the poem. The Sybil says: 'I wish to die.' Her statement has several possible interpretations. For one thing, she is saying what the people who inhabit the waste land are saying....

REVIVING SPIRITUALITY

Eliot's theme is not the statement of a faith held and agreed upon (Dante's *Divine Comedy*) nor is it the projection of a 'new' system of beliefs (Spenser's *Faerie Queene*). Eliot's theme is the rehabilitation of a system of beliefs, known but now discredited.... Unlike Dante, he cannot assume acceptance of the statement. A direct approach is calculated to elicit powerful 'stock responses' which will prevent the poem's being read at all. Consequently, the only method is to work by indirection. The Christian material is at the center, but the poet never deals with it directly. The theme of resurrection is made on the surface in terms of the fertility rites; the words which the thunder speaks are Sanskrit words....

The Christian terminology is for the poet a mass of cliches. However 'true' he may feel the terms to be, he is still sensitive to the fact that they operate superficially as cliches, and his method of necessity must be a process of bringing them to life again. The method adopted in 'The Waste Land' is thus violent and radical, but thoroughly necessary.... In this way the statement of beliefs emerges *through* confusion and cynicism—not in spite of them.

ANALYSIS OF POEM

I

The first section of 'The Burial of the Dead' develops the theme of the attractiveness of death, or of the difficulty in rousing oneself from the death in life in which the people of the waste land live. Men are afraid to live in reality. April, the month of rebirth, is not the most joyful season but the cruelest. Winter at least kept us warm in forgetful snow.... Men dislike to be roused from the death-in-life.... The first part of 'The Burial of the Dead' introduces this theme through a sort of a reverie on the part of the protagonist—a reverie in which speculation on life glides off into memory of an actual conversation in the Hofgarten and back into speculation again. The function of the conversation is to establish the class and character of the protagonist....

There are references to Ezekiel and to Ecclesiastes, and these references indicate what it is that men no longer know: The passage referred to in Ezekiel 2, pictures a world thoroughly secularized.... Chapter 37 in particular, which describes Ezekiel's waste land, where the prophet, in his vision of the valley of dry bones, contemplates the 'burial of the dead' and is asked: 'Son of man, can these bones live?'... The passage from Ecclesiastes 12, alluded to in Eliot's notes, describes the same sort of waste land.... The next section of 'The Burial of the Dead' which begins with the scrap of song quoted from Wagner (perhaps another item in the reverie of the protagonist), states the opposite half of the paradox which underlies the poem: namely, that life at its highest moments of meaning and intensity resembles death....

The two quotations from the opera which frame the ecstasy-of-love passage... take on a new meaning in the altered context. In the first, love is happy; the boat rushes on with a fair wind behind it. In the second, love is absent; the sea is wide and empty. And the last quotation reminds us that even love cannot exist in the waste land.... Tarot cards were originally used to determine the even of highest importance to the people, the rising of the waters. Madame Sosostris has fallen a long way from the high function of her predecessors. She is engaged merely in vulgar fortune-telling—merely one item in a generally vulgar civilization. But the symbols of the Tarot pack are still unchanged. The various characters are still inscribed on the cards, and she is reading in reality (though she does not know it) the fortune of the protagonist.

She finds that his card is that of the drowned Phoenician Sailor, and so she warns him against death by water, not realizing any more than do the other inhabitants of the modern waste land that the way into life may be by death itself. The drowned Phoenician Sailor is a type of the fertility god whose image was thrown into the sea annually as a symbol of the death of summer. As for the other figures in the pack:

Belladonna, the Lady of the Rocks, is woman in the waste land. The man with three staves, Eliot says he associates rather arbitrarily with the Fisher King. The term 'arbitrarily' indicates that we are not to attempt to find a logical connection here....The Hanged Man, who represents the hanged go of Frazer (including the Christ), Eliot states in a note, is associated with the hooded figure who appears in 'What the Thunder Said.' That he is hooded accounts for Madame Sosostri's inability to see him; or rather, here again the palaver of the modern fortune-teller is turned to new and important account by the poet's shifting the reference into a new and serious context....

After the Madame Sosostri's passage, Eliot proceeds to complicate his symbols for the sterility and unreality of the modern waste land by associating it with Baudelaire's *'fourmillante cite'* and with Dante's Limbo....In Baudelaire's city, dream and reality seem to mix....The line, 'I had not thought death had undone so many,' is taken from the Third Canto of the *Inferno*...the Third Canto deals with Dante's Limbo which is occupied by those who on earth had 'lived without praise or blame.' They share this abode with the angels 'who were not rebels, nor were faithful to God, but were for themselves.' They exemplify almost perfectly the secular attitude which dominates the modern world....

The people described in the Fourth Canto are those who lived virtuously but who died before the proclamation of the Gospel—they are the unbaptized. They form the second of the two classes of people who inhabit the modern waste land: those who are secularized and those who have no knowledge of the faith. Without a faith, their life is in reality a death...The reference to Stetson stresses again the connection between the modern London of the poem and Dante's hell....The protagonist, like Dante, sees among the inhabitants of the contemporary waste land one whom he recognizes. (The name 'Stetson' I take to have no ulterior significance. It is merely an ordinary name such as might be borne by the friend one might see in a crowd in a great city.)...In having the protagonist address the friend in a London street as one who was with him in the Punic War rather than as one who was with him in the World War is making the point that all the wars are one war; all experience, one experience...

[The] allusion to the buried god will account for the ironical, almost taunting tone of the passage. The burial of the dead is now a sterile planting—without hope...I am inclined to take the Dog (the capital letter is Eliot's) as Humanitarianism and the related philosophies which, in their concern for man, extirpate the supernatural—dig up the corpse of the buried go and thus prevent the rebirth of life....The last line of 'The Burial of the Dead'—'You! Hypocrite lecteur!—mon semblable,—mon frere!' the quotation from Baudelaire, completes the universalization of Stetson begun by the reference to Mylae. Stetson is every man including the reader and Mr. Eliot himself.

II

If 'The Burial of the Dead' gives the general abstract statement of the situation, the second part of 'The Waste Land' ...gives a more concrete illustration. The easiest contrast...is the contrast between life in a rich and magnificent setting and life in the low and vulgar setting of a London pub. But both scenes, however antithetical they may appear superficially, are scenes taken from the contemporary waste land. In both of them life has lost its meaning.

I am particularly indebted to Mr. Allen Tate's comment on the first part of this section...: 'The woman...is, I believe, the symbol of man at the present time. He is surrounded by the grandeurs of the past, but he does not participate in them; they don't sustain him....The rich experience of the great tradition depicted in the room receives a violent shock in contrast with a game of that symbolizes the inhuman abstraction of the modern mind.'...Cleopatra...is perhaps the extreme exponent of love for love's sake, the feminine member of the pair of lovers who threw away an empire for love....

The violation of a woman makes a very good symbol of the process of secularization...Our contemporary waste land is in large part the result of our scientific attitude—of our complete secularization.... Apparently the 'world' partakes in the barbarous king's action [rape], and still partakes in that action....Edmund Wilson has pointed out that the rendition of the bird's song here represents not merely the Elizabethans' neutral notation of the bird's song, but carries associations of the ugly and course. The passage is one, therefore, of many instances of Eliot's device of using something which in one context

is innocent but in another context becomes loaded with a special meaning....The raped woman becomes transformed through suffering into the nightingale...

The reference to [a] section of *The Tempest* is, like the Philomela reference, one of Eliot's major symbols....The song, one remembers, was sung by Ariel in luring Ferdinand, Prince of Naples, on to meet Miranda, and thus to find love, and through this love, to effect the regeneration and deliverance of all the people on the island....The allusion is an extremely interesting example of...taking an item from one context and shifting it into another in which it assumes a new and powerful meaning...a death which becomes a sort of birth...assumes in the mind of the protagonist an association with that of the drowned god whose effigy was thrown into the water as a symbol of the death of the fruitful powers of nature but which was taken out of the water as a symbol of the revived god....The passage therefore represents the perfect antithesis to the passage in 'The Burial of the Dead.': 'That corpse you planted last year in your garden,' etc....This contrast between the death in rat's alley and the death in *The Tempest* is made again in 'The Fire Sermon.'...

We have yet to treat the relation of the title of the second section, 'A Game of Chess,' to Middleton's play, *Women Beware Women*, from which the game of chess is taken. In the play, the game is used as a device to keep the widow occupied while her daughter-in-law is being seduced. The seduction amounts almost to a rape, and in a double entendre, the rape is actually described in terms of the game. We have one more connection with the Philomela symbol...The abstract game is being used in the contemporary waste land, as in the play, to cover up a rape and is a description of the rape itself....Ophelia [in *Hamlet*], too, was very much concerned about love, the theme of the conversation between the women in the pub. As a matter of fact, she was in very much the same position who has been the topic of conversation between the two ladies whom we have just heard. And her poetry, like Philomela's, had come out of suffering. We are probably to look for the relevance of the allusion to her here rather than in an easy satiric contrast between Elizabethan glories and modern sordidness....

III

'The Fire Sermon' makes much use of several of the symbols already developed. The fire is the sterile burning of lust, and the section is a sermon, although a sermon by example only. This section of the poem also contains some of the most easily apprehended uses of literary allusion. The poem opens on a vision of the modern river. In Spenser's 'Prothalamion' the scene described is also a river scene at London, and it is dominated by nymphs and their paramours, and the nymphs are preparing for a wedding. The contrast between Spenser's scene and its twentieth-century equivalent is jarring. The paramours are now 'the loitering heirs of city directors,' and, as for the nuptials of Spenser's Elizabethan maidens, in the stanzas which follow we learn a great deal about those. At the end of the section the speech of the third of the Thames-nymphs summarizes the whole matter for us.

The waters of the Thames are also associated with those of Leman—the poet in the contemporary waste land is in a sort of Babylonian Captivity. The castle of the Fisher King was always located on the banks of a river or on the sea shore. The title 'Fisher King,' Miss Weston shows, originates from the use of the fish as a fertility or life symbol. This meaning, however, was often forgotten, and so his title in many of the later Grail romances is accounted for by describing the king as fishing. Eliot uses the reference to fishing for reverse effect. The reference to fishing is part of the realistic detail of the scene—'Whilt I was fishing in the dull canal.' But to the reader who knows the Weston references, the reference is to that of the Fisher King of the Grail legends. The protagonist is the maimed and impotent king of the legends.

Eliot proceeds now to tie the waste-land symbol to that of *The Tempest*, by quoting one of the lines spoken by Ferdinand, Prince of Naples, which occurs just before Ariel's song, 'Full Fathom Five,' is heard. But then he alters *The Tempest* passage somewhat...The protagonist in the poem, then, imagines himself not only in the situation of Ferdinand in *The Tempest* but also in that of one of the characters in the Grail legend; and the wreck, to be applied literally in the first instance, applies metaphorically in the second.... The allusion to Marvell's 'To His Coy Mistress' is...one of the easiest allusions in the poem. Instead of 'Time's winged chariot' the poet hears 'the sound of horns and motors' of contemporary London. But the Passage has been further complicated. The reference has been combined with an allusion to Day's 'Parliament of Bees.'...Day's 'sound of horns and hunting' has changed to the horns of the motors. And

Acteon will not be brought face to face with Diana, goddess of chastity; Sweeney, type of the vulgar bourgeois, is to be brought to Mrs. Porter, hardly a type of chastity....

Mr. Eugenides, the Smyrna merchant, is the one-eyed merchant mentioned by Madame Sosostriis. The fact that the merchant is one-eyed apparently means, in Madame Sosostriis' speech, no more than that the merchant's face on the card is shown in profile. But Eliot applies the term to Mr. Eugenides for a totally different effect. The defect corresponds somewhat to Madame Sosostriis' bad cold. He is a rather battered representative of the fertility cults: the prophet, the *seer*, with only one eye. The Syrian merchants, we learn from Miss Weston's book, were, along with slaves and soldiers, the principal carriers of the mysteries which lie at the core of the Grail legends. But in the modern world we find both the representatives of the Tarot divining and the mystery cults in decay. What he carries on his back and what the fortune-teller is forbidden to see is evidently the knowledge of the mysteries (although Mr. Eugenides himself is hardly likely to be more aware of it than Madame Sosostriis is aware of the importance of her function). Mr. Eugenides, in terms of his former function, ought to be inviting the protagonist into the esoteric cult which holds the secret of life, but on the realistic surface of the poem, in his invitation to 'a weekend at the Metropole' he is really inviting him to a homosexual debauch. The homosexuality is 'secret' and now a 'cult' but a very different cult from that which Mr. Eugenides ought to represent. The end of the new cult is not life but, ironically, sterility.

In the modern waste land, however, even the relation between man and woman is also sterile. The incident between the typist and the carbuncular young man is a picture of 'love' so exclusively and practically pursued that it is not love at all. The tragic chorus to the scene is Tiresias, into whom perhaps Mr. Eugenides may be said to modulate, Tiresias, the historical 'expert' on the relation between the sexes....The essential horror of the act which Tiresias witnesses in the poem is that it is not regarded as a sin at all—is perfectly casual, is merely the copulation of beasts. The reminiscence of the lines from Goldsmith's song in the description of the young woman's actions after the departure of her lover, gives concretely and ironically the utter break-down of traditional standards.

It is the music of her gramophone which the protagonist hears 'creep by him' 'on the waters.' Far from the music which Ferdinand heard bringing him to Miranda and love, it is, one is tempted to think, the music of 'O O O that Shakespearean Rag.' But the protagonist says that he can sometimes hear 'the pleasant whining of a mandolin.' Significantly enough, it is the music of the fisherman (the fish again as a life symbol) and it comes from beside a church (though—if this is not to rely too much on Eliot's note—the church has been marked for destruction)....

The song of the Thames-daughters brings us back to the opening section of 'The Fire Sermon' again, and once more we have to do with the river and the river-nymphs. Indeed, the typist incident is framed by the two river-nymph scenes. The connection of the river-nymphs with the Rhine-daughters of Wagner's *Gotterdammerung* is easily made...Like the Thames-daughters they too have been violated; and like the maidens mentioned in the Grail legend, the violation has brought a curse on gods and men. The first of the songs depicts the modern river, soiled with oil and tar. (Compare also with the description of the river in the first part of 'The Fire Sermon.') The second song depicts the Elizabethan river, also evoked in the first part of 'The Fire Sermon.' (Leicester and Elizabeth ride upon it in a barge of state....) Elizabeth and the typist are alike as well as different. (One of the reasons for the frequent allusion to Elizabethan poetry in this and the preceding section of the poem may be the fact that with the English Renaissance the old set of supernatural sanctions had begun to break up....The third Thames-daughter's song depicts another sordid 'love' affair, and unites the themes of the first two songs...The songs of the three Thames-daughters... epitomize this whole section of the poem....

The moral of all the incidents which we have been witnessing is that there must be an asceticism—something to check the drive of desire. The wisdom of the East and the West comes to the same thing on this point. Moreover, the imagery which both St. Augustine and Buddha use for lust is fire. What we have witnessed in the various scenes of 'The Fire Sermon' is the sterile burning of lust. Modern man, freed from all restraints, in his cultivation of experience for experience's sake burns...

IV

Whatever the specific meaning of the symbols, the general function of the section, 'Death by Water,' is readily apparent. The section forms a contrast with 'The Fire Sermon' which precedes it—a contrast between the symbolism of fire and that of water. Also readily apparent is its force as a symbol of surrender and relief through surrender....

The drowned Phoenician Sailor recalls the drowned god of the fertility cults. Miss Weston tells that each year at Alexandria an effigy of the head of the god was thrown into the water as a symbol of the death of the powers of nature, and that this head was carried by the current to Byblos where it was taken out of the water and exhibited as a symbol of the reborn god. Moreover, the Phoenician Sailor is a merchant—'Forgot...the profit and loss.' The vision of the drowned sailor gives a statement of the message which the Smyrna merchants originally brought to Britain and which the Smyrna merchant, unconsciously and by ironical negatives, has bought. One of Eliot's notes states that the 'merchant...melts into the Phoenician Sailor, and the latter is not wholly distinct from Ferdinand Prince of Naples.' The death by water would seem to be equated with the death described in Ariel's song in *The Tempest*... 'Death by Water' gives an instance of the conquest of death and time, the 'perpetual recurrence of determined seasons,' the world of spring and autumn, birth and dying' through death itself.

V

The reference to the 'torchlight red on sweaty faces' and to the 'frosty silence in the gardens' obviously associates Christ in Gethsemane with the other hanged gods. The god has died... It is the death-in-life of Dante's Limbo. Life in the full sense has been lost....The passage on the sterility of the waste land and the lack of water provides for the introduction later of two highly important passages: 'There is not even silence in the mountains / But dry sterile thunder without rain—', lines which look forward to the reference to the Journey to Emmaus theme a few lines later: 'Who is the third who walks always beside you?' The god has returned, has risen, but the travelers cannot tell whether it is really he, or mere illusion induced by their delirium.

The parallelism between the 'hooded figure' who 'walks always beside you,' and the 'hooded hordes' is another instance of the sort of parallelism that is really a contrast. In the first case, the figure is indistinct because spiritual; in the second, the hooded hordes are indistinct because completely *unspiritual*—they are the people of the waste land...Eliot, as his notes tell us, has particularly connected the description here with the 'decay of eastern Europe.' The hordes represent, then, the general waste land of the modern world with a special application to the breakup of Eastern Europe, the region with which the fertility cults were especially connected and in which today the traditional values are thoroughly discredited. The cities, Jerusalem, Athens, Alexandria, Vienna, like the London of the first section of the poem are 'unreal,' and for the same reason. The passage which immediately follows develops the unreality into nightmare....

Figures from earlier in the poem [appear]: the lady of 'A Game of Chess,' who, surrounded by the glory of history and art, sees no meaning in either and threatens to rush out into the street "With my hair down, so,' has here let down her hair and fiddles 'whisper music on those strings.' One remembers in "A Game of Chess' that it was the woman's hair that spoke...The hair has been immemorially a symbol of fertility, and Miss Weston and Frazer mention sacrifices of hair in order to aid the fertility god....The doors 'of mudcracked houses,' and the cisterns in this passage are to be found in Ecclesiastes [12], and the woman fiddling music from her hair is one of 'the daughters of musick' brought low. The towers and bells from the Elizabeth and Leicester passage of "the Fire Sermon' also appear here, but the towers are upside down, and the bells, far from pealing for an actual occasion or ringing the hours, are 'reminiscent.' The civilization is breaking up...

The 'violet light' also deserves comment. In 'The Fire Sermon' it is twice mentioned as the 'violet hour,' and there it has little more than a physical meaning. It is a description of the hour of twilight. Here it indicates the twilight of the civilization, but it is perhaps something more. Violet is one of the liturgical colors of the Church. It symbolizes repentance and it is the color of baptism. The visit to the Perilous Chapel, according to Miss Weston, was an initiation—that is, a baptism. In the nightmare vision, the bats

wear baby faces. The horror built up in this passage is a proper preparation for the passage on the Perilous Chapel which follows it. The journey has not been merely an agonized walk into the desert, though it is that; nor is it merely the journey after the god has died and hope has been lost; it is also the journey to the Perilous Chapel of the Grail story. In Miss Weston's account, the Chapel was part of the ritual, and was filled with horrors to test the candidate's courage....In many of the Grail stories the Chapel was haunted by demons...

The fertility cults go back to a very early period and are recorded in Sanskrit legends. Eliot has been continually, in the poem, linking up the Christian doctrine with the beliefs of as many peoples as he can. Here he goes back to the very beginnings of Aryan culture, and tells the rest of the story of the rain's coming, not in terms of the setting already developed but in its earliest form....The use of Sanskrit in what the thunder says is thus accounted for. In addition, there is of course a more obvious reason for casting what the thunder said into Sanskrit here: onomatopoeia.

WHAT THE THUNDER SAYS

The comments on the three statements of the thunder imply an acceptance of them. The protagonist answers the first question, 'What have we given?' with the statement: 'The awful daring of a moment's surrender / Which an age of prudence can never retract / By this, and this only, we have existed.' Here the larger meaning is stated in terms which imply the sexual meaning. Man cannot be absolutely self-regarding. Even the propagation of the race—even mere 'existence'—calls for such a surrender. Living calls for...belief in something more than 'life.'...The comment on *dayadhvam* (sympathize) is obviously connected with the foregoing passage. The surrender to something outside the self is an attempt (whether on the sexual level or some other) to transcend one's essential isolation. The passage gathers up the symbols previously developed in the poem just as the numerous references to sex made earlier in the poem....The third statement made by the thunder, *damyata* (control) follows the condition necessary for control, sympathy....

I cannot accept Mr. Leavis' interpretation of the passage, 'I sat upon the shore / Fishing, with the arid plain behind me,' as meaning that the poem 'exhibits no progression.' The comment upon what the thunder says would indicate, if other passages did not, that the poem does 'not end where it began.' It is true that the protagonist does not witness a revival of the waste land; but there are two important relationships involved in his case: a personal one as well as a general one. If secularization has destroyed, or is likely to destroy, modern civilization, the protagonist still has a private obligation to fulfill. Even if the civilization is breaking up—'London bridge is falling down falling down falling down'—there remains the personal obligation: 'Shall I at least set my lands in order?'...

CONCLUDING QUOTATIONS

The bundle of quotations with which the poem ends has a very definite relation to the general theme of the poem and to several of the major symbols used in the poem...The sister of Philomela was changed into a swallow as Philomela was changed into a nightingale. The protagonist is asking therefore when shall the spring, the time of love, return, but also when will he be reborn out of his sufferings...with the special meaning which the symbol takes on from the preceding Dante quotation and from the earlier contexts.... The quotation from 'El Desdichado,' as Edmund Wilson has pointed out, indicates that the protagonist of the poem has been disinherited, robbed of his tradition. The ruined tower is perhaps also the Perilous Chapel, 'only the wind's home,' and it is also the whole tradition in decay. The protagonist resolves to claim his tradition and rehabilitate it.

The quotation from *The Spanish Tragedy*—'Why then Ile fit you. Hieronymo's mad againe'—is perhaps the most puzzling of all these quotations. It means, I believe, this: The protagonist's acceptance of what is in reality the deepest truth will seem to the present world mere madness. ('And still she cried...'Jug Jug" to dirty ears.') Hieronymo in the play, like Hamlet, was 'mad' for a purpose. The protagonist is conscious of the interpretation which will be placed on the words which follow—words which will seem to many apparently meaningless babble, but which contain the oldest and most permanent truth of the race: 'Datta.

Dayadhvam. Damyaya.'...Like Hieronymo, the protagonist in the poem has found his theme; what he is about to perform is not 'fruitless'...."

Cleanth Brooks
Modern Poetry and the Tradition
(U North Carolina 1939) 136-72

"Poem on the theme of the sterility and chaos of the contemporary world...This most widely known expression of the despair of the postwar era has as a structural framework the symbolism of certain fertility myths that reputedly formed the pagan origins of the Christian Grail legend. The Waste Land itself is a desolate and sterile country ruled by an impotent king, and the poem is divided into five parts: 'The Burial of the Dead,' representing the rebirth of the land after the barren winter; 'The Game of Chess,' a contrast between the splendor of the past and the aqualor of modern life; 'The Fire Sermon,' vignettes of the sordidness of modern life; 'Death by Water,' the vision of a drowned Phoenician sailor who at least dies by water, not thirst; and 'What the Thunder Said,' representing the decay of modern Europe, through symbols of the Grail legend.

The poem concludes with quotations from the Upanishads, its last word, three times repeated, being 'Shantih,' meaning 'the peace which passeth understanding.' In the 433 lines of the poem are included quotations from, allusions to, or imitations of some 35 different writers, as well as several popular songs and passages in foreign languages, including Sanskrit. The original poem was far longer than the published text, which was severely pruned and edited by Ezra Pound, to whom the work is dedicated."

James D. Hart
The Oxford Companion to American Literature, 5th edition
(Oxford 1941-83)

"T. S. Eliot is a culture hero... The width and the height and the depth of modern life are exhibited in his poetry; the agony and the horror of modern life are represented as inevitable to any human being who does not wish to deceive himself with systematic lies....He is the descendant of the essential characters of [Henry James] in that he is the American who visits Europe with a Baedeker in his hand, just like Isabel Archer. But the further sense in which he is the heir of all the ages is illustrated when Eliot describes the seduction of a typist in a London flat from the point of view of Tiresias, a character in a play by Sophocles. To suppose that this is the mere exhibition of learning or reading is a banal misunderstanding...Only an American with a mind and sensibility which is cosmopolitan and expatriated could have seen Europe as it is seen in 'The Waste Land'....

Literary allusion has become not merely a Miltonic reference to Greek gods and Old Testament geography, not merely the citation of parallels, but a powerful and inevitable habit of mind, a habit which issues in judgment and the representation of different levels of experience, past and present...Henry James was concerned with the American in Europe. Eliot cannot help but be concerned with the whole world and all history. Tiresias sees the nature of love in all times and all places and when Sweeney outwits a scheming whore, the fate of Agamemnon becomes relevant too...It is no accident that in 'The Waste Land' use is made of *The Golden Bough*, and a book on the quest of the Grail; and the way in which images and associations appear in the poem illustrates a new view of consciousness, the depths of consciousness and the unconscious mind....

Nowhere better than in Eliot can we see the difference between being merely literary and making the knowledge of literature an element in vision, that is to say, an essential part of the process of seeing anything and everything....The subject of 'The Waste Land' is the sensibility of the protagonist, a sensibility which is literary, philosophical, cosmopolitan and expatriated....J. Alfred Prufrock is unable to make love to women of his own class and kind because of shyness, self-consciousness, and fear of rejection. The protagonists of other poems in Eliot's first book are men or women laughed at or rejected in love, and a girl deserted by her lover seems like a body deserted by the soul.

In Eliot's second volume of poems, an old man's despair issues in part from his inability to make love, while Sweeney, an antithetical character, is able to make love, but is unable to satisfy the woman with

whom he copulates. In 'The Waste Land,' the theme of love as a failure is again uppermost. Two lovers return from a garden after a moment of love, and the woman is overcome by despair or pathological dependency. A lady, perhaps the same woman who has returned from the garden in despair, becomes hysterical in her boudoir because her lover or her husband has nothing to say to her and cannot give her life any meaning or interest....

The neurasthenic lady is succeeded in the poem by cockney women who gossip about another cockney woman who has been made ill by contraceptive pills taken to avoid the consequences of love; which is to say that the sickness of love has struck down every class in society: 'What you get married for, if you don't want children?' And then we witness the seduction of the typist; and then other aspects of the sickness of love appear when, on the Thames bank, three girls ruined by love rehearse the sins of the young men with whom they have been having affairs. In the last part of the poem, the impossibility of love, the gulf between one human being and another, is the answer to the command to give, that is to say, to give oneself or surrender oneself to another human being in the act of making love. Elsewhere love either results in impotence, or it is merely copulation....

Eliot's characters when they make love either suffer from what the psychoanalysts term 'psychic impotence,' or they make love so inadequately that the lady is left either hysterical or indifferent when the episode is over. The characters who are potent and insensitive are placed in contrast with the characters who are impotent and sensitive....In the same way, the plight of Prufrock is illuminated by means of a rich, passing reference to Michelangelo, the sculptor of the strong and heroic man. Only when the poet is the heir of all the ages can he make significant use of so many different and distant kinds of experience. But conversely, only when experience becomes international, only when many different and distant kinds of experience are encountered by the poet, does he find it necessary to become the heir of all the ages....

To be the heir of all the ages is to inherit nothing but a consciousness of how all heirlooms are rooted in the past. Dominated by historical consciousness, the international hero finds that all beliefs affect the holding of any belief...Modern life may be compared to a foreign country in which a foreign language is spoken. Eliot is the international hero because he has made the journey to the foreign country and described the nature of the new life in the foreign country. Since the future is bound to be international, if it is anything at all, we are all the bankrupt heirs of the ages, and the moments of the crisis expressed in Eliot's work are a prophecy of the crises of our own future in regard to love, religious belief, good and evil, the good life and the nature of the just society. 'The Waste Land' will soon be as good as new."

Delmore Schwartz
"T. S. Eliot as the International Hero"
Partisan Review
Vol.12 (1945) 199-206

"As an inheritor of the nineteenth century's determination to repossess all of history, modern man could often have the feeling, as Eliot remarked in Joyce, 'of everything happening at once'....He gave voice to this awareness in 'The Waste Land,' the most ambitious long poem of the period. Its structure is the opposite of the diffusion of the *Cantos*, since Eliot attempted to compress the essence of an epic into a poem of hardly more than four hundred lines. He omitted logical connectives, and the reader must find his way through this 'music of ideas' in a way somewhat analogous to associating recurrent themes in a symphony. Eliot was much attacked for this method, though it was in deliberate keeping with his reasons for believing why modern poetry must be difficult.

In the effort to give further coherence to his structure he borrowed a device from Henry James, and introduced Tiresias, the prophet who had 'foresuffered all,' as a central observer who 'sees, in fact, the substance of the poem.' 'The Waste Land' may not succeed as a whole, it may exist simply as a succession of dramatic lyrics. But it interpenetrates the present and the past, it manages to treat on the same plane modern London and the world of primitive myth, and to probe thereby at the root causes of cultural decay. In discerning the imaginative possibilities in the use of myth, Eliot was at one with the leading creative minds of the age. He knew that he had found 'a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy that is contemporary history.'

Eliot could envisage the modern metropolis as an Inferno more affectingly than Pound could in the *Cantos*, since, as he observed, Pound's 'is a Hell for the *other people*, the people we read about in the newspapers, not for oneself and one's friends.' This complacency, this lack of feeling implicated in the struggle with evil, necessarily rendered much of Pound's observation of human beings 'trivial and accidental.' Eliot's peculiar intensity comes from his conviction that poetry must spring out of suffering.

What excited the first appreciators of 'The Waste Land' were its astonishing juxtapositions, its sudden transitions from the witty to the serious, its bewildering variety of literary allusions, its passages of satire and its passages of lyric beauty, and its unfailing expertness in phrasing. Few recognized sufficiently, even when Eliot reached the pit of his Inferno in 'The Hollow Men' (1925), how terrifying an exposure he was making of the emptiness of life without belief, or that his main theme was how much of modern life is merely death. That his overwhelming sense of the need for redemption must finally transform Eliot into a religious poet was not apparent to many at that time."

F. O. Matthiessen
Literary History of the United States, 3rd edition
(Macmillan 1946-63) 1342-43

"'The Waste Land' contains a single unified metaphor, variously given and dramatically developed. It can be seen in at least two realizations; the fable of the land itself (and of its King); the situation of love in its profane, sacred, and mystic forms. These are unified in terms of analogies involving the cultural and personal meanings of fertility. The fertility of the land has been directly associated many times with both religious and sexual rites; in the legends of the Fisher King, the King and his land suffer analogous wounds, which make fertility impossible. There are gradations in the dramatic treatment of love: lust, indifference, perverted love, the love of man for woman, divine love; these are associated throughout with religious legends, ceremonials, and rites, so that we can assume an identity of love with faith, or belief. A failure of *love* is a failure of *belief*; the struggle for a meaningful sexual experience is identical with the search for a satisfactory religious experience....'The Waste Land'...is the acting out, the concrete bodying forth, of a human and cultural situation to be discovered in many forms in human history and legend....The literal scene is London; actually the condition is supra-historical and archetypal...Dramatically 'The Waste Land' identifies its general circumstance in terms of a failure of great love, of sexual communion and spiritual communication..."

This is a 'Sweeney' world [the pub]; the lines are written in a rapid, gossipy, colloquial tone. A woman rattles on to her companion about her friend Lil...both Cleopatra and Dido failed to win their lovers; the woman of the waste land cannot break through the fears of her companion to arrange a union more meaningful than 'a closed car at four' would suggest; and Lil, overcome by the pointless biological insistentcies of her body, refuses to permit another life to come from it. Frustration, neurosis, abortion: these are the variations upon the 'game of chess.' Because religious incentive is lacking, belief fails of a divine purpose, love has no real opportunity for issuing either in a meaningful sexual relationship or in life itself. The full terror of this situation is presented in terms of a dramatic analogy of *faith* and *love*... Appealing to three fragments of verse in other languages (...they offer only a minimum of hope), he considers their evocation of penitence (the purifying fire), regeneration (the swallow), and resignation (the ruined tower) as exemplars of his own condition and resolve....'The Waste Land,' while it was many other things as well, was in some respects at least a concrete, dramatic realization (given a universal and therefore also a 'contemporary' form) of a world in which the strength of belief was hard to achieve, even more difficult to sustain."

Frederick J. Hoffman
The Twenties: American Writing in the Postwar Decade
(Viking/Crowell-Collier 1949-62) 330-43

"'The Waste Land' is, in part, a collection of characters and scenes drawn from the modern world: Madame Sosostris, the fortune teller; the crowd crossing London Bridge in the early morning fog; the woman sitting at her dressing table, and talking or trying to talk with her husband, or lover; the woman in an English pub discussing Lil with another woman; Mr. Eugenides, the Smyrna merchant; the typist and the clerk; the girl from Highbury and her experience in a canoe on the Thames; and others. These characters and scenes are symbols of the degradation and despair of the modern world.

But 'realistic' scenes like these are only a part of the representation. The poem's intention is to show these things in relation to others things, to show them both in time and in eternity, and thereby achieve a rich dimensional development. The modern scene is shown, first, in relation to the historical past, and it would seem that there has been a decline. The bored woman is compared unfavorably with Cleopatra, whom age could not wither nor custom stale, the comparison being suggested by the verbal reminiscence of Shakespeare's description of Cleopatra's barge. The theme, now littered with 'cardboard boxes, cigarette ends / Or other testimony of summer nights,' has deteriorated since Elizabethan times, when it was the scene of stately bridals, suggested by a line from Spenser's 'Prothalamion.' Apparent deterioration is everywhere: the typist is a degradation of Goldsmith's 'lovely woman'; Sweeney and Mrs. Porter lack the dignity of Marvell's lovers, suggested by the verbal echo of 'To His Coy Mistress'; and so on.

Further development in dimension (or depth of perspective) is achieved by showing the contemporary scene in a frame of reference which is essentially timeless, and which is drawn from ancient myths. Old Tiresias, who has suffered all, knowing 'both sides of love,' and 'fore-suffered all,' having the power to foresee the future, is a dispassionate spectator and chorus. If the suggested comparisons between the present and the past seem to point to present deterioration, the commentary of Tiresias suggests the view that the decline is more apparent than real. The Fisher King, from the Grail legend, and the desert country, repeatedly described, are other symbols of timelessness: the evil of the world, the poem intends to say, is as old as the world itself. The present evil, however, is not nullified, or mitigated even, by the larger frames of reference; it is, rather, given added weight and significance when seen in the perspective of man's long and ageless experience.

The ironic futility of 'Prufrock' is continued in 'The Waste Land,' but the despair is greater and the religious implications, it is important to note, are correspondingly more emphatic. It is as if the poem meant to say that man must be reduced to utter despair before there can be a conscious striving toward religious faith. Many passages in 'The Waste Land' suggest a religious 'solution' (Eliot's solution was to be developed in 'Ash-Wednesday' and *Four Quartets*). The desert passages recall the Old Testament in both tone and language...Ecclesiastes 12 describes a waste land similar to that of the poem...

The allusion to Christ's agony and death...connotes Christian belief. The poem, however, reaches out to include all religions. Christ is associated with the Fisher King and other 'hanged gods,' and becomes one of many examples of the basic doctrine of life through death. Among the illustrations of the doctrine in the poem are the corpse buried in the garden (emblem of fertility rites), which the Dog threatens to exhume and thereby prevent the rebirth of life, and the drowned Phoenician Sailor, whose eyes undergo a supernatural change. The Sanskrit words at the end (meaning 'give, sympathize, control,' and 'the peace which passeth understanding') points up the antiquity and unity of religious belief."

Walter Blair
The Literature of the United States 2, 3rd edition
(Scott, Foresman 1953-66) 1054-55

"The latent intention of 'The Waste Land' might be called a reversal of Miss Weston's title—to translate romance back into its meaning as ritual....The most important idea for Eliot in Miss Weston's scheme was that the Grail story subsumes a number of myths; this provided him with both a central myth and a basic system of metaphor...Under this myth any parallel myth or any of its parts is a potential metaphor for other members of the same class; hence translations of one into another are both frequent and sudden....

Miss Weston argued that the meaning of the Grail legend centered in the Fisher King, and was explained by the Vegetation or Fertility rites. In this connection she called attention to the use of the Tarot pack, including the contrast between its present disrepute and its past authority. And she emphasized the importance of the Vegetation rites 'as a factor in the evolution of religious consciousness.' Of course this statement oversimplifies the elements which are compounded in this poem. Basically its myths have a common meaning, which permits their union; and this fact testifies to something permanent in human nature, which may be repeated in individual experience....The early note on the Tarot pack of cards shows how comprehensive it became for Eliot; his manipulation of the pack itself shows how he adapted it to that story and incorporated other elements of his poem. This pack, which Miss Weston had connected with the vegetation or revival myth, is the chief key to his plan....

The Hanged God, whom the Madame does not find, represents in the poem the final cause of the Waste Land and its possible restoration. In legend he was sacrificed in order that nature might be renewed. Now 'The Burial of the Dead' relates primarily to him, and the state of the land is an effect of his death. Any change in that state is contingent upon his revival, but also upon the attitude of the people. The Fisher King's role is to represent man's fate as it originates in sex but cannot transcend it; without this transcendence, which is figured in the Hanged God, he is doomed to death. The Fisher King is differentiated from the Phoenician Sailor by his awareness of the means of transcendence. Hence the first part of the poem develops the death theme, for god and man, and relates the fear of it to sex, as in the myth.

The Fisher King is a symbol of reproductive Nature, like the vegetation gods; having been maimed like them, he has become the object of similar rites; and it is to the volumes dealing with these gods that Eliot turns in *The Golden Bough*. But this king connects by his name with the Fish-Fisher symbols—an ancient Life symbolism, both pagan and Christian, which was based on the belief 'that all life comes from the water.' And it is to get both the Hanged God and the Fisher King into the Tarot pack that Eliot modifies its associations, for it becomes the unifying device by which he tells the fortune of the modern world... Reduced to its simplest terms, 'The Waste Land' is a statement of the experience that drives a character to the fortune-teller, the fortune that is told, and the unfolding of that fortune. But this latent narrative is both universalized and greatly complicated by being set in a framework of the legend in which Miss Weston had seen so many myths....

Miss Weston's treatment of the legend enables Eliot to see in the experience of sex the potentialities of the Fisher King and his Waste Land. In the poem the Fisher King is the prototype of the male characters who melt into one another, and his is the subsuming myth; hence the poem closes on him and his predicament, just as it develops after a comparable experience. He is the type who speaks throughout, even in the Tiresias interruption, which extends the speaker to include the other sex and to suggest the alternative consequences of blindness and vision....

The poem becomes a kind of dramatic lyric, in which the lyric themes are projected by characters associated with the central experience, and the individual fortune becomes a general fortune. The basic experience is that of the Fisher King, which is made universal in Tiresias, and the central speaker comprehends not only the characters within the poem but the audience which he taunts.... Ferdinand combines the roles of the Sailor and the Fisher King, or mediates between them.... As a modern knight of this legend, Ferdinand is a victim rather than a restorer...

The people of the Waste Land are not made happy by the return of spring, of fruitfulness to the soil; they prefer the barrenness of winter or the dead season.... When the lack of water is felt, it assumes a positive character; but for the most part it is a negative or something to be feared. This is a logical consequence of Eliot's inversion of the vegetation myth, which makes the inhabitants of the Waste Land fear the return of life. And this reversal enables him to express the theme of religious frustration in terms of the myth which subsumes so many myths, for sex can be seen as both the origin and the frustration of life."

George Williamson
A Reader's Guide to T. S. Eliot: A Poem-by-Poem Analysis
(Farrar, Straus/Noonday 1953) 118-19, 121-30

"'The Waste Land' is not a long poem, running to only 403 lines (plus several pages of notes). But its strange, shifting symbols, its imaginative power, its borrowings from myth and legend, its assimilation of a long poetic tradition, and its elaborate annotation—as if it were an ancient manuscript requiring explanation to the modern reader—give it a very special place in the poetic history of our time....

The poem's striking characteristics are variant rhythms and meters, borrowings from many writers, use of material from the legends of the Holy Grail and Frazer's monumental anthropological work *The Golden Bough*. Eliot introduces into the poem the blind seer Tiresias of Greek tragedy, whose function is to act as a central consciousness who 'sees, in fact, the substance of the poem.' As Strether sees his situation in Henry James's *The Ambassadors*. Eliot calls him in his notes 'the most important personage in the poem, uniting all the rest.'

The key image of 'The Waste Land' is obviously that of sterility, and throughout the work there are constant variant symbols of drought and of disintegration, dryness and decay—dusty trees, muddy streets, desert rocks, dry bones, empty cisterns, exhausted wells. Water...relieves drought but can also be destructive. Fire is a destroyer. It is also a purifier. And with this, Eliot seeks to evoke the mechanical dreariness of modern cities in which people work and make love in a kind of mechanical sleep-walking routine. The poet constantly alternates his setting between present-day London and the past, and some of his shifts are very rapid.

In spite of its obscurities, the poem succeeds in evoking an atmosphere and a mood: even if we ignore the notes and do not perceive the full meaning, the precise use of word and image and the cadence produces an effect and evokes emotion. If the reader succeeds in bridging the continual contrasts to which Eliot resorts, he experiences an emotion not unlike that produced by music, in which feeling is conveyed without the use of words—or in this case by the use of words as if they were musical notes. This results in partial perceptions, which grow as we reread the work into a more complete understanding of the special way in which Eliot, through language, is able to convey subtle experience."

Lillian Herlands Hornstein, Ed.
The Reader's Companion to World Literature
(Dryden/New American Library/Mentor 1956) 477-78

"In writing 'The Waste Land' Eliot also utilized Carl Jung's theory of primordial images or archetypes. With these materials Eliot constructs a poem of which the dominant theme is the contrast between human universals and modern materialism and banality. The epigraph is from the *Satyricon* of Petronius: "With my own eyes I saw the Sibyl suspended in a jar at Cumae, and when her followers said to her, Sibyl, what do you want? She replied, I want to die.' Thus two motifs of the poem are suggested: universal mythology and the death-wish deriving from boredom...."

The poem then ends with a Sanskrit benediction; the word shantih is equivalent to 'the Peace that passes all understanding.' But this consolatory note is almost ironic in the context of the previous pessimistic passage. Thus the poem's theme is that the mythical death and rebirth of Osiris, Adonis, or Christ, the ritual which has nourished mankind for centuries, is no longer possible, since our age has lost its contact with the past and has become spiritually sterile. 'The Waste Land' is not, as is sometimes thought, a mere portrait of the generation of the Twenties; it is an analysis of the predicament of modern man in his relation to the universal spiritual forces of nature."

Donald Heiney
Recent American Literature 4
(Barron's Educational Series 1958) 487-90

"A five-parted work of 434 lines entitled 'The Waste Land,' with sudden wrenching juxtapositions, thematic links between section and section, fragments quoted from several languages with no one present to whose mind they can occur: this dense textural unity...must have seemed to Eliot a little fractious until he had gotten used to the poem in its final form; which, as everyone who has encountered it knows, must take some time..."

We shall do well to discard the notes as much as possible; they have bedeviled discussion for decades.... 'I have sometimes thought,' Eliot has said, 'of getting rid of these notes; but now they can never be unstuck. They have had almost greater popularity than the poem itself...It was just, no doubt, that I should pay my tribute to the work of Miss Jessie Weston; but I regret having sent so many enquirers off on a wild goose chase after Tarot cards and the Holy Grail.' We have license therefore to ignore them, and instead 'endeavor to grasp what the poetry is aiming to be...to grasp its entelechy.' That the entelechy is graspable without source-hunting, and without even appeal to any but the most elementary knowledge of one or two myths and a few Shakespearean tags, is a statement requiring temerity to sustain in the face of all the scholarship that has been expended during a third of a century of these 434 lines."

Hugh Kenner
The Invisible Poet, T.S. Eliot
(Obolensky 1959) 145-52

“‘The Waste Land’ is the most important poem of the twentieth century, that is, the one that has caused the most discussion and is said by critics to be the culmination of the modern ‘mythic’ style. The poem, by Eliot’s own admission, is a collaboration with Pound. Pound edited it and removed a third or two thirds of it. The ‘continuity,’ we can assume, is therefore the work of Pound, who abhorred continuity in his own more ambitious poetry....That it is lacking in unity is obvious (assuming, as I do, that unity is a literary virtue). Any part of ‘The Waste Land’ can be switched with any other part without changing the sense of the poem.

Aside from the so-called ‘mythic’ form, which is worthless and not even true—for Eliot misread James Joyce’s *Ulysses* when he saw it as a parallel to Homer—the underlying unit of the poem is tonal and dramatic, exactly as a Victorian narrative poem would be. Eliot tries to conceal this indispensable literary method by mixing languages, breaking off dramatic passages, and by dividing the poem into sections with titles. But what really keeps the poem moving is its rhetoric, its switches from description to exclamation to interrogation to expletive, sometimes very beautifully, as in the passages beginning ‘Unreal City’....

‘The Waste Land,’ because of its great critical reputation, not because of any inherent worth it might have, is one of the curiosities of English literature. Its critical success was, I dare say, carefully planned and executed, and it was not beyond the realm of possibility that the poem was originally a hoax, as some of the first readers insisted. But hoax or not, it was very shortly made the sacred cow of modern poetry and the object of more pious literary nonsense than any modern work save the *Cantos* of Pound.”

Karl Shapiro
In Defense of Ignorance
(Random House 1960) 53-54

"I take it that the case of Pound’s *Cantos* goes without saying; they are the wreckage of poetry; brilliant passages, sometimes long, sometimes the merest splinters, floating in a turbid sea of stammering and incoherent mumble. But even in ‘The Waste Land’ and the *Four Quartets*, where the level of the individual passages is far more consistent, and where it is just possible to give their arrangement some sort of publicly valid justification, the organizing principle is still quite inadequate for poems of this scope. These poems survive, and will survive, not assisted by their structure, but in spite of it. This is true of much of the work of Pound, Eliot and Wallace Stevens—to name three of the founding fathers of modern poetry. Their poetry suffers, even on the level on which it functions so persuasively and brilliantly, from the lack of any other level, the lack of public, explicit, paraphrasable discourse."

Graham Hough
“Imagism and Its Consequences”
Reflections on a Literary Revolution
(Catholic U of America 1960) 2, 38

“Each of the five sections of ‘The Waste Land’ introduces a journey undertaken by the inhabitants, generally a journey of no spiritual import, part of a social routine. Only in sections IV and V—‘Death by Water’ (the voyage of the Phoenician sailor) and ‘What the Thunder Said’—does the traveling assume any wider scope. The first three sections of the poem deal with what we may call the social realities of the waste land: with what its people see and do. This picture is illuminated by occasional flashes of insight on the part of some of the speakers, by the introduction of Tiresias, who comments on the action, and by the hidden commentary of the allusions to past literatures....

In the fifth part the emphasis changes and we are shown behind the social coverings to see directly the disease of the land and its people. It has entirely the atmosphere of nightmare, but this apparent fantasy probes beyond the earlier social reality to the basic issues of the poem. We remain conscious of the preceding *background*, but are aware now that it was partly responsible for concealing from the people the true nature of their position....From his vision of the world, which forms the *foreground* of this poetry, Eliot moves to contemplation of the true reality, contained in God, the still point. This process continues to the *Four Quartets*, where it is the social reality that is largely left implied, and direct contemplation of spiritual affairs occupies the foreground.” [Italics added.]

D. E. S. Maxwell
The Poetry of T. S. Eliot

(Barnes & Noble 1961) 97-101

“‘The Waste Land’ has become such an assured part of the twentieth-century consciousness, one of the major vehicles for its sensibility, that we easily forget the transformation in worked. Realizing some of the possibilities latent in ‘Gerontion,’ it in effect at once proposed and confirmed a new basic style so powerful that the older basic style, charged deeply with egocentrism, would no longer be viable unless it met the challenge Eliot put to it....The mythic truth of “the Waste Land’ was a truth pertaining to that area in the psychic cosmos at which historical process was touched and stabilized by a supervening theistic order. The fragments of history, understood mythically, manifested the fragmented consciousness of modern man.”

Roy Harvey Pearce
The Continuity of American Poetry
(Princeton 1961) 306, 310

"And now, as fierce men in England and the United States undertake to destroy the myth of Eliot, it is appropriate to return to that time when *The Dial*, introducing ‘The Waste Land,’ decided to sponsor Eliot’s work....[Eliot] and Cummings shared essentially the same opinion on the quality prime in art of the first rank: it must be intense. When a work is intense, Eliot and Cummings agreed, it provokes in the reader a heightened sense of his own being....A man reared within a native utopian tradition, taught to admire only those intense works which bring an audience to life, Eliot has written a continental literature in the American grain....Alone among American poets he was not victimized by that ‘localism’ which...takes so much of American writing out of the field of comparison with European letters’ and requires for our writers a ‘special standard of judgment’."

William Wasserstrom
“T. S. Eliot and *The Dial*”
The Sewanee Review
Vol. 70, No.1 (Winter 1962) 81-92

“A work of 434 lines in five sections, ‘The Waste Land’ is undoubtedly the most famous and influential poem written in English during the first half of the 20th century. Many of its symbols were drawn from Jesse L. Weston’s *From Ritual to Romance*, a study of themes and legends, and James G. Frazer’s *Golden Bough*, a monumental work on anthropology and myth. Basically, ‘The Waste Land’ is an examination of modern Western civilization in terms drawn from the Grail legend; the Fisher King is ill and impotent, and his kingdom is laid waste; only the arrival of the Grail knight, who will ask the three thaumaturgical questions, will destroy the spell and restore the kingdom to fertility. The poem is highly allusive and ironic, and consists of a panoramic juxtaposition of episodes, historical sketches, imaginary landscapes, miniature dramas, and lyrical interludes.

The first section, ‘The Burial of the Dead,’ begins with April, ‘the cruelest month,’ in which the advent of spring only serves to reawaken the dull, sterile world to an awareness of its condition. Various protagonists and scenes are introduced which are allusively symptomatic of the living death of the 20th-century waste land. Section II, ‘A Game of Chess,’ deals primarily with lust and sterility. There is a sharp contrast between the two scenes, the one in an opulently furnished bedroom, the other in a London pub. The title of the section is taken from Thomas Middleton’s play, *Women Beware Women*, in which a woman is distracted by a game of chess while her daughter-in-law is being raped. In ‘The Fire Sermon’ (III) the 20th-century world is merged with the past by means of the figures of the fisherman and of Tiresias, the ancient seer who had seen snakes coupling and had been changed, for a time, into a woman."

Max J. Herzberg & staff
The Reader’s Encyclopedia of American Literature
(Crowell 1962)

“‘Genuine poetry,’ T. S. Eliot has written, ‘can communicate before it is understood.’ It is well to keep this truth in mind in approaching what is perhaps the most celebrated, the most difficult, and the most influential of modern poems. On its publication in 1922 ‘The Waste Land’ was met by one group of readers with cries of outrage and indignation: at best it was a muddle of obscurity; at worst it was, as one critic

called it, 'the greatest hoax of the century.' But for another group of readers it seemed to sum up everything they obscurely felt about the emotional sterility of modern life, especially of metropolitan life, in the postwar western world. It would be wrong to assert that these readers *understood* it: the poem is imperfectly understood, after much critical study, even today. But it thrilled a nerve in these readers: it communicated to them *before* it was understood.

The reasons for its obscurity are obvious. It contains passages from seven different languages, including Sanskrit; it quotes or alludes to some thirty or forty other works of literature, from the Bible to little-known popular songs; it jumps without warning from Europe to Asia, from present to past, from subject to subject, from tone to tone, depending for its effects on violent juxtapositions rather than on orderly transitions; it leaves its various speakers unidentified, and these speakers, according to Eliot's notes, melt into one another; finally, it is based, like James Joyce's *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*, on a substructure of recondite ritual and myth—the myth of the maimed fisher-king whose lands have been laid waste by a curse laid on them, the myth of the Holy Grail whose mysteries, when learned, will restore his lands to fertility.

It is best to disregard these sources of difficulty on one's first approach to the poem. There are, after all, passages which offer little difficulty; and one can sense the mood, the emotional meaning, of the whole without understanding it with intellectual precision. The central meaning of the poem comes through despite its obscurity of detail.

The theme of the poem is the emotional and spiritual sterility of modern life, of life without faith or love. The poem makes us feel how much of modern life is merely death. Its central metaphor is that of the desert, or waste land—the barren land where nothing lives or grows. The waste land is Eliot's image for modern civilization. Modern civilization is largely urban; hence Eliot presents his theme in terms of city life, specifically of London. Its king is the maimed fisher-king of the Grail legends, symbolic of the sick soul. The attempt to learn the secrets of the Grail, which will cure the king and restore his lands, is unsuccessful, but Eliot gives some indication of the nature of those secrets—of the qualities that have been lost and not been found—in the three Sanskrit words uttered by the thunder at the end of the poem: *Datta* (Give), *Dayadhvam* (Sympathize), *Damyata* (Control). The theme of sterility is carried largely by glimpses into the inconsequential or sordid lives of inhabitants of the modern waste land. These people live insignificant lives without faith and without love. A number of sordid sexual relationships are depicted in the poem, all of them marked by the failure or absence of love.

The poem will be most rewarding, of course, to those readers who have enough literary knowledge to respond to Eliot's use of allusions. Allusions may be used either straightforwardly, to reinforce and deepen the emotion that is being presented, or ironically, to comment on a situation by the use of contrast. Eliot uses allusions in both ways, but most characteristically he uses them ironically. Three examples must suffice. Perhaps the author alluded to most often is Dante. The line 'I had not thought death had undone so many' near the end of Part I is a direct quotation from the *Inferno*. Its use is ironic because it is here applied to the living, and it transforms the modern-city waste land into a region of hell. The London crowds 'walking round in a ring' (to and from work), each man with his eyes fixed before his feet, are the living dead.

In Part III, which depicts a number of loveless sexual relationships outside of marriage, the lines 'But at my back from time to time I hear / The sound of horses and motors...' combines allusions to Marvell's 'To His Coy Mistress' ('But at my back I always hear / Time's winged chariot hurrying near') and to John Day's 'Parliament of Bees' ('You shall hear / A noise of horns and hunting, which shall bring / Actaon to Diana in the spring'); but Eliot's chariot is an auto, his horns are automobile horns not hunting horns, and they bring not Actaon to Diana but the vulgarian Sweeney to the married Mrs. Porter. Even more effective is the allusion to a song from Goldsmith's *Vicar of Wakefield* which concludes the typist-home-at-teatime episode. Goldsmith's song asserts that 'When lovely woman stoops to folly / And finds too late that men betray,' her only recourse 'is to die.' But Eliot's 'lovely woman,' after her seduction by the 'young man carbuncular,' only says, 'Well now that's done: and I'm glad it's over,' and puts a record on the gramophone. Sexual transgression has lost significance, both emotionally and morally, in the modern waste land. Eliot is able to make these points dramatically by the skillful use of allusion."

Laurence Perrine

100 American Poems of the Twentieth Century
(Harcourt 1966) 130-32
with James M. Reid

“After ‘The Waste Land’ Eliot never used the mythical method again. It had served him well there to express his feeling (which may or may not have come to conscious thought) that sex and religion are intricately interwoven—for the Holy Grail, or cup, and the Knight’s lance, of the Grail legends, were transparently sexual symbols—and his growing conviction that myth was a kind of knowing, and that it would be found the only possible answer to the negations of scientific naturalism....Only a very clever technician in verse would have thought of describing the typist’s ‘love affair’...in hidden disintegrating sonnets.”

Hyatt H. Waggoner
American Poets: From the Puritans to the Present
(Houghton 1968) 422, 424

Michael Hollister (2021)