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Visible Poet: T. S. Eliot and Modernist Studies

Matthew Hart

*T. S. Eliot and the
Cultural Divide*, David
E. Chinitz. University of
Chicago Press, 2003.

*New World Modernisms:
T. S. Eliot, Derek
Walcott, and Kamau
Brathwaite*, Charles W.
Pollard. University of
Virginia Press, 2004.

*There are no longer any individuals
or individual poems, only a future*

*more shattery than ever but still
nearer to us than the present.*

Bob Perelman, “From the Front”

1. Invisibility

In his 1959 monograph *The Invisible Poet: T. S. Eliot*, Hugh Kenner wrote that “there has been no more instructive, more coherent, or more distinguished literary career in this century, all of it carried on in the full view of the public, with copious explanations at every stage; and the darkness did not comprehend it” (xii). Alluding to John 1:5, Kenner describes Eliot as one who, despite great publicity and explanation, still needs a little analytical daylight: unlike the Son of Man who declares himself the light of the world, the Eliot of 1959 still awaits the disciple to properly comprehend his word. However, Kenner has ambitions beyond the correction of a literary-critical discourse that—and the present essay, for one, is a perfect example—forgets the warp and weft of Eliot’s language, “slips off into *ideas*, when it doesn’t begin there,” and remains resolutely “mesmerized by personality” (x). Kenner sets his sights on the “invisible” Eliot, the poetic don and the inviolable “Voice,” “which is the persisting reality, the entranced self-expanding *élan vital* of which each word is a momentary modulation” (231).

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The allusion to the Philamel stanzas of "A Game of Chess" (1922) is mine; indeed, I have rather taken "Voice" out of context. Kenner is not saying that *Eliot's* voice is the "persisting reality . . . of which each word is a momentary modulation," but that, for Eliot, "Voice" is the grounds of language and meaning itself: "the word, in Eliot's imagination, relates itself most immediately not to any object which it names, not to the dictionary or to a system of discourse, but to the Voice" (231). Yet Kenner's capitalized "Voice" is no simple thing. It is shaky epistemological bedrock, it is the foundation, too, of the early Eliot characters: Prufrock, Gerontion, and Tiresias, who come to us as a "Voice with no ascertainable past and no particularized present," as "pseudo-persons" that are really just "congeries of effects" (41). Kenner describes J. Alfred Prufrock as "a name plus a Voice . . . a possible zone of consciousness where these materials can maintain a vague congruity; no more than that; certainly not a person" (40). In this way, "Voice" both exceeds and connects related terms like *meaning* and *personality*. Kenner describes how the vagueness of Prufrock's character, "blurring into the highly literary tapestry of which he is an unemphatic feature," would be a "defect" in an Alfred Tennyson or Robert Browning (42). For Eliot, on the contrary, Prufrock's tendency to disappear into the furnishings is "the thoroughly deliberated focal point" (42) of a poetics that, though it originates from a sensibility all Eliot's own, was "brought to fruition" under the auspices of F. H. Bradley (43).

The critical novelty of *Invisible Poet* (written after Kenner abandoned an initial collaboration with Marshall McLuhan) lies, in part, in the way it lights with a Bradleyan torch the darkness that did not comprehend:

The study of Bradley . . . may be said to have done three things [for Eliot]. It solved his *critical* problem, providing him with a point of view towards history . . .; it freed him from the Laforguan posture of the ironist with his back to a wall, by affirming the artificiality of *all* personality, including the one we intimately suppose to be our true one; not only the faces we prepare but the "we" that prepares; and it released him from any notion that the art his temperament badè him practice was an eccentric art, evading for personal and temporary reasons a more orderly, more "normal" unfolding from statement to statement. (55)

The ledger is pretty full. Bradley's philosophy satisfies the want of a "liberating view of history" and thus explains how Eliot's distinguished modernism charts a course between tradition and

experiment (Kenner 56). It provides a view of poetry as an art beyond Baudelarian symbolism and communicative rationalism. Most importantly, Bradley confirms what Eliot must have already intuited in writing “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” (1917) and “Portrait of a Lady” (1917): that personality is the collective fiction of a world in which experience is private but depends utterly upon the contingent presence of others. The “Voice” of the early poems, then, is phenomenological, predicated on the relation between self and other, and radically unstable. It is the sound of a self that, as Eliot put it in his 1916 *Monist* essay on Leibniz and Bradley, “is a construction in space and time . . . an object among others, a self among others, [that] could not exist save in a common world” (Eliot, “Leibniz” 204). It is a personality that, like all Bradleyan subjects and objects, only exists inasmuch as it coheres now, at this moment, embodying a past that, to quote from a very famous essay on tradition, “should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past” (Eliot, *Selected Prose* 39). Just as the personality of history (let us call it, suspending for a minute our geographical scruples, the “mind of Europe”) is “a mind which changes” (Eliot, *Selected Prose* 39), so is the personality of the individual poet or persona engaged in “a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality” (Eliot, *Selected Prose* 40). For, as any student of Eliot should know: “Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion”—although “only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to want to escape from these things” (Eliot, *Selected Prose* 43).

Such, at least, is the thesis of *Invisible Poet*, where Eliot’s inexplicability becomes a problem of philosophy rather than sociology and biography, which are “not our business anyhow” (xiii). The contradiction between the impersonality thesis of “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1919) and the multiple public *personae* of Mr. Thomas Stearns Eliot—from “the Reverend Eliot” and the “Pope of Russell Square,” to “the Elder Statesman of Poetic Revolution” (105)—is untangled once we understand that all personalities are metaphysical fictions, merely performative facts. Likewise, the question of Eliot’s difficulty is settled once we understand that his invisibility is neither a personal tic nor a function of ivory-tower abstruseness, but the grounds of modernism’s poetic and critical triumph.

2. Seeing Through

I have dwelt on *Invisible Poet* because, reading it again next to two new monographs on Eliot, I am struck by how much things

have changed, yet remained the same. (Since this is all rather cliché, I'm glad to confirm that *Invisible Poet* remains a very good book, well worth the trouble of re-reading.) For Kenner, Eliot's invisibility is the key to his greatness, but it is not long since Eliot seemed in danger of becoming invisible in the worst possible way. I refer to the invisibility that is the curse of the despised and unread.

David Chinitz warms to this theme in the introduction to *T.S. Eliot and the Cultural Divide* (2003), quoting Cynthia Ozick's 1989 judgment that "by the close of the Eighties, only 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' appears to have survived the indifference of the schools" (Ozick 4).¹ Ozick's assessment is hyperbolic. It is hardly true that "the mammoth prophetic presence of T. S. Eliot himself . . . the latest generations do not know at all" (Ozick 4), for whatever Eliot's standing in the literary press, his works have never, in my experience, disappeared from educational syllabi.² As Chinitz points out, Ozick is not really interested in "the vicissitudes of a poet's reputation" (2); for it is not just that Eliot has vanished into welcome invisibility, but that we can no longer recognize the poet who was identical with "high art, when art was at its most serious and elitist" (Ozick 9). This shift is in part due to poetry's long decline from its position as the elite literary art, partly to the collapse of "high" culture as a whole. Chinitz's monograph, meanwhile, explains the final third of this equation: the fraction that never crosses Ozick's mind. For Eliot, whatever his critics and defenders suggest, was deeply involved in the consumption, creation, and criticism of popular culture. Chinitz goes beyond the editorial policies of *Criteria*s old and *New* and tries, instead, to correct our central literary-historical metaphor of Eliot as "the hero or antihero of a losing battle to defend a pristine and sacralized high art from the threatening pollution of 'lower levels' of culture" (5). He notes that there has always been sporadic awareness of Eliot's interest in things like jazz, and he acknowledges a decade of scholarship by scholars such as Lawrence Rainey, Leonard Diepeveen, Cassandra Laity, Rachel Blau DuPlessis, and Michael North. Still, his book is the first to systematically map Eliot's investments in popular song, theater, stage comedy, radio, television, and the cult of celebrity. Against the invisibility that flows from the death of high art, Chinitz offers us an Eliot we hardly knew.

There are many surprising things in this analysis, some of which we ought to know by right, like the fact that the notion of Eliot as *only* an aesthete and elitist began very early and was often tied to tedious resentments (stand up Dr Williams, stand up Ms Monroe) about his expatriate life in England; or that even his

“most perceptive readers,” such as Edmund Wilson, had no problem writing about “futile aestheticism” barely “three years after Eliot’s 1928 preface to *The Sacred Wood* spoke of his current project as ‘the relation of poetry to the spiritual and social life of its time and of other times’” (159). However, the most interesting portion of Chinitz’s book comes in his reading of Eliot as a popular icon. He reminds us that Eliot was a celebrity of the first order, capable of attracting an audience of 14,000 to a lecture held in the basketball arena at the University of Minnesota (and of negotiating an astronomical \$2,000 fee). Yet the great irony—and this is Chinitz’s best insight—is that this very celebrity guaranteed the false image of Eliot the high art colossus:

[Eliot’s] celebrity was *based on* a perception that he was above the rabble who watched television and read bad novels. . . . The central importance of popular culture to Eliot’s work and thought was thus lost entirely. Eliot’s public—those thousands who flocked to his lectures, those millions who tuned in to *The Cocktail Party* on television, and the many more millions worldwide who came to know him by his name and reputation—came to him because (to recur to Cynthia Ozick’s formulation) he *was* high art at a moment when high art carried “power and prestige” magnified many times by its being menaced from below. No wonder people came “to get a look at him before he died”: his moment was, by definition, always passing, and his like would never be seen again. That he was the last of his kind was a condition of his fame. (Chinitz 184)

This Eliot is the poet of *The Waste Land* (1922) and “King Bolo” (1914), of *Ash-Wednesday* (1930) and *Sweeney Agonistes* (1925); the critic of Dante and the eulogist of Marie Lloyd. He is the writer whose verse dramas packed Broadway and the West End—and yet we have somehow missed the only really amazing thing about that fact, which is not that a poet should be interested in writing verse drama, but that he should desire a *mass* audience for the revival of this moribund art.³ In place of philosophical invisibility, Chinitz offers us a way to *see through* the too-present corpse of Eliot’s mandarin celebrity and so re-envision him as a living presence in modern literary history. In so doing, he acknowledges Kenner’s importance, citing *Invisible Poet* as one of the rare studies to give “Eliot’s relations with popular culture any extended consideration,” but complains that the invisible Eliot “does seem rather *too* arch, too much the confident manipulator” (6). This is a fair comment, and it is to our benefit that Chinitz

eschews the well-trodden logic of Bradleyan invisibility in favor of a rigorously historical analysis, where Eliot's "high" and "low" cultural identities conflict, are occluded, and are demystified.

3. All Too Visible

Yet there are risks to this approach. For the decline in Eliot's celebrity should be attributed not just to the waning of high cultural authority, or the obfuscation of his more populist qualities, but to his all-too-visible affiliations with authoritarian, even proto-fascist, ideologies. It is not just that Eliot needs to be seen through, we might object, but that we have seen him too well and chosen to look away. Chinitz is right to say that "while Eliot must be held partly responsible for the mythology surrounding his cultural outlook," we must also examine "outside forces" if we are to understand the persistence of opinions like Ozick's (158). However, the point is not just that Eliot helped create the unpleasant myths through which we comprehend his writing and thought; it is that these myths are partly accurate.⁴

Hence the centrality, in recent criticism, of the question of anti-Semitism.⁵ For Fredric Jameson, for instance, the Jew-hating tendencies of the male London modernists forms an inescapable part of his study of "the modernist as fascist," which aligns modernism and fascism as coterminous protests "against the reified experience of an alienated social life in which, against [their] own will, [the modernists] remain formally and ideologically locked" (14). This is perhaps the clearest example of the kind of critical discourse in which, until recently, Eliot's critical reputation has been immersed. I do not mean to imply that *Fables of Aggression: Wyndham Lewis, the Modernist as Fascist* (1979) is particularly essential to Eliot studies; rather, in the brevity of its engagement with Eliot, we can discern the extent to which his name became a by-word for reaction. Jameson compares Lewis's defense of the "strong personality," with "the ideology of T. S. Eliot (for whom Maurras' *Action française* takes the place of Mussolini for Pound, or Hitler for Lewis)" (116). He notes that "Eliot's aesthetic and political neoclassicism would seem . . . to foresee quite different solutions to the 'problem' of the personality than that of Lewis"; and yet, "both the defense of individualism and the strong personality against the inroads of the masses, and the abdication of the personality to the security of spiritual and temporal authority remain locked into the categories of the individual subject, and, mere ideological permutations of the same underlying system, stand as complementary responses to the same fundamental

experience of *anomie*" (116). Jameson thus links Eliot's manifesto of poetic impersonality to the "obscure sense" that "social space is contracting," leaving "no structural or institutional place to call [one's] own" (114). In situating Eliot within this reactionary protest against the relentless desublimation of the subject, he presents a quick array of all the least fashionable Eliotic characteristics: the sympathy with fascist politics, the neoclassical aesthetics, and the desire for religious and political order.

Jameson's representation of Eliot as a bourgeois proto-fascist is not in itself unusual or especially prescient. George Orwell, for example, speculated in 1940 that, as regards the politics of reaction, "Eliot has remained aloof, but if forced at the pistol's point to choose between Fascism and some more democratic form of Socialism, would probably choose Fascism" (558). Such attitudes only solidified over the 1980s and 1990s and are only now being reexamined by critics who, taking Eliot's authoritarian conservatism as axiomatic, nevertheless wish to recover the radicalism of his poetic example.⁶ However, the problem facing any optimistic reading of these engagements is that Eliot's aesthetics rarely escape the shadow of his cultural and political criticism. For instance, Charles W. Pollard's fine first book, *New World Modernisms: T. S. Eliot, Derek Walcott, and Kamau Brathwaite* (2004), makes the provocative argument that Eliot's "discrepant cosmopolitan modernism" was crucial to the development of the Anglophone Caribbean poets Derek Walcott and Kamau Brathwaite (9). Eliot's poetics, Pollard contends, is far from antithetical to these very different postcolonial poetics; because Eliot strives to "imagine an increasingly comprehensive but still contingent sense of cultural wholeness," his work remains a profoundly important resource for poets who seek to integrate the diverse strands of Caribbean island culture (Pollard 6). This is something we have too often missed, for "postcolonial theory has failed to see the implicit modernism in Caribbean literature because it had relied too readily on a faulty historical parallel (i.e., that modernism is to postmodernism as colonialism is to postcolonialism)" (15). Pollard therefore returns us to the idea of a cosmopolitan Eliot who, to repeat one of Pollard's quotations from Eliot's "Dante," writes a poetry in which "localization seems if anything to emphasize . . . universality, because it cuts across the modern division of nationality" (Pollard 207).⁷ This remains, however, a "discrepant" and provisional kind of universality. Pollard describes it as emerging from Eliot's "comparative" and "collocating" method, which yokes together the fragments of speech and cultures in order to "construct new shared but contingent meanings" (61). It is on this basis that Eliot remains of terrific use to Walcott and

Brathwaite, who write themselves into a position where they are “Not Borrowers, But Bearers” of that most ambivalent of burdens—a tradition.

Yet the cultural geography of Eliot’s poetics can never be wholly explained by its usefulness to radical or postcolonial literatures; nor can we cast off the nation, just yet, for the high plains or island chains of the local–universal. Pollard draws his language of “discrepant cosmopolitanism” from James Clifford and is understandably critical of Timothy Brennan’s attack, in *At Home in the World: Cosmopolitanism Now* (1997), on Clifford’s anthropology of traveling cultures.⁸ Pollard argues, against Brennan, that Clifford does not understand cosmopolitanism to be a variant of “Euro-American universalism” but that, rather, “insurgency, contestation, and divergence are embedded in Clifford’s concept” (Pollard 8); it is for this reason, he implies, that “discrepant cosmopolitanism” offers postcolonial poets (and post-postcolonial critics of modernism) a way to negotiate the mixture of radical differences and pervasive continuities that make up literary and political modernity (Pollard 7). However, this formulation does not quite address the politics of Brennan’s critique, which is predicated upon a defense of nations as “manageable communities” that, for all their imaginary or essentializing qualities, “may be as much a matter of practical default as of ideal enchantment, or manipulation” (Brennan, “Cosmopolitanism” 80). The nation, so often dismissed by cultural and political theorists as a dangerous relic of modernity, is instead recuperated by Brennan as, “in the current phase of worldwide neo-liberal hegemony . . . a manageable (albeit top heavy) site within which the working poor can make limited claims on power” (75). Seen in this light, even a cosmopolitan “coming into ‘modernity’ as the global entrance into a common hybrid self-consciousness by formerly subjugated peoples” will fail to “[disturb] the self-portraiture of the West,” which consists of a “discourse of the universal that is inherently local—a locality that’s always surreptitiously imperial” (81).⁹

It is not hard to see the relevance of this to Eliot’s vexed position in the field of modernist studies. Indeed, when we draw the map of Eliot’s cultural affiliations we cannot help but note how a hardly surreptitious imperial Europeanness is at the crux of his poetics, especially as it emerges in a late text like the 1944 lecture “What Is a Classic?,” which takes the Greco-Latin “bloodstream of European literature” as its subject (Eliot, *Selected Prose* 130). It is therefore no surprise that not everyone shares Pollard’s commitment to reading Eliot as a major force in the development of postcolonial modernity.¹⁰ For J. M. Coetzee, “What is a Classic?” is symptomatic of a critical project that represents “the essentially

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magical exercise of a man trying to redefine the world around himself—America, Europe—rather than confronting the reality of his not-so-grand position as a man whose narrowly academic, Eurocentric education had prepared him for little else but life as a mandarin in one of the New England ivory towers” (8, 9). We have returned, here, to Chinitz’s *bête noire*: Eliot as elite cultural representative, imperial clerk, donnish Englishman *manqué*; indeed, Coetzee’s hostility is, he says, greatly explained by “the fact that nowhere does Eliot reflect on the fact of his own Americanness, or at least his American origins, and therefore on the somewhat odd angle at which he comes, honouring a European poet to a European audience” (Coetzee 2).

Such evasions are in Coetzee’s opinion amplified by Eliot’s personal assumption of Englishness: “by 1944 the investment in this identity was complete. Eliot *was* an Englishman, though, in his own mind at least, a Roman Englishman” (3). However, if Eliot’s lecture contains no reflection on his Americanness, then neither does Coetzee’s.¹¹ By contrast, one important strain in recent Eliot criticism is the awareness of the complexity and residual importance of Eliot’s American identity, which is—to say the least—far from explained by the circular logic of *East Coker*, where the proposition that “Home is where one starts from” (Eliot, *Collected Poems* 203) merges gracefully into a repetition and reversal of the poem’s mantra: “In my beginning is my end In my end is my beginning” (Eliot, *Collected Poems* 196, 204).¹² I want to suggest, all too briefly, that what Pollard calls Eliot’s “discrepant cosmopolitanism” might be better described via Brennan’s portrayal of *internationalism* as “an ideology of the domestically restricted, the recently relocated, the provisionally exiled and the temporarily weak” (Brennan 77).

In a July 1919 letter to his brother Henry, Eliot reflects on his foreignness. Immediately after sympathizing with Henry about “how barbarous life in America is,” he turns from the reasons for exile to its costs: “Don’t think that I find it easy to live over here. It is damned hard work to live with a foreign nation and cope with them – one is always coming up against differences of feeling that make one humiliated and lonely. One remains always a foreigner – only the lower classes can assimilate” (Eliot, *Letters* 310). Here, foreignness is an effect of both geographical dislocation and the nature of English class-society, a feeling that is accentuated in a letter to Mary Hutchinson, written only nine days after the missive to Henry:

I don’t know whether I think you more complicated than you are – but I have fewer *delusions* about you than you

think – but no doubt a great deal of *ignorance*. I certainly don't recognise the portrait you hold up as painted by me. But remember that I am a *metic* – a foreigner, and that I want to understand you, and all the background and tradition of you. I shall try to be frank – because the attempt is so very much worth while with you – it is very difficult with me – both by inheritance and because of my very suspicious and cowardly disposition. But I may simply prove to be a savage. (Eliot, *Letters* 318)

Eliot's flirtation with the language of personal understanding is both coy and revealing. After five years in England, he still considers himself ignorant about the "background and tradition" of his English correspondent. Still, as Jean-Michel Rabaté has commented about this letter, the important thing is not whether "Eliot feels himself to be a savage, but that he might be seen as one," a social anxiety that does much to connect this letter to his earlier comment about the ability of the "lower classes" to "assimilate" (212). The key term in this context is the Greek word *metic*, which we might usefully read as a cognate of today's bureaucratic term, "resident alien." Scornful about England yet skeptical about the value of returning to America, Eliot justifies his ambiguous exile with the assertion: "Once there was a civilisation here, I believe, that's a curious and exciting point" (Eliot, *Letters* 431). In a move that recurs in Pollard's book, Rabaté links Eliot's *metic* self to his concern with the phenomenology of tradition. In this analysis, the "heap of broken images" (Eliot, *Waste Land* 135) of "The Burial of the Dead" is the problem the *metic* sets out to solve (Rabaté 213). The only way out, Pollard argues, is through work, for tradition, which "cannot be inherited," must now be labored over: "As an American, Eliot stands out of the direct line of descent under the logic of tradition as cultural legacy. So he shifts from the metaphor of inheritance to that of labor, and tradition becomes property that a poet acquires not by blood but by hard work" (Pollard 46). Though there is no gainsaying the European direction of Eliot's cultural politics, "Tradition and the Individual Talent" is the work of a painfully self-exiled writer, eager—like Brathwaite and Walcott—to redraw the seating-plan of the European high tables. This is a job of work that Coetzee judges from the perspective of Eliot's ultimate victory. However, in 1919 that victory was far from certain and the stain of nationality, expressed via an *international* poetics that reworks English letters from the standpoint of a resident alien, had not yet been obscured by the Virgilian certainties of Eliot's late style.

4. Darkness Visible

Despite their similar conclusions, Pollard and Chinitz hardly share the same agenda or critical method. They are united, rather, by the desire to restore lost complexities to the history of Eliot's writing and reception—and, moreover, to the idea of modernism itself, which Pollard, again citing Clifford, calls a “translation term” that has “general application” but which, in its “taint of location by class, gender, [and] race” is “useful in reminding us of the limits of comparative concepts” (179). These projects are peculiar to the present moment of modernist studies, where the field has been transformed by what Chinitz calls “the rediscovered variety and vitality of early-twentieth-century writing” (5), which these books extend to the often reified fields of “high” modernism, cultural studies, and postcolonial poetics. The more particular challenge is to sketch an Eliot with the darkness visible: one whose identity is complex, but not wholly protean; neither apolitical nor a concentration camp guard; whose recovered Americanness does not obscure the political conservatism that emerges in inter-war Europe; and whose “Roman” Englishness should not become (at least not without reflection) a synecdoche for his worst political traits. For the sake of exemplification, I will briefly explore the second and third of these imperatives.

Eliot's “once there was a culture here,” should remind us that *The Waste Land's* tragedy of unreconciled voices is not just a phenomenological problem: it is a metic's political reaction to the post-1918 crisis in European national cultures, involving the sense that the home of homes is burning down the house. The falling towers of “What the Thunder Said”—“Jerusalem Athens Alexandria/Vienna London/Unreal” (*Waste Land* 145)—symbolize Eliot's dissatisfaction with the Treaty of Versailles, the financial implications of which he struggled with in his day job at Lloyd's Bank, and the Balkanization of Europe at the altar of Woodrow Wilson's belief in national self-determination.¹³ The collapsing towers of greater Europe, especially as they appear in draft, exemplify this complexity:

What is that sound high in the air
Murmur of maternal lamentation
Who are those hooded hordes swarming
~~perished~~
endless
Over ~~Polish~~ plains, stumbling in cracked earth
Ringed with a flat horizon, only.

What is the city over the mountains
 Cracks and reformed and bursts breaks in the violet air
 Falling
~~Tumbling~~ towers
~~Athens~~/Jerusalem, Athens, Alexandria
 Vienna, London. Unreal
 Unreal (*Waste Land* 75)

It is worth noticing how few changes Ezra Pound and Valerie Eliot made to this section, Pound's comments being restricted to an "OK OK from here on I think" above line 1 (*Waste Land* 71). With the exception of punctuation, the differences between the draft and published copies lie in the choice of an adjective, an adverb, the decision to give Jerusalem (historical? spiritual?) priority over Athens, and the erasure of the penultimate "Unreal." The most interesting change comes in the substitution of "endless" for "Polish" and "perished." Eliot's headnote identifies "the present decay of Eastern Europe" as one of his themes and the line-notes go on to quote Hermann Hesse's *Blick in Chaos* (1920) on the eastern half of Europe that is "already on the way to chaos" (*Waste Land* 148).¹⁴ One can therefore speculate that the initial substitution of "perished" for "Polish" signals Eliot's desire to avoid establishing his theme in too referential a fashion, leaving the task of denotation to the supplementary riddle of the notes.¹⁵ "Polish plains" cannot help but evoke the international politics and national arenas of the inter-war decades, when Poland experienced a brief period of independence. However, in the revised version the mythic temporality of "What the Thunder Said," moving between Gethsemane, Castle Perilous, and the recent history of the Antarctic, means that we have little or no basis for deciding whether the hordes that swarm and stumble across the endlessly unnamed perished plains are Hunnish, Mongol, or Soviet.¹⁶ Rather, as "Ulysses, Order, and Myth" (1923) suggests, they are all three at once: Poland's erasure signals Eliot's "way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history" (Eliot, *Selected Prose* 177). The logic of the mythic method is such that this anarchic panorama is restrained through a paradoxical loosening of reference in favor of ahistorical parallels: the endlessness of the Eastern European plains is, ultimately, a feature of temporality rather than geography.

Yet if mythic restructuring occludes historical reference, then the historicity of the poem is restored through the combined pressure of the Quinn manuscript drafts and Eliot's headnote,

which operate together like an under-painting viewed by X-ray photography. Likewise, *The Waste Land's* sequential intratextuality means that we must reconnect Europe's falling towers with the London of "The Fire Sermon." The city that "Cracks and reforms and bursts in the violet air" not only looks forward to the "bats with baby faces in the violet light" (Eliot, *Waste Land* 145) of the next strophe, but back to Tiresias's evocation of "the violet hour, when the eyes and back/Turn upward from the desk, when the human engine waits/Like a taxi throbbing waiting" (Eliot, *Waste Land* 140). In the repetition of "violet," the stooped and reified frame of the English commuter—citizen of the empire of finance capital—becomes an objective correlative for the collapse of Europe's imperial towers: a litany that ends with London itself.

The "micro-politics of intimacy" suffered by Eliot's citizens may, in Michael Levenson's words, lack "a society stretching out around the desperate dyad" of his loveless pairs—but the poem provides that social context even against its own inclinations towards mythopoeia (4). The ahistorical temporality of Eliot's poems can only ever be partial: nuggets of social fact emerge against the background of mythic time, just as Eliot's "metic" sensibility emerges despite his tendencies to depict himself as an absolutist Anglo. Although this most canonical of Eliot's poems looks forward to his Virgilian cultural criticism, we can—if we choose—observe this tendency against the grain: through its ambivalent engagement with socio-cultural facts, including the poet's own identity as an American émigré working in a London bank. Much rather than another assault upon the socially evasive address *de haut en bas*. We have been stuck with that Eliot for too long.

Notes

1. Chinitz quotes from the rpt in Ozick's *Fame and Folly* (1996); my quotations follow Chinitz's example and are drawn from his engagement with Ozick's essay.
2. Though my university education post-dates Ozick's article by a few years, I can attest that Eliot's poems and essays were assigned in my graduate seminars in England and the US and appeared frequently on my undergraduate syllabi in Scotland. Nor was I only exposed to "Prufrock." My two years of A Level English would have been fundamentally different without Deborah Hunton's introductions to *The Waste Land* and *Four Quartets*. That was the kind of teaching that makes a literary scholar out of a theatrical 16-year-old, though its brilliance probably renders the rest of my experience unrepresentative.
3. Compare Eliot's attitude to that of Yeats, who, when formulating the poetics of his "plays for dancers," proclaimed that verse drama ought to be an

“unpopular” and “accomplished” art, fit for the drawing-room or country house (Jeffares, ed. 191–93).

4. Part of the overall strength of Chinitz’s book is that he remains unsparing about Eliot’s faults, even as he argues for a more generous and multi-faceted approach to his cultural politics. For example: “[Eliot] could see, but he feared to be seen, across the cultural divide. In his reams of prose, Eliot never sustains an analysis of popular culture for more than four or five pages. . . . The popular influence . . . is audible in, even crucial to his poetry; but only in some of the *March Hare* poems, which he did not publish, and in *Sweeney Agonistes*, which he could not finish, does he dare to bring it into the foreground” (187).

5. See Anthony Julius’s *T. S. Eliot, Anti-Semitism, and Literary Form* (1995), Christopher Ricks’s *T. S. Eliot and Prejudice* (1989), and the special issue of *Modernism/Modernity* featuring Ronald Schuchard’s defense of Eliot as an unacknowledged “philo-Semite” (“Burbank with a Baedeker, Eliot with a Cigar: American Intellectuals, Anti-Semitism, and the Idea of Culture”) and responses by eminent Eliot scholars (10.1 [2003]). I find the evidence for Eliot’s anti-Semitism persuasive. In general, I agree with Ronald Bush’s contribution to the Schuchard roundtable, which argues that, for Eliot, “Jews were key images of modernity and ambivalently represented both the positive and negative associations of the modern world. . . . If one identified the extreme [of modernity] as Jewish, though, one remained safe as long as one could safely distinguish oneself as a non-Jew” (34).

6. See, in this context, Marjorie Perloff’s *21st-Century Modernism: The “New” Poetics* (2002), 7–43. Perloff argues that, from the time of the Harvard *March Hare* poems until 1919 there existed an “Avant-Garde Eliot” whom we ought to distinguish from the increasingly conservative writer of the post-“Gerontion” poems.

7. Quoted from Eliot, *Selected Essays*, 239.

8. See Brennan, *At Home in the World*, 267, 270–72, 277–78.

9. Bruce Robbins points out Brennan’s avoidance of the fact that “the working poor have made their most effective claims on state power . . . in the more powerful rather than the less powerful states” (220). In this light, Brennan’s defense of national sovereignty as a challenge to surreptitiously imperial cosmopolitanism runs afoul of a parallel problem—i.e. valorizing political forms of most immediate value to the already-privileged.

10. Naturally, Pollard knows this very well: it is one of the strengths of *New World Modernisms* that it articulates exactly how it “challenges the dominant theoretical approach to the relationship between modernism and postcolonialism” (9) and characterizes Walcott and Brathwaite not as inheritors of poetic modernism but as poets who “approach it as a compromised but useful tool,” recasting Eliot’s modernism for new aesthetic ends in different historical-political circumstances (8).

11. It seems important to point out that Eliot did *not* end up “a mandarin in one of the New England ivory towers” but a freelance poet, playwright, and critic whose family bitterly resented his emigration, naturalization, and rejection of the

academic career he could have so easily taken up. If Eliot were everything Coetzee claims, he ought never to have left Harvard in the first place.

12. Chinitz's final chapter, "The T. S. Eliot Identity Crisis," is a very useful contribution to the debate over his nationality.

13. For this argument, see Schuchard, 5.

14. Trans. from Hesse my own: "Schon ist halb Europa, schon ist zumindest der halbe Osten Europa auf dem Wege zum Chaos."

15. However, the subsequent choice of *endless* over *perished* strikes me as a technical, rather than semantic or analytic, decision: it can be put down to Eliot's wish to avoid the predictable alliteration with *plains*, a tendency also displayed in the substitution of *falling* for *tumbling*. On the interpretive logic of Eliot's notes to *The Waste Land*, see Menand: "The structure of the poem—a text followed by an explanation—is a reproduction of a pattern that, as the notes themselves emphasize, is repeated in miniature many times inside the poem itself. . . . For each time a literary phrase or a cultural motif is transposed into a new context—and the borrowed motifs in *The Waste Land* are shown to have themselves been borrowed by a succession of cultures—it is reinterpreted, its previous meaning becoming incorporated by distortion into a new meaning suitable to a new use" (62).

16. The Huns, Mongols, and Red Army (who had not yet traversed the Polish plains in 1922) seem the most likely candidates from "swarm" central casting. I think it unlikely that Eliot would describe a Western European force, such as Napoleon's army of 1812, as a "swarm." Poland's status as a Catholic nation links it to Europe, rather than to Asia: a Catholic French army, then, is an invader but not a pestilence.

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