

## Eliot: Form and Allusion

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James Longenbach has argued that 'Eliot forces his readers to feel the weight of his allusions very strongly'.<sup>1</sup> The point is thought-provoking; forcing us to 'feel the weight of ... allusions' is part of that process of 'assuming a double part' which Gareth Reeves notes is acknowledged as 'an articulated and articulate strategy' in the terza rima passage in 'Little Gidding'.<sup>2</sup> In Eliot, allusion brings to mind a particular literary moment and a larger generic model. At the same time allusion finds a home in an imaginative world that is innovative

This newness may often involve shaking us out of conventional responses, as when, in John Crowe Ransom's words, Eliot 'inserts beautiful quotations into ugly contexts'.<sup>3</sup> Ransom is discussing the use of Olivia's song from Goldsmith's *The Vicar of Wakefield* in *The Waste Land*. There, Eliot turns lyric melancholy into a simulacrum of automatic response. He does so by making us hear the original differently. That original ('When lovely woman stoops to folly') has a tetrametric lilt and movement that are called up yet almost cancelled through the addition of 'and' in line 253, 'an unaccented syllable', as Jason Harding points out.<sup>4</sup> The reworking satirises lyric sentimentality. But it stops short of mere debunking; Eliot/Tiresias may have 'foresuffered all' (243), yet there is something to be 'suffered' in the scene, and the allusion suggests that there is, as well, residual value in the original lyric mode.

That value allows Eliot to express tacit sadness at the fate of the woman who 'smoothes her hair with automatic hand, / And puts a record on the gramophone' (255-6). The quatrains of the passage's central section imitate the 'automatic' nature of the sexual encounter they

depict. The formal means are metronomic iambs and alternating, often sardonic rhymes: ‘guesses’ (235) and ‘caresses’ (237), ‘tired’ (236) and ‘undesired’ (238). However, as a whole, the passage accommodates disciplined feelings of yearning. Secret sympathy for the woman insinuates itself beneath the air of detachment. Her washing ‘perilously spread’ (224), she is a descendant of the Keats who imagines voyages across ‘perilous seas, in fairy lands forlorn’ (‘Ode to a Nightingale’, line 70).<sup>5</sup> The allusion may be wholly ironic, but its effect is not without poignancy. Such a mingling of attitudes derives from shifts in the passage’s formal modes of being. With its vibrant ‘throbbing between two lives’ (218), the opening hints at foiled expectation amidst its echo of Sappho, fragment 149 (to which Eliot’s Notes indirectly refer us) or Dante’s *Purgatorio*, 8. 1-6.

To speak of ‘the evening hour that strives / Homeward’ (220-1) is to arouse memory of the desires evoked in those originals. And like a Dantean canto, the passage shapes surprises and change: first by introducing the spectatorial figure of Tiresias; second by the descent into near-contempt in its description of the ‘small house agent’s clerk’ (232) whose ‘vanity requires no response’ (241), a line that redeems the passage from snobbery by using the clerk to epitomise what the language suggests is a more general human failing – the line ‘requires [a] response’ from the reader who is asked to think about the nature of ‘vanity’); third by turning, with a gesture very like severe solicitude, towards the woman in a set-off passage of two run-together quatrains; and fourth by announcing its end and moving into a changed key with an allusion to *The Tempest* (257). Throughout, the handling of form and the workings of allusion conspire to create an original, disturbing, hauntingly multi-faceted vision.

In a comparable manner, when the woman in ‘Portrait of a Lady’ invokes ‘these April sunsets, that somehow recall / My buried life, and Paris in the Spring’, she induces in reader

and speaker an alienated empathy. The words are affecting. Yet they are also affected. Shaping our response is the fact that the passage alludes to Arnold's extended lyric 'The Buried Life'. The echo of that poem's central trope in the woman's words is touching. But Eliot is dry-eyed amidst her near-sentimentality and Arnold's emotional longing. His poem is at a remove from the genre which it calls to mind. Arnold's mode is lyric exploration; Eliot's is a self-aware, near-voyeuristic monodrama, the self-awareness belonging to the poem's 'I' and to the supervising poet one senses beyond or behind that self.

The simultaneous calling up and questioning of feeling may sound like a self-protective strategy, a matter of eating one's cake and having it, too. There are times, as at the close of 'Preludes', when Eliot seems to be spinning latter-day skeins of Romantic irony. 'Wipe your hand across your mouth, and laugh' annuls the reverence for the 'Infinitely suffering' which had found its way into the poem; a door is slammed in the face of any miniature *Maud*-like lyric. Laforgue is a key presider over such manoeuvres, which hint, too, at a post-Byronic mobility. At their most enriching, such inflations and deflations convey an attentiveness to poetic history as well as effects. This attentiveness links with Eliot's ability to restore the full formal integrity of the line to English verse. A line in his poetry supports or contests other lines around it by being memorably itself; it also frequently suggests its place in a literary lineage. Eliot induces readers to quote quintessential examples. 'For us', Stephen Spender reminisced, 'his private life was summed up in the line, "the awful daring of a moment's surrender"'.<sup>6</sup> Open vowels release unusual semantic suggestiveness. Hanging at the line ending, the 'surrender' is vulnerable, the matter of an instant and absolute, while 'awful' intimates a daring that is breath-stopping but also appalling, a faux pas.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, the return at this stage in the poem to a virtually regular pentameter rehearses the conflict between the 'proper' and the 'improper' in *The Waste Land*.<sup>8</sup>

Form, here as elsewhere, is the arena where Eliot stages tensions in his dealings with tradition. The hesitation between the meanings of ‘awful’ offers, in little, a sign of Eliot’s ability to crisscross between resonance and critique, to pay homage to a predecessor or previous culture, yet to distance himself, too. So, here, the start of Shelley’s ‘Hymn to Intellectual Beauty’ – ‘The awful shadow of some unseen Power’ – traces itself behind Eliot’s line, which installs its semi-ironised version (‘a moment’s surrender’) of a Platonic ‘Power’.<sup>9</sup> The idiomatic sense of ‘awful’ contributes to that vestigial irony, and displays Eliot’s gift, central to his poetic renewings, for mimicking the rhythms of speech. To apply to Eliot Hugh Kenner’s phrase for a Poundian quest, this gift manifests itself as ‘the rare cooperation of genius with common speech’.<sup>10</sup>

Eliot’s forms quicken into life, as they seek to utter what Wallace Stevens calls in ‘Of Modern Poetry’ ‘the speech of the place’, while remaining aware of the history of words.<sup>11</sup> Spender noticed that ‘His talk had a subdued metric quality which held my attention, as in the line once made at tea I have quoted elsewhere “I daren’t take cake, and jam’s too much trouble”’.<sup>12</sup> There is a link with the figure who revitalises poetic drama in the knockabout dark comedy of *Sweeney Agonistes*, in which he experiments with a line that is marked by its primitivist use of repeated accent. In this work Eliot ventriloquises different voices turning into the same voice, one that is banal, menaced and menacing, in keeping with the view that ‘Birth and copulation and death. / That’s all the facts when you come to brass tacks’. The first line has been used earlier in the scene, thus taking on a matter-of-fact quality, holding at arm’s length any doom-and-gloom portentousness. The second has a jaunty, jazz-like lilt, supplied by the internal rhyme and the kicking life of the accentual metre.

Whatever their ostensible genre, Eliot's poems are always a form of modernist lyric drama; he is a poet of voices, often of voices that fall subtly awry, as in Marie's line in 'The Burial of the Dead': 'I read, much of the night, and go south in the winter' (18). These mimicries tend to inhabit a half-numbed space between speech and thought. They show how 'Eliot uses styles, quotes styles, "as a way of putting it', as J. C. C. Mays has argued, alluding to 'East Coker'.<sup>13</sup> That idea, that poetry is 'a way of putting it', leads to Eliot's use of a powerful sub-genre: one that might be called the confessionally metapoetic. So, in 'East Coker', the passage continues with the comment: 'not very satisfactory: / A periphrastic study in a worn-out poetical fashion, / Leaving one still with the intolerable wrestle / With words and meanings. The poetry does not matter'.

The lines make evident later Eliot's experiment with a line unmoored from the pentameter, the pentameter or 'heroic line' being a variously strong if modified presence, as Helen Gardner has contended, in the poetry up to and including *The Waste Land*.<sup>14</sup> In its place, Eliot uses a pattern of stresses, usually four, which provides the basis for his attempts to wrest design from his materials. That design makes use of false starts and failures of communication, turning them into points of departure towards enhanced understanding. In calling the preceding lyric, 'What is the late November doing', 'A periphrastic study', Eliot poses his reader with a puzzle that allows him or her to re-experience the poet's own self-criticism: the poet may purposefully misrepresent his previous lines, or imply a withdrawal from a perspective which holds him and us while the lyric lasts, or suggest the temporary nature of all perspectives based on (mere) 'poetry'.

This use of poetic form requires that the reader works towards revelation by dwelling among misapprehension. One might argue, for instance, that, set in conjunction with and opposition

to the Symbolist lyric in 'Burnt Norton', section II, 'Garlic and sapphires in the mud', 'What is late November doing' is less 'periphrastic' than apocalyptic. Its vision of disaster opposes the previous lyric's intimations of harmony.<sup>15</sup> Its eighteen lines have a rhyme scheme that cunningly mimics disorder and accelerating anxiety; they constitute a form that is already self-troubled. Eliot's impressively risky challenge to the reader is to read the poetry's forms as an index of his conviction that 'the pattern is new in every moment'. In his gloss on the lyric, Eliot is original in the act of conceding lack of originality. His accentual line gives his voice space in which to make its fatigued yet incisive emphases. This sense that 'poetical fashion' is likely to be 'worn-out' characterises Eliot's dealings with forms, but so too does his abiding commitment to 'the intolerable wrestle / With words and meanings'. 'Words' first, one notes, then 'meanings'. Meaning in Eliot seems like the aura that surrounds his involvement in the life of 'words'.

Such attention to speech rhythms and their re-imagined existence in poetic lines often affects those borrowings which Eliot makes his own, as when, in 'La Figlia Che Piange', he concludes with the lines, 'Sometimes these cogitations still amaze / The troubled midnight and the noon's repose'. Hardyeseque 'throbbings of noontide' subside into becalmed, subliminally troubled amazement via echoes of Marvell, 'The Garden' (in the use of 'amaze') and Daniel 7: 28, 'As for me Daniel,' the prophet confesses, 'my cogitations troubled me'.<sup>16</sup> Surprising both in the King James Version and in Eliot, the Latinate 'cogitations' assumes, in the poem, an air of self-mockery. It means less 'Reflection previous to action', Samuel Johnson's meaning quoted in the OED (2b), than, in context, 'indeterminate and possibly futile reflections on an entire poetic process', with its imperatives, hypothetical conditionals, and assertions. The same poem recycles Laforgue's 'Simple et sans foi comme un bonjour', which it converts into 'Simple and faithless as a smile and shake of the hand'.<sup>17</sup> The

remodelling gives the poem's feelings 'a gesture and a pose', and the line is arresting, in part, as Edmund Wilson observes, because its approach to the alexandrine has an 'unstressed' quality which makes it very different from alexandrines found in Pope and Shelley.<sup>18</sup> Eliot brings to mind other lyric modes, including Hardy's emotional authenticity, Marvell's poise and Laforgue's *dédoublement* and handling of languorous ironies, while he offers his reader a poem whose idiom and manner compel the imagination.

To be original, for Eliot, is to be aware of tradition and to incorporate that awareness in the demeanour of a poem. From the beginning, he is freed, not weighed down, by such awareness. His ability to make his metres and rhythms work significantly is evident in earlier work in *The Inventions of the March Hare*. 'Paysage Triste' uses regular iambs to suggest the cool indifference to the speaker of the girl who climbed onto the bus and 'answered my appreciative stare' with an 'averted look without surprise' (3, 4).<sup>19</sup> Eliot deliberately makes his lines move 'without surprise'. Yet he concludes the second stanza, imagining the woman 'moving' (10) 'about her chamber / With naked feet passing across the skies' (11-12), the slight stumble in the last line's third foot among the constituents of an allusion to one of the lyrically suggestive and unscannable lines in the canon, Wyatt's 'With naked foot stalking in my chamber'.<sup>20</sup> Wyatt's example releases an erotic possibility unavailable in the speaker's social world, a world in which we have just been told the woman 'would not have known how to sit, or what to wear' (9). That line, itself at odds with anything iambically regulated, is wistfully or resignedly repeated in the final stanza (14).

Eliot, as this early poem shows, is pervasively conscious of the authority possessed by the iambic, and especially the iambic pentameter, in the tradition of English poetry. As here, he is able to arrange his departures from the iambic tradition with stealth and cunning. He praises

a passage from Ezra Pound's 'Near Perigord' (1916) because of the way it provides both 'the constant suggestion and the skilful evasion of iambic pentameter' and the praise might be returned to the giver. If the last four lines of the passage from Pound –

She who could never live save through one person,

She who could never speak save to one person,

And all the rest of her a shifting change,

A broken bundle of mirrors ... –

look ahead to the use of identical rhyme and 'broken images' (22) in *The Waste Land*, they also, with their slight but expressive shifts of accent, mirror Eliot's preference for a poetry of high rhythmic intensity that cannot and has no wish to be sustained at the length of a Swinburnian rhapsody or Tennysonian incantation.<sup>21</sup> In Pound's lines, the repeated, irregular stresses on 'She' and 'save', for example, and the possibly fractured grammar (though 'she' is initially an object we might expect her to take on the position of a subject) bear witness to his wish to engage solely with 'the poetic part of a drama the rest of which (to me the prose part) is left to the reader's imagination or implied or set in a short note'.<sup>22</sup> The notion casts light on Eliot's imaginative and rhythmic practice in many if not all of his poems: even when relatively long, their impulse is to move in a transitional way between passages, focusing maximum though unforced readerly concentration on their line-by-line workings. It is a poetry in which each line makes something happen.

Eliot captures an essential truth about his own practice when he writes in 'Reflections on *Vers Libre*' that 'the ghost of some simple metre should lurk behind the arras in even the "freest" verse; to advance menacingly as we doze, and withdraw as we rouse'.<sup>23</sup> If one



returns to 'La Figlia', one can see how the poem opens with iambic control, issuing directorial commands: 'Stand on the highest pavement of the stair -- / Lean on the garden urn', but finding its way with a change of key into a movement that is more conditional, hesitant, self-reflective, a movement marked by a sudden clustering of trisyllabic feet, 'So he would have left', for instance, scannable as a dactyl followed by an iamb. In the third and last section, iambic resolution is to the fore, as endings and self-aware regret assume a central position in the poem's emotions.

Highlighted as the bearer of allusive significance, the line, in Eliot, keeps readers and the poems themselves on their toes. 'A Cooking Egg' provides an example. Before the last of its whimsically clever quatrains, a line, set apart ('Where are the eagles and the trumpets?'), sways affectingly between elegiac pastiche of the 'ubi sunt?' motif and something close to the real thing, an effect only reinforced by the subsequent bathos of the rhyme with 'buttered scones and crumpets'. Each of the five sections of *The Waste Land* concludes with a strong line that sums up and leaves behind what has gone before: the table-turning quotation from Baudelaire at the end of 'The Burial of the Dead'; the allusion to *Hamlet* at the close of 'A Game of Chess', where pub-talk modulates into something more elegiac; the use of a single Buddhist word 'burning' (311) after the Augustinian 'O Lord thou pluckest' (310) at the conclusion of 'The Fire Sermon' with its 'collocation of ... two representatives of eastern and western asceticism', as Eliot's note has it; the admonition to 'Consider Phlebas' (321) at the end of 'Death by Water'; and the abrupt enigma of the Sanskrit chant at the conclusion of 'What the Thunder said'. With its ear for liturgical patterns, *Ash-Wednesday* concludes three of its six poems with single lines: 'And after this our exile' (IV), 'O my people' (V), 'And let my cry come unto Thee' (VI). The poet turns to a language saturated with the religious longings of others to convey his own yearning, even as the close of IV concedes a common

‘exile’, the end of V assumes a prophet’s lamenting tone, and the termination of V1, though personal, also voices a transpersonal desire to be heard.

The conclusion of *Prufrock* wreathes variations on couplet and tercet, wheeling adroitly between the faux-pathos of the music hall comedian, visionary fantasy and a sense of spent loss:

I grow old ... I grow old ...

I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled

Shall I part my hair behind? Do I dare to eat a peach?

I shall wear white flannel trousers, and walk upon the beach.

I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each.

I do not think that they will sing to me.

These six lines are each independent units; there is no enjambment, no carrying over of the sense across the line-ending. Eliot plays the lines off against one another: the lamenting repetition of ‘I grow old’ is punctured by the pseudo-decisiveness of the trouser-rolling assertion, while the questions of the tercet’s first line come into being as a contrast to this definiteness. We sense that the speaker’s will has faltered, passing into the perfectly balanced pair of questions, each kicked off by an anapaest, followed by two iambs. ‘*Teach* me to hear mermaids singing’ (emphasis added), the Donnean prompt, implicates itself in the choice of rhyme-word in the tercet here.<sup>24</sup> The rhyming may seem forced in the phrase ‘each to each’, the triple chime clenched rather than clinched. But it works by spinning a web of relationship

and difference. Like Prufrock, ‘each’ mermaid is an individual; unlike him, each is ‘singing’ to the others, as though the others were all individuals, capable of mutual song. Prufrock’s sense of exclusion from the harmony he fantasises into existence provides the formal principle for the stand-alone line that follows. ‘I do not think that they will sing to me’ marks a return to the hesitant, doubting self who has imagined self-escape in the lines which have preceded.

Eliot’s criticism rewards triumphs attained by single lines, often when a concentrated ‘singleness’ of poetic power coexists with a suggestive doubleness: Donne’s ‘A bracelet of bright hair about the bone’, for example, ‘where the most powerful effect is produced by the sudden contrast of associations of “bright hair” and of “bone”’, or Dante’s description of Farinata, *come avesso lo inferno in gran dispetto* (as though he entertained great scorn of Hell), where the glimpse of an individual is made ‘memorable by a perfect phrase’.<sup>25</sup> But he is alert to these moments as parts of larger wholes, relating single lines by Francesca to the entire scheme of the *Commedia*.<sup>26</sup> His own work thrives on single lines having a living relationship with the overall work, but doing so through relationships of tension, juxtaposition, an off-key yet musical dissonance. *The Waste Land* closes with a congeries of such lines, sometimes broken into half lines: ‘These fragments I have shored against my ruins’ (430) offers itself as a metapoetic epigraph for the work, its strong iambic pulse ‘shoring’ the poetry ‘against’ the ‘ruins’ which beset it. Longenbach is the among the most persuasive of those commentators who sees the reference to allusive ‘fragments’ as presupposing some totality: ‘the wide field of references are folded into the present to remind us of historical continuity and show us the way out of our predicament’.<sup>27</sup> On this line of argument, the ‘broken’ forms of which the poem is composed have an encyclopedic intent, aspiring after the condition of mock-epic or, indeed, epic itself. The range of allusions brings into play our awareness of a jostling crowd of literary forms, including medieval epic,

Elizabethan revenge tragedy, nursery rhyme, and nineteenth-century lyric. Yet the fact that fragmentation has undone so many forms may suggest, in the end, the absence of any one form as a guide to ‘show us the way out of our predicament’.

Here, after the line about the shoring of ‘fragments’, the next line uses the first person singular to remind us that the poem moans round with many voices, as it stitches together two moments from *The Spanish Tragedy*. The effect is of ironic juxtaposition: Hieronymo as producer of a carnage-ridden play set against the previous speaker’s perilous quest for residual order. And yet it is also the case that allusion forgets its origin in the Elizabethan revenge-tragedy and takes on new life, its edge of danger glittering keenly, as though we sensed something in the author not entirely well disposed towards our mental comfort, prepared to ‘fit’ (431) us to his own designs.<sup>28</sup>

Allusions are duplicitous in this ghosted masterpiece, just as the single line often works in juxtaposed tension with other lines. The result is a productive mirroring of uncertainty, an effect anticipated by the opening of *Prufrock*. There, we reach the relative closure of a semi-colon after three lines, yet each line dwells in its own space, taking more than its allotted time, each flirting with an iambic pattern into which it never wholly settles: ‘Let us go then, you and I’ is jaunty, intense, lilting, implying some causal antecedent in ‘then’; ‘When the evening is spread out against the sky’ is almost conventionally lyrical but disturbingly not so in the prepositional violence of ‘out’, which suggests that the evening has been spread-eagled; ‘Like a patient etherised upon a table’ confirms oddness, discomfort, yet also a longing for numbness. If the simile arrests us through its apparent projection of feeling onto the scene, Eliot’s strategy might seem, on reflection, close kin to Browning’s in ‘Porphyria’s Lover’, where the disturbed speaker hears the wind do ‘its worse to vex the lake’ (4).<sup>29</sup> Yet monologue undergoes change from Browning to Eliot. Browning’s speaker has or is a

definite essence; Eliot's moves between something close to a self-mocking persona and a voice that seems to flow in and out of our own thought-processes. The 'you and I' of whom Prufrock speaks are Eliot and persona, Prufrock and addressee, self and other, poet and reader. The subject positions steal away from certainty, much as the rhythms refuse, for all their musicality, to settle into a pattern.

Eliot's patterns, indeed, frequently refuse the reassurance of pattern. 'Cousin Nancy' closes with a straight lift from a sonnet ('Lucifer in Starlight') by Meredith, 'The army of unalterable law', but it stops one line short of the unconventional, unrhymed sonnet (with sestet and octave reversed) into which it appeared to be settling; the final effect is elusively serio-comic as Cousin Nancy's errancies take on (mock) Luciferian grandeur and are juxtaposed with 'unalterable law'.<sup>30</sup> In 'Prufrock' the couplet recalls its Augustan and even Byronic role of imparting order to the disparate, only to depart from that function. Not that Eliot is any less of a controlled artist than Pope or Byron, even as his use of a form associated with authorial command imbues it with trailing qualms. 'I should have been a pair of ragged claws / Scuttling across the floors of silent seas' feels as though it will rely on end-rhyme. But the premature clinching of the rhyme through the internal chime of 'floors' with 'claws' thwarts too clinched an assertion, throwing the emphasis back on the conditionality of 'should have been'.

When there is a full rhyme in a couplet, as occurs at the end of the first verse paragraph ('Oh, do not ask, "What is it?" / Let us go and make our visit'), an echo of Byronic nonchalance is audible. But the poem troubles the assurance of the ancestral voice as the rhyme sends us back to ask the question we are told not to ask. After a line space, Eliot offers another couplet, 'In the room the women come and go / Talking of Michelangelo', a couplet that is repeated some lines later. Christopher Ricks refutes the notion that the couplet indicts the

women as gossips. Instead, he argues, the couplet might be thought to have a generosity following the alleged ‘prissy pursedness’ of its predecessor.<sup>31</sup>

That reading may, in turn, show Ricks falling into the trap he claims the Michelangelo lines have successfully set for others: namely, of being, in effect, a screen on which readers project their prejudices. And whether the couplet is quite so tonally poker-faced as Ricks intimates is doubtful, given the poem’s allusive dynamics. Prufrock is ‘not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be’, a way of putting it that fleetingly gestures towards the tragic stature that is self-denyingly refused. He fantasises being Lazarus, or even Marvell’s speaker in ‘To His Coy Mistress’, drawing an energy of utterance from the fantasy. Yet such energy is almost playfully able to see its kinship with rhetoric, even bombast. Emotions perform themselves in the speaker’s head, ‘visions’ accompanied by their attendant ‘revisions’. So, when the lines are repeated, they seem themselves the screen on which Prufrock projects a recurrent scenario in which a former greatness jostles to assert itself in the presence, ‘the room’, of a world unable to measure up to such greatness. Even the argument that the couplet resists interpretation reads the reader as much as it tells us about Eliot.

That said, Ricks’s suggestion that Eliot’s couplet offers us an ‘impalpable smell’ rather than a ‘palpable dossier’ helps us to understand the function of many formal devices in his work.<sup>32</sup> For all the relative failure of the Popean pastiche excised at Pound’s advice from *The Waste Land*, the couplet, often without end-rhyme, is among Eliot’s most formidable weapons in that poem. Couplets can embed themselves in larger syntactical units, as when the speaker, head full of Dante (*Inferno*, 3. 55-7), says, ‘A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many, / I had not thought death had undone so many’ (62-3). There, the repeated phrase ‘so many’ earns its authority, in part, by ironising the pointed elegance of the Augustan couplet. There is no escape from the prospect of ‘so many’ undone by death. Rhyme is less a question of

chime than of a design that works thematically, allusively, as Eliot brings into connection contemporary London and Dante's *Inferno*. Again, in 'What the Thunder said', the two-line structure is vital:

We think of the key, each in his prison  
 Thinking of the key, confirms a prison  
 Only at nightfall, aethereal rumours  
 Revive for a moment a broken Coriolanus (413-16)

Again, repetition of the same word (here 'prison') does the work of rhyme, suggesting the obsession with imprisonment. The lines return to the idea of thinking, and the unrhymed couplets 'Revive for a moment', yet in modernist vein, the ways in which the form can present contrast and balance. In the first two lines, the syntax moves fluidly between 'We' and 'each', a movement that asserts a common fate yet suggests an individual one, too; the phrasing allows us to be 'Thinking of the key' and, in so doing, confirming 'a prison', yet in its access to a larger perspective (that accorded to the speaker who can see what holds true for 'us'), it permits momentary escape from complete isolation. As if building on that glimpse of escape, yet romantically overstating and thus threatening to undercut the possibility, the following two lines offer possibly the most charged vision of 'revival' in the poem. The adverb 'Only' signals a one-off opportunity, while 'a broken Coriolanus' illustrates one of Eliot's favourite post-Symbolist devices, the re-orchestration of a word within the poem's echo-chamber. He recalls, in this instance, the 'heap of broken images' (22) with which a voice confronted us in 'The Burial of the Dead'. 'Broken', there, suggested disintegration; here, it intimates something closer to 'broken in spirit', a residual tragic dignity clinging to

the word, as though we glimpsed 'a' Coriolanus in the 'moment' after he gave into his mother's entreaties and foresaw the consequences of doing so.

Elsewhere, an unrhymed couplet possesses a sealed-off loneliness, as when a voice, as if in response to the instruction to 'Think', breaks through the edgy preciousities and nerviness of 'A Game of Chess' to assert: 'I think we are in rats' alley / Where the dead men lost their bones' (115-16). The phrase 'rats' alley' seems incongruously close to a place-name, and the poem glimpses an utter lostness, even as such loss begins to breed dreams of recovery, hinted at in the subsequent return to an allusion to *The Tempest*: 'I remember / Those are pearls that were his eyes' (124-5). The allusion is complicated because in Shakespeare Ariel sings Ferdinand a song about his father's supposed death; he is, in fact, alive, his supposed death part of Prospero's elaborate dramatisations. When Eliot repeats the phrase, he brings into play, yet holds at arm's length, the possibility that *The Waste Land* will stage a miracle of recovery and near-resurrection.

Eliot's use of the tercet up to the 'familiar compound ghost' passage in 'Little Gidding' is rarely sustained, more a marker of suspended energies, a form that settles for the unsettled. 'Marina' finishes with a three-line paragraph that seems to aim for the 'peculiar lucidity' of Dante's tercets:<sup>33</sup>

What seas what shores what granite islands towards my timbers  
And woodthrush calling through the fog  
My daughter

One could say of these lines, as Eliot says of Dante, that 'The thought may be obscure, but the word is lucid, or rather translucent'.<sup>34</sup> Obscurity is at one, in this unpunctuated passage,



with the 'translucent' quality of their words: 'calling through the fog' is an almost self-reflexive example. The 'fog' is a 'translucent' image for the speaker's acceptance of what he cannot wholly comprehend, 'this grace dissolved in place', as the poem has asserted earlier, where rhyme gives substance to the dissolution into one another of matter and spirit, longing and reality, anticipates the sought-for 'face' of the next line, and betrays affectingly the speaker's desire to 'dissolve' or resolve the problem named as 'Death'. The closing lines recall and play against the five-line section with which the poem began, dropping the 'O' which had preceded 'My daughter' in the fifth line, substituting 'granite' for 'grey' before 'islands', cancelling the definite article before 'woodthrush', adding the phrase 'towards my timbers', and above all leaving out the earlier line: 'What images return'. The earlier lines still retained the interrogative note of the Senecan epigraph, but that note has now been subsumed within a mood of opened-ended yet accepting wonder. As Denis Donoghue remarks, 'The last three lines of the poem resume the first five, and conclude it as an exclamation rather than a question.'<sup>35</sup> Again, because of its intra-textual patterning, the poem must be read in its own terms, even if it invites us to recall the plot of *Pericles*. The suggestion may be that not only do 'images return' but also that in some sense the realities to which they correspond have been restored. Or it may be that the return of the images is the form that restoration can take. The speaker, at any rate, is caught up in vision, while at the same time he sees – it may be intimated – the challenges he has faced: challenges suggested by the 'granite islands' that are approached by and threaten the intactness of his 'timbers'.

In the 'familiar compound ghost' passage from 'Little Gidding', Eliot replaces the rhyme-scheme of terza rima with a pattern of alternating masculine and feminine endings. In conjunction with a fluid syntax, this pattern turns from device into perfect medium. Setting the poem 'In the uncertain hour before the morning / Near the ending of interminable night / At the recurrent end of the unending', Eliot is able to convey the co-existence of the

‘interminable’, ‘the unending’, and a sense of ‘the recurrent end’. Each line advances towards such a paradoxically circular ‘end’. The poetry’s rhythms, at once fatigued by watching and expectant, shape a pre-dawn space in which the German bomber turns into a shadowy paraclete, ‘the dark dove with the flickering tongue’, that speaks a language of conflict. This language prepares for the colloquy between poet and alter ego, the measure, wording and tone attuned to an encounter in which self and other share an identity that is ‘Both intimate and unidentifiable’, a making new of Dante that is the most emphatically accented passage of iambic pentameter in *Four Quartets*. The passage broods on questions of linguistic propriety, but, like the ghost, Eliot, with whatever self-lacerating irony, is able to ‘find words I never thought to speak’. Those words turn into savage self-indictment in which the severe tones of eighteenth-century satire rise to the surface: ‘Then fools’ approval stings, and honours stains’ has the air of a compound allusion to Pope, Swift and Johnson, but one that works to ‘urge the mind to aftersight and foresight’. That urging of ‘the mind’ suggests Eliot’s allusive elusiveness: ‘foresight’ means looking ahead to what will come ‘after’; ‘aftersight’ means reflecting on what has gone ‘before’. The phrase suggests both the poetic act of looking before and after and the dream of a new meaning that occupies the space between past and future which opens up in an Eliotic allusion; it comes after an allusion to Mallarmé’s ‘Le tombeau d’Edgar Poe’ in which he writes of the hyena-dislike of the angel who was able ‘Donner un sens plus purs aux mots de la tribu’, or as Eliot has it, adding his own ethical shading, ‘To purify the dialect of the tribe’.<sup>36</sup>

Eliot builds the sonnet’s compulsion to turn and surprise into his extended meditation, as he goes on to flesh out the cruelly humiliating recognitions forced by ‘aftersight and foresight’. And yet Dante, Yeats and *Hamlet* come to his aid in the sombre yet residually hopeful conclusion, the purgatorial joy of Arnaut Daniel, the Yeatsian vision of the ‘dancer’ at the close of ‘Among School Children’, and the ghost’s vanishing and farewell in *Hamlet* all

folding into Eliot's implicit 'valediction' to his own career.<sup>37</sup> Touchstones of excellence in epic, lyric and drama are deftly touched on; if 'next year's words await another voice', the voice we have heard uncannily anticipates the future it prognosticates in a form that has commerce with past and imagined realisations of poetic speech. In Eliot, as his reshaping of the sestina in 'The Dry Salvages' reveals, past forms move through his words as he evades them; as he permits them to return, they are invited to find new ways of inhabiting the poetic structures they help to question and rebuild.

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<sup>1</sup> James Longenbach, "'Mature Poets Steal': Eliot's Allusive Practice", in *The Cambridge Companion to T. S. Eliot*, ed. A. David Moody (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 176. For some theoretical speculations, see Stacy Magedanz, 'Allusion as Form: *The Waste Land* and *Moulin Rouge!*', *Orbis Litterarum* 61:2 (2006): 160-79.

<sup>2</sup> Gareth Reeves, 'T. S. Eliot', in *The Cambridge History of English Poetry*, ed. Michael O'Neill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 822.

<sup>3</sup> John Crowe Ransom, 'Waste Lands', in *The Waste Land*, ed. Michael North, Norton Critical Edition (New York: Norton, 2001), pp. 168-9.

<sup>4</sup> Jason Harding, 'Modernist and Modern Poetry: An Overview', in O'Neill (ed.), p. 733. Unless indicated otherwise, Eliot's poetry is quoted from *The Complete Poems and Plays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1969). Line numbers are supplied where they are given in the original.

<sup>5</sup> *The Poems of John Keats*, ed. Miriam Allott (London: Longman, 1970).

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<sup>6</sup> Stephen Spender, 'Remembering Eliot', in *T.S. Eliot: The Man and His Work*, ed. Allen Tate (1966; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), p. 51.

<sup>7</sup> As Seamus Perry points out, "'awful" is what he says here – full of awe, yes, but also just something you would normally avoid like you would anything awful', in Seamus Perry, *The Connell Guide to T. S. Eliot's 'The Waste Land'* (London: Connell Guides, 2014), p. 107.

<sup>8</sup> See Harriet Davidson, 'Improper Desire: Reading *The Waste Land*', in A. David Moody (ed.).

<sup>9</sup> *Percy Bysshe Shelley: The Major Works*, ed. Zachary Leader and Michael O'Neill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

<sup>10</sup> Hugh Kenner, *The Pound Era* (1972; London: Faber and Faber, 1975), p. 107

<sup>11</sup> Wallace Stevens, *Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1954).

<sup>12</sup> Spender in Tate (ed.) 54

<sup>13</sup> J. C. C. Mays, 'Early Poems: From "Prufrock" to "Gerontion"', in A. David Moody (ed.), p. 108.

<sup>14</sup> See Helen Gardner, *The Art of T. S. Eliot* (London: Faber and Faber, 1949), pp. 17-18n for her use of 'heroic line' rather than 'iambic pentameter'. For the view that by the close of *Four Quartets*, Eliot had made his peace both with the pentameter and a dactylic measure, see Annie Finch, *The Ghost of Meter: Culture and Prosody in American Free Verse* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993), p. 127. See also Julia M. Reibetanz, 'Accentual Forms in Eliot's Poetry from "The Hollow Men" to *Four Quartets*', *English Studies*; 65 (1984): 334-9.

<sup>15</sup> See Martin Schofield, *T. S. Eliot: The Poems* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 218.

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<sup>16</sup> “‘I look into my glass’”, line 12, in *Thomas Hardy: Selected Poems*, ed. Tim Armstrong (London: Longman, 1993); ‘The Garden’, line 1, in *The Poems of Andrew Marvell*, ed. Nigel Smith (2003; London: Longman, 2007 rev)

<sup>17</sup> The allusion to Jules Laforgue’s ‘Petitions’, where the line describes how ‘all women’ (toutes) behave, is noted, among other places, in *Modernism: An Anthology*, ed. Lawrence Rainey (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005), p. 117n.

<sup>18</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Axel’s Castle: A Study in the Imaginative Literature of 1870-1930* (1931; London: Fontana, 1961), p. 84.

<sup>19</sup> Quoted from T. S. Eliot, *The Inventions of the March Hare: Poems 1909-1917*, ed. Christopher Ricks (San Diego: Harcourt, 1996).

<sup>20</sup> For the echo of Wyatt, see *The Inventions of the March Hare*, pp. 201-2.

<sup>21</sup> ‘Reflections on *Vers Libre*’, in *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*, ed. Frank Kermode (London: Faber and Faber, 1975), p. 33 (Pound’s lines are quoted from this essay).

<sup>22</sup> Letter of Pound to William Carlos Williams in 1908, in *Selected Letters of Ezra Pound: 1907-1941*, intro. and notes. D. D. Paige (1950; New York: New Directions, 1971), pp. 3-4.

<sup>23</sup> *Selected Prose*, pp. 34-5.

<sup>24</sup> For the echo of Donne’s ‘Song’, see B. C. Southam, *A Student’s Guide to the Selected Poems of T. S. Eliot* (London: Faber and Faber, 1968), p. 35.

<sup>25</sup> *Selected Prose*, pp. 60, 212.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> Longenbach, in A. David Moody (ed.), p. 183.

<sup>28</sup> For further discussion of the allusions to *The Spanish Tragedy*, see my essay “‘Why then Ile Fit You:’ Poetry and Madness from Wordsworth to Berryman’, in *Madness and*

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*Creativity in Literature and Cultures*, ed. Corinne Saunders and Jane Macnaughton (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 153.

<sup>29</sup> *The Oxford Authors: Robert Browning*, ed. Adam Roberts, intro Daniel Karlin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

<sup>30</sup> For commentary, see Longenbach, in A. David Moody (ed.), p. 181.

<sup>31</sup> Christopher Ricks, *T. S. Eliot and Prejudice* (London: Faber and Faber, 1988), p. 17.

<sup>32</sup> Ricks, p. 18.

<sup>33</sup> *Selected Prose*, p. 207.

<sup>34</sup> *Selected Prose*, p. 207.

<sup>35</sup> Denis Donoghue, *Words Alone: The Poet T. S. Eliot* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), p. 177.

<sup>36</sup> *Mallarmé*, intro and ed. Anthony Hartley, with plain prose translations (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963). Eliot's emphasis on 'aftersight' picks up a concern in Mallarmé's sonnet: that of wishing to forestall later erroneous responses to Poe through the creation of his poem's memorial.

<sup>37</sup> For discussion of the allusions in this section of the poem, see Harry Blamires, *Word Unheard: A Guide through Eliot's 'Four Quartets'* (London: Methuen, 1969), pp. 152-8, and Longenbach, in A. David Moody (ed.), p. 186.