



T. S. Eliot: The Performativity of Gender in *The Waste Land*

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One of the most influential ideas developed as American feminist theory and women's studies grew into disciplines is the assertion that gender is socially constructed. Conceived in part as a means of political resistance to the disempowerment of women, this theoretical position may be located in a context of post-structuralist theory that sees meaning as constructed and deferred in language, and the speaking subject itself as constructed in discourse—positions variously elaborated by Lacan, Derrida, Foucault, and Kristeva. At the beginning of the last decade this idea received a powerful re-interpretation in the work of Judith Butler, who argued that gender is performative, asserting that “the performativity of gender revolves around . . . the way in which the anticipation of a gendered essence produces that which it posits as outside itself” and that “performativity is not a singular act, but a repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalization in the context of a body. . . .”¹

A close reading of *The Waste Land* will show, I believe, that T. S. Eliot profoundly anticipates a fundamental cluster of concepts taken, for much of the latter part of the twentieth century, to be **post**-modern. That Eliot's work contains a play of dramatic voices has long been well-understood, but critics have not fully recognized that a founding part of the drama is the performance of gender.² Indeed, this poet, sometimes flagrantly positioned as the epitome of male poetic/sexual hierarchy,³ is one of the first twentieth century figures to depict what Judith Butler later called “the ways in which the very thinking of what is possible in gendered life is foreclosed by certain habitual and violent presumptions” (*GT*, viii). To illustrate the way Eliot uncovers

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426 these structures of the self, as performances and as socially constructed in discourse, I will reexamine three crucial emotional scenes from *The Waste Land* comprising the Hyacinth girl episode (35–42); the first conversation in “A Game of Chess” (111–38); and the silent confession to the friend in “What the Thunder Said” (402–23). Each of these scenes reflects, I believe, memories of searingly intense moments from Eliot’s private life, involving three different persons with whom his relationship was deeply personal. Though such attributions may never fully escape from the speculative, recently published documentary evidence makes somewhat less arbitrary the association of the first of these scenes with the college friend he considered marrying, Emily Hale, the second with first wife Vivienne Eliot (*TSE*, 169), and the third (though a more contested one) with the young medical student Jean Verdenal.⁴ It is not insignificant that each of these scenes involves markedly different performances of gender and social situations in which expectations of performance are clearly, sometimes traumatically, imposed. The biographical allusion is enriching to our understanding of the full ramifications of these scenes; in the language of Butler’s later book, the protagonists possess *bodies that matter*.

Recognizing the performative elements of Eliot’s understanding of gender can help us get past some disputes in Eliot criticism; more fully understand the foundations of the modern; and perhaps help us make sense—possibly for our own satisfaction—of some of Eliot’s more abrupt decisions in his personal life. Both the first and the last of the three examples are contested sites for those who wish to claim Eliot exclusively for worlds either heterosexual or queer.

Significantly, each scene contains textual qualities which foster gender ambiguity—the first because the female figure of the lines is connected by name with the homoerotic figure of Hyacinthus and the third because the lines exploit the gender indifference of the English “I” and “you.” (Even the second exemplified scene withholds all explicit forms of gender assignment, save for the assumption that one quoted speaker is the same as the “she” who sits on a “Chair . . . like a burnished throne” (*CPP*, 39). Such indetermination forces a construction of gender in discourse about the poem.

Moreover, recognizing Eliot’s understanding of gender as performative highlights the extent to which competing critical claims to assign Eliot’s own sex/gender identity, through these scenes, are themselves ultimately a refusal of the very portrait Eliot himself offers of the self as a performance which actualizes some among the self’s many fluid possibilities. The loss of a stable subject is one of the formative elements of the modern, and that instability is most fundamentally realized in the conception that gender is itself a performance. This is an issue which united rather than divided male and female modernists, although they inevitably approached the issue from a different place within social discourse.

And, perhaps, Eliot’s implied belief that gender *is* what one *does* can help illuminate the personal decisions that often resist interpretation. Eliot’s decision not to marry Emily Hale, whom he met in 1912, before leaving for Europe (1914) came not very long after his profoundly significant friendship with Jean Verdenal (1911). The abrupt marriage to Vivienne in 1915, occurring shortly after that, offered a public resolution

to any personal gender ambiguities. Finally, his surprising legal pursuit of John Peter for a homoerotic reading of *The Waste Land* in 1952 gains intelligibility if the essay is understood as undoing a lifetime of gender performance to which the poet consciously subscribed.

One should not—as a result of this brief overview—conflate the concept of gender performativity with “play-acting.” As Butler observes, notwithstanding the fact that gender is produced in the concrete acts of human beings, those acts are projected outward *as if* they had origin and essential being elsewhere; and they become “identity categories that are in fact the *effects* of institutions, practices, and discourses with multiple and diffuse points of origin” (*GT*, xxix). In this guise gender becomes, Butler argues, even violently coercive as it is practiced and experienced in concrete social settings. Indeed, long before Butler, Eliot teases language to reveal the painful dialectic between production and reproduction of gender categories, between gender performed and gender experienced as imposed from without.

At an overarching level, *The Waste Land* is about failure to achieve union—with an Absolute, an Other, the Self, an object for knowledge, and with culture and tradition—and fragmentation is its ultimate condition. The failure of union and coincidence of all sorts is most prominently figured in *The Waste Land* by the breakdown of a wide variety of kinds of human relationships, and a failure of love.⁵ The first dramatic presentation of failed love in *The Waste Land* is the vignette with the “Hyacinth girl” in “The Burial of the Dead,” framed by two quotations from the account of the tragic love of Tristan and Isolde.⁶ In the first lines of the episode, a speaker is quoted wistfully recalling what seems to be the beginning of a romantic and erotic relationship:

“You gave me hyacinths first a year ago;
“They called me the hyacinth girl.”⁷

The narrator, who is by turns observer and actor, and whose avatars include both the sexually chameleon Tiresias and the impotent Fisher King, silently responds to the Hyacinth girl in language redolent of failure, impotence, and consequent self-loathing:

—Yet when we came back, late, from the Hyacinth garden,
Your arms full, and your hair wet, I could not
Speak, and my eyes failed, I was neither
Living nor dead, and I knew nothing,
looking into the heart of light, the silence.
[CPP, 38]

Much of the power of this scene—indeed its very reading—depends upon the invocation by the reader of a script of masculine gender performance which is at once normative and coercive, and which incorporates subsidiary expectations about performance of the feminine. This is a scene in which the male is the initiator: “you gave me hyacinths first a year ago.” What the narrator/lover has given is erotic both in the

428 overtly phallic shape of the hyacinth and in the culturally conventional sense of the male wooing his beloved with gifts of flowers.⁸ The word “first” stipulates that this was a continuing interaction (a *courtship*, in the terms of this narration). Moreover, it was recognized by a community of observers; indeed, in a fulfillment of the gender script of femininity, the female speaker has derived identity from it: “They called me the hyacinth girl.” The time of its recollection is another marked in the cultural narrative of romantic love, for this is the anniversary of something which began “a year ago.” In yet another manifestation of the power relations implicit in performances of gender, her subordinate role in the exchange is stipulated by the noun “girl.”

But the wistful tone and the past tense signal that the episode did not achieve the promise of its inception. The narrative is taken up by the male speaker, whose internal monologue offers an interpretation of the reasons for the girl’s wistfulness and her use of past tense. He conjures a scene of great sensuality: they returned “late, from the Hyacinth garden” and he remembers the girl with “Your arms full, and your hair wet.”⁹ In this context the reader is encouraged to interpret the passage as signifying that her arms were full of the flowers he has given her. But the imagery of fertility associated with the woman is overmatched by the imagery of stasis and impotence assigned to her would-be lover. In the agonizing light of the expectation of masculine dominance in literal physical and erotic connection, the speaker cannot connect in any abstract way: he can’t speak, he can’t see, and his consciousness cannot even seize an object:

....., I could not
 Speak, and my eyes failed, I was neither
 Living nor dead, and I knew nothing,
 Looking into the heart of light, the silence.
 [CPP, 38]

The attitude of self-flagellation here has led some critics and biographers to see these lines as a commentary on Eliot’s early relationship with Emily Hale.¹⁰ The account of the relationship with Hale which Eliot left with his second wife, Valerie, in “a private paper, written in the sixties” (and quoted by her in the introduction to Eliot’s *Letters*) is congruent with the memory of a personal love left unresolved (*LTS*, xvii). Eliot knew Hale in amateur dramatic performances at his cousin’s home in Boston, probably in 1912, and he tells us he declared his love to her in 1914, shortly before he left for study in England (*LTS*, xvii). The following year, 1915, he very abruptly married Vivienne, a marriage which speedily proved disastrous. In the private paper left with his wife, Eliot continued, “I was still, as I came to believe a year later, in love with Miss Hale.” Though he acknowledged that any explanation of those decisions about two crucial love relationships were likely to remain “unintelligible,” he argued that “I think that all I wanted of Vivienne was a flirtation or a mild affair: I was too shy and unpractised to achieve either with anybody. I believe that I came to persuade myself that I was in love with her simply because I wanted to burn my boats and commit myself to staying in England” (*LTS*, xvii). Of Vivienne, he confessed, “To her the marriage brought no happiness . . . to me, it brought the state of mind out of which came *The Waste Land*” (*LTS*, xvii; ellipses in the original).

Careful attention to tense and sequence suggests that the utter impotence and failure described in the Hyacinth girl scene is a symbolic negation of the speaker's self, of his anticipated "gendered essence." This calamity has *already* happened when the couple returns from the garden. Like Yeats's white heron in *Calvary* (1920; published 1921) the narrator's encounter with a metonymic Absolute—the "heart of light"—has proved all but fatal.¹¹ The parallels with Dante's *Paradiso* XXXIII, when the narrator looks upon the white rose (XXXI), are explicit: sight is consumed, the mind's gaze is suspended, and the narrator has no more speech than the babe at breast.¹² But unlike Dante's text, the scene here is framed by the tragedy of another tale of love lost. The beloved speaks in the past tense, and emphasis falls squarely on the experience of *disempowerment*. Because we are not told what happened in the garden, the text maintains simultaneously connotations both erotic and metaphysical. It becomes a founding site of one of the controlling conceits of the poem, the wastage of human erotic love, simultaneously figuring the absence of connection with a Divine Love; the interruption of desire in language; deferral of union of signifier with signified; and the failure of consciousness to be coterminous with its object. The very withholding of a description of the events in the garden which has led some commentators to argue (incorrectly, I believe) that the relationship was consummated (if later lost), helps to produce the dissolution of certainty in knowledge and interpretation (MW, 165).

But information about what happened in the garden is not the only information that is withheld, and it is worth revisiting the scene. The entire foregoing interpretation rests upon a normative and coercive concept of the performance of the masculine, and to use Judith Butler's words, the very "anticipation of gendered essence *produces* that which it posits as outside itself" (GT, xv; emphasis added). "[T]he performativity of gender revolves around this metalepsis" (GT, xiv). Look again; not once does Eliot use the masculine pronoun to refer to the narrator. And only once, almost *exactly* in the middle of the poem (line 219 of 434), is the sex of the narrator stipulated—notably during the scene in "The Fire Sermon" in which the narrator seems to blend with his avatar Tiresias, expressly described as having lived as both male and female. Further, although his body bears the marks of his past, Tiresias is not androgynous, but alternatively male and female. Although it may have been a convention in earlier narrative poems for the narrator simply to speak in the unmarked gender of first person, in a poem of such length with so many shifting voices, avoiding pronoun reference to the narrator must have required a good deal of care. This narrative produces what it presupposes; we presume the narrator in this poem is male because he "*acts* male." Thus with the collaboration of the reader the narrator performs a failed masculinity. Within the poem we know next to nothing about the narrator's body—save for the ascription of trans-sexuality to Tiresias and impotence to the Fisher King. What we do know thus does nothing to reassure us about gender roles as essential.

Nor is the withholding of explicit gender reference the only way in which the being of gender is destabilized in this scene. The scene of erotic heterosexual love, with its echoes of Grail legend, fertility ritual, and the Garden of Adonis, is shadowed by another scene, that of the love of Apollo for the beautiful youth Hyacinthus. The Hyacinth tale is one of agony too—for Zephyrus, who also loved Hyacinthus, caused

430 the quoit of Apollo at play to strike the youth in the head and kill him. From the blood of Hyacinthus grew the hyacinth flower, and its leaves are said to bear the initials of the youth, which became the sounds of woe—ai, ai. It forms another narrative of the terrible failure of the lover, for reasons beyond his control. The homoerotic implications of the Hyacinth myth have produced unusually sharp exchanges from several critical camps, from Marianne Thormählen's treatment of homosocial desire as "absurd conjecture, the flowers being given to a girl" (MW, 165), to James Miller's comparably pointed insistence that the entire *Waste Land* is an elegy for the dead male friend.¹³ Such sharp disputes depend, I suspect, upon essentialist readings of gender, which the poem itself does not confirm. Thormählen's dismissal is too swift, for, after all, designation of Hyacinthus as "girl" is precisely the way one manifestation of a normative construction of masculine gender would position the male object of hierarchically superior male affection.¹⁴ And Miller's insistence that Eliot's "real" sexual orientation was homosocial flies in the face of a lifetime of behavior much more complicated and ambiguous than such an ascription of gendered essence suggests.¹⁵

Significantly, both are present; the dominant heterosexual performance of masculine gender failure framed by the background echoes of alternative performances of gender, construct both a different object and a different subject.¹⁶ Indeed the doubleness of the scene, the simultaneous presence of alternate, almost opposite possibilities, may at one level even account for its stasis and silence.¹⁷ From another perspective, the effect is similar to the oscillation between the framing story of Tristan and Isolde and the central image of the Hyacinth girl, identified by Jewel Spears Brooker and Joseph Bentley. "In fact," they write, "*parergon* and *ergon*, frame and picture, must of necessity mutually exclude each other and mutually define each other. But though Eliot's mode of presentation leads to a stabilization of the picture of the hyacinth girl and her lover, the fact that the frame is more powerful than the picture has a destabilizing effect" (RWL, 70). In an analogous way, what is overpowering in this picture is not the figure of Hyacinthus standing behind the Hyacinth girl, but the erosion of confidence in an essential self. If gender is a performance (as, we might recall, it is also flagrantly displayed to be in Eliot's "Portrait of a Lady"), the poem seems to ask, what is there essential in the self even to aspire to union with a universal Absolute? Indeed, as Butler points out, "the fear of losing one's place in gender . . . constitutes a certain crisis in ontology experienced at the level of both sexuality and language."¹⁸ Accordingly, a fundamental part of the fragmentation and instability evinced by *The Waste Land* stems from the loss of a stable subject, and that instability is most flagrantly projected in the alternative possibilities for the performance of gender which *The Waste Land* displays. Such a redefinition of the subject unites metaphysics with cultural practice, and is common to both male and female poets of modernism, notwithstanding their often divergent reactions to the perception of gender as performative. It is, I think, a founding and pervasive element of the modern that has not yet, I believe, been sufficiently appraised.

Peter Nicholls, for example, in his outstanding assessment of *Modernisms*, asserts that "the hegemonic form" of modernism represented by Pound, Eliot, Lewis, and Joyce,

was “concerned with developing models of psychic order which reinstate the divide between art and life, frequently in terms of a parallel re-fixing of sexual difference.”¹⁹ He proceeds to argue that “Eliot’s suspicion of forms of writing which make the word somehow self-sufficient—“feminine” or narcissistic forms, because language has not there become a register of the differentiation of self from other—are shared in various ways by Pound and Lewis” (*MLG*, 195). “The literary values of this type of modernism are founded, then, on an attempt to dissociate desire from any form of identification, and on the appeal to the visual and objective which affirms distance and difference” (*MLG*, 197). Against this “modernism” he defines the work of H.D., Stein, Williams, Moore, and Loy as a kind of “anti-modernism” or “polemic disturbance within the canonical version” (*ibid*). However, I would argue, the attempt to determine the meaning of the instability of sexual difference and gender performance was a common thread among both male *and* female modernists; and the *failure* of modern man to accomplish the association of desire with identification is the profound tragedy and loss of connection that made *The Waste Land* waste.

Although pivotal to this argument, the Hyacinth girl episode alone remains insufficient to ground an argument that Eliot, *avant la lettre*, perceived and represented gender as dramatic performance. We now turn, more briefly, to two of many other representative scenes within the poem. Probably drawn from Eliot’s own life, another such scene is exemplified in the merciless exchange between the upper-middle-class woman in “A Game of Chess” and her husband or partner. As in the Hyacinth girl narrative, the woman is directly quoted, while the narrator responds only in an interior monologue set off by dashes. Indeed, it is the absence of response which constitutes the real passive-aggressive violence of this scene. Here too the female speaker is identified as female; the narrator’s sex is unspecified. Once again the narrator is constructed as male (this time in the role of husband) by what he refuses or fails to perform of the gender expectations his own actions summon into the poem from its surrounding community of discourse.

The woman makes demands on the narrator which we may presume appropriate coming from a wife, but hardly from a casual acquaintance. She demands that he “stay with” her, because she is unwell this night:

“My nerves are bad to-night. Yes, bad. Stay with me.”

[*CPP*, 40]

Because the location is her boudoir, where she has been dressing (perfume vials are unstoppered, her hair is being brushed), we presume a male visitor to be a sexual familiar. This impression is imagistically buttressed by the description of her hair (as in the previous scene a bodily focal point of erotic signification): “under the brush, her hair / Spread out in fiery points / Glowed into words, then would be savagely still” (*CPP*, 40). Equated with “fiery” hair, her words become a covert sexual demand, made in the oblique way permitted a middle-class woman of insistent libido, raised in the Edwardian era. Thus when she demands, “Speak to me. Why do you never speak. Speak” we

- 432 recognize that the woman pleads for a connection that is at once emotional and erotic (ibid). The extent of the brokenness of this connection is quickly clear. Words fail; the mind of this man is completely opaque to her, and identification of the perceiving subject with desired object is literally non-existent:

“What are you thinking of? What thinking? What?
 “I never know what you are thinking. Think.”
 [CPP, 40]

With the utterance of the word “never” we recognize the repetitiveness by which modes of gender, of being men and women in the world, appear. To use Butler’s language, “performativity is not a singular act, but a repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalization in the context of a body, understood, in part, as a culturally sustained temporal duration” (*GT*, xv).

The ritual quality of this relationship, endlessly recurring and never progressing, is shockingly clear in the parataxis of the narrator’s silent response:

I think we are in rats’ alley
 Where the dead men lost their bones.
 [CPP, 40]

This scene continues with pseudo-responses that could be viewed as exchanges of threat or injury. On the one hand the silent narrator substitutes two different kinds of evasion of emotional contact for the direct response which his partner demands. The first meditation, with its reference to “rats’ alley / Where the dead men lost their bones,” Sandra Gilbert has linked to Gallipoli, the site of the death of Jean Verdenal.²⁰ As she points out, “rats’ alley” is one of the names given to the labyrinth of trenches on Gallipoli, where Verdenal died on 2 May 1915. We recall that Eliot dedicated *Prufrock and Other Observations* (1917) to “Jean Verdenal, 1889–1915 / mort aux Dardanelles.” Here elements of Eliot’s own biography may prove illuminating about the emotional complexity of this text. To the extent that one may imagine personal emotions projected upon the figure of the metamorphic narrator in *The Waste Land*, it becomes significant that the woman in “A Game of Chess” can be associated with Eliot’s first wife Vivienne and the friend of “What the Thunder Said” with Jean Verdenal. If one makes such an association, the speaker’s despairing reference to “rats’ alley” substitutes reflection on a relationship permanently lost for response to the demands of a present one. In *Waste Land Facsimile* drafts the next response also seems to refer these lines to the very ambiguities established in the earlier Hyacinth girl episode. Although the bracketed material (below) was removed, the ur-text read:

I remember
 [The hyacinth garden]. Those are pearls that were his eyes, [yes!].²¹

As in the previous scene, such allusions destabilize the performance of gender and shadow the text with a relationship which constructs a subject with quite different gender possibilities, homoerotic rather than heterosexual. One thinks of a shadow as a replica of the “original,” but here again is a shadow with a difference, and the subtle effect is to emphasize the fluidity of gender performance.

The other emotional evasion by the silent narrator is performative in its aspect as parody. Responding to the frenzied demand “Are you alive, or not? Is there nothing in your head” the narrator performs a few bars from a contemporary jazz song that vulgarizes Shakespeare (whom he had himself quoted in the immediately preceding meditation). This gesture offers a kind of simulation of a simulacra which has its greatest force in reflexively demonstrating the emptiness of the center. It is as if the narrator literally acts out the emptiness of his response to the question of his partner: *Nothing* is precisely what is in his head. But to offer no response to the emotional and erotic demands of another—who is perceived in cultural gender scripts as “entitled” to make such demands—risks serious injury to the other. The extent of that injury can be measured by the fury of the woman’s response:

“What shall I do now? What shall I do?”
 “I shall rush out as I am, and walk the street
 “With my hair down, so. What shall we do to-morrow?
 “What shall we ever do?”

[CPP, 41]

Perceiving a kind of abandonment which would deny her the very identity as the wife or partner of this man, she first cries “What shall I do now?” She then proposes an action, which, under the guise of a distraught hysteria threatens a retributive betrayal suggestive of public emasculation: “I shall rush out as I am, and walk the street.” Bearing in mind the purposes of streetwalkers in Central London, the fact that she has been dressing in her boudoir, and that her hair is down, we are alerted to the significance of her threat to “rush out *as I am*” (emphasis added). It is therefore no accident that following this almost unbearable scene of union unachieved, the woman utters what is really the cry of the whole poem: “What shall we do tomorrow? / What shall we ever do?” The question is both ethical and ontological, and it is driven by the perception of the self as too unstable to make commitment or union possible. A fundamental feature of that instability is the instability of gender itself.

I will complete this portrait of gender performativity in *The Waste Land* with an examination both of the crucial address to the friend in “What the Thunder Said” and several stanzas in Part V of the poem which lead up to and help to situate it.

In the fourth stanza, following the liturgical rhythms of the lament at the absence of water, the narrator expressly notes his inability to recognize the sex of a “third who walks always beside you”:

When I count, there are only you and I together
 But when I look ahead up the white road

There is always another one walking beside you
 Gliding wrapt in a brown mantle, hooded
 I do not know whether a man or a woman . . .

[*CPP*, 48]

This passage contains dual and opposing allusions. In his notes, Eliot himself linked the passage to the explorer Shackleton's account of his Antarctic expedition, in which the party "at the extremity of their strength, had the constant delusion that there was *one more member* than could actually be counted" (*CPP*, 54). But in his opening note to section V, Eliot cites the journey to Emmaus as one of the themes of the section (53), and most subsequent critics have treated the lines as an allusion to the disciples on the road to Emmaus, unable to recognize a risen Christ.²² It is important to retain the collision of the two images Eliot himself suggested: is the figure one of salvation or a delusion brought on by life in extremis?

Uncertainty about the answer to this question inhabits the agonized agnosticism of the poem. However, there are also other nuances of meaning in which uncertainty about the sexual identity of the figure becomes importantly suggestive. The two allusions—to an explorer and to Christ on the road to Emmaus—do not in themselves mandate a perception of gender uncertainty. That is explicitly added by the narrator. Throughout the poem, Eliot, like Dante, has used desire for a human being as a metonym for desire for union with a divine Absolute—and failure at that quest as well.²³ The tragedy of *The Waste Land* is that the narrator fails at both quests. The passage suggests that the narrator, unlike Dante, is uncertain about the sex of the desired love object, an uncertainty made palpable in the poem by the introduction of the episode with the friend three stanzas later. The performance of the "one walking beside you . . . wrapt in a brown mantle" is insufficient in dress or action to inscribe gender in the narrator's understanding. Unprompted, he calls attention to his uncertainty, and thus adds one more link to the discourse of gender insecurity which is a central element in the ontological, spiritual, and erotic crises of the waste land. (Moreover, the speaker's inability to determine the gender of the figure also reinforces our perception of the speaker's uncertainty about the nature of the deity whose salvation he seeks.)

The narrator's seemingly tangential profession of uncertainty as to the gender identity of a companion on a journey of exploration is thus tellingly separated by only three stanzas from the crucial next-to-last stanza in which the speaker remembers the possibility and loss of a moment of genuine response between self and other, the speaker and his friend. Those three stanzas suggest the repetitive proceeding of civilization after civilization to their violent dooms, coming in the third to the site to which the journey of the poem seems to have led: an "empty chapel, only the wind's home" (*CPP*, 49). That stanza ends with a cock crow and a "gust bringing rain." Just as the narrative of the hooded third figure contains paired and opposing readings of delusion or salvation unrecognized, so too the cock crow compresses the alternative readings of renunciation of a beloved friend who offers the salvation of human connection, on one hand, and temporary escape from a ghost, on the other. These paired readings of

the cock crow so importantly frame the stanza which follows that their background must be brought forward.

The “co co rico co co rico” can recall for us the warning to Peter, “Verily I say unto thee, That this day, *even* in this night, before the cock crow twice, thou shalt deny me thrice.” Luke explicitly asserts “thou shalt thrice deny *that thou knowest me*” (emphasis added; Mark 14:30; see also *Matt.* 26:34; Luke 22:34). Peter, who has pledged to die with Jesus, now will not even acknowledge he knows him. This by itself greatly heightens the narrative which follows. But there is also a probable reference here to *Hamlet* and this reference confers still further layers of complexity on the succeeding narrative (*EPP*, 95, 328). This allusion reminds us of the crowing cock in *Hamlet* (I, 2, 209–19), whose cry causes the ghost of Hamlet’s lost father to vanish with the day. Hamlet’s love for his father makes him loathe to tolerate his mother’s swift remarriage, and the event torments him almost to witlessness. Eliot was at great pains to argue that this loss and what Hamlet sees as his mother’s guilt were insufficient to justify Hamlet’s anguish. The “‘madness’ of Hamlet” over these feelings is “For Shakespeare . . . less than madness and more than feigned,” Eliot argues.²⁴ Eliot calls it “an emotion which can find no outlet in action” and asserts that it is for the artist,

an emotion which he cannot express in art. The intense feeling, ecstatic or terrible, without an object or exceeding its object, is something which every person of sensibility has known; it is doubtless a study to pathologists. It often occurs in adolescence: the ordinary person puts these feelings to sleep, or trims down his feeling to fit the business world; the artist keeps it alive by his ability to intensify the world to his emotions. [“HHP,” 102]

These are of course among the famous lines explaining the objective correlative. When one sees the allusion to the cock in *Hamlet* as introduction to a narrative founded on personal experience of great consequence to Eliot, the lines which follow in the same essay become of considerable interest as well:

The *Hamlet* of Laforgue is an adolescent; the *Hamlet* of Shakespeare is not, he has not that explanation and excuse. We must simply admit that here Shakespeare tackled a problem which proved too much for him. Why he attempted it at all is an insoluble puzzle; under compulsion of what experience he attempted to express the inexpressibly horrible, we cannot ever know. We need a great many facts of his biography . . . We should have, finally, to know something which is by hypothesis unknowable, for we assume it to be an experience which, in the manner indicated, exceeded the facts. We should have to understand things which Shakespeare did not understand himself. [“HHP,” 102–3]

The crucial next to last stanza, for which the crowing cock—and “a damp gust bringing rain”—are introduction, offers the scene in “What the Thunder Said” in which the speaker addresses his “friend,” and we may well wonder if Eliot’s comments about Shakespeare do not apply to himself as well. Here he speaks, in some of the most contested lines of the poem, of “the awful daring of a moment’s surrender” and concludes that such surrender is literally constituent of the self: “By this, and this only, we have existed” (*CPP*, 49).

In the critical passage in the second to last stanza, the narrator responds to what the thunder said. As Eliot himself tells us, the passage is framed by a fable drawn from the *Brihadaranyaka-Upanishad*, 5, 1. And he supplies the meanings “Give, sympathize, control” for the Sanskrit transliterations “Datta, dayadhvam, damyata” (*CPP*, 54). This passage has prompted some remarkably divergent interpretations. In a thoughtful and detailed reading that stresses that the sound of the thunder is after all, just sound—da,” an incomplete phrase—and emphasizes the act of interpretation involved in the passage, Brooker and Bentley suggest that there may be three different interpreters here (*RWL*, 190). Grover Smith argues that there is one interpreter, a figure who is unable to respond affirmatively to the thunder and thus fails, again, the initiation required in the Legend of the Fisher King (*EPP*, 95). Both readings see the narrator as having succumbed to lust while failing to achieve love or union (*RWL*, 191; *EPP*, 96). Martin Scofield, however, notes “a moment of exceptional tenderness” here (*ETP*, 124). Scofield, I think, is right, and it is the sense of a healing, even redemptive, union—lost—that fuels the equivocation between despair and hope with which the poem draws to an end.

This passage, like the narratives in the Hyacinth girl episode and “The Game of Chess,” is at one important level a narration of the performance of gender possibilities. It is made by a single narrator, the same figure who appeared in the heterosexual courtship and marriage scenes we have previously discussed. This narrator listens to the thunder and interprets it to say that only by a genuine and profound encounter with the Other can one actually exist rather than succumb to the death in life of the wasted land. We may note at the outset that this passage, like that of the Hyacinth girl before, tolerates readings which figure gender in very different terms. Indeed one reading—not totally strained—could construe the assertion “By this, and this only, we have existed” to mean that human beings survive over time only through the fertility implicit in a man and woman’s erotic union (*CPP*, 49). But the passage oscillates, as the Tiresian speaker himself does, between two very different readings, or performances, of gender, and it is important, I think, to see as dominant the assertion of the meaning of a friendship between men. To begin with, the literal text invites such a reading. It begins:

Datta : what have we given?
 My friend, blood shaking my heart
 The awful daring of a moment’s surrender
 Which an age of prudence can never retract
 By this and this only we have existed . . .

[*CPP*, 49]

The address to “my friend”—*mon cher ami*, in the French salutation of Jean Verdenal’s letters to Eliot (*LTS*, 20–36)—exists within connotative conventions that make this the address of equals, in which the power relationship is unskewed by the expectations of male-female relationships that prevailed at the time, and in some circles to the present. (James Miller has argued that the canceled lines of the *Facsimile* stipulate the sex of the friend clearly: the line is, “we brother, what have we given?”²⁵ But this line in the

holograph has been heavily canceled and arguably remains impossible to read (WFL, 76). An equally compelling case exists, I believe, in the connotations of the mode of address: “my friend.”) The language, which is retrospective, suggests that the intensity of the moment was such that the very heart was hammering. This giving was a surrender of self, but paradoxically one which initiates actual existence. Not actual birth, it holds out the possibility of rebirth from death in life. It is “daring” and imprudent, we may interpret, precisely because it violates normative gender expectations. And it generates the possibility of a certain way of being in the world which cannot be canceled from history—even if unrepeated. It will, however, inhabit a place of silence. This act of momentary surrender will not be noted by others at our death, nor will it be woven among the memories we cast over our long ago past, and it cannot be left among our material possessions for others

Which is not to be found in our obituaries
 Or in memories draped by the beneficent spider
 Or under seals broken by the lean solicitor
 In our empty rooms

[CPP, 49]

Key language in the passage resembles—for whatever reason or accident—that in the last of the seven letters written to Eliot by Jean Verdenal in 1911–12, after the year in which they had lived in the same pension on the rue St. Jacques while Eliot attended lectures by Bergson and studied French language and literature with Alain-Fournier. As early as a letter of 5 February 1912, Verdenal had expressed fear that their separation had begun to attenuate the intensity of their friendship,²⁶ and in the final letter we have from him, he bids his friend goodbye in a passage that seems to regret the prudence which is in some unspecified way linked with the separation:

I see with pleasure that you are engaged in serious study; your delicate taste and perspicacity will be put to better use than in dealing with futile matters. I wish you, for the coming year, an oft-renewed ardour—ardour, flame—but its source is in the heart, and here it is that our wishes must be prudent. “Bring good upon me, O Lord, whether I ask for it or not, and remove evil from me, even though I ask for it.”

Goodbye, my dear friend, and all best wishes. J. Verdenal. [LTS, 36]

Eliot recalled this friendship several times in writing during the time both shortly before and after the composition of *The Waste Land*. The collection *Prufrock and Other Observations* in 1917 was dedicated to Verdenal, and for the 1925 edition of the poems the dedication “For Jean Verdenal, 1889–1915 / mort aux Dardanelles,” was brought together with an epigraph from Dante immediately below it which read, in Italian: “Now you are able to comprehend the quantity of love that warms me toward you, / When I forget our emptiness / Treating shades as if they were solid.”²⁷ Christopher Ricks notes that Eliot had written a similar dedication in his “Notebook,” “probably when he sold it to Quinn in 1922.”²⁸

438 Whatever the personal memories that may have attended the poet, the narrator he constructs in *The Waste Land* goes on to recount another case of an opportunity for human meeting that remained unrealized or unsustainable:

Damyata: The boat responded
 Gaily, to the hand expert with sail and oar
 The sea was calm, your heart would have responded
 Gaily, when invited, beating obedient
 To controlling hands.

[*CPP*, 49–50]

This is a relationship of mutuality. If the first interpretation of the thunder, “give,” spoke of “surrender,” this passage speaks of “control.” This is a control, however, which accommodates the force of the other. Eliot was himself an expert sailor and knew well that the skilled helmsman controls a sail boat, not by directly opposing the force of the wind, but by accommodating to it, by tacking on a course which is a marriage of the direction the wind is blowing with the direction the sailor wishes to go. The narrator speaks with a wistfulness fully comparable to that in the Hyacinth garden: “your heart would have responded / Gaily, when invited, beating obedient / To controlling hands” (*CPP*, 49–50). The verb is subjunctive: *would*. The possibility of the heart’s response existed, but it remained unfulfilled, perhaps broken off or abandoned, constituting one more lost glimpse of the possibility of union.

Unlike Miller, I do not believe that the entire poem can be read as a lament for the loss of the homosocial beloved; to read it so is to do violence to some of the most electrifying—and heterosexual—scenes in the text. But it is revealing and important, I think, to read this passage within the context of Eliot’s friendship with Jean Verdenal, just as the earlier passages have been associated with Emily Hale and Vivienne. I believe this to be true not because narrator and poet can be conflated—they are not—but because such a context sustains a contention that Eliot recognized gender as performative and illuminates a source of his portrayal of the modern person as unmoored from founding narratives. Butler herself has discussed the role of non-normative sexuality as part of her own history of articulating a theory of gender as performative:

The idea that sexual practice has the power to destabilize gender emerged from my reading of Gayle Rubin’s “The Traffic in Women” and sought to establish that normative sexuality fortifies normative gender. Briefly, one is a woman [for Eliot read “man”], according to this framework, to the extent that one functions as one within the dominant heterosexual frame and to call the frame into question is perhaps to lose something of one’s sense of place in gender. . . . I sought to understand some of the terror and anxiety that some people suffer in “becoming gay,” the fear of losing one’s place in gender. . . . This constitutes a certain crisis in ontology experienced at the level of both sexuality and language. [*GT*, xi]

Eliot and his contemporaries recognized the performativity of gender as a source of ontological instability of the self long before it became a touchstone of post-structuralist

theorizing. In the first quarter of the twentieth century this insight posed a profound challenge to a stable order in social experience, an order which human cultures have sought to achieve through centuries of essential constructions of the self. It also introduced an impediment to stability in one of the most consistent symbolic means of figuring ontological certainty, or a union with an Absolute—that of erotic love for a human person. This processual self, constructed in performance (even if projected outward upon the world as if it were given) thus has its important parallels in much of the philosophy of the early twentieth century. Heidegger, for example, noted that “Man’s being is grounded in language; but this actually occurs in *conversation*” and again:

The presence of the gods and the appearance of the world are not merely a consequence of the occurrence of language; rather they are simultaneous with it. And this to the extent that it is precisely in the naming of the gods and in the world becoming word, that authentic conversation, which we ourselves are, consists.²⁹

Many have recognized that the instability of the self shaped the practices of modernism and is a constitutive element of it. Fewer have noted the centrality of gender performativity to that instability. Recognizing the presence of this portrait of the gendered self in Eliot provides additional evidence of the far-ranging scope of Lyotard’s assertion that “A work can become modern only if it is first postmodern. Postmodernism thus understood is not modernism at its end but in the nascent state. . . .”³⁰ Simultaneously, identifying the performative elements of Eliot’s conception of gender may help us get past certain disputes in Eliot criticism concerning his personal life—if only for our own satisfaction—and competing critical claims regarding Eliot’s sex/gender identity. Ever the creator in words, Eliot understood life itself as performance.

Notes

1. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999), xiv–xv; hereafter abbreviated as *GT*.

2. See, for example, Lyndall Gordon’s *Eliot’s Early Years* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 107; hereafter abbreviated as *EEY*; and John T. Mayer’s *T. S. Eliot’s Silent Voices* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 244–5.

3. See, for example, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s *No Man’s Land*, Vol. 1 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 30–2; and Jewel Spears Brooker’s critique in *Mastery and Escape: T. S. Eliot and the Dialectic of Modernism* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1994), 217.

4. See Lyndall Gordon, *T. S. Eliot: An Imperfect Life* (New York: Norton, 1998), 169; hereafter abbreviated as *AIL*. Jean Verdenal to T. S. Eliot, 26 December 1912, *The Letters of T. S. Eliot*, Vol. 1: 1898–1922, ed. Valerie Eliot (New York: Harcourt, 1988), 35–6; hereafter abbreviated as *LTS*.

5. See Jewel Spears Brooker’s *Approches to Teaching T. S. Eliot’s Poetry and Plays* (New York: Modern Language Association, 1988), 103–8.

6. See Jewel Spears Brooker and Joseph Bentley’s *Reading the Waste Land: Modernism and the Limits of Interpretation* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1990), 70; hereafter abbreviated as *RWL*.

7. T. S. Eliot, *The Complete Poems and Plays, 1909–1950* (New York: Harcourt, 1958), 38; hereafter abbreviated as *CPP*.

8. Marja Palmer, *Men and Women In T. S. Eliot’s Early Poetry* (Lund, Sweden: Lund University Press, 1996), 165, 103–6; hereafter abbreviated as *MW*.

9. Tony Pinkney's suggestion in *Women in the Poetry of T. S. Eliot: A Psychoanalytic Approach* (London: Macmillan, 1984) that the Hyacinth girl comes back from the garden dead simply can not be supported in any reading that attends to the repetitive nature of the interaction implied in the Hyacinth girl's use of the word "first," which implies repeated action over time.

10. (EEY, 79–81) Lyndall Gordon and Nancy K. Gish, for example, think that Eliot's relationship with Emily Hale caused him great guilt (Gish, private communication).

11. "Motionless under the moon-beam, / up to his feathers in the stream; / Although fish leap, the white heron / Shivers in a dumbfounded dream. / God has not died for the white heron. [. . .] But that the full is shortly gone / And after that is crescent moon, / It's certain that the moon-crazed heron / Would be but fishes' diet soon." From *The Collected Plays of W. B. Yeats* (London: Macmillan, 1968), 288.

12. "O Grace abounding, wherein I presumed to fix my look on the eternal light so long that I consumed my sight thereon! Within its depths I saw ingathered, bound by love in one volume, the scattered leaves of all the universe; . . . Thus all suspended did my mind gaze fixed, immovable, intent, . . . Now shall my speech fall farther short even of what I can remember than an infant's who still bathes his tongue at breast." From Dante, *Paradiso*, XXXIII, in *The Divine Comedy*, trans. Carlyle-Okey-Wicksteed (New York: Modern Library, 1950), 605.

13. James E. Miller, Jr., "T. S. Eliot's Uranian Muse: The Verdenal Letters," *ANQ* 9 (Fall 1988): 4–20; 16–7.

14. Miller's "T. S. Eliot's Uranian Muse" makes the case that *The Waste Land Facsimile* supports an identification of the Hyacinth girl as male in the original draft—a fact which would not preclude a highly deliberate alteration from draft to final text. Such an alteration would suggest that Eliot was quite literally "of two minds" about the gender ascription and hence of the basic tale told (5).

15. (AIL, 81–5; RWL, 73–6) Gordon makes a persuasive case for connection between the Hyacinth girl scene and the scene in the garden of *Burnt Norton*, for which there is the precedence of Eliot and Hale's visit a few years before the poem's composition (AIL, 265–9). Her efforts to extend that connection to the view of the girl in "La Figlia che Piange" is less convincing, however, because the date of composition of that poem is either 1911 or 1912 placing it clearly before Eliot's declaration of love for Hale in 1914 and almost immediate separation from her (LTS, xvi–vii). The source supporting 1911 as the date of composition is the volume, *T. S. Eliot: Poems 1910–1930*, trans. Pierre Leyris (Paris: du Seuil, 1947). In his edition, *Inventions of the March Hare: Poems 1909–1917* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1996), Christopher Ricks cites this date noting that "the poems were dated (and given notes by John Hayward) (xxxvii). Ricks also cites another source, a letter from Eliot to Eudo C. Mason of 21 February 1936, held in the Humanities Research Center, in which the date is asserted to be 1912 (xv). Other scholars follow one of the two sources. In citing John Hayward as the source of the 1911 date, Gordon draws on Helen Gardner in *The Art of T. S. Eliot* (New York: Dutton, 1959) (107) (AIL, 572). The date of Eliot's meeting of Emily Hale is also uncertain. Gordon judges it to be "certainly by 1912" and cites both Valerie Eliot and a Hale letter to M. Moore (24 September 1959) as sources (AIL, 81). Valerie Eliot asserts the date to be 1912 (LTS, xvii, xxi). These probable dates, in combination, suggest that it is questionable to view Emily Hale as the figure represented in "La Figlia che Piange." Such a chronology would lead us to see an earlier friendship figured in the repeated images of unconsummated love in Eliot's poetry. The composition of the poem does, however, follow Eliot's year in Paris between 1910–1911, in which he experienced a deep friendship with Jean Verdenal. Thus the scene may actually figure an inner struggle over gender performance. Notably, I propose this view of the scene but do not subscribe to Miller's reading of it as a straightforward displacement of a male figure by a female "cover."

16. If some of the poignant figures of *The Waste Land* are rooted in Eliot's own memories, there are several aspects of Jean Verdenal's letters to Eliot which could be adduced to support an argument that this passage contains an allusion to both male and female friends. One of Verdenal's letters to Eliot describes a trip to "the woods" around St. Cloud he has taken that day. This letter too is on the approximate "anniversary" of a similar trip he took with Eliot the year before (Letter to Eliot, 22 April 1912; LTS, 22–4).

17. Lee Oser, in *T. S. Eliot and American Poetry* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1998), comment usefully in a slightly different context, “through the passive medium of Tiresias, he converts *Song of Myself* into *Song of Selves* (79).

18. (*GT*, xi) Butler makes this statement as part of an explanation of her efforts “to understand some of the terror and anxiety that some people suffer in ‘becoming gay,’” an inquiry perhaps even more germane to a text written in 1921 in the wake of Oscar Wilde’s trials, women’s suffrage, and the theories of “perversion” newly proclaimed by psychologists as diverse as Freud and Havelock Ellis.

19. Peter Nicholls, *Modernisms: A Literary Guide* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 167; hereafter abbreviated as *MLG*.

20. See her discussion of James Morris’s *Farewell the Trumpets: An Imperial Retreat* and Jean Verdenal in “‘Rats’ Alley’: The Great War, Modernism, and the (Anti) Pastoral Elegy,” *New Literary History* 30.1 (1999): 179–201; 193, 198.

21. T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land: A Facsimile and Transcript of the Original Drafts*, ed. Valerie Eliot (London: Faber, 1971), 13; hereafter abbreviated as *WLF*.

22. See, for example, *RWL*, 179; Grover Smith, Jr., *T. S. Eliot’s Poetry and Plays: A Study in Sources and Meaning* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 93; hereafter abbreviated as *EPP*; and Martin Scofield, *T. S. Eliot: the poems* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 122; hereafter abbreviated as *ETP*.

23. Lyndall Gordon argues unequivocally that Eliot saw “divine love as utterly different in kind” (*AIL*, 207). To this I would offer the qualified agreement, “yes—to Eliot as different as time and eternity.” But that does not mean that the possible momentary intuitions of union with another could not offer, for Eliot, the closest apprehension in time of what divine love might be. Indeed, Eliot’s very failures at love offer a synecdoche for human aspiration for unobtainable union with the Divine in time. Eliot thus joins those creating modern art as Lyotard defines it: “the art which devotes its ‘little technical expertise’ . . . to present the fact that the unrepresentable exists” (Jean-François Lyotard, *The Post Modern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984], 78).

24. T. S. Eliot, “Hamlet and his Problems,” *The Sacred Wood* (London: Methuen, 1967), 101, 102; hereafter abbreviated “HPP.”

25. (*WLF*, 76) Miller, “T. S. Eliot’s Uranian Muse,” 6.

26. “My dear friend, we are not very far, you and I, from the point beyond which people lose that indefinable influence and emotive power over each other, which is reborn when they come together again. It is not only time which causes forgetfulness—distance (space) is an important factor. It is already, no doubt, making itself felt between us (let us admit this frankly), . . . (*LTS*, 32).

27. Dante Alighieri, *Purgatorio*, XXI, 133–6.

28. *Inventions of the March Hare*, ed. Ricks, 4. Lyndall Gordon records that Eliot sent Emily Hale a copy of his poems *Ara Vos Prec* (1920) in 1923 with the inscription, “for Emily Hale with the author’s humble compliments, T. S. Eliot,” followed by another quotation from Dante in which “a man of learning speaks from hell, asking that his book be remembered” saying “‘Keep my *Treasure*, where I yet live on, and I ask no more.’ Then he turned round” (qtd. in *AIL*, 205). Gordon points out in a footnote that “The speaker is Brunetto Latini, Dante’s teacher, who is amongst the sodomites. TSE marked the canto in the pocket edition he used at Harvard. . . .) (*AIL*, 596).

29. Martin Heidegger, “Hölderlin and the Essence of Poetry,” *Elucidations of Hölderlin’s Poetry*, trans. Keith Hoeller (Amherst, N.Y.: Humanity Books, 2000), 51–65; 56; 57–8.

30. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 79.