

# Disciplining *The Waste Land*, or How to Lead Critics into Temptation

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I must admit that I am, on one conspicuous occasion, not guiltless of having led critics into temptation.

—T. S. Eliot, “The Frontiers of Criticism”

**I**n what is still the best-known review of *The Waste Land*, Edmund Wilson in 1922 assured readers of *The Dial* that they would find T. S. Eliot’s long poem “intelligible at first reading.” Yet, in the course of arguing for the poem’s intelligibility, Wilson used Eliot’s own as yet unpublished notes to *The Waste Land* to explain the poem’s “complicated correspondences.” Wilson may have been the first to use the notes to negotiate his way through the poem, but he certainly has not been the last critic to have been “led into temptation.” As Eliot acknowledged in “The Frontiers of Criticism,” his 1956 essay from which my epigraph and title are taken, his notes “have had almost greater popularity than the poem itself,” such that “now they can never be unstuck” (110).

Eliot’s own explanation in “The Frontiers of Criticism” of his notes’ genesis and influence must be taken with a large grain of salt, but it is worth reviewing nonetheless:

The notes to *The Waste Land*! I had at first intended only to put down all the references for my quotations, with a view to spiking the guns of critics of my earlier poems who had accused me of plagiarism. Then, when it came time to print *The Waste Land* as a little book—for the poem on its first appearance in *The Dial* and in *The Criterion* had no notes whatever—it was discovered that the poem was inconveniently short, so I set to work to expand the notes, in order to provide a few more pages of printed matter, with the result

that they became the remarkable exposition of bogus scholarship  
that is still on view to-day. (109)

Eliot's contention that the notes were added only because his poem "was inconveniently short" has been disproved. We now know that Eliot had the notes in mind before he began serious negotiations with his eventual publisher, Liveright, and that he had finished composing them several months before the poem first appeared in *The Dial*.<sup>1</sup> Eliot's description of the notes as a "remarkable exposition of bogus scholarship," however, should be taken more seriously. As Peter Middleton stated so concisely almost a decade ago, "academic interpretation of *The Waste Land* has gone straight along the paths laid out by those footnotes" because "*The Waste Land* is a ready-made academic poem with interpretations already included" (175, 176). The notes not only introduce a specifically academic discourse to the poem, but, at least until recently, they have also had the effect of encouraging professional literary critics to unify the poem's fragments along interpretive lines the notes themselves suggest.

What interests me, however, is how, when, and why the notes *stopped* being so effective at convincing critics that the poem is unified.<sup>2</sup> Unlike Middleton, who tends to view academic discourse as an unchanging instance of an ever more stable institution, I will argue that readings of the notes—and of the poem—have changed precisely because the notes represent a particular conflict in professional literary critical discourse in the 1920s. Beginning with Wilson's review, I argue that the notes have been successful in producing ordered readings of *The Waste Land* because they deflect the cultural crisis represented in the poem onto the act of reading, suggesting that the disorder seemingly so evident in the poem is in fact the fault of the reader. The notes particularly emphasize the readerly role of the professional literary critic, parodying the two theories of reading then dominant in the professional literary field, philology and impressionism. At the same time, however, the notes hold out the possibility that professional literary critics may be able to resolve the conflicts within their own discursive field and in so doing achieve the unified sensibility necessary for reconstructing the order apparently absent in the poem. In effect, the notes suggest that professional literary critics can use their expertise to resolve the crisis of modernity represented by the poem. This presumption of cultural power has swayed most professional readers of the poem until recently. Once poststructuralist theorists, however, began demonstrating that the expertise of the professional critic is a product of the very cultural crisis it is designed to overcome, the notes have ceased to have their unifying effect.

Unlike other early reviewers of magazine versions of Eliot's poem who had to make sense of *The Waste Land* on its own terms, Edmund Wilson had access to the poem's as yet unpublished notes.<sup>3</sup> Before reading the notes, Wilson believed *The Waste Land* to be "nothing more or less than a most distressingly moving account of Eliot's own agonized state of mind" (*Letter on Literature and Politics* 94). Wilson found the structurally fragmented poem representative of the "chaotic, irregular, fragmentary" experiences that Eliot, in his recent essay on "The Metaphysical Poets," had used to define the "disassociated" modern mind (247). After reading the notes in October and November, however, Wilson restructured his reading of the poem. By the time he published "The Poetry of Drouth" in December, he could write that "we feel that [Eliot] is speaking not only for a personal distress, but for the starvation of a whole civilization" (616).

As "the cry of a man on the verge of insanity," the poem Wilson first read enacted the very failure of modernity it critiqued. Following Zygmunt Bauman's account, I define *modernity* as the political and socioeconomic episteme that became dominant during the seventeenth century and may be characterized by its desire for order.<sup>4</sup> This desire for order, however, continuously deconstructs itself, as the very imperative to "set my lands in order" assumes as its foundational ground the presence of chaos. Eliot's poem, by expressing this central dilemma, marks a significant moment of crisis in the history of modernity. Faced with the impossible task of formulating a totalizing order, the poem's speakers, like the modern inhabitants of the everyday world they represent, fragment their world into increasingly smaller segments in an attempt to achieve a local order (e.g., "If there were water / And no rock / If there were rock / and also water"). Yet the more the world—and the poem—is catalogued, divided, fragmented, the more insistent becomes the pervasive sense of disorder. Read in this way, the poem suggests the postmodern possibility that the individual's relation to the world, and to him or herself, is fundamentally ambiguous and obscure. In this postmodern, poststructuralist reading, Eliot's poem is indeed what Wilson had early termed a "cry *de profundis*," a profound demonstration of the deconstruction not only of individual identity but also of the fundamental categories through which the individual in modernity has heretofore understood the world.

At first glance, Wilson's revised account of the poem as a representation of "our whole world of strained nerves and shattered institutions" seems only to underscore this poststructuralist reading. Yet Wilson does not believe that the representation of disorder necessitates a reconsideration of the quest for order. In his review of *The Waste Land*, Wilson asserts that the poem's apparent lack of "structural unity" is belied by "the force of intense

emotion" that "provide[s] a key" to the poem's organization. In arguing for the ultimate order of Eliot's poem, Wilson is drawing on Eliot's own discussions of the craft of poetry in "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1919) and "The Metaphysical Poets" (1921). According to Eliot, the best poets do not express their "personal emotions," but rather "transmute the passions" into an impersonal emotion, "forming new wholes" out of ordinary feelings and experiences ("Tradition" 8; "Metaphysical" 247). Those who succeed in marrying thought and feeling in this way are said by Eliot to possess a "unified sensibility." That possessing such a unified sensibility would lead to the creation of better poetry was a point already made by Ezra Pound and the imagists, who argued that presenting "an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time" was the ultimate aim of art (Pound 4). Wilson evokes this imagist aesthetic when he explains that Eliot's lines might "be wrung from flint . . . broken and sometimes infinitely tiny," but that they are nonetheless "authentic crystals." Like crystals, the bewilderingly multifaceted nature of the poem's lines are proof for Wilson of the strength of the underlying sensibility that orders the poem.

The notes to *The Waste Land* reinforced Wilson's emerging belief that modernist literature had an order, if only the critic would look for it. Although Wilson does not acknowledge in his review that he had access to the notes, he paraphrases and sometimes quotes many of them directly to piece together a unified reading of Eliot's poem.<sup>5</sup> Most importantly, where Wilson previously believed that *The Waste Land* was simply a reflection of a disordered mind, he now paraphrases Eliot's headnote to define what he later calls the "key" to the poem: "Mr. Eliot asserts that he derived [the] title, as well as the plan of the poem 'and much of the incidental symbolism,' from a book by Miss Jessie L. Weston called *From Ritual to Romance*" (611). Wilson proceeds to describe Weston's version of the grail quest, in which a knightly questor must find the grail to renew a sterile land ruled by an impotent king, then draws on the notes to trace images of this "waste land" through the poem. The grail quest becomes the "key" to the poem, Wilson asserts, because this "concrete image of a spiritual drouth" enables Eliot to hear "in his own parched cry the voices of all the thirsty men of the past" and so transmute his personal despair into an expression of the sensibility of his "civilization." Thus, although Wilson claims at the end of his review that the poem's unified sensibility implies the connections made in the notes, he uses the notes at the start of his review to make the case for the existence of the poem's unified sensibility.

Wilson's reading, in hindsight, became paradigmatic for several generations of critics who have found ample evidence for the poem's unity in the notes. The genealogy of such readings can be traced from Wilson

through Cleanth Brooks to Calvin Bedient, who in 1986 argued that the many voices of the poem are united by a nameless protagonist who disguises his faith with an ironic expression of disorder. All of these critics have used Eliot's notes to make their argument, even when such a use conflicted with their own theoretical methodology. Cleanth Brooks, for example, known for his description of poems as autonomous, organic wholes, admits in his essay on *The Waste Land* that he finds himself unable to resist using Eliot's notes to construct what he acknowledges to be a "scaffolding" of understanding around the poem. Although he realizes that he may "rely too much on Eliot's note[s]" (154), he finds it impossible to understand the poem without them.

How can we understand the power the notes have had to suggest that *The Waste Land* is, in the end, an orderly poem? The simplest answer is that the notes invite such a reading. It is the notes that insist that the poem has a "plan"; it is the notes that assert that the plan is based on the grail legend; it is the notes that suggest that the poem has one questor, Tiresias, in whom all the other characters "meet." As Hugh Kenner pointed out long ago, without the notes few readers would come to the same conclusions. For example, the only specific reference to the grail legend is in section V (the "empty chapel" of line 389), and the impotent Fisher King himself appears only in section III (where he is associated with Ferdinand of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*) and at the end of section V. Compared to the pervasive emphasis on the city as a locus of corruption, or even to the recurrent trope of Ariel's song, the grail quest appears at most a minor theme when considered without reference to the notes.

That the notes provide the means for unifying the poem does not, however, explain why they have had the power to do so. Many poets have annotated their texts—one thinks readily, to give just a few examples, of Spenser's "Shepherd's Calendar," Pope's "Dunciad Variorum," Byron's "Childe Harold," and more recently of James Merrill's "Yanina"—yet few such annotations have governed critical textual response in the way Eliot's notes have governed *The Waste Land*. Unlike Middleton, who suggests that all "footnotes are an institutional extension of the filing system for useful retrieval and recording of the institution's decisions" (175) and thus dictate how the text they annotate should be read, I believe that the discourses in which paratexts like the notes to *The Waste Land* participate must be understood within their own specific—and conflicted—historical contexts. Eliot's notes *have* served institutional purposes, but not because they simply "record institution's decisions." Indeed, if the notes did stand in for "the academy," then poststructuralist literary critics who have questioned the notes (including myself) would have to be understood as writing from a standpoint some-

how outside of that same academy, a position I find untenable. Readings of the notes have changed, not because poststructuralists have somehow managed to free themselves from institutional constraints but because the notes represent a particular conflict in the professional literary critical discourse of the 1920s which no longer governs professional literary critical discourse today.

Today, professional literary criticism is practically synonymous with academic criticism, the few exceptions proving the rule. In the 20s, however, the term "professional literary critic" could include both academic critics and men of letters like Edmund Wilson, who had little use for universities or organizations like the MLA but who still made his living from his expertise in literary criticism. Throughout the first half of this century, both academic and nonacademic literary critics alike were grappling with the crisis of modernity while simultaneously attempting to establish literary study as a professional field.<sup>6</sup> In doing so, they faced a peculiarly difficult problem. Modern culture was in crisis precisely because the rational, ordered universe it both produced and depended on had begun to unravel under the signature of such influential authors as Nietzsche, Freud, and Einstein. Yet, the literary critic's claim to professional status in the 20s was based on that critic's ability to provide a systematic method for ordering the literary text.<sup>7</sup> If the crisis of modernity had put the very possibility of ordering any text into question, what could distinguish the literary critic as a professional? Professional literary critics thus needed to find a way to resolve, or at least evade, the crisis of modernity in order to establish their own credentials.

Eliot's notes, by representing his poem as a unified and orderly whole, already performed the very maneuver professional literary critics sought to enact by shifting the central issues of the poem from questions of modernity to questions of interpretation. For although the poem radically questions the possibility of order, and thus the foundations of modernity, the notes assume that order not only can be achieved but already exists. While at least one speaker of the poem knows only "a heap of broken images," the author of the notes knows that the poem has a "purpose" and a "plan." The notes thus fundamentally change the reader's orientation to the poem. Like Wilson, readers who at first reading of the poem are confronted with a deconstruction of the very idea of order (a cry *de profundis*) find in the notes that the problem is not metaphysical after all but hermeneutic. The reader is asked to shift focus from considering the very possibility that order, as a concept, has failed, to considering how this poem is—or can be—ordered. In effect, when faced with the poem's "difficul-

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ties," the reader is told to become a better reader rather than to investigate the foundational source for his or her readerly discomfort.

The note to Tiresias provides a capsule example of this discursive shift. Tiresias, Eliot tells us in this famous note, "although a mere spectator and not indeed a 'character,' is yet the most important personage in the poem, uniting all the rest." We can see how this sentence redirects the reader from questions of order to questions of reading. Perhaps the most troubling aspect of the poem is its multiplicity of voices, a cacophony that refuses to follow any singular narrative line. Some of that trouble is reflected in this sentence, as the author searches for a descriptive term for the voice Tiresias names. Is he a spectator, a character, or a personage? If a spectator, what is the spectacle? If a character, in what play? These questions of narrative order are raised, however, only to be deflected by the central claim that, whatever Tiresias may be called, he unites all the rest. The question we are led to ask is no longer whether the characters in the poem are organized in any meaningful way, but how they are organized. How does Tiresias unite all the "personages" of the poem? More to the point, how did we miss his unifying role? Are there perhaps other unifying features we missed? The hermeneutic circle thus begun, the project of modernity is allowed to continue.

The note to the Tarot deck provides an even clearer example, not only of how this shift from a crisis of order to a crisis of reading occurs in the notes but also of why pursuing this interpretive move was so attractive to previous generations of professional literary critics. The Tarot cards enter the poem through the figure of Madame Sosostris, a fortune-teller whose name links her to the transvestite character in Aldous Huxley's *Chrome Yellow*. By the usual literary conventions, Sosostris appears to be an unreliable, even comic, speaker in the poem; a clairvoyant whose vision is clouded by her "bad cold," she stands as another lost figure in the "unreal city." Her attempt to tell the future, an endeavor that assumes that the future is fixed and thus knowable, parodies the modern quest to find predictable order. In this quest, Sosostris fails. She cannot see far enough into the future to protect the horoscope she brings to "Mrs. Equitone," nor can she even see the meaning of all of her cards. She can "not find" the Hanged Man, and she advises her client to "Fear death by water," even though the waste land is plagued by drought, and the speaker of the poem's climactic fifth section waits for rain. Sosostris's advice is not necessarily bad; Phlebas the Phoenician does experience a possibly unhappy "death by water" in section IV. That, however, is precisely the point. Sosostris is wrong not in warning her client to fear water, but in masking the complicated, ambivalent role water plays in the waste land. What her comic advice underscores is the

impossibility of formulating a coherent plan of action predicated on an ordered world.

Rather than focusing on the larger questions Sosostris's horoscope raises, however, this note, like the note on Tiresias, deflects our attention by suggesting that an ordered reading of the cards is, indeed, possible. Where a reader uneducated by the notes might ask whether formulating any "horoscope" is feasible in an uncertain world, the reader who follows the notes is instructed to overcome the comic disorder of Sosostris's predictions in order to find the "real" order they conceal. The note to the Tarot card implies that telling the future is possible, and advises us that Sosostris's horoscope accurately foreshadows the order of the poem, if only we know how to read it. We are told to look for the one-eyed merchant, the Phoenician Sailor and "Death by Water" later in the poem, where they appear, respectively, in part III as "Mr. Eugenides," and in part IV as "Phlebas the Phoenician" whose "Death by Water" is recounted. Despite Sosostris's own inability to find him, "The Hanged Man" is associated with the "Hanged God of Frazer," and thus with both the risen Christ the disciples see on their way to Emmaus (in part V) and with the grail quest (via the spiritual death of the King and his land's rebirth anticipated in that myth). The effect of the note is to demonstrate a method of reading that distinguishes between significant and insignificant references on the assumption that the seemingly heterogeneous images of the poem are unified by a few important themes.<sup>8</sup> This "elucidative method," as Eliot calls it in his headnote, orders the poem.

Not only does this method suggest a means of unifying the poem, it does so by using a language peculiar to early twentieth-century professional literary criticism. As I stated above, I do not mean that notes are or have become a distinctly academic form. Rather, the Tarot note in particular, and the notes to *The Waste Land* in general, encode a conflict then raging in professional literary criticism between philology and impressionism. Impressionism was based on Pater's claim that art can only be experienced subjectively, and on Arnold's belief in literature as the prime conveyor of a culture's spiritual values. In practice, impressionistic critics would offer their personal responses to works of art, believing that their refined sensibilities as members of an Arnoldian remnant would reveal the spiritual truths of the work before them. As literary studies became increasingly professionalized and localized in universities, however, impressionism was gradually supplanted by philology and its related forms of scholarship.<sup>9</sup> Originally based in linguistics, philology was developed in German universities as a scientific method using literary texts to study the history of language. Gradually, however, literary scholars, following the French critic Hippolyte Taine,



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became more interested in the historical background of the text than in the language in which the text was written. American philology essentially combined German philological methods with Taine's historical interest to develop a scientific study of literary sources.

Eliot's note on the Tarot deck is premised on the reader's ability to reconcile the author's personal impressions with the more "objective" citation style he uses, to reconcile, that is, the impressionistic and philological methods. Like many of the scholarly academic notes with which we are still familiar today, the Tarot note instructs the reader to examine other sources—namely, Frazer's *The Golden Bough* and the *New Testament*—in order to comprehend the full meaning of individual Tarot cards. At the same time, however, Eliot admits that he "is not familiar with the exact constitution of the Tarot pack," that he has "departed from the pack to suit [his] own convenience," and that some of his referential associations are made "arbitrarily," such as his claim that "The Man with Three Staves" is the "Fisher King." Two very different constructions of textual understanding are at play here, one based on the philologist's scientific use of annotation and citation to record evidence for textual arguments, the other based on the impressionist's intuition of the author's motives and desires to enhance the reader's pleasure in reading. Neither method, on its own, is apparently sufficient to "elucidate" the poem.

In fact, as represented in the notes, both philological and impressionistic inquiry can come to seem rather comical. Ever since the poem was published in book form, many commentators have noticed that the notes have a distinctly parodic quality.<sup>10</sup> In 1923, for example, one of Eliot's antagonists at Cambridge, the Renaissance scholar F. L. Lucas, attacked the notes in his review of the poem as being "as muddled as they are incomplete":

What is the use of explaining 'laquearia' by quoting two lines of Latin containing the word, which will convey nothing to those who do not know that language, and nothing new to those who do? What is the use of giving a quotation from Ovid which begins in the middle of a sentence, without reference? And when one person hails another on London Bridge as having been with him 'at Mylae,' how is the non-classical reader to guess that this is the name of a Punic sea-fight in which a Phoenician sailor, presumably, the speaker, had taken part? (117)

Lucas quite rightly perceives that many of the notes (especially those beginning "Cf." [compare with] or "V" [see]) have the form of philological citations, but then do not deliver the appropriate scholarly information. References that would be obvious to most educated readers of Eliot's day, like

the parodied lines from Marvell, are noted, while quite obscure references to Joyce, Lyly, and Kipling, among others, are omitted.<sup>11</sup> References to a given author and work are noted in one place, yet not in another; for example, references to Shakespeare's *Tempest* are noted for lines 192 and 257, but not for lines 48 and 125. Sources for passages in foreign or classical languages are given in those languages, which is hardly helpful for the person who does not have enough learning to recognize the passage in the first place. Obscure references to classical or historical situations are not noted, yet Eliot will take pains to describe the origins of a common ballad or the species of singing bird he has in mind. Finally, Eliot at times seems to mislead the reader deliberately, as in line 360, where he sends the reader off to investigate a "delusion" by one member of an Antarctic expedition "that there was *one more member* than could actually be counted," rather than noting the more relevant New Testament passages describing the journey to Emmaus. In short, these notes certainly do not fulfill the philological imperative of giving readers "all the references for my quotations."

At the same time, the notes hardly satisfy the expectations for impressionism that they also raise. A paradigmatic example of an impressionistic note comes at line 68, where the speaker, instead of citing the apocryphal tale in which Christ's crucifixion is said to have occurred on "the final stroke of nine," informs us that this sound was "a phenomenon which I have often noticed." Other references to the speaker's experience rather than to a textual source occur in the notes to lines 199, 210, 221, 264, and 360 (the hermit-thrush note arguably includes aspects of both philological and impressionistic discourse). In each of these cases, any source the author might mention is given not as a reference but as an impression of his experience, and thus an indication of its aesthetic value. The problem with these notes, and the source of their parodic quality, is that they ultimately refuse to give us access to the author. The impressionistic critic longs for biography—such as Coleridge's account of taking opium before writing "Kubla Khan"—yet the potentially biographical nature of these notes is itself too fragmented to be of much use. Tellingly, while Eliot's biographers have found a rich vein of material in the drafts to *The Waste Land*, they have, for the most part, left the notes to the poem alone.

The comic failure of either the philological or the impressionistic notes to have content commensurate with their theoretical objectives reflects Eliot's growing distaste for either method, a distaste he shared with many of his contemporaries.<sup>12</sup> His most direct criticism of philology and impressionism occurs in an important but unanthologized review essay titled "Reflections on Contemporary Poetry," which he wrote for *The Egoist* in 1917. In

the second part of that essay, he complains that an otherwise well-written study of the Scottish writer John Davidson suffers from the author's inability to find an alternative to the two dominant modes of contemporary literary criticism: "In avoiding the sort of thesis subject which demands merely detective manipulation of small facts," Eliot writes, "[the author] Mr. Fineman tends to the only alternative in University criticism—aerial generalization" ("Reflections II" 133). Eliot here is not arguing that critics should never be concerned with facts, or that critics should never generalize. Rather, what concerns Eliot is that philologists are only concerned with "thought," and impressionists are only concerned with "feeling." In short, Eliot felt that most of the contemporary criticism he was reading reflected precisely the disassociated sensibility that he already had observed in contemporary poetry.

Indeed, an argument could be made that Eliot's goal throughout his career as an essayist was to correct the disassociated sensibility he continued to see in literary criticism. In the Clark Lectures of 1926, for example, Eliot explains that the Cambridge don and the "artisan critic" (i.e., men of letters like Eliot himself) are really not as different as they might appear. "The speculative critic," he writes,

refines and intellectualizes our enjoyment, heightens, not destroys, the keenness of our immediate and irreflective apprehension; establishes standards which create a demand for the highest form of art, and so affects production. And the artisan critic, whose aim is production and novelty, production of the *best* possible, and novelty because we can only capture the enduring by perpetual movement and adaptation, must also adopt disinterestedness in the pursuit of such kind of truth as exists in his material. (45)

The don starts from thought, but must anticipate and increase feeling; the artisan starts from feeling, but must adopt the disinterested thought of the scholar. In each case, thought and feeling must be unified if great work and great criticism are to be produced. As late as 1956, Eliot was reiterating these same concerns, in perhaps his clearest formulation:

If in literary criticism, we place all the emphasis upon *understanding*, we are in danger of slipping from understanding to mere explanation. We are in danger of pursuing criticism as if it were a science, which it never can be. If, on the other hand, we over-emphasize *enjoyment*, we will tend to fall into the subjective and impressionistic, and our enjoyment will profit us no more than mere amusement and pastime. ("Frontiers" 117)

Over and over again in his essays, Eliot argues that critics must neither privilege a scientific, scholarly understanding of literature nor the impressionistic, subjective enjoyment of literature, but must somehow reassociate thought and feeling to form a unified critical sensibility.

This function of criticism is all the more important in an age of disassociated sensibility. Although he liked to think of himself as a poet first, then a critic, Eliot suggests in these essays that criticism is better equipped than poetry to reassociate the modern sensibility. For Eliot, poetry can only be great when it transcends individual emotion and expresses "the mind of a whole people," the common tradition that unifies the great works of the past with the culture of the present. In an age of disassociated sensibility, however, that common tradition is precisely what is lost, as society fragments into particulars, rather than joining into wholes. It is in such an age, Eliot writes in *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*, when criticism is most needed: "The important moment for the development of criticism seems to be the time when poetry ceases to be the expression of the mind of a whole people" (12). In effect, criticism must supplement poetry by reconstructing the unified sensibility the poet both needs and lacks. In the mind of "The Perfect Critic," Eliot writes in 1920, critical perceptions will "form themselves as a structure; and criticism is the statement in language of this structure; it is a development of sensibility" (58). Here, it is criticism, rather than poetry itself, which leads to the development of sensibility. That thought is echoed in the quote from the Clark lectures above. Significantly, it is the speculative critic who makes great art possible; it is he who "establishes standards which create a demand for the highest form of art, and so affects production." The artisan is able to produce "the *best possible*" only once the speculative critic has done this cultural work.

Faced with the crisis of modernity, Eliot in the early 20s looked to criticism, rather than to poetry, to reunite the disassociated sensibility of his age. In this light, the function of the notes to *The Waste Land* and the source of their rhetorical effectiveness for professional literary critics become much clearer. *The Waste Land* is a poem that demonstrates that the poetry of modernity has ceased to be "the expression of the mind of a whole people." The notes reveal the same disarray in the critical field by parodying the oppositional strategies of philology and impressionism. Yet, the notes also suggest that these critical methods can be joined. To fully "elucidate" his poem, Eliot insists, the reader of the notes must be receptive to both the philological and the impressionistic annotations he offers; we must be able both to perceive that a line alludes to Sappho and that the allusion "may not appear as exact as Sappho's lines," since the poet "had in mind" a slightly different scene (see note to line 221). The notes hold out the possibility

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that if critics would only become better readers, learning how to find formal unity in the poem's apparent chaos, the poem's wishful ending might in fact be realized as the fragments coalesce into a "peace which passeth understanding."

The notes thus not only appeal to the language of professional literary criticism but also represent the discourse of professional literary criticism as the best and perhaps the only solution to the crisis of modernity. What the notes do not do, however, is describe exactly *how* professional literary critics might achieve a unity of thought and feeling, philology and impressionism. Instead, the implication of the notes is that professional literary critics will be able to realize this unified sensibility through the proper exercise of their expertise. It is by suggesting this faith in professional literary critical expertise that the notes reassert the possibility of an ordered world in a poem that everywhere denies that order.

The note to line 309 provides a good example of the way in which the notes call on the expert reader to establish an order lacking in the poem. This note refers to the end of section III, where the song of the three Thames daughters dissolves into fragments from Augustine's *Confessions* and Buddha's *Fire Sermon*. It reads, "From St. Augustine's *Confessions* again. The collocation of these two representatives of eastern and western asceticism, as the culmination of this part of the poem, is no accident." As with the headnote on Jessie Weston, this note encourages us to believe that the poem has a definite order: Not only are the references to Augustine and Buddha "no accident," but also the note suggests they are "the culmination" of a greater plan. Yet we are not told what the plan is, or how the metonymic "collocation" of east and west may be understood symbolically as a metaphor for "this part of the poem." Instead, what the note to line 309 offers is a new kind of faith, a faith in the reader's ability to recreate a common tradition out of his or her expert knowledge of the past.

**E**arly in his career, Eliot had believed the roles of poet and critic to be so closely related that he insisted, in essays like "Professionalism, Or . . .," that the poet was a professional literary critic, and should be treated as such. By 1956 however, Eliot was arguing that his criticism was only "a by-product of my private poetry workshop," and not at all the same as that produced by the professional critic. Eliot could disassociate his poetic work from his critical work in these later essays because he no longer needed or wanted to invest criticism with the charge of reunifying the disassociated sensibility of his age. Eliot had begun to resolve the crisis of modernity for himself as early as 1926, when he gradually began to place his hope for order in the

Anglican Church.<sup>13</sup> Once converted, Eliot continued to believe that critics should attempt to overcome an increasingly disassociated sensibility by encouraging both “understanding” and “enjoyment.” However, he had come to the conclusion that only religious faith—in particular, his brand of Christianity—could restore a common culture and an ordered tradition.

Professional literary critics in the 50s, however, still based their claim to professional status on their ability to provide a systematic method for ordering the literary text, and thus still had a stake in the faith in criticism the notes offered. Indeed, the New Criticism, for which Eliot held himself partly responsible, emphasized the critic’s role in ferreting out the underlying unity of the literary work. In 1956, Eliot saw the result of having led such critics into temptation, and was not pleased with what he saw. In the 20s, he confessed, he had been more worried about the impressionists than the philologists (“Frontiers” 117). My guess is that the notes, while introducing both impressionism and philology, were meant to tip the balance a bit towards the philologists. By the 50s, however, academic scholars had largely replaced the traditional men of letters, and Eliot thought these new academics read the notes with altogether too much understanding and not enough enjoyment. “My notes,” he writes, “stimulated the wrong kind of interest among the seekers of sources. . . . I regret having sent so many enquirers off on a wild goose chase after Tarot cards and the Holy Grail” (“Frontiers” 110). In “The Frontiers of Criticism,” Eliot hoped to unstick the notes from the poem in order to once again balance out thought and feeling, understanding and enjoyment.

Eliot could not get rid of the notes, however, as he himself acknowledged. It has only been with the rise of poststructuralist theory that professional literary critics have been able to describe once again the sense of disorder *The Waste Land* evoked for many of the earliest readers of the poem. We no longer need to look to the notes to order the poem for us, because the basis of literary professionalism itself has undergone a significant change. Understanding what Sam Weber has called “the limits of professionalism,” we no longer feel compelled to “discover” the underlying unity of any literary work. The notes to *The Waste Land* remain important, however, precisely because they reveal the stake professional literary critics have had in continuing the project of modernity. Seeking to validate their expertise, professional literary critics responded to the suggestion, expressed in the notes, that the project of modernity and the project of professional literary criticism were one and the same. Providing a sense of order for the profession and for the poem became synonymous goals. Ironically, however, this made the notes a *necessary* supplement, underscoring the lack of order in a poem they were designed to correct, the conflicted nature of a literary

professionalism they were designed to support. The notes, now, can never be unstuck. Rather, they should be read as a reiteration of the very crisis of modernity that the poem represents, a reiteration that illuminates how embedded professional literary discourse has been in the cultural situations it has sought to transcend.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Stanley Sultan has put together a convincing chronology of the notes in his *Eliot, Joyce and Company* (see particularly the chapter "Ulysses and *The Waste Land*"). Sultan concludes that the notes were complete before any publication, but "were withheld from a prior periodical publication to protect the value of the book" (143).

<sup>2</sup> Since Middleton published his essay in 1986, Eliot's poem increasingly has been read as a postmodern work expressing a negative hermeneutics. The first critical reading of *The Waste Land* as a postmodern text was Ruth Nevo's in 1985, although Gregory Jay and Andrew Ross had already signaled that direction, and Harriet Davidson developed it more fully in her *T. S. Eliot and Hermeneutics* of the same year. Such poststructuralist readings have become mainstream: Among the best is Michael North's, who reads the poem as reflecting, rather than resolving, the fragmentation it records.

<sup>3</sup> Ronald Bush gives a complete account of Wilson's engagement with Eliot's text in "T. S. Eliot and Modernism at the Present Time: A Provocation." I am indebted to his suggestion there that the history of Wilson's reading of the poem and its notes provide a clue to our own reception of the poem.

<sup>4</sup> See Bauman's *Postmodern Ethics*, especially p. 8. For an excellent overview of the ever-shifting definitions of the concept of modernism, see Astradur Eysteinnsson's book by that title.

<sup>5</sup> For example, Wilson's list of the "voices of all the thirsty men of the past" is based on references made in the notes to passages from Ecclesiastes, the journey to Emmaus, the Buddha's Fire Sermon, Dante's Inferno, Webster's dirge, and so forth. Wilson's view that Tiresias is "in the centre of the poem" undoubtedly owes a debt to Eliot's note fingering Tiresias as "the most important personage in the poem," while his claim that the nightingale in the mantel's painted panel belongs in Milton's paradise is so far-fetched that he can only have gotten it from Eliot's cryptic note to Milton's "sylvan scene."

<sup>6</sup> A large literature has been written in the last decade on the role of professionalization in shaping literary studies, starting with Graff's *Professing Literature: An Institutional History*. The collection of essays Graff edited with Michael Warner, *The Origins of Literary Studies in America*, is especially useful for analyzing the rhetoric of early disciplinary battles. For a more general overview of the development of the American university, see Veysey's *The Emergence of the American University*. Similarly, for a general overview of the history of professionalization in the United States, see Bledstein's *The Culture of Professionalism*. Finally, Bourdieu, while focusing on the French academy, gives a good theoretical account of academic professionalism in particular in *Homo Academicus*.

<sup>7</sup> See Graff, chs. 8 and 9. Golding also makes this point in the context of his discussion of New Critical readings of *The Waste Land*.

<sup>8</sup> For an example of a reader who became engrossed in the method the Tarot deck offers, see Creekmore's "The Tarot Fortune in *The Waste Land*."

<sup>9</sup> Wilson's attack on the MLA in 1968 provides an excellent example of the response of an impressionist/man of letters to philologists/academics. The date of his pamphlet is a good reminder of just how long this particular conflict lasted.

<sup>10</sup> Among those who have noted the parodic quality of the notes, most, beginning with F. O. Matthiessen, have proceeded to demonstrate that what at first appeared irrelevant is actually relevant by pointing toward some important theme in the poem. That is, just as some readers have argued that the poem's fragmentary voices can be united in a thematic whole, these critics have argued that the notes' parodic voices ultimately point to precisely those unifying themes. The latest critic to deal with the notes in depth has been Stanley Sultan, who disagrees with Matthiessen on several points. Yet even Sultan concludes that the "irrelevant material" that "certain notes contain" is "a playful device enabling Eliot to slip in statements that do real work in his poem" (173). In arguing that the notes are "functional play," Sultan assumes that the poem is unified and that the notes serve to illuminate its mythic themes. I am arguing that the poem is governed by a negative hermeneutic, and that the poem's unity is not revealed by the notes but is *constituted* by the notes.

<sup>11</sup> Sultan has argued convincingly that in line 74, the "Dog" is based on Stephen's fox-dog in ch. 3 of *Ulysses* (138-39); Eliot gets his "jug jug jug" from Lyly's *Euphues*, as H.D. pointed out in her *By Avon River*: "O Tis the ravished nightingale / Jug jug jug terue she cryes. . . ." In a footnote to his essay on Kipling in *On Poetry and Poets*, Eliot himself gives evidence that in line 380 we can hear overtones of both Kipling's *In the Same Boat*, "Suppose you were a violin string—vibrating—and someone put his finger on you," and his *The Finest Story in the World*, where he describes a "banjo string drawn tight."

<sup>12</sup> In America, Eliot had learned from his mentor Irving Babbitt that the study of literature should be based neither on our impressionistic likes and dislikes nor on a scientific attempt to treat art as a natural object, but on our inner principle of restraint, which enables us to discern the authentic tradition from the "melange" of texts that have been produced (*New Laokoon* vii). Similarly, in Britain, men of letters like John Middleton Murry advocated a new, "truly aesthetic philosophy" that would guide critics to refine their powers of "discrimination" in an attempt to uncover the "organic" nature of art (*Aspects* 13). While Eliot rejected both Babbitt's and Murry's solutions (in "The Humanism of Irving Babbitt" and "The Function of Criticism," respectively), he was intent on finding an alternative to the two dominant modes of literary criticism.

A good source on Eliot's relationship to professional literary criticism is McDonald's *Learning to Be Modern*. Although I disagree with her view that Eliot uses *The Waste Land* as an education in relativism, I think she gives a good account of Eliot's complex response to Babbitt.

<sup>13</sup> Peter Ackroyd does an excellent job of detailing the connection between Eliot's desire for order and his conversion to Anglicanism. See pages 160-61.



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