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The Peace of the Waste Land and Understanding Eliot's Two Readings

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Poetry demands to be spoken aloud. If a reader peruses a poem silently, he must create a performance of the sounds in his mind, and how the words are laid out on the page can only suggest the aural experience in an indefinite way. The appearance of *The Waste Land* on its page is a significant element of its strangeness, for it creates a very strange sounding, imaginary poem when it is read silently, as it must be most often experienced. The lines appear in many places uneven and unlovely, with breaks seeming to come sometimes in arbitrary, or even in intentionally awkward places. When the poem is recited and heard, either the natural flow of a human voice must remove (or at least smooth over) the most awkward structures, creating, as it were, a different poem from the one on the page, or the natural flow of the voice must be broken to conform to the layout of the poem. Thus, there is either dissonance (or harmony depending on the recitation) between the visual and aural poem.

It is then remarkable that T. S. Eliot made two recordings of *The Waste Land* and that these recordings demonstrate both this harmony and this dissonance over different passages. And it is more remarkable still that scholarship has almost entirely ignored these two recordings.¹ The first recording was made in 1935 at Columbia University and the second in 1946 for the Library of Congress at the NBC Studio in New York (Swigg 54, Hawlin 545). The later 1946 recording, being the only one published, is by far the more well known. The 1935 recording is understandably of much inferior sound quality and is difficult to find, but it is, of course, a recording of a younger Eliot, closer in time to the original composition of the poem (though still separated from it by fourteen years). The two recitations are not as different as some have argued, but they do differ in specific and interesting parts of the poem. By comparing the recordings to each other and to the written representation of the poem, it is possible to conclude that Eliot's understanding and appreciation of his own work remained mostly steady over the years, but that by 1946 he was out of sympathy with his poem's angst or at least that he was tired of others' fretful interpretations of it.

Richard Swigg has written on the 1935 recording in "Sounding *The Waste Land*," and is of the opinion that it is closer to Eliot's original intent for the poem, something with which I must ultimately agree. As a marker of this intent, Swigg takes a diary entry made by Virginia Woolf in 1922: "He sang it & chanted it, rhythmized it. It has great beauty & force of phrase: symmetry and tensivity" (Swigg 54). Swigg declares of the 1935 recording:

Listening to this, one is immediately struck by the freshness of a reading that imposes no recitatory dulling from outside the verse's syntactic movement but is actually inside it. This is a rendering – often amazingly fast yet always varied, with Eliot's voice mimicking character [sic] in the pub scene or Sosotris's 'Thank you', but more usually marked by its shifts between the vehement and sorrowful, tender and vindictive, anguished and chastened – whose urgency constantly makes one imagine that one has returned for a moment to the 1922 reading. (54-5)

Swigg thinks that in the 1946 recording Eliot "is now so distant from the rhythms and daring of his original creation that he can now only offer a hardened version of that suppleness" (54). This is a gross overstatement of the differences between the recordings.

It is true that the 1935 recitation is overall at a faster tempo, lasting 23:21 in total, whereas the 1946 lasts 25:01. Only in the section, "Death by Water," is the 1946 recording shorter than the 1935, and there only by about one second. Some parts of the 1935 recitation are indeed remarkably quick. For instance the end of "The Fire Sermon," 308-310, is spoken at a very rapid pace. However, the 1946 recitation is similarly rapid. Indeed, though the overall tempo is slower in 1946, the accelerations and decelerations of the recitations are mostly consistent, and if parts are faster in 1935, like the end of "The Fire Sermon," other parts are much faster in 1946, such as lines 425-6, "Fishing, with the arid plain, etc." Likewise, Eliot in 1935 was, in general, more emphatic and flamboyant with his decrescendos and crescendos than in 1946, but the difference is only one of degree and not of the quality of the variation of voice.

Furthermore, in the few places where there is a real difference in the quality of voice, it is not always the 1935 version that is more energetic. The 1946 recitation is much louder and almost belligerent in the already mentioned lines 425-6, where the earlier recitation is resigned and sad. Yet, the 1935 version is similarly belligerent at the words "mon frère!" (76) where Eliot's voice rises suddenly in pitch and volume from the previous "mon semblable" (Swigg 57). In the younger recitation he lowers his pitch by a hair's breadth and stays at the same volume.

Although all of these observations on pitch, volume, and tempo are in part subjective, I assert that the recordings are more alike than dissimilar. Compare Swigg's description of the 1935 recording given above to what Stefan Hawlin says about the 1946 version as he defends listening to the recording for what it reveals about the poem and the author's intent:

Eliot's reading is flexible and nuanced by comparison [to W.H. Auden's recorded readings of his own poems]. Certain passages are read in a pressured, steady, slightly intoned manner . . . At other times there are changes of pressure and attack in the voice within and between fragments, small crescendos and diminuendos, and emphasized contrasts between colloquialness in direct speech and a different voice for the narrator or interlocutor. (Hawlin 547)

Hawlin wrote this in "Eliot Reads *The Waste Land*," 1992. Apparently, he was unaware of the 1935 recording, or it was unavailable to him, as he does not mention it. Swigg does not mention Hawlin's paper in his own, but writing in 2001, it seems unlikely that he was unaware of it. Swigg's phrase, "he can now only offer a hardened version of that suppleness," seems to be a rebuttal to Hawlin's "flexible." There is no quantifiable way of saying exactly how different the recordings are, and certainly no way of saying which is closer to Eliot's "original creation," but Swigg exaggerates how dull the 1946 recording is and how vibrant the 1935 is.

However, the recitations may be compared by a more objective aspect, which I have not yet addressed. That is the cadence of the lines, by which I mean the starting, stopping, and pausing that happens primarily at the end of lines, but also in their middle from time to time. The cadence of a line is also the aspect of a recitation that is most influenced by the way the line is written on the page, and so it serves as the best point of comparison between the written and spoken poem.

There are many long passages of the poem where the readings are almost identical. The distinctive scene between the laconic man and hysterical woman (if we may assign them such identities) in "A Game of Chess" is one such instance. The 1935 version is perhaps more staccato in the woman's voice, and the 1946 version more languid in the man's voice. Indeed, line 115, 124, 128, and 137, are all full stops in 1935, but enjambed in 1946. This enjambment in the 1946 recording has the overall effect of contrasting the man and woman and of deepening the divide between their voices. The memorable scene of Lil, Albert's wife

(139-72), that immediately follows is another case where the recordings are almost identical. The only differences in cadence in all thirty-four lines are slight stops in the 1935 version in the middle of line 142 and at the ends of lines 145 and 156, not present in the 1946.ⁱⁱ Both are read in a sort of pseudo-cockney American accent.

Another distinctive episode in which the recitations run extremely close is the song of the Thames-daughters in "The Fire Sermon." From 266 to 304 there are only six lines with a different cadence in 1935 than in 1946. Four of those lines in the 1935 version are "Weialala | leia | / Wallala | leialala |" (277-8, 290-1), whereas the 1946 version has no stop in the middle of each line. Hawlin writes of these lines, "[Eliot] performs it quickly and rhythmically in the recording, so shutting down on the lyrical fullness that it might otherwise seem to suggest" (578). And this is only more true of the 1935 version than of the 1946 about which Hawlin is speaking. The other three lines of different cadence are line 274, where there is a very slight stop in 1935, and line 304, with a full stop in 1935. There is a slight hesitation in the 1946 version, but not a full stop. Either way, "Nothing" (305) is left to resonate in the quiet and properly marks the end of the song of the Thames-daughters. In addition to this long passage in the "The Fire Sermon," note too that the Mrs. Porter interlude (196-206) is recited in precisely the same way in both versions.

The first thirty eight lines of "What the Thunder Said," (322-59) is a last, very distinctive section of the poem for which the two recordings are very close in cadence. Those lines are sung in a chant that starts on a high note on line 322. In the 1946 recording, the pitch stays the same until on line 328 it drops approximately a fifth. It recovers its high tone on line 332, then drops again on line 338 for just one line. In 1935 the pitch does not drop until line 331, then recovers over the course of line 332, and then the tone drops again in line 337 for just one line. Both recitations drop in tone a final time at "If there were water / and no rock" (346-7) as the word "rock" is drawn out slowly and painfully. Then the tempo accelerates to a feverous beat until slipping away with "Drip drop drip drop drop drop drop" (358). When one hears the two recordings of this section played one after the other, it is impossible to think Eliot did not know exactly how he wanted these lines to be read.

These five sections of the poem that are quite similar between two recordings—which I will call the languid man and hysterical woman, the Lil and Albert, the Mrs. Porter interlude, the song of the Thames-daughters, and the water among the rocks episodes—are remarkable for their vividness. These passages are some of the most graphically interesting in the poem as well. The fast part of the water among the rocks episode is kicked off with "If there were water" (345) aligned far right on the page. The next ten lines are all very short and rapid, and left aligned. They contain the word "rock" four times and "water" four times, usually at the end of the line. The passage ends with the visually distinct "Drip drop drip drop drop drop drop / But there is no water." Likewise, most of song of the Thames-daughters is made of short, quick lines, with an indented "Weialala leia / Wallala leialala" twice ending eleven line stanzas. Further, the Mrs. Porter interlude is most visually striking with its "Twit twit twit / Jug jug jug jug jug jug / So rudely forc'd. / Tereu" (203-6).

The languid man and hysterical woman, Lil and Albert, scenes are visually distinct in other ways. The former has jagged lines aligned left or right across the page, and it contains the well-known "O O O that Shakespeherian Rag—" (128). The latter is a block of seemingly realistic lower class, pub conversation—more loquacious by far than the previous scene, but no more pleasant and perhaps even less hopeful. This block is slashed through five times by the all capital and arresting, "HURRY UP PLEASE ITS TIME" (141, 152, 165, 168, 169).

Clearly, when Eliot had a distinct and vivid scene or image in mind, he knew how it was to sound and subsequently how it should be written on the page to suggest such a recitation. That is why these four passages changed so little in his mind in the eleven years between the two recordings.

The end of “The Burial of the Dead” (60-76) is another passage where the recordings are almost the same. Yet, the French, final line (already discussed in brief) is the only graphically remarkable thing about the passage: “You! hypocrite lecteur!—mon semblable,—mon frère!” (76). The slight differences that exist between the recordings here are that in 1935 there is no stop between 61 and 62 and there is no extra stop before “so many” (62). There is also an extra stop in the middle of 69: “There I saw one I knew, | and stopped him” These differences do very little to change the feel of the scene. They all come before the second half of the passage, in which Eliot adopts a remarkable, seemingly amicable accent (but with hostile undertones) to address “Stetson” and accuse him of burying a corpse in his garden—a moment made memorable by both the bizarre subject and the sudden rhyme and regular iambic pentameter.

But it is not graphically remarkable; it does not fit the pattern. In fact, it is most similar in style to the Tiresias episode (215-65). These fifty-one lines are the most regular of the entire poem, being mostly rhyming, iambic pentameter. They tell the most coherent story in the poem too. Yet, the two recordings are not identical in cadence; there are approximately twelve differences, about half at line ends and half mid-line. That means an average of four lines per difference, which is not much different from the five lines per difference in the corpse garden episode. The force of the imagery at the end of “The Burial of the Dead” is responsible for the greater similarity between the recitations in that part. The Tiresias episode is similar in style, but never reaches the same heights of disturbing imagery and internal rhyme. Its tone is slower and sadder. Therefore its rhythm, though distinctly iambic, is malleable, and can tolerate some changes in cadence.

Much of the rest of the poem fits into this category: the recitations are not exactly the same, but they are mostly similar. It seems that the choices of cadence could be made differently from reading to reading depending on Eliot’s mood or momentary inspiration. In addition to the corpse garden and Tiresias episode, lines 19-59, 174-195, 207-214, and 360-385 seem to be of this type of verse. However, there are two sections where the recitations are deliberate and schematically different: the beginning of “The Burial of the Dead” (1-7) and the beginning of “A Game of Chess” (77-110). They require closer consideration.

The first seven lines of the poem are some of the most heavily wrought, bound together by alliteration, rhyme, assonance, and repeated structure and imagery. Visually, one cannot escape noticing that five of the lines end in an isolated present participle: breeding, mixing, stirring, covering, feeding:

April is the cruellest month, breeding
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
Memory and desire, stirring
Dull roots with spring rain.
Winter kept us warm, covering
Earth in forgetful snow, feeding
A little life with dried tubers. (1-7)

As Pericles Lewis points out, “The participial verb endings perform something like the function of rhyme, linking together the various underground motions of winter and spring” (133). The “-ing” suffix is naturally unstressed, though in both recordings Eliot places as much stress on it as he reasonably can. Still, the rhyme is quite poor except in the feminine rhyme of the first participle, “breeding,” and last, “feeding.” Yet, this reluctance in the rhyme is intentional and characteristic of the poet’s opening. Lewis says, “These lines seem uneven – as if the poet had started to write iambic pentameter but not completed the lines or as if he had to write shorter lines with three or four beats each but felt compelled to add the words that

appear after the commas” (132). This is indeed how it appears on the page, and the 1935 recording supports this interpretation, but the 1946 does not.

When these seven lines are recited, the natural flow of a human voice would remove or smooth over the awkward placement of these participles at the ends of the lines, creating, as it were, a dissonance between the visual and aural. This is precisely what Eliot does in the 1946 recording. He reads the lines as: “April is the cruellest month, | breeding lilacs out of the dead land. . .” Lewis points out the use of alliteration in these lines as well: “Eliot makes use of alliteration . . . in phrases such as ‘lilacs out of the *dead land*,’ ‘mixing / *Memory*,’ ‘Winter kept us warm,’ and ‘a little life’” (133). Notice he points out one instance of alliteration across lines (*mixing / Memory*), but when the lines are read as Eliot read them in 1946 many more instances become apparent: “Breeding *lilacs* out of the *dead land*,” “Stirring dull roots with *spring* rain,” and “Feeding a little *life* with *dried* tubers.” Note also the consonance between “stirring” and “spring” and the near-alliteration between the voiced and unvoiced labiodental stops and velar stops in “Covering earth in forgetful snow.” This near-alliteration binds the sixth line together audibly in a way that the eye easily misses.

Indeed, all of these auditory effects in the first seven lines only come into proper focus when, naturally, the lines are recited aloud. But what effect does this rearranging of the lines have on the meaning? As Lewis suggests (above), the way the poem is written on the page makes the poet seem reluctant to finish his lines, offsetting each of the participles with a comma and letting each line dribble away with an “-ing.” The first three participles describe the action of April, metaphorically and literally the beginnings of new life. Even the latter two, though actions done by winter in the poem, could just as well be attributed to April in a different context, covering the earth with green plants and feeding life with the fruits of those plants. By pushing the participles away from their referents, but more importantly away from the objects of their action, the poet supports what is already evident in the simple meaning of the lines: his theme of resistance to the beginning of new things and antipathy towards the germination of new life.

Yet, the visual effect is lost to the ear in the 1946 recording where the unevenness of the lines is greatly reduced. Also reduced is the poet’s apparent antipathy, but to a lesser degree. That antipathy is rooted in the simple meaning of the lines and cannot be removed entirely by any recitation, however varied. Nor did Eliot always think that the antipathy of the poet should be lessened in the recitation, for in the 1935 recording he quite consciously isolates each participle on both ends with a full stop. Furthermore, he isolates “April” and “Lilacs” with stops: “April | is the cruellest month, | breeding | / Lilacs | out of the dead land, | mixing | . . .” Swigg says of these lines, “Now it is indeed *April*, and no other, which is the cruellest month, while the now-distinct participles are the small agitations that prey on unwilling movement. Like a microcosm of so much in the poem, they tease the sluggishness of the buried potency into light and invigorated time” (55). Swigg is perhaps a little carried away here by his enthusiasm, for by his reasoning it would now be *Lilacs* and no other plant that are now being bred, but his larger point is on the nose. Then, what is the effect of this recitation on all of the tight poetic structure of the lines previously discussed?

All five of the end participles are bound to the following line by alliteration as we have seen. The isolation of the participles in the 1935 version lessens the power of the alliteration, but it is still there and is still felt to a lesser degree. Indeed, this may be why Eliot created the alliteration in the first place; he knew that the participles should be isolated as they are on the page and would need something to keep them rooted in the lines. Then, in 1946, when he changed his mind about how the lines should sound (for reasons explored below), the alliteration rose thick and creamy to the top.

Why Eliot isolates “April” and “Lilacs” in the 1935 recording becomes evident if the entire first eighteen lines are listened to. Eliot struggles to start the poem, saying no more than four words without a full stop until line four gives him five words and line seven gives

him six. His momentum builds through the first seven lines and the stops become shorter. Then at “dried tubers” the poem nearly comes to a halt again. These words have two very long syllables on their accents. In addition, the adjacent dentals in “dried tubers” force the reciter to slow down in order to articulate the consonants separately. Then with line eight Eliot finally hits his stride. The form stays almost the same at first, but the lines lengthen: “Summer surprised us, coming over the Starnbergersee” (8). There is heavy alliteration and a comma followed by a participle as before, but this time it is not followed by a stop. Eliot’s tempo increases greatly, his tone rises, and the lines flow fluently until the break.

Many things bind the second section of lines (8-18) to the first, but it is unmistakably a section separate from the beginning. The difference is in tone. These lines tell stories of life and action, of summer, sunlight, rain, and of winter, yes, but lively winter, though these stories are memories of the past, either near or distant. It is as if life forces itself through the cracks of the poet’s dismayed mind and grows until it fills the poem, for a little while. Thus, the first seven lines are a subterranean struggle that slowly loosen into the freedom of a sunny afternoon in summer and a sled ride in the mountains.

Eliot in 1946 does not aim for such a gradual progression from torpor to excitement. As already mentioned, he begins in a completely different fluid style. Then in lines 8-18 he proceeds much like in 1935, although his stops at the commas and semicolon of lines 8-10 are slightly more pronounced. This has the effect of prolonging the use of the same cadence as the first seven lines, which the 1935 recitation has only just adopted at line 8. Thus, in the 1946 recording Eliot does not start as low as in 1935, but both recitations end up in about the same place.

How remarkable that, as if in mirror to the first seven lines, the end of poem has a similar set of single words enjambed with a neighboring line, the only other place I have found such a device in the poem.

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
 I sat upon the shore
 Fishing, with the arid plain behind me (419-426)

Notice that here we have the exact opposite visual effect to the one used at the beginning. Three times (420, 422, 425) the line begins, instead of ends, with a two syllable word with the accent on the first syllable. The emotional impact of this effect is different, though not exactly opposite, to that in the beginning. Now, instead of being belatedly and begrudgingly crammed onto the end of the line, “gaily,” comes first in a new line as if the poet is surprised by the jollity of the thought. “Fishing,” is not as obviously positive a word as “gaily.” However, most of “What the Thunder Said,” is describing a parched landscape where there is no water (331), or even the sound of water (353), and the wells are dry (385). Thus, “fishing,” and the rest of the sailing imagery takes on a wholly positive sense at the end of the poem.

Eliot reads these lines as conscientiously differently in the two recordings as he does the first seven. In 1935 he pauses before and then puts so much emphasis on the first “gaily” that he sounds almost alarmed at the possibility of happy control. Swigg says:

This is joy not running away but zestfully guided . . . It is not the restriction of self-enclosure heard entrenchingly earlier . . . but the enticement to a shared rhythm of delight where ‘your heart’ . . . has an intimate directness yet also an [sic] non-

personal quality. One belongs to a momentum greater than the self . . . when ‘your heart would have responded / Gaily, when invited’; and with such a warm invitation that the heart, in pleasurable order, seems already to be ‘beating obedient / To controlling hands.’ (60)

I wholly agree with this understanding of the lines. That the passage is a moment of peace is obvious. It is remarkably loosely constructed. The abundant alliteration which curls the first seven lines tightly in upon themselves is mostly gone here. There is alliteration on “sh” between “shore” and “fishing”, but the heaviest alliteration comes at “beating obedient,” and this seems to mimic the beating of a human heart. There is also a loose rhyming on “-and” and on “-ore” that comes at only semi-regular intervals, as do the two syllable starting words, “gaily” and “fishing.” This gives the last stanza an incredible feeling of unhurried peace and serene order. And it is absolutely fitting that this harmony and peace should arise from the structure at the same moment a major angst of the poem is, if not resolved, at least mitigated. Lewis says, “The return of the waters suggests the possibility of a different type of sexual relation from those seen in the poem so far” (146). How different must be the controlling hands of line 423 from the exploring hands of the young man carbuncular (240), and how different the indifferent lover with automatic hand (255) from the obedient beating heart of line 422.

The 1946 recording differs from the 1935, of which Swigg was speaking above, but the differences only support Swigg’s interpretation more strongly. In 1946 Eliot sounds surprised and resignedly pleased with “gaily.” Just as he does not pause after the participles in the first seven lines, neither does he pause before the first “gaily.” The lines come contentedly with only natural breaks. In contrast, in the 1935 recitation Eliot’s tone rises twice to “gaily,” and then falls away swiftly without pause, except for before first “gaily.” The peace of the moment is more obvious in the 1946 version, just as the struggle of the first seven lines is more defined in the 1935 version.

Now that we start to see a real difference between Eliot’s intentions in 1946 and 1935, what can we say about the beginning of “A Game of Chess,” 77-110? The 1935 recitation is, as always, slightly faster. It is also in a semi-chant like voice, though not quite as strong as the beginning of “What the Thunder Said.” The cadence is where the real difference lies. In 1935 Eliot much more frequently runs from one line to the next without a pause and almost never stops in the middle of a line, whereas in 1946 he often does. It may well be that again, in 1946 Eliot was more at peace and so reads more placidly than in 1935. Swigg says of the 1935 recitation, “Vocal speed therefore intimates an attempted reaching beyond the synthetic linkages of this enclosed space, yet also the compulsion of those linkages – not to be broke, but going on and on” (55). If Eliot’s rapid and high, strained voice shows that he was indeed thinking of the poet escaping such a setting (where he is trapped with an unbearable woman, recall) we must look for why this theme was important to him in 1935 but not important enough to energize his recitation in 1946.

Thus, we are justified in briefly examining the events of Eliot’s life between 1935 and 1946 that bear on this subject. Eliot separated from his first and mentally unhealthy wife, Vivien, when he went to America in 1932. When he returned to England, he refused to see Vivien although she pursued him with some drive and cunning until she was committed to a mental hospital in 1938 (Ackroyd 233). His first recitation was given in a period where he must have constantly been in fear of his wife. But 1935 also marked the beginning of his great master piece, *The Four Quartets*. The first part, “Burnt Norton” was published 1935, and “East Cocker” 1940, “The Dry Salvages” 1941, and “Little Gidding” 1942. *The Four Quartets* guaranteed Eliot’s status as the preeminent English poet in his life time (Sharpe 158-64). Thus, by 1946 Eliot had proven his ultimate worth as a poet and written something that

many critics thought better than *The Waste Land* (1921), and he had been free of fear of his wife for about eight years.

It then makes perfect sense that his 1946 recitation should be calmer, slower, and less flamboyant than the 1935 recording. He had less to fear with Vivien institutionalized and less reason to care about *The Waste Land* since he had written *The Four Quartets*. Indeed, he may have been quite tired of *The Waste Land* by that point, or at least tired of the morbid interpretations that proliferated.ⁱⁱⁱ As I have shown, in 1946 he read the poem in largely the same style, especially in the more scenic and vivid sections, but he did not include some of the original stylistic elements that he intended when he wrote the poem. Gone is the jagged cadence of the opening seven lines and the rising cry of “mon frère!” Gone is the frantic chanting of the beginning of “The Game of Chess.” But in return, the 1946 reading offers a peace in “What the Thunder Said” that far surpasses the 1935—a peace Eliot achieved only years after he originally wrote *The Waste Land*.

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ⁱ The only two papers I have found on them are: Stefan Hawlin, “Eliot Reads *The Waste Land*: Text and Recording,” *The Modern Language Review*, 87.3 (1992): 545-554, print. Richard Swigg, “Sounding *The Waste Land*: T. S. Eliot’s 1935 Recording,” *PN Review*, 28.1 (2001): 54-61, print.

ⁱⁱ In my comparisons of the recordings, I shall continually refer to the 1935 recording as deviating from the 1946. This is because by accident of history the 1946 recording is the one readers will be most likely to be familiar with and most likely to have available for listening, not because the 1946 recording is definitive.

ⁱⁱⁱ He is often quoted as having said that *The Waste Land* “is just a piece of rhythmical grumbling.” I have not been able to find a date for this statement. T. S. Eliot, “*The Waste Land*”: *A Facsimile and Transcript of the Original Drafts Including the Annotations of Ezra Pound*, ed. Valerie Eliot (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971), 1, print.