Phono poetics: The Making of Early Literary Recordings

Cap. 4 - T.S. ELIOT'S RECORDED EXPERIMENTS IN MODERNIST VERSE SPEAKING

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BETWEEN ACTORS AND elocutionists reciting Tennyson into horns and T. S. Eliot reciting his own poetry into a microphone, a new style of literary performance emerged. Still, we can refer to something called T. S. Eliot's Victorian voices as a starting point for this chapter's discussion of the emergence of modernist verse speaking. When I say, "T. S. Eliot's Victorian voices," I am not referring to Victorian sources for Eliot's poetry and criticism.

Nor will I be discussing at any great length Eliot's own critical discussions of voice in poetry, insofar as he used that term to explore the efficacy of some key generic categories that we often apply to poetry, such as the lyric, the epic, the epistle, the dramatic monologue, and dramatic verse. Eliot's lecture to the National Book League in 1953, "The Three Voices of Poetry," a revised version of which was later published in On Poetry and Poets (1957), is, in fact, dripping with Victorian categories, antitheses, and poetic examples. The opening sentences alone suggest the influence of John Stuart Mill and Robert Browning: "The first voice is the voice of the poet talking to himself—or to nobody. The second voice is the voice of the poet addressing an audience, whether large or small. The third antithesis, "that eloquence is heard; poetry is overheard. Eloquence supposes an audience," whereas the peculiarity of poetry lies "in the poet's utter unconsciousness of a listener."

Eliot identifies the first voice with "a poem that is neither didactic nor narrative, and not animated by any social purpose," and mentions later "the enjoyment of overhearing words which are not addressed to us."

Mill's idea of eloquence is roughly equivalent to how Eliot describes epic, as poetry "that has a conscious social purpose poetry intended to amuse or instruct." Epic manifests "the voice of the poet addressing other people," Eliot says.

About half of the "The Three Voices of Poetry" is devoted to discussion of one Browning poem or another (with some D. G. Rossetti thrown in for good measure). Eliot's discussion of Robert Browning's dramatic monologues is a pivot point here, because it marks the first

moment when Eliot's three voices collapse into each other, this collapse being the ultimate point of Eliot's essay. The dramatic monologue is representative for Eliot of the (second) "voice of the poet in non-dramatic poetry which has a dramatic element in it."

This awkward category is the most pertinent moment in Eliot's essay as far as my meaning of "Eliot's Victorian voices" is concerned, because it attempts to describe the voice of the poet as both lyrical, musical, nonpurposive, and performative, dramatic, instrumental, all at once. I return later in the chapter to something approximating this idea of hearing "the dramatic" in nondramatic poetry. Yet this idea of a voice that is "non-dramatic with a dramatic element" is still not exactly what I am getting at when I refer to "T. S. Eliot's Victorian Voices" as the place to begin an account Eliot's eventual realization of a post-elocutionary style of literary performance. I mean, instead, the Victorian verse-speaking voices that I believe Eliot heard in his head and that functioned as antithetical models for his own vocalizations of his poetry. One of the major assumptions that will allow my chapter to proceed is that the key voices in which Eliot spoke his poetry—I will be focusing on his recorded readings of The Waste Land —were articulated against Victorian ones. That is to say, against the kinds of readings and recitations that we have been considering up to this point. The primary elocutionary models against which Eliot voiced his verse were well established by the end of the nineteenth century. Eliot did not read poetry like a Victorian stage actor or elocution instructor. In the recordings he left us, his readings sound nothing like those of Len Spencer, Bransby Williams, William Sterling Battis, Rose Coughlan, Lewis Waller, Canon Fleming, or Henry Ainley. Those readings either approached the speeches they delivered as modes of character interpretation within a recognizable context of address, or according to a formula, however heavy or light, of structured elocutionary expression. Eliot's experiments in reading his own poetry, and the recordings he produced through such experimentation, work to eschew such techniques and to replace them with modes of intoning speech and character that were more in line with his own poetics.

Eliot's circumstance of reading his poems into a microphone for their transcription onto disc represents an opportunity for us to understand his own interpretation of voice and tone in The Waste Land, and how he wished to reframe the original contexts of address that might be attributed to the wide array of utterances presented in the poem "within a more expansive whole."

Still, I aim to make the case that the voices Eliot does speak in are audibly knowledgeable of a great variety of verse-speaking methods and modalities, and, further, that some of the more archaic, discredited—to our ears, embarrassing—methods, which were identified with "mechanical" tenets of elocution, are deployed, among other more obvious methods, by Eliot in odd and subtle ways, for specific effects that have nothing to do with the original aims of such schools of elocutionary thought. So, by "Eliot's Victorian voices" I mean that in his recordings of The Waste Land, Eliot voices knowingly within a range of modalities that transform techniques of Victorian elocution into something else; something decidedly modern.

Beyond their not sounding Victorian, Eliot's poetry recordings are distinctively different from the dramatic and character-elaborating theories of interpretation, audible in the recordings made of his poetry by an actor contemporary to Eliot, Robert Speaight, of whose manner of reading Eliot approved, but did not emulate. Speaight was a regular reader of poetry for the BBC. He appeared in and then recorded a speech from Eliot's Murder in the Cathedral for HMV in the 1930s and released his own recordings of The Waste Land and The Four Quartets in the 1950s.

In 1942, Eliot wrote to a BBC producer that he was "highly pleased" with Speaight's performance of "East Coker" on the air and recommended Speaight should the BBC wish to produce and air a reading of "The Dry Salvages." Eliot cared about the precedent that a "first reading of a new poem" would set for that poem's reception and understanding.

He cared how his poetry was read out loud. He did not believe that there was a single way to read a poem out loud, but he did believe that some ways were superior to others. Eliot's own ways of envoicing the poems he wrote are interpretations that articulate his ideas about how best to intone personality and character as it functions within the formal and ethical structures that modern verse affords. This chapter will seek to explain how Eliot experimented with ways of vocalizing his poetry in an iterative process of recorded performance and will situate these experiments within a wider discursive context surrounding "verse speaking" (as it was called at this time) that may have informed Eliot's understanding of what he was trying to accomplish when reading his poetry out loud. The story best begins with an understanding of the recording context in which Eliot's early recorded experiments in rendering The Waste Land in his own voice were made.

Audiographical Context

Most of us, if we have heard a recording of T. S. Eliot reading his poem The Waste Land, are familiar with the 1946 Library of Congress recording, in which he performs his poem primarily (except for the "nerves" and "pub" dialogues in "A Game of Chess") in what I would describe as his robotic liturgical voice.

Less familiar to us is a series of non-commercially released recordings of the poem that Eliot made in 1933 to "instantaneous discs" (made either of acetate cellulose-coated aluminum or just aluminum) under the auspices of William Cabell Greet's American and English dialect series, which this Barnard College professor of English developed for the purpose of teaching pronunciation and elocution.

As later institutional documentation of the collection indicates, what had been known as the "speech recording library" since the 1920s became a division of Columbia University Libraries in the mid-1960s and now forms a part of the recorded sound section of the Brander Matthews Dramatic Museum Collection owned by Columbia. Dubs of the early instantaneous disc recordings were made to magnetic tape in the 1970s, and these tape reels are held at the Library of Congress.

The director of the Brander Matthews Museum, Thomas F. Kilfoil, who presided over the collection around the time of its integration into the Columbia Library, provided this succinct history of its development in a letter to an inquiring researcher in 1966:

It began in the late 1920's as the Speech Laboratory, originated by faculty members of the departments of English and Physics. The main objective in the early years was to collect American dialect samples. Instantaneous recordings were cut out on aluminum discs, as students, faculty members, and others read a standard passage and briefly described their formative speech environments. Prof. Harry Morgan Ayers made instructional records in historical dialects. Recordings of visiting poets reading from their own works were added when possible. Radio broadcasts, especially those of literary, social, or political interest, became another source of instantaneous recordings. Local ceremonies and those in which prominent members of the University took part were recorded as well. Between one and two thousand discs have survived, to some degree at least, from this early period.

The National Council of the Teachers of English published some of the recordings made by Prof. Ayers and the poets. Linguaphone and at least one other publisher issued a series selected from the American dialect's recordings.

By the time, late in the 1940s, when recordings of poetry and drama began to be available in number, our division had abandoned the practice of making its own instantaneous recordings. The commercial releases which we have acquired since then far overbalance the early home-made recordings.

As Kilfoil's account indicates, an offshoot of the Speech Lab recording activities was a poetry recording project by The National Council of Teachers of English in collaboration with the journal American Speech (which William Cabell Greet edited), and Erpi Picture Consultants, Inc. (a company that specialized in educational talking pictures). The recordings of visiting poets that were made included records by W. H. Auden, Robert Frost, Vachel Lindsey, Harriet Monroe, Edgar Lee Masters, and Gertrude Stein, in addition to those of Eliot. Some of the poetry recordings made were treated, at least within the pages of American Speech, as phonetic specimens to study in tandem with the regional dialect recordings Greet collected for the purpose of correcting students' speech.

The Frost recordings and three by Stein were made commercially available for use by teachers in the classroom as early as 1936. There is no indication that the Eliot recordings were made available in the same way at that time. Richard Swigg notes how different the 1930s Eliot recording of The Waste Land is from the later 1946 recording. In contrast to the "monotonous fatalism" of the 1946 Library of Congress Waste Land, Swigg remarks that the 1933 recording enacts the kind of "passion and urgency" that must have led Virginia Woolf to record in her diary after hearing a private reading of the poem in June 1922, six months before it was published, that Eliot "sang it & chanted it, rhythmed it."

Swigg's observations of the differences between the 1933 and 1946 recordings are valuable, but also raise some basic questions about the nature and status of the recordings in question. If we examine the discs of the recordings that Eliot made, and listen to the transfers that were

made from each of those discs to magnetic tape, and then to digital WAV files, it becomes clear that there is no 1933 recording of The Waste Land in any singular sense, but rather, twelve two-sided disks (of approximately five minutes of sound per side) containing multiple and often extremely distinct experimental renditions, performances, rehearsals, let's call them takes, of each section of the poem. To be more precise, the discs contain five different versions (or in some instances, dubbed duplications from acetate to solid aluminum disc) of "The Burial of the Dead" and "Death by Water," and three each of "The Fire Sermon," "A Game of Chess," and "What the Thunder Said" (see table). What we mean by Eliot's 1933 recording of The Waste Land depends on which take of a particular section of the poem we are referring to.

Electrical disc-recording technology combined elements of the earlier acoustic recording process (in which a record was engraved ready for listening on the spot using a stylus connected to a diaphragm) with the electrical transduction of the acoustic signal, at the encoding stage (via a microphone), the transmission stage (via electrical signals sent to a magnetically calibrated engraving-needle cartridge), and the decoding/reproduction stage (via an amplifier and loudspeaker). The presence and sensitivity of the microphone, and the limited yet real means of controlling the amplitude of the signal it sent to the engraving cartridge added new kinds of sensitivity to the process of voice recording, or, in this case, of poetry record making. The increased amplitude of the voice signal that was possible with amplification of that signal prior to engraving, and a broader frequency spectrum captured by the microphone, altered the range of vocal actions an interpreter of poetry could deploy. For Eliot, the electrical instantaneous disc recorder seems to have been approached as a mechanism to be tested for its capacities in rendering vocal amplitude and timbre, and for its relative effectiveness in capturing nuances in pronunciation and tonal register. In listening to the various takes Eliot recorded, one can hear him testing the possibilities and limits of the recording technology with which he had the opportunity to engage. Instantaneous disc recording had the added benefit of producing a record that could be played back immediately, allowing, in the case of Eliot's early poetry recordings, an iterative process of performance, immediate playback listening and experimental adjustments of vocal action in relation to the affordances of electrical recording, and his aesthetic goals in the interpretation of the poem. He could try out different versions and then quickly select the take he most preferred. Upon examining the material artifacts left from Eliot's acts of recording, we can see traces of his judgments concerning the different recorded performances he produced. For example, a note in pencil (and likely in Eliot's own hand) on the sleeve of one of the recorded takes of "Sweeny among the Nightingales" notes Eliot's determination that this particular take was "not distinct enough" and "unsatisfactory."

T. S. Eliot's 1933 instantaneous disc recordings of The Waste Land

[Five versions of "The Burial of the Dead"]

402A Burial of the Dead (tape 30 A)
403A* Burial of the Dead (tape 30 A)
404A* Burial of the Dead (tape 30 B)
404.1A Burial of the Dead (tape 30 B)

405.1A Burial of the Dead

[Three versions of "The Fire Sermon" +
two versions of "Death by Water"]

406A* Fire Sermon Part 1 (tape 30 B)
406B* Fire Sermon Part 2 (tape 30 B)
406.1A* Fire Sermon Part 1 (tape 30 B)
406.2A* Fire Sermon Parts 1 and 2 (tape 31 A)

406.2B* Fire Sermon Part 2 / Death by Water (tape 31 A)
406.1B* Fire Sermon Part 2 / Death by Water (tape 30 B)
(poor audio quality, not duplicated to tape)

[Three versions of "A Game of Chess"]
402B Game of Chess (tape 30 A)
403B* Game of Chess, Part 1 (tape 30 B)
404B* Game of Chess, Part 1 (tape 30 B)
405A* Game of Chess Part 2 (tape 30 B)
405B* Game of Chess Part 2 (tape 30 B)
405.1 B Game of Chess Parts 1 & 2

[Three versions of "Death by Water"]
406.1B* Death by Water (tape 30 B)
406.2B* Death by Water (tape 30 B)
407A* Death by Water (tape 30 B)

[Three versions of "What the Thunder Said"]
(Poor audio quality, not duplicated to tape.)
407A* What the Thunder Said Part 1 (tape 30 B)
407 B* What the Thunder Said Part 2 (tape 30 B)
407.1A* What the Thunder Said Part 1 (tape 31 A)
407.1B What the Thunder Said Part 2 (tape 31 A)
407.2A What the Thunder Said Part 1 and 2 (tape 31 A [poor quality])

Something else that I have noted in my listening to these early Eliot recordings is that some of the takes among the 1933 recordings seem to be exactly the same as parts of the recording released by the Library of Congress in 1946. From listening closely to the 1933 and 1946 recordings over an extended period of time, it becomes audibly apparent (and visually apparent from a comparison of the wave forms) that the 1946 recording is most likely an edited fusion of the "best" takes (more about what "best" might mean later) recorded in 1933. In matching the digitized audio of the 1933 and 1946 records, there are occasional, fractional differences in the "speed" of the two digitized sources, most likely attributable to slight

calibration differences occurring during one or more of the processes of rendering. Scenarios of the migration of the audio signal of the 1933 recordings across media formats include:

(1) instantaneous disc ca. 1933 to 78 disc ca. 1946–49,

(2) instantaneous disc to magnetic tape ca. 1972, and

(3) magnetic tape to WAV files ca. 2008.[21]

Within each scenario, the precise speed of the record and tape players and recorders in question would have to have been exactly the same to avoid even the slightest time differences between the playback speeds of the digitized files. As we do not have the precise specifications by which the various media migrations were pursued in all cases, our digitized versions of these recordings hover somewhere in status between hard copies and audio apparitions of the literary recordings we are studying. With speed adjustments, and adjustments to some variation in pause lengths between audible phrases, using digital audio software, the 1946 recording and certain takes from the 1933 recordings seem to match up exactly, which is especially apparent in a multitrack, stereo presentation of the two files, with 1933 panned to the left ear and 1946 panned to the right (fig. 13).

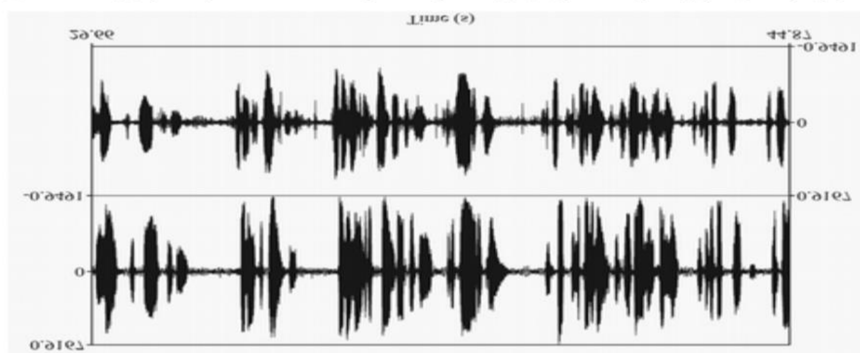

Figure 13. Multitrack comparison of wave forms, T. S. Eliot reading "The Burial of the Dead" (detail) from 1946 78 rpm record (top) and 1933 instantaneous disc (bottom)

From an evidentiary perspective, my claim that the later Library of Congress release of The Waste Land is a compilation of certain takes from a larger cluster of recordings made in 1933 raises the question: To what extent can one use analysis of a digital audio signal as the forensic claim about material media migration. The bibliographical leaflets inserted within the 1946 album suggest the possibility of such a compilation recording based on the extant recordings of 1933, noting that the album contents were "selected and arranged by the consultants in poetry in English and issued by the Library of Congress under a grant from the Bollingen Foundation."

The Library of Congress received a first grant of $10,500 in January 1946 to prepare five albums of five double-sided 78 rpm records of twentieth-century poets reading their own works. It is not clear who would have made the final selection, although William McGuire's

work on the role of the Library of Congress poetry consultants indicates that Louise Bogan (the LC poetry consultant for 1946) spent much of the month of February listening to poetry recordings that already existed as a form of research and preparation, and that “the work of auditing, consulting, list making, technical preparation, and text compiling continued through the tenures of the next two Consultants [Karl Shapiro and Robert Lowell, respectively] before the albums were published, in 1949.”

McGuire suggests that Bogan and Allan Tate may have persuaded Eliot to record some poems at an NBC studio in New York, but also suggests that Lowell’s letters “inviting poets to record or rerecord” attracted few respondents, and that Eliot was not among the poets who came to record during Lowell’s year as Library of Congress poetry consultant.

Based on the audible evidence, combined with this other information, it seems likely that Eliot’s album consisted of a mixture of old and new recordings, with The Waste Land being a compiled and mastered version of his previous experiments. Eliot’s Library of Congress album consisted of The Waste Land on three records, “Ash Wednesday” on two records, and “Landscapes: I. New Hampshire; II. Virginia,” and “Sweeney Among the Nightingales” on the fifth record. Given Eliot’s later concern for making recordings that were satisfying to him, it is likely he indicated at some point in time which of the 1933 takes he felt were, to his mind, most successful and worthy of public release. He certainly had much to say about the financial arrangement that was proposed for the release of the album, declining a single flat rate of $50 per record (for a total of $250) without subsequent royalties, and eventually negotiating a royalty of $250 per five hundred records pressed. This was more in line with the arrangement he had recently made around his recordings of the Four Quartets, for which Eliot received, in his words, “the usual gramophone royalty from the HMV Gramophone Company.”

As of the mid-1980s, Eliot’s Library of Congress recordings had sold over 10,500 copies, in 78, LP, and cassette form, and have brought more to the Eliot estate since then via the Apple Music store and other such online vendors, where this same selection of 1933 recordings can be streamed or downloaded by users (for a subscription fee) as The Waste Land—Read by T. S. Eliot—EP, EP designating, skeuomorphic ally in the context of iTunes, an extended-play release of about twenty-five minutes, not quite the length of a full LP record album.

The possibility that the 1946 Library of Congress release of The Waste Land on three 78 records consists of cleaned-up, de-crackled selections culled from the 1933 instantaneous disc recording session suggests a mastering and cleaning up of the sound of the recorded poem in more than just the sense of arrangement and audible noise reduction. I argue that Eliot combines a particular conception of the voice-recording machine with ideas prevalent in New Critical approaches to literary interpretation—ideas that he, himself, influenced as a means of expunging accent in any corrupting, dialectical sense, from his reading, and focusing his vocal performance of The Waste Land on cultivated forms of tonality instead. If we take Michael North’s idea that dialect, for Eliot, “is a flaw, a kind of speech impediment, a remnant of the inarticulate that clogs his language and stands in the way he attempts to link his own individual talent with tradition” —then a consideration of Eliot’s experiments in how

to vocalize his poetry must be attuned to a method designed to navigate (if not to remove altogether) such impediments, and to realize a delivery that escapes the parochial markers of regional accent by developing a disembodied conception of vocal tone. Knowing, as we do, that Eliot's first recordings of The Waste Land originated from a collection of recordings made by a collector of American dialects, Eliot's performative motivation to displace demarcating accent with universal tone sounds all the more resonant as an aesthetic project. In my reading of Eliot's recordings, I provide a series of elocutionary or "verse speaking" contexts that explain how Eliot imagined the voice of modernity as simultaneously oracular and disembodied, musical, and mechanical, communal and local. The contexts surrounding such a conception of oral delivery can be read into the history of how The Waste Land as an aural artifact was produced and can be heard in the recordings themselves. Leaving the relationship between the 1933 recordings and the 1946 Library of Congress release aside for a moment, I want to focus on the variety of performance techniques that can be heard in the 1933 recordings. The different takes of the 1933 recordings are remarkably different from each other, providing audible examples of experimentation in tempo, amplitude, intonation patterns, and varying degrees of dramatization and methods of avoiding it. One version of "A Game of Chess" (402.1B) is over half a minute longer than another recording of the same section (403B) and substitutes meditative/colloquial voicing with a more urgent, incantatory style of delivery. One version of the Pub scene from "A Game of Chess" (405B) is far more "dramatically" rendered, with a much more developed cockney accent, and greater character play than the other versions. For example, just following the lines, "You ought to be ashamed, I said, to look so antique. / (And her only thirty-one)" [II.156–57], Eliot adds a "harrumph" of exasperation. He has really gotten into character in this take. One version of "What the Thunder Said" (407.1A) is nearly sung, slowly and distinctly, in shifting and clearly identifiable musical pitches, and this in fact turns out to be the performance integrated into the 1946 recording. Another take (407) of this section is racing and urgently incanted with strong shifts in volume, ranging from whisper to more than occasional screaming, and with hardly any pauses between line breaks. One take of "Death by Water" (406.2B) provides a far more straightforward narrator's voice telling the story of Phoebas the Phoenician that works its way up to melody in the delivery of the lines "Gentile or Jew" (this is the delivery heard in the 1946 recording), whereas another take (407A) opens with melodic delivery as if it a sailor's song is being sung from the start, a sea shanty about Phoebas.

I will return at the close of this chapter with a closer listen to some of these different takes as illustrations of several key techniques in vocalization that Eliot deploys. First, I would like to speculate in a more general way on their significance. What are we to make of these varied experiments in recitation captured onto disc? What contexts beyond that of the recordings' production help determine their significance? In the spirit of Eliot's own early experiments in poetry recording, the rest of this chapter will proceed as a series of interpretive takes on Eliot's multiple recorded readings of The Waste Land.

TAKE 1—Phonographic Transcript versus Gramophonic Lament

One way to understand Eliot's 1933 recordings of The Waste Land is to hear them as an experimental step on the way to the calculated number or mechanical delivery of his

“definitive” recording of 1946—the one he allowed to be released commercially for the next thirty years of his life.

There are as I have said sections from these early readings that seem to have been used to produce what we now have commercially available as the 1946 recording. And in the materials held at the BBC Written Archives Centre in Reading, there is information concerning Eliot’s recording of another poem, “Ash Wednesday,” that indicates both Eliot’s aspirations to achieve definitive recitations of his poems, and to help us understand his procedure of achieving such master recordings. Eliot recorded “Ash Wednesday” for the Library of Congress in 1946, but dissatisfied with that American recording, negotiated terms with the BBC to re-record the poem in 1951. Rayner Heppenstall, the producer in charge of this particular project, remarked in memos that Eliot “seemed anxious to achieve a perfect and definitive rendering of ‘Ash Wednesday’” and that he wanted “to hold more than one recording session, hearing each section of the poem played back before he went on to read the next one.”

If some of the takes from Eliot’s 1933 recordings of The Waste Land represent failed attempts to achieve the solemn version of 1946, the multiple excised takes of that earlier version sit like misfit pieces abandoned on the way to constructing a vocal rendering that worked via the medium of the gramophone record. These early parts do not work for Eliot because they are too quirky, too human-sounding, too dialectical, too affective, or, too musical, too experimental in their alterations in tempo and pitch, and so not adequately dry, objective, or mechanical.

This interpretation treats The Waste Land more as an indiscriminate transcription recording capturing random and diverse sounds of life and culture to be played back than as a poem to be read. In Eliot’s recordings of it, we are, in effect, listening to a transcript of the trials and tribulations of (Western) history through the media technologies of modernity. “Poetic discourse competes here with Edison’s waxed cylinders and Emile Berliner’s blank records,” Juan A. Suarez comments. “It aspires to total inclusiveness. . .. The present quickly melts into the past; colloquial discourse transmutes into literature; and [Eliot’s female character] Lil blends with Hamlet’s hapless character.”

This kind of reading is valuable starting place, for it converts Eliot’s “allusions”—a dominant concern of analyses of the printed poem—into voices. Early responses to Eliot’s poem all commented on the mediation of his poetic personality through literary allusion. “The poetic personality of Mr. Eliot is extremely sophisticated,” a TLS reviewer observed in 1923. “His emotions hardly ever reach us without traversing a zigzag of allusion.” Suarez suggests that the poet is not so much “sophisticated” as “phonographic,” and that we should think of Eliot’s “quotes from a score of authors” (in the language of the TLS review) as voices, rather than as literary quotations.

Even if we adopt this idea of The Waste Land, however, we are left to deal with Eliot’s preferred, less affective mode of reciting the poem. The poem is not simply played back; it is read back to us as we play back the recording of Eliot’s recitation. The reading reinstalls the element of performance as a different kind of mediation (a human elocutionary one) into the

resounding of what Suarez describes as a “data bank of mechanical memories detached from self and psychology.”

If we approach the poem as an indiscriminate record, when we listen to Eliot’s recitation of the poem (the 1946 version), we must be listening to an elocutionary performance of mechanical play-back. With this ear, even the unpurged colloquialisms sound infused with mechanical apathy. The symbols of canned-ness used to communicate a disenchanted culture (the typist’s “food in tins” [III.223] and later, her “automatic hand” that “puts a record on the gramophone” [III.254–55]) are given their correlating tone of voice. “He Do the Police in Different Voices”—well known to be the original, abandoned title of the poem—might be translated, in this instance, to mean, “He Performs the Hegemony-Enforcing Medium in All Its Power to Falsely Suggest Multiplicity and Difference.” Or, more succinctly, “He Do the Gramophone.”

But the robotic liturgical delivery of the 1946 release performs more than just tinny automatism. It sounds a complex, paradoxical experience of the mechanically mediated and decorporealized voice, as it is heard through the technology of the gramophone, as simultaneously reduced, demystified, familiarized, automatized, on the one hand, and excessive, sublime, uncanny, and autonomous, on the other. Partly what I am referring to when I say Eliot’s delivery is robotically liturgical, or, maybe even better, mechanically oracular, is Stephen Connor’s point (in his cultural history of ventriloquism, Dumbstruck) that mechanical “technologies of voice are actualizations of fantasies and desires concerning the voice which predate the actual technologies.” The idea here is that the voice that is reduced, demystified, and automatized by technology results in an unexpected excess in the form of an ideational resurgence of the uncanny powers of autonomy that characterized pretechnological fantasies of an all-powerful, superhuman voice: the voice of oracles and gods. As Connor argues, vocal acoustic technologies enact processes of both disenchantment and enchantment. This application of Connor’s ideas about ventriloquism to Eliot’s mode of reading are in line with other critics’ attempts to characterize Eliot’s poetic method of voicing worldly and otherworldly perspectives simultaneously. Charles Sanders identifies the “distinguishing trait of Eliot’s rendition of the inarticulate superfluous man” to be “its ventriloquism,” that is to say, “his self-conscious manipulation of the ‘dummy’ as a deliberate, elaborate, often parodic piece of theater, in a space whose dimensions are both of and not of this world; in which all time is collapsed; and in which, after his example, it grows more difficult to separate lyric from dramatic poetry (if we ever could before), the speaker from the listener, the ‘construct’ of the poems from the associations evoked within and all about us.”

More recently, Omri Moses has thought a way out of this binary by arguing that Eliot’s conception of “poetic voice constructs several different, but overlapping relations of address,” some that are “exhibited in the circumstantial, dramatic or fictive context set up by the poem” and others that “appeal to perspectives outside these contexts.”

The Waste Land as a lyric/ epic/dramatic poem constructed of multiple, resonating voices speaking in incompatible tones and from incongruous contexts demands a reading voice that

does them justice. It requires a tone of voice that does not get lost in the din of the crowd, or drown it out, but, on the contrary, has a capacity to sound an ostensible babel in tones and frequencies that capture the larger circumstance informing the complex history of human communication, character, and life. That greater tonal mode would resound the significance of particularized utterances in new ways, according to an alternative context of vocal address. Such a tone would, potentially, give those particularized utterances new life. With this model in mind, Eliot's recorded delivery of The Waste Land may be understood to evoke a disenchanted voice with undertones of self-conscious knowledge and hope. Or, to use the terms found in so many early interpretations of Eliot's printed poem, Eliot delivers a dry and sterile voice seeking new tonal means for authentic feeling to well up again.

The sterility enacted vocally as an absence of socially motivated intonation would, in the reading of the present interpretive take be meant to sound the automatization of a once reflexive, vivacious, shared culture. Read in relation to Eliot's well-documented interest in specific forms of popular culture, in the art of the music hall and vaudeville (this last term from the French voix de ville —the urban, as opposed to, say, the urbane , voice), the machine-voice delivery can be heard to enact a declamation of what has been lost in the transition from the vital, participatory music hall era of Marie Lloyd, where "the working man . . . joined in the chorus" and "was himself performing part of the act," to a new era where live performance "has been replaced by a hundred gramophones," and "the working man now will receive without giving, in the same listless apathy with which the middle and upper classes regard any entertainment of the nature of art."

These last passages are quoted from Eliot's essay "In Memoriam: Marie Lloyd," published in the Criterion in the early 1920s. Eliot believed strongly in music hall performance of a certain era as an art form that was powerful for its ability to engage all classes of society. Eliot's memorial essay on Lloyd, in which he calls her "the greatest music hall artist in England," bases its claim on an argument that asserts her ability to express "that part of the English nation which has . . . the greatest vitality and interest." His assertion of Lloyd's preeminent status rests on his claim for "her understanding of the people and sympathy for them, and the people's recognition of the fact that she embodied the virtues which they genuinely most respected in private life."

Barry J. Faulk argues that the Eliot who wrote this essay was mourning "the loss of a compact which had permitted intellectuals to redeem the popular and exert enough authority to make this recognition of difference matter." In short, he was lamenting a working "formula for cultural hegemony."

Eliot recognized the importance of new communications technologies in making such a cultural formula operable. We may productively consider Eliot's early experiments in recording his poetry in the context of his lifelong engagement in public broadcasting, which took the form, not only of recitations of poems on the air, but of talks explaining the English literary tradition to a wide public. Michael Coyle's account of Eliot's career as a BBC broadcaster suggests that Eliot understood the radio talk as a distinctly popular genre, a genre that had great potential in shaping "a mass audience into an intellectual community."

The airwaves as a communications platform were, in effect, Eliot's musical hall stage. This was especially the case prior to the institution of the Third Programme in 1946. After the emergence of this new program—which BBC Director William Haley called "a programme for the educated rather than an educational programme" —Eliot became the voice of culture on a channel that was distinct from the other bands making their way into the ears of a stratified British public. Juxta-posed with the vision of culture represented in The Waste Land, Eliot's early work for the BBC represents a vision of community-building that might serve as reparative of the cultural fracture that is voiced in the poem. This might also explain why he did not feel that modern verse could effectively be presented on the air for widespread public broadcast. In his own radio presentations and discussions of poetry, he focused mostly on works that predated the seventeenth century, as if the "dissociation of sensibility" he identified with the metaphysical poets was still in effect and would not be helped by broadcast presentations of contemporary poetry that reinforced such a split between thought and feeling.

Eliot's arguments about the transition from participatory, interested music hall entertainments to mechanical film and gramophone entertainments in the Marie Lloyd essay, and his avoidance of modernist poetry in his early BBC radio work, are a comment on the non-participatory nature of new entertainment media—and raise the question of how The Waste Land as a poem, and Eliot's experiments in performing that poem, might be addressing this same problem. While the poem certainly uses metaphors and similes of canned-ness to communicate a disenchanted culture (the food tins, automatic hand, and gramophone), one might read into the poem other, more performative, and participatory elements that harken back to parlor recitation and late Victorian elocutionary culture. To do the police in different voices in one sense means to read aloud the condition of modernity as Betty Hidgen perceives Sloppy reading the newspaper in Dickens's "Our Mutual Friend", and yet, it can also mean to read for someone (for the pleasure of Betty Hidgen in the parlor), for their entertainment or ultimate edification. To do the police in different voices for someone means to participate in an interlocutory event, a performance for the sake of the audience's pleasure in seeing itself reflected in that performance. Eliot's multiple recordings of The Waste Land, and especially the 1933 recordings with their multiple, experimental takes of each section of the poem, may just stand as records of his attempt to realize a new way toward such a form of participatory performance—a reading for —for a series of isolated voices who speak in non-participatory ways, who speak without hearing each other. In other words, even as he is delivering a recitation of voices that are speaking from the fixed or grooved source of the gramophone record, he is doing these voices of mechanized individuals with experiments in timbre and intonation that aim to demechanize the isolated voices of gramophonic modernity. If so, Eliot's approach to rescuing such voices from isolation was not to resituate them into dialogical contexts but to emphasize the detachment of socially motivated, semantic intonation as an overarching aesthetic tactic and performative structure. Reenacting on record the vital exchange of sympathy and recognition that Eliot so admired in Lloyd was no longer possible. While The Waste Land as a poem constructed of textual excerpts might, in one sense, be understood as the phonographic poem par excellence, comprised of an extensive, eclectic album of phonographic genres and literary adaptations (speeches, scenes, sketches,

voices, sounds, and recitations), a Bransby Williams approach to recording The Waste Land would not do. Dramatization, mimicry, or mimetic performance were not aesthetically feasible categories with which to frame the reading techniques necessary in a recorded performance of this work. A new mode of recorded performance, one that subsumed the individuated quirks of voice and intonation into a broader vocal purview and tactic, was needed. In experimenting in his performance of The Waste Land, Eliot worked to figure out how to speak in a voice that did not emanate from a person but from something that captured the nature and import of the medium with which he was engaged.

Mark Morrison has identified the idea of natural delivery as a mode of reading that conveyed "the sort of impersonality that allows the presence of the author to speak through the reciter."

As Morrison notes, this "pure voice" delivery "helps elucidate modernist critical and aesthetic categories like those that preoccupied Eliot in his early criticism—the purity of language, impersonality, and verse drama."

Eliot's idea, articulated in "Tradition and the Individual Talent," that "the poet has not a 'personality' to express, but a particular medium," or, rather, an "impersonality" that he cannot reach "without surrendering himself wholly to the work to be done" had its equivalents in verse-recitation and elocution manuals of the early 1900s, which increasingly advocated that the reader enact a similar "impersonality" in relation the work he or she was reading aloud.

While there is nothing inherently "natural" about natural elocution, nothing inherently "pure" about the pure voice, the idea of natural vocal delivery has had identifiable meaning, primarily by contrast with so-called mechanical modes of delivery, in the history of rhetoric. Eliot's developing ideas about speaking verse worked to transcend this historical binary by vocalizing the formal unity of a poetic work as an aesthetic entity, rather than by attempting to voice the characters whose localized perspectives are articulated within that unified entity. I will unpack this assertion in my final two takes.

TAKE 2—Speaking Verse on the BBC

By the early 1940s—when New Criticism was well on the rise, if not allready in its full ascent—questions about the purpose of verse speaking were necessarily raised again, this time by pitting the dramatic manner of reading associated with Elsie Fogerty's trained actors against some other way that would be deemed more appropriate for nondramatic poetry. Fogerty's methods of executive interpretation had been dubbed mechanical, recitational, distorting in their turn, and a new roundtable debate about why and how verse should be read ensued. In 1941, the BBC producer Christopher Salmon asked Eliot for his opinion about a roundtable discussion series called Well Versed, involving writers, actors, and elocutionists, which Salmon put on to stage a public debate about how verse should be read aloud. Participants included the writers Cecil Day Lewis, Robert Nichols, and James Stephens, the actors Catherine Lacey and Robert Speaight, the voice educators Gwynneth Thurburn and Marjorie Gullan (the latter a strong advocate of choral speaking in the schools), and Thomas Hunt, who played the role of the "everyday listener" in the midst of these assembled experts.

Individual shows in this series had titles like: “How Should Poetry be Read?”; “Must Poetry Make Sense?”; and “Is Verse-Speaking a Lost Art?” These discussions articulated the terms and concerns that would have been informing Eliot’s own approach to reading verse, whether his own, or that of the poets he frequently talked about on the BBC, such as Richard Crashaw, George Herbert, and John Dryden. These radio discussions set up a series of oppositions that seem especially relevant to the performance of a poem like The Waste Land. They positioned everyday speech against poetry, communication against communion, meaning against music, action against meditation, and expressed a general concern for the status of poetry in the minds and ears of a more general public. In the Well Versed roundtable, the “everyday listener” Thomas Hunt asked, “Why can’t people read poetry in their ordinary voice, and carry over into it the tones they use every day?” Cecil Day Lewis defended the importance of the “special voice” used for speaking verse, because poetry “has a lot to do with incantation . . . and in that respect poetry is like the voice of a priest.” Robert Speaight argued that “reading poetry’s a problem of communication,” a matter of keeping “the attention of the people.” And the poet James Stephens focused on the importance of “rubato” (rhythmic flexibility in phrase or measure) for verse speaking and argued that “the public has got to learn that they must listen to poetry as they listen to music.”

In his report on these talks, Eliot challenged their apparent assumption that there was a single, right way to read a poem and then proceeded to articulate his own understanding of a verse recitation. He argued that a printed poem and a read performance of that poem are distinct works of art, and that a reading consists of a combination of three key elements: the printed poem, the performer’s understanding and interpretation of it, and the qualities of the reader’s voice. He lamented actors’ tendency to overdramatize nondramatic verse and to expunge everything but dramatic elements from dramatic verse. And he underscored the need to explain to listeners that different kinds of verse should be interpreted in different ways by a variety of readers, and that even the same kind of verse should be read out loud in a variety of ways. Eliot’s primary concern in his report to Christopher Salmon was that the audience not be deterred by the Well Versed series from trying to appreciate poetry. His suggested remedy was to stress the desirability of rendering a single poem in diverse ways and of explaining the value of doing so to general listeners by making the analogy to music, to different adaptations of the same score. Eliot found himself “strongly in agreement with Stephens,” the poet, as opposed to the actor, Speaight, on the question of how poetry should be read out loud, implying that he thought there was a right way to read poetry, notwithstanding his assertion that poetry can and should be read in different ways. Eliot allowed the BBC to produce The Waste Land dramatized by Geoffrey Bridson in 1938, but he so disliked it that he denied a request to produce a second dramatization submitted by Bertram Barnaby in 1958, and the Bridson experience led to what Terence Tiller called “the ban” of Eliot’s publishers and executors “on multi-voice performances of The Waste Land.”

Eliot’s refusal of further multi-voice dramatizations of the poem was due to his idea that The Waste Land is a poem, and not a play to which specific parts might be assigned to audibly distinct actors. He does not seem to have minded a more straightforwardly dramatic delivery of the poem by a single actor’s voice—why else would he have given Robert Speaight

permission to record the poem? In his delivery of The Waste Land, Speaight makes far greater effort to deliver the possible voice divisions in the poem as emanating from realized individual characters than Eliot does in his own recorded performances of it. In Speaight's performance, the "nerves" section is dramatically grounded as an exchange between a husband and a wife (with the wife's questioning voice rendered in a higher pitch, verging on Monty Python drag), the Shakespeherian Rag is sung, and in the pub scene, Speaight far out-cockney's Eliot. You can hear this characterizing approach even in Speaight's rendering of the opening portion of the poem. These are far more socially grounded voices than the ones we hear in Eliot's recording. Eliot's dislike of a multivoiced rendition of The Waste Land can also be explained with reference to the categories of poetic voice he enumerates in "The Three Voices of Poetry" (1953–57): "the voice of the poet talking to himself—or to nobody," "the voice of the poet addressing an audience, whether large or small," and "the voice of the poet when he attempts to create a dramatic character in verse."

It is especially evident in his awkward description of dramatic monologue as the "voice of the poet in non-dramatic poetry which has a dramatic element in it." This hybrid description of the poet's voice brings us back to his agreement with Stephens. In a BBC talk that he gave in 1937 called "On Speaking Verse," Stephens held "that tonally there are three different kinds of verse, and that each of these demands a different speech, adjustment and attack. There is a form generically the epic which is to be uttered in a fashion approximating gravely modulating speech. There is a form, the lyrical, which without being sung, approximates to singing. And there is an intermediate form which is come to by a subtle balancing of phrase against phrase."

The three forms Stephens outlines here—spoken, sung, and balancing verse—approximate the range Eliot deploys in his recordings of his own verse. Although there are obviously different voices to be done in The Waste Land, much of the experimentation in the various takes of the 1933 recordings has less to do with finding the individuated voices of characters in the poem less to do with doing voices—than with finding the correct tempo, pitch, and incantatory rhythm that would best allow the variety of voices already written into the poem to cohere as a vocalized movement of poetic composition. There are voices more pronouncedly "done" (e.g., the "harrumph" at II.156–57) among the lost takes of 1933, and even a few in the 1946 recording. But Eliot seems to have left that approach to the actor, for the most part. His own approach and ultimate focus was on tonal patterns that would allow his poem to be received, not as a play, but as a series of themes with their own recurrent vocal registers, a "musical composition of ideas."

Eliot's experiments with pitch, amplitude, duration, tempo, and caesura in the 1933 recordings attempt through vocal leitmotiv to give formal precision to a din of disparate dramatic scenarios that are in fact written into the poem. This approach to reading transmutes character in a manner that suggests an oral performance of New Critical tenets. The spirit of Samuel Silas Curry's idea from Imagination and the Dramatic Instinct that oral performance consists of "the spontaneous realization of ideas in living relations, and of motive and manifestations of character" seems alive in Eliot's multiple attempts in 1933 to render The Waste Land in voice, minus one key element, the final motive to ground speech in character.

Eliot's experiment stresses the more formal elements of vocalization as a means of organizing "ideas in living relations." The issue of "motive and manifestations of character" are addressed by such formal elements not as sources for dramatization but as audible renderings of "verbal imprecisions" and "approximate thoughts and feelings"—these last two phrases being from Eliot's "Choruses from the Rock"—that evoke Eliot's version of New Critical formalism, oralized in The Waste Land recordings.

Character is set within, and infused by the overarching structure that emerges from his deployment of rubato, tempo, monotone, misplaced intonation, and drone, all of which add up to a performance of The Waste Land's "patterns of sound." The drama of The Waste Land as Eliot works to render it has to do simultaneously with the impossibility of making all the voices fit into a single realized character, and the recuperative, restorative power of poetry incanted to do just that. The late Victorian elocutionist Canon Fleming described "reading and speaking by word, without any regard to the sentiment" as "reading mechanically," stating that "when we read without feeling, we are inclined to speak on one note of the voice only, in monotone."

Reading without feeling (but for a "music of ideas" [I. A. Richards] or "musical organization" and "unity" [F. R. Leavis]) might also describe the effect of New Critical approaches to poetry that translate dramatic voice into a unifying force of formal cohesion. "The ideas are of all kinds: abstract and concrete, general and particular; and, like the musician's phrases, they are arranged, not that they may tell us something, but that their effects in us may combine into a coherent whole of feeling and attitude and produce a peculiar liberation of the will," as I. A. Richards explained what he meant by a "music of ideas."

Alternating authoritative epic speech, lyrical modulation, and localized dramatic scenario, Eliot's recordings render both the abstract conception of "voice" and "music" as an organizing principle that informs New Critical vocabulary, and the dull flatness resulting from the disconnect between performed affect and intellectual and affective context that natural elocutionists like Fleming identified with mechanical methods of elocution. These distinct modes of speech are ultimately both subsumed into a pervading sense of incantation or meditation voiced by nobody in particular—which is to say, by the gramophone as autonomous oracle.

TAKE 3—T. S. Eliot's Asemic Phrasing

What do some of these experimental tactics deployed by Eliot in rendering The Waste Land in his own voice look and sound like? We can focus on some of the key prosodic elements that I have been describing above (rubato, tone, amplitude, intonational phrasing, caesura, musicality) by thinking of Eliot's recordings with attention to his use of phrasing, intonation, and stress, and by observing the nature of visualized contours of pitch and patterns of amplitude. Not much can be said about pitch curves and amplitude patterns without first defining the domains in which the patterns take place. Like natural speech, a recorded literary work has natural prosodic divisions—domains that appear to denote complete intonation patterns. Unlike natural speech, they may not always be motivated by the goals of semantic communication, but by aesthetic goals, and expressive aims that differ from the desire to be

intelligible in a straightforward sense. As an example of the prosodic divisions of natural speech, a typical declarative sentence will have a high then falling intonation. The declarative intonation curve will be confined to the prosodic domain that encompasses the sentence. I am using the term "phrase" now to refer to these domains, without making any theoretical claims, linguistic or literary, about the status of the phrase, other than to note that phrases in these literary speech acts are generally separated by salient, acoustically measurable pauses.

Phrases as I observe them in Eliot's recorded performances are delineated solely on the basis of the recorded speech act and not by the graphic divisions of the poem on the page. Lineation and punctuation found in the printed text are, in the first instance, irrelevant. Consequently, preconceived notions about poetic structure as it pertains to such typographical cues are superseded by acoustic evidence.