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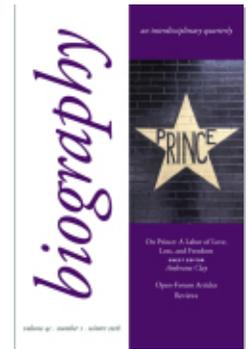
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"HERE I AM"

ELIOT, "GERONTION," AND THE GREAT WAR

JAMIE WOOD

*Here I am, an old man in a dry month,
Being read to by a boy, waiting for rain.
I was neither at the hot gates
Nor fought in the warm rain
Nor knee deep in the salt marsh, heaving a cutlass,
Bitten by flies, fought.*

—Eliot, "Gerontion"

Eliot's "Gerontion" begins with a simple request, one that is implicit in all forms of life writing, that asks us to recognize the present being of the speaking I. "Here I am" (Eliot, "Gerontion" 31). But as the line shifts immediately to conjure up its "old man in a dry month" ("Gerontion" 31), the poem does everything it can, particularly through layers of irony and allusion, to mitigate against, or at least greatly complicate, the autobiographical mode invited in those opening three syllables. Eliot's consistent advice to readers of this famously difficult poem was that they should follow form not content. He pointed Mary Hutchinson, probably the poem's first reader, to its allusive nature when he boasted on July 9, 1919, that "I can show you in the thing I enclose how I have borrowed from half a dozen sources just as boldly as Shakespeare" (Eliot, *Letters* 372). He made it clear that it was in the poem's totality that we would find meaning. The "core" of a poem, he wrote to Lytton Strachey on June 1, 1919, is "the *tone*," a quality achieved by "crystallization" (*Letters* 357).¹ Illustrating the point several weeks later in a review of Herbert Read's *Naked Warriors* (1919), Eliot found Read "handicapped by his imperfection of musical sense, in the production of *tone*: the effect . . . a succession of effects of ideas and images, rather than the sharp and indefinable effect of the poem as a whole" (Eliot, "Reflections [IV]" 68). Almost thirty years later, Eliot described "Gerontion" as the "expression of a mood,

its variations and associated or evoked memories," the mere "impression of old age," an "experiment" devoid of any "intellectual generalisation" (qtd. in Ricks and McCue, "Commentary: 'Gerontion'" 468). The remark is consistent with the unsubstantiated attribution to Eliot that *The Waste Land* (1922), to which "Gerontion" was considered as a prelude, was "'just a piece of rhythmical grumbling'" (qtd. in Scofield 132). Such precatory messages on tone, effect, rhythm, and totality focus readers firmly on essences and universals rather than on history and particulars. They dovetail with the theories of tradition and impersonality.

Challenges to this orthodoxy have been consistently marked by attempts to insert neurosis, pain, or trauma into the poem. Stephen Spender proposed that the analogy in "Gerontion" between the decadence, villainy, and intrigue of the Jacobean world and post-1918 Europe was markedly self-indulgent (63–67). Robert Crawford recently entitled his chapter discussing Eliot in 1919, "Old Man," a reference which subtly links poet, narrative voice, and poem (312). But the more savage tone that has accompanied analysis of Eliot's work in relation to biography owes a great deal to Cynthia Ozick's reading of Eliot as "false coinage" (121). Ozick's proposal was that Eliot's objective correlative was no more than "a device to shield the poet from the raw shame of confession" (126). Her Eliot is a confessional poet who lacked the guts for confession, an "autocratic, inhibited, depressed, rather narrow-minded, and considerably bigoted fake Englishman" (121) who developed a critical method "to describe the wound without suffering the embarrassment of divulging who had held the knife" (126). Ronald Schuchard has speculated that Vivien Eliot's sexual betrayal of her husband with Bertrand Russell figured extensively in Eliot's work between 1916 and 1919, establishing the spiritual frustration that became a primary preoccupation in his poetry and underpinned the turn to T. E. Hulme's concept of original sin (*Eliot's Dark Angel*). The turn to biography has perhaps been most notable, though, in relation to Eliot's alleged anti-Semitism, which, as Anthony Julius pointed out in 2003, cannot, even if we allow the defense of multiple personae splitting poet and poem, escape the deployment of a racial slur for poetic ends (307–08). In this body of biographical work, the power (and interest) of Eliot's poetry, for good or bad, lies in the attempt to bury pain and neurosis using personae. In other words, Eliot's critical method functions much like Freudian repression, sequestering impulses from the id in the unconscious of the poem. Edward Brunner is one of the few to have taken a less psychological stance in the relationship between life and art, arguing that in *Gerontion* we find the extreme New England and Unitarian skepticism of Henry Adams, "a mix of [Eliot] as he might be yet would not be." For Brunner, there is no disguise: rather just "a terribly honest position" (154). It clearly matters what one feels Eliot ought to be confessing to.

Eliot's relationship to life writing is, then, especially fraught. What is clear is that changing attitudes to biographical interpretation can at least be partly explained by the evolving critical apparatus that now surrounds Eliot's scant oeuvre. Ozick proposed that New Criticism had been hoodwinked by Eliot's methodology because of the lack of evidence against him, a situation she saw remedied by the publication of the first volume of his letters (1988), and biographies by Lyndall Gordon (1977 and 1988) and Peter Ackroyd (1984). But her own biographical claims, which lean heavily on a crude oedipal theory taken from a small number of letters, were surely influenced by the art-life controversy that surrounded the publication of Anne Stevenson's *Bitter Fame: A Life of Sylvia Plath* (1989) in the same year. In contrast, in the last ten years such biographical analysis has given way to a more comprehensive examination of Eliot's prose, the identification of previously unattributed essays, and a recognition of the central position of Eliot's criticism within the genealogy of modernist aesthetics and Anglo-American literary production, dissemination, and reception (see Harding). There has been a marked shift in scholarship that has attempted to understand Eliot's theory prior to its adoption by New Criticism, especially the centrality of his poetics of impersonality, the concept of tradition, and his doctoral interrogation of F. H. Bradley's idealism (see Brooker; Logenbach). Although some gaps between Eliot the critic and Eliot the poet have emerged, it is now the widely accepted view that "Gerontion" "dramatizes the theory of poetic creation that Eliot was developing at the time of its composition" (Lehman 67; see also Bezel). Even Rick de Villiers, who detects an "undercurrent of personal pain" and finds the biographical background of personal betrayal tempting (56), concludes that "Gerontion" and Eliot's quatrain poems of the same period "exhibit a determination to minimize subjective experience" (56) and thereby "not only represent the concentrated poetic outflow of his most influential theories about art" but "witness Eliot's capacity to compel disparate materials and experiences into a cohesive poetic and moral vision" (70).

There are obvious risks in each of these approaches. The biographical often flirts so closely with the reductive that it becomes a form of tabloid journalism that misses the multiple technical subtleties within Eliot's poetry. The formal, by allowing Eliot's poetry the rare status of being read on the terms it invites, often devolves into mere hagiography and risks whitewashing difficult ethical issues. Both Ozick and de Villiers, from different directions, risk turning the poems into imaginative annotations to the essays. We might ask whether we are prepared to accept, using Michel Leiris's words, such a *riskless* approach on Eliot's part:

Is not what occurs in the domain of style valueless if it remains "aesthetic," anodyne, insignificant, if there is nothing in the fact of writing a work that is equivalent . . . to the bull's keen horn, which alone—by reason of the physical danger it represents—affords the *torero's* art a human reality, prevents it from being no more than the vain grace of a ballerina? (Leiris 154)

Ultimately, both approaches seem willing to ignore Eliot's own insistence on *synthesis*, one of the most obviously recurring features of his critical method in 1919.

As Sanford Schwartz's seminal study of 1985 made clear, Eliot's method was founded on two critiques, of *both* reified subjectivity *and* reified objectivity (174). Perhaps it is the case that Eliot was never successful in achieving this balance, that he was always ultimately with one set of the angels—"The artist's mind is a catalyst; it looks on" (Eliot, "Modern Tendencies" 215)—or that the classical position he took up in the 1920s has come to dominate how we view him. But in the attempt to better understand Eliot's difficulty, or to damn or redeem him, or to damn or save some aesthetic, or even because of the value we tend to place on the prosaic versus the poetic, Eliot's *own* search for balance would appear to have been neglected. One clue to Eliot's intention, at least in 1919, might lie in his repeated use of the language of chemistry throughout that year. Such usage has long been noted (see Whitworth 156–57), particularly his idea that "the mature poet, in the operations of his mind, works like the chemist" (Eliot, "Modern Tendencies" 214). But Eliot's imagery is more specifically related to the processes of industrial chemistry that aim to synthesize new products. Hence the fundamentally *alchemical* leaning of his vocabulary: "crystalline" ("Contemporanea" 720), "derivatives" ("Christopher" 98), "ebullition," "catalysis," "combinations" ("Modern Tendencies" 213, 215, 218), and "transmut[ation]" ("Tradition" 109). There are base metals in the alchemist's search for gold; "platinum" needs the mundane quantities of "oxygen" and "sulphur dioxide" to produce "sulphurous acid" ("Tradition" 108–09); and, "of course, only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to want to escape from these things" (111).

Does then Eliot stand alone in the center of his empty plaza de toros twirling his cape for the appreciation of a small crowd, going through the maneuvers without the threat of being gored? Are we only able to insert the stinking bulk of the toro into the poem by having it summoned, unconsciously, behind the matador's attention? Or are we able to make some synthesis of form and content as Leiris himself proposed:

These images I gathered together, this tone I employed—at the same time that they deepened and sharpened my self-awareness—had to be (unless I failed) what would accord my emotion a better chance of being shared. Similarly, the order of the *corrida* (a rigid framework imposed on an action in which, theatrically, chance must appear to be dominated) is a technique of combat and at the same time a ritual. (Leiris 162–63)

Through the transformational power of frank authenticity, the artist moves beyond the *littérateur*; confession becomes self-definition, becomes socially meaningful through shared communication, becomes political as a form of Sartrean engagement: it reconnects individuals in a modernity marked by alienation (Hand 68).

The central argument of this essay is that “Gerontion” represents a conscious attempt to write such confessional poetry: it aims at synthesis, a means, following Leiris, of introducing at least “the shadow of a bull’s horn into a literary work” (Leiris 154). Not only did Eliot begin “Gerontion” with the call to autobiography—“here I am”—but the poem was tellingly begun as he read *The Education of Henry Adams* (1906), a text to which, as a mark of the complexity of the genre, the publisher of the posthumous trade edition that Eliot reviewed in 1919 added the subtitle *An Autobiography* (1918) (Pilling 18–19). It is a poem that is very firmly in dialogue with its immediate cultural context: Eliot’s old man “bob[s] up” in 1919, unsummoned and unannounced from the depths with a message, just as Joyce’s drowned man in “Telemachus” had done some months earlier with its “puffy face, saltwhite,” announcing its own reemergence from “five fathoms” with the same ghostly phrase: “Here I am” (Joyce, “*Ulysses*: Episode I” 21). My contention is that what Eliot confesses to as he “bob[s] up” is primarily neither sexual nor neurotic, although of course it is also partly both. Nor is it hidden, buried, or in some way anterior to the text. Rather, if we are prepared to take the poem at face value, that is ignore the signposts that aim to lead us out of it, then the key issue is clearly laid out in the opening lines quoted at the beginning of this essay: that is, the difficulty Eliot faced in coming to terms in 1919 with his status as a noncombatant, with the fraught relationship between experience and art, the embodied moment and disembodied reverie, action and inaction, belief and disbelief. The real question ought to be whether, as Leiris anticipated was possible, Eliot “failed,” or whether such failure is imposed on the poem by scholarship that negotiates only with “style.”

The first part of the essay traces the poem’s composition and links manuscript changes to specific biographical and historical events, while the second focuses on a number of image clusters in the poem that deal more specifically with Eliot’s confessional crisis. In the third and final section, I consider how

we might clearly link this analysis to Eliot's critical prose in 1919, showing how the concept of noncombat was a central agonist for his theoretical approach. I conclude that this poem is a "*curriculum mortis*" (Ricks, *T. S. Eliot and Prejudice* 29) that is brutally authentic in its description of the risks of *disengagement*, of becoming painfully cut off from the world. In this sense, attempts to read the poem solely through form serve only to reenact the purgatorial plight that its content warns us against.

FROM "GEROUSIA" TO "GERONTION"

It is a mark of the poem's rootedness in 1919 that it offers us, through recurrent images of heat, a precise representation of the weather as Eliot sat down to write it. April may well be "the cruellest month" (Eliot, "Waste Land" 55), but, according to the *Monthly Weather Report of the Meteorological Office*, May 1919 was indeed a very "dry month" ("Gerontion" 31) with London held in the grip of a historic drought. "Abnormally dry," less rain fell on London that month than it had at any point in the previous forty years (*Monthly Weather Report*). The previous months had amounted to a "dry season" in other ways ("Gerontion" 33). Eliot was advised to rest from all literary work in December 1918. His father died in January, but although Eliot carried forward his ongoing Elizabethan lecture series, he apparently wrote nothing new until March.² Instead, the Eliots spent a good deal of time that spring dealing with the lease on the Marlow house they shared with Russell, "tenants of the house" ("Gerontion" 33) in a ménage à trois to which only astonishing innocence could protect Eliot from awareness of his own cuckolding. He and Vivien had also nursed their charwoman—"our woman," "the sick woman" (*Letters* 335, 324)—back to health from pneumonia, probably the result of the H1N1 influenza pandemic that had swept across England: "The woman keeps the kitchen, makes tea, / Sneezes at evening, poking the peevish gutter" ("Gerontion" 31). By May 14, Eliot, having finished Adams's autobiography, and living in a hotel apart from his wife while their flat was redecorated, was under pressure from both John Rodker and John Quinn for new material for what would become *Ara Vos Prec* and *Poems* (both February 1920). On May 21, he advised Rodker that he may have "new stuff" (*Letters* 352) by the end of June, a poem that was "half-finished" (*Letters* 358) by June 1. By July 9, an early draft of the same poem was sent on request to Hutchinson, with Sidney Schiff, anonymous backer of the recently reformed *Art and Letters*, sending Eliot an analysis of it on July 16. The poem was also possibly shown to Nancy Cunard (Ricks and McCue, "Textual History: 'Gerontion'" 339). Eliot's focus then switched to his critical essays, beginning "Tradition and the Individual Talent" around July 11. By August 6, however, Eliot was asking Hutchinson

for the return of his poem ahead of departure to France for a brief holiday with Ezra Pound. On his return to England at the end of the month, he then finalized a number of changes, telling Edgar Jepson on September 22 that he had two poems he was “working on now” (*Letters* 397), sending one of them, “Gerontion,” on September 28 to Quinn, who had already been alerted to the new poem by Wyndham Lewis (*Letters* 400) who may well have wanted it for the abandoned third edition of *BLAST* (Wood 149–50).

We can then usefully divide the composition of “Gerontion” into three distinct phases. First, an initial constructive process, between April and July 1919, but most probably in the first half of May, led to the poem initially entitled “Gerousia,” the typescript now referred to as “*ts1*.”³ Second, a period of expansion, most probably in June, led to “Gerontion,” the first public manifestation of the poem distributed to a close cohort of readers and resulting in the manuscript “*ts2*” and, possibly, “*ms Cunard*,” an undated copy of the poem in Cunard’s commonplace book.⁴ With *ts2* in his possession as he crossed from Le Havre on August 9 and traveled to Périgueux, Eliot presumably first added lines 69–73, beginning “Gull against the wind” (“Gerontion” 33), to the verso of the second leaf (“*msAdd*”) before allowing Pound to annotate the poem as they traveled through the Dordogne and Corrèze (Crawford 333). Third, a final version of the poem, “*ts3*,” incorporated some final revisions following Eliot’s return to England on August 31. Although subject to numerous minor punctuation changes since, this version is in substance the poem we have today.⁵ But what is particularly notable is how little, with the exception of the “Gull” section, these iterations changed the poem.⁶ Eliot did make small changes to the poem’s physical arrangement, to sentence construction, and to matters of grammar. But the sense of the poem, its “*tone*,” remained principally the same. In particular, Pound’s scribbled comments, his questioning of the opening stanza (“don’t know whether”), his proposed deletions (“Here I am, an”), his sense of being disorientated by the poem’s opening lines (“Being read to? to by”), were largely ignored. The Joycean “here I am” remained. Ultimately, Eliot toyed with the “m” of “Hakagama,” capitalized “horn,” swapped “driven” for “running” and “on the trades” with “by the Trades” (Ricks and McCue, “Textual History: ‘Gerontion’” 339–41), but the original advice of “*il miglior fabbro*” (Eliot, “The Waste Land” 53) was mostly set aside. This was to be Eliot’s own poem, not a collaborative one that followed Pound’s developing method.

Three major changes, one in each phase of composition, are however worth considering as we turn from production to meaning. The first is the change in the title that came early in the drafting process of *ts1*. The Gerousia was a Greek (or, we should note, Jewish) probouleutic and judicial council

of men over the age of sixty. While the "old man" is still recognizably individual in "Gerousia," the change of title has the effect of clearly individuating his neuroses, placing them in a solipsistic landscape that has come unmoored from any social attachment. Gerontion is of the group and from the group, but he is no longer either its emissary or called before it as a witness. I suspect Eliot's title change was part of the broader design of complicating the real and the fictional, the poem's impression "of a particular man about whom nothing further is known, looking back on his past" (Eliot qtd. in Ricks and McCue, "Commentary: 'Gerontion'" 468). But the wider social context, of social trial by elders, was also lost. Although age is a particularly recurrent motif in Eliot's work, by 1919 the satirical edge that had helped blunt the anxiety of premature aging in earlier work appears to have been replaced by deeper wounds. His "feverish" (Lyndall Gordon 134), but ultimately futile, attempt to enlist in the autumn of 1918 led to his telling his father in November that "I feel years older than I did in July!" (*Letters* 289). Indeed, Eliot's attempt to enlist, his repeated insistence that "I at least did my best to get into some service" (*Letters* 301), demonstrates that his prewar thermodynamic references to aging (linked to energy and vitality) became mixed up with a specifically postwar language in which distinctions based on age had been inscribed into English law, ethics, and cultural consciousness by acts of conscription and then of demobilization.

Distinctions based on age during and after the war have typically been given less attention than distinctions based on gender, class, and race (Thacker 8). But the specific and distinctive postwar dimension to the split of old and young was clearly dramatized in *Voices*, the journal launched in January 1919 by the combatant Thomas Moul. Published monthly, the journal was ostensibly open to both modernist abstraction and traditional forms, but the clear bias was against the "ivory towers" of the moderns (Cardus 43). Its central image was of the young returning from a war propagated by the old (Morrisson 408). The first edition opened with Louis Golding's "Voices," a depiction of another disembodied old man speaking empty words to a friend. The second contained Moul's "The Old Men," a poem significantly more savage than Wilfred Owen's well-known "The Parable of the Old Man and the Young" (1920) written the previous year. Moul's poem depicts those who "crowd the brink of the pit, / The old, lascivious men. / With horrible lust in their eyes / And twitching avid senses, thwarted" ("The Old Men" 93). That image immediately suggests a dialogue with Eliot's senseless old man "twitching with rheumatism," lines added to and then dropped from *msAdd* (Ricks and McCue, "Textual History: 'Gerontion'" 341). Gerontion's windy terminus is also summoned up by Moul's "Winds," a poem of "the little old man" to whom the young are "as strange" as "are the winds" (Moul, "Winds" 95), and

Golding's own "Winds" that blow from the "howling North Sea" and drown out "the voice of the old man" (Golding, "Winds" 200). As noncombatants, both Eliot and Gerontion are marked by a very self-conscious awareness of their own literal and metaphoric age, especially as it was constructed by post-war discourse. Neither has experienced combat, they lack the knowledge that might purify their own alleged guilt. We can find echoes of the same trope in Katherine Mansfield's review of Sarah Macnaughton's *My War Experiences in Two Continents* (1919), which followed Eliot's essay "American Literature" in the April edition of the *Athenaeum*. Here, the elderly woman's heroic sacrifice for "those who are broken" was singled out by Mansfield from a narrative in which Macnaughton regretted being forced to leave the world on the wrong terms: "The fires are going out, and I am tired" (qtd. in Mansfield 237). Her "experiences" and specifically the will to action, alongside those within *Voices*, were taunts with which noncombatants were forced to negotiate.

The second change, which occurred between *ts1* and *ts2* was the loss of an epigraph taken from Dante that translated as "how my body stands in the world above, I have no knowledge" (Ricks and McCue, "Commentary: 'Gerontion'" 470). Again, we might speculate that the change reflected its obviousness: it was too direct a signpost to the poem's central nervous system, that is, to the question of knowledge, existential and spiritual, but especially in relation to gnosis, of extreme, mystical, or esoteric experience, of which combat is of course now understood to be exemplary (Campbell). In any case, the surviving Shakespearean epigraph makes much the same point about the uncertain fate of body and soul after death. Mortality was certainly on Eliot's mind in 1919. He told Pound on August 15 in France, "I am afraid of the life after death" (qtd. in Schuchard 119), an emotion that might partly explain the perplexed attitude of his Confucian confessor to *ts2* (see Moody 360–61). Eliot, albeit much later, expanded the fear by claiming it as a "sense of dispossession by the dead," a feeling he encountered before in the rented house at Marlow (Eliot and Haffenden 287). Gerontion is of course haunted by the voices of the literary dead, his language a system of papery allusions, the windy "tenants of the house" ("Gerontion" 33) he has created in his own mind, in turn the smallest unit in a *matryoshkan* structure that begins with the Jew's rented house.⁷ And then there were the physical and emotional dispossessions of the war itself, the death of Jean Verdenal, the nervous breakdown of Eliot's brother-in-law Maurice Haigh-Wood, and the gassing of his cousin at Cantigny. And there were those dispossessions, as Pound's *Homage to Sextus Propertius* (published during the spring and summer of 1919) demonstrated, which are peculiar to martial societies that must insist on the sublimation of all action to the reification of combat, and on the suppression of private fears beneath the mountains of the dead.

Such dispossessions accord with Jane Goldman's reading of the composition of "Tradition and the Individual Talent" amid Europe's memorialization of its returning heroes and its war dead (89). By the early summer of 1919, the delayed mass demobilization of British armed forces was finally underway as three million men, two hundred thousand of them suffering from shell shock, forty-one thousand amputees, three hundred thousand injured in a single limb, sixty-five thousand with a head or eye injury, and eighty-nine thousand with other bodily injuries, returned to England (Bourke 33). The Housing and Town Planning Act of June passed into law Lloyd George's promise to rejuvenate the country's "decayed" housing stock into homes fit for heroes, creating its own brick memorial to suffering and offering us a wider context for Gerontion's obsession with images of housing. That summer contained other more obvious symbols of memorialization: Peace Day celebrations in Paris on July 14, in London on July 19, in Brussels on July 22, and in New York on September 10. Osbert Sitwell renamed London's celebrations "Corpse-Day," setting the unveiling of the plaster and wood prototype of the Cenotaph, the parading of fifteen thousand troops led by the Allied commanders, and the bonfires and fireworks against the grotesque bodies of "Hundreds of men, / Twisted into the likeness of animals / —Writhing men / Without feet, / Without legs, / Without arms, / Without faces— . . ." raining down on the city (10–11). These dead dispossess the living both physically and spiritually; they steal the loved, rob belief, and destroy hope.

The third and final change to examine was the addition of lines 69–73. The important effect of these lines, I propose, was to accentuate the poem's malevolent sense of violence. The central image, of "De Bailhache, Fresca, Mrs. Cammel, whirled / Beyond the circuit of the shuddering Bear / In fractured atoms" ("Gerontion" 33), was present in the poem from its initial drafts. While others have linked these lines to discoveries in physics (see Whitworth), they suggest to me a precise attempt to "formalize," in Sarah Cole's words, the specific nature of war's violence and of the manner in which violence breeds violence (5). And more particularly they attempt to capture the manner in which the Great War can be distinguished in the history of warfare by its invention of techniques of dismemberment capable of complete bodily morcellation (Tate 78). But whereas the early drafts of the poem merely repeat the same construct of anonymous destruction, "We have saved a shilling against oblivion / Even oblivious" (Ricks and McCue, "Textual History: 'Gerontion'" 341), the new lines Eliot added to the poem dramatically bring the simultaneously atomic and cosmic perspective closer, creating an image in which the laws of violence seem impregnated into the currents that circle within the sea and on the air, chthonic and vengeful, acting without ethics, against animal and man equally.

Gerontion's retreat to "a sleepy corner" ("Gerontion" 33), to take shelter from a natural order structured by the mechanization of violence, invokes the concept of brutalization, George Mosse's phrase for the manner in which the apotheosis of the war dead was used to justify an escalation of violence in the postwar world. As "white feathers" are smashed indiscriminately into the "snow" ("Gerontion" 33), that myth, that memorialization process, has been perversely bent by nature itself as justification for its own actions. Indeed, despite its composition being both *postwar* and *intra-peace* negotiations, "Gerontion" was born during a progressive reescalation of violence: the Irish War of Independence (January), the formation of the Italian Fascist Party (February), the Amritsar Massacre in India (April), and war in Afghanistan and Turkey during May, then for most of the year in Eastern Europe. The same was true at a more local level (see Cabanas 172–97; Emsley). Violence was escalating among soldiers waiting to be demobilized in France, by aggrieved veterans on Peace Day, in Belgium against collaborators, throughout Europe against war profiteers and those who were judged to have shirked their part in the conflict, in the press, in the language of the war poets, and in films, of which the hallmark was Abel Gance's *J'Accuse* (April 1919). It is this transformation, the idealization of violence that results from martial society's processes of memorialization, that Eliot's poem almost uniquely captures.

PRESENT PARTICIPLES

This context for the poem, particularly the emphasis on death, suggests an obvious, although little explored, borrowing from Cardinal Newman's *The Dream of Gerontius* (1865).⁸ Newman's poem opens with Gerontius near to death, fearing the afterlife. He awakens during his dream in a confused state, without body; thought alone, he is told, is what blocks the path to God as he is presented to a court of judgment, a demonic Gerousia, before which he loses his sight, forced into realization that his earthly guilt prevents any final beatific vision. The poem ends as his soul is led into a purgatorial night of trial, that intermediate suffering state of the soul, neither yet salvation nor damnation. Gerontion presents himself to us as an exaggerated version of Gerontius, locked into the circularity of thought, fearing the loss not only of sight but of all his senses, that his own vices, which cluster together in the poem's third section as "whispering ambitions," "vanities," "unnatural vices," and "impudent crimes," will prohibit earthly or divine "passion" ("Gerontion" 32). Indeed, what Gerontion's fears amount to are the contents of Gerontius's dream, that failure of synthesis, that purgatorial plight, that neither-nor betwixt life and death, heaven and hell, that intermediate no man's land, that wasteland, which ought to be the prelude to purification but might constitute only "terror in inquisition" ("Gerontion" 32) at the point of revelation.

This identification of Gerontion with Gerontius would have been particularly obvious to Eliot's contemporaries. So popular was Newman's poem and its theme of consolation for those "dispossess[ed] by the dead" that it had been reissued by John Lane during 1916 in a lavish edition illustrated by Stella Langdale. Edward Elgar's choral setting of the poem had also been extensively performed throughout the war. Revived at the Festival Gerontius in May 1916 in the shadow of Verdun, a time when large-scale concerts had all but ceased under threat of zeppelin attack, the piece continued to draw large audiences throughout 1917 and 1918. According to the alto Clara Butt, the principal idea behind the Festival had been to address directly the nation's mourning: "Isn't it time," she asked rhetorically, "that art in England should try to express a new attitude of the English mind towards life after death?" (Crump 201). Accompanied by selections from Elgar's *The Spirit of England* (1915–1917), choral settings of Laurence Binyon's poetry, including the famous lines "They shall grow not old, as we that are left grow old" (Binyon 43), Eliot's "Gerontion" represents the failure to rise to Butt's call to have faith in life or death at a time of mass slaughter. Gerontion's faith is unable to respond to all the evidence of carnage.

This repeated clustering of concerns around the issue of aging points to one of the poem's most remarkable structural features: the manner in which, despite the obvious difficulties, it lends itself to a simple model comprising a small handful of image clusters. *Aging*, for example, is repeatedly set within the spatial context of the *house* (for example, "draughty house" and "window-sill"), of which the wider environmental context is marked by dry rather than monsoonal *winds* ("windy straits," "windy knob," "weave the wind") and a biblical panoply of *animals* ("gull," "spider," "tiger," "goat," "flies"). The narrative presence, like Gerontius in the afterlife, is almost entirely *cephalic* ("think," "think now," "think at last"). There is no body, except one seen in fragments ("weak hands," "knee deep," "caressing hands"), such mutilation, particularly of the hands as the principal organs of touch, being symptomatic of a wider failure of *belief* in all its forms ("Christ," "Judas," "passion," "beauty"). The entire scene is structured by *violence* ("fractured," "blistered," "bitten"), a world experienced as if a *maze* ("circuit," "operations," "wilderness," "deliberations," "passages," "corridors"). There are perhaps other such clusters in the poem that we might extract—images of *eating* ("craving," "devours"), the passage of *place* ("Antwerp," "Limoges") ("Gerontion" 31–33)—but these initial handful of clusters seem to be the main ones in establishing the poem's overall "tone."

The one image that does not readily fit this analysis is that of the “Jew,” or “jew” in the three surviving manuscripts (Ricks and McCue, “Textual History: ‘Gerontion’” 339). There is a theme in the poem related to *mercantilism* (“owner,” “profit”) (“Gerontion” 31, 33) but it is deemphasized by the loss of “saved a shilling” in later drafts. The more obvious context is that of *violence*. Eliot clearly used the word “estaminet,” the “jew’s” ur-site, a French word he may have encountered in André Salmon or Jules Laforgue (Ricks, “*A l’envers ou à Anvers?*”), in its English form. Unlike many of his other linguistic borrowings, here the word is not italicized. Nor is “merds,” we should add, emphasizing that these two words are tokens of a foreign language and culture collected and regurgitated within English, made literal in the poem’s sonic insistence that we pronounce the final of the word’s syllables, “es|tam|i|net,” against the vowels “of Antwerp” (“Gerontion” 31). While not losing the idea that this site might be both a Spenglerian ghetto and a manger, *estaminet* being taken from the Walloon *stamina* (literally a cowshed), it also invokes the site of British wartime male culture, the drinking houses of Ivor Gurney’s “The Estaminet” (1917) that Jonathan Vance has proposed ought, based on soldiers’ own recollections, be considered the central metaphor of the Great War (Vance 79). Such a reading is supported by its location in Antwerp, the site of Macnaughton’s “*experiences*,” of Wyndham Lewis’s *Before Antwerp* (1915) on the front cover of *BLAST 2* (1915), and Ford Madox Ford’s poem “Antwerp” (1915), which Eliot proposed as “the only good poem I have met with on the subject of the war” (Eliot, “Reflections [III]” 610).

Famously “spawned” and “squatting,” the “jew” is also “blistered . . . patched and peeled” (“Gerontion” 31), subject to the poem’s violent substructure, blistering being the result not only of poverty but also of mustard gas. Indeed, as Eliot wrote the poem, the wave of postwar violence in Eastern Europe was acutely centered on the Jewish community with persecution, verging on pogrom, in Lviv and Kielce (November 1918), Minsk (April 1919), and Kiev (June–September 1919). The resultant refugee crisis, coupled to the broader issues of postwar economic reconstruction, the demobilization of soldiers, and the repatriation of prisoners of war, served to demonstrate the inadequacy of local government, forcing an entirely new transnational character onto international law and politics (Cabanas 17–19). Such a redefinition in boundaries is mirrored schematically in Gerontion’s own movement outward from Europe to the tail of the Americas. This Jewish crisis was widely covered in the Western press, and Eliot, in his new role as foreign exchange analyst at Lloyds Bank, would have known of its impact, particularly in Poland. On May 21, as Eliot penned his infamous lines in *tsI*, some fifteen thousand men and women had gathered in Madison Square Garden to protest the pogroms

in Poland; on June 28, as he revised *ts2*, the Little Treaty of Versailles, designed to give some protection to Polish minorities, was signed alongside its more famous sibling; and at much the same time, Henry Morgenthau was appointed to head a commission investigating the Polish atrocities against the Jewish community, a report finally issued shortly after Eliot finished *ts3*. There seems to be little defense against the accusation that Eliot deployed an astonishing racial slur in "Gerontion" for poetic ends. But there is also the suggestion, even if not a redeeming one, that the slur is part of a natural order of institutionalized violence in which the wider Jewish search for a homeland is a microcosm of Europe's deracinated landscape in which all shelter is refused. The racism is neither a slip nor is it hidden: it is sincere, and all the more frightening because of its authentic existence within a discourse that leads to the order and cleanliness of *Lebensraum*. Such a historical reading might propose that Gerontion borrows his "jew" from that other lowercase anti-Semite of 1919, Joyce's Mr. Deasy, who fears "England is in the hands of the jews" (*Ulysses: Episode II* 14). Stephen's response, that mercantilism is the preserve of the "merchant" not of the "jew or gentile," reminds us, as one anonymous writer in the *New Age* proposed at much the same time, of what the anti-Semite's logic hides: "He judges the Jew for his material acquisitions, as though these do not appear to him as well" ("We Jews" 293). Such borrowed anti-Semitism unmasks carnal cravings, monologues of foiled desire.

This inability to act in the shadow of violence, except by propagating more violence, is the very essence of Gerontion's plight. The allusions plundered from the Elizabethans, which try to lead us out of and away from the text, serve only to accentuate that plight: they do not so much engage with tradition as strike us as divisionary tactics. For Gerontion can neither move, fight, believe, conclude, nor love. In contrast, the reader is transformed into the very source of action, attempting to create a narrative, a temporal and spatial context, some linkage between transitions in ideas and stanzas. The recurrence of variants of the present participle, the dominant verb form in the poem, dramatizes this asymmetry between inaction and action: "dreaming," "waiting," "heaving," "poking," "flowering," "caressing," "bowing," "shifting," "whispering," "craving," "shuddering," "running" ("Gerontion" 31–33), and, in earlier versions, "twitching." The present participle is action in process, that intermediate state somewhere between, for example, *wait* and *waited*; it is the suspended moment of space and time, the experiential moment. It actualizes the purgatorial state, it dramatizes suffering, most obviously in the *waiting* to which Samuel Beckett subjects his tramps, forced into the endless nightly re-enactment imposed upon them by form. The form is the plight, and Gerontion's own night of trial offers us an insight into Eliot's life betwixt, as an expatriate in London, as someone committed to art but only outside London's

various cliques, as a part of a failing marriage and possibly an adulterous affair, as someone between a Unitarian upbringing and an Anglican future, between the pacifism of the Garsington society he entered for the first time in May 1919 and the jingoism of the early conscripts, between the agnosticism of Pound's attitude to the War and the decision to fight taken by Ford and Lewis among others. Trapped in the circle of reason, a circle that provides the fuel for its own anxiety, mind becomes separated from the material world of the senses, shrinks further into its shell, the "sleepy corner" of agoraphobia. "Gerontion" is a terrifying poem, charting the ends of asceticism.

That present principle is important in recalling to the poem one further borrowing by Eliot. The poem's attempt to destabilize the structure of the Tennysonian dramatic monologue has been widely discussed (Julius 41–74), although the extent to which Eliot silences the repeated emergence of those tortured voices of Mariana, Tithonus, and Ulysses, wearied souls on the edge of life, alone, close to the edge of sanity, even suicide, which repeatedly puncture the poem's formal plan, is debatable. Eliot repeatedly yoked Tennyson to Walt Whitman in critical conversation, specifically criticizing their shared conservative satisfaction in the world, their "transmuting the real into an ideal" ("Whitman" 877). But Eliot also recognized in Whitman "another vision" beneath the illusions, suggesting a conflict in this literary inheritance, with, on one side, Irving Babbitt's disgust at Whitman's "ordinary desires of the flesh" (877–78), and, on the other, Whitman's powerful influence via American expatriates in France on Laforgue (see Bohan 195–97). It was to Whitman's imagery of "lilacs" and "the mocking-bird" (Eliot, "Whitman" 878) to which Eliot's poetry frequently turned, however, especially in "Ode" (composed 1918–1919 and published in 1920) and sections of *The Waste Land*, both of which bracket the composition of "Gerontion" (see Miller 416–18). And May 1919 marked the centenary of Whitman's birth. That month's issue of *Poetry* was devoted to Whitman and a plethora of essays followed it by, among others, Edward Carpenter, Henry Nevinson, and Padraic Colum. Whitman's presence in "Gerontion" lies in the final two lines of the poem's first stanza, for although the "old man" might well invoke A. C. Benson's *Edward FitzGerald* (1905), it also recalls another noncombatant at time of war, Whitman in "The Wound-Dresser" (1865), one of the poems in the Civil-War-inspired *Drum-Taps* (1865) sequence: "An old man bending I come among new faces" (Whitman 442). But whereas Whitman's use of the present participle is one of human action and external engagement, "bending" he tends and touches the wounded, Eliot's is an inhuman retreat into the self; he has no sensory capability, the repetition at the stanza's close merely pointing us back to its opening and that sterile "waiting." Whitman's poem is focused on caressing the wounds of others, Eliot's poem on analyzing the brutal internal processes of self-immolation.

VERSES VERSUS POETRY

"Gerontion" can then be read as Eliot's attempt to come to terms with his personal experience of the war and its aftermath. While scholarly analysis has focused on Eliot's undeniable literary, philosophical, and religious borrowings, my analysis suggests a much more local framework of reference was *also* in operation. The poem captures an immediate postwar public mood characterized by the divisions between combatants and noncombatants, the sublimation of private emotion to public memorialization, changes in international law and politics, and the acceleration of violence around the world. Privately, it captures how the war was a lightning rod for multiple anxieties, doubts, and negations in relation to ethics, religious belief, and sexual relations. Gerontion has lost contact with everything that connects him to reality in his land of books; tradition—the "half a dozen sources" Eliot boasted of to Hutchinson—are precisely the problem, not the way out. Accordingly, it is difficult to conclude that there is any simple correspondence between Eliot's critical prose at this time and the poem. The two must be in negotiation, not agreement.

A decade later, Eliot would explain that "the War crippled me as it did everyone else; but me chiefly because it was something I was neither honestly in nor honestly out of" (Eliot, Letter to E. M. Forster 573). That "me chiefly" might be insincere, ideological, but either way, this manner of thinking through negatives is particularly revealing. The use of joint denial, the neither-nor construction that asserts that both conjoined propositions in a statement are false, emerged in Eliot's career, as far as I can discover, for the first time in "Gerontion": "I was neither at the hot gates / Nor fought in the warm rain / Nor knee deep in the salt marsh, heaving a cutlass" (31). Reappearing later in the same poem, we find it in *The Waste Land, Ash-Wednesday* (1927–1930), and *Coriolan* (1931–1932) before it became a crucial refrain in the *Four Quartets* (1936–1942). A common element in his private letters and philosophical work, Eliot's critical essays of 1918–1919 feature joint denial some fourteen times, most famously in the opening part of "Tradition and the Individual Talent" and "A Sceptical Patrician," his essay on Adams, a man who "could believe in nothing" (Eliot, "Sceptical" 44). One obvious way to read this device is to make it consistent with the desire of Eliot's personae to structure their worlds using an entelechy built on doubt, indeterminacy, and uncertainty (Sherry 210). In other words, joint denial is the grammatical equivalent of purgatory, entrapment in a "No Man's Land" between unresolved opposites (Leed).

Why did the war have such a profound impact on Eliot, "chiefly"? Of course, he lost people close to him and others he respected, saw war neuroses first hand, hid in cellars from Zeppelin attacks, witnessed the damaging

effects of war shortages and of an unstable peace, saw European politics and ethics implode, and participated in the gradual breakdown of a marriage. But the issue of fighting and nonfighting, being neither in nor out, takes on an extra dimension in his work, at the core of which, I propose, is the manner in which experience works in relation to biography and aesthetics. Despite the obvious classicism of his critical prose, Eliot repeatedly exhibited, at least prior to 1920, a romantic fascination with the manner in which experience “ripen[s]” the poet (Eliot, “Sceptical” 45). In a letter of September 5, 1916, for example, explaining his brother-in-law’s war stories—“the sight of *disjecta membra*” and “nights when he couldn’t sleep in shooting rats with a revolver”—Eliot told Eleanor Hinkley that Haigh-Wood’s experience made him “feel comparatively immature” (*Letters* 162). The opposition of immaturity and maturity, the stratification of society into “the aged,” “the middle-aged,” “the ageing,” and the “present generation” was a constant refrain in his essays of 1918–1920 (Eliot, “Murmuring” 126). In the essay “American Literature,” Eliot concluded that Hawthorne, Poe, and Whitman were ultimately destined to fall short of greatness as a direct result of their paucity of experience:

Their world was thin; it was not corrupt enough. Worst of all it was secondhand; it was not original and self-dependent—it was a shadow. Poe and Whitman, like bulbs in a glass bottle, could only exhaust what was in them. Hawthorne, more tentacular and inquisitive, sucked every actual germ of nourishment out of his granite soil; but the soil was mostly granite. (Eliot, “American Literature” 24)

Gerontion’s own musings on doubt and inaction are remarkable precisely because of their romanticism, the longing for combat that underpins his images of “hot gates,” “warm rain,” the “salt marsh,” and the “cutlass” (“Gerontion” 31), all of which are diametrically opposed to the experience of Flanders itself: mud, sunken archipelagos, and broken trees. Such an idealized landscape invokes the distanced, indecisive gaze of the comfortable middle-class man being read to by his quizzical daughter in the recruitment poster, “Daddy, what did YOU do in the Great War?” (1914–1915). Like its depiction of toy soldiers spread out on the floor, Gerontion’s images of battle are taken from myths, “secondhand” stories he has heard and reconstructed via imagination rather than from experience.

Again, the historicity of the issues at hand here is important. By 1919 “secondhand” or vicarious accounts of the war had been widely subject to challenge by the growth of firsthand accounts that shared certain common characteristics: the direct witnessing of extreme experiences; the attempt to understand highly unusual psychological, physical, and emotional states; a commitment to an unwavering realism in relation to sensory experience; and

an underlying need to confess, despite everything, that "here I am." I would pick out work in three genres that particularly exemplified this elevation of the figure of the "moral witness" to use Jay Winter's term (467): the serialization of Henri Barbusse's *Under Fire* (*Le feu: journal d'une escouade*) beginning in August 1916, the exhibition of Christopher Nevinson's front-line canvases at the Leicester Galleries in September 1916, and the gradual emergence of trench lyrics by Ivor Gurney (1917) and Siegfried Sassoon (1918). If Eliot felt (leaving aside whether that feeling is valid or not) that he needed the "nourishment" of a rich "soil" to avoid inauthenticity, how should the non-combatant poet respond to the emergence of the moral witness as the artistic spokesperson for modernity? How can the poet make universals from seemingly paltry particulars? Eliot was of course professionally concerned with the popularity of a confessional war literature that had made *occasional poets* into writers of *occasional poetry*, especially its support in large parts of the English press. But there was also the aesthetic question of how to reconcile the Aristotelian emphasis on universals with a technological modernity that had made particulars so unique, extreme, and unusual that only a witness seemed able to testify authentically. The problem was a matter of both reception and production.

The central importance of this issue can be found in Eliot's very first article for the *Athenaeum* on April 4, an unsigned review of E. B. Osborn's *The New Elizabethans: A First Selection of the Lives of Young Men Who Have Fallen in the Great War* (1919), a work he had privately termed "a decadent work of sentiment" on March 12 (*Letters* 328). Crucially, this was Eliot's first major essay after his winter sabbatical following his attempt to enlist, his experience of nervous exhaustion, and the death of his father. His central critique of Osborn's anthology was that it contained only sentimental youthful verse, none of "that super-human honesty which is realized only by years of observation and thought and which constitutes the genius of middle age." Here is the kernel of the theory of impersonality, and it arose (again) through the trope of age and in direct opposition to a war fought and then recorded by the "youthful mind" from the "youthful point of view." In opposition to this, Eliot introduced Walter Raleigh, who, "well over forty," "when he had a subject from his own experience, or for the benefit of which he could draw upon his own experience . . . could write without the vices of his age" (Eliot, "New Elizabethans" 11–13). Eliot's proposal was that whereas the modern age might, like that of the Elizabethans, be "corrupt enough" (Eliot, "American Literature" 24) as substrate for poetry, it took the "ripen[ed]" Raleigh to avoid the rhetorical failures of which Osborn's sentiment-laden poets fell victim. This allowed Eliot to link war poetry to Rupert Brooke, Oscar Wilde, and Victorian

idealism, part of a wider history of sentimentalism, that is the doctrine of man's essential goodness within an alien social environment dominated by the mechanical, rationalistic, deterministic, and pragmatic forces of industrialism (Kaplan 1–2). Eliot's move was to make war poetry part of the wider modernist attack on idealism, led most notably by G. E. Moore, and on Victorian hypocrisy, spearheaded by Strachey, Eliot's newest acquaintance of May 1919, in *Eminent Victorians* (1918).

Eliot's denigration of war poetry's literary claims was significantly expanded in the following weeks of 1919. It found its place in a full timeline of tradition, mapped to the "intellectual and emotional debility" of Gray and Goldsmith, through Rogers to Byron (Eliot, "Romantic" 77), and eventually to the "immature" Kipling (Eliot, "Kipling" 35). But it was Brooke, who had existed on the edges of Eliot's previous criticism of the Georgians and had even been allowed "a really amazing felicity and command of language" in 1917 (Eliot, "Reflections [I]" 575), who became the central representative of the modern, "the Rupert Brooke period" (Eliot, "New Elizabethans" 13). John Middleton Murry reinforced the point on May 16 alongside Eliot in the *Athenaeum*, proposing that the driver of the wartime "boom in poetry" was "Brooke becoming a national hero," his "mantle of stars" reconstituting poetry as a form of war work ("Modern Poetry" 325). Although some critics have read modernist antisentimentality as a means of resisting a coercive bourgeois ideology (Greenberg 12–15), we can see here how it was used as an attempt to wrestle the future of poetry from the Georgian versifiers.

The important intent of this theory is clear in Eliot's attempt to obtain a wider audience for his first *Athenaeum* essay. On July 9, he sent it to Quinn for possible inclusion in *Poems*: "I thought that the Elizabethan article would be suitable because of the American interest in War poets" (*Letters* 373). Eliot had singled out "the young American Alan Seeger" in the essay as representative of Osborn's cohort (Eliot, "New Elizabethans" 11). Born in Staten Island, Seeger attended Harvard with Eliot and was killed on the Somme in 1916.⁹ Eliot had reviewed Seeger's poems in the *Egoist* in 1917 and others had already made the link between his romanticism and that of Brooke, both poets becoming popular icons of doomed youth, in Seeger's case after publication of his letters home in the *New York Sun*. Harriet Monroe's *Poetry* had also chosen to single out Seeger, particularly after the death of fellow poet Joyce Kilmer in July 1918 on the Marne: "Death in battle is for a poet an accolade," she wrote, "it ennobles him, gives him a high significance" ("Comment" 32). This publication was followed in December by a tribute to Brooke, Seeger, and Kilmer from Marsden Hartley: "These men will live not by the wondrous achievement that is claimed for them, but by the fixed ardor that was in them

for the ideals of poetry" (Hartley 152). In a review of a collection of soldier's verse, Vachel Lindsay saw in its dialect and colloquial language "a step toward the future idiom" of American poetry (329). What became clear in *Poetry* was the idea that American combatant verse, especially its shift to the particular, the occasional, and the everyday, might be a way forward, not a retrogression to an outdated Victorian ethic. It was such an attitude that Eliot clearly wanted to address.

Eliot was keenly aware of how sensitive this subject was. Throughout this period, phrases such as "last few years" (Eliot, "Brief" 202) or "young writer" ("Reflections [IV]" 66) are used to subtly introduce the "enormous mass of verse" (Eliot, "Brief" 202) of the war. His letters, for example, suggest he planned a follow-up to "The New Elizabethans and the Old," a now lost or abandoned lecture on May 25 on "the younger poets," which he admitted was "a delicate subject" (*Letters* 353). With the country gripped by demobilization and memorialization, it is hardly surprising that Eliot, always guarded in any case, spoke in such a coded manner. But what of Eliot's choice of text for that inaugural *Athenaeum* review? Eliot was probably attracted by the Elizabethan theme, and Osborn was a rival literary editor at the *Morning Post* and had collected other war poets in 1917. But it is an obviously odd and uneven collection in which Osborn's literary judgment is questionable, although its central editorial premise, wholly ignored by Eliot, that in this poetry we can detect a classless "instinct of brotherliness" (Osborn 4), anticipates recent academic work demonstrating the homosocial and homoerotic aspect of much war poetry (see Das). Eliot's choice looks like a straw man: Richard Aldington's *Images of War* had appeared in April 1919 illustrated by Paul Nash, and was followed by Aldington's *Images of Desire* in June. Sassoon's *Picture Show* would also appear in July.

One further clue to Eliot's choice might lie in Murry's influence. A number of articles have traced the origins of Eliot's arguments on impersonality in "Tradition and the Individual Talent" to wider debates in Murry's *Athenaeum* during 1919 (see White). But Murry's seminal July 1918 essay "Mr. Sassoon's War Verses" in the *Nation* was among the first critical voices against the "moral witness," tartly dismissing Sassoon's work as "a cry," as "verses . . . not poetry." Here, Murry proposed "the experiences of battle, awful, inhuman, and intolerable" could only be "comprehended" by an "intellectual remoteness," by the "perspective" that comes from looking on rather than from participation. Such remoteness, he argued, was "the condition in which a mind works as a mind" (Murry, "Mr. Sassoon's" 70, 78). Instead, in May 1919, Murry anointed Jules Romain's *Europe* (1916) as "the tormented cry of the European soul made articulate." It alone avoided "the cries of animal pain" that came from

Sassoon: “The mind stands apart from the event. It alone lends to the event the terror and pity without which it is merely a thing that happens” (Murry, “The Poet” 377). Here is the mind of the poet as “platinum,” that bifurcation of “the man who suffers and the mind which creates” (Eliot, “Tradition” 109), which was so evidentially clear in May 1919 as the wounded returned home. In Osborn’s anthology, Eliot found a model for the “man who suffers” in merely occasional “verse.”

CONCLUSION

To summarize: in the summer of 1919 as he wrote “Gerontion,” a poem that takes inaction in combat as the starting point for its wider analysis of personal failure, Eliot was simultaneously engaged in the critical attempt to define literary taste in poetry in direct opposition to the verses of those moral witnesses who had participated in combat. The central problem, however, is that the “*tone*” of the poem exudes absolute doubt—there is no secure vantage point, even in form—while that of the prose asserts absolute certainty. It might, of course, be possible to argue that by creating the poem “Gerontion,” a poem whose tone and mood captures the spirit of postwar violence and doubt, the poetry “dramatizes” the prose: Gerontion’s musings on combat, the gradual destabilization of his position, might demonstrate that the experience of battle leads only to historical particulars and not to any greater meaning. “Gerontion,” with its entry into tradition, might accordingly be considered a way of using form to order the chaos of experience.

But there is another argument, based on the idea that Eliot was far from certain about his position and ability as a spectator to shape the central event of modernity, that such doubts are manifest in the poem, that he was following Murry’s lead ideologically, believing in the professional challenge but questioning its philosophical basis: was he “ripe” enough having not been at the “hot gates”? I acknowledge that such an argument cuts fully against the grain of contemporary criticism. The divisive nature of the representational boundary between combatant and noncombatant, inscribed as it is with distinctions based on gender, race, and class, has deeply politicized the issue. New Modernist Studies has driven a resurgence of interest in the previously silenced voices of ambulance drivers, nurses, and prisoners of war, challenging “combat gnosticism,” the idea that participation in war represents an order of separate and incommunicable experience (Campbell 203). But there are two issues with this. First, if we allow that “Gerontion” enacts the position of the critical prose, then Gerontion is merely a patsy of some sort, and the poem moves beyond the gnosis of combat to the universal, that is, from verse to poetry. But that would lead to the perverse outcome that the expansion of the

war canon in recent years has been effectively in collusion with Eliot's critical intent; perverse, that is, because Eliot's intent (as it was with the New Critics) was not to *incorporate*, for example, the voices of women, colonial soldiers, and homosexuals, but to *exclude*, to deny that the experience of battle was a fit subject for poetry in the first place. Second, we introduce into the equation Murry's core idea that there must also be a form of *noncombat gnosticism*, whereby representation requires nonparticipation and distance. What might this mean for how the particulars of, for example, something as individual as traumatic experience is represented? How far can the imagination go before authenticity breaks down and leaves only simulacra of trauma, the "*disjecta membra*" crystallized from the spectator's "platinum"?

These questions of the power of the imagination, of the artist's ability to convey vicarious experience, and of the power of the real are central to the modernist project, and they continue to animate studies of literature and life writing today. My contention is that Eliot was alive to these issues. Tellingly, as Eliot reconfigured literary taste in 1919, he did so by replacing one form of gnosis, that of the combatant bearing witness at the coal face of modernity, with another. Tradition, he proposed in July 1919 immediately after the writing of "Gerousia," was "a feeling of profound kinship, or rather of a peculiar personal intimacy, with another, probably a dead author." Once discovered it assured the writer of "an unshakeable confidence," the possession of a "secret knowledge," of "intimacy, with the dead man" (Eliot, "Reflections [IV]" 66). It is telling that one of the books Eliot saw in this review as "conspicuously lacking" in tradition was Read's self-acclaimed "gory war-book," *Naked Warriors*, which Eliot had read on March 26 (*Letters* 329n3). But what is most shocking is the manner in which Eliot implicitly reconfigured one sort of "secret knowledge" with a "dead man," that is, the soldier's encounter with the corpse, into an entirely different encounter, a "personal intimacy" with dead authors. Indeed, in subsequent essays this gnosis, like that of the soldier, enters into its own value system in which there is a payoff for the risk of obtaining such knowledge. For Eliot's tradition "cannot be inherited," it can only be earned "by great labour" (Eliot, "Tradition" 106), restricted to the "very few" (112), perhaps just "two or three" initiates who "actually devote themselves to this pursuit of form for which they have little or no public recognition" (Eliot, "Possibility" 279–80). This is a pure form of *noncombat gnosticism*.

The problem the war posed for Eliot, I would suggest, was that it betrayed his own youthful ambitions. When he left the United States and came to settle within the comparative Edwardian calm of a live European tradition, he was not, as Ozick has suggested, primarily avoiding parental control; he was positioning himself on what he felt was the front line of experience. Had

he stayed in the United States, he feared he would remain another stunted New Englander. But the war had shifted that front line, not just physically but metaphorically, for it signaled that new unimagined and unimaginable extremities of experience might require a new type of literature governed by a new type of narrative consciousness. As the course of twentieth-century literature has developed, as technological modernity has accelerated and late capitalism has expanded across the globe, the figure of the moral witness has become a central, if not the central figure in art, moderating atrocity between the private and public spheres. In this sense, while Eliot might well have captured the modern idiom, he was openly old-fashioned in terms of genre: he was fighting a battle in a war that he feared might already be lost.

NOTES

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1. Here and below, emphasis is in the original unless otherwise indicated.
2. "New Elizabethans and the Old" was begun after March 12 and "Marivaux" after March 29.
3. Typescript names are taken from Christopher Ricks and Jim McCue ("Textual History" 339).
4. Lois Gordon concludes that Eliot and Cunard had a brief affair (35–44), although all Eliot's biographers remain unconvinced. There are good, but seemingly irresolvable, arguments on both sides based on Eliot's repeated use of the figure of "Fresca" and Cunard's response in *Parallax* (1925).
5. This narrative is supported by Lyndall Gordon (533–36), and by Ricks and McCue, although they argue, without support, that Eliot sent a draft of "Gerontion" to Rodker on July 9 ("Commentary: 'Gerontion'" 467). Arguments against Lawrence Rainey's dating of the poem manuscripts to February 1919 (198–99) are set out in Ricks and McCue ("Commentary: 'The Death'" 1180).
6. For the change of "Nature" to "History" see Logenbach (192).
7. On the recurring images of housing in the poem see Brooker (89).
8. Ricks and McCue also suggest this connection ("Commentary: 'Gerontion'" 469).
9. Crawford speculates they were roommates (110–11).

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