

# READING T.S. ELIOT IN OUR IDEOLOGICAL AGE: ALLUSIONS TO CHRISTIAN LITURGY IN *THE WASTE LAND*

J. Rhett Forman

Tarleton State University, Texas (US)

## ABSTRACT

Critics have long engaged in an ideological debate regarding T.S. Eliot's antisemitism, misogyny, and ethnocentrism. While his opponents attack him according to deconstructionist readings, his proponents remain unsure about how to defend his place in literary studies. Upon the centennial of *The Waste Land*, I argue that its opening and closing allusions to Christian liturgical practice in "The Burial of the Dead" and "What the Thunder Said" offer a poetic defense against deconstructionism's literary nihilism, a defense that justifies its place in the next century. Through these allusions, Eliot fashions a poetic ritual that enacts the Biblical and liturgical journey from death into new life, a journey reflected in the poem's images of a barren modernity and its resurrection of tradition.

KEYWORDS: Allusion, Ideology, Christianity, T.S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*.

LEER A T.S. ELIOT EN NUESTRA ÉPOCA IDEOLÓGICA:  
ALUSIONES A LA LITURGIA CRISTIANA EN *LA TIERRA BALDÍA*

## RESUMEN

Durante mucho tiempo, los críticos se han enzarzado en un debate ideológico sobre el antisemitismo, la misoginia y el etnocentrismo de T.S. Eliot. Sus detractores lo atacan según las lecturas deconstruccionistas y sus defensores no saben cómo defender su lugar en los estudios literarios. En el centenario de *La tierra baldía*, alego que sus alusiones iniciales y finales respecto a la práctica litúrgica cristiana en "El entierro de los muertos" y "Lo que dijo el trueno" ofrecen una defensa poética contra el nihilismo literario del deconstruccionismo, una defensa que justifica su lugar en el próximo siglo. A través de estas alusiones, Eliot configura un ritual poético que representa el viaje bíblico y litúrgico de la muerte a la nueva vida, un viaje que se refleja en las imágenes del poema de una modernidad estéril y su resurrección de la tradición.

PALABRAS CLAVE: alusión, ideología, cristianismo, T.S. Eliot, *La tierra baldía*.

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Any treatment of T.S. Eliot seems to require scholars to engage in an ideological debate. They are either on the offensive, attacking him for antisemitism, misogyny, or ethnocentrism, or on the defensive, erecting an Eliot apologetics. To maintain their credibility, the former must still recognize Eliot's prominence because, after all, why else would they deem him worthy of attack? The latter distance themselves from his unseemly prejudices. Both sides must hedge their position.<sup>1</sup> Now we are commemorating the centenary of *The Waste Land* and grappling again with how to justify its enduring attention despite its author's transgressions. We are anxious and dissatisfied because ideological trends can limit our admiration of Eliot or undermine a literary canon that includes him, but they cannot account for why we still read *The Waste Land*, or why we would want to recognize its one hundredth-year anniversary.

To answer those questions, we must examine something more fundamental: the tradition underlying Eliot's work and how the poem conveys that tradition to readers. In *The Waste Land*, the primary vehicle for tradition is allusion. Allusion directly challenges ideology because it suggests that, without a tradition, literature itself would be impossible. Without allusion, no author could write anything. By extension, ideologies that deconstruct the tradition upon which allusions depend render literature impossible. Ideological reading, then, is literary nihilism, against which Eliot's highly allusive *The Waste Land* raises a bulwark. Now that we find ourselves recognizing its centennial amid a climate of battling ideologies that have escaped academia, such a study would assist us in overcoming the ideological debate in which Eliot scholars seem ceaselessly trapped. This paper will examine two allusions to Christian liturgy to demonstrate how the poem frustrates ideological attempts to deconstruct tradition.

Examples abound of the three deconstructionist strains in Eliot criticism, those dissecting his alleged antisemitism, misogyny, and ethnocentrism. Among this crowd, Robert Alter contributed "Eliot, Lawrence & the Jews," which characterizes Eliot as a "Christian conservative militantly defending an ostensibly older idea of European culture" (1970, 81). Alter contends that allusion relates directly to Eliot's "conceptions of European culture" because the "density of discontinuous allusion [in Eliot's verse] ... invoke[s] the whole range of the European cultural tradition in a way that suggests the tradition is at once universal and esoteric, impenetrable to the outsider" (i.e., the Jew) (84). On the centennial of Eliot's birth, however, Alter celebrated him as the "exemplary poetic voice" of modernism, who "succeeded in creating between 1909 and 1922 an iconoclastic poetic idiom that was ... resonant for a new historical era" (1989, 31-32). Anthony Julius revived the topic of Eliot's attitude towards Jews with *T.S. Eliot, Anti-Semitism, and Literary Form* (1995), as did Walter A. Strauss in "The Merchant of Venom? T.S. Eliot and Anti-Semitism" (1997). David M. Thompson carried this subject into the new millennium with

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<sup>1</sup> Examples of this tactic appear in Brooker (2001, xiii), Freedman (2003, 420), Julius (1995, 2), and Strauss (1997, 31-32).



“T.S. Eliot, Anti-Semitism and the Weight of Apologia” (2001, 165-176), followed in 2003 in *Modernism/modernity* with “Eliot and Anti-Semitism: The Ongoing Debate,” which included essays and responses by many critics.<sup>2</sup>

Over the past few years, concerns about Eliot’s misogyny have also escalated. Carrie Rohman accompanied the unveiling of the Eliot-Hale letters with “Severed Tongues: Silencing Intellectual Women” (2020), whereas Frances Dickey gives a balanced overview of the letters in “May the Record Speak: The Correspondence of T.S. Eliot and Emily Hale” (2020). Karen Christensen discusses Emily Hale’s side of the story in “The Love of a Good Woman” (2021). Over the past seven decades, these and other treatments have contributed to understanding Eliot’s life and the images of women and Jews in his verse, and while they may overall reflect the trend of reading through ideological perspectives, a greater understanding of his prosody can better justify readers’ continued interest.

Previous discussions of allusion in *The Waste Land* refrain from defining the term or offering an overview of how readers interpret allusions.<sup>3</sup> The following analysis is based on the understanding of allusion found in Robert Alter’s *The Pleasures of Reading in an Ideological Age* ([1989] 1996) and Ziva Ben-Porat’s “The Poetics of Literary Allusion” (1976). First, readers must distinguish between general and literary allusion. General allusion occurs when a text merely references something outside itself, such as a historical or personal event, a painting, or a sculpture (Ben-Porat 1976, 105). Literary allusion, on the other hand, is a specific type of allusion where one text refers to another: “a device for the simultaneous activation of two texts” (7). Readers move through four stages when they encounter a literary allusion. First, they recognize an allusive marker (Alter 1996, 110). After recognizing one or more of these markers, readers then identify the source text (Ben-Porat 1976, 110). Third, if readers successfully identify the source, then they reinterpret the marker accordingly (Ben-Porat 1976, 111). Finally, readers try to find larger patterns where

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<sup>2</sup> These included Ronald Schuchard, David Bromwich, Ronald Bush, Denis Donoghue, Anthony Julius, James Longenbach, Marjorie Perloff, Jonathan Freedman, Bryan Cheyette, and Ranen Omer-Sherman.

<sup>3</sup> Recent contributions include Olga Ushakova’s “Wagnerian Contexts and Wagner’s Codes of T.S. Eliot’s Poetry, 1910-20s,” which traces Wagnerian plots, “music techniques,” and direct citations (2021, 267). Adrian Paterson also examines Wagner in *The Waste Land for The Edinburgh Companion to T.S. Eliot and the Arts* (2016). In response to Grover Smith’s *Eliot’s Poetry and Plays* (1956), Lawrence Rainey’s *The Annotated Waste Land* (2006), and Christopher Ricks and Jim McCue’s *The Poems of T.S. Eliot* (2015), Thomas Gordon-Colebrooke recommends classical sources for the “What the Thunder Said” (2019, 113-115). Dídac Llorens-Cubedo’s “T.S. Eliot in the Art of R.B. Kitaj” (2019) examines how *The Waste Land* inspired R.B. Kitaj’s use of allusion in his visual art, while also commenting upon how the Jewish artist dealt with antisemitism. Kate Pfeffer’s “T.S. Eliot’s Tea Time Allusions” compares Eliot’s allusions to Carroll across his works (2014), and Han-Mook Lee has written extensively on Biblical allusions (2010; 2004). Like this study, Viorica Patea’s “T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* and the Poetics of the Mythical Method” refutes certain ideological tendencies, revealing instead “mythical and allusive strategies” that “attempt to enact psychological conflicts and processes of consciousness” and “bring forth the common language of Eastern and Western spirituality” (2007, 93).



the text they are reading interacts with the source (Ben-Porat 1976, 111). If the alluding text “is a reconstruction or a rewriting” of a previous text, then its allusions are metonymic (Ben-Porat 1976, 117; Alter 1996, 132). Alternatively, if the alluding text –like *The Waste Land*– is similar to a source only in certain respects, then its allusions are metaphoric (Alter 1996, 131-132).

A pair of allusions in *The Waste Land* from the Christian liturgical tradition shows how this framework offers a non-ideological understanding and appreciation of the poem, substantiating its merit as its second century begins. In the first step, readers recognize the title of the opening section as an allusive marker. Specifically, “The Burial of the Dead” cites the Christian liturgical service whose full name in the 1662 Anglican Book of Common Prayer is “The Order for the Burial of the Dead” (Eliot 2015, 55; 1762). As for the second step of identifying the source text, the Church of England used this edition from 1662 until 1928 (after *The Waste Land*’s publication), so Eliot could reasonably assume that almost all of his audience would identify the source of the allusion from their participation in the centuries-old service. Referring to such a widely-known text ensures from the outset that readers find themselves in familiar territory and that they can confidently rely upon their own “cultural literacy” to guide them through the maze of allusions to come, even if this turns out to be a false confidence (Alter 1996, 119).

Regarding the third step of interpreting the reference according to its source, readers have four options. “The Burial of the Dead” is itself a small, limited phrase. Eliot does not quote the entire liturgy. So, readers can easily eliminate at least two options: the marker is not large and extensive with limited, local significance, nor is it repeated numerous times as a refrain (Alter 1996, 124-129). Therefore, as a small marker, “The Burial of the Dead” either maintains a significance across the entire *Waste Land*, or it is only significant in its immediate vicinity. Readers’ assessment of these two possibilities must be ongoing. They must interpret section one according to the allusion, and they must keep it in mind as they read the other four sections in order to determine if its significance pervades the entire work.

As for its local significance, images of the dead abound in the first section. The rather crude word “breeding” in the first line is immediately undermined with “dead land” in the second (Eliot 2015, 55). Such contradictions continue throughout the opening lines, which contrast past “memory” and future “desire,” “dull roots” from below and “spring rain” from above, “winter” and “warm,” “earth” and “snow,” “little life” and “dried tubers” (55). This catalogue extends the idea of burial or *interment* –literally *into earth*– into the opening of the section where the once dead earth begins to sprout life in the cruel month of April. The primary perspective of this catalogue is from underground since spring arrives first at the roots. After only seven lines, then, readers begin to see the local significance of the allusion and to assess it according to the fourth stage, namely, the pattern that exists across *The Waste Land* and the Book of Common Prayer’s “Order for the Burial of the Dead.”

At first, readers have two choices for characterizing this pattern. If it is metonymic, then the entirety of *The Waste Land* must reproduce the liturgical service. If it is metaphoric, then only certain points of similarity must exist between the two. Since *The Waste Land* alludes to far more than “The Order for the Burial of the



Dead,” readers can dismiss metonymy. In other words, the volume of allusions in the work implies that they are metaphorical. Readers assume that partial similarities and not complete congruencies exist between *The Waste Land* and its many source texts. Therefore, knowing that “The Burial of the Dead” metaphorically alludes to an Anglican service, readers need only determine what sort of consonance or dissonance operates between them. Of course, if the relationship were completely consonant, then *The Waste Land* would reproduce verbatim “The Order for the Burial of the Dead.” Some degree of playfulness or tension must therefore exist between Eliot’s “The Burial of the Dead” and the Anglican order.

Returning to the catalogue of contrasts in the opening verses, readers with the Anglican liturgy in mind recognize a playful consonance between this part of *The Waste Land* and the burial service. From the outset, the liturgy overwhelmingly emphasizes the body’s eventual resurrection and eternal life. The priest and clerks first process before the corpse, singing Jesus’ words from The Gospel According to St. John 2: 25-26: “I Am the resurrection and the life, saith the Lord: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: and whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die” (1762).<sup>4</sup> This emphasis on the resurrection continues throughout the service, culminating in the lesson from the First Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians, 15: 20: “Now is Christ risen from the dead, and become the first-fruits of them that slept. For since by man came death, by man came also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive” (1762). First Corinthians continues with “for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality” (15: 52-53 [KJV]). Afterward, the liturgy concludes at the graveside with a collect (emphasis on the first syllable) that reiterates the overall purpose of the service: “O Merciful God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who is the resurrection and the life; in whom whosoever believeth shall live, though he die.: We meekly beseech thee, O Father, to raise us from the death of sin unto the life of righteousness...” (1762). Though called “The Order for the Burial of the Dead,” then, the service defiantly emphasizes life and resurrection over death and decay.

The opening lines of *The Waste Land* playfully reverse this emphasis. Like any participant in the liturgy, Eliot must have recognized its paradox of sorrow and joy: the sorrow at a loved one’s death but joy at an eventual salvation. Paul’s first letter to the Thessalonians attests to this experience in a passage often used in Christian burial liturgies: “But I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning them which are asleep, that ye sorrow not, even as others which have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will

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<sup>4</sup> In traditional Christianity, the terms “body” and “corpse” are not synonymous. “Body” refers to the entirety of a person, not just some material aspect (i.e., a “corpse”). The clergy process before the material corpse only, not the body, which Christians believe will be resurrected.





God bring with him” (4: 13-14 [KJV]).<sup>5</sup> Like Paul’s admonition not to wallow in sorrow, *The Waste Land* explores the possibility of life’s renewal despite extending the imagery of “the burial” and “the dead” across the opening lines. Eliot borrows this insistence on the necessity of death for resurrection from another of Paul’s epistles: “Know ye not, that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into his death? Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life” (Romans 6: 4 [KJV]). Here Paul refers to a death “unto sin” to accomplish a life “unto God” (Romans 6: 11 [KJV]). Therefore, the consonance between *The Waste Land*’s opening section and the Anglican liturgy invites readers to consider the relationship between Eliot’s work and the epistles of Paul. Accordingly, they can interpret “The Burial of the Dead” as an exploration of the death “unto sin” that prepares the saved for eventual resurrection.

Because death is required for new life, the speaker fears the “cruellest month” of April when Easter commemorates Christ’s triumph over death (Eliot 2015, 55). This month breeds “[l]ilacs out of the dead land” (55). In Eastern Christianity, lilacs commemorate Christ’s resurrection, since their Greek name “paschalia” refers to the feast of Passover (“Pascha”) during which Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection occurred (“Easter” is called “Pascha” in Eastern Christianity). However, with its attention to death, the more operative image in “The Burial of Dead” is Christ’s Good Friday crucifixion rather than his Easter Sunday resurrection. The opening speaker fondly remembers winter as a time for “forgetful snow,” as opposed to a spring full of dreadful “[m]emory” (55). Here the word “[m]emory” prompts readers who recognize the “Burial of the Dead” allusion to recall that the most important event memorialized in April is Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection. Unlike Eliot’s poem, the liturgy recalls this event as joyous rather than cruel.

In addition, at the center of the Christian liturgy lies the Eucharist, the sacrifice of bread and wine that Jesus commanded his disciples to make “in remembrance” of him (Luke 22: 10; 1 Corinthians 11: 24-25 [KJV]). As the quintessential memory of Christianity, this sacrifice must occur to any reader who has participated in the Anglican rite. However, Eliot’s opening speaker fears the cruelty of April, that is, the pain of a death “unto sin,” even though this death is necessary for new life. This section thus emphasizes the loss and suffering that precedes the Eucharist’s eventual promise of joy, salvation, and thanksgiving (“Eucharist” is usually translated from Greek as “thanksgiving;” more literally, “good grace”). By exploring the death requisite for renewal, this section enhances readers’ understanding of the sacrifice at the heart of Christian worship, an understanding established by the “Burial of the Dead” allusion.

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<sup>5</sup> Following Paul, the death of a Christian is often referred to as “falling asleep in the Lord,” implying that the resurrection is a kind of waking up. 1 Thessalonians, chapter 4 does not appear in the Anglican “Order for the Burial of the Dead,” but it does appear in Roman Catholic and Western Rite Orthodox requiem masses and in the Greek Orthodox funeral service.

This allusion primes readers to notice additional references to death in the section, including those to Ezekiel (Eliot 2015, 55). Eliot's notes only cite Ezekiel 2: 1 for the term "Son of Man": "And he said unto me, Son of man, stand upon thy feet, and I will speak unto thee. And the spirit entered into me when he spake unto me... And he said unto me, Son of man, I send thee to the children of Israel, to a rebellious nation" (2: 1-3 [KJV]). However, Eliot's "What are the roots that clutch" alludes to Ezekiel 17:

Say thou, Thus saith the Lord God; Shall it prosper? shall he not pull up the roots thereof, and cut off the fruit thereof, that it wither? it shall wither in all the leaves of her spring, even without great power or many people to pluck it up by the roots thereof. Yea, behold, being planted, shall it prosper? shall it not utterly wither, when the east wind toucheth it? it shall wither in the furrows where it grew. (17: 9-10 [KJV])

In addition, Ezekiel 37 reads,

And he said unto me, Son of man, can these bones live? And I answered, O Lord God, thou knowest. Again he said unto me, Prophecy upon these bones, and say unto them, O ye dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. Thus said the Lord God unto these bones; Behold, I will cause breath to enter into you, and ye shall live. (37: 3-5 [KJV])

Taken together, these allusions demonstrate how *The Waste Land* reflects the narrative arc of the Book of Ezekiel. First, at 2: 1-3, God inspires Ezekiel with prophetic vision. In section one's Ezekiel allusions, readers initially recognize a voice presaging death. Next, in chapter seventeen, Ezekiel prophesies Israel's destruction and Babylonian captivity as punishment for disobeying God. This punishment instantiates the death "unto sin" mentioned in the Anglican "Order for the Burial of the Dead" and Paul's letters. Finally, while this opening section of *The Waste Land* emphasizes death in contrast to the Anglican rite's insistence on resurrection, the promise of new life appears in Ezekiel 37, which describes the kind of resurrection declared by the liturgy. In a playful treatment of the Christian burial ritual, Eliot's verse expresses the hesitancy and fear of approaching the death that is necessary for new life, though the assurance of that life lies hidden in the allusions themselves.

These images culminate in the final verses with "A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many / I had not thought death had undone so many," a citation from Dante's *Inferno*, book 3, 55-57 (Eliot, 2015, 57). Again, the allusion playfully departs from its source text, since the crowd refers to living London commuters, not to shades in Limbo. In fact, some readers—the very same who grew up occasionally attending liturgies for the burial of the dead—might themselves be commuters in a modern Western city. In other words, this allusion describes the living as dead, a group with whom at least some readers may identify. Associating this Dantescan imagery with "The Order for the Burial of the Dead," Eliot then delivers another liturgical allusion: "That corpse you planted last year in your garden, / Has it begun to sprout? Will it bloom this year?" (57). Ricks and McCue suggest that these lines



may allude to Paul's first letter to the Corinthians: "Thou fool, that which thou sowest, is not quickened except it die. And that which thou sowest, thou sowest not that body that shall be, but bare grain..." (15: 36-37 [KJV]). The Anglican "Order for the Burial of the Dead" includes this passage, which resonates with the prophecy of resurrection in Ezekiel 37. In conjunction with both the "Burial of the Dead" and Ezekiel allusions, then, the Dante imagery places readers not in the position of living mourners attending a funeral, but in the position of the dead.

Given the way in which section one plays with its opening allusion, readers may realize that "The Burial of the Dead" does not merely allude to another literary text, but that it references a ritual. The Book of Common Prayer's liturgical services are not meant to be read. They are meant to be performed and enacted. Section one inverts the reader's typical role in this ritual. On the one hand, it is a ritual that makes its participants fearful and anxious because they must abandon their comfortable existence within a winter that "kept [them] warm" under a cozy blanket of "forgetful snow" (Eliot 2015, 55). On the other, after facing the kind of death "unto sin" at the forefront of the "Burial of the Dead" ritual, participants will receive new life. This life eventually reaches the "dried tubers" under the "dead land" or the "crowd [flowing] over London Bridge," a crowd whom Eliot identifies with both himself and his readers in the Baudelaire allusion "mon semblable – mon frère!" (57). As in the Anglican rite, *The Waste Land's* allusions suggest that readers are not participating as mere spectators, but as the dead themselves.

Instead of finding comfort in an easy, lifeless winter, "The Burial of the Dead" thrusts readers' frightening death upon them. After all, Christians perform "The Order for the Burial of the Dead" primarily for the sake of the deceased. Like Donne's "never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee," Eliot's "The Burial of the Dead" reflects the ritual back upon his readers (1975, 87). In this section, they repeatedly find references to life and resurrection alongside weightier images of death. Those who recognize "The Burial of the Dead" as an allusion detect that the first section does not omit the liturgical theme of life and resurrection, but they may notice how Eliot emphasizes the fact that death is required for this new life by placing his audience in the role of those being buried.

Readers may conclude that the small "Burial of the Dead" allusion maintains its significance across section one and that it playfully accords with the source text without simply repeating it. Whether such significance emerges throughout the entire poem readers will only learn after they have read all five sections, but a tentative resolution lies in *The Waste Land's* closing words, "Shantih shantih shantih," along with Eliot's corresponding note (Eliot 2015, 71). This allusion is certainly more difficult for Eliot's Anglican, Christian readers to recognize than "The Burial of the Dead," but Eliot's note explains it as "a formal ending to an Upanishad" (77). In their source context, these words constitute a prayer of peace at the end of a ritual or lesson. Eliot further mentions that "'The Peace which passeth understanding' is our equivalent to this word" (77). Christian liturgies use these words in their closing benediction, borrowed from St. Paul's Epistle to the Philippians: "And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus" (4: 7 [KJV]). Therefore, "Shantih shantih shantih" alludes directly to



the ending of an Upanishad and indirectly to both Christian liturgy and another of Paul's letters.

Interestingly, Eliot's phrase "our equivalent" reveals that he is confident in his readers' knowledge of the liturgy. The significance of Eliot's note to "Shantih shantih shantih" and his allusion to "The Order for the Burial of the Dead" depend upon this confidence. The simple pronoun "our" betrays the fact that people who have participated in the Christian rituals referred to in *The Waste Land* are its immediate audience, and Eliot includes himself in this group. Again, in recognizing allusions to its religious rituals, such an audience may understand the poem itself as a ritual. As yet another liturgical allusion, "Shantih shantih shantih" certainly resonates with "The Burial of the Dead." Since they connect the beginning and end of *The Waste Land*, readers may safely assume that this closing has a global significance within the work. In fact, what Eliot's note omits is the fact that the "Shantih shantih shantih" prayer may also be recited in preparation at the beginning of a ritual. *The Waste Land's* concluding allusion, therefore, marks both the beginning and end of something, harkening back to the beginning of the poem itself. In the same way, the Anglican liturgy closes with a benediction that alludes to yet another of Paul's letters, Second Corinthians: "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and fellowship of the Holy Ghost, be with us all evermore. Amen" (1762; cf. 13: 14 [KJV]). Both this allusion and "Shantih shantih shantih" imply that the end of *The Waste Land* dismisses its readers into a new life of peace and unity with the divine.<sup>6</sup>

Considering this liturgical connection, "Shantih shantih shantih" emits the same consonant tone as the "Burial of the Dead" allusion. As dead as the modernity depicted in the poem may be, it still insists on renewal and closes with the resolution of peace. Given that "Shantih shantih shantih" and "The Peace which passeth understanding" both appear in performed liturgies, readers may conclude that they are not merely reading a work of literature, nor are these allusions merely literary: they are participants in a ritual wherein the author is a kind of priest or prayer leader. As with the Christian priest in "The Order of the Burial of the Dead," the author is not the source of peace, but he points the way to the source. Like a liturgical service, Eliot's *The Waste Land* is not merely the product of an individual personality. It is a rite aimed at a peace that "passes all understanding." Mere human understanding cannot encompass or create such a peace. In other words, the peace that "Shantih" denotes cannot be discursively contained. It can only be poetically and ritually experienced.

This ritualization of poetry accords well with Eliot's insistence on its impersonality in "Tradition and the Individual Talent" ([1919] 1975). While the author alone can undertake the "great labour" necessary to "obtain" tradition

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<sup>6</sup> The Latin term "mass" refers to such a dismissal, though of course the Anglican *Book of Common Prayer* does not include this remnant from Roman Catholicism. The term does, however, appear in the Western Rite masses of Eastern Orthodoxy (the liturgies of Tikhon and Gregory) but not in its Eastern divine liturgies of John Chrysostom, Basil, and James.



and “sweat for it,” he “[continually surrenders] himself” in an “extinction of personality” (38-40). To use the term Eliot borrows from Aristotle, this “process of depersonalization” belongs to the author’s mind (νοῦς; nous) (40-43). The artistic creation comes after the non-deliberative “receptacle ... [of the mind seizes and stores] up numberless feelings, phrases, images, which remain there until all the particles which can unite to form a new compound are present together” (41-43). Despite the activity necessary for developing a “historical sense” out of tradition, because the mind is a “receptacle,” the author is a “medium” or “catalyst” of the “emotions and feelings” that result in the art. This catalyst –the author– remains absent from the final product (38-41). This product is a “concentration which does not happen consciously or of deliberation” (43). In other words, the poem is not the expression of a single consciousness or personality. It is also not the result of deliberation or reason, though conscious deliberation may be necessary for crafting a poem (43). In offering an “escape from emotion” and “personality,” the poem is a practice in self-denial belonging to the mind, the location of the divine (θεϊότερόν from Greek θεός or *theos*, meaning *god*) in the human (43).

Read in this way, *The Waste Land*’s allusions emanate from a process of self-denial with its seat in the poet’s mind. Being inalienable from the poet, this mind does not belong to the poem. As the part of the poet responsible for the poem, the mind remains with the author and is not transmitted to the reader. Lacking the poet’s mind, the poem must be “impersonal,” its “emotion [must] have its life in the poem and not in the history of the poet” (44). These allusions are the very combinations, the new substances, of the “feelings, phrases, images” that the author’s mind received. In constituting the poem, they are the active agents that must “[readjust] the relations, proportions, values of each [new and preceding] work of art toward the whole” (38). And they enable the receiving mind of the reader to participate in such a tradition.<sup>7</sup>

In ritualizing the tradition at the source of its allusions, *The Waste Land* initiates readers in a practice or rite. By contrast, deconstructive readings that undermine this tradition desecrate this ritual and repudiate on divisive, partisan grounds the possibility of renewal alluded to at the close of the poem. It is this very modern destruction that *The Waste Land* guards against. Allusion, therefore, counterbalances deconstructionism since they serve contrary purposes. On the one hand, allusion enables literature itself since “[a]ll that we have of literature builds on literature that precedes it” (Alter 1996, 113). If we admit this premise, then we must also accept that literature is fundamentally allusive. On the other hand, in rejecting tradition on the grounds that it is inherently prejudiced, deconstructionists undermine the very thing that makes literature possible.

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<sup>7</sup> Ezekiel’s mind or Greek νοῦς is what receives “the spirit” responsible for his prophetic visions in 2: 1-2, the section Eliot cites. That Eliot understood Ezekiel’s prophetic gift as akin to his poetic gift is a topic for another occasion, a topic suggested by his reticence in “Tradition and the Individual Talent”: “This essay proposes to halt at the frontiers of metaphysics or mysticism, and confine itself to such practical conclusions as can be applied by the responsible person interested in poetry” ([1919] 1975, 43).



In *The Waste Land*'s first century, some critics have enjoyed discovering what they themselves have projected onto the tradition behind its allusions. They have assumed that this tradition is inherently bigoted and then congratulated themselves when they have confirmed their bias. Their literary nihilism has said much about why we should not read Eliot and about the demerits of his life and work. But they have subverted what *The Waste Land* emerged from –the literature underlying its allusions. They have ignored why and how it came to be: as an imitation, adaptation, and response to other works. They have ignored why readers admire it: as a novel and exciting response to texts, events, and rituals that readers recognize from their own experiences. In the poem's second century, we need not sustain this ideological debate by defending Eliot. Traditions can be both ideologically problematic and artistically significant. To combat ideological reading, we should not erect ideological defenses. Rather, we ought to do what the poem asks of us: to gain an understanding of the tradition behind it.

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