

**Throbbing Between Two Lives:
Tiresias and Elegiac Gender in T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land***

In his notes to *The Waste Land*, T. S. Eliot remarks upon the figure of Tiresias as one that unites all other personages in the poem, a kind of nodal point at which the various voices and psyches of Eliot's "rhythmical grumbling" merge.¹ "Just as the one-eyed merchant, seller of currants, melts into the Phoenician Sailor, and the latter is not wholly distinct from Ferdinand Prince of Naples," he states, "so all the women are one woman, and the two sexes meet in Tiresias."²

The idea of the confluence of male and female in the person of Tiresias derives its origin from Greek mythology. Ovid, in Book III of *The Metamorphoses*, tells the story of how Tiresias came to be transformed into a woman through a mysterious incident involving two snakes in the act of copulation:

One day while walking through a green-grown wood
He thrust his stick between two monstrously
Large and love-joined serpents (and the, O mir-
Acle!) was changed into a woman, and as
A woman lived for seven autumns.³

Eliot gives this ancient mythological tale of transvestism a subtle twist. In *The Waste Land*, Tiresias is described as an "old man with wrinkled female breasts," who is "throbbing between two lives."⁴ While it is true that in most versions of the myth Tiresias inhabits a woman's body for a time, he later regains his masculine form: at no time in the original myth is he the distinctly hermaphroditic entity of Eliot's depiction. Tiresias's androgyny, then, is an invention of Eliot himself, one which is painstakingly and persistently developed through the entire poem.

The passage quoted at the beginning of this essay articulates a principle of fusion which operates throughout *The Waste Land*. It is a principle which involves the conflicting and conflating of gender boundaries, and the androgyny of Eliot's Tiresias is its most poignant embodiment. But the melting away of boundaries among the characters and speakers in the poem performs more than a structural or thematic function. Indeed, Tiresias' liminal condition, like so many of Eliot's allusions, reverberates beyond the text onto a larger literary and historical landscape. A detailed exploration of this landscape involves not only literary analysis but the comprehensive reconsideration of the state of Western consciousness at the time of the poem's composition, including an examination of the collapse of existing gendered modes for the experience and representation of death. Approaching the figure of Tiresias from the perspective of the elegy, this essay proposes that the double-gender of the mythical blind seer forms a key site within which to unearth some of the originary impulses of Eliot's elegiac project: the representation of a crisis in elegiac subjecthood which arose in the wake of the Great War.

That Eliot's poem can be regarded in the light of an elegy has been discussed by many critics, including Jahan Ramazani. In the brilliant introduction to his book, *Poetry of Mourning*, he announces:

While the poem owes much to quest romance, epic, and other genres, it can be read as a convert elegy, whether for Eliot's friend Jean Verdenal "mort aux Dardanelles," for Eliot's father who died in 1919, for the recent carnage of the Great War, for Western civilization, or for all of these losses. In any case, it borrows substantially from the repertoire of elegy. [...] [T]he poem's elegiac cues include the poetic burial of the dead, the pathetic fallacy of the seasons, the

fertility gods, the trope of the river, the recognition of the corpse, the mourner's chaste withdrawal from desire, the dismissal of female figures, the multiple dramatic voices, and the elegiac coda in which the poet reviews the work of mourning he has just completed.⁵

While it may be debated to what degree “the mourner’s chaste withdrawal from desire” and, more importantly, “the dismissal of female figures” take place within the poem, Ramazani makes it clear that *The Waste Land* is a work of elegiac dimensions. The puzzle lies, as he indicates in his catalog of “losses,” in the fact that it is well-nigh impossible to pin down precisely who or what is being mourned. In fact, examining the comprehensive and diffusive nature of both the subject and object of mourning seems more rewarding than any linear, simplistic attempt at identifying them. In this respect, the character of Tiresias, in whom their diverse trajectories allegedly intersect, can be a fertile point of departure.

Tiresias’s androgyny is defined not only through such isolated moments of direct explication as is quoted at the opening of this essay, but also through an intricate network of associations which begins even before the first lines of the poem proper. In the introductory epigraph, the figure of the Sybil, whose prolonged existence and power of prophecy mirror Tiresias’, anticipates the introduction of the blind seer and establishes from the outset the resonance of femininity in the portrayal of Tiresias. Tony Pinkney, in his psychoanalytic exploration of the role of women in Eliot’s poetry, points to two factors in the allusion to the Sybil that come to be bound up with Tiresias’s androgynous multi-consciousness: her old age and her oracular gift. Tiresias is an “old man with wrinkled dug” who, “though blind [...] can see.”⁶ His body has shriveled up with the years, and his physical hermaphroditism sits like a sterile and ineffective burden upon him. At the same time, his power of prophecy—or more

accurately, his power of vicarious experience, within the context of *The Waste Land*—keeps him rehashing the experiences of youth, specifically the emotionally bankrupt sexual experiences of youth that the poem so starkly represents.

From the mythological account of his life, we know that Tiresias' acquisition of the gift of foresight was itself occasioned by an event inextricably linked with the problem of sexuality. It is a well-known tale: one day, Jove and Juno come to a dispute about whether it is the woman or the man who takes more pleasure in the sexual act. Unable to settle the question, they turn to Tiresias for the answer, appealing to his unique authority as someone who has had the experience of both sexes. When he answers that women have more pleasure, Juno becomes enraged and blinds him in revenge. However, Jove, who finds the answer entirely satisfactory, bestows on him the power of prophecy, the sight beyond sight, in compensation.

The underlying tensions of the story are quite remarkable. First of all, we must consider the symbolic significance of Tiresias' response. In order to substantiate Jove's side of the argument, Tiresias draws on his own experience of womanhood; that is, he brings his feminine subjecthood to bear on an act which in the end amounts to upholding the law of the father. But the substance of his answer, namely that "women have more joy in making love than men," is one that repudiates the prescribed gender roles of patriarchal culture. In supporting masculine authority, Tiresias subverts the conventional patriarchal framework according to which activity is assigned to men and passivity to the "weaker" sex.

As a second point of tension, we can look to the idea of the replacement of actual sight by the capacity for foresight. Here, it is pertinent to note that this power of prophecy is codified by Eliot as a kind of surrogate position. According to *The Waste Land*, the extraordinariness of Tiresias's faculty resides more in the fact that he can project himself into various other subjects

outside himself and “suffer” their experiences as his own. His blindness goes hand in hand with his powers of “seeing”: having delivered the wisdom of his experience, he is deprived of his capacity for firsthand experience and consequently relegated to vicarious subjecthood. In the sense that it renders him ineffectual or even obsolete as regards his own physical experiences, his blindness is a counterpart for his aged and depleted body, with its “wrinkled female breasts.”

What such undercurrents of tension reveal is that Tiresias’s double-sexed consciousness, far from being a marker of privilege, is a space fraught with the anxieties of loss and subversion, as well as the troubled negotiation of identities and positions. The stakes involved are high: both gender and experience, and the *gendered experience* which patriarchal culture produces in its inhabitants, are on the line.

In her study of the dynamic between the feminine and the masculine in *The Waste Land*, Christine Froula discerns two selves who struggle with and against each other: the Lover, “the passionate, remembering, desiring self,” and the Police, who represents “the patriarchal social law” of cultural masculinity. The initial relationship between the two selves Froula defines in Lacanian terms: the Police enforces “the law of the father,” and seeks to repress the Lover, the “part of [the poem’s speaker] which vestigially identifies with the mother/woman with whom he was completely merged”:

By the lights of the Police, the unworthy Lover must be suppressed, downed, so that the modern poet can abandon his former sins, amend his life—so that he can, in other words, fashion himself the inheritor not only of Dante’s poetic authority but of the Christian epic poet’s moral authority.⁷

If what is taking place in Eliot’s poem is a clash between the dual selves of the Police and the Lover, the text becomes the locus of tensions arising from variant and *gendered* subject

positions; the masculine self and the feminine self, as influenced by the experiences of early sexual development, are in dynamic conflict within the multifaceted persona of *The Waste Land*. In order to pursue the implications of the poem's uneasy combination of gendered elements as it related to the figure of Tiresias, we need to transpose the framework of this conflict onto the context of the elegy. What precisely is at stake in this struggle between the male and female voices in terms of Eliot's elegiac project?

Taking *The Waste Land* to be a form of elegy, the "inheriting of poetic authority" mentioned above assumes a vital significance in the discussion of the inter-relationship between the male and the female. As Celeste Schenck explains:

The funeral elegy is, from its inception in the poetry of Theocritus and his followers, Bion and Moschus, a resolutely patriarchal genre: a song sung over the bier of a friend-forbear in order to lay the ancestor to rest and to seize the pipes of pastoral poetry from his barely cold hands, it is modeled on archaic initiation rituals of younger man by an elder. [...] In modern poems, the Freudian model of sons succeeding their poetic fathers by violent means replaces the Greek homosexual pattern, but in all cases the elegiac initiation scene is a masculine one: since Classical times, the elegy has functioned as a ritual hymn of poetic consecration during the course of which a new poet presents himself as heir to the tradition.⁸

Initially, the elegiac voice was not only masculine but also constitutive of masculine authority: that is, it was at once masculine and patriarchal. It was also a means of ensuring cultural continuity. The formal conventions of the "masculine" elegy include the apotheosis of the dead figure and the mourner-poet's corresponding assumption of the authoritative position previously

occupied by the former. It is a tradition of substitution and survival, one which, as Schenck points out, effects symbolic succession paradoxically through severance: “The masculine elegy marks a rite of separation that culminates in ascension to stature: it rehearses an act of identity that depends upon rupture.”⁹

Fittingly, the formal and ideological conventions of the elegy has persisted long after the “passing” of antiquity. We see them put to innovative and masterful application in Milton’s “Lycidas,” where the drowned Edward King is placed high above the reach (or, to phrase it more bluntly, out of the way) of the poem’s speaker, while the latter embarks on his poetic progress to “fresh woods and pastures new.”¹⁰ We even find them among examples of twentieth-century poetry that deal with death and bereavement, although often such poems self-consciously rebel against or parody the traditional elegiac formula. T. S. Eliot himself, in his poem “The Hippopotamus,” satirizes the convention of the final heavenly ascent of the dead by portraying the eponymous animal—bulky, clumsy, and ponderous—as an angelic figure, flitting among the seraphs and strumming upon a golden harp.

In *The Waste Land*, however, we see little, if any, of the kind of movement toward resolution and transcendence that structures the traditional elegy. Instead, there is a sense of casting about, of being arrested in a conflicted state between hope and despair, all the while feeling compelled, however reluctantly, to inch gradually toward the latter. It is a repetitive struggle, one exemplified in perhaps its most schematic form in the following lines from the section, “What the Thunder Said”:

If there were water

And no rock

If there were rock

And also water
And water
A spring
A pool among the rock
If there were the sound of water only
Not the cicada
And dry grass singing
But sound of water over a rock
Where the hermit-thrush sings in the pine trees
Drip drop drip drop drop drop drop
But there is no water¹¹

Here, we see the voice of the speaker descending from a plane of hypothetical hope to the harsh ground of reality through a series of compromises. It is a downward movement reminiscent of the opening section of the poem: “He said, Marie / Marie, hold on tight. And down we went.”¹²

The speaker’s dire need to hope is undercut from the first by his awareness that there is little in the surrounding landscape that might justify such hope, and the frustration expresses itself not only in the words themselves but also in the syntax, through the repeating of conditionals in the past tense. The particular syntactic construction which Eliot uses in the lines above is defined by the articulation of the diametric opposite of what is factually true in the present. In Eliot’s poem, the speaker has not yet reached the point of utter desolation, at which he could flatly announce that “there is no water” without such an equivocating preamble. He is still driven to fantasize about the possibility of hope, but has traveled far enough into the dark not to be able to couch that fantasy in any other syntactic form but one predicated on the absence of

what it invokes—so much so that he cannot even bring himself to verbalize what “would be” if any of the conditions he envisions “were” true. Both the substance and the syntax of the lines poignantly epitomize the speaker’s internal struggle between the impulse to move forward, and the stark sense of futility which holds him in place.

I have dwelled at some length over this passage because they epitomize the crisis of elegiac consciousness which the androgyny of Tiresias symbolically encapsulates. It is a crisis similar to that of Septimus Warren Smith in Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway*, where the haunted hero—whom the novel portrays as a femininized figure—is fixed within his experiences of the war and is unable to progress toward recuperative resolution. In what follows, I show that this crisis can be interpreted as the conflict between the male and the female elegiac consciousnesses. Tiresias’ psychological and corporeal hermaphroditism [is the overarching image of this conflict within *The Waste Land*.]

In dialectic opposition to the “male elegy,” Celeste Schenck describes an alternative tradition of the “female elegy,” which she traces at least as far back as Anne Bradstreet:

[T]he unsettling coherence of the female funeral aesthetic across centuries suggests that women poets have clearly enjoyed an elegiac mode of their own, an intertextually verifiable tradition of mourning their dead in a poetic form that calls the genre, as patriarchally defined, into question.

Refusal of consolation, [...] mourning without end, is perhaps the female elegist’s most characteristic subversion of the masculine elegiac.¹³

The latter passage, with its emphasis of a feminine mode of mourning alternative to the dominant masculine one, sheds much light on the definition of the female-identified portion of *The Waste Land*’s persona. Schenck notes that, unlike male practitioners of the elegiac art, women poets

“seem unwilling to render up their dead.” “In fact,” she goes on to explain, “the task of the male elegist reflects certain psychic models, which seem, in the revisionist elegies of women poets, to be inappropriate to inscribe female experience.” Like Froula, Schenk employs the language of psychoanalytic criticism in tracing this difference to its origins. The contrast between female and male psycho-sexual development plays a key role in her exposition: “Feminine development is characterized by continuity with the mother and an attenuated separation, whereas the male act of identity coincides with the rupture of significant relationship.”¹⁴ Thus, the recuperative action in the masculine elegy occurs through a substitutive forward movement, while in its feminine counterpart such restoration takes place through a connective return to maternal origins.

The gendering of thought, experience, and perception became a prominent issue during and after the Great War of 1914, especially in terms of death and trauma, loss and bereavement. Women’s experience of the war was no less real than the men’s, if differing in the kind of outlook and physical, psychological trauma involved. As Helena Swanwick, writing in 1915, notes, “War is waged by men only, but it is not possible to wage it upon men only. All wars are and must be waged upon women [...] as well as upon men.”¹⁵ However, the contrast between the European battlefields where soldiers lived and breathed scenes of mass death and the geographical remove from which women underwent their ordeal of suspense and grief created a kind of binary division in the perception of male and female experiences of the Great War, which tended toward the denigration of the latter as uninformed, romanticized, and above all secondary. Nosheen Khan, remarking on literary critics’ “obliviousness” to women’s war writing, points out that “the trench writers who have conditioned modern responses to war often use woman as a scapegoat in their efforts to come to terms with their war neurosis. Their distorted images of the role played by women in war, images not a little touched by their misogyny and homosexuality,

have, being the only ones widely known, become embedded in the modern consciousness.”¹⁶

It was not only the validity of *women's* responses to war that was undermined and attacked. Feminine and *feminized* responses of the men were also subjected to a similar kind of suppression. It is a well-discussed point that one of the reasons behind the adoption of the ambiguous term “shell-shock” to refer to the soldiers who returned from the War in a deeply traumatized psychological state was that the more accurate term “hysteria” had long been associated (largely in the pejorative sense) with women. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, the character of Septimus Warren Smith is in similar fashion feminized and targeted for isolation and elimination by the menacing (and almost allegorical) figure of Dr. Bradshaw, when he fails to conform to the narrative of the returning hero demanded by society. Even Rezia, his loving wife, refuses to accept his transformed self as congruous with the “man” she had married: “[I]t was *cowardly* for a man to say he would kill himself, but Septimus had fought; he was brave; *he was not Septimus now*” (my emphasis).¹⁷

The particular species of “shell-shock” suffered by Septimus is doubly feminized, primarily in the sense noted above but also in the sense that it is a fixation with the idea of grief. Septimus imagines that “human nature had condemned him to death” because he “could not feel.” He harangues against himself for not having “cared” when Evans, a fellow soldier with whom he had been close friends in the war, died in battle: “[W]hen Evans was killed, just before the Armistice, in Italy, Septimus, far from showing any emotion or recognizing that here was the end of friendship, congratulated himself upon feeling very little and very reasonably. The War had taught him.”¹⁸ After he returns from the battlefield, Septimus is haunted by the image of his dead friend, and is horrified at himself because of his failure to grieve: he is plagued by the injunction to “feel” for his friend, for death, for the War—by the injunction to *mourn*.

Ramazini devotes several pages of his book to a discussion of elegy and the “gendering of mourning”:

In responding to social codification of mourning, modern poets have [...] had to define their grief in relation to the gendering of mourning. The twentieth century, though discarding many specific customs, largely inherited the nineteenth-century feminization of grief. [...] The elegy [...] afforded male poets the exploration of feelings publicly marked as unavailable and alien, permitting the social mask of the griefless male to slip a little. Working in the high literary tradition of Milton, Shelley, and Tennyson, men could enact a psychological work that in extraliterary practices might have been more dangerously feminizing. Like traditional male elegists, who guardedly associated their laments with nymphs and muses, modern poets sometimes overtly link femininity with mourning in their elegies. Many of the most despondent mourners in Hardy, Frost, and Stevens are women. In Yeats’s “Easter, 1916,” the male speaker even undergoes a momentary disturbance of gender, switching from male to female [...]. In the figure of Tiresias, whose vision is “the substance” of *The Waste Land*, Eliot also blurs the gender of his universal lament.¹⁹

The point made toward the latter half of the passage, namely that the poetic exploration of grief and mourning sometimes entails the blurring or confounding of gender boundaries, rings a striking note in relation to my discussion of the struggle between male and female elegiac subject positions. The First World War, as well as being attacked as a “preposterous masculine fiction,” put to the test many of the most influential social fictions, ideals, and ideologies of the period.²⁰ The rhetoric of the heroic and of masculine stoicism were not the least among them. The

urgency of battle and the need to grasp on to psychological stability necessitated the kind of stoical indifference to and swift dismissal of the deaths of fellow soldiers that Septimus later reviles in himself. In David Jones's *In Parenthesis*, an analogous situation is described with distinctly ironic nuances. The fall of a commanding officer results in a "hole" in the line which must quickly be filled by the one who follows behind. There is no leisure for stopping to "feel" the fuller implications of his death, only the need to "inherit" his position of command.²¹ This is the very principle of succession-in-separation, the overarching framework of the masculine elegy, stripped of its emotional dimensions and put to stark and literal practice. The female elegy, in its reluctance to relinquish actual and abiding connections with the dead and its insistence on "mourning without end," poses a model of grief that significantly diverges from the male, which was pushed to radical extremes by the exigencies of war. In this sense, the voice of censuring "human nature" which plagues Septimus is the voice of the female elegiac, adjuring him to mourn.

An analogous strife between the male and the female elegiac can be discerned in *The Waste Land*. However, this conflict is intensely problematic in its implications. As indicated in the passage from Ramazani, the genre of the modern elegy is itself fraught with sexual tensions. In addition, the severe disillusionment and the subsequent unraveling of "masculine fictions" occasioned by the War imposed a double strain on the work of mourning and the literary rendering of grief. In Eliot's poem, the kind of formulaic, transcendental resolution of the traditional male elegy no longer holds; yet, at the same time, the impulse toward a female model of mourning is fettered and undermined by a countering impulse to suppress and discredit it. The frame of the Grail Quest and its connection with ancient fertility rites suggest the same movement toward maternal origins that is characteristic of the female elegiac. However, the

quest fails or is not yet achieved, as indicated by the image of the Fisher King which leave the poem, his line still cast while his “arid plains” stretch behind him. The maternal and feminine, which constitutes recuperative possibility for the poem, is portrayed as potentially sterile, violated, and even paralyzed. According to Eliot’s depiction of women in *The Waste Land*, it seems almost impossible that there should be any restorative, connective tissue with the original fertile sources of life in the women who are its descendants.

In section two, “A Game of Chess,” the lady in the chair is surrounded by a multitude of valuable trinkets, pearls, glasses, and “other withered stumps of time.” She is displaced from the world of nature into the world of civilization and domesticated accordingly; the “sylvan scene” upon her wall evokes in faded poignancy both the alienated maternal origins of the vegetation myth and the bankrupt formalized pastoral devices of masculine elegy. In the painfully disjointed “conversation” which follows between her and a man who, it appears, has returned from the battlefields, we see how far post-Great War civilization has traveled from the complete union between the mother/woman and son that Froula’s “Lover” yearns for. The corporeal image of Tiresias, old, decrepit, depleted, seeing through another’s eyes and suffering through another’s body, reflects that same remove from vital union brought to harsh light by the War, a state of severance due to which all knowledge and experience are attained as if at secondhand, mediated by the debilitating revelations of reality. Tiresias emblemizes the moment of crisis at which the elegiac consciousness has realized that the “masculine” paradigm of mourning is no longer viable or desirable, but that the “feminine” paradigm which offers itself as the alternative may be equally impossible and out of reach. The poem seems to gesture toward a third possibility, one whose alignment with the male or the female has yet to be discerned, one which may elude the definition of gender altogether:

Who is the third who walks beside you?
When I count, there are only you and I together
But when I look ahead up the white road
There is always another one walking beside you
Gliding wrapt in a brown mantle, hooded
I do not know whether a man or a woman
—*But who is that on the other side of you?* (my emphasis)²²

As we emerge from *The Waste Land*, the question still stands unanswered: a new elegiac subject capable of transcending the masculine and the feminine to voice alternative songs for the celebration and survival of the dead remains tantalizingly elusive. Tiresias still stands throbbing, lamenting, caught in an in-between existence in and from which life and death seem hardly distinguishable.

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Notes

¹ T. S. Eliot, quoted by Theodore Spencer, from *The Waste Land: A Facsimile and Transcript of the Original Drafts*, edited by Valerie Eliot (New York: Harvest, 1971), p. 1.

² T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*, *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, 3rd edition shorter (New York: Norton, 1989), note to f. 218.

³ Ovid, *The Metamorphoses*, translated by Horace Gregory (New York: Penguin, 1960), p. 95.

⁴ T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*, ff. 218-19.

⁵ Jahan Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 26.

⁶ Eliot, f. 228.

⁷ Christine Froula, "Eliot's Grail Quest, or The Lover, The Police, and *The Waste Land*," *The Yale Review* 78 (1989), pp. 237, 246.

⁸ Celeste M. Schenck, "Feminism and Deconstruction: Re-Constructing the Elegy," *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 5 (1986): p.13.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p.15.

¹⁰ John Milton, "Lycidas," *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, vol. 1, sixth edition (New York: Norton, 1993), p. 1456, f. 193.

¹¹ Eliot, ff. 346-59.

¹² Eliot, ff. 15-16.

¹³ Schenck, pp. 23, 24.

¹⁴ Schenck, pp. 15-16.

¹⁵ Helen Swanwick, *Women and War* (UDC, 1915), p.1.

¹⁶ Nosheen Khan, *Women's Poetry of the First World War* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1988), p. 2.

¹⁷ Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1981), p.23.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 86, 91.

¹⁹ Ramazani, pp. 20-21.

²⁰ Virginia Woolf, *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, vol. 2, edited by Nigel Nicholson (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1976), p. 76.

²¹ David Jones, *In Parenthesis, The Norton Book of Modern War* (New York: Norton, 1991), pp. 70-81.

²² Eliot, ff. 360-66.