

## Carol Christ: On "The Waste Land"

In *The Waste Land* Eliot, with a desperate virtuosity, presents various ways of constituting the male and female, as if in search of a poetic figuration and voice that place him beyond the conflicts that characterize his earlier poetic stances. The early sections of the poem, up to the entry of Tiresias, develop the strategy of "Portrait of a Lady." They juxtapose the meditations of a male voice with a number of female portraits: Mme. Sosostriis, the wealthy woman and the working-class woman in "A Game of Chess," Marie, the hyacinth girl, and, in Eliot's rough draft of the poem, Fresca. In this collage Eliot gives the women of the poem the attributes of traditional literary character. They inhabit settings, they exist in dramatic situations, they have individual histories, and they have voices. They constitute most of the identified speakers in the first three sections of the poem, and they contain among them a number of figures for the poet: the sibyl of Cumae; Mme. Sosostriis with her Tarot deck; Fresca, who "scribbles verse of such a gloomy tone / That cautious critics say, her style is quite her own"; and La Pia, who can connect "nothing with nothing." One might appropriately object that these are for the most part satiric portraits (indeed, some of them savagely satiric), but they are nonetheless the ways in which the poem locates both verbal fluency and prophetic authority.

In contrast, the male voice through which Eliot presents these women has none of the definitional attributes of conventionally centered identity. It resists location in time and space, it conveys emotion through literary quotation, and it portrays experience only through metaphoric figuration: the cruel April at the poem's beginning, the desert landscape, the rat's alley, where "dead men lost their bones." Eliot thus turns the shifting figuration that appears as unsurety in "Portrait of a Lady" to a poetic strength. The very lack of location and attribute seems to place the speaker beyond the dilemmas of personality, as if Eliot had succeeded in creating the objective voice of male tradition. But for all this voice seems to offer, the early parts of the poem imagine men as dead or dismembered: the drowned Phoenician sailor, whose eyes have been replaced by pearls, the one-eyed merchant, the fisher king, the hanged man, the corpse planted in the garden. Thus Eliot allows us to read the sublimation of body and personality that mark the poem's voice as a repression of them as well, an escape from dismemberment by removing the male body from the text.

The one place where Eliot attaches a specific historical experience to the speaking voice of the poem -- the episode of the hyacinth girl -- supports such a reading. The episode begins with the speaker's quoting a woman who addressed him, recalling a gift he gave her: "You gave me hyacinths first a year ago." The speaker then describes his own consciousness of that moment in their relationship. When they came back from the Hyacinth garden, her arms full and her hair wet, he could not speak and his eyes failed, he was neither living nor dead, and he knew nothing, "looking into the heart of light, the silence." Perhaps in recognition of the special status that this episode has by virtue of its attachment to the poet's "I," many critics have found in it the emotional center of the poem. The moment offers some revelation of spiritual and erotic fullness ("the heart of light"), but the speaker portrays himself as unequal to it. Speech and vision fail him, and he ends the passage by borrowing the articulation of another poem ('Oed' und leer das Meer'), a ventriloquized voice that is not his own, that reveals him at a loss for words. We have here a Tiresias who, at the moment of sexual illumination, loses not only his sight but his voice as well, a seer who does not gain prophetic

power from sexual knowledge. As in his early poetry, Eliot represents the moment of looking at a woman as one that decomposes his voice.

Eliot's use of visual imagery in "A Game of Chess" sustains this sense of a moment of vision evaded. For all the elaborate description of the woman's dressing table and chamber, the passage avoids picturing the woman herself, unlike its source in Antony and Cleopatra, The long opening sentence of the description -- seventeen lines long -- carefully directs the eye around what is presumably the woman sitting in the chair, but she only appears at the end of the passage, in the fiery points of her hair, which are instantly transformed into words. The passage thus finally gives the reader only a fetishistic replacement of the woman it never visualizes, a replacement for which he immediately substitutes a voice. A number of the images in "A Game of Chess" reinforce this concern with the desire to look and its repression: the golden Cupidon that peeps out while another hides his eyes behind his wing, the staring forms leaning out from the wall, the pearls that were eyes, the closed car, the Pressing of lidless eyes, and in the second section, Albert's swearing he can't bear to look at Lil. All of the eyes that do not look in this section of the poem are juxtaposed to images of a deconstituted body, imagined alternately as male and as female: the change of Philomel, withered stumps of time, the rat's alley where dead men lost their bones, and the teeth and baby Lil must lose. As the men in the section resist looking, so they do not speak. Albert is gone, and the speaker cannot or will not answer the hysterical questions of the lady.

The poem changes its figuration of gender with the introduction of Tiresias. Eliot states in a note to the passage that "the two sexes meet in Tiresias. What Tiresias sees, in fact, is the substance of the poem" -- a declaration that critics have tended to view rather skeptically. But what Tiresias sees is the sight that the poem has heretofore evaded: the meeting of the sexes, a meeting that Tiresias experiences by identifying with the female. As the typist awaits her visitor, Tiresias asserts, "I too awaited the expected guest," and at the moment when the house agent's clerk "assaults" her, he states, "And I Tiresias, have foresuffered all," a position assumed again in the lines spoken by La Pia. Paradoxically, when the poem assumes the position of the female, male character becomes far more prominent: in the satiric portrait of the house agent's clerk, which is the first extended satiric male portrait in the poem, in the image of the fishermen, and in the extended fisherman's narrative that originally began Part IV and concludes with the death of Phlebas. As if repeating the doubleness of identification that Tiresias represents, that death affords at once the definitive separation of male identity and a fantasy of its separation of male identity and a fantasy of its dissolution as "He passed the stages of his age and youth / Entering the whirlpool."

In the final section of the poem, Eliot changes its representation of gender dramatically. He drops the strategy of character that had been the principal way in which the poem had up to this point centered its emotion and develops a voice and figuration for the speaker that remains separate from categories of gender. He accomplishes this by using both specifically religious allusions and natural images that for the most part avoid anthropomorphization. He seeks to evoke a poise from natural elements, as in the water-dripping song, which he gives a religious rather than a sexual resonance. Through the song Eliot moves the power of articulation in the poem from character to nature. The hermit-thrush sings in the pine trees, and the sound of the water for which he yearns is finally realized in the last line of the section: "Drip drop drip drop drop drop drop." As if in recognition of its separation from gender, this temporary poise immediately issues in the appearance of the third figure, "who walks always beside you[,] ... / ... hooded / I do not know whether a man or woman. . . ."

When the sexual concerns of the poem return, in the next passage, they assume a very

different form than they have heretofore. Eliot does not locate them in relation to particular female characters or voices, although the image of the woman who "drew her long black hair out tight" does recall the woman in "A Game of Chess"; he evokes them through a sexual fantasy that represents the collapse of civilization as an engulfment within an exhausted and blackened vagina, suggested in the images of empty cisterns, exhausted wells, and bats "with baby faces" crawling "head downward down a blackened wall." This passage develops the technique of "Prufrock" in displacing images of sexual anxiety onto elements of the poem's landscape, such that the world itself rather than the characters within it locates its sexual malaise. These feminized images now possess the power of music and song that had been given to the water and the thrush; the woman fiddles "whisper music" on the strings of her hair, the bats whistle, and voices sing out of the cisterns and wells. Despite what would seem the movement of the power of articulation to the feminine, Eliot's figurative technique here opens the way both for the poem's resolution and for the transfer, through nature, of the power of music and song to the male poet. By shifting to a poetic mode that expresses emotion through landscape rather than through character, Eliot can achieve sexual potency in purely symbolic terms, as, in the decayed hole, the cock crows, and the damp gust comes, bringing rain. The very way in which these images resist, because of their natural simplicity and the literary allusions with which Eliot surrounds them, what would seem to be their obvious sexual symbolism is precisely their virtue, for they enable the poem to resolve its sexual conflict at the same time that it arrives at a figuration that places the poet beyond it. At the moment when the cock crows, Eliot transfers the power of articulation to the landscape, as the thunder speaks, giving the power of translation to the poet. When the poet interprets the commands of the thunder, he once again describes human situations, but he articulates them in abstract and ungendered terms, as if only a language free from the categories of gender allows him to imagine human fulfillment.

From Carol Christ, "Gender, Voice, and Figuration in Eliot's Early Poetry." In T.S. Eliot: The Modernist in History. Ed. Ronald Bush. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Reprinted by permission of the author.

**Publication Status:**

Excerpted Criticism [1]

**Criticism Target:**

T. S. Eliot [2]

**Author:**

Carol Christ [3]

**Poem:**

The Waste Land [4]

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**Source URL:** <http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/criticism/carol-christ-waste-land>

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