

## The Reader, The Interpreter and *The Waste Land* Recycled

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The true poem awakens an unconquerable desire to be re-read. We immediately have the impression that the second reading will tell more than the first.

Gaston Bachelard<sup>1</sup>

If one did not live at a time when authors, attending academic conferences on literary theory, anxiously offer themselves as empirical proof of living authorhood and declare they honestly meant something particular in writing their work, one might not need the recent reassuring little volume, *Interpretation and overinterpretation*.<sup>2</sup> This work features the Tanner Lectures for 1990 with essays by Umberto Eco, Richard Rorty, Jonathan Culler and Christine Brooke-Rose. As it is, on this occasion, David Lodge, Malcolm Bradbury and Eco himself felt compelled as living authors to testify to meaning something and not everything whenever they write a work. And so not a moment too soon do we have Eco's recalling academe from epistemological hypochondria or 'epistemological fanaticism',<sup>3</sup> to use his phrase. Not a moment too soon do we have Eco's cautioning against unlimited semiosis, his defence of the intention of the work, his criterion of interpretative economy, and his Popperian notion that some interpretations can be shown to be invalid, unacceptable or inadequate, tenable or untenable – terms Eco uses at various times (pp.15-16, 78 et passim).

- 1 Gaston Bachelard, *On Poetic Imagination and Reverie. Selections from Gaston Bachelard*, trans with preface and introduction by Colette Gaudin (Spring Publications, Dallas, Texas, 1987), p.28. Cf. Gaston Bachelard, *L'air et les songes. Essai sur l'imagination du mouvement* (Librairie José Corti, Paris, 1943), p.286.
- 2 Umberto Eco, Richard Rorty *et al*, *Interpretation and overinterpretation*, ed. Stefan Collini (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1992). Hereafter cited by page in the text.
- 3 Umberto Eco, *The Limits of Interpretation* (Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1990), p.24.

Eco's views have the added advantage of theorizing what actually takes place in every department of literature around the globe.

But just when the way seems clear for Eco's Empirical Reader, the Implied Reader, the Model Reader and the real writer, Richard Rorty's countering of Eco's views seems to obscure the issues again. Rorty seems to be confusing a reading and an interpretation. This indistinctness of terms is so frequent an aspect of the debates on interpretation that it is inevitable the debates seem interminable (if one may be allowed a pun). Rorty says: 'Reading texts is a matter of reading them in the light of other texts, obsessions, bits of information, or what have you and then seeing what happens' (p.105).

This is interpretation, not reading and poor interpretation at that.

Or again, Rorty says: 'Methodical readings are typically produced by those who lack what [Professor Frank] Kermode ... calls "an appetite for poetry". They are the sort of thing you get, for example, in an anthology of readings on Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* which I recently slogged through – one psychoanalytic reading, one reader-response reading, one feminist reading, one deconstructionist reading, and one new historicist reading' (pp.106-7).

Now if these are readings, what are interpretations? One needs to make a distinction between reading and interpretation so that debates about interpretation, indeterminate, over- and under-, are not muddled by only apparent disagreement.

Readers can be a tinker, tailor, soldier, sailor, rich man, poor man, beggarman, thief, feminist, sexist, racist, Eskimo, Hottentot, dumb blonde, smart blonde, college student, a professor or even philosopher, Gilbert Ryle, reading only Jane Austen. Readers share two characteristics: they are able to read and they want to. They share at least one other characteristic. In the act of reaching for the poem or fiction or going to the theatre or cinema, they also share the desire,

conscious or unconscious, *not* to participate for a while in the normal routines of their living. They enter fictive time, fictive space, fictive unity with fictive feelings and fictive fortunes. They take an existential holiday. They deputize an artificial or prosthetic experience; they allow art's surrogate experience of something or other, to take over; and they probably look forward to this, expecting some pleasure. The reader is a quester in that he is looking for something in this surrogate, virtual experience. This reader reads innocently, unsystematically, unselfconsciously, satisfied or dissatisfied in varying degrees, with the experience, which well may be undergone in an individual or stock way.

The reader on an existential holiday may be a housewife bored with her vinyl furniture and the husband that goes with it, who is enthralled by Barbara Cartland's fetishized status symbols and the aristocrat who goes with those. The reader may be a corporate lawyer on a plane reading a spy novel or a Western that enthralls him more than the actual danger he is in of his plane's being hi-jacked or of developing engine trouble. Or the reader could be Virginia Woolf, entranced by T. S. Eliot's rendition of *The Waste Land*: 'He sang and chanted it and rhythmized it. It has great beauty and force of phrase; symmetry; and tensivity. What connects it together, I'm not so sure.'<sup>4</sup>

At the moment when Virginia Woolf puzzles over its connections, she is on her way to *needing* to be an interpreter, to be questing after meaning and not just to be willingly participating in a surrogate experience; and if she were to put ample literary knowledge to work to figure out what *The Waste Land* means and then to try to communicate this effort, she would be an interpreter. In a famous essay of 1939 Cleanth Brooks does just that. He is a typical interpreter – within the academy, a professionally trained, systematic reader, widely read in several literatures, using his knowledge of poetics and the particular knowledge of the poem's sources, allusions and so on, to try to come to an idea of the

4 Quoted in F. B. Pinion, *A T. S. Eliot Companion* (Macmillan, London, 1989), p.25.

meaning conveyed by the poem. The interpreter is seriously, systematically, searching, trying to make progress; a hired gun, as it were, trying to find sense in works that purport to offer sense in the guise of experience, that make the presumption of self-publicizingly being published and of taking up one's time. Interpretation is the first step in deciding whether a work is enough worthwhile to make claims on one's time. It is a necessary preliminary to criticism, to culture criticism and to any discussion of the significance of a work beyond its meaning, if I may use E.D. Hirsch's distinction between meaning and significance here.<sup>5</sup> In this essay, however, I do not intend to encroach on culture criticism.

Brooks brought to his task as much literary knowledge as one could possibly expect up to 1939.<sup>6</sup> Much primary material including the manuscript and typescript versions of *The Waste Land* had not yet been discovered. Ezra Pound's excisions, Eliot's accepting or rejecting of Pound's advice and an analysis of all this did not appear until Eliot's widow, Valerie Eliot, edited the manuscript in a facsimile edition of 1971.<sup>7</sup> This set going a new wave of interpretations.

5 The distinction E. D. Hirsch makes between meaning and significance is useful if one were to attempt to make a distinction between the function of the interpreter and that of the culture critic or cultural historian. See *Validity In Interpretation* (Yale University Press, New Haven, 1967), pp.62-4 *et passim*.

6 The original version of Brooks's interpretation was 'The Waste Land: An Analysis', *Southern Review* (Summer, 1937) pp.106-36. The revised version of 1939 was included in *Modern Poetry and The Tradition* (University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 1939). I quote from the 1939 version reprinted as 'The Waste Land: Critique of a Myth', in *T. S. Eliot, The Waste Land*, ed. C. B. Cox and Arnold P. Hinchliffe (Macmillan Casebook, Macmillan, London, 1968) pp.128-61. Hereafter cited as *Macmillan Casebook*. I cite this convenient source, although the essay is available in *T. S. Eliot Critical Assessments*, ed. G. Clarke (Christopher Helm, London, 1990), vol II, pp.212-36.

7 T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land: A Facsimile and Transcript of the Original Drafts Including the Annotations of Ezra Pound*, ed. Valerie Eliot (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, New York, 1971). Hereafter referred to as *WL Facsimile*.

Brooks merely saw himself, as any interpreter would, as a link in the chain of interpreters and as actually adding to knowledge by re-interpreting *The Waste Land*, indeed, 'correcting' the interpretations of F. R. Leavis and F. O. Matthiessen. 'Though much has been written on *The Waste Land*', says Brooks, 'it will not be difficult to show that most of its critics misconceive entirely the theme and the structure of the poem. There has been little or no attempt to deal with it as a unified whole. F. R. Leavis and F. O. Matthiessen have treated large sections of the poem in detail and I am obviously indebted to both of them. I believe, however, that Leavis makes some positive errors of interpretation'.<sup>8</sup>

Now all this is reasonable and well considered in spite of the recent trend to see the New Critics as scholars of bad faith.<sup>9</sup> Nothing Brooks says here need upset anyone but a deconstructionist, except for his working assumption of the poem as a unified whole (that Northrop Frye, Gadamer, Michel Riffaterre or Eco also share to name a very few); and, of course, his absoluteness of vocabulary, when he slates his rival interpreters: they 'entirely' 'misconceive' or have 'positive errors'. This is no more than irritating, this absoluteness, and no less than forgivable – an occupational hazard of an interpreter in a competitive profession.

But the notion of the artwork as a unity dies hard. Iris Murdoch in *Metaphysics As A Guide to Morals*<sup>10</sup> simply reasserts it as a given, in spite of the history of challenges to it

8 *Macmillan Casebook*, p.128.

9 Elizabeth Freund in *The Return of The Reader* (Methuen, London, 1987) obsessively suspects the New Critics. She sees W. K. Wimsatt's views as 'rigidly hierarchical' with the 'dominion' of the critic over the 'lowly reader' in a 'despotic arrangement' (p.4). She claims New Criticism 'bristled with contempt for anything so brazen as a personality in the critic'. She contends there is a 'conspiracy of silence' in New Criticism that is 'now gradually being unmasked' (p.5); although in agreement with Jonathan Culler, she feels none the less New Criticism has left an 'insidious legacy' (p.64).

10 Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics As A Guide to Morals* (Chatto and Windus, London, 1992), pp.1ff. and 81 *et passim*.

that she has witnessed in the post-War years. The notion of unity dies hard because it is related to the notion that the presumptuous, self-publicizing artist, or for my purposes here, author, intends to say something, to communicate a particular meaning by his work; and the work itself, published<sup>11</sup> and now on its own, may indeed be saying that something which the reader may or may not grasp – but which the interpreter must try to grasp. Denying the *intentio auctoris* and the *intentio operis*, whether they turn out to be the same or different, and also denying that a work's meaning or *intentio* may well be coherent and graspable is a deceptive finessing of a simple situation, that should not need the testimony of Eco as writer of intended meanings and of published works to expose (p.25 *et passim*).

Besides, the questing interpreter needs the *working assumption* of coherence or unity or graspable meaning in his quest as much as Parsifal needs the Grail. As Ruth Saw says: 'Whatever theorists may say as to the importance of the unity of a work of art, practical critics assume it in their evaluations of works'.<sup>12</sup> I would add, interpreters do too.

And to perceive that a work has a unified or graspable meaning is not contradictory of an 'open' ending. To talk about closed and open endings – *The Waste Land* is rich territory for these notions – is quite consistent with the notion of coherence or unity in a work, even though critics and students repeatedly confuse the notion of an 'open' ending with the notion of 'infinite polysemy'. An 'open' ending – like that of *The Waste Land* – is simply a strategy of

11 The act of publishing – whether it is to pass one's manuscript around a few courtiers as Sir Philip Sidney did or to publish in little magazines or in the mass market – is to say something to more than to oneself. It is to attempt to speak to a wider audience and not to say anything to everybody but rather to say something to somebody or – in the mass market – to everybody or nearly everybody.

12 Ruth L. Saw, *Aesthetics: An Introduction* (Macmillan, London, 1972) p.101. The issue of unity is summarized well in a review of the Dickie/Beardsley debate in Diané Collinson, 'Aesthetic Experience', in *Philosophical Aesthetics: An Introduction*, ed. Oswald Hanfling (The Open University, Blackwell, Oxford, 1992), pp.167-9.

meaning. It is, as it were, the show business, while meaning goes about its task behind the shifting scenes.

As for 'infinite polysemy', take, for example, Antony Easthope's multiple interpretations of "The Windhover", first published in *The British Journal of Aesthetics* in Autumn 1985 and reworked for *Literary Into Cultural Studies* of 1991.<sup>13</sup> Easthope's 'demonstration' of 'potentially unlimited polysemy'<sup>14</sup> is more a demonstration of interpretations that are not thorough enough. He says each different interpretation 'in other contexts' will be 'privileging other features in the poem'.<sup>15</sup> 'Privileging' only some features in a work seems just what the book of essays on *Heart of Darkness* that Richard Rorty 'slogged' through was doing. Now that is *not* what an interpreter should be doing – sometimes privileging some features, sometimes others. Anyway, how does Easthope's interpreter pick what features to privilege – on the basis of their seeming to cohere enough to make up into an interpretation? If that is so, Easthope allows his individual interpretations to be coherent, but not the originary text. Apart from this difficulty, Easthope's procedure of privileging now some features of a work, now others, is unfair to a work. The duty

13 Antony Easthope, 'The Problem of Polysemy and Identity in the Literary Text', *The British Journal of Aesthetics*, xxv (Autumn 1985) 326-39 and 'Rereading The Windhover', in *Literary Into Cultural Studies* (Routledge, London, 1991), pp.25-33.

14 *Literary Into Cultural Studies*, p.25.

15 *Ibid.*, p.28. Fred D. Crawford well summarizes this 'colonizing' of *The Waste Land*, done for ideological purposes: '... the poem's thematic ambiguity...allows readers to draw diverse conclusions regarding the poem's meaning. A nihilist approaching the poem finds confirmation for his nihilism, a sociologist confirmation for his approach to the problems of modern civilization, and a Christian affirmation of his faith.... One can support virtually any interpretation the reader brings to the poem by reading controversial lines in a manner consistent with the reader's expectations: many value the poem for its apparent support of their preconceived notions'. See *Mixing Memory and Desire: The Waste Land and British Novels* (Pennsylvania State University Press, University Park and London, 1982), p.154.

of the interpreter – indeed it should be one’s irresistible compulsion – is to try to account for all the features of a work. The work, say, a poem, is after all not just signs but interrelated signals, cueing a plenary reading. Everything must be paid attention to, if one is going to settle whether this poem need seriously presume on one’s time. A dozen *partial* interpretations or a hundred do not make for infinite polysemy. They prove how hard interpretation is and how poorly it can be done. For instance, in Easthope’s original analysis of Gerard Manley Hopkins’s ‘The Windhover’ where he offers sixteen ‘contexts’ for interpreting the poem and thus sixteen ‘interpretations’, he does not consider the poem’s dedication: ‘To Christ Our Lord’. This dedication is an important tip, a signal or cue of no little import for determining whether the ambiguous word ‘Buckle’ in line 10 of the sonnet can set more than one association going (as it surely does and as is often Hopkins’s habit in creating the stress of ‘instress’). It does not disprove a work has unity to ignore elements of it or to privilege some signals sometimes and others at other times.

Just as much as Frederick Crews does in his hilarious *The Pooh Perplex*,<sup>16</sup> what Antony Easthope demonstrates, if not infinite polysemy, is how difficult interpretation is and how it must continue. The nature of interpretation is such and the nature of, say, poetry is such that even a seemingly exhaustive interpretation still leaves room for other interpreters irresistibly to feel that they have experienced signals which have been missed or that they can reconstrue misconstrued ones. This is sufficient excuse for a further interpretation.

An interpretation, that is, *statements about a work’s meaning*, is a quest for meaning that tries to take account of as many of a work’s signals or cues as is possible. But taking account of as many cues as possible and then setting down, say, a poem’s meaning in statements is difficult, for the poem has as much going on in it as the simple looking Rubik’s cube potentially has. The real cause of so many partial

16 Frederick C. Crews, *The Pooh Perplex* (Arthur Baker, London, 1967).

interpretations, seemingly proof of infinite polysemy, often mistaken for infinite polysemy, is that the poem piggybacks so much in even just a few words – like Hopkins's 'Buckle' or Eliot's 'Shantih shantih shantih' – that the interpreter is bound to treat only so much of a poem at a time and compel another interpreter to come along and try to do better, to be adequate to all its cues, if possible, to try to grasp the poem's plenary meaning.<sup>17</sup>

Cleanth Brooks makes a great effort to determine meaning in *The Waste Land* and to decide whether it is a 'piece of tripe',<sup>18</sup> as Amy Lowell said or 'just a piece of rhythmical grumbling',<sup>19</sup> as Eliot said or this century's most important poem, as most critics have said. This is after all the reason to begin the process of interpretation. Is this work that lays claim on our time, feelings and thoughts, a great poem, a good poem, a bad poem, an important good poem, an important bad poem or an insignificant piece of tripe? In trying to answer these questions that eventually are handed over by the interpreter to the critic, Brooks the interpreter confronts some highly debated aspects of the poem, whether or not there is one coherent protagonist speaking; whether the Phlebas the Phoenician episode and the Saint Magnus Martyr episode are crucial; whether the discontinuity that troubled Virginia Woolf can be accounted for; and whether or not the ending is open or conclusive, and thus the poem one of despair, resolve, hope or whatever. Brooks brings to bear enormous knowledge including that of Jessie Weston's book *From Ritual to Romance* that Eliot sent his readers to, knowledge of a great many of the Biblical and literary allusions, and what other interpreters had said.

Yet Brooks's interpretation is not final. It comes to this, a view of the very ambiguous ending as closed with a rather definite meaning: 'It is true that the protagonist does not

17 I attempt to deal with some of these issues in 'Dignifying Signifying: A Meditation on Interpretation', *Arts*, The University of Sydney Arts Association, xv (1990), 71-86.

18 *Macmillan Casebook*, p.11.

19 *WL Facsimile*, p.1.

witness a revival of the waste land; but there are two important relationships involved in [the protagonist's] case: a personal one as well as a general one. If secularization has destroyed, or is likely to destroy, modern civilization, the protagonist still has a private obligation to fulfill. ... "Shall I at least set my lands in order?"<sup>20</sup> Brooks's final statement of the poem's meaning is positive and assumes a coherent protagonist and a 'closed' ending.

It is, of course, true that Brooks did not have the benefit of Grover Smith's exhaustive studies of sources<sup>21</sup> or the knowledge of the revisions or of the original title of *The Waste Land*, 'He Do the Police In Different Voices'.<sup>22</sup> Or all the interpretations since the publication in 1971 of the facsimile edition. This breakthrough in knowledge is certainly one reason why interpretation must go on and on and can be said to progress.

But it is only one reason. Interpretation must and does go on also because of its very nature: it is limited, handling only so much at a time of the enormous complexity of the poem and needing every possible hermeneutic strategy in order to continue to make progress – or a viable contribution. For instance, it was reasonable at the time that Brooks thought there was a coherent voice, a single protagonist standing in for Eliot; it was reasonable for Brooks to assume a univocal closure; and it was reasonable to leave some cues out.

Milestone as his 1939 interpretation was, Brooks leaves other milestones to pass. He himself acknowledged that his interpretation did not account for everything and was not a substitute for the plenary experience of the poem. 'The foregoing account of *The Waste Land* is, of course', says Brooks, 'not to be substituted for the poem itself. Moreover,

20 *Macmillan Casebook*, pp.153-4.

21 Grover Smith made two studies: *T. S. Eliot's Poetry and Plays: A Study in Sources and Meaning* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1956, 2nd edn 1974) and *The Waste Land* (George Allen and Unwin, London, 1983).

22 *WL Facsimile*, p.4.

it certainly is not to be considered as representing the method by which the poem was composed. Much which the prose expositor must represent as though it had been consciously contrived obviously was arrived at unconsciously and concretely'.<sup>23</sup> There are hundreds of cues left untouched by Brooks and all sorts of hermeneutic strategies untried as Brooks struggles towards his notion of the poem's meaning and towards the inference the poem was not a piece of tripe after all. In assuming there is a coherent protagonist, for example, Brooks misses the haunting, as it were, of the reader by disembodied, often nightmarish, voices that – as if in a horror film – come unbidden from near and far, without, within. In concluding that the poem ends on personal commitment versus modern secular civilization, Brooks almost ignores the contrived openness, the seeming undecidability of the ending and the degree to which the reader must collaborate in the poem's effects.

One has to wait until the late 1980s and the 1990s to get some progress on these issues. Meantime even after the publication of the Ur-text facsimile in 1971 and the new knowledge concerning Eliot's original title, 'He Do the Police In Different Voices', interpreters still clung to the single protagonist and the closed ending. Let me illustrate this by some random samples of post-1971 interpretation. In a study that at times brilliantly benefits from Eisenstein's montage theory and the notion of the 'third something' that emerges from montage, Anne Bolgan nevertheless asserts the coherent protagonist (although in this instance Bolgan does not limit this just to Tiresias):

The attempts made by critics to read the poem in terms of its thematic unity, or the unity of its emotional effect, or that provided by its images, or by its mythical scaffolding, have all been generous in the extreme, but they leave me ... with the conviction that the solution to the poem's structural problem can only really be found by way of the one single personage who from beginning to end moves through the poem and finally emerges in sight of, if not yet perfectly endowed with,

23 *Macmillan Casebook*, p.155.

"The Peace which passeth understanding." I would locate that personage in the composite and thereby Christianized mythical figure of the poet-protagonist.<sup>24</sup>

Or take D. W. Harding's study which concludes:

The whole of Part V, 'What the Thunder Said', is highly complex and to some extent ambiguous, corresponding to the precarious situation of a man who has partially recovered from a psychological collapse but remains aware of the formidable obstacles ahead of him.... The quotation 'Hieronymo's mad againe' suggests the danger of relapse. But the final lines repeat the three injunctions as if they were still valid and still pointed to possibilities; and 'Shantih' expresses the acceptance of things as they are in all their uncertainty.<sup>25</sup>

'Things' may be uncertain, but the ending for Harding is certain: the central protagonist is accepting. Harding's interpretation is to rely unquestioningly on a coherent protagonist and see all the cues at the poem's end as relating to this protagonist (who is Eliot in a nervous breakdown thinly disguised) and not to an imputed consciousness addressed by multiple voice overs.

A. D. Moody does the same thing but he assumes the coherent protagonist is a poet coincidentally – again Eliot thinly disguised. Moody says:

The final proving of the poet's recovered powers ... is his responding to The Thunder's challenge with a just account of his experience. Instead of guilt and terror or evasive denunciation of the world, he plainly acknowledges, and compassionately revalues his relationship with others. These matter-of-fact assessments of limitation and failure are a form of arriving ... where he started, to know the place for the first time.<sup>26</sup>

24 Anne C. Bolgan, *What The Thunder Really Said. A Retrospective Essay on the Making of The Waste Land* (McGill, Queen's University Press, Montreal, 1973), p.33.

25 D. W. Harding, 'What The Thunder Said', in A.D. Moody, ed. *The Waste Land in Different Voices* (Edward Arnold, London, 1974), pp.27-8.

26 A. D. Moody, "'To fill all the desert with inviolable voice",' *op.cit.*, p.62.

Again the reading reader, the imputed consciousness listening to the poem, to the multiple voices, is ignored in favour of an unambiguous ending propped up by the coherent protagonist. As Harriet Davidson says in criticizing those interpreters who insist on Tiresias as the unified protagonist of the poem: 'The easiest way to solve the problem of meaning in the poem is to find there is a central persona'.<sup>27</sup> This may seem unfair to the deep searching these interpreters have done, but it is true that the easiest way to solve the open ending is to close it and to assume a coherent protagonist.

However, by the late 1980s and the 1990s, interpreters are addressing the reader's collaboration with the discontinuities that so troubled Virginia Woolf and the open ending that so troubles nearly everyone; and interpreters are not so preoccupied with the coherent protagonist. *Reading The Waste Land* by Jewel Spears Brooker and Joseph Bentley was published in 1990.<sup>28</sup> Brooker and Bentley focus their whole

27 Harriet Davidson, *T. S. Eliot and Hermeneutics* (Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge, 1985), p.13. Nevertheless, Davidson's interpretation finally is that '... the only positive conclusion can be an acceptance of the absence of the other in the self' (p.123).

28 Jewel Spears Brooker and Joseph Bentley, *Reading The Waste Land. Modernism and the Limits of Interpretation* (University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst, 1990), hereafter referred to in the text by page number. The most recent work available to me is *Early Poetry of T. S. Eliot* by Robin Grove (Sydney University Press, Melbourne, 1993), where the reader (perhaps too coherent and unified a reader replacing the coherent protagonist) is assumed to participate in the ending (pp.56-7). Cf. *T. S. Eliot's Silent Voices* by John T. Mayer (Oxford University Press, New York, 1989) pp.290-1: 'this most extravagant and revolutionary of Eliot's psychic monologues finally has no ending, for the process of ending it is continuous because we as readers have been incorporated into the poem and must "end" the poem for ourselves. We complete it by discovering in the "details" of our own experience the unique shape of our quests and the appropriate modes of release. We must interpret the commands of The Thunder in our own language of response'. *The Waste Land* is 'ended when readers repeat and complete the original task of the protagonist, to "end" his life by giving it purpose'.

study on the reader's role in the poem. This work has the benefit of Grover Smith's work on Eliot's sources, Valerie Eliot's facsimile of the revisions, Eliot's Harvard thesis on F. H. Bradley and other primary materials plus hundreds of articles and book-length interpretations that have accrued over seventy years.

Brooker and Bentley acknowledge their interpretation is built on past scholarship and past interpretations. They acknowledge the work of the New Critics is 'still indispensable' (p.3) and that Brooks's essay is 'still a model of critical helpfulness (p.3). They acknowledge the value of all the new access to primary materials and all the various critical approaches – existentialist, phenomenologist, structuralist, psychoanalytic, feminist and post structuralist; the work of Bloom, Miller, Poulet, Gadamer, Foucault, Lacan, Kristeva, Derrida (p.5); Marianne Thomählen, Gregory Jay, Harriet Davidson, Calvin Bedient – to mention only a few (pp.5-6).

What is their excuse for one more interpretation? The answer is that Brooker and Bentley feel they are making progress. They reject the reliance on the single protagonist in the poem; and they feel they come closer to an adequate interpretation, because of their knowledge of Eliot's views of language – paying particular attention, as they do, to Eliot's knowledge of F. H. Bradley. They offer a close reading of *The Waste Land* as a 'text about reading' (p.8): 'Like several other modernist texts, it can be read with profit as a set of guidelines, rather analogous to a musical score, an hour to read, or perform into actuality, the complete artistic experience' (p.8). Brooker and Bentley tackle the issue of the many voices and the lack of connections as well as all the other pitfalls. They acknowledge interpretation's limitations in their subtitle: 'Modernism and the Limits of Interpretation'.

But they still are compelled to interpret. 'As for the limits of interpretation, it is true in one way that the only limit on interpretation is the imagination of the interpreter, that reading a text such as *The Waste Land* sets in motion a

ceaseless and never-ending activity. This activity, paradoxically, leads to the discovery that all interpretation is essentially and severely limited in what it can achieve, that the value of interpretation is related more to something gained en route than to something waiting at the end. ... No interpretation is good for all seasons'. 'One of the issues we address in this book', say Brooker and Bentley, 'is this tension between the limitations and the unlimitedness of interpretation. We believe that the most useful interpretations are those in which the interpreter is self-conscious about the nature of interpretation ...' (pp.8-9).

So in spite of the limitations of interpretation, in spite of the vast amount of interpretation of the poem already, Brooker and Bentley feel compelled to another interpretation and one that they feel is of value: 'By decoding *The Waste Land*'s instructions on how it is to be read, we hope to contribute to the renewal and enrichment of dialogue on this great text which after sixty-five years still appears to be the poem of the century' (p.12). But after their thorough and original endeavours, they conclude: 'The final stanza indicates that neither shoring up nor tearing down will achieve closure. Art does and does not help. The Indian words do and do not help. The finale is a balance of positive and negative values. They add up to zero' (p.207).<sup>29</sup>

Now it is irresistible for another interpreter to join in the debate with Brooker and Bentley, when after their profoundly learned study, they feel *The Waste Land* adds up to zero. Not only that, they are still puzzled by some of the same things that puzzle every interpreter: they are undecided

29 Brooker and Bentley do have a second version of *The Waste Land*'s meaning in a speculative postscript to their study. With ideas drawn from Piaget and Kristeva, they amplify their notion of loss beyond what might be Eliot's conscious meaning to what could be Eliot's purpose in writing as he does in *The Waste Land*: to regain unity and human community. (See 'Infancy and Immediate Experience in Reading *The Waste Land*', *op.cit.*, pp.208-22). This view does not constitute an interpretation of the text so much as an explanation of it – its parataxis, the recurrent loss, indeed, the language itself which they take à la Kristeva as incestuous.

about the Phlebas the Phoenician episode;<sup>30</sup> they do not fully account for the Saint Magnus Martyr episode;<sup>31</sup> and they feel the open ending adds up to zero – even though they concentrate on reader collaboration and reader perspective.

So – prompted by what still seems to remain for another interpreter to do, and helped by what has gone before and the more recent trend towards accepting the role of the reader above that of a central protagonist and accepting the open ending, I feel compelled to see if *The Waste Land* adds up to zero. I do this, keeping in mind the daunting fact that interpretation is only simple, mere statements about the meaning of a poem and a poem is a great complexity, simultaneously piggybacking thoughts, feelings, associations, memories, in order to make up a surrogate experience, an experienced meaning.

For present purposes, I will only sketch what I would like to contribute to the interpreter's debate, particularly touching on the central obstacles – the multiple voices; the parataxis, the open ending; the Phlebas the Phoenician episode, and the Magnus Martyr episode. To begin with the first two obstacles: the many voices and the parataxis. The original title of Parts I and II of the *Ur-Waste Land*, 'He Do the Police In Different Voices' which Eliot took from *Our*

30 'Whatever may be said of this section cannot be said with any finality. The tale of Phlebas refuses allegorization, refuses to be caught in final statements of meaning' (p.163).

31 Cf. pp.138, 146-8: Brooker and Bentley do take account of the reader's role in the Magnus Martyr episode, but they do not see it as a sacred epiphany: 'The walls of Magnus Martyr cannot be in the bar and cannot be in the music – except in the alternative universe, the heterocosm, which the poetry invents. To see this brief passage as it is written is to recognize that the reader must invent a universe from which to read and perceive if he is to experience the coherence in what he has read. The affirmation of community is an affirmation of both the artist's creativity and the reader's need to complete the creation of a heterocosmic point of view' (p.148).

*Mutual Friend*,<sup>32</sup> is encouragement to discard the notion that there is one protagonist and that protagonist is Eliot in disguise as Tiresias. There is no evidence in the final version or even in the Ur-text that only one speaker speaks all. Eliot does say in his notes to the poem that Tiresias 'although a mere spectator and not indeed a "character", is yet the most important personage in the poem, uniting all the rest .... What Tiresias *sees*, in fact, is the substance of the poem'.<sup>33</sup> This is not evidence that Tiresias, 'mere spectator', speaks all the voice overs. But if one speaker does and that speaker is Tiresias, his is a voice over in many different scenes and of many different characters; and his voices come from past and present, from near and far, from without and within the reader, whose own consciousness provides the only continuity in the poem. All through *The Waste Land*, an imputed continuous consciousness listens to the voices, responds, feels, remembers. As with Eisensteinian montage, the imputed continuous consciousness collaborates, no less than with the discontinuities, with all the strategies of the poem.

One voice from long ago begins the poem, that of the Sibyl of Cumae in the epigraph. It mobilizes pain and is an omen to further suffering when coupled with the poem's title. The Sibyl is living on into a time that does not understand her wisdom. This is imaged or emblemized by her being inverted in a bottle with the uncomprehending youths not even knowing her and her sufferings being recounted unfeelingly by the grossest of hedonists,

32 *WL Facsimile*, p.125. Valerie Eliot's note on this identifies the source as Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend*, Chapter XVI, and continues: 'Sloppy is a founding adopted by old Betty Higden, a poor widow. "I do love a newspaper" she says. "You mightn't think it, but Sloppy is a beautiful reader of a newspaper. He do the Police in different voices."'

33 T. S. Eliot, *Collected Poems 1909-1962* (Faber and Faber, London, 1963), p.82. Hereafter cited in the text as line numbers, when referring to the poem itself.

Trimalchio in Petronius's *Satyricon*.<sup>34</sup> Her wisdom has not changed. It is simply unknown. The Sibyl is a spiritual potentiality, misperceived or unknown. Structurally Christ is in the same position in the poem as the Sibyl of Cumae – a spiritual potentiality misperceived or unknown in a time that pays attention to a parody of a prophet, Madame Sosostriis, the 'wisest woman in Europe' (l.45). Her wisdom is sought to be bought and merely relies on a pack of cards. Eliot uses her to set the reader second guessing, questing in the poem, as she tells the reader to watch for the Hanged Man and to fear death by water (l.55). But the horror of the Sibyl's fate introducing the poem means that the reader cannot be merely complicit with Madame Sosostriis and, instead, looks in on the tableau of her fortune-telling with wariness and irony. This ironic wariness is to be part of the reader response to the waste landers and to perceive with such irony is not to be a waste lander, but to be outside the valuelessness of the waste land.

This ironic perceiving begins early in the poem. Right after the Sibyl's haunting cry to die, the poem begins the section 'The Burial of the Dead' with a disembodied voice one cannot quite locate that makes a seemingly paradoxical statement: 'April is the cruellest month, breeding/Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing/Memory and desire, stirring/Dull roots with spring rain' (ll.1-4). And ever after in the poem disembodied voices continue to come at the reading reader. Sometimes, they seem sententious; sometimes troublesomely paradoxical, like the opening lines, getting past the reader's usual feelings about April, unsettling associations and expectations. The altered perspectives used in early German expressionist cinema had the same destabilizing motive. Sometimes the voices seem to come suddenly and frighteningly from someone close by, perhaps just by one's shoulder as in the harsh and sudden 'What are the roots that

34 *The Satyricon of Petronius*, tr. by Paul Dinnage (John Calder, London, 1953), p.42. Following this anecdote, which Trimalchio shows no sign of understanding, a huge pig is brought to the banquet table and there follows one of Trimalchio's gross pranks.

clutch, what branches grow/Out of this stony rubbish?' (ll.19-20). After the vapid gentility of Marie's recollections, the listening, unsettled reader is immediately reminded of something unpleasant and perhaps profound – harrowed by a question sudden and exigent that, although it is not *directly* connected to the Marie episode, is *instantly* connected to it in the reader's mind as the Marie episode is the last item read or 'listened' to. The question 'What are the roots that clutch?' is an almost violent parataxis and is typical of Eliot's technique – in greater or lesser degree – throughout the poem. As in cinema, Eliot's technique of discontinuity, 'suppression of "links in the chain"'<sup>35</sup> as he says, achieves a deep response from a vulnerable reader. It is a very 'inner' technique, getting past a reader's defences as any jeremiad or prophetic poem should. And it does more here. It makes the virtual past (Marie) and the present (the question) collide disarmingly. Eliot is to use parataxis and time collision repeatedly.

At this point the 'stony rubbish' does not have an obvious visual connection with the tableau of Marie. But just when the question ('What are the roots that clutch?') is only on the tip of the reader's understanding (Eliot is expert at this technique of withheld meaning), with only confused feelings mobilized, the voice over gives the answer, addressing the reader both directly as 'you' and hyperbolically and ominously as 'Son of man' (a phrase perhaps with remembered associations for the reader from *Ezekiel*): 'Son of man,/You cannot say, or guess, for you know only/A heap of broken images ...' (ll.20-22). There is surely scorn in this voice over. But, then, suddenly, the voice over modulates to an intimacy: 'Only/There is shadow under this red

35 In the Preface to St John Perse's *Anabasis*, Eliot defends apparent discontinuity as a technique: 'any obscurity [in *Anabasis*] ... on first readings, is due to the suppression of "links in the chain", of explanatory and connecting matter, and not to incoherence, or to the love of cryptogram. ... The reader has to allow the images to fall into his memory successively without questioning the reasonableness of each at the moment; so that, at the end, a total effect is produced' (Faber and Faber, London, 1930, p.8).

rock,/(Come in under the shadow of this red rock)' (ll.24-6). No sooner does the voice over yield this beckoning intimacy, than it moves to a haunting mode ('I will show you fear in a handful of dust' – l.30) – a mention of the future is in 'will show' and it is a threatening discomfoting future if one continues to read, as one irresistibly does.

But suddenly, discontinuously, this threatened discomfort is allayed, subverted, by another voice, beautiful and haunting, bringing seeming relief (ll.31-4). That one does not recognize the passage from Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde* or that one does not understand the German does not harm the poetical effects it instantly brings of soothing, gentle, predictable rhythm accompanied by lulling soft sounds, ending on a question – always a technique to achieve a very inner response from the reader, here only a barely mobilized response. But to understand the German is to feel more than a barely mobilized response; it is to feel a longing nostalgia, to have memory stirred. Certainly it is stirred with the next voice over, which is consistent in tone with the love theme conjured up in the 'Frisch weht der Wind' (l.31) passage: "“You gave me hyacinths first a year ago;/They called me the hyacinth girl”" (ll.35-6).

Does this mix memory and desire in the reader? The lines seem to be from within the very consciousness of the reader and to bring barely grasped memory just to the threshold of articulation. For the first time in the poem something seems gained – up from memory – that is precious. But it is soon subverted by another voice that suggests loss, failure:

– Yet when we came back, late, from the Hyacinth garden,  
Your arms full, and your hair wet, I could not  
Speak, and my eyes failed, I was neither  
Living nor dead, and I knew nothing,  
Looking into the heart of light, the silence.  
*Oed' und leer das Meer.* (ll.37-42)

This failure suggests loss (perhaps after consummated passion), a profound spiritual incapacity that renders the speaker or rememberer incapable of desire or insight or spiritual potential before the 'heart of light'. This phrase –

suggesting something transcendent just hovering – peters out into the ominous ‘*Oed’ und leer das Meer*’ – wide and empty the sea, a negation of the presence suggested by ‘heart of light’.

This brief passage is typical of Eliot’s strategy. The reader undergoes what Brooker and Bentley say – loss. ‘How do the poem’s techniques cohere with its themes?’ ask Brooker and Bentley. They answer: ‘The poem’s dominant rhetorical technique ... is parataxis or the absence of connectors. The process of reading the poem, then, is inevitably an experience of loss, involving repeated moments of unresolvable uncertainty’ (pp.211-12).

Certainly the poem is repeatedly moments of gain, then loss, assisted by the parataxis, at times harshly enacted by the parataxis. The reader undergoes gain – moments that are precious, profound, that are taken away – the hyacinth episode ends in loss; the heart of light dissolves in ‘*Oed’ und leer das Meer*’. Here I must deal with other major obstacles for interpreters, the Phlebas the Phoenician episode and the Saint Magnus Martyr episode.

Interpreters argue as to whether the Phlebas the Phoenician episode in Section IV, ‘Death by Water’, is a horrifying or peaceful experience for the reader and they prove or disprove this by reference to possible etymologies of the name of Phlebas, the long episode in the Ur-text of the fishermen facing death that Pound excised;<sup>36</sup> and Madame Sosostri’s advice to fear death by water (l.55). Without here arguing my decision too closely, I would agree with Helen Gardner’s interpretation (which did not have the benefit of the Ur-text). Helen Gardner takes the episode not as a fearful death episode but one of ‘ineffable peace, a passage backward through a dream, to a dreamless sleep in which the stain of living is washed away....’<sup>37</sup> This fits both the Ur-

36 See the account of the revision of this passage in *WL Facsimile*, pp.54-69.

37 Helen Gardner, *The Art of T. S. Eliot* (Faber and Faber, London, 1968), p.95. Cf. F. B. Pinion, *A T. S. Eliot Companion* (Macmillan,

text's episode of the fishermen confronting the storm and imminent death and the final version Pound approved. It fits the euphony of the section; and it picks up the lust versus purification theme from the Fire Sermon; and it is the purification by water that a waste lander is told to fear by Madame Sosostri's tricky advice.

But the passage does not end with peace. The voice over directly warns the reader: 'Consider Phlebas, who was once handsome and tall as you'(l.321). Once again the reader has a moment of something precious, as in the hyacinth passage or the mention of the heart of light, perhaps here it is the serenity of purity, and once again it is lost. It is taken away by the importunate warning 'Consider Phlebas'. This command startlingly brings the passage up to the actual present moment of the reading reader. Very disconcerting this moment, as harrowing as the close sudden experience of the voice that says 'I will show you fear in a handful of dust' (l.30).

The Magnus Martyr episode is like the Phlebas episode, a gain then a loss. It is an epiphany of harmonious beauty and holiness – prompted not just by the actual contiguity of the pub with the church, but also by the congeniality of the community of the fishermen – the Billingsgate workers. The feeling in the passage ascends from a sense of human community to transcendence –

where the walls  
Of Magnus Martyr hold  
Inexplicable splendour of Ionian white and gold (ll.264-5).

The splendour is inexplicable, unbidden and is associated both with beauty, an ascetic Ionian beauty,<sup>38</sup> and the martyr

London, 1983), p.132: 'The submarine current which whisperingly denudes his bones of their sinful flesh connotes an early process of spiritual rebirth, "whispers" being a metaphor for mystical communion with God or intimations of the Divine'.

38 In the Ur-text Eliot shows he has decided on 'inexplicable' instead of 'Inviolable' and 'Their joyful'; and he decided on 'splendour' instead of 'music.' 'Music' would have modulated the music motif of the gramophone (l.256) but 'splendour' serves as a visual bursting of

Saint Magnus. The walls paradoxically 'hold' this splendour and the reader – with the splendour visually associated with the church – can behold it. A little miracle? An epiphany.

But right after this exquisite epiphanic moment, the inexplicable beautiful holiness that the reader has just experienced, it is taken away and the sordid episode of the Thames maidens follows in which human gestures – in fact, sexual relations – have no value, are parodic of human community. The reader has had a transcendent moment – just a glimpse, that can only be desirable and memorable, but which is followed by the resumption of almost numbing valueless human relations. And so once again the reading reader has an experience incapable of being treated ironically that is precious, something to be desired and held in memory, and it is taken away as the importuning of the voices of the Thames maidens take over and the reading reader returns to irony, distance and disgust. But the Magnus Martyr episode has happened. It is held in memory.

Perhaps the next precious moment is the voice over considering what might have been after 'Damyata' in 'What the Thunder said' (ll.40-41). This occurs after a series of disembodied voices, close, startling, of 'mantic intensity' as Hugh Kenner says,<sup>39</sup> almost as if at one's shoulder, nudging the listening reader to remembrance of the suffering of the crucifixion:

After the torchlight red on sweaty faces  
 After the frosty silence in the gardens  
 After the agony in stony places  
 The shouting and the crying  
 Prison and palace and reverberation  
 Of thunder of spring over distant mountains  
 He who was living is now dead. (ll.322-8)

This last line brings the reader back up to the present

beauty in keeping with the suddenness and the transience of the epiphany. The original version also had 'Corinthian' instead of 'Ionian'. 'Ionian' is more in keeping as an ascetic association.

39 Hugh Kenner, *The Invisible Poet* (Methuen, London, 1945), p.248.

moment and to the present moment, as waste land. The reader then relentlessly undergoes almost a pounding:

Here is no water but only rock  
Rock and no water and the sandy road  
The road winding above the mountains  
Which are mountains of rock without water. (ll.331-4)

After the relentlessness of the waste land imagery imposing thirst and helplessness, an intimate voice over asks the reader the question 'Who is the third who walks always beside you?' (l.359) or 'What is that sound high in the air' (l.366). The answers are not in the poem. The answers are hovering, on the threshold of knowing and of speech within the reader's mind – an achievement of Eliot's mobilizing technique that he uses successfully throughout his poetry, perhaps even more effectively in *Four Quartets*.

These questions and those of nightmare imagery precede what the thunder says and they produce an intensity and a chaos of sensation that gives way when finally a 'damp gust' brings rain (l.394) and the thunder speaks. Eliot has the thunder, a sort of originary Logos, speak from long ago, the farthest back in the poem's virtual time. The title of this section is 'What the Thunder said', not just what it says – and the thunder speaks a language older than any European language. But the thunder's utterance comes up to the present moment setting an individual consciousness, not necessarily that of the poet or Tiresias or the reader, exploring his own ethical life in relation to another (indeed, each of the voice over's responses to the thunder's commands is to ruminate on a relation to another) and reliving a moment of spiritual potential in 'your heart would have responded/Gaily, when invited, beating obedient/To controlling hands' (ll.420-23). This is another reprieve in the poem, a brief, precious moment of harmony – gaiety associated with control as the peace of Phlebas is associated with purification or the beauty of Magnus Martyr with the ascetic and holy.

But this glimpse of harmony is soon to be lost like the other moments. In another flashback 'I sat upon the

shore/Fishing' (ll.423-4), the 'I' who is often conflated with Christ or the Fisher King waiting for renewal or recognition, may also be the 'I' of the previous section who has responded to the commands of the Thunder by his ethical soul-searching. 'Shall I at least set my lands in order?' (l.425) may suggest a resolution from his soul searching. But at the moment of the mention of order, chaos is come again and the reader undergoes another loss. An explosion of disconnected quotations bursts forth. Whether from the single speaker who attempts to set his lands in order and who may be mad, or whether again from disembodied voices that are hauntings of the reader's continuous consciousness, the reiterated fragments from the past, from the present, from without, from within, bombard the listening reader in the present. All the quotations have been identified and analysed again and again. My interest here is that the quotations are a reprise of pain and longing and they prompt memories the reader has just accrued from reading the poem.

Then suddenly, a voice over, exigent and seemingly close, addresses the reader in the same disconcerting way 'hypocrite lecteur' did (l.76). 'Why then Ile fit you. Hieronymo's mad againe' (l.431) is an abrupt, threatening clinching of the reader's attention to the present moment obviating reverie. Interpreters may well be right that here Eliot allows himself a crypto-didactic trick with Hieronymo.<sup>40</sup> In Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*, Hieronymo, driven mad by his son's murder, agrees to present an entertainment. In his play, his hanged son's murderers are killed. (His hanged son can be conflated with other figures structurally similar – the inverted Sibyl or the Hanged Man of the cards or Christ.) But after this aggressive address to the listening reader ('Why then Ile fit you') come the sounds that now are not incomprehensible: 'Datta Damyadhvam, Damyata' (l.432). They have by now been glossed from line 400 to line 420. They are reiterated now not as new, but as if the voice over is repeating a catechism.

40 Cf. F. B. Pinion, *A T. S. Eliot Companion* (Macmillan, London, 1986), p.136.

Regardless, they are remembered from shortly before by the reader. In the final line of the poem, the sounds of the commands, definite and insistent, are followed by the relieving persistent softnesses of 'Shantih shantih shantih'.

The three commands coming as they do in the second last line of the poem cannot but be remembered by the reader; and 'Shantih shantih shantih' immediately following these, the poem's last line and last harmonious peaceful moment, is a release that cannot but be desired and remembered. These final moments of the poem belong not to a coherent protagonist but to the imputed continuous consciousness of the reading reader who has just finished reading the poem. And in the ensuing silence after the final 'shantih' the mobilized remembered desire created by this final peace is an equivalent to the spiritual potential briefly experienced in the Phlebas episode or Magnus Martyr epiphany.

It is at this very moment, the final moment of the poem, that the so called open ending does its work: the reader's consciousness has been altered; the reader now has memories of disgust as with the typist and the young man carbuncular episode; of recoil and hurt as with the mention of Philomel or the children singing in the cathedral right after the mention of the procuress, Mrs Porter and her daughter; or the reader has moments of loss in human love as with the hyacinth girl or of peace. Amidst the sordidness, the loss, the reader has experienced barely glimpsed moments of peace – that are remembered to be desired. *The Waste Land* is indeed a poem of memory and desire; it unifies these in the final line and brings them to the brink in the reader's consciousness in a present moment of spiritual potential.

Interpreters generally make too much of the Fisher King at last on the shore fishing as if that were the poem's end. The poem and reading the poem do not end until the silence after 'Shantih shantih shantih' and the reader has finished reading. The imputed continuous consciousness experiencing all the exigent voice overs is in the poem until the very end – and beyond. The poem does not end with an

undecided Hieronymo or Fisher King who is an undecided T. S. Eliot. The poem, part jeremiad, part satire, part exemplum, part catechism and entirely lyric drama, ends on a moment of possibility in the consciousness of the reader. The poem does not add up to zero. The way out of the waste land has become an *experienced* possibility through remembered desire. That is the undecidable, 'open', momentous beginning the poem ends on.

For the reader on an existential holiday, *The Waste Land* may or may not be rewarding; it may seem a profound experience or forever like highbrow flotsam and jetsam, a strange experience one may never or need never comprehend. Fragments of it only may stay with one – beautiful phrases or rhythms or grotesque anecdotes. One might even want to visit London and photograph a few churches. But for the interpreter, *The Waste Land* is deeply rewarding. The interpreter, compelled to make sense of the experience of the poem, who tries at least to account for the voice overs, the epiphanies, the parataxis, the open ending and the imputed consciousness of the reader, has the reward of learning that the poem ends on a possible beginning of no little significance in that consciousness. *The Waste Land* is not a 'piece of tripe', not even the voice of twentieth-century despair or alienation or nervous exhaustion or indecision, but a poem that yet brings the twentieth-century reader, remembering lust, longing, pain, betrayal, but also harmonious love, holiness, control, peace, to something momentous – a future of one's own choosing.

This interpretation is consistent with Eliot's own development at the time. He was not a sudden convert to Anglicanism in 1927. His interest in the moral and in the nature of divinity was life long, coming as he did from a Unitarian family of rigorous opinion on sex, martyrdom and God.<sup>41</sup> And having experienced as a student in Boston, a

41 Lyndall Gordon, *Eliot's Early Years* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1977), pp.4-14.

moment he called 'silence', Eliot accepted its implications.<sup>42</sup> He read deeply in books about mysticism and in sacred texts of all sorts, whatever philosophic works he read. As he came nearer to drawing together the fragments of *The Waste Land* he carried in his pocket his volume of Dante everywhere.<sup>43</sup>

Other interpreters will undoubtedly find cues I have missed or disagree with, say, the way I accept the controversial Phlebas episode as serene or the way I disregard a coherent protagonist, or they could agree with the way I disregard the coherent protagonist and make even more of it than I do, or make more of the time collisions and so on. Interpretation goes on, not because of unlimited semiosis, but because art works are complex simultaneities, rich experiences; and because interpretation, that is, making statements about a work's meaning, is limited.

But if interpretation is compelled to go on, it must test its progress and its worth, as Umberto Eco has suggested: in relation to the text, testing itself against the 'text as a coherent whole'<sup>44</sup> – that is to say, not in relation to how well an interpretation can *use* a text to illustrate a few ideas finessed into a theory. The interpreter quests for the meaning of a text, testing his findings always against the plenary experience of the text's cues.

Such an interpreter can never again be the innocent reader on an existential holiday, seeking merely a surrogate experience for a while. However the rewards of the interpretative endeavour are to have what the reader has but also to have the deep apprehension that the work that has come one's way, claimed one's time, changed one's consciousness and memory, has genuine meaning and that something of perhaps permanent value has been put into the world.

42 Gordon, p.75.

43 *Ibid.*, p.118 *et passim*.

44 Umberto Eco, *Interpretation and overinterpretation* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1992), p.65.