

MULTIPLE VARIETY IN A WILDERNESS OF
MIRRORS:
T.S. ELIOT'S THE WASTE LAND AND THE
CRITICAL CONTROVERSY IT SPURS

Ruben Moi

"Criticism is an autotelic activity."

"Criticism is as inevitable as breathing."

"Literary criticism is a distinctive activity of the civilised mind."

T. S. Eliot

Ever since T.S. Eliot published his famous poem in that *annus mirabilis* of modernism, 1922, the poem has attracted congeries of criticism. The poem's kaleidoscopic diversity of thematic and formal concerns invites a vast range of individual interpretations, as well as various schools of literary theory. Since its appearance on the literary arena most principles of metatextual theory have been applied to this enigmatic text. Some critics have regarded *The Waste Land* as a unified work with a definite vision, other critics have seen it as a fragmented and open-ended text whose meaning is indeterminate. The attention the poem attracts originates primarily in the polysemic nature of the poem. It seems as if the irreducible multiplicity of the poem captures the fascination of most literary critics, and also offers the poem as a lucid example of their different literary theories. Thus it has been subjected to critical analysis by the New Critics, cultural critics, Marxists and archetypal structuralists. In addition the theories of Barthes and Bakhtin offer new perspectives of literary criticism that are pertinent to the poem. The text constitutes the central focus of the different critical approaches, yet exactly what the nature and function of this text is, emerges as a pivotal point. The different definitions of the text also implicate the triangular relations between the author, the text and the reader. In my analysis I will attempt to express my opinion of the poem's nature in light of three

Multiple Variety in a Wilderness of Mirrors

central approaches to the poem. It appears to me that the New Critics, Barthes and Bakhtin centre most specifically on the text itself, as other critical schools often introduce the text into a larger dimension that diminishes the textual concentration.¹ As my stance so far has probably already revealed, it is my contention that T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* is an open-ended text that does not exercise any determinacy on the reader. In my discussion I will keep the poem as a point of departure. Through an analysis of various sections of the poem, I will try to illustrate how it reflects, relates to and illustrates different literary theories.

Interliterary introspection and New Criticism

The constricted concentration on textual features is engendered by the convoluted intertextuality of the poem itself. Eliot anticipates this quality in his own poetry in his famous lines from the classic essay, "Tradition and the Individual Talent":

... not only the best, but the most individual parts of his [the poet's] work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously.²

An analysis of some of the major literary critics of *The Waste Land* in general, and the New Critics in particular, is quite often inextricable from the literary theories of Eliot himself. That Eliot's literary doctrines became significant far beyond his own poetry is a well-established fact, and Delmore Schwartz traces his crucial influence in his essay "The Literary Dictatorship of T.S. Eliot".³ As a literary critic Eliot soon established himself as a prominent figure within the New Criticism movement. He emphasises the connection between his poetry and criticism in the essay "The Frontiers of Criticism":

¹The orthodox Marxist critics often form their literary judgement on ideological foreclosure and extra-literary criteria. The archetypal approach is too restricted by Jungian psychology. The cultural critics often regard the poem as a result of the author's social background.

²T.S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent", in Frank Kermode's *Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot* (London, Faber and Faber, 1987), 38.

³Delmore Schwartz, "The Literary Dictatorship of T.S. Eliot", in Graham Clarke (ed.), *T.S. Eliot: Critical Assessments* (London, Christopher Helm Ltd., 1990, 4 vols.), Vol. IV, 178-192.

My criticism has this in common with that of Ezra Pound, that its merits and its limitations can be fully appreciated only when it is considered in relation to the poetry I have written myself.⁴

The very beginning of *The Waste Land* indicates the literary consciousness and the intertextual character of the poem that Eliot adumbrates in "Tradition and the Individual Talent":

April is the cruellest month, breeding
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
Memory and desire, stirring
Dull roots with spring rain.

The imagery of spring flowers evokes a primordial literary convention. The lines hint of the opening of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, Whitman's flowers and Frazerian fertility rites. Eliot's acute choice of a traditional poetic convention even extends to the Scandinavian corner of the world and includes Bjørnson's famous choice. But Eliot's method here is not one of lame and insipid imitation. The description of April inverts the conventional poetic idea of spring, as the natural revitalisation of the season is not a welcome harbinger, rather an ominous ghost disturbing the pleasant slumber of winter darkness. Likewise the free verse disrupts the prevalent prosody of this time.⁵ The irregular metre and the absence of conventional rhyme and pattern of the opening passage contrast with the pedestrian rhythm into which the

⁴T.S. Eliot, "The Frontiers of Criticism", in *The Sacred Wood* (London, Methuen & Co Ltd., 1969), 106.

⁵For Eliot's definition of free verse and the importance he attaches to this technique, see his exemplary essay "Vers Libre", in Frank Kermode, *Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot* (London, Faber and Faber, 1987), 31-37.

Multiple Variety in a Wilderness of Mirrors

romantic tradition had degenerated by the end of the 19th century.⁶ In this way the poem is not merely a repository of literary texts, but more an abrasive filter through which poetic sediments are separated from the currents of contemporary poetry. As it befits a poet-critic, many of Eliot's literary principles are subsumed in his creative writing. The opening lines of *The Waste Land* incorporate many of Eliot's ideas of poetry, but most of all they illustrate the extreme literary awareness of the poem.

On publication of *The Waste Land*, Eliot's poetic practice provoked immediate polemics, and the critical controversy centred very much on the indeterminable nature of the text. In his review "The Poetry of Drouth" [sic?], Edmund Wilson assigns an overriding importance to the archetypal ideas of Frazerian fertility myths and Weston's romance theories and compares Eliot's poem to "a full-rigged ship in a bottle."⁷ In his response to Wilson, Eliot's close friend, Conrad Aiken, adopts the opposite stance and argues that *The Waste Land* is not "a kind of epic in a walnut shell":

I think we must, with reservations, and with no individualness, conclude that the poem is not, in any formal sense coherent [...] I think, therefore, that the poem must be

⁶A ditty written by Sir William Watson (1858-1935) just before the turn of the century reveals the inane level some contemporary poetry had sunk to. The poem illustrates lucidly what the Imagists reacted against and bears specific relevance to Eliot's famous first verses of *The Waste Land*. (Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch (ed.), *The Oxford Book Of English Verse 1250-1918*, (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1943), 870:

Song

April, April
Laugh thy girlish laughter;
Then, the moment after,
Weep thy girlish tears!
April, that mine ears
Like a lover greetest,
All my hope and fears,
April, April,
Laugh thy golden laughter,
But, the moment after,
Weep thy golden tears!

⁷Edmund Wilson Jr., "The Poetry of Drouth", in Lois A. Cuddy and David Hirsch (eds.), *T.S. Eliot's The Waste Land* (Boston, G.K. Hall & Co., 1991), 30.

sense coherent [...] I think, therefore, that the poem must be taken - most invitingly offers itself - as a brilliant and kaleidoscopic confusion [...] intensely literary consciousness which perceives itself to be not a unit but a chance correlation or conglomerate of mutually discolorative fragments.⁸

Aiken and Wilson represent the two opposing groups of early reviewers, who regarded *The Waste Land* as a unified work with a definite vision or as a multi-fragmented text of indeterminate meaning. But they both agree in defining as a novel and constitutive aspect of the poem what Aiken calls "a literature of literature" and "idolatry of literature". In this sense they represent two poles that are engulfed by the literary ideas of New Criticism.

The intertextual complexity of the poem increases considerably throughout. Eliot's poetic diction is replete with recondite references and abundant in allusions. The imagery evokes the desolate aridity of *Exodus*, *Oedipus Rex* and the myths of the Fisher King. The water metaphors swirl with the protean buoyancy of Renaissance literature and Wagnerian opera. The moribund spirituality involves ideas from both Oriental and Western religions. In addition to the literary canon, the interwoven texts are taken from myth, music and religion. But the collation of textual fragments expands beyond the realm of written words to include speech and cultural context. The vernacular slang of contemporary London pub-life creates a foil to the literary solemnity of Belladonna's situation. Madame Sosostriis appears as the false prophet with fraudulent texts. Her spurious solutions represent an alternative signifying system, and they are symbolic of the sense of spiritual ennui in the poem. It becomes evident that the disparate intertextuality of the poem is taken from all walks of life, as well as all genres of literature.

This heterogeneity defies any notion of unity and harmony, and thus supports Aiken's evaluation of the poem. But a vast number of critics maintain that the radical form is counteracted by underlying ideas in the poem. They impose order upon the

⁸Conrad Aiken, "An Anatomy of Melancholy", *Ibid.*, 35.

Multiple Variety in a Wilderness of Mirrors

incongruous plurality of the poem by resorting to the significance Eliot attributes to the works of Weston and Frazer in his notes. Many critics have been seduced to conclude that Eliot's comment assigns a basic fabric to all the interwoven allusions. In their view the fertility myths provide a means of unity to the disjointed character of the poem. In fact it is hard to subscribe to the view that the poem is unified by an underlying myth. This orderly structure is undermined by the fact that there is no single myth at the core of the poem. The biblical myths of the Old Testament and the myths of ancient Greece vie with the myths of Frazer and Weston for hegemony. The various critics' selection of a single unifying comment in Eliot's notes is based on arbitrary choice. Some critics give priority to Eliot's note on Weston and Frazer, others prefer the importance he attributes to Tiresias. The irrelevance of encroaching unity upon the poem by means of a single comment is enhanced by the precarious status of the notes. First of all the poem was originally published without the notes. Secondly, they are just as ambiguous as the poem itself. Although some of them might seek to assert monological authority over the main text, other notes counteract this function by their ludic, esoteric and arcane quality. Finally, in his famous disclaimer of the notes as "the remarkable exposition of bogus scholarship", meant to stall accusations of plagiarism and to fill out the slender volume of *The Waste Land* for publication, Eliot re-evaluates ironically his view of the notes and regrets "stimulating the seekers of sources" and "having sent so many enquirers off on a wild goose chase after Tarot cards and the Holy Grail."⁹ By their dissipated quality the notes do not unify the incongruity of the main text. On the contrary, the notes exacerbate its inchoate quality.

The idea of a mythic unity is further dissipated by the works of Frazer and Weston themselves. In *The Golden Bough* and *From Ritual to Romance* there is no single, unitary myth, rather the opposite. In her study, Weston analyses a large number of myths that might be traced to the same origin. But the plenitude of these myths is immense and dissimilar. Likewise Frazer expatiates upon

⁹T.S. Eliot, "From the Frontiers of Criticism", in *The Sacred Wood* (Methuen & Co Ltd., 1960), 109-110.

an enormous corpus of myths in his social-anthropological study of vegetation ceremonies from all ages and places. Although there are similarities in the veritable plethora of myths and rites they investigate, it takes quite a strenuous effort of structural reductionism to extract any unity.¹⁰ Thus the critics who base their ideas of unity on the mythical aspect form their theories on a fallacious misconception, just as those who resort to specific notes employ a method that seems preposterous to the nature of the text itself.

Cleanth Brooks' essay, "*The Waste Land: Critique of the Myth*" epitomises the orderly mind and the preoccupation with unity and coherence that is symptomatic of so many of the New Critics.¹¹ The propensity for order is reflected in its organisation. His chronological reading of the poem gives it a form of coherence, which is antithetical to the discontinuous and disparate discourse of his subject of analysis. Similarly, his choice of words creates an illusory state of unity. Brooks speaks continuously of "the theme", "the structure", "a unified whole", and "the basic symbol". His pervasive use of the singular form misrepresents totally the multi-fragmented character of Eliot's poem. He even speaks of "*the protagonist*" (italics mine). The singular form of this literary term

¹⁰In Weston's investigation of the Fisher King myths, there are multiple variables; the heroes of the quest vary, as do the purpose and the nature of the quest itself. Similarly, who gets stricken by disease varies, as well as the reasons for this and the final outcome. She also discerns two major mythic traditions that appear particularly irreconcilable - the pagan and the Christian - and posits:

"A prototype, containing the main features of the Grail story - the Waste Land, the Fisher King, the Hidden Castle with its solemn Feast, and mysterious Feeding Vessel, the Bleeding Lance and Cup - does not, so far as we know, exist." (Jessie Laidlay Weston, *From Ritual to Romance*, 3). In his social-anthropological studies Frazer deals with ancient Oriental and Norse mythology, together with recent Africa and his own contemporary America. It seems absurd to regard this immense diversity as a single concept.

¹¹ Although I have chosen Cleanth Brooks' essay as the paradigmatic example of the literary principles propounded by the group later called New Critics, it is almost certain that Eliot himself was an even more influential figure within this movement. In 1956 Eliot emphasises the diversity and novelty of New Criticism;

"The term 'The New Criticism' is often employed by people without realizing what a variety it comprehends; but its currency does, I think, recognize the fact that the more distinguished critics of to-day, however widely they differ from each other, all differ in some significant way from the critics of the previous generation." ("The Frontiers of Criticism", 103-104).

Despite the number of individual critics, it is rare to come across any literary idea that can not be traced back to the essays of Eliot himself.

Multiple Variety in a Wilderness of Mirrors

ignores the multi-vocal disharmony of the poem and precludes any investigation of the poem's multi-voiced technique. Brooks' analysis leans substantially on his detailed exposition of all the esoteric symbols and allusions. This creates an erudite intertextual introspection that does not transcend the hermetic literary sphere. Brooks' approach to *The Waste Land* deals with the poem as a loose balloon adrift in mid-air. Any external reality and evaluation of the poem's function are eclipsed by the constricted literary focus. Although New Criticism adopted the scientific approach to literature from positivist scholarship, this school transferred the emphasis from Hippolyte Taine's "la race, le milieu et le moment"¹² to the text itself. The literary criticism that previously found its unity in the mind of the author, now finds its completeness in the text itself. The text becomes a self-contained entity detached from both author and reader. It is restored as a new centre of unity. But this unity tends to be a superimposed one in which the literary concentricism operates as the common denominator of the multiplicity of heterogeneous elements.

The quest for unity that Cleanth Brooks illustrates lucidly, arises as a hallmark of the criticism succeeding the period of the poem's publication. In his exposition of Eliot's poetry, the great critic F.R. Leavis states quite peremptorily: "Not that the *poem* lacks organisation and unity. The frequent judgements that it does, betray a wrong approach."¹³ John T. Mayor¹⁴ and George Williamson¹⁵ follow suit with Edmund Wilson Jr. and impose unity upon the poem under the aegis of the misconceived ideas of Frazer and Weston. Keith Wright¹⁶ finds unity in word repetition and an early anonymous reviewer allocates the poem's unity to the poet's vision: "Mr. Eliot's poem is also a collection of flashes, but there is

¹² The quotation from Hippolyte Taine is cited from Ann Jefferson and David Robbey (eds.), *Modern Literary Theory* (London, B.T. Batsford Ltd., 1988), 9.

¹³ F.R. Leavis, "T.S. Eliot", in Graham Clarke, *Op. Cit.*, Vol. II., 172.

¹⁴ John T. Mayor, "The Waste Land: Eliot's Play of Voices" in Lois A. Cuddy and David H. Hirsch (eds.), *Critical Essays on T.S. Eliot's The Waste Land*, (Boston, Massachusetts, G.K. Hall & Co., 1991), 265-279.

¹⁵ George Williamson, "The Structure of *The Waste Land*", in Sheila Sullivan (ed.), *Critics on T.S. Eliot* (London, George Allen and Unwin, 1978) 32-44.

¹⁶ Keith Wright, "Word Repetition in the Early Verse", *Ibid.*, 21-26.

no effect of heterogeneity, since all the flashes are relevant to the same thing and together give what seems to be a complete expression of this poet's vision of modern life.¹⁷ Maud Bodkin and Genevieve W. Foster agree in unifying the poem in the primordial imagery of Jungian archetypes.¹⁸ Although these critics allocate the unity of the poem to different elements, they all conjoin in ascribing unity and coherence to the poem. In fact the concept of unity which to a large extent became a feature typical of New Criticism, stems from a contemporary *zeitgeist*. It seems as if they all yield to the incubus of a quest for structure and order that in many ways appears universally prevalent throughout the first half of this century. At the time of Eliot's early poetry this quest manifests itself in such diverse works as Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, Vladimir Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale*, and in the search for archetypes in Jung's psychoanalytical studies. Later on the tendency is pursued in the field of social anthropology by Claude Lévi-Strauss, and in all spheres of society by the post-Saussurean structuralists. In a historical period that spans two world wars and the explosion of plurality in the field of art, this quest for underlying unity represents a logical reaction. But *The Waste Land* is not party to this sentiment. Part of the poem's merit hinges on the way it resists its contemporary mood and suggests an alternative frame of mind.

The approach of Cleanth Brooks and the New Critics illuminates many of the obscure elements in Eliot's poem. But the literary determinacy it implants in the text is flawed in many ways. First of all, their quest for order is lodged in the mind of the individual critic than the text itself. Secondly, in their "literariness" the New Critics are insensitive to the constituent element of any text: the nature of language itself. The language Eliot employs is not only taken from a restricted literary realm; it incorporates a speech diversity from all walks of life. In this respect the literary

¹⁷ Anonymous, "Review of *The Waste Land* and notice of first issue of the *Criterion*" in Graham Clarke, *Op. Cit.*, Vol. II., 65.

¹⁸ Maud Bodkin, *archetypal patterns in poetry* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1968), 305-314. Genevieve W. Forster, "The Archetypal Imagery of T.S. Eliot", in Lois A. Cuddy and David H. Hirsch (eds.), *Op. Cit.*, 113-122.

Multiple Variety in a Wilderness of Mirrors

theories of Roland Barthes and Mikhail Bakhtin open up the restricted perspective of New Criticism.

Barthesian intertextuality and the loss of the reader

The supra-literary polyphony of Eliot's language is clearly seen in the poem's final verses:

I sat upon the shore
Fishing, with the arid plain behind me
Shall I at least set my lands in order?
London bridge is falling down falling down falling
down
Poi sáscese nel foco che gli affina
Quando fiam uti chelidon - O swallow swallow
Le prince d'Aquitane à la tour abolie
These fragments I have shored against my ruins
Why then Ile fit you. Hieronymo's mad again.
Datta. Dayadhvam. Damayata.
Shantih shantih shantih

These verses subsume many of the poem's leit-motifs and incorporate literary fragments and allusions. But the polyphonic crescendo of *The Waste Land* transcends the constrictions of the literary canon. The myth of the Fisher King blends with nursery rhyme and Dantean verse. The Italian and French language intervene in the English. The Occidental culture interacts with the Oriental. In this manner the text embraces a range of self-referential themes, numerous intertextual fragments, several languages and different cultures. The intertextual network clearly moves beyond the literary tradition to include various types of speech, languages, myths, religions and ideologies. The verses explode the literary narcissism of New Criticism, and it takes a really rigorous mind to discern any unity. The ending, as the whole poem, pertains much more to Barthes' concept of text: "The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of

culture."¹⁹ Or as he explains more elaborately in his encyclopaedic summary of the textual ideas of the Parisian circle in "Theory of the Text":

The text redistributes language (it is the field of this redistribution). One of the paths of this deconstruction-reconstruction is to permute texts, scraps of texts that have existed or exist around and finally within the text being considered: any text is an intertext: other texts are present in it, at varying levels, in more or less recognisable forms: the texts of the previous and surrounding culture. Any text is a new tissue of past citations. Bits of codes, formulae, rhythmic models, fragments of social languages, etc. pass into the text and are redistributed within it, for there is always language before and around the text.²⁰

Compared to this comprehensive idea of the intertextual, it seems logical to redefine the New Critics' use of the term as "interliterary". In many ways this is exactly what Barthes does in his essay "From Work to Text". In his substitution of text for literary work, Barthes erects a new set of criteria for the evaluation of creative writing. Barthes' ideas of a text's nature and function also seem more apposite to *The Waste Land* than the literariness of the New Critics. In his essay, Roland Barthes redefines the traditional conventions of literature and strongly opposes the convergence within the text which the New Critics emphasised. In many ways this essay reveals the unchallenged assumptions about literature inherent in the doctrines of the New Critics. Although *The Waste Land* is probably as remote from mass culture as you can possibly get, it is tempting to quote an incisive line by Barthes that certainly is pertinent to the New Critics: "The reluctance to declare its codes characterises bourgeois society and the mass culture issuing from

¹⁹Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author", in *Image, Music, Text* (New York, The Noonday Press, 1989), 146.

²⁰Roland Barthes, "Theory of the Text" (1973) in Robert Young (ed.), *Untying the Text* (Boston, London and Henley, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), 39.

Multiple Variety in a Wilderness of Mirrors

it."²¹ According to the ideas of "From Work to Text" a literary work is conventional, monological, mimetic and artistic. In opposition to this, the text is subversive, heterodoxical, plural, dialogic and metatextual. It seems Barthes' textual theories are attuned to the experimental development of creative writing (and all cultural signifying systems) in our century, a type of textual experimentation that *The Waste Land* is a superb example of. In a quote that is highly apposite to both the ending of Eliot's poem and the unitary idea of the New Critics, Barthes observes:

The pleasure of the text does not prefer one ideology to another. [...] What is overcome is the *moral unity* that society demands of every human product.²²

Such a reading of the text as Barthes suggests here captures the multilogical nature of *The Waste Land*. It also debunks exactly that moral unity that the New Critics tried to impose on Eliot's dissipated poem and assigns a radical new role to the reader. The literary introspection of the New Critics maintained the distinction of genres and excluded the reader's role. Likewise the interpretation ensuing from their "close reading" hardly ever proceeded to any evaluation of the literary work. In his definition of text Barthes opposes these ideas by revoking the division of genres and emphasising the function of the text:

In the same way, the Text does not stop at (good) Literature; it cannot be contained in a hierarchy, even in a single division of genres. What constitutes the Text is, on the contrary (or precisely), its subversive force in respect of the old classifications.²³

The subversive quality of *The Waste Land* is quite evident. The poem's mood of metropolitan malaise, its inclusion of symbolist

²¹ Roland Barthes, "Structural Analysis of Narratives", in *Image, Music, Text*, 116.

²² Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text* (New York, Hill and Wang, 1975), 31.

²³ Roland Barthes, "From Work to Text", in *Image, Music, Text*, 157.

features, its disruption of a unified voice, all corroborate with the intertextual technique to shape its radical form. This radical nature of Eliot's poetry was noticed immediately by some critics, as an anonymous review of *Poems* (1920), the collection that preceded *The Waste Land*, clearly reveals. Although they disagree, Conrad Aiken and Edmund Wilson Jr. are much more attuned to the poetic climate of the day than the anonymous critic of *The Poems*, who in many ways represents the contemporary predilection for the romantic detritus and the aesthetic movement (Johnson, Dowson and Wilde) that still lingered on. The very title assumes the status of a symptomatic slogan and indicates how abrasive the poetry of Eliot was to contemporary poetic taste: "Is This Poetry?" In a very perspicacious judgement of the volume, the critic ends on a reactionary note: "Yet the poetry often seems to come in precisely at the moment when the scientist and the science, the method and the newness go out."²⁴ As late as 1988, the leading poet Craig Raine testifies to the novelty of Eliot's poetry and points out his influence on succeeding poets, films and daily speech. In his introduction he offers this evaluation of Eliot's status:

The late Hans Keller definitely observed that the greatest art is characterised by "unpredictable inevitability" - a quality which T.S. Eliot possessed in abundance. Extravagantly inventive yet fastidiously word perfect, stylistically prodigious yet always recognisably himself, Eliot is the century's greatest poet.²⁵

It is evident that Eliot's poetry, especially his early poems and *The Waste Land* in particular, caused a poetic revolution. Through its innovative complexity the poem challenges the mind of the individual reader in a radical new manner and therefore opens up for the reader's involvement in a way the New Critics ignored:

The text imposes a state of loss, the text that discomfords, unsettles the reader's historical, cultural, psychological

²⁴Anonymous, "Is This Poetry?", in Graham Clarke (ed.) *Op. Cit.*, Vol. II, 28-29.

²⁵Craig Raine, "The awful daring of T.S. Eliot", *Ibid.*, 400.

Multiple Variety in a Wilderness of Mirrors

assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, brings to a crisis his relation with language.²⁶

There is little doubt that *The Waste Land* instigates this confusion in many readers, much more than it engenders any type of unity. The dislocated utterances, the indeterminable "I", the lack of chronology and the intertextual network are only a few aspects that certainly discomfort readers. The radical form challenges any conventional reader's tastes and values. A number of various languages pop up with the effect of stones in a stew. Although the multilingual voices do not constitute the ideological critique of the sign that Barthes probably has in mind, they nevertheless bring many readers into a lingual crisis of understanding. At the end of the reading, the (Barthesian) reader is much more likely to experience a sense of loss than capture any vision of unity. In this way the contrary character of Eliot's masterpiece also yields itself freely to the theory of the *scribble* that Barthes establishes in *S/Z*: "Why is the writerly our value? Because the goal of literary work (of literature as work) is to make the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text."²⁷ The anomalous nature of *The Waste Land* opposes any easy consumption on the reader's part. Readers are invited to co-produce the text. In order to do so they often have to re-evaluate their pre-established ideas of literature, as well as reconsider the conventions of their own mindset. This emphasis on the reader's participation opens up the text. The text is no longer a self-contained entity, "a full-rigged ship in a bottle", and the determinacy the New Critics assigned to the text is now only to be completed in the interaction with the reader.²⁸

Barthes argues: "The birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author."²⁹ Concurring with the New Critics on the

²⁶Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, 14.

²⁷Roland Barthes, *S/Z* (New York, The Noonday Press, 1988), 4.

²⁸In his emphasis on the reader's role in the production of meaning, Barthes overlaps with the ideas of the German reception-theorist Wolfgang Iser. For a reader's response approach to Eliot's poem, see Steve Ellis, "The Waste Land and the Reader's Response."

²⁹Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author", in *Image, Music Text*, 148.

tenet of "the intentional fallacy",³⁰ Barthes, nevertheless, opposes the idea of any inherent value in the text *per se*. The intrinsic value with which the New Critics imbued a literary work established a metaphysical immanence and an ontological purity which are illusory. A literary work may contain precious poetry and inestimable ideas, but these values are only enacted in intercourse with the reader. Nor are these values decided by any permanent and unassailable determinacy of the text, rather they are eternally subjected to re-assessments. All the controversy *The Waste Land* has incited is a prime example of this. Although the intentions of the author and the "social energies" of his time might constitute an interesting topic of study, a literary work of art is quite capable of existing independent of these origins.³¹ On the other hand it is necessary to link the reader to the significance of any work of art, as the value of any art is only determined in relation to the human subject.³²

Bakhtinian Multilogism and intellectual radicalism

Barthes and Bakhtin overlap considerably in their textual theories. Nevertheless, there are nuances between the two that in many ways render Bakhtin's attitude the most appealing approach to *The*

³⁰ Eliot, like most of the New Critics apart from I.A. Richards perhaps, reacted against the search for the author's mind that was dominant in positivist scholarship: "Honest Criticism and sensitive appreciation is directed not upon the poet but upon the poetry." "For my meaning is, that the poet has, not a 'personality' to express, but a particular medium, which is only a medium and not a personality, in which impressions and experiences combine in particular and unexpected ways." "The emotion of art is impersonal." ("Tradition and The Individual Talent", 40, 42, 44). "If poetry is a form of 'communication', yet that which is to be communicated is the poem itself, and only incidentally the experience and the thought which have gone into it." ("The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism", 80). Eliot's most established rejections of the intentional and affective fallacy are of course his theories of the "objective correlative" and "the dissociation of sensibility" in his essays on Hamlet and the metaphysical poets. But Eliot granted much more liberty to personal interpretation, and in this manner he seems more in accord with Barthes than his contemporary critics: "*But what a poem means is as much what it means to others as what it means to the author.*" ("The Use of Poetry...", 89, italics mine).

³¹ The novels (*V*, *The Crying of Lot 49*, and *Gravity's Rainbow*) of the pseudonymous Thomas Pynchon exemplify the ultimate practise of this theoretical stance.

³² As is well known, Roland Barthes carries the importance of the reader to the utmost extreme in his essay of hedonistic and erotic rhetoric, *The Pleasure of the Text*. In this essay he abandons textual determinacy for his anarchic and open-ended solipsism.

Multiple Variety in a Wilderness of Mirrors

Waste Land.³³ In a paragraph that seems to capture the very quintessence of Eliot's poem he explains:

What are the salient features of this novelization of other genres suggested by us above? They become more free and flexible, their language renews itself by incorporating extraliterary heteroglossia and the 'novelistic' layers of literary language, they become dialogized, permeated with laughter, irony, humour, elements of self-parody and finally - this is the most important thing - the novel inserts into these other genres an indeterminacy, a living contact with unfinished, still-evolving contemporary reality (the open-ended present).³⁴

This multitude of literary plurality and speech diversity is clearly seen in "A Game of Chess". The descriptive discourse at the beginning of this section includes numerous "layers of literary language". In the nightingale e.g. is included the old classical myth of perfidious seduction, rape and torture. This imagery is intertwined with the romantic conception of the bird and Keats' Nightingale. This complex weave of allusions reveals the fruitless and futile life of Belladonna. Likewise the Shakespearean Cleopatra and the old classical myth of Dido suggest the varied fortunes of the lady of situations. And the whole chapter is framed by the lugubrious game of lecherous moves from Middleton's *Women Beware Women*. This literary discourse is juxtaposed with the extraliterary heteroglossia of the lady's attempted dialogue, "O O O that Shakespearean Rag" and the lingo of London pub-life. In the latter situation the conversation is interrupted by the publican's impatient calls at closing time: "HURRY UP PLEASE IT

³³ Although Bakhtin centres on the novel, *The Waste Land* yields itself freely to his theories. In many ways the revolutionary aspects of Eliot's poem illustrate Bakhtin's ideas of the novelistic and opposes his denigration of poetics to such an extent that it is likely that Bakhtin would have had to modify his deprecation of poetic quality had he been aware of the poem. In his essay "*The Waste Land*, Dialogism and Poetic Discourse", Tony Pinkney argues convincingly that Bakhtin's theories can be applied to Eliot's poem.

³⁴ Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, (Austin, The University of Texas Press, 1994), 7.

IS TIME". This request is in itself double-voiced as iteration causes the line's significance to develop beyond the temporal scene to include a metaphysical perspective. The passage is rounded off with the exchange of pleasantries: "Good night, ladies, good night, sweet ladies, good night, good night." This conclusion is ironic in all its elegant and ceremonious contrast. In its serio-comical stance it reflects the section's mixture of seriousness and levity. The final sentence is also internally dialogized. The literary reference to Ophelia contends with the extra-literary words of the real-life representation. In its multi-voiced ambiguity the final sentence captures all the indeterminacy the whole section exudes. In its confluence of literary allusion and every day speech it also sums up the discursive development of this passage. The text moves from allusive literary solemnity via the swinging rhythms of contemporary rag tunes, through Cockney slang to dialogized discourse. Here the heteroglossia and multistylistics of *The Waste Land* fit perfectly Bakhtin's description of the novel: "The novel as a whole is a phenomenon multiform in style and variform in speech and voice."³⁵ The language renews itself, or rather, the languages renew themselves. The colloquial patter of May and Lou throws new light on the elevated diction describing Belladonna's situation. The jazz rhythm intersects with the poetic prosody. They all interanimate and revalorise each other. The movement is from the literary arena of the past to the real-life scene of contemporary London. Literary language develops in "a living contact with unfinished, still evolving contemporary reality." The poem acts as a constituent in both literary and social becoming. The full dimension of this literary and social becoming is seen in the prevalent influence the poem has had in the fields of poetics, culture and language, as Craig Raine testifies. It is also observed in the manner the multilogic nature of the poem oversteps the binary oppositions that govern much of the Western mind. Today this specific ideological critique has almost become a commonplace of academic intellectualism, and Eliot's poem is frequently quoted as a paradigmatic example of a text that illustrates this ideological

³⁵*Ibid.*, 261.

Multiple Variety in a Wilderness of Mirrors

stance. In all respects the nature of *The Waste Land* corresponds to Bakhtin's exposition of the volatile interaction between a vital text and the development of its contemporary society:

... then it must be said that the art of prose is close to a conception of languages as historically concrete and living things. The prose art presumes a deliberate feeling for the historical and social concreteness of living discourse, as well as its relativity, a feeling for its participation in historical becoming and in social struggle; it deals with discourse that is still warm from that struggle and hostility, as yet unresolved and still fraught with hostile intentions and accents, prose art finds discourse in this state and subjects it to the dynamic unity of its own style.³⁶

A language is revealed in all its distinctiveness only when it is brought into relationship with other languages, entering with them into one single heteroglot unity of social becoming.³⁷

Bakhtin's concept of heteroglossia corresponds in many ways to Barthes' definition of intertextuality. But Bakhtin differs from Barthes by stressing the historical and social situation of the heteroglossia which the speaking subject, in this case the author, redistributes. Bakhtin treats language as a vital organism whereas Barthes regards it as a clinical object, much in the tradition of Saussure. Bakhtin also assigns a much more vital force to any text and speaking subject than does Barthes. In Barthes' view the writer is reduced to a captive within the language: "As a creature of language, the writer is always caught up in the war of fictions (jargons), but he is never anything but a plaything in it..."³⁸ According to Barthes both the writer and the co-writer (reader) are inescapably incarcerated in what Fredric Jameson has termed "the prison house of language".³⁹ In Bakhtin's theory both the

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 331.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 411.

³⁸ Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, 34.

³⁹ Fredric Jameson, *The Prison House of Language* (Princeton N.J., Princeton University Press, 1972).

heteroglossic utterance and the speaking subject participate in and shape the living language they are inextricably a part of:

The living utterance, having taken meaning and shape at a particular historical moment in a socially specific environment, cannot fail to brush up against thousands of living dialogic threads, woven by socio-ideological consciousness around the given object of an utterance; it cannot fail to become an active participant in social dialogue. After all, the utterance arises out of this dialogue as a continuation of it and as a rejoinder to it - it does not approach the object from the sidelines.⁴⁰

Not only the origins, but also the functions of language are in Bakhtin's thesis linked to the socio-ideological situation of a specific time. In this, his ("logocentric" as Barthes would probably describe it in Derridaean terms) theory of novelistic discourse distinguishes itself starkly from Barthes' definition of the text as a site for the irreducible play of signifiers: "The text is language without its image reservoir, its image-system,"⁴¹ "the text is read (or written) as a mobile play of signifiers, with no possible reference to one or several fixed signifieds"⁴², "textual analysis impugns the idea of a final signified."⁴³ Despite the intertextual fabric of *The Waste Land*, the poem is not a Barthesian kaleidoscope that excludes everything beyond the vertiginous introspection of its own signifiante, it arises just as much out of a specific social situation at a particular time. The poem results from the demolished ruins of post-war battlefields and the dissolution of pre-war ideologies. The annihilation which W.W.I precipitated on the Western mind and matter caused a revaluation of established ideologies and challenged any authoritative discourse. Eliot's poem articulates the whole gamut of this post-war disenchantment.⁴⁴ The polyphony of

⁴⁰ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Op. Cit.*, 276-277.

⁴¹ Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, 33.

⁴² Roland Barthes, "Theory of the Text", *Op. Cit.*, 37.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 43

⁴⁴ As well as capturing the post-war chaos, in the field of literature the poem's desolate mood prepares the waste land ennui of the lost generation. The mood of malaise and

Multiple Variety in a Wilderness of Mirrors

disjunctive utterances undermines a unified discourse, and the contention of primeval myths, Oriental religion, Sosostrisean new age, and Christian orthodoxy reflects contemporary disillusionment. According to Bakhtin's theories literary creations of such a heteroglossic, polyphonic and multivalent nature carry considerable radical potential. Its very heterogeneous form challenges the underlying ideology of conventional society. Despite the fact that much criticism carrying the insufferable air of vulgar Marxist reductionism disagrees,⁴⁵ it is viable to argue that the preternatural quality of *The Waste Land* does not only provoke the habitual thinking of the individual reader; its creativity also constitutes a counterpoint to the monological mindset of mass society and totalitarian politics. In the aftermath of W.W.I, and during the dawning of the totalitarian take-over of Mussolini, Hitler and Franco, *The Waste Land* propounds an alternative way of thinking that opposes some of the forces that lead to the greatest disasters of the century. In this way *The Waste Land* contains a radical critique of right-wing totalitarian forces, just as Bakhtin's thesis keeps up a subsumed strain of harsh critique against Stalinist suppression and Soviet Marxist orthodoxy. The polyphony of Eliot's artistic text and the multiplicity of Bakhtin's socio-ideological linguistics give freedom to the individual character by subverting the authoritarian discourse and monological politics of an autocratic society. This subversive nature charges *The Waste Land* with cogent intellectual radicalism, despite the much-discussed conservative politics of its author. The Bakhtinian ideas that Eliot's poem illustrates also suggest that a revolution in language and poetics may contribute to a social revolution. Eliot's masterpiece is bound to provoke the mind of the individual reader. In like manner the poem's multilogical plenitude also contains radical potential in a socio-ideological context. As Barthes argues

neurasthenia are persistent in most of Hemingway's novels, *The Sun Also Rises* in particular, and it underlies the meretricious gaiety of Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. The theme of Eliot's poem also sings in the grass of Doris Lessing's famous novel.

⁴⁵ For different traditional Marxist repudiations of Eliot and *The Waste Land*, see David Craig, "The Defeatism of *The Waste Land*"; also Terry Eagleton, *Marxism and Literary Criticism*, and "The Rise of English", in *Literary Theory* (Oxford, Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1989), 31-41.

in his depreciation of a literary work: "The work has nothing disturbing for any monistic philosophy; for such a philosophy, plural is the evil".⁴⁶

Barthes is the prominent theoretician when it comes to assigning a text with the ultimate open-endedness. But in his extreme stance of textual signifiante, "Signifiante, unlike signification, cannot be reduced to communication, to representation, to expression: it puts the (writing or reading) subject into the text..."⁴⁷, his theories function as a Procrustean bed. He dismembers too many vital parts in the productivity of meaning in his subordination of a text to his signifying practice. Bakhtin shares the radical ideas of a text with Barthes, but retains a wider perspective of the text's origin and function which offers a more inclusive approach to Eliot's *The Waste Land*.

Conclusion

There can be little doubt that *The Waste Land* is a text whose meaning is indeterminate. The intertextual complexity and the multilogism of the poem engender indeterminacy. Any unity can only be formed by superimposition of fallacious methods that appear preposterous to the poem's multivalent plenitude. The very fact that the poem has emerged as a paradigmatic example for all types of textual theory confirms the poem's indeterminacy.

⁴⁶Roland Barthes, *Image Music Text*, 160.

⁴⁷Roland Barthes, "Theory of the Text", *Op. Cit.*, 38.

