

Forms of Loss: Epitaph, Dirge, and Ashes in Late Modernist Poetry

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## ABSTRACT

“Forms of Loss” investigates the ways in which the late modernist poems of H.D., W.H. Auden, and T.S. Eliot move away from the personal, consolatory, and pastoral language of the English elegy while expressing mourning, absence, and loss. By looking at poetic form through twentieth-century cultural institutions of mourning, I try to reconstruct the methods through which modernist poets aestheticized the destruction of war or resisted the depersonalizing conditions of modernity. I begin with H.D.’s *Trilogy*, which I argue uses the form of the Greek elegiac couplet as a way of juxtaposing ancient ruins with the bombsites of London during the Blitz, effectively rendering the future ruins of Western civilization in Sapphic epitaphs that convey a modernist, unsentimental, and redemptive loss. In my second chapter, I claim that Auden uses the genre of the Biblical dirge in order to re-invent “In Memory of W.B. Yeats” as a modernist elegy that is public, ceremonious, and serves as a “mouth” for a modern world that is on the precipice of the Second World War. In my final chapter, I end with the suggestion that Eliot draws upon the scientific, religious, and Dantescan rhetorics of cremation in order to generate an elegiac “poetics of ash,” a form that collapses the poet’s memory and experience into a fiery vortex and immortalizes his disembodied and impersonal poetic mind.



## RESUMÉ

“Forms of Loss” explore les méthodes utilisées par les poèmes modernistes tardifs de H.D., W.H. Auden et T.S. Eliot permettant de s’écloigner du langage personnel, consolateur ou pastoral de l’élégie anglaise, et ce, tout en exprimant le deuil, l’absence et la perte. En examinant la forme poétique au travers des institutions funéraires du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle, je tente de reconstruire les méthodes par lesquelles les poètes modernistes ont esthétisé la destruction de la guerre ou ont résisté aux conditions de la modernité. Je commence par l’œuvre *Trilogy* de H.D., qui utilise la forme du couplet élégiaque grecque afin de juxtaposer des ruines antiques avec les bombardements de Londres pendant le Blitz, devenant ainsi les futures ruines de la civilisation occidentale dans des épitaphes saphiques qui traduisent une perte modernisme, non sentimentale et rédemptrice. Dans mon deuxième chapitre, je prétends qu’Auden utilise le genre du chant funèbre biblique pour réinventer “In Memory of W.B. Yeats” en tant qu’élégie moderniste, laquelle est publique, cérémonieuse, et finalement triste pour le monde moderne qui est sur le précipice de la Seconde Guerre mondiale. Dans mon dernier chapitre, je termine en suggérant qu’Eliot s’est inspiré des rhétoriques scientifiques, religieuses et dantescaniennes de la crémation pour générer une “poésie de la cendre” élégiaque, une forme qui détruit la mémoire et l’expérience du poète dans un vortex enflammé et immortalise son esprit poétique désincarné.



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## INTRODUCTION

*Liu Ch'e*

The rustling of the silk is discontinued,  
 Dust drifts over the courtyard,  
 There is no sound of footfall, and the leaves  
 Scurry into heaps and lie still,  
 And she the rejoicer of the heart is beneath them:

A wet leaf that clings to the threshold.

— Ezra Pound

Is it possible to write a poem about absence? Ezra Pound's interpretation of Ernest Fennollosa's prose translation of a Chinese verse by Liu Ch'e is his best attempt at answering this question. With each consecutive line, the lyric speaker presents the reader with some form of loss: the "rustling" is "discontinued," there is "no sound" of "footfall," and the heaps of dust and leaves "lie still." These images are then attached to the penultimate line of the poem, which reveals the true object that is missing: the "rejoicer of the heart"; a loved one who has died. The ensuing line break intimates that the final revelation of the speaker is his own sense of detachment, both from the images being described above and from the "rejoicer" whom he mentions. In conveying loss and absence, Pound's poem notably does *not* follow the conventions of the English elegy, at least in the ways in which that form was being deployed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Instead, the form of the poem, which combines images into static heaps of dust, rhetorically 'empties out' and negates everything that it brings out of the speaker's imagination. In its short lines and concise diction, Pound's poem draws on the Japanese *haiku*, which he uses to interpret the Chinese lyric by Liu Ch'e,



an emperor of the Han dynasty. By doing so, Pound filters loss and mourning through different formal and poetic traditions — English, Japanese, Chinese — in order to arrive at loss that is common to all three: a loss that is minimized, threadbare, and understated. Pound lets the emptiness speak for itself.

How is Pound's use of form in "Liu Ch'e" important to conveying loss and mourning? While not explicitly its source, Pound's "Liu Ch'e" can be read as an Imagist interpretation of Wordsworth's Romantic masterpiece "She Dwelt among the Untrodden Ways": both poems address a missing, unknown woman; both poems generate loss through consecutive images of emptiness; both poems end with a mysterious proclamation that masks the lyric speaker's relationship with said woman. Their final lines — Wordsworth's "But she is in her grave, and, oh, / The difference to me!" and Pound's "And she the rejoicer of the heart is beneath them: / A wet leaf that clings to the threshold" — serve to complicate the relationship between the speaker and the woman, which troubles the act of mourning itself, since the object of loss is not the "rejoicer" but rather the lyric speaker's undefined feelings towards her. Pound's alignment with Wordsworth suggests that, instead of enacting a complete break with the literary and poetic traditions, modernist poets often took the subject matter and topoi of previous generations and modernized them through form. In Pound's case, a poetry of loss and mourning are renovated through progressive notes of poetic detachment: the emptied images, the subtle linkages of movement and stasis, and the final, abstract line signals to the reader that loss is the ultimate "threshold" between the living and the dead.

My reading of Pound's "Liu Ch'e" anticipates the ways in which the following study reads loss and mourning through poetic form. Following on the heels of the recent theoretical move by scholars of poetry, my work embraces the theoretical drive of "historical poetics," a term developed and deployed by scholars such as Yopie Prins, Virginia Jackson, Max Cavitch, among others. Prins points out in "What is Historical Poetics?" that



two approaches have dominated this conversation. The first recovers lost ways of thinking about form—in prosody manuals, recorded performance, private correspondence, newspaper reviews, and so on—and reads them back into cultural history. The second historicizes poems from the inside out, making evident social affinities and antagonisms in literary form by comparative description. (Prins 14)

By focusing on inherited poetic forms that lay outside the poetic tradition, historical poetics studies the ways in which different cultural forms can be “read into” the language of poetry. By focusing on cultural rather than strictly literary forms, this study identifies the ways in which twentieth-century institutions of burial and mourning — by way of the burial epitaph, the funeral dirge, and the ceremony of cremation — have influenced poetic understandings of mourning in the twentieth century. This approach therefore historicizes how modernists thought about ceremonies, traditions, and institutions of mourning and then reads the influence of this thought into the late modernist poems of their era. In order to do so, I attempt to reconstruct how these poets saw burial grounds, funerals, and the simultaneously scientific and religious process of cremation — and how they reworked these ideas, actively or passively, into their poetry and poetic form.

There are two reasons for going about a study of loss and mourning without focusing exclusively on the genre of elegy. First, there already exists sufficient scholarship that has focused exclusively on the English elegy, with many of the works that exist today deal with Anglo-American elegies written in the early- and mid-twentieth century, some of which will be discussed below. The second reason for sidelining the elegy in the discussion of poetic mourning is due to the fact that, in my view, the term constricts, rather than expands, our understanding of how words and language can be used in order to convey absence and loss; Pound’s poem is a prime example of what a poet can do once he is thinking outside of these generic conventions. This study therefore argues that the poetry of H.D., W.H. Auden, and



T.S. Eliot was written partially as a response to the generic restrictions of the elegy and partially in response to the institutions of mourning that were dominant in the cultural imagination of the late 1930's and early 1940s. A study of particular power that furnishes the background of this thesis is Thomas Laqueur's *The Work of the Dead: A Cultural History of Mortal Remains* (2015), which argues that the dead continue to do "work" for the living by creating "social worlds" in which the living participate (1). I align these "worlds" with the institutions of mourning that persist in day-to-day life and continue to re-create the dead: these worlds can be places, such as graveyards, funeral homes, or burial sites; or they can be inscriptions, which continue to speak out the language of the dead from sarcophagi, tombstones, chapel walls, or ancient temples to whoever passes by and reads them. I go on even further than Laqueur to suggest that the 'dead language' that he sees in rituals of mourning is inscribed, to a significant extent, in the poetry of the authors that are the subjects of this study. All of these texts manage to speak out from beyond the "threshold," to use Pound's coinage: epitaphs are short poems cry out into eternity, seeking remembrance; dirges are songs sung at funerals, meant to console and lament; and cremation is a scientific symbol that ritualizes and reconstructs spiritual rebirth in a way that metaphorically and physically erases the body and leaves only the soul and the poetic mind. By drawing on these historical "forms of loss," this thesis reads twentieth century poetic conceptions of loss in ways that extricate the study of mourning from the study of the elegy.

The chapters in this thesis often figure loss in through the lens of these historical 'places' of mourning. In the first chapter, my attention turns to H.D.'s *Trilogy*, where I read the first section of H.D.'s modernist long-poem through the form of the Greek elegiac epitaph, which I claim allows the speaker to convey distant, temporally detached, and apocalyptic loss by imagining herself as an archaeologist from a distance future passing through the ruins of war-torn London. Loss, for H.D., means thinking about an impersonal



response to death, one that allows her to read the elegiac epitaphs on the walls of the ruins as ‘open spaces’ where art and literature ‘can grow.’ In the second chapter, I read Auden’s modernist elegy, “In Memory of W.B. Yeats,” as particularly indebted to the Christian and Anglo-Catholic burial dirge, which captures Auden’s budding Christianity, his musical lyricism, and his renewed understanding of the purpose of poetry as ceremonial, public mourning. For Auden, loss and absence are an ever-present condition of the late 1930s, where the “airports are almost deserted” and where poetry — through its associations with the traditions of the Biblical dirge — inherits the importance ceremony and public mourning which in Auden’s view, the world has forgotten. In the third and final chapter, I draw on the conventions of cremation and suggest that T.S. Eliot repurposes two common topoi of the form — fire and ash — in order to create a “poetics of ash” that allows him to imagine and relive his life through a simultaneously fixed and fixless vortex “whirled by the cold wind.” For the *Four Quartets*, mourning and loss allow the poet to transcend his physical body, partially resisting the Blitz that was occupying London and recreating fire as generative and purifying rather than destructive. The overarching thesis of this work, then, is the idea that late modernist poetry draws on and modifies many different cultural forms in a way that operates outside of the elegy; instead, late modernism re-interprets, re-synthesizes, and actively responds to death through rituals, ceremonies, and the language of the dead for the purpose of modernizing the poetry (and language) of loss and mourning so that it can better respond to the devastating totality of war and the modern condition.

While this study attempts to read poetic loss that is registered outside of the English elegy, the work in these chapters nonetheless makes ample use of the existing studies of the elegy as starting points for discussion — two books are important to mention right away. The first is Peter Sacks’s *The English Elegy* (1985), which at the time of its publication positioned itself as an interpretation of the elegy’s generic conventions, especially in the ways in which



“the traditional forms and figures of elegy relate to the experience of loss and the search for consolation” (1). Sacks’s inquiry is largely Freudian: his thesis draws out the relationship between “the process of mourning and the oedipal resolution” (8), essentially going on to argue that

Each procedure or resolution is essentially defensive, requiring a detachment of accession from a prior object followed by a reattachment of the affection elsewhere. At the core of each procedure is the renunciatory experience of loss and the acceptance not just of a substitute, but of the very means and practice of substitution. In each case such an acceptance is the price of survival, and in each case a successful resolution is not merely deprivatory, offers a form of compensatory reward. The elegist’s reward, especially, resembles or augments that of the child —both often involve inherited legacies and consoling identifications with symbolic, even immortal figures of power. (8)

Sacks’s study draws on a large set of English elegists across many different time periods in order to study the conventions of the form, partially looking back to the “rituals associated with the death and rebirth of vegetation gods” (19) which he believes are an essential element of how the elegy was conceptualized in such poems such as Milton’s “Lycidas” and Shelley’s *Adonais*. My study takes up some of Sacks’s observations about the common presence of fire in the English elegy and how presence is related to the Greek funeral pyre and the classical tradition of burning the dead. In Chapter 3, I read that cremation into Eliot’s *Four Quartets*, where I argue that Eliot collapses the different traditions of burning the dead: partially these traditions come from classical antiquity, partially from the secular and later Christian popularization of cremation, and partially from an inversion of Dante’s Vanni Fucci episode in Book XIV of *The Divine Comedy*. These associations with ash therefore allow Eliot to explore successive modes of poetic rebirth through the “poetics of ash” amidst the ruins of



London during the Blitz.

Later scholarship on the elegy often takes issue with Sacks's assertion that elegies are inherently consolatory in nature. Jahan Ramazani's influential *The Poetry of Mourning* (1994) is the second book vital to my claims in this thesis: Ramazani counters Sacks's claims by suggesting that the "modern elegist tends not to achieve but to resist consolation, not to override but to sustain anger, not to heal but to reopen the wounds of loss" (xi). The present study follows up Ramazani's arguments about Eliot and Pound and the other modernist poets of their generation:

just as high modernism's metrical break with the past is now recognized to be less extreme than it once appeared, so too we are coming to understand that Eliot and Pound, while seeming to spring free from genres, often press, engraft, or disguise them. They may seem to reject the elegy above all, since they ostensibly favour impersonality over emotion, "masculine" irony over "effeminate" sorrow; but elegy is one of the most important genres embedded in their poetry. Because these two preeminent high modernists have overshadowed the generic innovations of their contemporaries and have discouraged genre analysis of modern poetry, we should pause to consider the generic, and especially the elegiac, determinants of the apparently metageneric work. (25)

While I would generally agree that much of modernist work tends to "press, engraft, or disguise" the elegiac mode, it seems more useful to me to not necessarily think of modernism as anti-elegiac but rather as a movement that drew on cultural forms of loss from a variety of sources. Pound's "Liu Ch'e" is once again a useful way of illustrating how the modernists were able to combine many different voices and forms. Yes, "Liu Ch'e" operates within the elegiac mode, but it also borrows so much from non-English poetry that its indebtedness to the English elegy is almost entirely masked and transformed when communicating the central



object of loss. By resisting the English tradition of the English language and drawing on a wide variety of non-literary forms, these modernists were able to channel a more generalized, more impersonal sense of loss and mourning to account for the dead of the twentieth century.

Ramazani's *Poetry of Mourning* inevitably serves as an important, recurring intertext for my own study. For instance, Ramazani's justification for *not* including H.D. in his study of the elegy due to her "classical detachment" from loss and mourning serves as an entry-point for my own work on *Trilogy* — I pick up his coinage of "classical detachment" as being, in fact, the chief elegiac impulse of H.D.'s lyric speaker as she tries to convey the loss that arises out of large swaths of time that "detach" the passerby from the burial inscription being observed. Later on, Ramazani's close reading of Auden's "In Memory of W.B. Yeats" mentions that he "ceremonious sounds of the dirge" (185) is essential to my own reading of the poem as a poetic elegy that intentionally fashions itself as a dirge, primarily from the Christian Biblical tradition. And while Ramazani's and Sacks's studies are largely generalized to either "modern poetry" or even more broadly "English poetry" for the latter, my interests are largely focused on the period which many identify as "late modernist poetry," which spans the years somewhere between the mid-1930s and the late 1940s. Late modernist poetry, with its post-WWI conceptions of death and its inherent response to the over-aestheticized experimentation of modernism's early period, is more open with its desire to bridge the gap between the living and the dead. Somewhat inevitably, many modernists saw the destruction of the Second World War as a kind of 'second coming,' thus formally aestheticizing apocalypse alongside the language of grief and mourning. By avoiding the elegy as their primary organizing form, the modernists in this study were able to reconceptualize loss and mourning from an ethical standpoint.

More recent work on poetry and mourning has increasingly become interested in this ethical facet of loss and consolation. Patricia Rae's collection *Modernism and Mourning*



(2007) proved indispensable for advancing the outline of contemporary discussion surrounding modernism and the elegiac mode, since Rae's collection charts the "widespread public and academic interest in how we mourn and in the question of whether there is social progress to be gained from experience of loss" (13). Through their interregation of loss and ethics, the essays in *Modernism and Mourning* are often responding, to some extent, to the arguments posited by R. Clifton Spargo in *The Ethics of Mourning* (2004). Spargo's work situates mourning as synonymous with resistance, going even further than Ramazani and Sacks in order to say that "there is an ethical crux to all mourning, according to which the injustice potentially perpetrated by the mourner against the dead as a failure of memory stands for the injustice that may be done to the living other at any given moment" (4). Ethics is also central to my study. By capturing the voices of the dead through epitaphs, H.D.'s *Trilogy* allows the reader to grasp both the inevitability and the breadth of twentieth-century destruction. Similarly, Auden's "In Memory of W.B. Yeats" argues for poetry as an ethical voice — making grief public and generalized — with the poetics of ceremony, which allow us to acknowledge the problems of the present day by mourning the state of the world rather than Yeats himself. Finally, Eliot's *Four Quartets* collectivize spiritual resurrection — cremation and ash stand-in as symbols for our rebirth in the afterlife, should we choose, of course, to accept mourning and loss as ever-present recurrences in our lives.

Diana Fuss, in *Dying Modern: A Meditation on Elegy* (2013), situates this relationship between ethics and mourning as an inherent component of elegiac poetry: "Who is the elegy for: the dead or the living? It turns out what might be ethical for one (the dead) may be unethical for the other (the living). Elegies speak to both audiences, forced to negotiate the impossible ethical demands of a genre that strives neither to disrespect the memory of the dead nor to ignore the needs of the living" (5). Fuss concludes that "ethics is elegy: speaking, acting, and surviving in the face of loss, no matter how irretrievable those



losses may be.” (7) Read in this light, Ezra Pound’s “Liu Ch’e” attempts to chart out the territory between the living and the dead; to define, categorize, and put into words the empty space that exists between the lyric speaker and the “rejoicer of the heart.” In doing so, Pound reaches for the abstract and the ineffable. Is the “wet leaf” the poet or the rejoicer? or is it both? or neither? We may never know, but by speaking out in the face of loss, Pound’s lyric puts into words the sense that we are all mourning someone or something; in this lyric’s view, emptiness persists in everything.



## CHAPTER 1

H.D.'s Epitaphs: The Lithic Poetics of *The Walls Do Not Fall*

“a torn beginning, a torn ending, and in between them five stanzas entire: a very notable addition to the Sapphic canon... And its tone is elegiac. For a thousand years no more than four lines of Sappho’s on such such a theme and been accessible to anyone. To Pound, then intent on a poiesis of loss, it came punctually: a sustained lament for an absence, for the absence of a familiar of Sappho and Attis, now among the girls of Lydia and remembered across the sundering sea.”

— Hugh Kenner, *The Pound Era*, 56

What, if anything, separates the poet from the historian? Leo Mellor’s work in *Reading the Ruins* broaches this question by investigating the prominence of ruins in British modernist writing, where the the bombsites of the Second World War are places that “could be aestheticised into picturesque ruins or politicised through surrealism, observed through the templates of archaeology or natural history or the phantasmagoric” (2). For Mellor, thinking through ruins is a way of understanding, among other things, “a great swathe of linear time previously hidden or buried, offering history exposed to the air” (6). While *Reading the Ruins* mainly focuses on prose fiction, Mellor briefly mentions that H.D.’s late modernist collection, *Trilogy*, “works by the interlacing of bombed London with ancient Egypt... This historicization of newly made wreckage, or rather its insertion into a continuum of wrecked cities, depends upon the display of layers — the cities parading their wounds as proof a long past endured” (188). Published in 1944, the first poem of H.D.’s collection, *The Walls Do Not Fall*, places the lyric speaker into a set of ruins that combines both the bombsites of the Second World War and the tombs and ruins of Greece and Egypt, which H.D. visited with Bryher in the early 1920s. Building from Mellor’s observations, the present chapter argues that *The Walls Do Not Fall* not only brings Greek and Egyptian ruins into her poem, but the



*form* of those ruins as well. By borrowing the form of the Ancient Greek epitaph, H.D. produces the perspective of a distant lyric poet — a future Sappho — looking back at the ruins of Western civilization as she “aestheticizes” them into a long, lyric, and fragmented catalogue of lithic artifacts.

H.D.’s poem primarily relies on the Greek epitaph in order to structure her own “lithic poetics”<sup>1</sup>: broken into Greek elegiac couplets, these hard, inscriptional patterns of language “open” the ruins of London “to the air” and to the eyes of the reader. By filtering loss through a lithic poetics — inspired directly by Sappho and *The Greek Anthology* — H.D. conforms to Diana Fuss’s conception of ethics as “speaking, acting, and surviving in the face of loss, no matter how irretrievable those losses may be” (7). Using the tenets of impersonality, which she borrows from Eliot, from Sappho, and from the chorus of the dead, H.D. aestheticizes the tombs, crypts, and burial inscriptions that bare themselves to the world. In doing so, H.D. resists traditional conceptions of the English elegy and the apocalyptic mode, generating redemption through an opening up of millenia-old wounds to the “air.” H.D. synthesizes a form of loss that is artistically detached but poetically recuperative: it is the Sapphic speaker’s own form of beauty that grows out from between the rocks of the ruins. Instead of emphasizing apocalypse as a solely negative form of purification, the Sapphic poet expresses absence and loss as an aestheticized forms that inspire her own poetry, preserving civilization through its material and lithic form.

The aestheticized walls of London’s ruins that are at the centre of *Trilogy* have a prominent biographical and cultural lineage. Throughout most of her life, H.D. visited Greece and Egypt many times, which would explain why ruins, stones, inscriptions, hieroglyphs, and epitaphs feature so prominently in her work. In the winter of 1913, she travelled through Italy, visiting Pompeii with Charles Leander, Helen Wolle Doolittle, and Charles Aldington;

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<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to Miranda Hickman for this terminology. I am also thankful for Miranda Hickman’s suggestion to incorporate H.D.’s “The Wise Sappho” into the thesis of this chapter.



in 1923, she went to Egypt, where she “drove in a sand cart to the tombs in the Valley of the Kings” and tried to witness the opening of King Tutankhamen’s tomb — the speaker of *Trilogy* refers explicitly to the trip in 1923 in its epigraph: “*for Karnak 1923 / from London 1942.*”<sup>2</sup> It is also worth noting here that the interest in ruins and archaeology were prominent in H.D.’s time. Thomas Laqueur points to sociologist Robert Herz, who, in 1907, wrote in his famous study *Death and the Right Hand* that “the dead have two lives:

one in nature, the other in culture. There are the dead as bodies... [then there are] the dead as social beings, as creatures who need to be eased out of this world and settled safely into the next and into memory. How this is done—through funeral rites, initial disposition of the body and often a redispotion or reburial, mourning, and other kinds of postmortem attention— is deeply, paradigmatically, and indeed foundationally a part of culture. (Laqueur 10)

H.D.’s awareness of these facts, I believe, is the reason that the Western ruins of London are the main focal point of the poem’s lyric speaker, who attempts, in the first canto, to reconstruct the experience of walking through these architectural remains.

After all, the epigraph to *The Walls Do Not Fall* is an overt admission of the fact that the speaker is a detached observer, a passer-by, who sees the the rise and fall of Western civilization from the standpoint of a future Sapphic poet, highlighting the “postmortem attention” that cultures pay to their dead. The fourth stanza of the first canto “opens” with the speaker’s description of these ruins:

there, as here, ruin opens  
the tomb, the temple; enter,  
there as here, there are no doors:

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<sup>2</sup> For more information, see Louis Silverstein's *H.D. Chronology: Part One, Rev. Dec. 10, 2006* (<http://www.imagists.org/hd/hdchron1.html>); *Part Four (1929-April 1946)*



the shrine lies open to the sky,  
 the rain falls, here, there  
 sand drifts; eternity endures:

ruin everywhere, yet as the fallen roof  
 leaves the sealed room  
 open to the air (509-510)<sup>3</sup>

Many critics have discussed how the poem's epigraph collapses the Ancient Egyptian ruins of Karnak at Luxor with the bombsites of London in 1942, which was demolished during the Blitz. The speaker inhabits both worlds: she sees how "the rain falls, here, there / sand drifts; eternity endures" as she inspects the architecture of the tomb and the temple. The openness of the site "leaves the sealed room / open to the air," letting out the languages of the dead that "continue to prophesy / from the stone papyrus." The destruction on display in *Trilogy* is different from the ruins of *The Waste Land*, which largely embraces the negative connotations of destruction and contemporary sordidness. The Sapphic speaker's lithic poetics allow her to "open to the air" the compounded time and beauty of these "temples" and shrines. The stone inscriptions that are in the "sealed room" are now exposing a "large swath of linear time" to the poet, who walks through the site unhindered by walls, doors, or gates. Walls, as the poem's title suggest, actually become the palimpsest — they allow the lyric speaker to bridge the gap between the ancient and the modern world through the "social worlds" of the dead.

My argument for the speaker's lyric detachment in canto [1] is partially predicated on the fact that the stanzas of canto [1] are the only ones in the poem that are composed out of tercets, while the rest of the poem is composed out of couplets. To add to this, the speaker emphasizes, in this first section, her desire to enact a historical or

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(<http://www.imagists.org/hd/hdchron4.html>)



archaeological inquiry into the materials at hand: the voice takes us “to another cellar, to another sliced wall / where poor utensils show / like rare objects in a museum” (509), noting that “Pompeii has nothing to teach us” (510). This partial alignment with Pompeii is virtually synonymous with a thought experiment that historian Thomas Laqueur asks the reader to entertain in the introduction to his most recent book, *The Work of the Dead*:

I invite the reader to imagine herself as an archeologist around the year 3000, a thousand or so years from now, excavating a European city... whose destruction could be dated with some precision to the year 1900: a city frozen in time like Pompeii. She would look, as her professional predecessors had, for evidence about what that city’s inhabitants did with their dead, those strange artifacts that speak so powerfully of what matters to a civilization... [in the] outskirts of the early twentieth-century city [she would find] huge expanses, hundreds and even thousands of acres in size, packed full of grand monuments difficult to distinguish from those of earlier civilizations: Egyptian, Greek, Roman, medieval Irish, European baroque, in relatively pure form but, more likely, each one in a strange bricolage of historical elements. Almost all of these would be stone, but perhaps by some extraordinary circumstance a great iron mausoleum might have survived if only in traces of ferrous oxide. Maybe even a photograph preserved in glass, like a fly in amber. It might well be puzzling to our excavator that instead of a tidy progression of styles through the ages there had been a sort of historical compression in which all of them came into being at roughly the same time. (14-15)

It would be difficult, even from just reading the first canto of *The Walls Do Not Fall*, to not see any resemblances between Laqueur’s language and H.D.’s conceptualization of London’s

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<sup>3</sup> Since line numbers are not indicated in H.D.’s *Collected Works* ed. Louis L. Martz (New York: New Directions, 1983), I use the page numbers of this volume to indicate the location of the passages.



bombsites. Like the excavated Western city from the year 3000, *Trilogy* becomes a zone of generalized and impersonal loss, since the poem chooses to observe “stones” rather than bodies or people. Putting *Trilogy* in contrast with *The Waste Land* makes this distinction more pronounced: Eliot’s poem begins with “The Burial of the Dead,” with the speaker noting in “The Fire Sermon” that the “White bodies naked on the low damp ground” (III. 193). Eliot’s frame still mourns the degradation of a civilization of which the speaker (or speakers) is a part; in *Trilogy* the absence is too distant to be in anyway judgemental. By looking at those “artificats that speak so powerfully of what matters to a civilization,” the Sapphic poet is truly impersonal as she refines the London of *Trilogy* into a “strange bricolage of historical elements.” After the first canto, the lyric speaker detaches her identity from the poem and lets the epitaphs speak out for the things that remain, for the artifacts that in themselves suggest that “eternity endures” the pressure of deep time.

This impersonal aspect of the poem’s loss turns away from what many critics of the elegy have identified as the genre’s essence. While R. Clifton Spargo and Peter Sacks make no mention of H.D.’s poetry in their studies, Jahan Ramazani cites H.D.’s “classical detachment”<sup>4</sup> — which he claims mirrors that of Yeats — as a marker that makes *Trilogy* ineligible for his study, since the elegy is a form which is usually associated with deeply personal, redemptive loss (21). Ramazani is right to point to “classical detachment” as a key element of H.D.’s work; the central drive of the following chapter is to put forward the argument that the “classical detachment” is precisely the kind of impersonal loss that is so prominent in Laqueur’s archaeologist. By drawing on this historicist impulse in her own poem, H.D. incorporates the qualities of stone, along with the inscriptions, epitaphs, and

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<sup>4</sup> The argument that classicism discounts elegy or elegiac mourning is problematic since the elegy form, at its core, is rooted in the classical tradition, a fact that is key to the heart of the present inquiry. Indeed, H.D. invokes the Greek elegiac couplet as a gesture towards mourning and to the epitaph, but only insofar as to show how impossible lamentation becomes given the distance created by time. The elegiac couplet, twisted into free verse by H.D., precludes both an epic sense of heroism or bravery as well as any potential mourning for the dead and thus signals the impersonal distance that the speaker has towards the long-lost dead.



hieroglyphs that are carved into them, as a way of fashioning her lithic poetics. This stone-like form serves to preserve the fragments of the current civilization through the lens of historical objectivity — H.D.’s speaker seems more interested in conveying generalized cultural and ultimately impersonal loss, to again refine Eliot’s term, in the place of loss that is elegiac, individualized, or personal. Redemption, in *Trilogy*, arrives through a classically detached, Sapphic, generalized, and impersonal mode that aestheticizes rather than politicizes the ruins that surround her.

H.D.’s lithic poetics, which draw on Greek elegiac couplets, are also inspired by Sappho’s poetics. H.D.’s reading of Sappho’s form in “The Wise Sappho” sheds some light on her understanding of her own poetic qualities:

I think of the words of Sappho as these colours or states rather, transcending colour yet containing (as great heat the compass of the spectrum) all colour... Yet not all roses—not roses at all, not orange blossoms even, but reading deeper we are inclined to visualize these *broken sentences and unfinished rhythms as rocks*— perfect rock shelves and layers of rock between which flowers by some chance may grow but which *endure when the staunch blossoms have perished*. (58, italics mine)

The important takeaway from H.D.’s reading of Sappho is the way that she positions “broken sentences” and “unfinished rhythms” as elements that incorporate absence and loss into their poetic makeup. The poet’s desire to emphasize the spaces between the “rock shelves and layers of rock between which flowers by some chance may grow” draws on some of the impulses of her earliest collection, *Sea Garden*, which does, in fact, expose the reader to the botany that thrives between rocks and stones. Famous early poems like “Sea Rose,” while intentionally subverting the traditional and poetic associations of love and roses, nonetheless engage roses and flowers — even if they are made of stone — as imagistic elements that signify through their lithic qualities. Much as the roses of the *Sea Rose* are now hardened,



lifeless, and still beautiful, the civilizations of *Trilogy* follow the same pattern of development. H.D. ends “The Wise Sappho” with a reflection on beauty amidst ruins by stating that “the roses Meleager saw as ‘little’ have become in the history not only of literature but of nations ... a great power, roses, but many, many roses, each fragment witness to the love of some scholar or hectic antiquary searching to find a precious inch of palimpsest among the funereal glories of the sand-strewn Pharaohs” (69). In *Trilogy*, the flowers have been burned away, with only the “rock shelves” and the “funereal glories” leaving spaces between these stones as sites where poetry and beauty may someday grow. *The Walls Do Not Fall* occupies a state of absence that develops the feeling of loss without devolving into Romanticized lament and mourning; H.D. resists a very specific brand of sentimentality intuited by Wordsworth in “Essays Upon Epitaphs,” where the Romantic poet mentions that the epitaph form is useful because it allows the poet to raise a “monument.” Raising a monument, according to Wordsworth, is “a sober and a reflective act” that involves writing an “inscription ... intended to be permanent, and for universal perusal; and that, for this reason, the thoughts and feelings expressed should be permanent also—liberated from that weakness and anguish of sorrow which is in nature transitory, and which with instinctive decency retires from notice” (59-60). By showing how H.D. integrates her thoughts on Sappho into her lithic poetics, the following argument seeks to develop the argument that *The Walls Do Not Fall* is, in fact, not interested in permanence at all — instead, the lyric speaker appreciates the ways in which these “funereal glories” can be torn down, decomposed, and then become generative for their own form of aesthetic beauty.

Reading H.D.’s form of aestheticization, which relies primarily on the Greek elegiac couplet, requires a classicist’s toolset — in the readings that follow, I rely on the work of several scholars of the Greek elegy for both my conception of the form Greek elegiac couplet as well as the connotations associated with that form. According to Gregory Nagy, Greek



“elegiac couplets” are the essential component of both Greek epitaphs and elegies, which are composed of “two verses” consisting of “the elegiac hexameter and the elegiac pentameter.”

Nagy goes further to determine that the elegiac couplet originated “from traditions of singing songs of lament... [whereby lament is defined as] an act of singing in response to the loss of someone or something near and dear, whether that loss is real or only figurative” (13).<sup>5</sup>

H.D.’s exposure to these epitaphs and forms arise from her reading of John Mackail’s *Select Epigrams from the Greek Anthology*<sup>6</sup>, which features a section on “Epitaphs.” According to Mackail, the relationship between the Greek elegy and the Greek epitaph was self-evident: the “elegiac metre was instinctively recognized as the one best suited for inscriptional poems”

(5). By reading *Trilogy*’s form through the epitaphs compiled by John Mackail in *Select Epigrams* and other collections, such as Paul Friedländer’s *Epigrammata*, we can note the sources of H.D.’s lithic poetics. The similarities that I notice, right away, are as follows: both H.D. and the Greeks use the couplet to enact a sense of “historical compression,” aligning images, metaphors, and concept into short and terse lines. Both make notable use of parataxis and alliteration, enacting rhyme and sound not through conventional end-rhymes but rather through disparate and unexpected half-rhymes (Greek verse almost never employs end-rhymes). Both play, to different extents, on the tension between the poem’s holism and

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<sup>5</sup> Nagy’s arguments are largely supported by the literature on Greek and Roman tomb inscriptions: see Paul Friedländer, *Epigrammata*: “the word *elegies* in lyrical passages of Euripides and Aristophanes invariably means a song of mourning — be it the lament of Helen or Iphigenia or of the ‘much-mourning’ halcyon or the ‘tearful’ nightingale — ... This fact agrees with the prevailing theory of the ancient grammarians, explaining and etymologizing the word elegy as song of mourning” (65). The hexameter/pentameter form of the elegiac form has also been contested by Campbell, *Greek Lyric Poetry* (1967): “The elegiac couplet was well described by W. R. Hardie, *Res Metrica* 49, as ‘a variation upon the heroic hexameter, in the direction of lyric poetry’. Its first line is a heroic hexameter; its second line, misleadingly called the pentameter, begins with a hexameter-opening of the type *menin aeide, thea*, pauses and then repeats itself, so that the pattern of the whole couplet is an approximation to AB/AA” (xxiv-xxvii). More nuance is offered by Barron, J.P., Easterling, P.E., and Knox, B.M.W., *The Cambridge History of Classical Literature* (1985): “The elegiac metre at first glance appears a hybrid, and has been regarded as an adaptation of the epic in the direction of lyric. Misleadingly described as an alternation of dactylic hexameters and pentameters to form a couplet, the metrical unit in fact consists of hexameter followed by two hemiepes with word division between each of the three elements; and it was the Romans who abridged the freedom of the earlier Greek poets by insisting that the end of the unit should coincide with the end of the sentence” (128). This essay continues on from older assumptions about the hexameter/pentameter form of the Greek and Roman elegy and epitaph when making the case for H.D.’s use of metrical subtraction as a way of creating absence in her work.



the fragmentation enacted by the poetic catalogue and the lyric sequence.

So what is the effect of reading the thematic content of *The Walls Do Not Fall* with H.D.'s impersonal lithic poetics in mind? The first thing that we may notice is that H.D. paratactically assembles cultural texts as a way of condensing millennia of time into a single unit through "historical compression." The bedrock of the poem therefore becomes an atemporal textured foundation that resists the idea of the "tidy progression of styles" and embraces the multiplicity of mythological and religious images. Coming back to the first canto, we can see this desire to compress history, right in the poem's opening lines:

An incident here and there,  
and rails gone (for guns)  
from your (and my) old town square:

mist and mist-grey, no colour,  
still the Luxor bee, chick and hare  
pursue unalterable purpose

in green, rose-red, lapis;  
they continue to prophesy  
from the stone papyrus: (509)

Multiple signifiers from disparate centuries — such as the hand "rails" of the city square, the "Luxor bee," and the "lapis" (the latin word for stone) — are unified in the way that they "continue to prophesy / from the stone papyrus" (509). These temporal shifts account for the way that these elements are etched beside one another, creating gaps not in just in the breaks between the couplets, but also in the temporal gaps between implied to exist between these

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<sup>6</sup> See: Eileen Gregory, *H.D. and Hellenism*, 161-162.



objects. The objects that are inscribed on the “stone papyrus” are therefore objects of mourning that are historically compressed into a single poetic object. Both the form of the Egyptian “hieroglyph”<sup>7</sup> and the Greek and Roman epitaph, mentioned in a unified poetic sequence, condense Grecian and Biblical imagery into a single strand. In addition to this, the inscription allows for each section to become a distinct unit within a larger whole: the three-line stanzas of the first section are contrasted with couplets of the rest of the poem, reminding us that we are not reading a unified voice but rather a stylized collection of poetic sections wrought into one single and largely discordant poem. H.D.’s speaker anticipates her own formal move in the coming cantos of the poem — the first canto is the epilogue to the poem that foregrounds her curatorial work of the voices that are to come.

By framing civilization’s figurative absence within a long lyric sequence, H.D.’s poet uses these lithic poetics in order to imitate, in some ways, the curatorial work done by the many editors of the *Greek Anthology*. The lyric sequence aids the poet in presenting the fragments of *Trilogy* “objectively”; the cantos follow no narrative progression yet still build on a historical “progression” of images, as Laqueur or Mellor would note. Take a look, for instance, at canto [7], which is surrounded by two longer, more lyric fragments:

[7]

Gods, goddesses

wear the winged head-dress

of horns, as the butterfly

antennae,

or the erect king-cobra crest

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<sup>7</sup> See: Morris, *How to Live/What to Do*, 41: “The pattern for language in “The Walls Do Not Fall” is the Egyptian hieroglyph.”



to show how the worm turns.

While canto [6] uses the lyric “I” to convey its voice, canto [7] shifts out of that lyric mode and embraces an imagistic level of precision to describe a religious monument in a way that is only nebulously tied to the previous canto through the association with the “worm.” The lyric sequence form allows H.D. to layer canto [7] on top of the voices and descriptions of previous sections in order to shape the architecture of the poem — from the reader’s perspective, we are privy to the images of Egyptian goddesses and cobras alongside private epitaphs of people now long gone. This section in *Trilogy* manages to combine many of the poem’s dominant symbols and themes: as Susan Stanford Friedman points out, the serpent in canto [7]

is the same as the healing serpents entwined on the winged Caduceus of Hermes Psychopompous; the uraeus worn by Egyptian deities and pharaohs; the horned headdress of Hathor, associated by H.D. with insect antennae; and the serpent rod of the biblical magician Aaron. The shortest section in *The Walls Do Not Fall* condenses serpent and insect into the single image of the worm, and it synthesizes Greek, Egyptian, and Hebrew traditions into a single current of esoteric wisdom. (217-18)

The long-poem format separates *Trilogy* from H.D.’s earlier work in the way that it relies on a unity that upends traditional narrative form and replicates reading a contemporary edition of Sappho or Meleager. The lyric sequence, in H.D.’s hands, becomes a source of unifying this chorus of elegiac voices — each image is able to feed off the associations that are informed by previous and future cantos. Loss, in this poem, becomes participatory: it is left up to the reader to disentangle the symbology and the referential images of the poem’s atemporal frame. By placing the reader into this site of future destruction using the lyric sequence, H.D. opens up the ruin in order to let us participate in its aesthetic qualities.

While the architecture of the poem is composed using the lyric sequence, the



speaker also compresses loss into the shape of the Greek elegiac couplets. If H.D. followed this form faithfully, her stanzas would have had a rigid metrical pattern: she would start each couplet first with a hexameter line, following up with a pentameter in the second and the starting all over again for the following couplet. The effect of such a pattern results in an empty space of one foot between these two lines, a component of Greek elegiac metre that distinguishes it from the consistent hexameter lines of the epic mode. The stanzas of *The Walls Do Not Fall* have retained their two-line shape but have been transposed into free verse. Since the poem no longer uses a set meter, H.D. recreates loss using another method, which I would like call the effect ‘metrical subtraction,’ which I find is integral to the elegiac effect of her lithic poetics. By aligning two lines of unequal length — a component inherent to Greek elegiac verse — H.D. creates the belated sense that something is missing without conforming to strict metrical guidelines. H.D.’s free verse can therefore use the inconsistent line lengths in to signal the “broken sentences and unfinished rhythm” that she saw as the defining aesthetic of Sappho. Canto [29], the first half of which is reproduced below, is a particularly strong example of this effect:

[29]

Grant us strength to endure

a little longer,

now the heart's alabaster

is broken;

we would feed forever

on the amber honey-comb



of your remembered greeting,  
but the old-self,

still half at-home in the world,  
cries out in anger,

I am hungry, the children cry for food  
and flaming stones fall on them; (531-32)

The lyric fragment of this section of the long poem preserves the collective unconscious of the dead (“we would feed forever / on the amber honey-comb”) as they speak out against the injustices perpetrated on the living (the children cry for food / and flaming stones fall on them). The shape of the couplets allows the poet to combine the lyric “I” with the collective suggestion that the world is again turning into ruin. The elongated first lines stretch out just long enough to create the sense that the lines that follow are cut short — the “cry” of anger is stopped by the “flaming stones” of the bombings. Stones populate the poem, taking the place of people: they are both the elements of the “heart’s alabaster” and the inscriptions from which these voices are born. Through the voices of the dead, H.D. cements the ethical drive of the elegy into the cantos of the poem. Ethics and form in *The Walls Do Not Fall* are inseparable as the stones speak out in the face of destruction, time, and an apocalyptic vision of absence and loss.

The strictness of the elegiac couplet is significantly different than what other commentators have said about the form of *Trilogy*. Alicia Ostriker, for instance, underscores the poem’s fluidity when she points out in “The Open Poetics of H.D.,” that poet’s versification is “inseparable from her radical stance as visionary and modern poet” (336), which leads her to suggest that her technique “involves a balance between a sense of



confident order on the one hand and on the other a sense of improvisation which we experience as seeking and questing, as hesitation and testing, as confusion and as play; between a sensation of crisp clarity and one of fluidity; between the closed and the open” (339). In Ostriker’s reading, the “openness” of the poem can be directly attached to the musical presence of “confusion and play,” the patterned repetition and internal rhyme of the long poem’s three sections. My conception of the lyric speaker’s tendency to read these inscriptions, on the other hand, emphasizes “openness” differently. Through the careful subtraction of mournful lament that is said to have accompanied the Greek elegy, the openness comes by way of the poem’s liberal use of empty spaces, both in form (the spaces between the stanzas) and in content (the empty temples, sarcophagi, and ruins). In H.D.’s lithic poetics, these empty spaces open up places that “endure when the staunch blossoms have perished” and when the beauty and mourning of human life is gone. Through this metric subtraction the poet puts emphasis on an “unfinished rhythm,” H.D.’s lithic poetics alter the forms of Greek elegy in order to permute the impersonal ethical drive of the poem’s elegiac mode.

Ethics have dominated critical discussions of *Trilogy*: the poem is often positioned as a consolation to the Blitz that destroyed London in the 1940s. Sarah Graham, for instance, is interested in “an approach to *Trilogy* that keeps the war center-stage at all times, that reads the poem as a key component of the ‘war poetic’ that H.D. began to develop during the First World War and which continue to preoccupy her in her later work” (162). Similarly, Madelyn Detloff claims that *Trilogy* “provides a powerful example of public mourning. The compelling, apocalyptic language of *Trilogy* is not without its costs, however, for in its redemptive turn, the poem redescribes loss as something triumphant, character-building, transformative... Like the elegy, which helps to manage loss on the individual scale, apocalyptic rhetoric can help a culture cope with catastrophic loss by suggesting that such



losses happened for divine reasons that will be revealed in the future” (81). Graham and Detloff would therefore most likely agree that the poem moves outside of the generic container of the elegy for the simple reason that it tries to capture the inconceivable vastness of loss during the Second World War. Such consolatory and apocalyptic readings of *Trilogy* have been, in part, anticipated by several studies of mourning and elegy in twentieth-century poetry, especially with the publication of *Modernism and Mourning*, edited by Patricia Rae, introduces the common consensus among recent critics that modernism saw a unified “imperative to find an ethically satisfactory response to loss, whether through resisting the closure of mourning or seeking the alternative of irrational forgiveness” (38). Despite *Trilogy*’s formal work bearing little resemblance to any of the noted conventions of the elegy in the English language, many contemporary readers of the poem still latch on to the intricate display of absence as a “ethically satisfactory response to loss.” By opening up the ruins in the first large poem of *Trilogy*, the Sapphic poet responds to loss in a way that is neither consolatory nor apocalyptic. Instead, she does it through an aestheticization of ancient ruin, suggesting that the surfaces of the walls offer, at least to her, a place for the poet’s words to “grow.”

By erasing the singular voice of the poem’s speaker after canto [1] and fully embracing the elegiac couplets that, I argue, are read directly off the surface of the ruin, H.D. not only preserves the voices of these dead but also offers a strain of resistance against dominant forms of mourning in both the English and Greek traditions. As Nagy suggests, elegiac couplets took on their form primary because they were initially always sung by “the one person who is most closely affected by whatever loss is being lamented. That person is conventionally a woman. She shows her sense of loss by expressing her sorrow in song. She sings her lament” (21). H.D.’s speaker’s resistance to being placed into the category of “mourner” is a gendered resistance to affective labour — it registers an awareness of the fact



that women have always traditionally been forced to provide affective labour as griever and placaters of loss. The negation of lament in H.D.'s *Trilogy* is a way of discrediting the early twentieth century assumption that "women writers were entangled in sensibility, were romantic and sentimental by nature, so even the best might not altogether escape this romantic indulgence in emotion and sublimity" (Clark 2). H.D.'s lithic poetics generate historical syncretism through the flexibility of her verse: the couplets illustrate a resistance towards sentimental mourning by making the Sapphic poet descriptive rather than affective — her role is to "open" the loss, to show it to the reader as a way of transferring that affective labour into the mind of the reader. While the Sapphic poet does not "mourn" the loss of Western civilization, the "tone is [nonetheless] elegiac," which signals that the poet, unlike the historian, still cares deeply about the ethical ramifications of exposing lithic palimpsests to the world.

The poem subsequently opens the voices of the stones in the poem's next 42 cantos. Canto [2] sounds prophetic, as the Blakean lines proclaim that "Evil was active in the land, / Good was impoverished and sad" (511); canto [6] bends to the confessional, lyric tone of a Christian speaker lamenting absence: "I am yet unrepentant / for I know how the Lord God / is about to manifest" (516). Each section of the poem can be compared to an excerpt or a translation — reminiscent of an epigram from Mackail's anthology — a poem recorded from stone and loosely organized either by theme or by formal structure in a way that signals a single vision. These lyrics are then formally bound together: Graham would label this impulse as a "a determination of purpose, of ideas contained within a grid, of language tamed" (162). By intentionally invoking the ways in which the lyric form compounds the "absence, incompleteness, self-cancellation, and inaccessibility" (Burt 424) of an ancient lyric impersonality, the poem remains in opposition to the objective historical impulse of someone like Laqueur's archaeologist. Imitating Sappho allows H.D. to invoke an ancient sense of



absence and impersonality that resists the objective, collectively mournful gaze of an objective historical speaker. By invoking Eliot's "Tradition and the Individual Talent" through a classical frame, *Trilogy* impersonally replicates mournful lyric experience as "an escape from emotion" coupled with an "escape from personality" and makes the poet's personality that takes on the "objective correlative" of the ruins. The Sapphic poet uses her absent identity as a space where poetry and beauty can grow, redeeming not through politics or history but through art.

This model of the poet as a Sapphic prophet is emphasized by the voices in canto [9], which attempt to bridge the relationship between writing, war, and public mourning:

Thoth, Hermes, the stylus,  
 the palette, the pen, the quill endure,  
  
 though our books are a floor  
 of smouldering ash under our feet;  
  
 though the burning of the books remains  
 the most perverse gesture  
  
 and the meanest  
 of man's mean nature,  
  
 yet give us, they still cry,  
 give us books,



folio, manuscript, old parchment

will do for cartridge cases;

irony is bitter truth

wrapped up in a little joke,

and Hatshepsut's name is still circled

with what they call the *cartouche*. (518)

According to this speaker, “the stylus, / the palette, the pen, the quill endure” beyond individuals or civilizations, even though the “books are a floor / of smouldering ash.” These voices proclaim that writing — if it is inscribed on stone — is eternal, even if civilizations attempt to silence the writers themselves. The second half of canto [9] suggests that history is an inevitable by-product of writing and war by acoustically apposing the couplet “folio, manuscript, old parchment / will do for cartridge cases” with the closing couplet “and Hatshepsut’s name is still circled / with what they call the *cartouche*.” The definition and pronunciation of *cartouche* are both rhymed: the word can mean “tablet for an inscription or for ornament” as well as “a roll or case of paper, parchment, etc., containing the charge of powder and shot for a gun or pistol” (OED), which echoes both the “manuscript, old parchment” and the “cartridge cases” signifiers mentioned earlier. The writer’s parchment, just like the soldier’s *cartouche*, therefore, is an essential element of the historical record. But it is the poet, and not the historian, who excels at exhuming the linguistic proximity of these to things: writing and weaponry inevitably “create” the lithic palimpsests in this poem. The poet aestheticizes these things into “books” even if those books are then reduced to “smouldering ash under our feet.” Perhaps it is for these reasons that our Sapphic speaker reaches for a lithic poetics — stones are not as easily destroyed by fire or war and are



thus able to “endure” in the face of total and complete annihilation.

Through the engagement of the concepts of textuality, *The Walls Do Not Fall*, much like Eliot’s *Four Quartets*, signals awareness of its own conception as a written text, an awareness that ties together the rhythmic sound of its verse with the inscription. In fact, the poem attempts to analyze the purpose its own existence in canto [10] onwards: “so what good are your scribblings? / this — we take them with us / beyond death; Mercury, Hermes, Thoth / invented the script, letters, palette; / the indicated flute or lyre-notes / on papyrus or parchment / are magic, indelibly stamped / on the atmosphere somewhere, / forever...” (518-519). The writing that has been “stamped” on the lithic surfaces of these ruins allows for the poet to walk through and collect them into her lyric catalogue. Layered in scripts, letters, and palettes that are augmented by the elegiac flute and lyre-notes that float out of the temporal past of the ruins, the poem’s lithic palimpsests are positioned as a way of acknowledging loss and absence and then speaking out against that absence through the lithic qualities of those stones. The uniform visual quality of the poem acknowledges the jagged edges that protrude out of these catalogues while simultaneously acknowledging their common core — canto [10] ends with “*in the beginning / was the Word*” (519), a reiteration of the Genesis story that reflects the speaker’s desire to find the most essential element underneath all cultural constructs. The metrical patterning makes potent use of the “unfinished rhythms” of free verse to generate much the same kind of subtraction that occurs when the hexameter line is followed by the shorter line of the pentameter. These lines formally signify loss in both their open congruence (sound, meaning), and their incongruence in metre (formal Greek verse) and rhyme (formal English verse). Each couplet is made out of lines that do not match metrically, thus creating the spaces between the stones that H.D. theorized were present in Sappho’s poetics.

Along with Sappho, Homer also exerts an influence on the imagery of the dead in



*Trilogy*. Canto [4] is a good example of the ways in which H.D. borrows not only images from Homer but the poem's form as well — H.D. transposes the Homeric epithet into hyphenated compound nouns in order to imitate, at least partially, the Ancient Greek:

There is a spell, for instance,  
in every sea-shell:

continuous, the sea-thrust  
is powerless against coral,

bone, stone, marble  
hewn from within by that craftsman,

the shell-fish:  
oyster, clam, mollusc

is master-mason planning  
the stone marvel:

yet that flabby, amorphous hermit  
within, like the planet

senses the finite,  
it limits its orbit

of being, its house,



temple, fane, shrine:

it unlocks the portals

at stated intervals:

These hyphenated compound nouns — “sea-shell,” “sea-thrust,” “master-mason” — are analogous to the poet, who as the “craftsman” of the ruin is issued a combination of materials through which she compresses large swaths of time. “Stone” becomes the common ingredient of immortalized craftsmanship, as engravings are equated with the masonry of the mollusc and, earlier, with the palimpsest of the stone papyrus. Much like the “wine-coloured” sea makes little sense in the present context, so the words in cantos [4] and [5] replicate the experience of reading a nascent language. Canto [4], for example, uses dashes to combine words like “tide-flow,” “shell-jaws,” and “ocean-weight” (513) as signifiers of an archaic diction. The effect is again one of compression. The poet defamiliarizes concepts to such an extent that language itself becomes circuitous and self-referential, as the poet addresses the reader with “you beget, self-out-of-self, / selfless, / the pearl-of-great-price” (514) in endless catalogues of images and concepts. The short dashes play with language in order to create foreign objects and ideas through their jagged and imperfect edges; the “indigestible, hard, ungiving” becomes a “pearl” that is unique in the way that it is full of impregnable meaning. This biological condensate is contrasted with various cultural touchstones, layering fragments into a unitary whole, like the mollusc layers the pearl.

The Sapphic speaker wants us to appreciate how individual elements fit into a greater whole, a move that reminds me of Coleridge’s “secondary imagination,” which “dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create... yet still at all events it struggles to idealize and to unify” (364). The role of the poet, then, is to reveal these forces and absences as forces that are often concealed by the misallocated mourning for a single individual in the



form of an elegy. In section [8], the speaker remarks: “poets are useless... / we are ‘pathetic’:  
/ this is the new heresy; / but if you do not even understand what words say, / how can you  
expect to pass judgement on what words conceal?” (517). H.D.’s lithic poetics thus resists  
classical and Romantic conceptions of the elegy, primarily due to the fact that they attempt to  
reveal the minutiae that is often ignored. Poetry, like the shell-making mollusc, is not only a  
necessary element of social culture but arguably its *only* necessary element, as it evokes the  
“idols and their secret stored / in man’s very speech” (Ibid). The historically condensed  
“dream” is predicated on mystical absences, on incomprehensible resurgences of  
misunderstood words, and on the infinitely irreducible meaning of words. Poetry, despite  
what the lyric speaker proclaims, is not “useless,” since, through its ability to be used for  
inscriptional purposes, it allows poets to create “portals” that can help us communicate with  
the social worlds of the dead.

Revealed loss and absence are therefore rejuvenating forces in the poem, forces of  
chiseled lithic beauty that persist despite the coming fire that the poet acknowledges to be  
inevitable. The contemporary ruins of London that the poet walks through are bookended by  
fire: first, by the “Apocryphal fire” of canto [1], then by the “pillar-of-fire” of canto [36]:

In no wise is the pillar-of-fire  
that went before

Different from the pillar-of-fire  
that comes after (537)

The lines above repeat “pillar-of-fire” twice, following each repetition with a shorter line  
that creates an empty space underneath the image of the “pillar-of-fire.” These metrical  
absences in the lines that follow elide both fire and time (“went before” and “comes after”) as  
fundamental forces of loss, as both lines capitalize on the spaces between stanzas for this



elegiac effect. The only things that can help us make sense of this loss is the “secret hoard / in the light of both past and future” (538), acknowledging, in some respects, the temporal distance that has formed around the images and objects that she is observing. These “coins, gems, gold / beakers, platters, / or merely / talismans, records or parchments” are the objects of recorded material history that she finds so valuable as signals of the past and the future and ones that are, at least partially, resistant to fire and flame due to their lithic qualities. Echoed here are Walter Benjamin’s thoughts from *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, published just a few years before *The Walls Do Not Fall*. In *Theses*, Benjamin famously states that “There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism” (Brunner 257) implying that objects that are retained throughout history are inadvertently either the products of human suffering or objects conquered by means of human suffering. The historical record, for Benjamin, is mired in war, in death, slavery, and human plight, and the objects that are left behind are imbued with that history. While for Benjamin these riches are descending from the bourgeoisie, H.D.’s catalogue holds a more stone-like and mystical valence. The cyclicity of fire as both destructive and rejuvenatory is placed here as one that is consistent with other famous poems like Yeats’s “The Second Coming” and Eliot’s “The Fire Sermon” — in H.D.’s case, the fire almost seems like a necessary rejuvenation and purification of the inscriptions found on these stones. Fire and time, for H.D., are the curators of history: they syncretize, symbolically, human suffering and loss into the archaeological objects that are then aestheticized in *Trilogy* through the Sapphic speaker’s lithic poetics.

Due to its curatorial treatment of these “documents of barbarism,” *The Walls Do Not Fall* has inverted the direction of mourning and grief. The poem notably omits mourning that is sentimentalized or attached to a ‘monument’ of memory. H.D. and Yeats, to pick up Ramazani’s argument once again, are comparable in their “classical detachment” but differ in purpose and method. Yeats drew heavily on these Romantic conceptions of the epitaph in



order to renounce them: as Helen Vendler points out, “Yeats repudiates the Christian communion implored in piety by Coleridge, and substitutes for it a modernist and skeptical haughtiness, together with a modernist asymmetry of form” (97). Vendler’s claims with regards to Yeats can be just as easily applied to H.D.’s poetics and the qualities of metrical subtraction. H.D. also actively resists the Romantics: the unsentimental ruins in *The Walls Do Not Fall* are likewise resisting Romantic conceptions of ruins, such as those that we see in Wordsworth’s “Tintern Abbey.” While the lyric speaker of “Tintern Abbey” comes to appreciate “these beauteous forms” which inspire in him recollections of personal memory, *Trilogy* transposes the lyric speaker to erase herself, to erase her own experience amidst these objects and inscriptions:

Yet we, the latter-day twice-born,

Have our bad moments when

Dragging the forlorn

Husk of self after us...

We pull at this dead shell,

Struggle but we must wait

Till the new Sun dries off

The old-body humours (521)

The speaker’s transformation into stone, as she “pull[s] at this dead shell,” resists the traditional elegiac tendency to understand memory and loss as overly-reliant on the death of a single individual. The poet sees mourning and loss as devoid of the “husk of self” — loss in this scenario is a metaphysical condition of culture rather than an overwhelming lyric



interiority, like it is in Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey" or in an archetypal elegy such as Milton's "Lycidas." Indeed, *Trilogy* puts itself at odds with an even more distant source material: the Greek elegy. While the Greek elegy is conventionally supported by the performance of a funeral dirge, usually by a female singer, the collective 'we' of the singers replaces the Greek Chorus, instead. The conventions of the Greek funeral dirge assume that the singer "invokes the 'antiphonal performance,' which touches on aspects of [the lead singer's] emotions, creating a 'communalization of emotions'" (Nagy 23). H.D. takes Yeats's "skeptical haughtiness" and makes the speaker in turn repudiate the gendered, feminine role of the emotional mourner; the future Sappho reads the walls of London's tombs in a way that overlooks the emotions that are evoked under loss of human life. Despite H.D.'s dependence on funerary inscriptions as her form of choice, these formal conventions are reproduced in such a way that make *Trilogy* resistant to lamenting the loss of human life through the "sober and reflective act" of raising a "monument." The Sapphic speaker of *The Walls Do Not Fall* does no such thing — she generalizes loss as a collective phenomenon that is anti-nostalgic, she seems to appreciate the cycles of fire and history that create these ruins as aesthetic art-pieces that are inscribed in experience rather than in the "sober and reflective" moments of memory.

In fact, the monuments of the poem are deflated in their importance as they are repeated in the lyric sequence. The body of the deceased — a prevalent cornerstone of the poetic elegy — is conspicuously absent from any and all sections of the long poem, replaced instead by the things that signify that a body was once present: a tomb, a monument, or an inscription. The only remnants of bodies that we see in *The Walls Do Not Fall* are the burnt, stone-like organs of the dead: "slow flow of terrible lava, / pressure on heart, lungs, the brain / about to burst its brittle case... / the flesh? It was melted away, / the heart burnt out, dead ember, tendons, muscles shattered, outer husk dismembered, / yet the frame held: / we passed



the flame” (510-11). Instead of a body, we are privy to a pastiche of corporeal parts that have no name and no defining features, held by a single “frame” that endures the destructive cycles of history. Redemption comes in the appreciation of the ruins and the collectivizing frame that bridges together the experiences of the ancients with the experiences of the moderns. Again, H.D. is resisting older conceptions of the English elegy, which has predominately focused on personal and consolatory loss. By ridding the elegy of the body, H.D. reinvents an ‘elegiac tone’ in *The Walls Do Not Fall*, without invoking an outdated and “useless” mode of personalized mourning. By invoking the “frame” of the bodies captured within the ruins, the impersonal lyric mode unifies the poem, suggesting to the reader, perhaps, that what outlasts the body are the hard, chiseled, and lithic language of the burnt ruin.

H.D.’s speaker therefore resists the feminine and gendered readings of female mourners in both the Greek and Christian traditions. The poem embraces a Yeatsian beauty of apocalypse in canto [35], which orders us to “substitute / enchantment for sentiment” (537) but offers no concrete emotional anchors for empathy in order to help us to do so. Substitution is a recurring theme in the poem. The poet is again placed in the nexus of these lithic elements, as the section closes with “*for every scribe / which is instructed / things new / and old*” (538). This Sapphic impersonal poet must record history in ways that go against Romantic and historical impulses — the artist preserves that which is important to culture without devolving into the sentimental. In some ways, *Trilogy* foregrounds experience and memory through the first-person lyric form, one that no longer cares much for preserving history through names and record-keeping and has instead pointed its attention to objects and symbols of cultural beauty. Perhaps, in that way, the speaker of *Trilogy* underscores the ways in which time makes us forget: even contemporary historical and classical inquiry tends to focus on the object — the urn, the monument, the burial ground — and not on the “bones” that rest beneath. *The Walls Do Not Fall* foregrounds for the antisentimental forces that have



governed the Western world over the past millennium. These forces, according to Suzanne Clark, arise out of a Western logic “which is at work constantly to purify itself of unreason,” a purification that is done primarily through the creation of an “unreasonable other: women, Jews, slaves, peasants, working class, blacks, Arabs — together with the transgressive carnivalesque” (10). In *The Walls Do Not Fall*, however, there is no “unreasonable other” — all bodies have been scrubbed clean, no longer able to be fully oppressed by the horrors of Western civilization. Instead of foregrounding and purifying a single voice that is representative of “the whole race” and effectively hushing the “other,” *The Walls Do Not Fall* admits how these inscriptions generate the “intellectual effort / of the whole race” and are impersonal in their nature. By focusing on ruins, H.D.’s poem is inclusive rather than exclusive, all the while acknowledging that this move is cyclical in the multiple civilizations that will rise and fall — “This search for historical parallels, / research into psychic affinities, / has been done to death before, / will be done again” (539). The poet is exhausted by the consistent drive to be ‘emptying out’ the culture of all of its others, so she omits human beings as a way of escaping this sentimentalized mourning and letting the dead speak through her.

To that end, the absence of a burial or even of a body is therefore an integral part of H.D.’s lyric and lithic poetics. The poem seems to hope that the dead can inspire aesthetic or ethical beauty, arguing that time turns death into beauty:

[...] I know, I feel

The meaning that words hide;

They are anagrams, cryptograms,

Little boxes, conditioned



To hatch butterflies... (540)

Words are the “little boxes” of the couplet that contain the beauty of the dead. The mortuary inscription aestheticizes mourning that can try to transcend time, despite the fact that mourning is hopelessly rooted in history and is slowly eroded by the passing of generations. H.D. develops a poetics that allow these “little boxes” to hatch and create moments of aestheticized loss that can capture an entire civilization’s worth of history. The symbol of the butterfly, which in Greek mythology was associated with “Psyche” or the ‘soul’ and in the Christian art tradition symbolized the Resurrection of Christ (Seigneuret 199), in *Trilogy* translates to the ways in which death and mourning are transcribed into beauty. Just like the aesthetics of the rock shelves can emphasize the flowers that may one day grow, so beauty can arise out of the words inscribed on those rock shelves. H.D. problematizes the sentimental in a way that mirrors Yeats, but also in a way that is entirely her own: she acknowledges the necessity for these stones that create absence as a way of making space for art and poetry. The Sapphic poet re-builds the architecture of the ruin through the lyric sequence and the Greek elegiac couplet and therefore opens up a space where symbols, pictograms, and epitaphs can create the foundation for a new art, a new poetry. The elegiac couplet and the subtle transfiguration of the epitaph form allows for the poet to see things differently than the historian, primarily because the eye of the poet falls on aesthetic rather than political details. By resisting the epic mode, H.D.’s version of the elegy use the elements of compression in order to open up the possibility of resurrection through aesthetic form.

Perhaps that is why at the end of *These Walls Do Not Fall*, the speaker is placed again in the site of the ruin where we first encountered her in the first canto. “*Still the walls do not fall, / I do not know why;*”, laments our speaker, as the chorus of the dead speaks out for the living as they reach out through the “portals” on the walls and make their voices heard through elegiac inscriptions. The ruins that the speaker has described has ‘hatched’ these



aestheticized, lithic palimpsests that speak out beyond the grave, even though they are the “*not-known, / the unrecorded.*” H.D.’s *The Walls Do Not Fall* is a work of absence — a poem that resists traditional avenues of sentimental mourning associated with the elegy — a work that deconstructs, in an impersonal, modernist fashion, the prescribed Western notions of death or the after-life. The recuperative drive to document the rise and fall of people and civilizations captures, through historical compression, the ways in which culture continues to exist after seemingly complete annihilation. The “classical detachment” attributed to this poem by scholars of the elegy is the reason that our future Sappho attempts to document the scraps of history that fire and time have effectively curated for her instead of the history of the individual men or women that came before her. The poem’s speaker lauds poetry, first for its ability to collapse different forms into a single unity, and second as a place where resurrection can occur: the “butterflies” that hatch out of the spaces located between these burial inscriptions are the places “*where wings separate and open*” (543).

The final canto emphasizes the role that loss has in H.D.’s *Trilogy*. Much as Pound ‘empties out’ the lines of “Liu Ch’e” by following each presence with an absence, so the Sapphic speaker this technique when she describes the liminal space between herself and the ruins. “*Still the walls do not fall, / I do not know why;*”, suggests our speaker, “*we know no rule / of procedure, / we are voyagers, discoverers / of the not-known, / the unrecorded; / we have no map; / possibly we will reach haven, / heaven.*” The walls are beautiful and simultaneously powerful because they do *not* fall, and the sense of exploration that we get from observing the “*not-known*” with “*no map.*” Poetry and the ancient lyric mode of our speaker mystically fall outside of the “known” world of history, politics, and science, and for that the Sapphic speaker appreciates their permanent and hardened qualities. These final images of “openness,” achieved through negation and absence, cement the idea that poetry has its own tangible method for preserving and aestheticizing historical objects and voices.



*Trilogy* is an innovative work of late modernist poetry precisely because our speaker accentuates the distinction between form and content in such a way that amplifies their interdependence — to engage with *Trilogy* means to engage with the poem's curation of material history through both historical (Laqueur's gaze) and aesthetic form (Sappho's lyrics). Coming back to the original question posed by this chapter — what separates the poet from the historian? — one might answer so: the poet builds on history and archaeology as a way of “opening up” a lasting, tangible, and aesthetic sliver of history that can be appreciated aesthetically rather than objectively. Redemption and the poem's ethical drive, then, comes through art and affect rather than through a meticulous or accurate recreation of the social, political, or cultural realities of an era. The Sapphic poet of *The Walls Do Not Fall* relies on absence of the lyric persona in order to create an open space for these couplets to enamour and tame their readers through the mysteries of an “unfinished rhythm.” In doing so, art redeems through a perpetual creation and re-creation of the destruction, one that makes it simultaneously beautiful and terrifying.



## CHAPTER 2

Auden's Dirge: Ceremony, Mourning, and "In Memory of W.B. Yeats"

When W.B. Yeats died in 1939, Auden was in the process of moving to Manhattan with his friend and occasional lover Christopher Isherwood. As Nicholas Jenkins points out, we know for certain the first poem that Auden wrote in America was "In Memory of W.B. Yeats." This poem, according to Jenkins, elegizes many things: it is an ambivalent elegy for "a particular poet about whom [Auden] had decidedly mixed feelings," it elegizes Auden's "own former style," while simultaneously mourning the "vatic, politically instrumental conception of the poet's role within culture" (42). Adding to this effect, as the following chapter will argue, Auden structures "In Memory of W.B. Yeats" according to the conventions of the Biblical dirge. By combining different musical forms in the poem's three sections while simultaneously re-conceptualizing Yeats's "In Memory of Major Robert Gregory," Auden uses the dirge to resist the personal, consolatory form of the pastoral elegy and instead transforms his elegy into a public, ceremonious, and impersonal song that mourns the state of the world. In the lead up to Auden's conversion in 1940, the dirge form sustains the Christian, musical, and unifying strands of the poet's imagination. And while the line "Poetry makes nothing happen" in section two is often taken out of context in order to cynically suggest poetry's irrelevance in the twentieth century, this study suggests reading the poem's development sequentially. Auden follows up the second section of the poem with the ceremonious music of the third section by partially adapting the sounds of the dirge's conventional metre to suggest that poetry, in an increasingly insular and secular age, is a "mouth" that can commemorate and mourn the state of Europe on the brink of the Second World War.

To be completely clear: the following chapter is not arguing that "In Memory of W.B. Yeats" should be read as a dirge *instead* of being read as an elegy. Rather, I wish to



underscore the influence that the Biblical dirge has had on the English elegy and illustrate the ways in which this ritualistic, ceremonious, and Christian form is an essential component of Auden's modernist elegy for Yeats. What is the difference between the dirge and the elegy? The dirge, unlike the pastoral elegy, is an inherently public, instead of private, performance of lament. Even more specifically, the Biblical dirge, according to Edward L. Greenstein, postulates that the song has several key conventions — it generally contains a section that focuses on the desolation or destruction of a city, where the singer uses the city-lament as a way to emphasize the impact of the lost individual. The form then usually moves to address the deceased in the second person, establishing a dialogue between the living and the dead. Usually, the dirge also uses a special "qinah [dirge, lament] meter," which consists of an "uneven rhythm: a line of three beats, followed by a shorter line of two beats... sometimes explained as the rhythmic reflex of a funeral march — three paces, then a halting two" (70) as a way of rendering loss through an absence of a beat on every alternating line.

The present chapter argues that Auden integrates these three elements of the Biblical dirge into his modernist elegy for Yeats. This previously unnoticed parallel between "In Memory of W.B. Yeats" and the Biblical dirge allows the poem to be read as a sequential development of Auden's understanding of what poetry means to the modern world. The poem begins with the lament for the dead poet in the frozen "brooks" and "evergreen forests" of a modern city that is unmoved by the loss of the poet. This move calls on the convention of the dirge while simultaneously deflating the conventions of the pastoral elegy that have previously undergirded the genre. The second section then uses the deflation of the first section to address the dead poet in the second person, thus 'emptying out' poetry's meaning and levelling the ground between Auden and Yeats. At the very end of the poem, the third section replaces the *qinah* metre with Yeats's funeral march from "Under Ben Bulbin" as a way of inhabiting his voice: song and ceremony construe poetry as an essential part of the



ceremony of the dead, therefore allowing the poet not only to mourn Yeats but also reflect upon the state of the world that can no longer let Yeats speak publicly. The final section, building off the ironic deflation of poetry's value in sections one and two, allows Auden to suggest that poetry is the public place for collectively mourning the dead and acknowledging the darkening state of the modern world on the brink of the Second World War.

While the elegy usually depends on the speaker's self-seclusion from society, the dirge re-inserts its mourning into the public sphere through funeral rites and the necessary vocalization of the poem in front of an audience, making it a performance. The dirge also makes no pretensions to be eternal or consolatory: loosely defined, a dirge is "a song for the dead, sung at the funeral ceremony... its chief aim was to lament the dead, not to console survivors" (Greene 368), making its aim and tradition somewhat different than that of the Greek or the early sixteenth- and seventeenth-century elegy, which focused more on personal "sorrow, shock, rage, longing, melancholy and resolution — often in quick succession" (Greene 398). Dirges also have an essential musical component to their making. The dirge, in the Biblical tradition, was often accompanied by musical instruments or by a choir, making the threnody or the monody an explication of loss through the simple fact that the deceased can no longer join them in the performance. The formality of the dirge form allows the mourner, in this case Auden, to maintain a detachment from the deceased; it allows the poet to memorialize without condoning, to mourn without relying on the sentimental. By resisting the sentimental mourning of the Romantic or Victorian elegy, Auden uses the form of the dirge much the same way that H.D.'s *Trilogy* uses the epitaph to emulate the perspective of a distanced, Sapphic speaker, to recreate the ruins of London from a different temporal standpoint. All of the elements of the dirge — its musicality, its performative aspect, its ceremonious formality — allow Auden to reconsider what shape mourning and commemoration take in a modernizing world.



The specific components of Auden's musicality in the elegy for Yeats can be interrogated through the Christian musical forms that were beginning to influence Auden's life and poetic career in 1939. Auden's elegy not only commemorates the dead master but thereby interrogates the purpose of writing poetry — Yeats serves as a “vessel” for understanding the importance of poetry in an age where, in Auden's view, intellectualism and civility are rare commodities. Combined with the fact that Auden often experimented and modernized old, complicated, and deeply musical forms for seemingly contradictory purposes, Auden used the Biblical dirge as a formal experiment much the same way that Yeats himself embedded unconventional forms into his poems. Take, for instance, Auden's 1937 poem “Lullaby” in which the speaker works against the simplified musical genre of a lullaby by invoking a high-Yeatsian rhythm and tone in order to sing a love song to a (presumably) same-sex lover. The poem's first six lines evoke this tension perfectly:

Lay your sleeping head, my love,  
 Human on my faithless arm;  
 Time and fevers burn away  
 Individual beauty from  
 Thoughtful children, and the grave  
 Proves the child ephemeral...

Now, compare the six lines of Auden's poem with the first six lines of Yeats's “Lullaby”:

Beloved, may your sleep be sound  
 That have found it where you fed.  
 What were all the world's alarms  
 To mighty Paris when he found  
 Sleep upon a golden bed  
 That first dawn in Helen's arms?



Auden's "Lullaby" directly responds to Yeats's poem of the same name. Both Auden's and Yeats's "Lullaby" use roughly the same poetic form; both rely primarily on tetrameters, and both poems use a similar rhyme scheme. Auden, however, shifts his "Lullaby" into a more confessional mode — while the classical allusions have been removed, the diction remains Yeatsian, with its oppositions of "soul and body" and the "fashionable madmen" with their "pedantic boring cry" later in the poem. Auden's turn, in response to Yeats, signals a more impermanent sense of loss: the speaker is "faithless" — his lover, "Mortal, guilty" — as the poem descends from the realm of the Greek gods to the world of the living. In Auden's "Lullaby," the prophetic and omniscient Yeatsian speaker proclaiming the perfection of the ideal true beauty is replaced by an Audenesque speaker that is cynical in his appreciation of the imperfection and fallibility of human love. By meshing tones, voices, and musical forms, Auden creates a moment where the lyric speaker faces the ephemerality of human nature and begins to respect and appreciate a beauty that does not and will not last. Auden's poem therefore reworks Yeats's "Lullaby" in order to convey a distinctly modern experience; Auden works against established conventions of the lullaby as a way of breaking away from preconceived notions surrounding romantic love.

The origin of Auden's interest in such musical forms can perhaps be traced to his Anglo-Catholic mother, a woman "who instilled in him a strong literary sense as well as a delight in theology and music" (Smith 16) from a very early age. Perhaps inspired by his upbringing, Auden became famous, later on in life, for composing libretti and writing textual accompaniment to the works of Stravinsky and Britten, which attest to his good musical ear and his interest in combining music and poetry. As Igor Stravinsky once pointed out in an interview which questioned him about his work with Auden, Stravinsky insisted that "Wystan had a genius for operatic wording... his lines were always the right length for singing and his words the right ones to sustain musical emphasis" (Northcott 69). Auden's poetry of



mourning can therefore also be understood as drawing on many intersecting and overlapping forms of Christianity and music. An early example of such a fusion can be found in the ninth section of “Twelve Songs”, which is colloquially known as “Funeral Blues”, and which Edward Mendelson classifies as “a dirge for a dead beloved” (32) in the context of *The Ascent of F6*, a two-act play co-written with Christopher Isherwood and later set to music by Benjamin Britten. Written in rhyming couplets, the ballad stanzas of “Funeral Blues” describe a funeral procession that “with muffled drum” silences the world around the tragedy: “Stop all the clocks, cut off the telephone,” echoes its famous first line. The predominantly iambic feet shift from pentameter to hexameter lines, prolonging the emphasis on words that signify absence: words like “dismantle” are given sustained musical emphasis in long lines that yearn for complete sensory absence — “Pack up the moon and dismantle the sun.” Meanwhile, the rhyming couplets of the poem “sustain musical emphasis” just as they accentuate the inability of productive creative generation in a moment of profound loss. The original song in *The Ascent to F6* is performed by the character of James Ransom and, according to Mendelson, originally inhabits a “somewhat ironic tone” in the context of the play; by taking the poem out of its dramatic and subsequently ironic context, the poem in the collected edition of Auden’s poetry legitimates its lament using the isolation of the mourning from the spectacle of drama — Auden therefore invokes, through careful lyricisms, an intimacy of a fleeting and unstable poetic loss.

Auden’s elegy for Yeats, known often for its line “poetry makes nothing happen,” has sustained many different interpretations. This famous line splits critics into two general camps of thought. On one side, readers such as Charles Altieri assert that the line has a positive valence, and that through Auden’s deflation, the poet asserts that poetry *can* make things happen by initiating dialogue and conversation: “So long as poetry keeps the effect and the affect of happening, it gives the mouth a substantial place in the world — not by invoking



images but by dramatizing processes within which various dialogues can take place” (155). On the other side of the debate, critics such as R. Clifton Spargo insist that “In Memory of W.B. Yeats” is an “anti-elegy” which “demystifies the premise according to which the poet and his work are idealized so as to transcend time and be made worthy of remembrance” through a “deflation of poetry’s value” in the second section of the poem (415). In my reading of the poem through the conventions of the Biblical dirge, the fact that “Poetry makes nothing happen” is a good thing; in Auden’s view, poetry cannot kill or harm, but it does serve a real purpose. By placing the recuperative value of poetry in the elegy’s third section, Auden implies that poetry continues the religious traditions of ceremony and public mourning as a place where people can rejoice. While it is not “anti-elegiac,” the dirge form does, in fact, subvert many of the topoi usually associated with the pastoral elegy: the poem produces a ceremonial and spiritual closure for Yeats’s death without suggesting that individual grief or mourning has now been allayed. Auden reinterprets the English elegy through the Biblical context and through another poetic dialogue with Yeats. The elegy for Yeats reworks Yeats’s pastoral “In Memory of Major Robert Gregory” as a way to acknowledge Yeats’s death, speak out against the problems of the world, and assert the significance of poetry in this modern world.

Instead of relying on the pastoral elegy as the verse form in which to write his commemoration of Yeats, Auden instead chooses to make his mourning public and largely impersonal. First, Auden’s poem invokes the city-lament, a theme borrowed from the ancient Greek elegy and then repurposed into the dirge. Greenstein points out that this tradition springs from the Sumerian dirge over King Urnammu of Ur, which began to employ the imagery of desolate cities to describe the personal loss felt by the mourners. The elegy and the dirge therefore draw on these common topoi — people as broken pots, the abandonment of the city and the temples, the ‘fall’ motif, and so on — to describe the ruinous nature of



death; as Greenstein concludes, “what goes around comes around: the city laments, which drew inspiration and rhetoric from the elegy, come in turn to influence the dirge over an individual” (78). By beginning with the city of New York, Auden erases individual agency through the modern desolation of the urban scene. In order to emphasize the ways in which modern society erases individual agency, Auden removes the lyric “I” of Yeats’s poem and instead relies on the Christian tradition “to address the deceased in the second person,” thereby bridging the gap between us and Yeats (Greenstein 68) — a move common to the Biblical dirge that Yeats’s elegy never makes for Robert Gregory. The third section of Auden’s poem comes to rely on a funeral march metre that is similar, but not identical, to the “‘*qinah* [dirge, lament] meter’ [which] consists of an uneven rhythm: a line of three beats, followed by a shorter line of two beats (where a beat is usually one major word)” (Ibid 70). It is important to note here that while the meter occurs in the Bible three times (Samuel 17, Isaiah 14, Ezekiel 19) in the original Hebrew, it is prominently written in accentual-syllabic metre and not necessarily alliterative verse, although the three-beat and two-beat alternate structure is prominent in dirges that use alliterative verse as well. Auden does not replicate this rhythm: instead, Auden’s elegy is written in catalectic trochaic tetrameters that force the beat of the “muffled drum” to sustain the sense that we are experiencing a funereal ceremony in a distinctly Yeatsian voice. While Auden does not sustain the exact form of the *qinah* metre, since he adds an extra beat to each line, the effect is similar: the last section of the poem emulates the sound of a public funeral procession that rings out across the desolate world described in the first section of the poem.

Auden’s elegy begins with the topos of the deserted city, placing Yeats’s disappearance in the cold January months when Auden arrived to New York:

He disappeared in the dead of winter:

The brooks were frozen, the airports almost deserted



And snow disfigured the public statues

Auden initially engages the tradition of the pastoral elegy by dedicating this elegy to another poet, a codified convention of the genre, whereby the body is placed in a “landscape” which “remains a concrete, palpable world in which the elegist can place diffuse, intangible feelings of grief and thereby win his release from suffering” (Lambert xiii). Yet unlike the idyllic scene of a typical pastoral elegy, Auden’s cityscape is cold, imperfect, and urban. Auden situates mourning within New York, where the public statues are “disfigured” and the suburbs are silent and unresponsive. As Ellen Lambert points out, the typical pastoral landscape “pleases us not, like the vanished groves of Eden, because it *excludes* pain, but because of the way it includes it. Pastoral offers us a vision of life stripped not of pain but of complexity” (xv). Defying the oversimplification of traditional pastoral — and in that way the pastoral frame of “In Memory of Major Robert Gregory” — Auden’s cityscape offers no such escape from complexity. The “deserted” airports, the “frozen” brooks, and the “disfigured” public statues — which echo, again, Wordsworth’s conception of the elegy as a monument — all signal a sense of loss that has been transposed into the hustle and bustle of modernity rather than into a dignified and minimal country landscape. This desolate environment is then merged with Yeats’s body: “the squares of his mind were empty, / Silence invaded the suburbs, / The current of his feeling failed; he became his admirers,” suggesting that it is, in fact, the abandonment of the city that is central to the poet’s grief, and not the death of Yeats. Auden draws on the “fall” motif of the Biblical dirge in order to resist the tradition of the pastoral elegy and emphasize the forsaken state of the modern world.

On top of these topoi generally associated with the dirge, the auditory structure of the first stanza has been noted, by Jahan Ramazani, to have dirge-like qualities:

the modern diction of the opening — *air-ports, mercury, instruments* — gives the elegy an air of casual speech. Yet the ceremonious sounds of a dirge circumscribe the



appearance of offhand utterance. The letter *d*, for example, after an initial appearance in the inscription “(d. Jan. 1939),” generates an alliterative climax: *disappeared, dead, deserted, disfigured, dying day, The day of his death was a dark cold day*. This bunching of final stresses is the rhythmic culmination of a stanza that moves from feminine line-endings — *winter, deserted, statues* — to masculine — *dying day, agree* — to a massive triple stress — *dark cold day*, reinforced by alliteration and lexical repetition. (185)

Ramazani is the only other commentator of “In Memory W.B. Yeats” that notes Auden’s affinity for the sounds of the funeral dirge, emphasizing, somewhat erroneously, that its presence is dominant in the first section of the poem. My reading builds on Ramazani’s in order to suggest that Auden’s tension between the “casual” and the “ceremonious” also manifests itself in the satirical qualities of this section. “The wolves ran on through the evergreen forests, / The peasant river was untempted by the fashionable quays” uses the rhetoric and topoi of the city and country life divide to suggest that the death of the great poet had little to no effect on the city’s “fashionable quays.” The tone here is urbane, slightly sardonic, but still mournful. Auden’s treatment of Yeats here is similar to the way that he treats the “Old Masters” in “Musée des Beaux Arts”: as Terry Eagleton deftly suggests,

One problem the piece faces is how to be suitably wry about suffering without being cynical about it. It has to tread a fine line between a lightly ironic wisdom and sounding merely jaded. It needs to demythologise human pain, but without seeming to devalue it. So the tone – mannered, but not callous or cavalier – has to be carefully managed. (5)

The carefully managed tone thus drains the poet of his mythical status: as his mind is “empty,” as “it was his last afternoon as himself” — his “words” are reduced to the spaces occupying “the guts of the living.” The “demythologization,” to use Eagleton’s term, lowers



Yeats's legacy from Byzantine heights into the realm of what seems to resemble the quotidian human body. The poet successfully demythologizes the pastoral elegy, using his urbane and slightly ironic tone, without necessarily undercutting the importance of the elegy as a whole. Auden's speaker seems to assert that this bleak urban world needs elegy and ceremony in an alternative, more trustworthy, more genuine form.

The speaker, in the role of a critic, effectively resists classical conceptions of elegy by instead refocusing the poem into the qualities of the dirge. The poem goes from a personalized, deeply conventional elegy for one man, William Butler Yeats, to a scene of public mourning that grieves for the state of the world that is witnessing the death of the great poet. The city is in ruins not because of the destruction of critical infrastructure but rather because it is devoid of humanity, devoid of the spiritual qualities that we tend to associate with the "soul." Much as Wordsworth's "London, 1802" mourns the passing of Milton through the invocation of a degrading modern city — London becomes "a fen / Of stagnant waters" — Auden's speaker mourns the state of the modern world that is now burying Yeats. The dirge's public and collective qualities are more expansive than the pastoral elegy's and thus allow the poet to mourn the setting, not the man. Modern grief, in the first section of Auden's elegy, provides no timeline for thinking about the impact that the poet has had on society: "A few thousand will think of this day / As one thinks of a day when one did something slightly unusual." The capitalist superstructures of society and the complexities of the modern world, those that focus value as something that is intrinsically tied to "the floor of the Bourse," create a perpetual state of distraction that has reduced tragedy into merely "something unusual." In the first stanza, Auden's efforts seem pointless, since the poetic elegy, in this modern world, has outlived its usefulness. Yet by airing these discontents, the poem clears a space for its counter-argument in section three that poetry and ceremony affirm our need for public rituals of mourning when we mourn the dead. The poet empties out the



elegy of all of its generic conventions in order to carve out a genuine and level space for a sincere dialogue between him and Yeats. The invocation of the desolate city opens up Auden's critique of this emotionally desolate, quotidian, and overly-capitalistic social world that no longer wants — but desperately needs — the English elegy.

This critique reaches its peak in the poem's second section. The poem's climax, which insists that "Poetry makes nothing happen," places this prophetic claim in the middle of the poem, and not at the end. Often torn out of the context by commentators, this line puts under suspicion the larger project of the poem to elegize a 'great modernist master.' I want to emphasize that the placement of this line in the middle of the poem is very strategic, since its placement in the middle rather than the end of the poem plays an integral part in developing Auden's understanding of poetry's role in the modern world. I borrow this approach to reading the poem's development from Kenneth Burke, who employs this move in his essay on Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn":

If the oracle were to have been uttered in the first stanza of the poem rather than the last, its phrasing proper to that place would have been: "Beauty is *not* truth, truth *not* beauty." The five stanzas of successive transformation were necessary for the romantic philosophy of a romantic poet to transcend itself... (72-73)

Burke claims that "Ode on a Grecian Urn" begins with a view that is the polar opposite of the one that is proclaimed at the end of the poem. Through each lyric section, the poem goes through a "successive transformation" that eventually arrives to the poem's romantic philosophy: "Beauty is truth, truth beauty." I want to emphasize that Auden's claim that "Poetry makes nothing happen" is placed squarely in the middle of the poem precisely because it is *not* the poem's primary philosophy and is simply part of a "successive transformation" necessary for the poet to arrive, at the end of the third section, to his own viewpoint on the role of poetry in the world. Spargo's view that "the hypothesis entertained



by the first section of the elegy, that Yeats's poetry merits eternal remembrance, is made subject to suspicion in the second section, in which Auden reminds his reader, as part of the rationale for not taking Yeats's politics too seriously, that 'poetry makes nothing happen.'" (415). I believe that Auden's "deflation" of Yeats, Yeats's poetry, and the pastoral elegy traditionally used to mourn poets makes his second-person address to the dead poet so much sincerer. By placing the "oracle" that "Poetry makes nothing happen" in the middle of the poem rather than the end, Auden lowers the heightened tone of the first stanza and allows the speaker to talk plainly with Yeats, as poet to poet. "Poetry makes nothing happen" is the poem's climax but not its conclusion, and is instead positioned as an argument that the third section effectively counters through a re-enactment of Yeats's funeral march and second-person address.

The second section of the poem therefore takes up the second large convention of the Biblical dirge — the second person address — to establish a dialogue with the dead poet and reconstruct the role of poetry in the twentieth century. The heightened sincerity of the moment is aided by Auden's use of slant-rhyme and caesura, one that verges on free verse: "You were silly like us; your gift survived it all: / The parish of rich women, physical decay, / Yourself." The speaker-poet acknowledges the suffering of Yeats's life and discusses the poetry that came out of the political and social problems that dogged Yeats: "Mad Ireland hurt you into poetry" which pronounces the difficult role that political passions played in his poems, which at the start of his career were predominantly lyric. The speaker takes on some of Yeats's diction here — "parish," "Mad Ireland", "the valley of its making" — these words pronounce a sense of closeness to the poet that makes both Auden and Yeats the mourners for the death of poetry in the modern world. By deflating poetry's role in the world, Auden strips his own ironic tone and delays the formal pomp long enough to speak to Yeats candidly. The sincerity of the moment capitalizes on the idea that Auden owes a great deal of his own poetic



prowess — and his language — to W.B. Yeats. The commonality is made concrete in the poem's remark that both Auden and Yeats are "silly" interlocutors that no longer belong in the world with their poetic skills and talents. This commonality heightens the sense of isolation and absence that is reflected in the imagery: "ranches of isolation and the busy griefs, / Raw towns that we believe and die in." Auden is now alone in the world of poetry, now walking through this unforgiving, modern world by himself.

The emptying-out that occurs here is decidedly no longer sardonic, as the speaker-poet considers the one thing that Auden and Yeats both held in high esteem: the value of poetry. A convention of the dirge, the sense that the speaker is directly addressing Yeats, belongs strictly within the Christian tradition of Biblical mourning. This dialogue is usually reserved for a wake or a funeral, yet Auden carefully inserts it into the middle of the poem. After a poet's death, the poem seems to argue, all that survives is the poetry, because it is "a way of happening, a mouth." Auden's emptying out of poetry's meaning is often misread: poetry makes "nothing" happen, and it is precisely for that reason that it is important — poetry deals in absence rather than presence. "Nothing" comes to signify many things in the poem: the "ranches of isolation", the "raw town", a "mouth" with no voice. Poetry is used to talk about and imagine 'emptiness' and, by extension, death: poetry is useful as a rhetorical space to talk about the things that have no monetary worth, that cannot be managed by "executives" or traded "on the floor of the Bourse," those things that we must all face: love, beauty, loss, and death.

The dirge convention of the second person address formulates poetry as a spiritual space as well as a dialogic one. Poetry's "mouth" carries with it mourning and loss through communal rituals surrounding death. Important here is the audible function of the "mouth" — poetry is inherently oral, at least to Auden. Unlike the poetics of H.D., which focus predominantly on the ways in which inscription etches words and history into inanimate



objects, Auden's projection of history is formulated through words and auditory memorialization. The first-person plural "us" unifies the "busy griefs" of its constituents, providing consolation through what is most probably a religious ceremony. Sound, rhyme, and memory identify Auden's tendency to see the subvocalization of the poetic act as its most significant driving force, one that is resilient to the "executives" of the Bourse which were so indifferent to Yeats in the very first section of the poem. By asserting their commonality through the perceived uselessness of poetry in real-world concerns, Auden magnifies poetry's importance — poetry is a rhetorical space, a "mouth," that can speak about death and nothingness and mourn in ways that other modes and genres cannot.

The third and final section of Auden's poem is therefore vital to the logical development of the argument that poetry is meaningful in the ways in which it can mourn and commemorate through ceremony. Many critics, on the other hand, see the third section of Auden's elegy as simply imitative of Yeats's "Under Ben Bulbin." Peter Sacks views Auden's elegy as "generic" in that the "caricatured voice of Yeats" with its "formal pomp and ceremony" undercuts the elegy and makes it one of the less successful elegies by Auden (304). Lawrence Lipking, meanwhile, praises the final section of the poem for its ability to capture "the resources of Yeats' verse: the rhythm whose momentum drives ahead of meaning, the simplicity of language that weaves opposing thoughts into a single thread" (159). In a particularly strong reading of the influence that Yeats had on Auden's thinking, Lipking also states that the formal innovation of the third section teaches the poet "how to praise," how the poet can "call us to rejoice even amid the 'numb nightmare' of history" (160). Elaborating on Lipking's argument only requires one to consider not only the ways in which Auden imitates Yeats, but also in the ways in which the poet praises him. The answer is quite simple: Auden praises Yeats through the funeral march, which resounds throughout the desolate world of New York and reminds us of the importance of mourning and consolation.



Poetry, therefore, becomes a public, collective “mouth” that speaks out against the desolate world of pre-war Europe and offers a space for us to mourn the dead.

The third and final section of the poem not only emulates the sounds of the fifth section of “Under Ben Bulbin,” but also, partially, its message — with its first two trochaic tetrameter lines featuring prominent catalectic substitutions on the first foot: “Irish poets learn your trade / Sing whatever is well made.” In this section, Auden is clearly inspired by both the rhythm of the funeral march (qinah) metre, which is written in alternating trochaic trimeter and dimeter lines, and the sound of Yeats’s funeral march, which is predominantly a trochaic tetrameter. While Auden does not reproduce the qinah beat exactly — Auden’s lines are predominately tetrameters with various metric substitutions — the poet nonetheless foregrounds a regimented, militaristic, strong-stress beat of a metre that is highly-reminiscent of the Biblical dirge:

Eárrh, recéive an hónoured guést:

Wílliam Yéats is láid to rést

Lét the Írish véssel lié

Émptied òf its póetry.

The poet begins the section with the tetrameter lines of “Under Ben Bulbin” which overlook both the physical body of Yeats as well as his poetic corpus. Indeed, within the first three lines, the beats undoubtedly fall into a tetrameter structure — it is only the last line that gives a reader pause as the unconventional rhyme between “lie” and “poetry” wants to force a strong accent of the final syllable “y.” The final line of this stanza replicates the slow and cumbersome sounds of a funeral procession by creating alternating tetrameters and trimeters that withhold a stress on every other line. The denouement of the last line ‘empties out’ Yeats’s body: not only through imagery and content, but also through the audible halt brought about by the word “poetry,” which stumbles off into silence with no final concluding stress to



match the lines above it. Yeats's coffin becomes the site of "nothing" (since poetry makes "nothing" happen) as the line runs off unstressed, and the sound and imagery becomes Biblical as the form shifts away from Yeats's coffin towards the 'nightmare of history':

    In the nightmare of the dark  
     All the dogs of Europe bark,  
     And the living nations wait,  
     Each sequestered in its hate;

The poem reprises the four beat structure of "Under Ben Bulbin" in this stanza, curtly ringing the bells of a formal, Christian funeral procession. This beat persists in the second, third, fifth, and sixth stanzas of the third section: as the poet acknowledges the unfortunate turns that are being taken within Europe found once again on the brink of war, the poet's metre forces the sounds of a funeral procession for Yeats. The traditional Biblical dirge metre, no longer present in its qinah form but instead transformed into catalectic trochaic tetrameters, draws on Biblical imagery — take for instance the "farming of a verse / make a vineyard of the curse" — as a way of accentuating that it is a public and collective song of mourning for a world that is "sequestered" in its "hate." The beat, forced into this rhythm, now promotes traditionally weak-stress words, such as "and," "in," "of," into strong-stresses. Poetry's power is turning weakness into unity — the cure for the "curse" put on the world is ceremony: Auden creates a public funeral march metre in the third section as a way of forcibly making the world mourn this poet, despite the earlier suggestion in the first section that the world remains unmoved by Yeats's death. The speaker seems to insist, through the poem's form and logical development, that acknowledging death is what keeps the people of the world from becoming the "dogs of Europe" that live "sequestered" in their "hate." By having a public procession for the dead, poetry has an ethical component: it unites the living with the dead and incites us not to repeat the mistakes of the past.



Poetry and the poet, according to our speaker-singer, allow us to “rejoice” in ceremony and song — and inadvertently, in psalm as well. As the final line of Psalm 145 unfolds, “My mouth shall speak the praise of the Lord” (KJV 145), so the final line of the poem acquires new valences if read through the singer’s mastery of the public and oratory dirge: “Teach the free man how to praise,” proclaims the poet’s role to the world. The main symbol of poetry in the second section — “mouth” — becomes figuratively aligned with the final word of the third section: “praise.” The Christian poet figuratively overtakes the necessities of creating and following “ceremony and pomp” that can help melt the frozen “seas of pity” and temporarily “persuade us to rejoice,” even in the “nightmare of the dark” that can be overcome with the dirge that has always been used to join voices into a single unison. “Praise” in a Biblical sense can allow for the “healing fountain” to inhabit the “deserts of the heart.” The “nothingness” of Yeats’s coffin, which lies “emptied”, is a generative source for the “mouth” to “praise” and to create unifying poetry that embraces ceremony and cultural mourning rituals as necessary avenues for human reunification. The Biblical dirge form attempts to recuperate the role that poetry may play in world driven by “the Bourse,” a war-ridden world seen by the speaker as the “nightmare of the dark.” While this argument is not implying that the ultimate goal of “In Memory of W.B. Yeats” is to espouse Auden’s Christianity, the poem nonetheless seems to be suggesting that poet is the master of ceremonies to the world. To “praise” in this poem means to mourn and elegize the maker: whether that maker is Yeats or whether the Maker is the Judaeo-Christian God is up to the reader. The poem mourns not only the passing of Yeats but also the passing of a society that would care about a man like Yeats, conjuring up in the final section a utopian image of dystopian world. Auden does this by partially recreating the final section of “Under Ben Bulbin,” inspired by musical essence of the funeral dirge and the funeral procession in such a way that makes ceremony the only space where communion and Communion can take place.



According to Edward Mendelson, it was around 1940 that Auden, while living in Brooklyn Heights, began going to church, which marked for the poet a return to the theological roots of his youth (148). During this time, Auden wrote “In Sickness and in Health,” a “large-scale rhymed essay on the theology of marriage.” The last couplet of this rhymed essay — “Yet through their tohu-bohu comes a voice / Which utters an absurd command — Rejoice” — is an “elaborate triple allusion,” read by Mendelson as stating

Auden’s new loyalties by explicating the Bible, paraphrasing Kierkegaard, and contradicting Yeats. The command to rejoice is the same creative imperative that brings light to the tohu-bohu (“without form and void”) in Genesis 1:2. It is an absurd command because Abraham, as Kierkegaard described him, “believed by virtue of the absurd”; and, as Auden writes later in the poem, “All chance, all love, all logic, you and I, / Exist by grace of the Absurd.” (152)

The word “rejoice,” in my reading in the third section of the elegy for Yeats, holds no such contradictory power. Instead, Auden aligns his budding Christian beliefs with the older master, and thus combines the mourning that he had for him with the surreptitious power of the poem’s final call to “Teach the free man how to praise.” The Biblical dirge is the light that illuminates the “tohu-bohu” that is the “emptied vessel” of Yeats. The words and sounds of the Bible reverberate throughout the poem by way of the “muffled drum” of Auden’s ever-shifting metres, metres that capably invoke the sounds of Yeats, the Bible, and other personal and literary sources. Auden collapses many strands of sound and discourse to invoke what can be said to be his newly-acquired ceremonial poetics. Mourning, in the elegy for Yeats, is no longer a simple “pastoral lament” or a panegyric — instead, it is the amalgamation of all of these, in different patterns and mosaics that evoke meaning in many different ways. The dirge, of course as this chapter argues, is a powerful force in Auden’s imagination that has gone unnoticed: it provides within itself the convention for public mourning but also for the



discourse that underpins poetry's purpose in a secular age.

Through the Burkean development that underpins "In Memory of W.B. Yeats," Auden develops his own prophetic vision of the role that poetry plays in the twentieth century and in modern America. For that reason, the poem cannot be read without a consideration of the "successive transformations" of Auden's argument. In the first section, he inverts the pastoral elegy convention in order to satirize the urbane society that has no use for Yeats's poetry, the society which marks his death as the "day when one did something slightly unusual." By doing so, the poet simultaneously empties poetry of its rhetorical pomp and aggrandized self-importance while clearing a space for a sincere discussion of poetry's value: its ability to discuss "nothingness"; its power in addressing the dead and the dying; its power to unite and unify people through ceremony. The heightened sincerity of the second section — possible only due to the sardonic tone of the first — sets up the funeral ceremony of the third.

Drawing on the sound of a funeral march, Auden's speaker invokes a ceremonial poetics that serves as a potential space for human reunification. For that reason, the poem ends by elegizing poetry itself. Yeats becomes the symbol for an old, bygone mode of poetic expression that has lost its currency in the fast-paced world of bankers and stock brokers. Poetry, from now on, must carry within itself the ceremony that was previously associated with religion, mainly due to the fact that poetry can absorb sound and ceremony through form. This is exactly what Auden does: by absorbing the conventions of the Biblical dirge into the poem's three sections, the poet provides society with a "mouth" and a tongue to express the inexpressible, to open up rhetoric instead of close it down. The indelible power of ceremony, one that may have been found in the Anglican Communion for Auden specifically, but one that can be found in other religions and faiths as well, is the overlooked driving force of "In Memory of W.B. Yeats." Auden's poem asserts a source of genuine unity in the face of a world that in the year of 1939 was quickly descending further and further into



the “nightmare of the dark.” It is precisely for these reasons that the dirge is so important to Auden’s elegy. By subverting some forms and invoking others, the poem opens up an ideological and conceptual space for lamenting and discussing the role that poetry can play in the modern world. For Auden, there is no longer a place for contemplative and deeply mournful personal elegies. Instead, Auden recreates his modernist elegy in such a way that allows it to carry the public, collective, ceremonial power that can “Teach man how to praise.”



## CHAPTER 3

Eliot's Ashes: Fire, Cremation, and Rebirth in the *Four Quartets*

*"...for all is vanity. All go to one place; all are from the dust, and all turn to dust again. Who knows whether the human spirit goes upward and the spirit of animals goes downward to the earth?"*

— *Ecclesiastes 3:19-21*

*"Ash on an old man's sleeve / Is all the ash the burnt roses leave. / Dust in the air suspended / Marks the place where a story ended."*

— *T.S. Eliot, Little Gidding*

*"Poetry is just the evidence of life. If your life is burning well, poetry is just the ash."*

— *Leonard Cohen*

I have now discussed how the epitaph and the dirge have given way to re-invented modernist poems of loss that break with the conventions of the genre of the English elegy: these poems defy tradition either by mourning the living instead of the dead, or by mourning the state of the world instead of a single poet, or simply by grieving the death of poetry itself. Eliot's *Four Quartets*, written during the London Blitz, are a collection of poems — like H.D.'s *Trilogy* and Auden's "In Memory of W.B. Yeats" — that respond to the state of the world at war. As Jahan Ramazani points out, the *Four Quartets* present the reader with sequential acts of mourning: "Eliot mourns the death of human continuity through time, the death of the revelatory moment upon its occurrence, the death of generalized poets and war victims, and the failure of words to stem this endless stream of losses" (26). And yet, for Ramazani, "Eliot most succeeds as elegist when he claims to be writing something else" (27) — when the poet no longer conforms to the elements of the genre that confine and conceal the inner workings of the poem. Indeed, sustained reading of the *Quartets* inevitably breaks down generic categories such as "lyric" or "elegy," primarily due to the poem's ability to



subsume separate elements of those forms into the poems without replicating all of their conventions. Nonetheless, I pick up Ramazani's argument in order to assert that Eliot is writing a long, meditative, modernist long poem that captures, using a "poetics of ash," the mind of a poet perpetually mired by loss.

The following chapter argues that Eliot invokes the elegiac mode primarily through two topoi of the English elegy — fire and ash — which organize the symbolic and formal architecture of the poem. Partially inspired by the religious arguments for cremation in both literature and culture, especially alluding to people like John Page Hopps, I argue that Eliot develops his poetics as a way of moving through the *Four Quartets*. These poetics of ash draw on Biblical cyclicity and the shape of Dante's *Inferno* in order to create a freeform structure for the poem; the inherited forms of the poem re-create an atemporal vortex that combines a lifetime filled with elegiac moments of loss. Moreover, these poetics of ash put into play a series of free associations between words and images drawn from *The Divine Comedy* and from John Page Hopps; the *Quartets* invert the Vanni Fucci episode and use the "refining fire" of Brunetto Latini and Arnaut Daniel as a way of enacting a "purification" of Eliot's life that separates his conscious lyric mind from his mortal body. This rebirth out of the 'ashes of poetry' — the "dust on a bowl of rose-leaves" — allows the poet's mind to be eternally reborn in moments of complete emptiness; when the mind is not "distracted" by modernity and war. At the end of this chapter, I propose to contrast the "poetics of ash" with Cleanth Brooks's seminal readings of poetry as an "Urn" in *The Well-Wrought Urn* (1947) a study that Brooks wrote several years after the publication of the *Quartets* in 1943. Similarly influenced by Donne and Keats's late poetry, Eliot's *Four Quartets* discards Brooks's urn and embraces a shapeless poetics as a way of suggesting that the "ashes of the phoenix" (Brooks 19) reside in a fixed vortex of pure poetry.

Eliot's rhetoric surrounding the topoi of fire and ash was a clear product of the



changing religious and scientific attitudes towards cremation in England. Thomas Laqueur offers a brief summary of how and when cremation started to gain popularity:

fire and ash took their place on the front line of the culture wars more than a century before the 1873 Vienna World exposition, beginning with enlightenment interpretations—or rather misinterpretations—of antiquity: if the Christians had suppressed cremation, then embracing it again in the enlightenment and nineteenth century was a way of honouring the Classical world that had been lost and more or less aggressively rejecting the new one that had supplanted it (524)

For progressives and Romantic socialists like Robert Blatchford, cremation's associations with Sir Thomas Browne's *Urne-Buriall* "evoked a layered English deep time: archeological remains of an ancestral and communal past" (Laqueur 533). Part of this was due to the fact that "cremation in its technological, economic, and ecological registers thus embraced a hopelessly utopian high modernism," which made it popular amongst the educated elite. It was then only a matter of time that cremation became an "aesthetic" in the popular imagination. Indeed, by the time of Eliot's death in 1965, 44.28% of all dead bodies in the UK were being cremated.<sup>8</sup>

Despite its adoption by the Enlightenment, cremation was still rooted in the language of the Bible. Drawing on the logic of Ecclesiastes, Jakob Grimm expounded the "aesthetic merits of a firey grave" when he read cremation back into Christian liturgy: "the use of fire distinguished humans from animals [... because] spirit-like fire rises to heaven, where flesh is earthbound." Picking up on these resonances, John Page Hopps, "another spiritualist and nondenominational preacher whose 'churches' attracted tens of thousands," positioned cremation as a way of liberating the soul from the body (Ibid 536). In a public speech Hopps uttered before the cremation of Alice Dunn, later published in 1894 as "The

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<sup>8</sup> "Progress of Cremation in the United Kingdom 1885-2015." *The Cremation Society of Great Britain*. <http://www.cremation.org.uk/progress-of-cremation-united-kingdom>



Etherealization of the Body,” fire is “one swift act of disintegration and purifying, [rather than...] the foul and lingering process of the grave” (1-2). Hopps detested burial: cremation was a reversal of the putrefaction that he associated with the burial tradition; fire, instead, enacted a “sublimation” of the body, which liberated the soul which was now “dismissed into the sunshine” (2). Hopps’s language predominantly focused on “dust” and “roses” as symbols of this purification, which he issues along with the prerogative that we “must let the dust go,” because “to the body, the bath of heat is as painless as a bath of fragrance of summer roses” (4). Roses and dust quickly became prominent symbols of cremation, as it made the practice “regenerative” and “purifying” rather than desecrating or destructive. “Burnt Norton” begins with this very language: “But to what purpose / Disturbing the dust on a bowl of rose-leaves / I do not know” (I. 15-17). Roses, leaves, dust, and ashes, as the following chapter will point out, cyclically reappear as important markers of rebirth — where the poet comes to terms with the choice that he has made. The closing image of the poem — “And the fire and the rose are one” — strengthens the poet’s resolve to commit to the refining, regenerative power of fire; one which allows him to write an elegiac long-poem as a way of reliving his life in the face of the destructive fires of the London Blitz.

By combining the Miltonic fire from “Lycidas” and the “refining fire” from *Inferno*, Eliot carefully treads the territory between the elegiac and the epic mode. Often used as a figure for creation and for recuperation, fire has regularly appeared in poetic mourning ever since the English Renaissance. Peter Sacks’ reading of Yeats’s “In Memory of Major Robert Gregory” sheds some light on the role that the symbol of fire has played in elegizing an individual: “associated with light and heat, and with the sun and stars, fire has served most elegists as a figure for the physical or spiritual powers that exist within and beyond individual men.... Usually, the destructive aspect of fire is suppressed to create a pure image of regenerative or unconsumed force” (292). Sacks goes on to mention instances where fire



begins several famous elegies, among them Spenser's "Astrophel" and Milton's "Lycidas." The latter is a particularly important example of fire's regenerative force. Milton's speaker sets up the pastoral scene exclusively by using fire: the "Flames in the forehead of the morning sky; / So Lycidas sunk low but mounted high..." (l. 171-72) makes fire into a vehicle of ascent to Heaven, an image intricately tied to resurrection. For that reason, the "flames" in the "morning sky," can be read, in Sacks's view, as the possibility of Lycidas of living once again.<sup>9</sup> The similarities also extend to Dante's *Divine Comedy*, which was closer to Eliot's imagination than Milton. For Dante, fire is also spatial and mystical: the poet ascends out of the flames of the *Inferno* into the light of *Paradiso* as the poem progresses. Through an inversion of the perverted resurrection of Dante's *Inferno* 24, an episode in which the Pistoian thief Vanni Fucci is condemned to be eternally burned and resurrected from his own ashes, Eliot begins his poem after a fire has already happened: Norton house is already "Burnt," and Eliot capably puts himself into the Virgilian role of observing the cooling embers of his setting.

The title of the first poem, "Burnt Norton," — a place name for the "Norton House,"

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<sup>9</sup> The associations between fire and the elegy tradition do not stop with Milton. Thomas Gray's "Elegy in a Country Churchyard" tacitly picks up these resonances from Dante and Milton and brings them back into the English elegy tradition. The speaker, left alone in a graveyard at night, reflects on the plots of the dead as no longer containing a "celestial fire": Perhaps in this neglected spot is laid / Some heart once pregnant with celestial fire; / Hands that the rod of empire might have swayed, / Or waked to ecstasy the living lyre (l. 45-48). Gray's elegy is particularly vital in the associations that it generates. Fire is associated with the life-granting presence of the soul, with the "celestial" movements of the sun and the stars, and with the "hands" that are a common synecdoche for human agency. To add to this, the dead can no longer participate in the "ecstasy of the living lyre," and are thus immune to the movements and sounds of poetry. In this formulation, fire is aligned with life, with movement, with the stars, and with poetry. With the exception of the mention of poetry, Gray's elegy strongly echoes the work of Sir Thomas Browne, who in his seminal work *Hydriotaphia, Urne-Burialle*, discusses the relationship between fire, death, and the life-lived. For Browne, "Life is a pure flame, and we live by an invisible Sun within us. A small fire sufficeth for life, great flames seemed too little after death, while men vainly affected precious pyres, and to burn like Sardanapalus, but the wisdom of funerall Laws found the folly of prodigall blazes, and reduced undoing fires, unto the rule of sober obsequies, wherein few could be so mean as not to provide wood, pitch, a mourner, and an Urne" (137). In Browne and Gray's vision of fire, the only way that we can capture and then release the "invisible Sun within us" is by burning the body with the "undoing fires" that administer the traditions of cremation. These impulses are therefore direct descendants of the vision of the afterlife from antiquity — the funeral pyre has tacitly been subsumed into the elegy tradition from Greek and Roman sources and re-appropriated by the English elegy into pastoral conventions. In a distinctly modernist move, Eliot picks up on the elegiac connotations of fire and historicizes them into the post-Enlightenment discourse of cremation that begun with Sir Thomas Browne. By nodding to the lineage of both the Greeks and the Romans as well as the English pastoral elegy, Eliot reappropriates the cyclical logic of Ecclesiastes and uses



which Eliot briefly visited in 1937 — begins with a fire that has long since been extinguished. The Norton House has a fascinating history, as Christopher Ricks' curation of John Hayward's letter to Eliot illuminates:

Overlooking the Vale of Evesham, a mile north-west of Chipping Campden in Gloucestershire, Norton House was enhanced in the 18th century with extensive gardens by Sir William Keyt, but in Sept 1741, after a week of drinking he set fire to the house and immolated himself. The ruins were pulled down in 1789, and the 17th-century farmhouse, subsequently expanded, became known as Burnt Norton. The estate was acquired by the Earls of Harrowby, and in 1902 the 5th Earl extended the rose-garden and constructed a swimming pool and a semi-circular amphitheatre.

(903)

Eliot responded to Hayward, affirming that he knew “nothing about the house,” and that the arson and self-immolation were news to him. His reason for naming the poem “Burnt Norton” was “some obscure attraction in the name rather than the look of the mansion itself, which he found to be ‘disappointingly commonplace’” (Ibid). Eliot's attraction to fire harks all the way back to *The Waste Land*. In “The Fire Sermon,” the third and longest section of *The Waste Land*, the poet ends the poem with a prayer for self-immolation: “Burning burning burning burning / O Lord Thou pluckest me out / O Lord Thou / pluckest / burning.” Relating this fire back to *The Divine Comedy*, the final stanza of *The Waste Land* features a line from Canto XXVI — “*Poi s'ascose nel foco che gli affina*” — which translates roughly to “Then he hid himself in the refining fire,” with “he” referring to Dante's “better craftsman” Arnaut Daniel disappearing in the flames as the poet moves into the next circle of Hell. The fire on display in *The Waste Land* is a “refining fire:” it ‘purifies’ perverted human impulses in the irredeemably degenerate culture of modernity.



In the first lines of the *Quartets*, however, Eliot reprises this refining fire as a way of reconsidering a past life, a process that has nothing to do with the “distraction” of the outside world. “Burnt Norton” opens with the monologue of *Murder in the Cathedral*: “The opening... was originally written as a comment by the Second Priest after the exit of the Second Tempter. The second of Thomas’s temptations is the temptation to attempt to retrace one’s steps, to try to go back to the moment when a choice was made and make a different choice” (Gardner 39). It is only after the recycled monologue that the poem ‘truly’ begins, at least in the compositional sense, on the fifteenth line of the poem when the speaker breaks his solipsistic musings with: “... But to what purpose / Disturbing the dust on a bowl of rose-leaves / I do not know. Other echoes / Inhabit the garden” (l. 15-18). Hopps’s image of the purification of the rose in the dust of cremation reverberates powerfully from here on out, suggesting that the refining fire has already run its course before the poem has even begun. As our speaker-poet walks into the vortex of the Inferno, the rose-leaves, which stand-in as pages of poetry which now belong to a past life, are reborn in the form of the “choice” the poet “did not make.”

The dust of the rose leaves is the first image of the poem that is unmentioned in *Murder in the Cathedral*, and in that way it seems to hold a generative power that is aligned with the compositional novelty of those lines. The aesthetics of funerary form — here used to denote the “sense of an ending” from which the poem begins — launches the *Quartets* into movement. As the poet “disturbs” the rose-leaves, the dust seems to spring into the air, invoking descriptions of memories and time. The dryness of the pool and of the yard where the poet is wandering empties out a rhetorical space where time and mind can co-exist with no worldly interference — there are no clocks, telephones, bars, or voices, such as those that we have seen in *The Waste Land*. The refining fire has cremated memory and transferred the poem into a retrospective, elegiac mode: passing time has scrubbed clean the poet’s



multivocality and rid his words of their inherent allusive and associative connections. The meta-textual address from the speaker to the reader: “My words echo / Thus, in your mind” (l. 14-15) places the echo at the centre of the image, thus making the emptiness of Norton House so much more pronounced. The dust of the rose-leaves initiate the active movement of the mind only after the scene is made “empty,” allowing for the aforementioned echo to reverberate in the drained pool. Words and memories bounce off this empty pool in Norton House in more active and agitated ways: “Quick, said the bird, find them, find them, / Round the corner” (l. 19-20) springing into lyric movement. The poetics of ash is a formal conception of the way that memory and feeling move — like a vortex — in the mind in response to loss. The poet’s meditations place mind, choice, and memory into the “bowl” and the “drained pool” where they can interact with one another through a progressively cyclical movement. Unlike the ash and the dryness of *Ash-Wednesday*, the dry pool and the dust of the rose-leave are pure because they are untouched, negated from the outside world: the empty dilapidated house liberate the speaker from his epistemological uncertainty, and he is able to make sense of himself through a singular, personal, and retrospective poetics that puts his many impersonal lyric selves back into motion.

The formal aspects of the way that memory moves in the poem are rooted in the syntax that generates absence: the “un-” prefix, for instance, provides the framework that can allow for the repetition that will signify alongside the auditory imagery of echoes bouncing off the empty pools of the garden. We are privy, for instance, to “the unheard music,” “the unseen eyebeam,” the “formal pattern” of the “drained pool” which was completely “empty” (l. 26-39), emphasizing how memory, in “Burnt Norton,” arises out of dryness, emptiness, negation and absence. These metaphysical images seem physically to echo over the dry surfaces and that strategically patterned, metrically and metaphorically, to carry the “dust” of the bowl of “rose-leaves” around the abandoned Norton House. The poetics are unfixed, the



internal rhymes of the poem circle, like a vortex, in a “formal pattern.” The aesthetic of dust and loss is recuperative, resurrectionary: the dry pool “was filled with water out of sunlight” (I. 35) as the symbol of the refining fire is embodied in the “lotos” which “rose, quietly, quietly” (I. 36). The final image of “the fire and the rose” are foreshadowed in the image of the “lotos,” a moment which displays an emptiness and “dryness” that is markedly different from Eliot’s earlier work, at least in its rhetorical effects. Note, for instance, the first mention of dust in “The Burial of the Dead”: “Your shadow at morning striding behind you / Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you; / I will show you fear in a handful of dust” (l.27-30). The dryness of the *The Waste Land* is the existential agony, the spiritual decay, and the anxiety of inevitable destruction and apocalypse of the modern man, as well as the “fear” of both death and “undead” existence. The “dead land” in *The Hollow Men* and the self-reflexive doubt of *Ash-Wednesday* are reconsidered in “Burnt Norton,” as the tone of the speaker changes drastically from an over-emphasis of death to a “celestial” acceptance of the present moment, through “an inner freedom from the practical desire” (II. 24), which brings a “grace of sense, a white light still and moving / *Erhebung* without motion” (II. 27-28). Grace and fear are juxtaposed: the speaker’s tone here becomes ambivalent with respect to the outcomes of his past, and the language is decidedly Biblical and sermon-like, at least in its cadence.

Christopher Ricks, along with a litany of other scholars, aligns Eliot’s first lines “Time present and time past” with Ecclesiastes 3:15, which proclaims “That which hath been is now; and that which is to be hath already been; and God requireth that which is past” (907). These lines can also benefit from a similar association with Ecclesiastes 3:19 to 3:21, as the cultural persistence of the image of “all are from the dust, and all turn to dust again” is a testament to the image’s power in Eliot’s imagination. “From dust to dust, ashes to ashes” evokes the sense that “flesh cannot endure” (II. 35) in the unstoppable circle of time. The



danger of these metaphors is that they can push the poet to seeing the world as filled with “time-ridden faces / Distracted from distraction by distraction / Filled with fancies and empty of meaning / ... Men and bits of paper, whirled by the cold wind” (III. 11-15). The poetics of ash is “whirled by the cold wind:” it is cyclical but progressive vortex, a constant return to the beginning and the end that is generative of something new with each revolution. The vortex, which is the shape that the ashes most often take in the *Quartets*, are emblematic of the movements of the poet’s mind. Yes, the poetry is cyclical, but it is more than that — it is a gyre, that moves forward and backwards through time. As the ashes of the poetry cycle through Eliot’s mind, they bring up associations and words that are adjacent to those ashes.<sup>10</sup>

Other sources claim that Eliot’s reliance on the circuitous expression of time stems from Hegel. In this light, the lateral movement of “*Erhebung*” mentioned in part II of “Burnt Norton” can be read as an allusion to the “paradox of ends” that comes from the German philosopher. As David W. Shaw points out in *Elegy and Paradox*, “Hegel puts the paradox of ends this way: the journey is “a circle that returns into itself, that presupposes its beginning, and reaches its beginning only in its end... The road [Weg] to Wissenschaft is itself already Wissenschaft” (50). The liberation from this eternal movement is stillness, or the point when words and echoes and memories are at rest. For these purposes, I propose to look for the “still point” not in the circle or the “paradox of ends” but rather in Eliot’s own suggestion in section V of “Burnt Norton”: “Only by the form, the pattern, / Can words or music reach / The stillness, as a Chinese jar still / Moves perpetually in its stillness” (V. 5-9). While it would be easy to conflate “the form, the pattern” with the shape of the “Chinese jar,” I believe that is not what these lines suggest, despite how tempting such a comparison would be. The jar is primarily a misleading simile because it so forcefully echoes John Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” another poem with an ekphrastic turn that imagines history as a container

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<sup>10</sup> I am grateful to Miranda Hickman who noted that “ashes” and dust most often take the shape of the vortex in these poems. For more on the vortex and vorticism in modernism, see Hickman’s *The Geometry of Modernism*.



fit for holding ashes. The analogous relationship between the Grecian Urn and the Chinese jar is inevitably self-reflexive: the persistence of eternal art is marked by Keats's speaker (Thou, silent form, dost tease / us out of thought / As doth eternity"), and the remarkable tenacity of reading poetry through the metaphor of the urn long-attributed to Cleanth Brooks.

Eliot, however, moves away from the form "fixed" form of the jar or the urn as his own metaphor for poetry. Eliot wrote to Sherry Waites on August 10<sup>th</sup> 1962, where he mentions that "I did not have Keats' *Ode [on a Grecian Urn]* in mind. What I attempted to convey about the Chinese jar occurred to me some years ago when there was a Chinese exhibition, I think at the Royal Academy" (Ricks 921). While the two poems begin with similar metaphors and language, it is the formal difference between them that makes their approaches interesting. For Keats, the urn gives form to ashes, especially in the way that it "fixes" a particular historical and cultural moment which contributes to the poem's internal logic and development of the "Truth is beauty, beauty truth" revelation. Eliot's "Burnt Norton" goes in a different direction. The "dust on a bowl of rose-leaves" in "Burnt Norton" betrays any firm logic or development: the poem embraces a vortex of fire and ashes that is simultaneously fixed in one point of time while constantly moving in the shape of a Yeatsian gyre. The ending of the poem returns to this model of dust:

Sudden in a shaft of sunlight  
 Even while the dust moves  
 There rises the hidden laughter  
 Of children in the foliage  
 Quick now, here, now, always—  
 Ridiculous was the sad time  
 Stretching before and after. (V. 33-39)

The closing lines of "Burn Norton" mourn for the moment of stillness that began the poem,



but the movement of the dust alongside the illumination of the “shaft of sunlight” fixes the dust and make new perceptions (auditory, visual) possible. The movement of the dust collapses memory and consciousness: “now, here, now, always” are reprised in the movement of the dust which is free to make fleeting associations and forms out of “sad time.” The “stillness” of the dust can only ever be temporary: the word “Quick” signals the return to the condition of the first section of “Burnt Norton” and uses the shapeless form of ashes to evoke things unseen and unheard, namely the “hidden laughter” and “children in the foliage.”

The Chinese jar also motions towards the indirect presence of Eliot’s own funeral urn implied in the title of his second *Quartet*, “East Coker.” This title, also a place name, refers to the village of East Coker, “the home of the poet’s ancestors, [the place where] Andrew Eliot emigrated in 1667 to found the American branch of the Eliot family from which the poet is directly descended” (Ricks 925). After being asked whether or not T.S. Eliot visited the old house of his ancestors, Eliot’s response was curt: “No house there. Said to have been destroyed by fire” (Ibid 926). While the alignment is most likely a coincidence, the fact that Eliot’s own ashes were interred at a columbarium in East Coker is not — Eliot wanted his remains to be near the ashes of the old Eliot house. As a consequence of these associations, the language of death and rebirth becomes strongly pronounced in the poem’s five sections: the first section of “East Coker” opens up with another house destroyed by fire, placed in another historical house that serves as the rhetorical anchor for Eliot’s meditations on memory and time. The Ecclesiastes account of fire and ash — and their corresponding elements, creation and cremation — is overtly the focus of the first section of the poem:

Old stone to new building, old timber to new fires,  
 Old fires to ashes, and ashes to the earth  
 Which is already flesh, fur and faeces,  
 Bone of man and beast, cornstalk and leaf (II. 5-9)



Instead of focusing on the nostalgia of personal history, however, the poet emphasizes the necessity of historical rejuvenation through the chiasmus of “old fires” to “new fires.” The “old fires” of the Eliot house are invoked in the following meditation on the folk dance of his primitive ancestors, with the new fires denoting currently lived experiences that allow the lyric speaker to access this history. Chiasmus, which operates much like the vortex of ash, is essential to both the poetics and the overall structure of the poem; the poet experiences many consecutive deaths and rebirths, rebirths and deaths in his journey towards a comprehensive personal memory. The rhetoric of cremation — both through the language of John Page Hopps and Ecclesiastes — is formative to the ways in which Eliot combines and aestheticizes his own personal history.

The historical aspect of ash and fire therefore gets absorbed into Eliot’s elegiac myth-making. By bringing together new and old, Eliot inserts the resurrectionary power of fire and ash into the language of the poem and gives a new meaning to the “freedom” of “free verse.” Instead of being a destructive force, fire is generative in the ways that cleanses and purifies the memory of the land and compartmentalizes these experiences within words. Instead of accepting history as a solid and unchanging model — as in Keats’s urn or Yeats’s “form as Grecian goldsmiths make” — Eliot emphasizes ash as the chief component of the poem’s language. The chiasmus in these lines is essential to a poetics of ash that tries to unify “old” and new,” “ashes” and “earth,” and “bone” and “leaf.” By eschewing strict formal conventions that would restrict the movement and the diction of the poetry, Eliot’s speaker creates containers for his images through the lyric sequence and through the imaginative moments that move cyclically in the speaker’s mind. Time, death, and rebirth float freely along these lines, unconstrained by stanzaic or sectional breaks. The fire in the lines above represents a pastoral unification of “old” and “new” history: “Two and two, necessarye coniunction, / Holding eche other by the hand or the arm / Whiche betokeneth concorde.



Round and round the fire / Leaping thorough the flames, or joined in circles” (I. 31-34). The language floats in and out of past and present; dramatic “masks” and voices are no longer necessary in the lyric meditative verse of the speaker. The circle of people dancing around the fire elicits the fire-vortex which was such a large part of “Burnt Norton.” Indeed, “East Coker” brings in and inverts the logic of Ecclesiastes more fully in this poem: instead of separating the soul of man and beast, the speaker asserts that “The time of the coupling of man and woman / And that of beasts” (I.44-45) is no different in its inevitable movement towards “Dung and death” (I. 46). The poetics of ash allows the speaker to participate in his own making — by relying on the lexical shifts which signal the different “time of the seasons and the constellations” (I. 43), the poet uses the fire that his ancestors dance around in order to revisit his lineage. The lyric speaker is no longer fixed in time — “I am here / Or there, or elsewhere. In my beginning” (I. 49-50) — each handful of ash allows the poet to revisit a different generation through the “fire” of the poetry.

The poetics of ash therefore allows Eliot to be self-reflexive: by drawing on the imagery of fire, Eliot is able to reconsider his own previous lyric selves by working his old poems into *The Four Quartets*. The most evident example of this occurs in the second section of “East Coker,” which echoes Eliot’s *The Waste Land*:

Thunder rolled by the rolling stars  
 Simulates triumphal cars  
 Deployed in constellated wars [...]  
 Whirled in a vortex that shall bring  
 The world to that destructive fire  
 Which burns before the ice-cap reigns. (II. 7-17)

The whirling “vortex” unifies the the “rolling” Thunder and the “destructive fire” in the burning world “before the ice-cap reigns.” Using the form of ashes, whirled by the “cold air”



allows the poet to take on previous tones and ideas in order to reconsider their relevance in the context of the poem and the late-life. Eliot mourns that the “wisdom of age” (II. 25) does not provide solace or comfort — the pattern becomes unimportant, the “poetry does not matter” (II. 21). Much as Auden’s “In Memory of W.B. Yeats” offers an alternative elegiac project with “Poetry makes nothing happen,” so Eliot’s line also acquires its sincerity and candour through negation. “Not” and “nothing” offer a taciturn resistance to the ambitions of youth — the poet, in old age, seems to find himself at the very beginning again like the Dante, “in a dark wood, in a bramble” (II. 41) — and insists upon the “wisdom of humility” (II. 48) rather than the prophetic or apocalyptic visions.

Rebirth and resurrection are central innovations to the vortex of fire and the poetics of ash that it creates in Eliot’s work; the poet previous assertions of decay and dryness in *The Waste Land*, which provided no rousing respite or moments of contemplation in the “garden,” are no longer present in the *Quartets*:

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  
 He who was living is now dying (*TWL* 322-329).

In the *Quartets*, emptiness and dryness are not places of decay and degeneration as they are in *The Waste Land*. The garden in “Burnt Norton,” although empty and dry, allows the poet to travel into his mind and imagination in fruitful ways. Repurposing the image of fire to be generative rather than “destructive” is one of the more powerful uses of the *Quartets* as a poetic project. Fire produces life in “East Coker,” drawing on Dante and Ecclesiastes as ways



of knowing the self: “Not the intense moment / Isolated, with no before and after, / But a lifetime burning in every moment / And not the lifetime of one man only / But of old stones that cannot be deciphered” (V.21-25). Ashes and tombstones are ways of retroactively reconsidering the life-lived, and the poetics of ash allow the poet-speaker to reach “another way of putting it.” In a famous letter to George Barker, written on the 24<sup>th</sup> of January 1938, Eliot wrote that “Poetry is either a matter of a brief outburst, or it is a matter of a lifetime’s work” (Ricks 957). The headnote to the *Quartets*, which reads “NOT MERELY MORE OF THE SAME” acknowledges this very impulse to find precisely this other way of “putting it.” The loss that pervades “East Coker” is one that is a requirement of the poet to look back on the life while remaining impersonal and without delving too extremely into mourning or regret. The poetics of ash allow the poet to collect a “lifetime’s work” into a compressed vortex that can hold in suspension the ever-changing facets of a life lived before and after the “refining fire.”

The final *Quartet*, “Little Gidding,” is the section that most overtly deals with fire and ash as concepts aligned with rebirth and reincarnation. Drawing heavily on Dantescan language and the ascent of *The Divine Comedy*, Eliot’s speaker imbues the images of circular return with images of fire and ash. To that effect, this section of the poem deals with death and regeneration through the “pentecostal fire”:

When the short day is brightest, with frost and fire,  
 The brief sun flames the ice, on pond and ditches,  
 In windless cold that is the heart’s heat,  
 Reflecting in a watery mirror  
 A glare that is blindness in the early afternoon.  
 And glow more intense than blaze of branch, or brazier,  
 Stirs the dumb spirit: no wind, but pentecostal fire



In the dark time of the year. (V. 4-11)

It is here that the poet best captures living in the flame of the sun that persists despite wind, ice, and blindness. The “heart’s heat” displays Sacks’ assertion of “the physical or spiritual powers that exist within and beyond individual men,” and the “pentecostal fire” that brings with it the “transitory blossom” of human life that exists during one “brief sun.” One might remember the “Apocryphal fire” brought in as an apocalyptic force in H.D.’s *The Walls Do Not Fall* — the fire that razes London in *Trilogy* is the fire that is the site of rebirth in “Little Gidding.” Eliot discharges the sentimentality of rebirth as positive and death as negative by associating resurrection with Dante and with Christ. Fire’s association with both resurrection and penance is central to Book XIV of the *Inferno* when the poet sees the fate of Vanni Fucci of Pistoia, whose “soul caught fire and burned / and, as he fell, completely turned to ashes; / and when he lay, undone, upon the ground, / the dust of him collected by itself / and instantly returned to what it was”; a man doomed to eternal cremation and resurrection. Eliot inverts Dante’s parable by underscoring the relationship between ashes and poetic creation and putting the second section of “Little Gidding” into heroic couplets: “Ash on an old man’s sleeve / Is all the ash the burnt roses leave. / Dust in the air suspended / Marks the place where the story ended” (II. 1-4). “The dust in the air suspended” references the formal vortex of the poem that remains in movement as Eliot completes his journey; the poet relishes the freedom and the lack of fixity that eternal death and resurrection can offer the cremated remains. Instead of agony, cremation becomes a creative outlet: the “burnt roses” take us back to “Burnt Norton,” where the poet begins his descent into memory and history. The “sleeve” invokes the poetic act as well, as the ashes stain on the poet’s sleeves after he is finished physically writing down the lines of his poem seem to give him the capability to branch the language of the living through the associations with ash: “the communication / Of the dead is tongued with fire beyond the language of the living” (I. 50-51).



The metaphorical play in the beginning of section II on the word “tongued with fire” suggests an appositional relationship with Auden’s conception of poetry as a “mouth” in “In Memory of W.B. Yeats.” Both poems, in fact, defer to Yeats when they think of a singular figure that represents poetry:

I caught the sudden look of some dead master  
Whom I had known, forgotten, half recalled  
Both one and many; in the brown baked features  
The eyes of a familiar compound ghost  
Both intimate and identifiable. (II. 39-43)

Eliot’s editor, John Hayward initially recognized these lines as alluding specifically from *Inferno* XV 25-30, where Dante and Virgil approach Brunetto Latini, just one book after the encounter with Vanni Fucci: “And I, when he stretched out his arm to me, fixed my eyes on his baked aspect, so that the scorching of his visage hindered not my mind from knowing him; and bending my face to his, I answered: ‘Are you here, Ser Brunetto?’” (Ricks 1011). The reference to Brunetto Latini in these lines took me back to Eliot’s “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” where Eliot discusses the relationship of poetry and the author through Dante after asserting that the poet is the “catalyst” for the poetry:

The experience, you will notice, the elements which enter the presence of the transforming catalyst, are of two kinds: emotions and feelings... Canto XV of the *Inferno* (Brunetto Latini) is a working up of the emotion evident in the situation; but the effect, though single as that of any work of art, is obtained by considerable complexity of detail. The last quatrain gives an image, a feeling attaching to an image, which “came,” which did not develop simply out of what precedes, but which was probably in suspension in the poet’s mind until the proper combination arrived for it to add itself to. The poet’s mind is in fact a receptacle for seizing and storing up



numberless feelings, phrases, images, which remain there until all the particles which can unite to form a new compound are present together.

The mind of the poet itself is the “receptacle for seizing and storing up numberless feelings, phrases, images” remains alive after the poet himself has died. Yeats, who had passed in 1939 during the writing of the *Four Quartets*, is often quoted as a stand-in for the old master (Ibid). By giving Yeats a new life through the associations with Brunetto Lattini, Eliot uses the poetics of ash to replicate Dante’s *terza rima* form in such a way that can reproduce the language and lyric consciousness of Yeats. The speaker, presumably walking through the firebombed ruins of London, sees the “familiar compound ghost” of Yeats and proceeds to have a conversation with him the same way that Dante had a conversation with Brunetto. Yeats shares the “gifts reserved for age” with the speaker: the “expiring sense” of the aging body and spirit is Yeats’s first gift, the second is the “conscious impotence of rage / at human folly” and the last is the “the rending pain of re-enactment / Of all that you have done, and been” (II. 76-86). Yeats’s advice, caught in the vortex, is put inside the “suspension” of Eliot’s mind as the poet himself ponders all that he has done and all that he has been.

And yet, Eliot’s response to Yeats seems to come in the form of resistance. Old age and the “expiring sense” yield little acrimony for our speaker; instead, he seems to take pleasure in the thought of death and cremation and seizes at as an opportunity to enact the “re-enactment.” Death and destruction and the “human folly” that elicits “impotence of rage” in Yeats is merely an ambivalent quality in “Little Gidding.” The firebombing of London, in that sense, provides resurrection: the compound ghost rises out of the fire and ashes of war-torn London. By inverting both Dante and resisting Yeats, Eliot forges his own unique forms and symbols for re-enacting the life-lived through a poetics that his own making into a disembodied “familiar compound ghost.” As the poet-speaker negates the four classical elements — we witness the “death of air” (II. 8), the “death of earth” (II. 16), and the death of



“water and fire” (II. 24) — he uses the “vortex” and the “gyre” and the to structure the elements that constitute memory: ashes and rose leaves.

In the *Four Quartets*, the elegiac inheritance of fire works on the level of symbol, and the inheritance of ash works primarily on the level of form. In section II, visiting tombstones, monuments and inscriptions (presumably those of Eliot) are seen as derivative and inconsequential: “If you came by day not knowing what you came for, / It would be the same, when you leave the rough road / And turn behind the pig-sty to the dull façade / and the tombstone” (II. 27-30). The ending of the *Four Quartets* thus presents to us the dichotomy of “liberating” fire and the “incandescent terror” that comes with that liberation. The closing symbols of the poem — “When the tongues of flame are in-folded / Into the crowned know of fire / And the fire and the rose are one” (V. 44-46) — have been conventionally read as reassertions of Biblical love. As F.O. Matthiesen paraphrases in an early study of the *Quartets*, the fire and the rose insist that “all we have is the terms of our choice, the fire of our destructive lusts or the inscrutable terrible fire of divine Love” (192). A similar reading is done by Helen Gardner, who writes:

All shall be well, when all is gathered in love, and the rose, the symbol of natural beauty and natural love, is one with the fire, the love by which all things are made. ‘Little Gidding’ is a poem of fire, the fire which is torment to the self-loving, purgation to the penitent, and ecstasy to the blessed, and it closes with mortal and immortal life united in the resurrection symbol of the rose of Heaven. (*Art* 183)

In my reading of the poem, the rose at the end of the poem affirms the idea of the *Four Quartets* as a reverse cremation. We begin with the dust on the bowl of rose leaves, out of which, like the phoenix, the rose-leaves generate poetic and lyric experience through the vortex that structures Eliot’s poetics of ash. Eliot’s reverse cremation represents a desire to make form out of ashes, rather than to dissolve form into ashes; to erase, once again, the



distinction between the poetic mind and the poetry, as he tried to do in 1919 with the concept of “impersonality” in “Tradition and the Individual Talent.” By troubling Keatsian formalism in “Ode on a Grecian Urn” and reconsidering his own impersonal mode, the poet of the *Four Quartets* attempts to effect the sense that memories and personal history can go co-exist in poetic experience.

Hugh Kenner, in his essay on Pound’s *Cantos* called “The Rose in the Steel Dust,” cites the rose in the steel dust as the image that may ‘unlock’ the *Cantos* for some readers:

It is difficult to conduct this discussion without recourse to electromagnetic imagery. The behavior of particles of metal is used by Pound several times as an image of the poetic act: “I made it out of a mouthful of air” wrote Bill Yeats in his heyday. The forma, the immortal conceit, the concept, the dynamic form which is like the rose-pattern driven into the dead iron-filings by the magnet, not by material contact with the magnet itself, but separate from the magnet. Cut off by a layer of glass, the dust and filing arise and spring into order. Thus the forma, the concept rises from death (80).

Eliot’s *Quartets* and the poetics of ash similarly arise from death and the elegiac mode. Eliot, however, wrought his rose out of fire and ash. By associating dust with death and then crafting the poem based on a schema that reverses cremation and enacts resurrection and rebirth, Eliot writes a sequel to *The Waste Land* and *Ash-Wednesday*. Fire is the “beginning” and ashes are the “end”; fire is “time present” while ashes are “time past;” fire is the poetry, ashes — the poet’s body and that body in time. The “fixed point” is the vortex of ash — the place where all of these interplays and interchanges can fruitfully take place. The metaphorical cluster of fire and ash in the rose can identify a moment in time where that vortex of rose-petals (rose-leaves) is fixed. The *Four Quartets* thus engages in a lyric and an



elegiac mode, but in a way that paradoxically remains impersonal. What is important is Eliot's intention of emptying out meaning and symbols, of configuring the poet's mind as an empty space where "numberless feelings, phrases, images" bounce off one another like the ashes in the bowl of rose-leaves. The "compound ghost," which arises in the second section of "Little Gidding," is born out of Yeats's poetry — likewise, Eliot's reverse cremation creates its own kind of "compound ghost" with which we talk to — sometimes directly, sometimes indirectly — through the poem. The *Four Quartets* are thus a suspension of the poet's life-lived: the poet achieves a new form of modernist elegy, a new way of responding to loss and to death through the compounding power of fire and ash.

After the poet's death on January 4<sup>th</sup> 1965, Eliot's body was cremated at Golden Green Crematorium in London. In April of the same year, an urn containing his ashes was interred at St. Michael's Church in East Coker (Behr 86). Around the commemorative plaque that hangs in St. Michael's Church, these words appear: "In my beginning is my end / in my end is my beginning"; these lines also close the *Quartets*. The ending of the *Four Quartets* is a testament to Eliot's vision of his own end. Eliot's use of fire brings together all of these images and associations: the dust and the roses, the fire and the soul. By looking at the *Four Quartets* through the duality of fire and ash, I try to bring to Eliot what Kenner brought to Pound: a reading of the poems' form and content that explicate what absence, loss, negation, and death *do* in the *Four Quartets*. The loss that is prevalent in the *Quartets* is paradoxical, elusive and difficult to define; and yet, if we see it through the physical and spiritual associations of fire and ash we can begin to grasp at the worldview of a poet who dominated half a century of verse. Aesthetically, the rose holds in tension the "compound" mind that has so far given us Eliot's complete personal history: his journey to Burnt Norton, the location of the burnt Eliot house in East Coker, his time as a London fire-warden during the Blitz. Other Eliots abound — the young Eliot who wrote *The Waste Land*, the middle-age Christian Eliot



who questions his faith in *Ash-Wednesday* — all of them have a voice and a space in the dry, empty, but generative world of the *Quartets*. By invoking the elegiac mode through dryness, ash, fire, and roses, the late Eliot unites these multi-faceted personae into a single vortex, a unitary lyric sequence that allows Eliot's mind to continue to exist beyond the fires of cremation.



## CONCLUSION

Apart from conveying a shared sense of impersonal, collective, and redemptive loss, these war-time modernist poems, all written between 1939 and 1942, overlap in three interesting ways. First, all of the poems in this collection at some point state that poetry itself is useless, meaningless, or unimportant. In *The Walls Do Not Fall*, the Sapphic speaker proclaims in canto [8] that “poets are useless... / we are ‘pathetic’” (517); in Auden’s “In Memory of W.B. Yeats,” “Poetry makes nothing happen;” and in Eliot’s *Four Quartets*, the speaker of “East Coker,” in a solipsistic aside, reminds us that “The poetry does not matter” (II. 21). Second, all three poems position themselves, in one way or another, in response to W.B. Yeats: *Trilogy* borrows Yeats’s “classical detachment” and his rejection of Wordsworthian sentimentality, Auden commemorates the state of the world through the death of Yeats, and Eliot meets Yeats’s compound ghost in firebombed London during WWII. Finally, H.D., Auden, and Eliot enact a kind of disembodiment in the process of the poem. The bodies of *Trilogy* are burnt out and broken, the body of Yeats in Auden’s elegy is emptied and leveled with the cityscape, and Eliot’s own body is cremated, leaving only his poetic mind.

All three of these elements speak, perhaps, to the shared move that these modernist poems of loss and mourning make in resistance to the conventions of the elegy. Through poetry’s negation, these poets resist the high-flowing and self-aggrandizing elegiac mode of previous Romantic and Victorian panegyrics, choosing instead to create a more understated and minimized sense of loss. This resistance to the past also extends to their acknowledgment of Yeats. Both Auden and Eliot emulate the voice and metres of the dead poet in their works, walking the line between ambivalence and respect. Neither H.D., Auden, or Eliot make any significant moves to ‘embody’ their poetry of loss — that is to say, no poems that were read during this thesis acknowledged loss in a way that acknowledges a single individual or their corpse. By eliminatating the corpse from their elegiac tone, these modernist poets reject



traditional forms of loss in the English elegy tradition and instead look to other ways of generating grief, mourning, and redemption in the face of those things.

By eliminating the human body for their poetry, these modernists react against the depersonalizing forces of the twentieth century while simultaneously creating their own elegiac form of impersonality that speaks out in the face of loss. H.D.'s *Trilogy* acknowledges the fact that the only thing that lasts are stones: *The Walls Do Not Fall* is covered in aestheticized inscriptions that "open up" a "large swathe" of linear time to the air — bodies do not last and are no longer of any interest. "In Memory of W.B. Yeats" merges Yeats's body with New York, consciously resisting the conventions of the pastoral elegy and instead embracing a dirge form that can "Still persuade us to rejoice" rather than remaining solely in dialogue with Yeats. Finally, Eliot's *Four Quartets* use the rhetoric of cremation and reincarnation to incinerate the poet's body, attempting, with each whirl of the vortex of memories, to erase and impersonalize the mind by burning away — with Dante's refining fire — his mortal existence.

Whether it is H.D.'s Greek epitaph, Auden's dirge, or Eliot's ash, these modernists imbue their poetry with the sounds and forms of those traditions and institutions of mourning which they see fit to speak out in the face of the Second World War. Although this thesis did not, at length, grapple with the wartime context within which these poems were composed, it is difficult not to hear the noises and reverberations of war in their poetics. Auden, who moved to America in 1939, had already heard the "muffled drum" and march of the Wehrmacht assembling in Germany. H.D. and Eliot, writing their respective long poems during the Blitz, were much more aware of the dangers of falling fire and stone as the Nazis bombed London. Eliot, a fire warden during this time, transforms this experience into a Dantescan journey, where he encounters W.B. Yeats much as Dante encountered his master, Brunetto Latini.

To close, the poems and work that I have read throughout this investigation into



modernist poetic form, still, I believe, offer us some form of redemption in the face of loss. These poems are not consolatory — they do not attempt to offer us relief or release from those things which we grieve — but they do provide an ethical response through a language that connotes absence. The poetics of loss necessitates an ethical component: going back to Diana Fuss’s conception of elegy and ethics, they are “speaking out” in the face of these historical atrocities, which constitutes an ethical and elegiac response to this loss. Mourning ethically, in the poetics of these late modernist poems, however, means to mourn collectively. To acknowledge and understand the state of the world as being the “nightmare of the dark,” meant to H.D., Auden, and Eliot that they had to continuously find the reason for continuing to speak and to write poetry. Responding to these impulses, in turn, unifies these very poems, which are as similar as they are different: they approach the nature and value of poetry with an ingrained skepticism, but they continue to write in a disembodied, impersonal, and predominantly lyric mode — one that emulates absence and simultaneously responds to loss through poetic and cultural forms.



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