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Source: *PMLA*, Vol. 110, No. 2 (Mar., 1995), pp. 236-247

Published by: [Modern Language Association](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/462913>

Accessed: 26/03/2014 16:39

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## T. S. Eliot and the Cultural Divide

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**T**HROUGH AN ONGOING PROCESS of critical rereading that began in the early 1980s, the relations between modernism and mass culture have become better understood. The once secure conviction that modernism was uniformly hostile to mass culture has undergone a series of challenges—for example, by Andreas Huyssen's distinction between "high modernism" and the "historical avant-garde" and subsequently by Bernard Gendron's demonstration that even this dichotomy "fails to map completely the space of modernist practice" (Gendron 4–5).<sup>1</sup> In addition to a high modernism inimical to mass culture and an avant-garde receptive to it, that is, there are various individual and group positions that cannot be reduced to either of these extremes. But for Gendron, as for Huyssen, high modernism continues to represent an absolute position that is "altogether committed to the ideal of autonomous art," "politically unengaged," and devoted "to aestheticist goals" (5, 19). This characterization retains the force of critical consensus.<sup>2</sup>

Certainly there has been little inclination to question the applicability of this view to T. S. Eliot. "Modernists such as T. S. Eliot and Ortega y Gasset," writes Huyssen, "emphasized time and again that it was their mission to salvage the purity of high art from the encroachments of . . . modern mass culture" (163). Another critic identifies Eliot and Ezra Pound as "the most vocal of American modernists" in their efforts "to preserve the autonomy and integrity of institutional art" and to "[fortify] the boundaries between genuine art and inauthentic mass culture" (Berry 168–69). References to Eliot's "modernist dogma of hermetic art" are commonplace (Stade 15). Central to twentieth-century literary history as it is currently represented is the image of Eliot as the hero or antihero of a losing struggle to defend a pristine and sacralized high art from the threatening pollution of "lower levels" of culture.

My goal here is to show that Eliot cannot be characterized accurately by this simple metaphor. I am concerned primarily with the Eliot of the 1920s and earlier; the older Eliot was somewhat more willing to play the part for which he has been remembered: a human monument to "absolute art . . . high art, when art was at its most serious and élitist" (Ozick 122). This is the laureated poet whose profile appeared on the

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cover of the *Atlantic Monthly* in February 1951—a handsome, well-tailored, serious figure, his hands clasped before him, ominous skies looming behind him, his image hovering over a classical odeon as if it were his personal shrine. Even this later Eliot was no uncomplicated cultural conservative, though such a figurehead suited the academic climate of the 1940s and 1950s, the period during which high modernism was domesticated and canonized (Dettmar 7, 10–11). The Eliot I portray is more complex and, from a postmodern vantage point, more interesting—one who, despite his ambivalence, developed a quite progressive theoretical position on the relation between high culture and popular culture and attempted repeatedly to convert this theory into art.

## I

Thanks to his biographers, much is now known about Eliot that seems incongruous with the image of his beatified profile floating above the odeon. Aside from information about his private life, there is also evidence of his lifelong attraction to various forms of “lowbrow” culture: comic strips (“Krazy Kat,” “Mutt and Jeff”), boxing, street slang, melodrama, vaudeville, sensational news stories (especially about murders), the music of Broadway and Tin Pan Alley, the bawdy comedy of Ernie Lotinga. These interests flout preconceptions that Eliot was merely disdainful of contemporary popular culture. Equally hard to assimilate is the Eliot who wrote indecent verses with titles like “Ballad for Big Louise” and “Bullshit,” drank hard, entered crossword puzzle contests, saw all the Marx brothers’ movies, and sent fan mail to Groucho.<sup>3</sup> Given the abiding appeal such activities held for Eliot, it would be surprising if popular culture played only a negative role in his work.

One of Eliot’s lasting enthusiasms was for detective fiction, from Arthur Conan Doyle to Georges Simenon and Raymond Chandler (Crawford 194; Ackroyd 167). In “Wilkie Collins and Dickens,” a 1927 essay, Eliot associates this genre—of which Collins is an acknowledged founder—with melodrama.<sup>4</sup> Through this connection Eliot delineates what he sees as a crucial problem with contemporary art and proposes that “serious” writers look to

popular culture for a solution. Noting the passing of the “golden age of melodrama” within his lifetime, Eliot describes the disjunction between the “high” and the “popular” as a sort of iron curtain that has only recently come to divide the arts. “Those who have lived before such terms as ‘high-brow fiction,’ ‘thrillers’ and ‘detective fiction’ were invented,” he writes, “realize that melodrama is perennial and that the craving for it is perennial and must be satisfied” (409). Because of the gulf that has now opened, “highbrow” fiction, increasingly independent of any popular impulse, has evolved into a literature without thrills:

In the golden age of melodramatic fiction there was no such distinction. The best novels were thrilling; the distinction of genre between such-and-such a profound “psychological” novel of today and such-and-such a masterly “detective” novel of today is greater than the distinction of genre between *Wuthering Heights*, or even *The Mill on the Floss*, and *East Lynne*.<sup>5</sup>

(409–10)

The danger in this situation is that the gap will only widen as self-conscious literature grows more isolated and less thrilling. “If we cannot get this satisfaction out of what the publishers present as ‘literature,’” Eliot predicts, “then we will read—with less and less pretense of concealment—what we call ‘thrillers’” (409).<sup>6</sup> If the great divide is to be breached, it will be necessary “to reassemble the elements which have been dissociated in the modern novel” (410). The rift between popular culture and high culture is indeed, for Eliot, nothing less than a further development in the general dissociation of sensibility—a special case of the mutual disengagement of thought and feeling. Under these circumstances, the popular thriller is becoming formulaic (417). But Eliot is speaking primarily to “literary” writers, who are now, he admonishes, “too conscious of [their] ‘art’”:

We cannot afford to forget that the first—and not one of the least difficult—requirements of either prose or verse is that it should be interesting. (418)

Literature “nowadays more and more” is dull, and if it is dull, it is doomed (416).

“Wilkie Collins and Dickens” illustrates an important critical position that Eliot maintained fairly consistently, at least through the 1920s. Jeremiah to the literati, he cautioned that one cannot take for granted the continued existence of poetry or the fine arts in a society that finds its entertainment elsewhere. His response was to seek a recombination of literature’s dissociated elements and specifically to call for a new form or genre in which such a reconciliation might be possible.

In his laudatory 1923 review of Marianne Moore’s poetry, Eliot argues that popular culture and the fine arts are essentially the same enterprise, though the terms in which they are discussed create troubling divisions. Eliot faults Glenway Wescott’s introduction to Moore’s *Marriage* for making an “artificial and unimportant distinction” between “proletariat” and “aristocratic” art. This distinction, Eliot warns, has “dangerous consequences”—again, presumably that a dissociation between popular culture and high culture will impoverish the first and kill off the second (“Marianne Moore” 594). Eliot attacks Wescott’s implication that the popular is merely a degradation of high art; on the contrary, all art, to be valid, must be rooted in the popular. “Fine art,” Eliot argues, “is the *refinement*, not the antithesis, of popular art” (595).

In several guises, this principle of “refinement” is a central element of Eliot’s aesthetics. His appeals for a rediscovery of the primitive foundations of art are always accompanied by an insistence that the modern artist do more than simply re-create a primitive style;<sup>7</sup> similarly, a new poetic drama must grow out of and not merely replicate popular forms like music-hall comedy. The concept extends to poetic language as well: the poet is to “purify the dialect of the tribe” by building on the possibilities of the popular idiom (*Complete Poems and Plays* 141). Eliot praises Moore not for eluding the jumble of the American sociolect but for constructing a poetic diction out of it. Moore’s vernacular is a “refinement of that pleasantry . . . of speech which characterizes the American language, that pleasantry, uneasy, solemn, or self-conscious, which inspires both the jargon of the laboratory and the slang of the comic strip” (“Marianne Moore” 596).<sup>8</sup> Contemporary art, Eliot argues, cannot afford to see itself as antithetical to popular culture; the fine

arts are, rather, continuous with the popular. He therefore stresses the falseness of the dichotomies by which literary genres are separated from subliterary ones: he writes, for example, that “the frontier of drama and melodrama is vague” (“Wilkie Collins” 415) and that “[t]he distinction between ‘journalism’ and ‘literature’ is quite futile” (“Charles Whibley” 439).<sup>9</sup> The artist’s task is to produce not an elite or uncontaminated art but a particularly artful rendering (“refinement”) of popular forms.

Eliot’s interest in the primitive provided an added dimension to this argument. His readings in anthropology impressed on him that art originated not for purposes of pure aesthetic pleasure but as a component of ritual. Originally the arts were neither functionally autonomous nor mutually independent. Poetry and narrative could not be separated from music and dance, ritual and religion, the corporeal and the sexual; art was not private but public, an activity in which the entire tribe participated (Henighan 606). Literature, as civilization has inherited it, is a vestige of this integrated ur-culture. The lessons of early anthropology thus dovetail with Eliot’s concern that art could not survive if it persisted as an autonomous cultural practice. In a particularly intriguing passage from a 1924 review of an anthropological work, Eliot asks:

At what point . . . does the attempt to design and create an object for the sake of beauty become conscious? At what point in civilisation does any conscious distinction between practical or magical utility and aesthetic beauty arise? . . . [S]urely the distinction must mark a change in the human mind which is of fundamental importance. And a further question we should be impelled to ask is this: Is it possible and justifiable for art, the creation of beautiful objects and of literature, to persist indefinitely without its primitive purposes: is it possible for the aesthetic object to be a *direct* object of attention?

(Rev. of *The Growth* 490–91)

The implication, here as in “Wilkie Collins,” is that art in its present forms, with the functions it is now accorded, is unlikely to endure—that the art object raised to aesthetic icon is most precariously situated.

Eliot’s relation to popular culture is also closely linked with class politics and especially with his

modernist antagonism toward the middle class. His May 1922 "London Letter" in the *Dial*, for example, complains that "the respectable mob, the decent middle-class mob," has taken over high culture and turned it into a museum piece, averse to "adventure and experiment" (510–11). The arts of the lower class are an ally in Eliot's war against this stultifying misappropriation, and at the end of this essay, Eliot finds relief from both English and American poetry in the music hall. The same strategy appears in "Marianne Moore," where Eliot defines "proletariat art and aristocratic art" as confederates and "middle-class art" as a separate phenomenon marked by "sham ideas, sham emotions, and even sham sensations" (594–95). The problem for Eliot is not how to sustain an absolute art but how to wrest art away from "the respectable mob" to reunite it with "the people" (597).

During the 1920s the English music hall was Eliot's chief site of contact with popular culture. At Harvard Eliot had regularly attended vaudeville performances with Conrad Aiken (Gordon 32); in London he continued to patronize the halls with Wyndham Lewis. Eliot, who had a capacious memory for music-hall material, enjoyed singing popular numbers and reenacting comic routines for friends (Ackroyd 234). His essays identify a number of favorite performers, including Nellie Wallace, George Graves, Lupino Lane, Robert Hale, Little Tich, Ernie Lotinga, and George Robey—a list that encompasses a wide variety of styles. And Eliot's 1922 memorial tribute to the comedian Marie Lloyd is probably the most moving—and among the most personally revealing—of all his essays. Eliot calls Lloyd the "greatest music-hall artist of her time in England" and credits her with representing "that part of the English nation which has perhaps the greatest vitality and interest" ("Marie Lloyd" 405). He locates Lloyd's uniqueness in her "capacity for expressing the soul of the people" and making them thereby "not so much hilarious as happy"; her "sympathy" with the masses wins his particular approval (406). In this tribute, as in a related 1921 essay called "The Romantic Englishman, the Comic Spirit, and the Function of Criticism," Eliot manifests obvious affection for the (idealized) working-class audience. It seems clear that part of his attraction to the music hall de-

rives from the feeling of group identification he experiences for the duration of the performance.<sup>10</sup> The music hall is a rare venue in which Eliot's modernist alienation is momentarily assuaged by a sense of genuine community.

The vital element in the music-hall format, for Eliot, is audience participation—a stark contrast to the passivity of the middle class when confronted with "Art." "The working man who went to the music-hall . . . and joined in the chorus was himself performing part of the act," Eliot explains; "he was engaged in that collaboration of the audience with the artist which is necessary in all art and most obviously in dramatic art" (407). Behind such statements lies Eliot's model of primitive society, in which the arts are a shared public activity. The music hall thus becomes the English tribal ritual.

Participation in such a ritual, Eliot believes, generates the communal solidarity he admires in tribal societies, for ritual allows members of the tribe to "partake in a common nature from which other men are excluded" (Eliot, "Durkheim"). This exclusion of outsiders exhibits a more troubling aspect of Eliot's thinking; David Spurr has shown, for example, that this same model of the "highly integrated" primitive community underlies the anti-Semitism expressed in such works as *After Strange Gods* and "Burbank with a Baedeker: Bleistein with a Cigar" (Spurr 273). Similarly, the racist and sexist elements of music-hall entertainment probably also reinforce the self-other alterity that Eliot considers necessary to ritual. The banishment of the other represents the dark side of Eliot's ideal—an ideal of organic community sustained by ritual participation.

The high value Eliot places on participation also explains his distrust of such new mass media as phonograph recordings and film, which in his view are absorbed passively and noncommunally. The cinema in particular represents a threat to the cultural alliance he is attempting to forge. Lloyd's death, he announces, is "a significant moment in English history"; it marks a symbolic beginning of the end for the healthy and independent lower-class culture with which Eliot wants to reunite high art:

The lower class still exists, but perhaps it will not exist for long. . . . With the decay of the music-hall, with

the encroachment of the cheap and rapid-breeding cinema, the lower classes will tend to drop into the same state of protoplasm as the bourgeoisie.<sup>11</sup>

As passive spectators, these audiences “will receive, without giving, in that same listless apathy with which the middle and upper classes regard any entertainment of the nature of art” (“Marie Lloyd” 407). Thus Eliot’s attempt to recombine the stratified levels of culture is intended to rescue not only an endangered high culture but also certain forms of popular culture.

The music hall remained crucial to Eliot in the early 1930s, when he expressed the wish of “every poet . . . to be able to think that he had some direct social utility.” The poet, Eliot averred, yearns for the “satisfaction” of “having a part to play in society as worthy as that of the music-hall comedian”; he or she “would like to be something of a popular entertainer” (*Use* 147–48). From the beginning of his career, Eliot dreamed of playing such a role, and as a means of adapting his talent to a socially “worthy” enterprise, he contemplated a modern poetic drama. In essays like “‘Rhetoric’ and Poetic Drama” and “The Possibility of a Poetic Drama,” he considered this genre years before he acted on his ideas, and he returned to the theme continually throughout his life (“A Dialogue on Dramatic Poetry,” “Poetry and Drama,” “The Need for Poetic Drama,” etc.).<sup>12</sup> Eliot repeatedly predicted that his poetic genius might have spent itself and anticipated turning his attention exclusively to the drama; he prepared himself for that transition over and over. When *The Cocktail Party* became a popular hit in 1949–50, Eliot regarded its success as the triumph of a lifetime.

In the light of the aesthetic position I have extracted from Eliot’s essays, the source of his uneasiness with his poetic vocation is clear. A genuine reconciliation with popular culture cannot take place on poetry’s terms, for nothing one might do with poetry in contemporary Western society seems likely to make it a truly public or popular art. A poeticized (or “refined”) music hall is a much likelier prospect, particularly if a music-hall audience can be brought along with it:

I believe that the poet naturally prefers to write for as large and miscellaneous an audience as possible, and that it is the half-educated and ill-educated, rather than the uneducated, who stand in his way: I myself should like an audience which could neither read nor write.

(Eliot, *Use* 146)

Yet the new genre that Eliot envisions would not only appeal to the original working-class audience but also “cut across all the present stratifications of public taste—stratifications which are perhaps a sign of social disintegration” (147). A poetic drama rooted in the music hall could at least begin to heal the dissociated modern sensibility.

## II

Eliot’s theoretical relation to popular culture may appear at odds with his practice as an artist. The familiar defense of modernist obscurity in “The Metaphysical Poets” perhaps seems to account for the striking qualities of Eliot’s own poetry better than the argument that the high and the popular arts must be reintegrated. I do not believe, however, that Eliot’s work can be explained by the first principle without the second. A reexamination of his poetry reveals the constant presence of popular culture in his creative process. But after the 1920s Eliot increasingly turned to writing drama as a way of bridging the cultural divide. By this point he had nearly given up writing poetry for just the reason offered in *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*: that poetry is not a sufficiently public medium. “No honest poet can ever feel quite sure of the permanent value of what he has written,” Eliot observes; “he may have wasted his time and messed up his life for nothing” (148).

After 1927, Eliot’s goal of cultural reintegration becomes inseparable from his mission of reintegrating the church into British life. In *The Rock*, for example, Eliot weaves music-hall elements into his pageant of religious history. *The Rock* features as its lead personae three cockney bricklayers. The foreman, Bert, is intelligent and self-educated; the others, Alfred and Edwin, are good-natured listeners, willing to learn. The play’s comedy points directly to the music hall; for instance, when Alfred explains that a court jester is “a man what comes

on and does the comic turn," Edwin replies, "Oh, like George Robey" (25). Eliot satirizes the fascistic Blackshirts by having a group of them enter "in military formation" and announce in traipsing dactyls:

We come as a boon and a blessing to all,  
 Though we'd rather appear in the Albert Hall.  
 Our methods are new in this land of the free,  
 We make the deaf hear and we make the blind see.  
 We're law-keeping fellows who make our own  
 laws—  
 And we welcome SUBSCRIPTIONS IN AID OF THE  
 CAUSE!

*Hold out collection tins.* (44)

And near the end of the play, Bert sings an original comic duet with his wife (67–68). *The Rock* is a specimen of the kind of public art Eliot hoped to produce.<sup>13</sup> Yet after writing *The Rock* in early 1934 and *Murder in the Cathedral* over the next twelve months, Eliot's subsequent project—his first major poem in five years—was "Burnt Norton," which can hardly be said to have been intended for a "large and miscellaneous" audience. The communal or ritual function of art, then, was addressed by the plays; the late poems could be as "difficult" as the age demanded.

Still, in what Eliot considered the first main movement of his poetry—the period that ends with *The Hollow Men* and his conversion to Anglicanism (Ackroyd 209)—popular culture was significant as both influence and subject. In contrast to the urgent imperative I have located in Eliot's criticism of this period, however, the early poetry manifests a profound ambivalence. In constant conflict with the Eliot who was deeply attracted to several popular forms was the fastidious and austere traditionalist all too familiar to readers for most of this century. This is the Eliot who predicted that the triumph of the saxophone forecast a future of barbarism ("Charleston") and who sang a bawdy ballad for some friends only to deny later that he had ever so much as heard of the song (Ackroyd 236). But this elitist Eliot alone could never have written Eliot's poetry, which issues in part from an internal struggle over popular culture.

In "Portrait of a Lady," for example, this struggle expresses itself in the speaker's alienation from all segments of culture. Implicit in the encounter between the narrator and the lady is a conflict between a degenerate high culture and an inadequate modern alternative. Music is the cultural battleground on which the skirmish is fought. At the outset, the Jamesian lady and the Laforguean dandy have just come from a Chopin recital, to which she responds with cultivated cliché and he with irony (the pianist is only "the latest Pole" in an implied succession of equally uncoiffed Slavic performers). The lady's musty romanticism is likewise embodied in musical terms:

And so the conversation slips  
 Among velleities and carefully caught regrets  
 Through attenuated tones of violins  
 Mingled with remote cornets  
 And begins. (*Complete Poems and Plays* 8)

This "attenuated" music is the outmoded culture that is the lady's world.

But if Chopin is her world, the narrator asks, what is his? And if the old high culture no longer suffices, can the modern? The poem finds no one answer to these questions but proposes several partial solutions.

Among the windings of the violins  
 And the ariettes  
 Of cracked cornets  
 Inside my brain a dull tom-tom begins  
 Absurdly hammering a prelude of its own,  
 Capricious monotone  
 That is at least one definite "false note." (9)

The modern comprises, among other things, the primitive—a tom-tom capable of disrupting the meticulously arranged world of the lady (Crawford 77). But the primitive here plays only a subversive role. Uncontrollable and disruptive, it seems to offer no basis for a modern successor to the lady's disintegrating culture. A passage in the second section of the poem, however, does speak to this problem:

You will see me any morning in the park  
 Reading the comics and the sporting page.

Particularly I remark  
 An English countess goes upon the stage.  
 A Greek was murdered at a Polish dance,  
 Another bank defaulter has confessed. (10)

The modern has mass culture on its side, including such favorite Eliot pastimes as comic strips, drama, boxing (on “the sporting page”), and sensational murder stories. But with mass culture apparently come vulgarity and materialism—as well as troublesome aliens. The narrator finds the tabloid diverting enough to read daily but does not feel at home in its world:

I keep my countenance,  
 I remain self-possessed  
 Except when a street piano, mechanical and tired  
 Reiterates some worn-out common song  
 With the smell of hyacinths across the garden  
 Recalling things that other people have desired. (10)

A popular tune ground out on a street piano moves the narrator where Chopin has failed and reminds him that however much he enjoys the comics, he is not of the masses either.<sup>14</sup> The narrator remains trapped between two worlds to the very end of the poem. Whereas the lady has her conventions and clichés, her preludes and her tea, the narrator, though he will survive her, is “really in the dark” (11). The declining high culture and the ascendant mass culture fight to a draw, while Eliot, or his narrator, can only observe his own alienation from both.

*The Waste Land* is a much more complex case—in part because the poem that Eliot wrote and the poem that was published differ considerably. *The Waste Land* would have openly established popular culture as a major intertext of modernist poetry if Pound had not edited out most of Eliot’s popular references. Though Pound, like Eliot, assailed the “very pernicious current idea that a good book must be of necessity a dull one” (Pound 13), he did not consider contemporary popular culture seriously as a potential antidote to literary dullness. His work on *The Waste Land* simply made the poem more Poundian: he collapsed its levels of cultural appeal while leaving its internationalism and historicism intact, recasting the poem as the

first major counteroffensive in high culture’s last stand. To be sure, almost all Pound’s emendations improve the poem, and Eliot acceded to the recommendations of “*il miglior fabbro*” in virtually every instance. Still, part of Eliot’s original impulse in composing *The Waste Land* was lost in this collaboration precisely because Pound’s relation to the cultural divide differed from Eliot’s own. Had Eliot improved rather than deleted the passages condemned by Pound, he might have given literary modernism a markedly different spin.

The manuscript of *The Waste Land* shows Eliot drawing on popular song to a greater extent than he uses the Grail myth in the final version. For the long idiomatic passage that was to have opened the poem he considered several lyrics from popular musicals. “I’m proud of all the Irish blood that’s in me / There’s not a man can say a word agin me,” he quotes from a George M. Cohan show; from two songs in the minstrel tradition he constructs “Meet me in the shadow of the watermelon Vine / Eva Iva Uva Emmaline”; from *The Cubanola Glide* he takes “Tease, Squeeze lovin & woin / Say Kid what’re y’ doin’” (Eliot, *Waste Land* 5, 125; North 66). The characters’ nocturnal spree then takes them to a bar that Eliot frequented after attending melodramas in Boston (Eliot, *Waste Land* 125):

Blew into the Opera Exchange,  
 Sopped up some gin, sat in to the cork game,  
 Mr. Fay was there, singing “The Maid of the Mill.” (5)

Pointing out that these lines are “the first examples in the draft of [Eliot’s] famous techniques of quotation and juxtaposition,” Michael North suggests a direct connection between the miscellaneous format of the minstrel show—or, one might add, the English music hall—and the very form of *The Waste Land* (66).<sup>15</sup> But the hints of popular song that survive in the published *Waste Land* are eclipsed by the more erudite allusions that dominate the poem. Thanks to the deletion of the original opening section, for example, the first line places the poem squarely within the “great tradition” of English poetry (Jay 237). A long poem called *The Waste Land* that begins, “April is the cruellest month,” largely shaped the course of lit-



erature and criticism for years to follow. One can only imagine the effect of a long poem called *He Do the Police in Different Voices* beginning, "First we had a couple of feelers down at Tom's place."

As Gregory S. Jay argues, this opening passage displays both sides of Eliot's ambivalent relation to mass culture. Eliot's "often affectionate imitation of [working-class] voices," which "conveys a respect for . . . ordinary lives and feelings," is offset by his "almost physical disgust for the materiality of existence—for the object world that dominates the lower classes" (236–37). A similar observation can be made about the "Shakespearian Rag," the second-rate 1912 send-up that Eliot quotes in "A Game of Chess." The allusion is usually taken to indicate ironically how far culture has fallen since Shakespeare's time, yet from a reader's perspective, its appearance in the middle of one of the most painful sections of *The Waste Land* comes, I think, as something of a relief. In "The Fire Sermon," the Australian ballad of Mrs. Porter performs a similarly positive function, breathing momentary life into an otherwise bleak passage on cultural decay. In context, the comic irreverence of the "Shakespearian Rag" seems at least to balance its vacuity. Whether Eliot more relished or loathed the song is impossible to say, but it remained with him ten years after it had vanished from the hit parade.

The issues of class that Eliot maps onto the problem of cultural dissociation surface repeatedly in *The Waste Land*. The deadly boredom that, according to "Marie Lloyd," will follow the dissolution of lower-class culture into the "bourgeois protoplasm" finds its analogue in the typist's gramophone, an objective correlative of the mechanized anesthesia apparent in her lovemaking and her other "automatic" motions. But the sterile tableau of typist and gramophone dissolves into another of the poem's rare moments of relief—a relief again supplied by a form of popular culture in which Eliot finds continued vitality:

O City city, I can sometimes hear  
Beside a public bar in Lower Thames Street,  
The pleasant whining of a mandoline  
And a clatter and a chatter from within  
Where fishmen lounge at noon. . . .  
(*Complete Poems and Plays* 45)

Like the "common song" played on the street piano in "Portrait of a Lady," this scene of working-class fellowship can be experienced only from a distance; the speaker cannot participate in the "clatter" and the "chatter." But the mandolin and the street piano seem to represent a species of art that retains its affective capacity in an increasingly middle-class world where art has less and less power to stir emotion.

These themes, still present in the published version of *The Waste Land*, saturate the manuscript version. The song of the Thames daughters, for example, continues the trajectory I have traced through "The Fire Sermon." After leaving behind the fishmen and their mandolin, readers enter a desiccated world in which the first Thames daughter explicitly identifies with the bourgeoisie:

Highbury bore me. Highbury's children  
Played under green trees and in the dusty Park.  
Mine were humble people and conservative  
As neither the rich nor the working class know.  
My father had a small business, somewhere in  
the city  
A small business, an anxious business,  
providing only  
The house in Highbury, and three weeks  
at Bognor. (Waste Land 51)

And the opening of the uncut "Fire Sermon" is devoted to the haute bourgeoisie Fresca, a salon hostess and literary dabbler whom Eliot savages in a distended, misogynistic series of Popian couplets. Fresca's "[u]nreal emotions, and real appetite," echoed in "Marianne Moore" in the "sham ideas, sham emotions, and even sham sensations" that characterize middle-class art, are associated with the cancan (middlebrow ballet) and the cinema (middlebrow music hall). But the popular voice retakes the stage in the long narrative eventually removed from "Death by Water," which is full of authentically drawn seamen (Eliot the New England sailor knew their lingo). The "pleasant violin / At Marm Brown's joint" (Waste Land 65) recalls the earlier "pleasant mandoline" in the public bar "[w]here fishmen lounge at noon." Eliot's sympathy for the doomed sailors contrasts with his disgust

for Fresca. Once more the cultural dissociation that he deplores takes the form of class conflict.

In *Sweeney Agonistes*, his next project after *The Waste Land*, Eliot turns away for the first time from poetry as a private medium and consciously attempts to reach a mass audience by using vernacular forms. Taking music hall and jazz for its materials, *Sweeney* aspires to “the condition of ritual” as a refined work of popular culture (Eliot, “Marianne Moore” 597). From the music hall come *Sweeney*’s vaudeville elements: its parodic songs, its rapid dialogue, its paired characters with a habit of stepping forward in the midst of the action to deliver musical numbers, and its rhythmic “backchat,” in which a line is bounced comically between two speakers. The scene with Klipstein and Krumpacker at the end of the prologue particularly resembles a comic routine, with its absurd nicknames (“Klip” and “Krum”), confusions of identity (each man answers the questions addressed to the other), and frequent anticlimax (“Do we like London? do we like London! / Do we like London!! Eh what Klip?” [*Complete Poems and Plays* 79]). Eliot maneuvers this style away from raw comedy to construct the ghoulishly playful dialogue of the agon and the tormented speeches of Sweeney.

Eliot’s dialogue is replete with slang, most of it imported from America—phrases like “you said it” and “all right”; words like *swell*, *slick*, *gotta*, *gona*, *joint*, *pinched*; and dialectical solecisms like “what you going to do,” “I seen that,” and “that don’t apply.” Indeed, the fragments later called *Sweeney Agonistes* were first printed in the *Criterion* under the title “Wanna Go Home, Baby?”<sup>16</sup> The minstrel show—a theatrical format as popular in England as in America and a standard music-hall feature from the 1830s into the twentieth century (Pickering 70–73)—is another ingredient, from Swarts and Snow’s assumption of the roles of Tambo and Bones to the parody of “Under the Bamboo Tree,” a “coon song” cowritten by James Weldon Johnson. And the sensationalistic murder stories that Eliot enjoyed reading in the tabloids come to life in Sweeney’s grotesque account of “a man [who] once did a girl in” (Jayne 104).

Because Eliot did not discuss jazz in his criticism as he did detective fiction and music-hall comedy, knowledge of his acquaintance with jazz

is limited. Eliot emigrated in 1914—early enough for him to have missed the emergence of jazz in America but quite late enough for him to have known ragtime and its derivatives as staples of American popular culture. Eliot’s native Saint Louis became the acknowledged birthplace of ragtime during the first decade of his life. And through his patronage of the English music halls in the 1920s and earlier, Eliot was inevitably exposed to jazz as it evolved. Throughout this period, African American musicians, including, from 1919 onward, performers practiced in the New Orleans style of jazz, appeared regularly in the halls (Rye 47–53).<sup>17</sup>

While there is no explicit mention of jazz in *Sweeney Agonistes*, many elements of the play—the slang, the parody, the primitivism, the demimondaine female leads, the party atmosphere—would have suggested jazz (not only the music but the entire cultural phenomenon) to a contemporary audience. Technically, too, the play re-creates the velocity and syncopation that to most listeners of the 1920s were the salient qualities of jazz. The play’s meter creates four implicit stresses in each line—implicit in the sense that though all are felt, any one may be replaced by a rest or interval of silence. A variable number of weak syllables separate these musical downbeats. A powerful rhythmic expectancy, reinforced by repetition and rhyme, confines each half line to approximately the same interval of time (Lightfoot 122):

DUSTY. How about Pereira?

DORIS. What about Pereira?

I don’t care.

DUSTY. You don’t care!

Who pays the rent?

DORIS. Yes he pays the rent.

DUSTY. Well some men don’t and some men do

Some men don’t and you know who.

(*Complete Poems and Plays* 74)

The pattern established by the initial questions about Pereira—which are, in fact, the first lines of the play—indicates that a short pause follows each hemistich of the next exchange (“I don’t care. You don’t care!”) and that Doris’s “Yes” precedes the

beat. Eliot's continually shifting patter of strongly accented beats and weak intermediary syllables thus creates the effect of syncopation.

The popular elements of *Sweeney Agonistes* are often taken to be implicated in the play's nihilistic vision of modern life. The argument goes that Eliot uses jazz and other forms of popular culture only to expose them as vacuous—as symptoms, in other words, of modernity's spiritual and cultural emptiness. There seems no reason to doubt the partial validity of this reading in the light of Eliot's personal ambivalence. An alternative not entirely incompatible with this view, however, is that *Sweeney* was intended as a popular entertainment with Eliotic content: the popular elements serve as the vehicle through which Eliot's horrific vision is to be conveyed to a "large and miscellaneous" audience. Eliot does, after all, use this strategy in his later plays, where his theological ideas are embodied in drawing-room comedy. The popular elements in *Sweeney Agonistes*, like those in *The Waste Land*, are treated much too affectionately for Eliot only to be setting them up for a fall.

On the contrary, the coincidence of such essays as "The Romantic Englishman," "Marie Lloyd," and "Marianne Moore" with Eliot's attempt to write a "jazz play" strongly implies that *Sweeney Agonistes* was meant to inaugurate the new, public phase of Eliot's artistic career. In September 1924 Eliot even told Arnold Bennett that he "had definitely given up" nondramatic poetry (Ackroyd 145). But *Sweeney* was derailed late in 1924, apparently by writer's block, and a depressed Eliot glumly refocused his attention on the related lyric sequence that became *The Hollow Men* (Ackroyd 146–47). It is hard to say what "an audience that could neither read nor write" would have made of the heavy stylization and profoundly negative worldview of *Sweeney Agonistes*, but Eliot's efforts to found a new art form based in popular culture appear to have been genuine.

Moreover, the fundamental structural contribution that jazz makes to *Sweeney Agonistes* is not anomalous: Eliot merely let surface there an influence that had permeated his poetry long before. In particular, poems in Eliot's still unpublished early notebook illustrate the importance of musical mass culture to the formation of his verse style.<sup>18</sup> The

Eliotic protagonist of "Suite Clownesque," for example, enthusiastically recounts his adventures on Broadway in a pastiche of popular song. The narrator of another work of 1911, "The Smoke That Gathers Blue and Sinks," sits in a Parisian cabaret, where he languishes for one stanza in sophisticated ennui. In its second stanza, the poem suddenly lurches into a new verse form that can only be called jazz poetry *avant la lettre*. The poem depicts protojazz performance and dance, quotes an actual lyric, includes appropriate slang, and, most important, imitates the snappy rhymes and syncopated rhythms of popular songs of the period. Stylistically, these unpublished verses stand midway between jazz lyrics and the famous lines with which they are interspersed in manuscript:

And indeed there will be time  
To wonder, "Do I dare?" and, "Do I dare?"  
Time to turn back and descend the stair,  
With a bald spot in the middle of my hair

and

And I must borrow every changing shape  
To find expression . . . dance, dance  
Like a dancing bear,  
Cry like a parrot, chatter like an ape.  
Let us take the air, in a tobacco trance.

(*Complete Poems and Plays* 4, 11)

Although these lines drape loosely over an iambic pentameter skeleton, what makes them unique—what gives them the particular character that one recognizes as Eliotic—has no source in classical metrics. Nor is this inflection lost in *The Waste Land* or even years later in *Ash Wednesday*:

The new years walk, restoring  
Through a bright cloud of tears, the years, restoring  
With a new verse the ancient rhyme. Redeem  
The time. Redeem  
The unread vision in the higher dream. (64)

Eliot's patented cadences—his characteristic rhythms, the ways he uses rhyme, the tonal contours of his lines—were learned from, or discovered

in, the sounds of popular music. Every moment that he sounds “like Eliot,” Eliot is alluding to jazz.

If the usual notion of a high modernist “mission” to “preserve the autonomy and integrity of institutional art” does not apply to Eliot, then it is fair to ask how far adrift the dominant conception of modernism in general may be. While Eliot’s willingness to cross the cultural divide was not shared by all his contemporaries, there are many other writers—among them Yeats, Stein, Joyce, Woolf, Williams, Cocteau, Brecht, and Auden—whose views overlap Eliot’s in significant ways. I suspect that each modernist’s relation to mass culture is in fact sufficiently complex to put the matter beyond easy generalization. A reappraisal of modernism as a whole therefore seems necessary if our understanding of the transformation of culture during the twentieth century is to continue to grow.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Huysen’s distinction is in turn an extension of Peter Bürger’s *Theory of the Avant-Garde*.

<sup>2</sup>For the appraisal of the critical situation outlined in this paragraph I am particularly indebted to Gendron (4–9, 18–24), as well as to Huysen, Michael North, and Gregory S. Jay.

<sup>3</sup>See, for example, Aiken 21; Ackroyd 31, 105, 137, 143, 251; Crawford 82; Gordon 31–32; Marx 154–64.

<sup>4</sup>Despite its title, the essay says little about Dickens except in comparison with Collins.

<sup>5</sup>Eliot’s reading of cultural history is corroborated by the work of the historian Lawrence Levine. The divisions between levels of culture had indeed been, until late in the nineteenth century, “much more fluid, much less rigidly hierarchical” (Levine 107). Levine’s work deals specifically with cultural developments in the United States. Though the situation in Britain was not identical, the difference lies primarily in America’s more egalitarian starting point, not in the forms of cultural stratification that eventuated.

<sup>6</sup>As if to prove that he was in earnest, Eliot reviewed twenty-four mystery novels (as well as two nonfiction works on the subject of murder) in the January and June 1927 issues of the *Criterion*.

<sup>7</sup>See Eliot’s review of Stravinsky’s *Le sacre du printemps* (“London Letter,” Sept. 1921).

<sup>8</sup>When he wrote the review of Moore’s poetry, Eliot was struggling to construct his first play, *Sweeney Agonistes*, using this same language (Everett 250–53).

<sup>9</sup>Throughout the twentieth century it has been impossible to consider these issues without using such terms as *popular culture* and *high culture*, which reinscribe these dichotomies. Neither Eliot nor I have succeeded in evading this difficulty, even with the judicious use of quotation marks. “I gotta use words when I talk to you,” as Sweeney twice complains (Eliot, *Complete Poems and Plays* 83–84).

<sup>10</sup>Charles Sanders argues, no doubt correctly, that Eliot unconsciously identifies with Lloyd as well (24–25).

<sup>11</sup>Eliot made this unpleasant forecast repeatedly; for example, in his “London Letter” of April 1921, he wrote, “Both middle class and lower class are finding safety in Regular Hours, Regular Pensions, and Regular Ideas. In other words, there will soon be only one class and the second flood is here” (451). It would be easy, and not entirely misleading, to see Eliot’s opposition to the breakdown of the class system as a reflection of the same conservative impulses that are codified in his later social writings. But his emphasis during the period under discussion was on the ascendancy of the hated middle-class culture.

<sup>12</sup>Eliot’s lifelong interest in this subject is also apparent in his numerous pieces on individual verse dramatists.

<sup>13</sup>J. Isaacs points to Eliot’s success in reaching across class divisions: “I remember very vividly the audience of *The Rock* at Sadler’s Wells in 1934. It was the first time poetic drama had really come home to the people. It was a simple and devout audience, a rapt and uncomprehending audience, moved by the liturgical patterns, laughing uneasily at the human lines as if they were afraid of being caught laughing in church. . . . It was an audience of church workers, of mother’s outings, of shepherds and their flocks, and a few ‘highbrows’ like myself. . . . Liturgy, Bible, George Robey, Auden and clerihew—there was something for everybody” (152–53).

<sup>14</sup>It is just this sense of deracination that, as I have suggested above, Eliot’s trips to the music hall helped to alleviate. See also North 57–59 on the problem of deracination in Eliot and in modernism as a whole.

<sup>15</sup>Sanders has also argued this point—more elaborately, though to my mind less convincingly.

<sup>16</sup>The change of title replicates the substitution of *The Waste Land* for *He Do the Police in Different Voices*: in both cases the suggestive and literary replaces the definite and colloquial.

<sup>17</sup>Debates over the “authenticity” of the music that Eliot would have known as jazz are largely pointless. Gendron argues persuasively that an “essentialist construction of ‘authentic’ jazz” has been imposed on this early period by later criticism, creating an insupportable division between the “genuine” and the “counterfeit” (13–14). Howard Rye similarly states that both “in fact [and] in public consciousness,” minstrelsy and “those forms of Afro-American music which have been known since 1920 as jazz and blues” formed a musical continuum rather than truly distinct genres (45). Ragtime and the “symphonic jazz” of the era also belong to this continuum.

<sup>18</sup>Unfortunately I am not permitted to quote from this manuscript, which the interested reader will find in the Berg Collection at the New York Public Library (*Complete Poems*). An edition by Christopher Ricks is forthcoming, as I write, from Faber and Faber.

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