Ball State University

"Eliot's Theory of the Three Voices of Poetry as Illuminated by Its Application to The Waste Land"

Julia Ballard
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T.S. Eliot delivered a lecture in 1953 in which he sought to explain his concept of the three voices of poetry.\(^1\) In summing up his comments, he asked his listeners to test his assertions as they read poetry. This paper is an attempt to employ Eliot's suggestion and to test his principle of the three voices of poetry in an analysis of Eliot's own poem, *The Waste Land*.

Eliot defined the three voices of poetry in the following manner:

The first is the voice of the poet talking to himself -- or to nobody. The second is the voice of the poet addressing an audience, whether large or small. The third is the voice of the poet when he attempts to create a dramatic character speaking in verse; when he is saying, not what he would say in his own person, but only what he can say within the limits of one imaginary character addressing another imaginary character.\(^2\)

The poet further stated in his lecture that the reader of poetry who complains that a poet is obscure or speaks only to a limited circle

\(^1\) *The Three Voices of Poetry* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1954).

\(^2\) Ibid., pp. 6-7
of initiates must keep in mind that the poet endeavors to put into words that which cannot be said in any other way. The language used, Eliot asserts, "may be worth the trouble of learning."\(^3\) Eliot offers his explanation of the three voices of poetry as one key to learning the poet's language.

Readers of *The Waste Land* have contended that the poet is far too difficult and, to use Eliot's term, far too obscure. If Eliot was being accurate in his lecture, he has written the poem in the only way in which he could -- in his own language. When *The Waste Land* is read with a knowledge of Eliot's theory of the poem are brought into focus. An analysis based upon this theory yields a greater insight into what the poet was striving to communicate.

In an article dealing with Eliot's lecture, Delmore Schwartz wrote:

> Whatever Mr. Eliot's purpose may be ..., he provides a classification of the voices of poetry which has an immediate relevance to any attempt to characterize his poetry as a whole ... what is in question here is not this classification as true of all kinds and varieties of poetry, but only its relationship to the poetry which Eliot himself has written.\(^4\)

From this point in his article, Schwartz proceeds to express his opinion that the reader who seeks to read Eliot's poetry with a knowledge of the theory of the three poetic voices

\(^3\)Ibid., p. 38.

of each respective voice can be catalogued, and Eliot's method of blending all three voices as he constructed the poem becomes readily apparent.
I. THE FIRST VOICE

The Poet Talking to Himself -- or Nobody

Eliot attempted to elaborate upon his definition of the first voice by referring to a lecture entitled Probleme der Lyrik delivered by the German poet, Gottfried Benn. Eliot paraphrased Benn's theory in the following manner:

There is first . . . in inert embryo or "creative germ" . . . and, on the other hand, the Language, the resources of the words at the poet's command. He has something germinating in him for which he must find words; but he cannot know what words he wants until he has found the words; he cannot identify this embryo until it has been transformed into an arrangement of the right words in the right order . . . . But you start from is nothing so definite as an emotion, in any ordinary sense; it is still more certainly not an idea . . . .

Eliot further explains that he would carry Benn's statements a little further. He says that in a poem which is "neither didactic nor narrative, and not animated by any other social purpose, the poet may be concerned with expressing in verse . . . this obscure impulse." Eliot maintains that the poet at this point is not concerned with communicating with the reader, but is "oppressed by a burden which he must bring to birth in order to obtain relief." 9

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9Ibid., p. 29.
The opening lines of *The Waste Land*:

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

are a perfect example of a first-voice attempt to obtain such relief for Eliot. He has likened the "burden" to a demon and first-voice poetry to a sort of "exorcism" of the demon. What Eliot has labeled an attempt to "gain relief from acute discomfit" is contained in the first four lines. Demon or burden, the lines exemplify Eliot's world view, his personal attitude toward existence, and an aesthetic principle found in his poetry.

With the first line, the poet blasts away all romantic images of spring and its regenerative connotations. Eliot is allowing the reader a glimpse into his most private thoughts and reveals his own attitude toward the quality and nature of human existence. The content is far too personal to be considered the second voice. Eliot is not lecturing an audience large or small, nor is he trying to convince or sway his readers. The statement is a lament, the first revelation of an all-embracing attitude which is the poet's own and will be repeated in various ways throughout the poem in both the second and third voices.

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10 *In The Complete Poems and Plays* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1952), 11. 1-4. Subsequent references to lines of this poem, included parenthetically within the text, are drawn from this edition.

11 *The Three Voices of Poetry*, p. 29.

A.C. George in T.S. Eliot: His Mind and Art states:

His Eliot's ideas of impersonality and objectivity in art, the necessity for the subordination of feeling to the discipline of a religious system, his insistence on tradition, order and finish in execution and clarity in conception are all antithetical to Romanticism.13

George's statement explains Eliot's anti-Romantic opening lines and it also sheds light on the poet's explanation of first-voice poetic comment. The opening lines are not didactic, narrative, or animated by social purpose. They are, however, an intensely personal statement -- what Eliot himself calls "meditative verse."14 Eliot's rejection of the Romantic tendency toward personal poetry may underlie the fact that only a small proportion of The Waste Land appears to be written in the first voice.

The next appearance of lines written in the first voice is to be found beginning with line 37, wherein the poet is clearly describing a personal experience:

--Yet when we came back, late, from the Hyacinth garden,
Your arms full, and your hair wet, I could not
Speak, and my eyes failed, I was neither
Living nor dead, and I knew nothing,
Looking into the heart of light, the silence.
Oed' und leer das Meer (11. 37-42).

These lines constitute a reverie, that author Ruth Rose Williamson calls "a personal note, a memory, a confession . . . ."15

14 The Three Voices of Poetry, p. 27.
The hyacinth garden, symbolic of ancient fertility rites, is a reminder to the poet of an experience which fell short of his expectations -- which was, as Elizabeth Drew describes, "the torture of a vision seen and felt, with the power of creative response, of speech, movement, interpretation, withheld." 16

Again, line 176, "Sweet Thames, run softly till I end my song," and lines 182-186,

By the waters of Leman I sat down and wept . . .
Sweet Thames, run softly till I end my song,
Sweet Thames, run softly, for I speak not loud or long.
But at my back in a cold blast I hear
The rattle of the bones, and chuckle spread from ear to ear.

are personal enough to be considered first-voice musings in much the same way that the first four lines of The Waste Land constitute a statement that needs no audience, but for which the poet must find expression. These lines and the allusions which they contain are again a complex private lament. Line 176, which alludes to Spenser's Promotional, is an ironic comment considering the discrepancy which existed between Spenser's Thames, the setting for his romantic marriage song, and the littered condition of Eliot's Thames. Line 182 intertwines Byron's "Prisoner of Chillon" and the Hebrews' mourning for their homeland by the rivers of Babylon. Eliot wrote The Waste Land in Lausanne by Lake Leman (Lake Geneva) and his meditations at this point are on a setting which he could view as he wrote. The anti-Romantic overtones heard in his previous first-voice comments are to be found again in line 182 when the reader

comprehends one meaning of the noun "Leman" with its connotations of a mistress, for the waters of Lake Leman are ther- associated with lust. Line 125 begins an allusion to Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress" and expresses Eliot's personal attitude toward the state of modern-day love which he associates, as Drew has explained, with the rattle of bones and the grinning death's head, rather than "time's winged chariot" and "deserts of vast eternity."17

The last five lines of Section III are unmistakably expressed in the first voice. Taken from eastern and western religious heritages, the words have a particular meaning within the context of the poem when it is understood that Eliot brings East and West together in the first voice and closes the foregoing section with a note of personal despondency for the state of all mankind:

To Carthage then I came

Burning burning burning burning
0 Lord Thou pluckest me out
0 Lord Thou pluckest

burning (ll. 307-311).

It will be noted that these lines are again a lament, and in this way are similar to the other first-voice quotations cited above. Likewise, the lines are anti-Romantic and fail to portray man as essentially good -- the Romantic's noble savage.

According to J.C. George, Eliot has synthesized Augustine's teaching that sin, which is the cause of passion and concurrence, is at the basis of human misery with Buddha's belief that passion causes suffering, and if one eliminates passion, one can experience rebirth.18
The ten lines which conclude The Waste Land are also written in the first voice. They are the final portion of "the fragments" which the poet has "shoved against his ruins" in writing the entire poem:

I sat upon the shore

Fishing, with theacid plain behind me

Shall I at least set my lines in order?

London Bridge is falling down falling down falling down

Poi s'ascose nel foco che gli affina

Quando fiam uti ch'aller -- o swallow swallow

Le Prince d' Aquitaine a la tour abolie

These fragments I have shoved against my ruins

Try then I'll fit you. Hieronymo's mad again.


Shanti. Shanti. Shanti (ll. 423-433).

The fact that these lines are fragmentary and disconnected can be accounted for by understanding that they are symbolic of chaos in the modern world. They could be spoken in the first voice only because the fragments are different for each man. These first-voice comments are that which remains for Eliot of a cultural tradition -- a tradition which, for him, lacks any sense of unity or value. The poet is speaking to himself -- or possibly nobody. He is not deliberately obscure at this point, but is expressing a highly individualized concept. As Francis Mettheissen suggests, the fundamental precept upon which Eliot based his artistic endeavors was "the necessary union of intellect and emotion."19 The fragments which Eliot uses to conclude The Waste Land are intellectual concepts based upon literary and philosophical allusions that come from his vast store of learning. The conclusion of the poem is emotion-packed, but the

emotion is blended with the intelligent. There is, in other words, order of a sort within the apparent disorder of unrelated fragments. The order is personal and exists for the poet. This intimate tone is primarily what identifies these ten lines as first-voice comments.

Cleanth Brooks has stated that Eliot's poetry, and The Waste Land in particular, has poetic value of a "different order." Poetic value, Brooks explains,

...is not a property of objects but a relationship among them, a relationship discovered and established by the poet. Moreover, the relationship may be one of tension in which the materials pull against each other and resist any easy reconciliation...when he Eliot first enunciated this view of tension in poetry, it very much needed saying -- or at least needed re-saying. And his statement of this conception, together with the poems that embodied it, inspired the literary revolution that is sometimes given Eliot's name.20

G. Wilson Knight makes a similar observation when he states of Eliot that "No poet has been more deeply honest. The results are simultaneously personal in substance and impersonal in technique."21

Similarly, the "I" of line 423 can be interpreted as an inclusive pronoun, but when considered in the context of the lines which follow, it is apparently a personal statement. It seems as if Eliot is asking, "Can I sum up my work of art?"


The poem, however, as Elizabeth Drew points out, is not summed up:

Eliot's note on the conclusion is: 'Shantih. Repeated as here, a formal ending to an Unfinished. "The Peace which posseth understanding" is our equivalent to this word.' But it is impossible to feel peace in the concluding passage. It is a formal ending only. The atmosphere is coloured for more strongly by the image of destruction 'London Bridge is falling down, falling down, falling down,' and by the sense of attempting to shore up the ruins by repeating words of comfort and strengthening of the spirit which may help him. But they are in foreign tongues, not translated into his own inner experience and so become a part of himself. Give, Sympathize, Control, Peace, remain abstract ideas; none of them has been transfigured into a redeeming symbol. The surrender has been made, but it still seems a surrender to death, and the possibility of rebirth is still without substance or outline. 22

The figure fishing upon the shore is also regarded as a first person poetic comment by critic Helen Gardner:

... we return to the arid plain and the single figure on the shore fishing. The Bridge over which the crowd flowed is falling down. There come to mind three phrases: a phrase expressing surrender to pain and terror, a phrase declaring longing for freedom, and a phrase that suggests a total destitution ... With these fragments of other men's wisest the poet leaves us ... 23

Each of the passages which have been identified as those of the first voice have had certain qualities in common. Each has been a highly individual response, a display of the poet's private attitudes. Each constitutes a personal lament and is despondent in tone. The viewpoint expressed is essentially anti-Romantic. It may be argued that these same qualities could be said to prevail throughout the entire poem, but the intensely personal manner in which the passages are delivered sets them apart from the second or third-voice passages which are identified in the remainder of this analysis.

22Pr. 89-90.
II. THE SECOND VOICE

The Poet Addressing an Audience

The passages of The Waste Land which are written in the second voice are clearly written with an audience in mind. They are essentially descriptive, narrative, or contain lines of direct address.

The second voice is used for the first time beginning with the fifth line:

Winter kept us warm, covering
Earth in forgetful snow, feeding
A little life with dried tubers.
Summer surprised us, coming over the Starnbergersee
With a shower of rain; we stopped in the colonnade,
And went or in sunlight, into the Hofgarten,
And drank coffee, and talked for an hour (ll. 5-11).

It is as if the poet has glanced up and noticed that he has an audience and offers a further explanation of his opening metaphor of seasonal barrenness. These lines are primarily descriptive and instruct the reader of the location which the poet now describes. This location sets the scene for a third-voice dramatic passage found in lines 12-18. Lines 5-11 are introduced without transition from first to second voice. Transitional elements are not to be found in The Waste Land and for this very reason, a familiarity with Eliot's principle of the three voices of poetry proves to be extremely helpful in understanding when such transitions take place.
No transition is to be found following line 18 when Eliot returns to the second voice and addresses his audience with a profound question followed by his own answer to the same question:

What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow
Out of this story rubbish? Son of man,
You cannot say, or guess, for you know only
A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,
And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,
And the dry stone no sound of water. Only
There is shadow under this red rock,
(Come in under the shadow of this red rock),
And I will show you something different from either
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. (ll. 18-20).

The appellation "Son of man," which Williamson suggests as establishing a connection between Jesus and theclairvoyant god, is a clear indication that lines 19-20 are spoken in the second voice, that is, that the poet is addressing an audience.

The reader's introduction to Madame Sosostris, fake clairvoyante, is a second-voice descriptive passage of fewer than four lines. Eliot's lecture stated that the second voice is used for satirical purposes and his juxtaposition of the contemporary clairvoyante and her parallel in the past are what Elizabeth Drew labels "satiric levity." Drew states that "Madame Sosostris, with her name suggesting a Greek-Egyptian origin, is a modern, vulgarized version of the Egyptian diviners and practitioners of magic, who professed to control fertility, and to forecast the rising and falling of the waters of the Nile through the Tarot cards."26

24 P. 92.
25 P. 71.
26 Ibid.
Section I, entitled "Burial of the Dead," is completed by a second-voice description of modern civilization in lines 60-76. Eliot addresses his audience directly at the close of this section with a line from Baudelaire's "Fleurs du Mal:"

"You! hypocrite lecteur! -- mon Dieu, - monstrel" (l. 76). Herbert Knust, commenting on this section, suggests that Eliot directs his cynicism toward mankind's state of existence by using the dog image in line 74. Herbert Knust points out that the cynic took the name for their philosophy from the Greek word κυνικός, meaning "doglike." Knust comments that cynicism may be defined as a "sneering distrust of man's sincerity and a sneering attack on his traditional values . . . ." Knust thus ties together Eliot's cynical tone of the passage with the poet's choice of Baudelaire's line as a means of direct address.\(^{27}\) in this example of a second-voice passage.

Section II of The Waste Land, entitled "A Game of Chess," opens with a second-voice description of lush surroundings where a wealthy and neurotic woman sits brushing her hair. Eliot employs the second-voice technique to set the stage for the scene which will be played in the third voice. The poet is, in a sense, instructing the reader before the curtain goes up on a dramatic monologue. In his analysis of this section of The Waste Land, A.C. George refers to its "greater narrative continuity,"\(^{28}\) and narration is, as Eliot points out in the "Three Voices" lecture, one of the fundamental purposes of second-voice poetry.\(^{29}\)

\(^{27}\) "Eliot's The Waste Land, 74," The Explicator, XXIII (May, 1965), item 74.

\(^{28}\) P. 128.

\(^{29}\) P. 24.
Eliot employs the second voice as he opens Section III, "The Fire Sermon," with an impression of the Thames in autumn. He speaks to the reader, his audience, and describes the littered condition of the river to them. With the exception of line 178 and lines 182-186 which have previously been identified as first-voice comments, this section of the poem continues with the second voice through line 314 and the appearance of Tirzah, through whom Eliot will tell a story in the third voice.

"Death by Water," Section IV, is a short, second-voice comment as the poet speaks to "you who turn the steed and look to windward" (l. 319), or all readers who are concerned, as Phlebas was, with "the profit and the loss" (l. 314). Eliot's admonishment in the second-voice passage is directed toward all mankind -- "Sedile on Sun" (take, as Drew explains, from the Epistle to the Romans where Paul states that Christian salvation belongs equally to both). 20

The final section of the poem, "That the Thunder Said," is delivered, with the exception of the concluding ten lines, in the second voice. Eliot describes again the lack of meaning and direction which prevails in the modern waste land:

We who were living are now dying
With a little patience (ll. 320-330),

the poet tells his audience. There are subsequent references to "we," meaning the poet and his readers as he addresses them in the poetic second voice. "What have we given?" the poet inquires."My friend... we have existed... In our empty rooms... We think of the boy, each in his prison... each confirms a prison" (ll. 401-402, 405, 409, 413-414).

20 P. 83.
The fact that the poet poses several questions throughout this section is also indicative of second-voice poetic technique—the presence of an audience: "What is that sound high in the air" (1. 386); "Who are those hooded hordes . . ." (1. 398); "What is that city over the mountains" (1. 371). In these lines Eliot is addressing a society, according to Dale Kramer, whose "inner betrayal" and inability to "choose decisively between destruction and affirmation" is symbolized by the crowing cock.31

The examples of second-voice passages cited above differ from those of the first voice in their essentially descriptive and narrative qualities. An audience is anticipated by the poet, as is indicated by the number of lines which contain direct address. The remaining passages to be analyzed are those written in the third voice, and it will be demonstrated that the poetry of the third voice possesses its own unique characteristics.

III. THE THIRD VOICE

A Dramatic Character Speaking in Verse

Eliot explained in his lecture on the three voices that the poet employs the third voice when he attempts to say "not what he would say in his own person, but only what he can say within the limits of one imaginary character addressing another imaginary character." The instances in which the third voice is used in *The Waste Land* occur when Eliot allows a character to speak and the reader to "overhear." Eliot observed in his lecture that

There may be from time to time, and perhaps when we least notice it, the voices of the author and the character in union, saying something appropriate to the character, but something which the author could say for himself also. . . . 32

Eliot is saying that there is often times a blending of the three voices of poetry. The third-voice technique which he employed in *The Waste Land* is far more complex than character dramatization through speech. As Delmore Schwartz points out, "Eliot is doing something more than the dramatic poet habitually does, something which includes what that kind of poet does." 33

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32 P. 34.
33 P. 233.
Eliot uses the third-voice technique for the first time in lines 12-18:

| Bin gar keine Russin, Stamm; aus Litauen, echt deutsch. |
| And when we were children, staying at the archduke's |
| My cousin's, he took me out on a sled, |
| And I was frightened. He said, Marie, |
| Marie, hold on tight. And down we went. |
| In the mountains, there you feel free. |
| I need, much of the night, and go south in the winter. |

Eliot has provided the reader with the Munich location of this character in the second-voice passage which preceded these lines. The speaker is a voice, as revealed by the German phrase in line 12. The reader is allowed to draw his own conclusions about this character from "overhearing" her comments. Desmond Maxwell concludes that in these few lines Eliot is able to introduce a character who is "separated not only from the life of a nation, but also from that other natural unit, the family, for her memories involve neither father nor mother, only a holiday at a cousin's."34

The second occurrence of a third-voice characterization is to be found in Madame Sosostris, when Eliot introduces in the second voice as a famous clairvoyante. She speaks for herself in lines 46-59 in the journal of her trade. Her speech is significant because it introduces characters and themes which will reappear in The Waste Land. The shady nature of her fortune-telling and its lack of reality is revealed in her spoken comment:

If you see dear Mrs. Equitone,  
Tell her I bring the horoscope myself;  
One must be so careful these days (ll. 57-59).

There are two third-voice characterizations included in Section II of The Waste Land. "A Game of Chess" introduces the

bored socialite described by Gardner as "driven by panic, trying
to read her silent companion into speech," and Lou, who tells
her story of Lil and Albert in a London public house. Using the
poetic third-voice technique frees the poet from the necessity of
expressing only his own opinions in a didactic manner. "This
is the way this character speaks and thinks," Eliot seems to be
saying to the reader, "and you may draw your own conclusions from
the evidence which I have presented." The poet reproduces speech
in the poetic third-voice and the dramatic character takes shape.
The reader is able to identify the social status, level of education,
and psychological state of the speakers in this section from
the recorded bits of conversation. In short, the reader may judge
what kind of life the speaker lives and how the speaker views her
own existence. Eliot uses these speakers as representatives of
mankind and their speech as a reflection of the culture in which
they live. The result is a poem about the culture itself.

The woman who begins speaking in line 111 is well-educated
and refined, speaking an upper-class British dialect. The gram-
matical structures which compose the woman's speech and her com-
panion's thoughts are also significant. The woman uses no contrac-
tions in her speech. She does not frame her many questions in
the usual manner of interrogative sentences used in conversation.
They are patterned in the literary fashion. For example, she
asks, "Do you remember nothing?" and not "Don't you remember
anything?" This pattern is used in each of the many questions
she poses. She also makes the correct distinction between "shall"

35p. 93.
and "will." She uses "shall" each time she uses the first person with the concept of futurity. The same grammatical structure is used by her silent companion in his thought processes. Their speech patterns are as "correct" and inflexible as their way of life -- "hot water at ten. And if it rains, a closed car at four" (ll. 125-126). It is characteristic of a woman who speaks in this fashion to consider walking in the street with her hair down an act of complete abandon.

It is also linguistically significant that the woman's monologue is, in the main, composed of questions. She has no answers or receives no logical ones from her companion. Her experiences and existence are meaningless, providing no answers. "What shall we ever do?" she asks as a culmination of all the preceding questions. She does not know what to do now, tomorrow or ever. The repetition of the verb "nothing" is also significant. The verb is repeated 18 times in the course of six lines (ll. 130-135). In a culture which has no meaning, one knows nothing, has nothing, wherever nothing, and existence, like the Lady in "Subterranean Homes," is reality, neither close nor intelligent.

Eliot continues this section with a second monologue in the third voice. In "modern" versions of the poem, as stated earlier, Woolf's newspaper woman will think to test her theory of the three voices of poetry. 26 The second monologue is in the third voice: in a "rupture" there of sorts, and Eliot just as abruptly changes the speech pattern beginning with line 129. The poet

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26 The Chadron Treasury of Modern Poets READING.
reads these lines with a lower-class British dialect and he drops the \textipa{\textit{\textup{a}}} in some words which begin with this sound (11. 1/4, 160, 167). The contrastly repeated "she said" or "I said" often becomes \textipa{\textit{\textup{aid}}}. The boater's line, "HURRY UP PLEASE IT'S TIME" identifies the locale, and the speech patterns of the patrons are indicative of the sort of pub in which the scene takes place.

The mental processes of the second speaker are as crazy as her fiction and pronunciation. Her jumbled thoughts are reflected in her dialect. For example, "What you have" becomes \textipa{\textit{\textup{hwalov}}} (1. 143), "nice set" becomes \textipa{\textit{\textup{naiset}}} (1. 145), "pick and choose" becomes \textipa{\textit{\textup{pikn\_uz}}} (1. 154).

This speaker's use of slang and trite phrases throughout the monologue is in keeping with her social status and manner of expressing her jumbled thoughts. "Demobilized" is replaced by "demob-ed" and "to bring it off" is substituted for "to abort." "Since my words," "takes off," "pick and choose," and "pulling a long face" are further linguistic examples of the woman's lack of originality. Lil's deteriorating appearance, Albert's infidelity, and sex which only produces unwanted children are an accepted and inevitable part of the scheme of things in this woman's evaluation of the situation which she describes.

The entire speech has little organization, and the fragmented sentence structure and contractions which Eliot uses tend to enforce the colloquial tone of the monologue. There are few long pauses in Eliot's rendering of the lines. The speaker does
not stop to think about what she is saying or to ask any
questions of her silent companions. In contrast to the first
woman speaker who asked question after question, this woman's
monologue is made up entirely of answers. Not only does she
know what to do, she is eager to tell others what to do. She
considers their personal lives her concern, and in recounting
Lil's story she uses no discretion and reveals everything she
knows. Her lack of sensitivity is reflected not only in the
subject matter but also in her vocabulary.

The two conversations vary greatly in context, grammar,
and sentence structure, and it is appropriate that the variation
exists. Eliot was attempting to represent opposite ends of the
social scale, and he chose to do so by employing the language
spoken by the two extremes in the poetic third voice. The
rigid, sterile, hysterical, and futile speech of the bored
upper-class woman is shaped by a brand of existence for which
the same adjectives are applicable. The second speech, which
lacks sensitivity, originality, and organization, establishes
a prevailing mood of resignation and despair which is heightened
by the poet's ironic one-line closing comment delivered in the
first voice and echoing Shakespeare's Ophelia, a troubled lady
of a different sort: "Good night, ladies, good night, sweet
ladies, good night, good night" {1. 172}.

Still another third-voice characterization is to be
found in Section III, "The Fire Sermon," as the voice of Tiresias
describes from his special point of view a modern scene of lust
devoid of love. By using the third voice of Tiresias, Eliot can
not only express that which such a situation would move him
to write, but also make use of Tiresias' particular view-
point. Tiresias, after having lived the role of both sexes,
possesses omniscient understanding which the poet gains from
the blind man who "perceived the scene, and foretold the rest"
(1. 229). Author A. E. George observes that

It is the presence of Tiresias as a witness to this modern
love incident and his subsequent comments on it that enable
us to conclude that "The Waste Land" deals not only with the
modern perversions but with the sinfulness and sensuality
which lie at the heart of every man. 37

Eliot again uses the third-voice technique from line
202 through line 206 as what he terms "The Song of the (three)
Thames-daughters" is sung. 38 The sylvan and pastoral world they
inhabit is brought to life as they describe it in their own
words. The result is much more moving than a first or second
voice description by the poet could have been. The feelings
they express are not within the range of the poet's own experi-
ence. The story must be told by characters who are humble, mortal,
and have been "nudes" and still retain nothing and "create
nothing with nothing" (11. 300-301).

The passages which have been cited as examples of the
third voice are each a dramatic characterization. Those included
in Section II are perhaps more fully developed than the others,
but all are Eliot's attempt to present a character who will speak
for himself. Of course, the poet's voice is also heard, for he

37 P. 131.

38 The Complete Poems and Plays, p. 53.
has created the speech of each character, but his reasons for
varying the personae are, for technical reasons, well-founded.
The viewpoint each can express enhances that which the poet
seeks to convey. The variations which the speakers bring to
the poem increase the appeal of the total work and are a mark
of Eliot's craftsmanship.
While a close analysis of poetry written by authors other than T.S. Eliot might provide additional examples of the existence of the three poetic voices, the foregoing has been an attempt to do nothing more than test Eliot's assertion that the three voices exist and function in the manner in which he suggested in his lecture. As Delmore Schwartz proposed, the classification of the three voices should be applicable, first of all, to Eliot's own poetry.

It may be, as Marvin Mudrick has stated, that the "diffuse-ness solicited by a public occasion" has left Eliot's critics with the opinion that the theory, as advanced by the poet, failed to provide enough information with which to test its validity. Granting Mudrick's point, however, does not negate the assertions which Eliot has made. The poet is often at a loss to explain the process by which he creates the most abstract art form known today. Eliot must have had a personal conviction, at least, to prompt him to set forth a theory such as that of the three voices. Abstract it well may be, but do not the similar literary devices with which we discuss poetry lack concrete and explicit definition, such as tone, idea, imagery, and meaning -- to name only a few? They can be understood only when examples of each are examined. The reader must use his imagination, for poetry does not come equipped with visual appeal, as does a painting or a piece of sculpture, nor does it furnish (without an oral rendition) the audio stimuli found in musical art forms.

Eliot was, therefore, attempting to define and describe a part of the process and a portion of the ingredients which are
contained within his poetry. If his theory falls short of completeness or lacks mathematical precision, it is little different from other explanations of the creative process which have thus far been advanced. Is it not enough that within his poetry itself there exist concrete examples of the theory?

After the language of the poem has been examined, after the allusions have been identified, after the poet's message has been assimilated, there still remains the essence of the poem which is closer to its creator than anything else. It is the manner in which the poet employed the language and the allusions to obtain a total effect. The complex mental process may never be totally understood, but it is surprising that when one of the greatest poets of our century endeavors to put into words his thoughts on the subject they are received with so little comment by his critics.

One could gloss over the importance of Eliot's explanation, as Schwartz asserts, with the assumption that the poet was merely restating what has been known for some time about literary techniques. With an analysis which provides as many examples as does The Waste Land, however, it is difficult to dismiss Eliot's comments as mere restatement of known facts. The poem contains numerous examples of each voice and each voice possesses unique characteristics. The voices can be distinguished and catalogued. Knowledge of the theory and the ability to recognize the poet's use of each voice enhance the reader's appreciation of the total poem. The lack of transitional elements becomes less of a difficulty when one understands that a change in poetic voice has occurred. Some insight
is to be gained into the complexity of the process and development of the art form, not to mention the quality and depth of understanding which accompany an analysis based, in part, on an awareness of Eliot's theory. It would be deemed short-sighted, if not stupid, to ignore the poet's punctuation, imagery, or allusions when reading his poems. Would it not be equally presumptuous to dismiss lightly his earnest attempt to explain one of the methods by which he puts his thoughts into written form?
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