Dear P&P workshop –

Many thanks in advance for reading this (early) chapter draft of a larger project about modernist Grail narratives, new medievalism, and failure aesthetics. The working structure of the book project is 1) James’s *The Golden Bowl* 2) Eliot’s *The Waste Land* 3) Kafka’s *Das Schloss* 4) Céline’s *Voyage au bout de la nuit* 5) Beckett’s *Molloy*. I look forward to your comments.

Eliot and Weston: The Mythical Method of *The Waste Land*
Jonathan Ullyot
CHAPTER DRAFT

“As a matter of fact I believe that the ‘Waste Land’ is really the very heart of our problem; a rightful appreciation of its position and significance will place us in possession of the clue which will lead us safely through the most bewildering mazes of the fully developed tale.”
(Jessie Weston, *From Ritual to Romance*, 60)

In 1922, Horace Liveright, T. S. Eliot’s American publisher, suggested that Eliot write explanatory notes to his new poem, *The Waste Land*, in order to increase the page count for the limited edition. Once Eliot wrote the notes, however, he considered them an integral part of his poem.¹ Eliot prefaced the notes with a generous acknowledgement to Jessie Weston’s study of the Grail legend, *From Ritual to Romance* (1920). The passage has been the source of much debate among readers and scholars.

Not only the title, but the plan and a good deal of the incidental symbolism of the poem were suggested by Miss Jessie L. Weston’s book on the Grail legend: *From Ritual to Romance* (Cambridge). Indeed, so deeply am I indebted, Miss Weston’s book will elucidate the difficulties of the poem much better than my notes can do; and I recommend it (apart from the great interest in the book itself) to any who think such elucidation of the poem worth the trouble.²

Eliot’s notes to *The Waste Land* elucidate very little. They provide references, at times citations of French, Italian, or Latin texts without English translations, and offer a few vague thoughts on his poetic intentions: “The Man with the Three Staves (...) I associate, quite arbitrarily, with the Fisher King himself;” “The following lines were stimulated by the account of one of the Antarctic expedition (I forget which, but I think one of Shackleton’s).” (22, 25) Eliot’s suggestion that his reader consult Weston in order to better understand his poem, therefore, was intriguing. Either Weston’s text would illuminate this unusual and fragmented poem, or the suggestion was intended to be as vague and misleading as the notes themselves.

Thirty-two years later, in 1956, Eliot clarified the meaning of his acknowledgement to Weston.

My notes stimulated the wrong kind of interest among the seekers of sources. It was just, no doubt, that I should pay my tribute to the work of Miss Jessie Weston; but I regret having sent so many enquirers off on a wild goose chase after Tarot cards and the Holy Grail.

Eliot does not recant his debt to Weston here, as Leon Surette has argued. Nor does Eliot deny that Weston’s text will help elucidate his poem, long after many of her ideas had been dismissed as unfounded by other scholars, and *The Waste Land* had been established as a canonical poem of English modernism, or what John Crowe Ransom called “the apotheosis of modernity.”

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3 “Eliot recanted his generous acknowledgement of the debt to Weston – thirty-two years after the event. [...] Eliot himself joined the consensual dismissal of *From Ritual to Romance*, apparently agreeing that his original recommendation was, after all, misleading.” (Leon Surette, “The Waste Land and Jessie Weston: A Reassessment,” *Twentieth Century Literature*, 34.2 [1988], 225-26)

her book as an inspiration and as a structural model for his poem, which may explain some of the incidental symbolism, but is not a crib to understand a hidden meaning behind the poem.

Weston’s basic argument is that the origin of the medieval Grail romances are pagan fertility rituals. *The Waste Land* is not a rehashing of that thesis. In fact, Eliot’s poem contains no references to medieval Grail narratives or fertility rituals. As this chapter will argue, Eliot’s indebtedness to Weston is structural and methodological.

*From Ritual to Romance* is often misread as a series of interesting but unfounded theses by an eccentric medievalist. In fact, Weston’s book is a unique and ambitious work of scholarship inspired by the scientific medievalism of Gaston Paris and the anthropology of Sir James Frazer. Weston fragments a vast body of medieval Grail literature and arranges it into common themes, episodes, and topoi. She then deduces that the Grail story describes an ancient fertility ritual which runs directly contrary to the explicit meaning of the texts. Implied in Weston’s argument is that the very wholeness of medieval romance – and, by extension, literature itself – is the symptom of the loss of this ritual: either a misreading, a deliberate suppression, or medieval *translatio*. Eliot was arguing similar ideas in his reviews of the work of Lewis, Joyce, Durkheim, Lévy-Bruhl, and other anthropologists. Eliot argued that poetry contains traces of “primitive” mentality, or what Levy-Bruhl called, “pre-logical mentality.” Eliot called for a poetry that would reveal its roots as a primitive ritual.5 Inspired by what he would call Joyce’s “mythic” technique, Eliot insisted that this new poetry must resist all narrative methods, and instead adopt the scientific methods used by anthropologists and other scholars.

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5 “Poetry begins, I dare say, with a savage beating a drum beating a drum in a jungle.” (Eliot, *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*, quoted in *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot* [London: Faber and Faber, 1975], 73)
In other words, Eliot had been calling for a work of art to do what Weston’s book had done at a theoretical level: to reveal the primitive nature of poetry, the ritual behind romance. Weston’s book was not just inspiring to Eliot; it offered him a structure and a method to organize his poem. *The Waste Land* is an intimate and complex response to *From Ritual to Romance*. It presents itself as a pseudo-scholarly work full of footnotes and section headings which read like they have been lifted right out of Weston’s book. Weston stages her book as a fragmented and personal quest to discover the truth of the Grail and make sense of the overwhelming mass of contradictory Grail criticism; Eliot stages his poem as an intellectual quest to discover the origin of vegetative life and make sense of a heap of textual fragments. Weston’s guiding thesis is that scholars must focus on the story of the Waste Land and the wounded Fisher King in the Grail narratives rather than on the story of the hero’s quest; Eliot’s poem is inundated with Waste Land and Fisher King/Drowned King images, while noticeably absent of any questing hero that is trying to liberate or revivify the Waste Land. Weston’s methodology is to isolate and compare Waste Land motifs from medieval literature regardless of their context and the history of their composition; Eliot does the same, but to literature in general.

Eliot scholarship has overlooked Weston’s methodological influence on *The Waste Land*. This is partly due to superficial or limited readings of Weston’s text that do not consider the novelty of her methodology or her structure. It does not help that Weston’s ideas have been dismissed by most medievalist as essentially unfounded. Instead of regarding Weston as pioneering an inspiring technique, the way Freud influenced the work of authors like Virginia Woolf or Robert Musil, literary scholars continue to search for the fragments of Weston’s ideas in *The Waste Land*, and often
come the conclusion that Eliot only vaguely read Weston himself, or that he satirizes her ideas, or, as Cleanth Brooks argues, that Eliot’s point is that the mystery cults no longer have any meaning in a secular society. If Eliot’s point is only that Weston’s ideas about medieval society do not apply to modern society, it would hardly be necessary to offer such a generous acknowledgement.

Likewise, no scholarship has commented on the structural affinities between these two texts: what Eliot referred to as “the title” and “the plan.” Most scholars assume Eliot’s structural affinity is with Weston’s description of the Grail myth, rather than Weston’s actual study itself. Is easy to understand how a work of literature might be radically ‘adapted’ by another author – like Joyce’s recreation of *The Odyssey*. But there are no real precedents of an author adapting a work of criticism. Eliot, however, began his career as an academic; he was known to most of his readers as primarily as a critic, and spend just as much time lauding new works of criticism and philosophy as he did works of literature. In “The Function of Criticism,” he argues that “so large a part of creation is really criticism,” and then asks his reader if so large a part of criticism is really creation. Eliot also compared Joyce’s *Ulysses* to a scientific breakthrough, or an important work of Homeric and anthropological scholarship.

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Joyce’s Homer

Less than a year after publishing *The Waste Land*, Eliot wrote an article for the *Dial* entitled, “*Ulysses*, Order, and Myth.” *Ulysses* had just appeared in complete book form, although its serialization had begun four years earlier. Eliot argues that Joyce’s book “has the importance of a scientific discovery. No one else has built a novel upon such a foundation before: it has never been necessary.”\(^{10}\) For Eliot, Joyce’s structural framework is more than just a “scaffolding erected by the author for the purpose of disposing his realistic tale (and) of no interest in the completed structure.” (175) Homer’s *Odyssey* is what allowed Joyce to order “the intense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history.” (177) Those readers who do not refer to Joyce’s schemata and reread Homer’s text, Eliot argues, will not understand Joyce’s work.

“The novel ended with Flaubert and James,” Eliot writes, and so Joyce must be understood not as a novelist but as a scientist. Eliot likens Joyce to Einstein, who worked *through* the ideas of his predecessors. (According to Eliot’s analogy, if Joyce is Einstein who developed modern physics, then Homer is Newton.) Joyce has not simply written a modernist adaptation or even *translatio* of Homer’s text; Joyce turned Homer into a precursor of his own scientific revolution.\(^{11}\) *Ulysses* changes our understanding of Homer the way a work of Homeric scholarship might do. As Eliot had argued four years earlier about any great literary work, “the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past.”\(^{12}\)

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\(^{11}\) The medieval *translatio* is something between translation and an ‘updating.’ Benoît de Sainte-Maure’s *Le Roman de Troie* (c. 1155), for example, is a 40,000 line retelling of Homer’s *Iliad* that makes it conform to medieval codes of Christian chivalry.

Eliot’s argument was sympathetic to Joyce’s own intentions. When Joyce began to serialize his book in *The Little Review*, he insisted that the Homeric titles be prefixed to each episode. He also circulated to his friends and favorite critics two different schemes which explained how his novel maps onto Homer’s text. He also recommended to friends and family that they reread Homer’s *Odyssey* before tackling his book. And not Chapman or Pope’s translation: Joyce recommended Samuel Butler’s prose translation of 1900, which Latinised all of the Greek names (Jove for Zeus and Ulysses for Odysseus) and made the text read like a novel. In his preface, Butler explains to his reader that his translation “is intended to supplement a work entitled *The Authoress of the Odyssey*, which I published in 1897.” His translation is filled with pictures, diagrams, and footnotes in support of his eccentric theory that the *Odyssey* was written by “a very young woman” who lived on the west coast of Sicily and who “introduced herself into her work under the name of Nausicaa.” In the first book, for example, he argues in a long footnote that the clasp by which Telemachus latches his door from the inside is a feature of Sicily. “Doors fastened to all intents and purposes as here described may be seen in the older houses at Trapani. [...] My bedroom at the Albergo Centrale was fastened in this way.”

Joyce had read both of Butler’s critical works on Homer, as well as Butler’s satirical utopia *Erewhon* (1872), which itself has Homeric overtones, and is one of the

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14 When Ezra Pound discounted the parallels between the two texts, Joyce disagreed with him. See Ellmann, “Joyce and Homer,” 569. Pound would later dismiss the importance of Eliot’s notes and his acknowledgement to Weston in a letter to Hugh Kenner: “I did not see the notes till 6 or 8 months afterward; and they have not increased my enjoyment of the poem one atom. The poem seems to me an emotional unit ... I have not read Miss Weston’s *Ritual to Romance*, and do not at present intend to.” (Quoted in *The Invisible Poet* [New York, Obolensky, 1959], 151-52.)
15 Samuel Butler, “Preface” to *The Odyssey* (London: A. C. Fifield, 1900), v.
16 Ibid.
first novels to ever entertain the possibility of artificial intelligence. Butler’s decision to create a scholarly translation of Homer but yet still Latinise all of the Greek names (especially when Greek etymologies are so important to his argument) might have been a nod to the medieval practice of *translatio* which did the same. It is hard to know what in Butler’s *oeuvre* is ironic and what is not. However, by titling his book *Ulysses*, Joyce was alluding to the practice of *translatio* as well as to Butler’s translation.

Joyce was also an enthusiast of Victor Bérand’s *Les Phéniciens et l’Odyssée* (1903), a book diametrically opposed to Butler’s, which argued that Homer was a cosmopolitan landlubber who knew nothing of the Western Mediterranean (where most of the *Odyssey* is set) and relied on Semitic Phoenicians for his information. *Ulysses* was one such Phoenician. Joyce would even claim Bérand’s authority for the climactic encounter in *Ulysses* when “jewgreek meets greekjew.”

*Ulysses* was as much inspired by Homer as it was by Homeric scholarship. The model of Homer that Joyce wanted his readers to keep in mind was an idiosyncratic prose Latinisation of Homer used as a source text for an archaeological study. Eliot wrote his poem with Joyce’s text in mind. He was keenly aware that it was considered even by Ezra Pound to be the “verse equivalent” of *Ulysses*. It is therefore not surprising that Eliot’s own radical version of the Grail narrative would include a note that referred readers not to the medieval Grail romances themselves, but to a recent and eccentric philological study of them.

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18 Quoted in Ellmann, “Joyce and Homer,” 571. [*expand*]
19 See Lawrence Rainey, “Price of Modernism,” 97.
The Mythical Method

Eliot concludes his article with the claim that Joyce used a mythical rather than a narrative method in rewriting *The Odyssey*. Eliot calls for a new kind of art whose inspiration and methodology come from recent developments in science:

> Psychology (such as it is, and whether our reaction to it be comic or serious), ethnology, and *The Golden Bough* have concurred to make possible what was impossible only a few years ago. Instead of narrative method, we may now use the mythical method. It is, I seriously believe, a step toward making the modern world possible for art. (178)

For Eliot, *Ulysses* does not just tell a story; it investigates into the nature of its origins just as Butler or Bérand’s studies of Homer do. But Eliot is thinking especially of the work of Sir James Frazer and Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, whom he knew Joyce also read. For Eliot, the only way to make the modern world possible for art was for literature to return to its *anthropological* roots: its primitive and ritualistic nature.

Eliot enthusiastically reviewed Lévy-Bruhl’s *Les fonction mentales dans les sociétées inférieures* (1910) in 1916, in which Lévy-Bruhl criticizes Frazer for representing primitive logic as an inferior version of civilized Western logic. Lévy-Bruhl argues that a “pre-logical mentality” involved mystic connections between people and objects or animals and the phenomenon of multi-presence (being in more than one place at the same time). One of Eliot’s favorite examples of the pre-logical mentality was the Bororo of Brazil who can ‘become’ parrots:

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According to M. Lévy-Bruhl, this is not merely the adoption of parrot as an heraldic emblem, nor a merely mythological kinship or participation in qualities; nor is the savage deluded into thinking that he is a parrot. [...] He is capable of a state of mind into which we cannot put ourselves, in which he is a parrot, while being at the same time a man. In other words, the mystical mentality, though at a low level, plays a much greater part in the daily life of the savage than in that of the civilized man.22

Unlike Lévy-Bruhl, however, Eliot believed that civilized man had the capacity experience this mystic mentality through poetry: “the pre-logical mentality persists in civilized man, but becomes available only to or through the poet.”23 The poet’s job is to unearth and communicate the pre-logical mentality by means of the mythical method. In his 1918 review of Wyndham Lewis’s Tarr, Eliot writes, “the artist, I believe, is more primitive, as well as more civilized, than his contemporaries, his experience is deeper than civilization, and he only uses the phenomena of civilization in expressing it.”24

The following year, in a review of George W. Cronyn’s anthology of North American Indian songs and chants, Eliot outlined in more detail how the mythical method is communicated through poetry.

Primitive art and poetry can even, through the studies and experiments of the artist or poet, revivify the contemporary activities. The maxim, Return to the sources, is a good one. More intelligibly put, it is that the poet should know everything that has been accomplished in poetry.

accomplished, not merely produced) since its beginnings – in order to know what he is doing himself. He should be aware of all the metamorphoses of poetry that illustrate the stratifications of history that cover savagery. For the artist is, in an impersonal sense, the most conscious of men; he is therefore the most and the least civilized and civilizable; he is the most competent to understand both civilized and primitive.25

The task of the poet is to “revivify the contemporary activities” – a phrase which recalls the curse of the Waste Land in the Grail myth, but also Eliot’s description of Joyce’s technique as a way of “controlling, or ordering, of giving shape and significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history.” (177) This revivification is achieved by returning to the sources – not to the source text but to the anthropological source of poetry: poetry as a ritual, poetry as ‘primitive,’ poetry as a reflection of a pre-logical mentality. But Eliot also stresses how learned the poet must be to undertake this, and how he must straddle between savage and the civilized. It is not a matter or writing imitations of primitive verse (though Eliot did some of this as well26), but a matter of illustrating “the stratifications of history that cover savagery,” juxtaposing primitive thought and art with civilized thought and art, and, most importantly, showing the primitive roots of the most civilized poetry.

26 For some good examples, see Harmon, “Anthropologist and Primitive.”


The Waste Land

Eliot’s criticism on Joyce and the mythical method offers a preliminary gloss on the purpose and technique of The Waste Land, which, as William Harmon puts it, displays “the modus operandi of kinds of perception and memory that are not logical or civilized (as Lévy-Bruhl used these terms) but pre-logical or mystical-mythical.”27 The poet-narrator has a vast knowledge of the poetic tradition. His goal is to revivify the waste land of contemporary life, or make relevant “the intense panorama of futility and anarchy” of the present day by returning to its anthropological and mythic roots, and reveal the ‘savagery’ at the heart of the most beautiful of poems. Just as Joyce made Homer (via Butler) into one of his scientific predecessors, Eliot’s authors become valuable evidence gatherers: “The passage in Ovid is of great anthropological interest,” he writes in a note. (23)

Eliot’s method is to fragment canonical works (Shakespeare, Dante, Ovid, the Bible, Milton, St. Augustine, etc.) into new and unsettling juxtapositions, disregarding chronology, with especial attention to moments of revelation, terror, violence, and especially rape. At the end of section four, for example, Eliot juxtaposes the description of Augustine arriving at Carthage and throwing himself into sensual lust to a drastic redaction of Buddha’s Fire sermon: “To Carthage then I came // Burning burning burning burning / Oh Lord Though plukest me out / Oh Lord Thou pluckest // burning.” (lines 307-8) In his note he explains, “The collocation of these two representatives of eastern and western asceticism, as the culmination of this part of the poem, is not an accident.” (25) Likewise, Eliot’s interest in the Philomela myth is in her brutal rape followed by her

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27 Harmon, “Anthropologist and Primitive,” 806. Harmon’s comment is meant to apply to all of Eliot’s early poetry, but he does not analyze The Waste Land.
longing to become a swallow ("Quando fiam uti chelidon," or, “When shall I be like a swallow?” [line 428]) which recalls Eliot’s own description of the savage of Bororo who can become a parrot. The story of Shackleton’s hallucination of an “extra man” walking among his team in the north interests Eliot because it is an instance of multi-presence. (“Who is the third who walks always beside you?” [line 359]) Tireseas interests Eliot because he is “throbbing between two lives” and two sexes. (line 218) He can become every other character, including the clerk and his victim, the typist girl: “I Tiresias have foresuffered all / Enacted on this same divan or bed.” (lines 245-46) In a note Eliot explains, “just as the one-eyed merchant, seller of currants, melts into the Phoenician Sailor, and the latter is not wholly distinct from Ferdinand Prince of Naples, so all the women are one woman, and the two sexes meet in Tiresias.” (23)

The mythical method of The Waste Land is to unearth the savagery behind the most lines of beautiful poetry and find remnants of this primitive mentality. Eliot does this by dissecting poetry into scientific data, fragmenting it, making it incoherent, creating characters that double and melt into one another. He wants to give an experience of Lévy-Bruhl’s pre-logical mentality, in which a woman can become a swallow; bats can have baby faces; empty cisterns, exhausted wells and grass can sing; and where thunder can speak. For Eliot, it is only by laying waste to traditional forms of narrative and poetic representation that one can revivify the contemporary world, and, of course, poetry itself. Not “to maintain ‘the sublime’ / In the old sense,” as Pound puts it, but change it irrevocably, and make “the modern world possible for art.” It was not until Eliot read Weston’s book, however, that he decided upon a central myth that he could focus on: the

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story of the Grail. Weston also offered him a structure and a more precise technique for his mythical method.

*From Ritual to Romance*

As a work of Grail scholarship, Weston’s slim 200 page book contains more controversial theses for at least three books. She presents her research as a collection of fragmentary notes written during a 30 year career studying Grail romances. She often interrupts her chapters with additions and supplemental details. “This section had already been written when I came across the important article by Dr Jevons, referred to in a previous chapter.”³⁰ As her argument progresses, however, Weston’s fragments become the building blocks of an extraordinary discovery: the true nature of the Grail. Her ideas are worth briefly summarizing in order to demonstrate how the argument develops.

1) The story of the *terre gaste* (wasted land) and the wounded Grail King is the key to understanding the origin of the Grail myth, rather than the quest story of a hero (Gawain, Perceval, or Galahad) who fails to ask a question about the Grail and causes a blight on the land. The quest story and the question-test were later additions by medieval authors.

2) Although Perceval is the hero of the earliest extant Grail narratives by Chrétien de Troyes, Joseph de Boron and Wauchier de Denain, Gawain was the original Grail hero. He played the role of a medicine man. In a (lost) Welsh version called the *Bleheris* (Chrétien, Robert and Wauchier’s source), Gawain cured the Grail King by administering a healing herb.

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3) The Grail King was originally a part-human part-divine king who was ritually ‘sacrificed’ (usually drowned) and then resurrected (fished out, healed). The original Grail texts pre-dating the *Bleheris*, which were similar to mummer plays, described this ritual in detail.

4) Christian and Celtic scholars are wrong about the meaning of the Grail procession, because they analyze the four objects (platter, cup/grail, candelabra, and spear) in isolation from one another. They argue that the Grail is the cup of the Last Supper or the cauldron of the Dagda, and that the lance is the lance of Longinus or the lance of the Tuatha de Danann. In fact, the Grail and lance are sex symbols which represent male and female reproductive energy. The four objects together correspond to the four suits of the Tarot (hearts, spades, clubs, and diamonds).

5) This ritual dates back to the mystery of Mithraism and other vegetative cults like that of Adonis and Attis, as described by Frazer. It still continues to this day in occult societies. The ritual had an exoteric and an esoteric meaning: one for laymen and one for initiates. As an exoteric ritual, it invoked the restoration of the earth and the crops in the spring. As an esoteric ritual, it described a gnosis, or a union with the divine, which often involved a visit with the underworld and an experience of death and terror. The story of the Waste Land and its rejuvenation in the Grail narrative is evidence of the exoteric ritual. The story of the Grail hero’s encounter with a dead body or demon in the Chapel Perilous is evidence of the esoteric ritual.
6) The Grail narratives developed in rocky coastal regions like Wales and Ireland because they were far from seats of Christian power. Authors such as Chrétien had no idea about the mystic ritual behind the Grail story. Other authors like Robert did, but cleverly concealed the ritual as a Christian mystery and the Jewish festival of the fish. The author of the *Queste*, the most orthodox version of the Grail romance, worked to cover up and excise any residues of the ritual. One text, the *Elucidation*, directly ties the Waste Land myth to the suppression of the pagan rituals, when the temple of the Grail was pillaged and the priestesses violated.

Hopefully this gives some idea of the staggering claims in Weston’s book, and how her argument in many ways ‘performs’ what Eliot wanted modernist poetry to do: reveal the mythical and primitive sources of the most civilized narrative and poetic forms. Weston’s book is ambitious to a fault, and it is partly the reason that it has not stood the test of time. I. A. Richards called it “a theosophical tract with astral trimmings,” partly because of Weston’s cryptic references to contemporary occult societies. (He would later argue that Weston’s book does not elucidate *The Waste Land.* Even the scholarly mystic Arthur Edward Waite also dismissed Weston’s book as the work of “an accomplished scholar who used to be taken seriously.”

Weston’s thesis, while certainly compelling, relies on speculation, as well as a very selective and creative reading of a vast body of medieval literature, most of which

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was inaccessible to her readers. First, she speculates on the content of a lost source, the Welsh *Bleheris*, claiming that it depicted Gawain as a healer, then claims that its source was a collection of mummer-like plays that described the ancient fertility ritual in detail. But she has no definitive proof for these claims. In a footnote, Weston explains that she once

came across a passage in which certain knights of Arthur’s court, riding through a forest, come upon a herb ‘which belonged to the Grail.’

Unfortunately the reference, at the time I met with it, though it struck me as curious, did not possess any special significance, and either I omitted to make a note of it, or entered it in a book which, with sundry others, went mysteriously astray in the process of moving furniture. In any case, though I have searched diligently I have failed to recover the passage. (103)

Aside from this lost passage (which no one has since found), Weston has no evidence that links Gawain to the medicine man.

Second, Weston reads the Grail romances in at least four different ways: as a misreading of the pagan ritual (by authors who didn’t understand their sources, like Chrétien); as a coded translation of the pagan ritual (by authors who did understand their sources, like Robert and the author of the *Perlesvaus*); as a cover-up of the pagan ritual (by the author of the *Queste*); and as a meta-text or reflection on the very loss of the pagan ritual and the necessity of its remaining coded (by the author of the *Elucidation*). Weston repeatedly claims that she is not concerned with the earliest form of the Grail story, but the source, and hence “no matter what version we take, we find in that version points of contact with one special group of popular belief and practice.” (46n) Such a
methodology allows her to disregard the order in which the Grail texts were written, but it is obviously contingent on whether her version of the earliest form of the Grail story is correct.\textsuperscript{34}

Third, Weston’s main evidence for the description of an esoteric fertility rite is a very obscure passage from the \textit{Perlesvaus}, in which a young knight has a dream that he stumbles across a dead body in a chapel, receives a fatal wound from a demon, and then wakes up with the same wound. The fact that Weston can’t find more convincing evidence in the vast body of Grail literature is problematic, especially given the marginal nature of the \textit{Perlesvaus}. Roger Sherman Loomis found the text so bizarre that he suggested that the author was “deranged.”\textsuperscript{35}

Incidental Symbolism

Even to an enthusiastic amateur anthropologist like Eliot, many of Weston’s specific arguments would have seemed too good to be true. (Eliot also read the reviews.) This is one reason why there is only ironic or superficial references to Weston’s specific theses in Eliot’s poem. Eliot perpetuates the misreadings of the sacred ritual by medieval authors that Weston describes.

A good example of this is Eliot’s use of the Tarot. Weston’s primary authority on the Tarot is William Butler Yeats, whom even Eliot knew was no expert. “Nearly all of

\textsuperscript{34} In the chapter “Tammuz and Adonis,” Weston oddly justifies her use of the prose \textit{Lancelot}: “My use of this parallel has been objected to on the ground that the prose \textit{Lancelot} is a late text, and therefore cannot be appealed to as evidence for original incidents. But the \textit{Lancelot} in its original form was held by so competent an authority as the late M. Gaston Paris to have been one of the earliest, if not the very earliest, of French prose texts.” (46n) In other words, Weston argues that the fact that Gaston Paris so vehemently believed the Vulgate Cycle to predate Chrétien and Robert’s texts is evidence that it was closer to the ultimate \textit{source} of the Grail story — something that Paris never argued.

what Yeats told Weston about the Tarot [...] verges on the outlandish,” as Sloane put it. Weston argues that the original use of the Tarot “would be to predict the rise and fall of the waters which brought fertility to the land.” (76) “Today the Tarot has fallen somewhat into disrepute, being principally used for purposes of divination.” (74) Eliot’s interest in the Tarot is only as divination. Madame Sosostris is a charlatan and she barely knows how to fake it well. She names the cards as she turns them up on the table, ignoring their suits, which is the only detail of the Tarot Weston discusses. “Here is the man with three staves, and here the Wheel / And here the one-eyed merchant.” (lines 51-52) Sosostris also offers the most literal interpretation of the drowned sailor card: “Fear death by water.” (line 55) In his note, Eliot explains that he is “not familiar with the exact constitution of the Tarot pack,” and that the purpose of the scene is merely to foreshadow the appearance of later figures in the poem. (22) But then he adds that he associates the hanged man with the hanged god of Frazer, and the man with three staves, “quite arbitrarily, with the Fisher King himself.” Any reader of Weston would associate the drowned sailor with the Fisher King, who is fished out of the water and reborn each spring. Eliot’s reading of the Tarot is as arbitrary and superficial as Sosostris’s reading, and a deliberate misreading of Weston’s thesis.

Likewise, Weston explains that the characterization of the Grail King as the Fisher King, or a king who fishes to pass the time, was a misunderstanding by medieval authors of the sacred fish meal. Eliot’s narrator describes himself as fishing in a canal: “I sat upon the shore / Fishing.” (lines 422-23) Eliot even adds a footnote directing his reader to Weston’s chapter on the Fisher King. In this case, Eliot seems to be inviting his reader to witness his perpetuation of the misreading Weston describes.

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36 Sloane, “Richard Wagner’s Arthurian Sources,” 33.
One of the most comic examples of a deliberate misreading of Weston is Eliot’s merchant character. Weston describes that Syrian merchants passed on the teachings of the pagan rituals. Eliot’s *Smyrian* merchant tries to initiate a homosexual debauch with the narrator. Mr Eugenidies, “asked me in demotic French / To luncheon at the Cannon Street Hotel / Followed by a weekend at the Metropole.” (lines 212-14) This is a crass version of the ‘sex rituals’ to which Weston obliquely refers.

Modernist Grail Narrative

Eliot’s playful uses of Weston’s “incidental symbolism” illustrates that he was less interested in her ideas than he was in her method. By ‘misreading’ Weston in such a superficial way, of course, Eliot is also parodying the medieval misreadings of the sacred ritual that Weston describes, and ultimately pointing to his own poem as a poem, rather than a mere rehashing of Weston’s ideas. He is declaring that *The Waste Land* is also a version of the Grail narrative. Weston closes her book with an indirect challenge for a contemporary author to write an *accurate* version of the Grail legend:

The Grail is a living force, it will never die; it may indeed sink out of sight, and, for centuries even, disappear from the field of literature, but it will rise to the surface again, and become once more a theme of vital inspiration even as, after slumbering from the days of Malory, it woke to new life in the nineteenth century, making its fresh appeal through the genius of Tennyson and Wagner. (177)

Whether Weston intended it or not, the passage suggests that *From Ritual to Romance* should be added to the list. If any work has given the Grail “new life” and shown it as “a
living force,” it is Weston’s thesis that a Life Cult is at the core of the Grail narrative and that the Grail represents a life-giving womb. At the very least, these lines indirectly challenge a contemporary author or poet to revitalize the Grail narrative the way that Weston had done in theory. To Eliot, Weston’s text illustrates just how close a work of criticism might approach the ideal of his modernist art. Eliot would therefore accept her challenge and write a modernist Grail narrative, but also borrow her style, methodology and structure. He would adapt her version of the Grail narrative rather than a Grail narrative itself.

Style

The most obvious affinity between Weston’s book and Eliot’s poem is a scholarly and at times pedantic style. Weston assumes that her readers know French, Old French, German, Middle High German, Spanish, Latin, Ancient Greek, and even Old Dutch (Lanceloet) and Old Welsh (Peredur), which a lot of medievalists probably wouldn’t know. The only English translations Weston provides is of the Sanskrit texts because she herself doesn’t read Sanskrit. (She refers her reader to H. H. Wilson’s 6 volume English translation of the Rigveda for more information.) Weston also quotes other critics in the original language, even when their points could be easily paraphrased or translated. In her chapter, The Secret of the Grail, for example, she introduces a Latin quotation that discusses the meaning of two lines of an Ancient Greek poem through the words of a German medievalist, who then closes with a half-line of commentary. (139) Weston offers no commentary of her own. Eliot, likewise, assumes his reader knows Latin, Greek, Italian, French and German. His notes offer citations and at times quotations in
the original language. Eliot also doesn’t read Sanskrit; in a footnote he refers the reader to “the late Henry Clarke Warren’s Buddhism in Translation (Harvard Oriental Series). Mr. Warren was one of the great pioneers of Buddhist studies in the Occident.” (25) For those of his readers who might want to know the fable of the meaning of the Thunder’s words, “Datta, dayadhvan, damyata,” Eliot directs his readers to “the Brihadaranyaka – Upanishad, 5, 1. A translation is found in Deussen’s Sechsig Upanishads des Veda, p. 489.” (25) In other words, the reader should consult a 1897 German translation of it.

Weston has the habit of mentioning conversations and personal correspondences with eminent scholars and artists (Gaston Paris, Alfred Nutt and W. B. Yeats). She volunteers aesthetic opinions on her source material, rarely resists an attack of another scholar, and describes the critics and authors of the Celtic revival as having taken a “by-path, and not the King’s Highway.”

Eliot explains to his reader that the interior of St. Magnus Marty is “to my mind one of the finest among Wren’s interiors.” (24) He defends his description of the bell in Saint Mary Woolnoth church which makes “a dead sound on the final stroke of nine” in a short note: “A phenomenon which I have often noticed.” (line 68, 22). Eliot also reassures his reader that he has indeed heard the hermit-thrush song in Quebec County which Chapman described in the Handbook of Birds of Eastern North America. (23)

Twice Weston describes having lost one of her sources in a footnote: a text that directly connects Gawain to the medicine man, and testimony from “Mr. Rogers Rees, resident at Stepaside, Pembrokeshire, who informed me that he held definite proof of the

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37 “The truth may lie very deep down, but it is there, and it is worth seeking, and Celtic fairy-tales, charming as they are, can never afford a satisfactory, or abiding, resting place. I, for one, utterly refuse to accept such as an adequate goal for a life’s research. A path that leads but into a Celtic Twilight can only be a by-path, and not the King’s Highway!” (176)
connection of Bledri with both *Grail* and *Perceval* legends.” (188n) Eliot informs his reader in a note that the origin of a ballad “O the moon shone bright on Mrs. Porter,” is lost to him; “it was reported to me from Sydney, Australia.” (line 199, 23) He also forgets which account of an Antarctic expedition he read, “but I think one of Shackleton’s.” (25)

Weston’s book is filled with self-references, most often to her exhaustive *The Legend of Sir Gawain* (1897) and *The Legend of Sir Perceval* (1906), as well as her numerous translations. In the third to last paragraph of her book, Weston writes,

> I am also still of opinion that the table of descent given on p. 283 of Volume II. of my *Perceval* studies, represents the most probable evolution of the literature; at the same time, in the light of further research, I should feel inclined to add the Grail section of *Sone de Nansai* as deriving from the same source which gave us Kiot’s poem, and the *Perlesvaus.* (196)

She then adds her final footnote: “Cf. my Notes, *Romania*, Vol. XLIII. pp. 403 et seq.” (196n) Eliot’s poem is peppered with self-reference. The name Sweeney appears only once in the poem: “I hear / The sound of horns and motors, which shall bring / Sweeney to Mrs. Porter in the spring.” (lines 196-98) No information is given about Sweeney; a reader would only know that he is an urban lout by being familiar with Eliot’s previous poems, “Sweeney Erect,” and “Sweeney Among the Nightingales.” The shortest and most cryptic section of Eliot’s poem, *Death By Water*, is a translation of the final lines of “Dans le Restaurant,” which Eliot wrote four years earlier. The lines, “On Margate Sands. / I can connect / Nothing with nothing,” might make a reader wonder what the geographical significance of Margate is. (lines 300-302) But only those who knew Eliot
personally would know that this refers to his rest-cure at a hotel in Margate where he wrote the bulk of the poem.

Last, Weston assumes that her reader is familiar with other works of medievalism and anthropology, including her own previous work. She refers to the work of Sir James Frazer and her mentor, “the late M. Gaston Paris”, in a way that assumes the reader either already knows or will consult their work. (46n) Eliot, likewise, prefaces his explanatory notes by recommending that his reader familiarize themselves with two volumes of Sir James Frazer and read the entirety of From Ritual to Romance. Twice more in his notes Eliot directs readers to consult specific chapters of Weston.

The Plan and the Title

As Eliot points out, the title and the plan of his poem were inspired from Weston’s book. Eliot segments his poem out into five parts: The Burial of the Dead, A Game of Chess, The Fire Sermon, Death by Water, and What the Thunder Said. These resemble Weston’s own chapters which divide the Grail romance into themes or topoi: The Task of the Hero, The Freeing of the Waters, The Sword Dance, The Medicine Man, The Fisher King, The Perilous Chapel, etc. Many of Eliot’s titles are linked to Grail themes or Weston’s ideas. The Burial of the Dead and Death by Water both recall Weston’s description of a ritual that involves ‘drowning’ an effigy of the Grail King and resurrecting him again (a connection that Eliot himself makes in a note); What the Thunder Said recalls the terrible storm that leads the Grail Knight to the Chapel Perilous as well as the loud noise inside the chapel (another connection that Eliot makes in his
note); and A Game of Chess recalls a common adventure of Grail romances (although one not mentioned by Weston): the hero’s encounter with a magical chessboard.

The title of Eliot’s poem itself might be read as a supplemental chapter to Weston’s book. Weston does not actually have a chapter on the Waste Land because an analysis of the Waste Land motif is central to her methodology at work in almost every chapter. As she puts it, “‘the ‘Waste Land’ is really the very heart of our problem; a rightful appreciation of its position and significance will place us in possession of the clue which will lead us safely through the most bewildering mazes of the fully developed tale.” (60)

By titling his poem The Waste Land, Eliot is not just borrowing a motif from Weston’s book; he is aligning his methodology to her own. Eliot’s poem situates itself as a continuation or extension of Weston’s research: an investigation into the Waste Land motif in literature. His method is to extract and collect descriptions of wasted and empty landscapes, barren expanses, and dead vegetation from various sources: the empty sea of Wagner’s Tristam (“Oed’ und leer das Meer”); Baudelaire’s Paris (“Unreal city / Under the brown fog of a winter dawn”); Biblical deserts (“the agony in stony places”); Shackleton’s Antarctica (“the white road”); Herman Hesse’s Europe and Dante’s hell (“hooded hordes swarming / Over endless plains, stumbling in cracked earth / Ringed by the flat horizon only”); and the Chapel Perilous of the Grail romances (“In this decayed home among the mountains / In the faint moonlight, the grass is singing / Over the tumbled graves”). (lines 41-42, 61, 324, 361, 368-70, 385-87)

Eliot’s emphasis on the Waste Land motif also serves to deemphasize the quest aspect of the story, which is Weston’s method as well. If there is a quest in Eliot’s poem,
it is the protagonist’s intellectual quest to understand the source of life. Eliot’s narrator-poet finds the vegetative awakening in Spring cruel and unsettling, and this prompts a question: “What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow / Out of this stony rubbish?” (lines 19-20) The question might be summarized as: Why is there life at all?

The narrator (or someone else) quickly responds through Ezekiel 2.1: “Son of man, / You cannot say, or guess, for you know only a heap of broken images.” (lines 20-22) Nothing else that happens in the poem seems to disprove Ezekiel. The narrator visits an uninspired clairvoyant who tells him to fear death by water. His neurasthenic wife needles him about what he is thinking, but he can connect nothing with nothing. He disappears from the action of the second half of the poem, then reappears near the end fishing in a dull canal and “shoring” the fragments of the poem.

As F. R. Leavis puts it, “the thunder brings no rain to revive the Waste Land, and the poem ends where it began.” But Cleanth Brooks disagrees; there has been a subtle change from the beginning: the protagonist “resolves to claim his tradition and rehabilitate it.” In a way, they are both right. Eliot de-emphasizes the importance of the quest in his poem to such an extent that his questing protagonist literally becomes the Fisher King. The ‘action’ of Eliot’s poem mirrors the ‘action’ of Weston’s book: to shift attention away from the quest story and towards the motif of the Waste Land and the Wounded King. Eliot’s modernist Grail narrative is, in many ways, an anti-narrative. It dramatizes the shift from the narrative to the mythical method. The goal of his poem is to have done with the narrative entirely, and turn poetic composition itself into an assemblage of Waste Land motifs without a clear beginning, middle, or end. For that

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reason, Eliot’s poem can’t end with any definitive resolution, even one that champions its own method. It can only gesture, as Brooks suggests, to its own form as very intentional.

The argument that Eliot fragments works of canonical literature to the point of meaningless in order to illustrate modern man’s fractured consciousness or in order to reflect on the fact that models of the past no longer make sense in today’s secularized world, therefore, is not consistent with Weston’s philological technique or Eliot’s description of the mythical method. Eliot himself responded to such readings: “When I wrote a poem called The Waste Land some of the more approving critics said that I had expressed the ‘disillusionment of a generation,’ which is nonsense. I may have expressed for them their own illusion of being disillusioned, but that did not form part of my intention.”40 The idea of a literature that uses a scientific technique instead of a narrative technique was for Eliot something to celebrate and wholly commit to.

Wasted Aesthetic

The difference between Eliot’s poem and Weston’s book is that Eliot’s data is arranged in a way to actually reveal a pre-logical mentality and the ritual behind poetry. Weston’s data serves to deduce that such a ritual exists. For Eliot, therefore, the Waste Land motif serves another important function: it enacts a ‘laying waste’ of narrative coherence and literary expression.

At the level of imagery, Eliot’s strategy is not just to overwhelm his poem with depictions of sterility and waste, but to make them almost generic. The narrator begins by inverting the Chaucerian invocation of spring as a time of vegetative rebirth: “April is the cruelest month, / Breeding lilacs out of the dead land.” (lines 1-2) The allusion is comic

40 Eliot, Thoughts after Lambeth (London: Faber, 1931), 10.
and specific; the exact month and type of flower are specified. But as images of sterility, dryness, and dead vegetation take over, the images become increasingly abstract, repetitive, and monosyllabic: a “stony rubbish,” (line 20); “where the sun beats, / And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief, / And the dry stone no sound of water” (lines 22-24); “the brown land” (line 75); “Here is no water but only rock / Rock and no water and the sandy road” (line 332); “dry sterile thunder without rain” (line 342); “endless plains, stumbling over cracked earth / Ringed by the flat horizon only” (line 369-70); “empty cisterns and exhausted wells” (line 384); and “the arid plain” (line 424). As Maud Ellmann puts it, Eliot’s poem revolts against “the imaginative richness of poetry.”

Eliot’s invocation of sterility is itself sterile, or the product of an imaginatively exhausted mind.

Even Eliot’s gruesome images feel generically gruesome: “a rat crept softly through the vegetation” (line 187), “white bodies naked on the low damp ground / And bones cast in a little low dry garret, / Rattled by the rat’s foot only, year to year.” (lines 193-95) Like a lot of Beckett’s images, these lines strike a reader as the product of a morbid or exhausted mind, rather than one suffering from a genuine trauma. One doubts whether Eliot’s bookish narrator has ever seen naked corpses lying in the grass. And why would bones be cast in a dry garret? Would they really rattle when a rat walked over them?

The other voices that populate Eliot’s poem are also consistent with this wasted or imaginatively exhausted aesthetic. Madame Sosostris has a bad cold, and is evidently not even trying to make her fortune telling sound convincing. She names the cards out as she

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sees them, and presents only a literal interpretation of the drowned sailor card. A drunk woman at a bar natters in circles about getting a new set of teeth: “He said, I swear, I can’t bear to look at you. / And no more can’t I, I said, and think of poor Albert.” (lines 146-47) The narrator’s wife plagues him with repetitive questions that break down into nonsense: “What are you thinking of? What thinking? What?” (line 113) Someone is singing nursery rhymes: “London bridge is falling down falling down falling down.” (line 426) Even the lament of Philomela is a dirty joke: “jug jug jug jug jug jug.” (line 203) Nameless females recount being sexually violated in flat, indifferent terms: “Well now that’s done: and I’m glad it’s over;” “After the event / He wept. He promised a ‘new start.’ / I made no comment. What should I resent?” (lines 252-53, 297-99).

The irony of Eliot’s aesthetics of failure in this poem, however, is that it is idealistic. It is in line with his aesthetics of the “primitive.” The more violence done to traditional poetic forms and narrative methods, the greater possibility of poetry’s ritual aspect showing itself. In the final lines, Eliot likens his poem to the madman Hieronomo’s play in Thomas Kyd’s *The Spanish Tragedie* (1592). This suggests that *The Waste Land* is a play within a play: a meta-fragment of a larger work. As Denis Donoghue puts it, “the whole poem looks like the sub-plot of a lost play; what is lost is the main plot.”42 In Hieronomo’s play, all the characters speak different languages, making it impossible for them to understand one another or for the audience to understand what is going on. The effect is comic. It is a parody of a well-written play (such as *The Spanish Tragedie*). But the real purpose of Hieronomo’s play is revenge. He has convinced the murderers of his son to act in it, and he will murder them onstage.

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The Waste Land is a madman’s version of the Grail story, which takes Weston’s ideas in a direction that even she might have found incomprehensible. Nothing is resolved. There is a Waste Land without a Questing Knight or a Grail. But Eliot’s goal is not to be comic, or to reflect on the disillusionment of contemporary life. His goal is to uncover the pre-logical mentality and poetry’s ritual element. Whether he is successful is not something that can be demonstrated, especially given the fact that Eliot’s anthropology and his notions of the “primitive” are so problematic. However, what is clear is that Weston offered Eliot a structure and a methodology by which to accomplish this definitive (if mad) goal.