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# Plasticity at the Violet Hour: Tiresias, *The Waste Land*, and Poetic Form

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*For Catherine Malabou, plasticity names what gives or receives form, as well as what potentially annihilates form. Malabou does not propose a liberation from the closure of form but a liberation within form itself. In *The Waste Land*, the metamorphic force of Tiresias, who figures a bodily excess at the approximate center of the poem, announces a disordering impulse from within the poem. Critical approaches to *The Waste Land* have often reproduced Eliot's desire for order by repeatedly privileging ordering logics in readings of the poem's form, especially in readings focused on the role of Tiresias. In contrast, by thinking of Tiresias as a plastic figure and as a figure for the plasticity of *The Waste Land*, we can reconceive the form of *The Waste Land* as that which bears witness to the disordering and excessive force excluded and absented from traditional conceptions of the poem's formal organization.*

**Keywords:** T.S. Eliot / *The Waste Land* / form / Catherine Malabou / plasticity

T.S. Eliot's comments to Otto Heller, in a 5 October 1923 letter, elliptically gesture to a perceived problem in the form of *The Waste Land*: "The poem is neither a success nor a failure—simply a struggle" (242).<sup>1</sup> Eliot prefaces this remark with praise for Heller's review of *The Waste Land*, in which Heller describes Eliot "as the possessor of an orderly mind throwing itself not without difficulty into experimental disorder" (qtd. in *Letters* 242n.2). The citation acknowledges a concern—common to Eliot's poetry and prose—for the relation between order and disorder, as well as for the ultimate rule of order and ordering principles.<sup>2</sup>

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Such a drive toward order motivates, in large part, Eliot's famous endnote to *The Waste Land* that characterizes Tiresias as a figure "uniting" all the other figures of the poem and thus providing an ordering form to a poem so entangled with disorder (52n.218).

While the aims of Eliot's notes have been questioned and remain suspect, in what follows I nevertheless take seriously Eliot's suggestion that Tiresias holds a privileged position in *The Waste Land*, but to argue differently that what Heller refers to as the "experimental disorder" of the poem appears through the figure of Tiresias and thus threatens to overwhelm the poem's ordering logics. Critics have persistently turned toward or away from Tiresias in their readings. In order to stress the drive toward order that these readings, in one way or another, manifest, I preface my own approach with some notable representatives of this critical tradition. By privileging order, as Eliot's note seemingly encourages, we risk excluding or regulating the excess that erupts from within the poem. In my reading of Tiresias and Eliot's note, I suggest the opposite; rather than a principle of order, Eliot's note points to Tiresias as a figure of unprincipled disorder in *The Waste Land*.

By returning to Tiresias and to his disordering excess, I argue that Tiresias embodies what Catherine Malabou theorizes as "plasticity," which shifts the critical conversation from a sense of form dependent on the dialectic of order and disorder to a sense of form as "plastic." In *Plasticity at the Dusk of Writing*, Malabou states that plasticity "refers both to the aptitude to *receive form* [...] and the ability to *give form* [...], but it is also characterized by the power to annihilate form" (87n.13).<sup>3</sup> Plasticity privileges radical "transformation," which, according to Malabou, allows her to return to thinking form without a reduction to essence (21). Malabou proposes "plastic reading" as "*the reading that seeks to reveal the form left in the text through the withdrawing of presence, that is, through its own deconstruction*. It is a question of showing how a text *lives its deconstruction*" (52; emphasis in original).<sup>4</sup> I propose that Malabou's concept might be productively transposed from ontological form to poetic form and thereby mobilized for a literary reading. In *The Waste Land*, Tiresias figures the way in which the text anticipates both its deconstruction and its metamorphic, or plastic, survival, that is, its living on through and after its own deconstruction.

In and through the figure of Tiresias, *The Waste Land* displays its own plasticity and by metamorphic force overcomes any and every imposition of ordered form. The radical plasticity of Tiresias, and of *The Waste Land*, thus enacts the return of the poem beyond and through its own deconstruction to "return, other and stronger this time, speculatively *promoted*" (Malabou 16). Tiresias's "throbbing between two lives" (l. 218) affirms a metamorphic logic that represents the metamorphic, plastic logic of *The Waste Land* itself, for his metamorphic force or excess disassembles *The Waste Land*'s assemblage of fragments. Tiresias deconstructs, then, the form of the poem, in part by de-forming the supposedly organizing, or formalizing, role accorded to him by Eliot's note. Yet Tiresias's plasticity then allows for the possibility of giving form in the space of this apparent

annihilation, a form of the poem that can be understood as plastic, that is, as moving in place. Rather than focus on a regulating order, such an approach to the poem's form privileges the excess, the disordering force, of its figures.

Turning to James Longenbach's "Radical Innovation and Pervasive Influence: *The Waste Land*" helps stress the value of Malabou's plasticity for literary readings. Longenbach presents a sophisticated argument that criticizes the restriction of order at the same time that it reinstates the closure of an ordered form: "The poem accumulates coherence as we move through its texture not because there is an underlying schema (there isn't one, despite many readers' efforts to put one there), but because the various pieces of the poem become a chamber in which subsequent pieces resonate" (453). Longenbach here dismisses any "underlying schema" to *The Waste Land*, but his metaphor of the poem as "a chamber in which subsequent pieces resonate" suggests, if not a schema, at least a limit to the poem's accumulation, for its pieces resonate *within* a chamber, a contained space. The problem here becomes how to conceive of the form of *The Waste Land*, its resonating chamber, without imposing a fixed schema that reduces or limits the poem's potential resonances and their force. Or, as Malabou says in the afterword to *Plasticity at the Dusk of Writing*, "It is not a question of how to escape closure but rather of how to escape within closure itself" (65). For Malabou, "plasticity renders possible the appearance or formation of alterity" from within closure (66).<sup>5</sup> Reading Tiresias as plastic, and against the tradition that reads him as an ordering figure, allows us to conceive an alterity of the poem from within itself, an echo that exceeds the bounds of its chamber.

Long subject to critical debate, the figure of Tiresias appears at the approximate center of *The Waste Land* in "The Fire Sermon." Tiresias asserts himself—though his voice is indirect, mediated by free-indirect discourse—three times during his brief appearance in the poem. These reiterations describe Tiresias's physical blindness and prophetic sight, as well as his dual gender determination, thereby linking Tiresias to his long mythic and literary history:<sup>6</sup>

At the violet hour, when the eyes and back  
 Turn upward from the desk, when the human engine waits  
 Like a taxi throbbing waiting,  
 I Tiresias, though blind, throbbing between two lives,  
 Old man with wrinkled female breasts, can see  
 At the violet hour, the evening hour that strives  
 Homeward, and brings the sailor home from sea,  
 [..]  
 I Tiresias, old man with wrinkled dugs  
 Perceived the scene, and foretold the rest—  
 I too awaited the expected guest.  
 [..]  
 (And I Tiresias have foresuffered all  
 Enacted on this same divan or bed;

I who have sat by Thebes below the wall  
 And walked among the lowest of the dead.) (ll. 215–21, 228–30, 243–46)

Because Tiresias can see all of time simultaneously—"I [...] Perceived the scene, and foretold the rest"—he seems to be the persona representing absolute stasis and stability within *The Waste Land*. All of history, all of the fragments contained within the poem, have been seen and comprehended already by Tiresias, which seems to emphasize his role as organizing figure. Ezra Pound, in one of his editorial comments on the draft of *The Waste Land*, similarly notes Tiresias's all-seeing abilities when he points to the contradiction in Eliot's initial use of "may" during Tiresias's free-indirect narration: "make up yr. mind / you Tiresias if you know know damn well or else you dont" (47).

In the published version, Tiresias's ability to see and to know seems uncompromised, and he therefore provides *The Waste Land* with what appears a sense of coherence underlying or imposing order on the disorder of the text. The text's movements also seem to reinforce Tiresias's presence as an ordering figure: from Tiresias's first to his second appearance, his activity changes from seeing to perceiving. Whereas the sensory experience of vision marks a direct encounter with the disordered materiality of the world, perception can refer at once to sensory apprehension and to mental apprehension. In other words, Tiresias potentially apprehends, mentally, "the scene" that might otherwise remain an unordered influx of materials. Perception implies an interpretative or a sense-making act in response to the potentially insensible excess of sensory experience.

If such a reading of Tiresias is taken seriously, then Eliot's endnote on Tiresias may be read as a guide to the text, rather than as an ironic miscue:

Tiresias, although a mere spectator and not indeed a "character," is yet the most important personage in the poem, uniting all the rest. 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. What Tiresias *sees*, in fact, is the substance of the poem. (52n.218)

For Eliot, at least ostensibly, Tiresias "unit[es]" all the poem's personae, and he also "*sees* [...] the substance of the poem." Given Tiresias's seeming centrality, he is often cited as one way in which to organize *The Waste Land's* fragments.<sup>7</sup> As Calvin Bedient writes, "Understandably trying to honor Eliot's dictum that 'what Tiresias *sees* ... is the substance of the poem,' many readers have struggled to posit Tiresias as the dominant consciousness of *The Waste Land*" (129).<sup>8</sup> Lee Oser exemplifies such an effort in his reading of *The Waste Land*:

To the extent that *The Waste Land* is about "the whole of history," this whole exists in the figure of Tiresias, a universal subject for whom all history is the predicate. [...] In the figure of Tiresias, Eliot construes a model of the self that contains not only a multitude of characters, but age upon historical age. [...] Through the passive medium of Tiresias, he converts *Song of Myself* into *Song of My Selves*. (78–9)

Oser contains the plurality of “selves” in *The Waste Land* within the singular “my.” Such a formulation seeks to ensure a reading that restricts or confines the multiplicity of the poem in an effort to prevent an uncontainable and potentially chaotic dissemination. Tiresias, as the prophet who can see all of time, therefore stabilizes in this reading the otherwise unstable collection of literary and historical fragments that compose *The Waste Land*.

Even readings of the poem’s form that turn away from Tiresias tend to reproduce a similar privilege of order, perhaps most famously by using Eliot’s “mythical method.” Such is the case in Jewel Spears Brooker’s *Mastery and Escape: T.S. Eliot and the Dialectic of Modernism*, which remains a powerful articulation of the problem of form in *The Waste Land*. As Brooker argues, form requires an ordering logic: “The notion that creating or perceiving order depends on the existence of a reference point (or center) is crucial to understand form in art” (141).<sup>9</sup> Rather than use Tiresias as a reference point, Brooker turns to Eliot’s 1923 review essay, “*Ulysses*, Order, and Myth,” in which “Eliot addresses himself in specific terms to the problem of creating order in the absence of a center or reference point” (Brooker 142). Eliot’s well-known essay argues that James Joyce’s use of myth in *Ulysses* realizes a new organizing principle:

In using the myth [of the *Odyssey*], in manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity, Mr. Joyce is pursuing a method which others must pursue after him. [...] It is simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history. [...] 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, toward [...] order and form. (“*Ulysses*, Order” 177–8)

Eliot proposes the “mythical method,” then, as “a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history” (177). The “mythical method,” in other words, gives an ordering form to the apparent disorder and “anarchy” of contemporaneity. In Brooker’s reading of *The Waste Land*, Eliot’s “mythical method” suggests that the poem’s “unity derives from reference to an abstraction [the wasteland myth] brought by the artist” (145). For in *The Waste Land*, “Eliot focuses on fragments and on the reconstructions they make possible” (Brooker 146).<sup>10</sup>

At least two problems emerge in reading *The Waste Land* through Eliot’s formulation of the “mythical method” that, though they do not eradicate absolutely the value of such a reading, mark the limits of such a move.<sup>11</sup> The first problem has to do with an anachronism. As Frank Kermode’s edition of Eliot’s prose tells us, “*Ulysses*, Order, and Myth” was published in *The Dial* in November 1923, after the publication of *The Waste Land*. More specifically, however, David Chinitz suggests that Eliot composed the essay as he was working on *Sweeney Agonistes*:

For now it will suffice to observe that although the “mythical method” is usually discussed in connection with *The Waste Land*—largely because of the light Eliot’s

analysis of Joyce sheds on his own major work—it is his unfinished play, *Sweeney Agonistes*, that best exemplifies Eliot's attempt to launch his broader program. It was this new project that Eliot had in mind when he wrote “*Ulysses*, Order, and Myth,” and not the work he had written almost two years before in a genre on which he had “definitely given up.” Whereas *The Waste Land* was torn out of Eliot under great psychological pressure, *Sweeney* was a calculated first step toward “making the modern world possible for art.” (84)

Given this history, Eliot's essay reads as a response to the problem of form in *The Waste Land* and moves toward reconciling that problem in later work rather than prescribing a solution to the problem of form in *The Waste Land* itself. This reading lends more weight to Eliot's self-deprecatory comment on *The Waste Land* in an 11 January 1923 letter to Edmund Wilson that characterizes the poem as a “consummation” of his past work rather than “the initiation of something new” (*Letters* 11). As Chinitz suggests, readings of *The Waste Land* through the lens provided by Eliot's “mythical method” seem motivated by the “light Eliot's analysis of Joyce sheds on his own major work” (84). In other words, such readings seem motivated by the convenience of having a ready frame with which to understand and order Eliot's notoriously difficult poem. This convenience of a ready frame speaks to the second problem of using the “mythical method” as a way to elucidate and comprehend *The Waste Land*. Reading *The Waste Land* through the “mythical method” imposes, albeit in disguise or concealment, another conception of an organizing center onto *The Waste Land* that renders static the excessive force latent in Eliot's poem.<sup>12</sup>

What this critical tradition tends to circumvent, and what Malabou helps us to see, is the way in which Eliot's endnote and critical responses attempt to contain and stabilize Tiresias's excessive figure, as well as the poem's excessive force. To read Tiresias as plastic is to read him against the logic of a stabilizing center, for plasticity's metamorphic logic designates an excess and absence within form itself. Such a reading begins by reconsidering Eliot's note, which describes Tiresias as a figure uniting male and female, as well as a figure with god-like access to the infinitude of time (52n.218). In his note, however, Eliot suppresses the metamorphic implications of Tiresias, in part by describing Tiresias as static and unifying: “the two sexes meet in Tiresias.” Eliot's “meet” implies a joining of the two sexes “in Tiresias,” which suggests an androgynous body in which the sexes are stably merged, yet “meet” also implies an encounter of the male and female sexes “in Tiresias” that cannot be contained “in” the body.<sup>13</sup> Eliot elides this excess in a single body by suggesting Tiresias is a unification of the sexes rather than a point or place at which they converge without necessarily merging or stabilizing.

Eliot's note also privileges Tiresias's capacity as a prophet, as one who “sees [...] the substance of the poem.” While Tiresias has a static vision of time, his experience of time is in fact inextricably linked to the temporal finitude that no corporeal body can surpass. Eliot's apparent disavowal of Tiresias's participation in the mobility of finitude in addition to the stasis of infinitude seems further

undercut by his description of *The Waste Land* as metamorphic in this same note: “the one-eyed merchant, seller of currants, *melts* into the Phoenician Sailor” (52n.218, my emphasis). Eliot’s note thus evinces an uneasy tension between an effort to stabilize the poem by using Tiresias and the instability that exceeds such stabilizing efforts.

While Eliot’s note reveals a tension and anxiety toward the role of Tiresias, the text of *The Waste Land* portrays a much more dynamic Tiresias that Eliot’s note cannot suppress. The first appearance of Tiresias in the text of *The Waste Land* introduces a metamorphic potential and force that speaks to the meeting of female and male in Tiresias at the very time it also speaks to Tiresias’s access to both the infinitude of true prophetic vision and the finitude of temporal life: “Like a taxi *throbbing waiting*, / I Tiresias, though blind, *throbbing between two lives*, / Old man with wrinkled female breasts” (ll. 217–19, my emphasis). The mechanized image of the taxi precedes the embodied description of Tiresias, and the language implies a parallel between the “throbbing waiting” of the taxi and the “throbbing between two lives” Tiresias experiences. While the “taxi throbbing waiting” suggests the taxi’s latent potential for movement, the present continuous “throbbing waiting” without any punctuation to signify a pause between the two words instead gestures to the way in which this “throbbing” in fact exceeds the stasis, the latent potential, of “waiting.” Even “waiting,” in its present continuous form, paradoxically implies both stasis and movement. “Waiting” figures, then, another way of escaping “within closure itself” rather than escaping from closure, for “waiting” operates as a way of “[f]leeing without going anywhere” (Malabou 65, 67). For Malabou, “Fleeing without going anywhere is in every case a question of the possibility of transformation and metamorphosis” (67).

The taxi may be “waiting,” but time passes nevertheless. As an idling vehicle, the “taxi throbbing waiting” also suggests a spatial movement, but specifically the paradoxical logic of moving in place. Because the taxi is “throbbing,” the fixity or stability of the taxi’s position itself becomes undermined. The taxi, in this sense, becomes a figure for *The Waste Land* itself. Like the taxi, the poem seems to be moving in place; that is, it seems to be both exceeding and adhering to its formal contours in a way that responds to Malabou’s provocation of “how to escape within closure itself” (65).

The analogy between the “taxi throbbing waiting” and Tiresias “throbbing between two lives” allows us to see Tiresias as similarly exceeding the sense of stasis and stability he might otherwise present in the text. Rather than a stable union of the sexes in the single body of Tiresias, the text implies a more mobile “throbbing between two lives” that introduces a destabilizing force, a trembling, to Tiresias’s being. Tiresias’s “throbbing” suggests a logic of becoming that is always metamorphosing instead of a logic of being that is tied to fixed and stable essence. In “The Origin of the Work of Art,” Martin Heidegger writes, “What something is, as it is, we call its essence” (143). With Tiresias, we cannot delineate his form, for Tiresias’s “throbbing” exceeds the fixity of the language of being and essence, the language of “is” statements, or “to be” formulations more generally. The privilege of essence, of a regulative and ordering principle, needs to be rethought, for the text’s



logic of becoming, its “throbbing,” departs from and revises the language of being and essence in the Ovidian myth as cited in Eliot’s endnote.<sup>14</sup>

In Ovid’s version, Tiresias is transformed “from man to woman” for “Seven autumns” before he then “regain[s] the shape he had before” (89–90).<sup>15</sup> Ovid’s “from man to woman” suggests a shift from one stable being to another, and “regained” similarly suggests a return to a previous state of being. Ovid’s version therefore implies a rather stable logic of metamorphosis in the case of Tiresias. Whereas in Ovid Tiresias transforms into a female and then back to a male, in *The Waste Land* this metamorphosis is not between stable states of being. Instead, the metamorphosis seems to be incomplete in Tiresias, for rather than revert back to a male, he retains at least some characteristics of his female body: “Old man with wrinkled female breasts” (l. 219). Eliot’s presentation of Tiresias’s metamorphosis therefore suggests that metamorphosis from one form to another does not necessarily—or perhaps cannot—erase all traces of previous forms. This occurs in part because of Tiresias’s more dynamic form in *The Waste Land*, in which the end of one form and beginning of another form cannot be demarcated. Instead, ends and beginnings cease to mean in the always “throbbing,” metamorphic body of Tiresias. The preposition “between” in “throbbing between two lives” emphasizes this metamorphic logic as well, for “between” at once refers to what is shared and what cannot be shared. “Between” names a simultaneous similarity and difference, a contradictory pairing of identity and non-identity. Eliot’s Tiresias, in other words, emerges in *The Waste Land* as a metamorphosis of Ovidian metamorphosis, exceeding any logic of transformation as discrete displacement.<sup>16</sup>

While “throbbing between two lives” most explicitly refers to Tiresias’s experiences as both a man and woman (with “throbbing” connoting erotic potential as well), the phrase also gestures to Tiresias’s vision of the infinity of time that is, paradoxically, still bound to his mortal body, which is subject to the experiences of temporal finitude.<sup>17</sup> Tiresias’s second assertion of his mediating or controlling position in the narration affirms an experience of temporality founded on the finitude of the mortal body: “I Tiresias, old man with wrinkled dug / Perceived the scene, and foretold the rest— / I too awaited the expected guest” (ll. 228–30). Whereas the simile between the taxi and Tiresias implies the co-implication of stasis and dynamism in both figures, Tiresias’s “I too” here more forcefully gestures to his inclusion in the process of waiting for “the expected guest.” Tiresias “too” must wait, despite his privileged vision of time’s infinitude: “I [. . .] perceived the scene, and foretold the rest” (ll. 228–9). If Tiresias experiences time as infinite rather than simply seeing it as such, then waiting could not exist. For waiting necessarily depends upon the logic of finitude. Though Tiresias may see all of time, he cannot experience or live all of time but remains bound to his mortal existence. Tiresias may participate in an incorporeal, disembodied existence by virtue of his ability to glimpse the infinitude that exceeds mortal being, but he cannot transcend absolutely his corporeality.

Tiresias’s “throbbing” between two genders, as well as between finitude and infinitude, relates to the force of his body, a body in which incorporeal infinitude

and corporeal finitude appear coextensive. This is perhaps most apparent in Tiresias's final statement: "And I Tiresias have foresuffered all / Enacted on this same divan or bed" (ll. 243–44). "Foresuffered" implies, contrary to my previous reading, that Tiresias has in fact suffered—that is, experienced—all of time already. Yet the prefix "fore" includes in its qualification of suffering both a temporal dimension (suffering already what will happen or has happened across time) and a spatial dimension (in which case "foresuffered" speaks to Tiresias's position with regard to the suffering, that is, he is positioned before or in front of the suffering as a spectator). This double dimension of "foresuffered" produces a split, a rupture within Tiresias—who in turn ruptures the *The Waste Land*—that co-implicates Tiresias's incorporeal infinitude and his corporeal finitude. Given this spatial implication, "foresuffered all" suggests that Tiresias has experienced all of suffering only in so far as he has been positioned before it, that is, has seen it as a spectator. Again, then, Tiresias remains bound to his mortal body and its finitude even though he can participate in the immortality of infinitude.

Because Tiresias is "throbbing between two lives"—a coextensive corporeal finitude and incorporeal infinitude, as well as a coextensive male and female body—Tiresias's form in *The Waste Land* cannot be reduced to form as essence, for the metamorphic force of Tiresias's body requires a reconceptualization of form as that found in Malabou's logic of plasticity. Importantly, the plasticity of Tiresias does not simply supplant or negate the logic of displacement proposed in Ovid's myth and Eliot's endnote. Rather, Tiresias's plasticity lies in his form's ability "to negotiate with its destruction" (Malabou 27). Tiresias's seemingly oppositional but coextensive states of being—finite and infinite, male and female—do not negate and destroy each other; instead, Tiresias's plastic form allows him to survive his own potential self-destruction through metamorphic energy and potential.

This metamorphic logic is at odds with the logic of displacement in Eliot's endnote, which adheres to traditional conceptions of stable beings and form as essence. As described by Eliot, Tiresias's changes follow "the vocabulary of displacement and migration, the *metastatic* lexicon, without its *metamorphic* corollary" (Malabou 48–49). According to Malabou, "displacements are not metamorphoses" (49). Eliot's note on Tiresias, drawing on Ovid's account, implies a discrete shift from one stable form to another. *The Waste Land*, in contrast to this traditional form of Tiresias, depicts an "*other form*" of Tiresias, "a form that no longer corresponds to its traditional concept" (Malabou 50): the metamorphic Tiresias "*throbbing* between two lives." This *other form* of Tiresias, throbbing with metamorphic potential and motion, undermines the stability imposed by Eliot's note. For the metamorphic form of Tiresias in *The Waste Land* exceeds the note's imposition of stability on Tiresias that aims to contain and control the chaos and disordering force of *The Waste Land*.

The metamorphic, plastic body of Tiresias stresses a condition of possibility for *The Waste Land*'s movements. As Malabou argues, "*There are no graphics and no tracing without metamorphosis*. I have called this new condition of supplementarity 'change'" (50). In Malabou's conception, the dissociation between

the graphic—writing, trace—and the plastic cannot be properly maintained (47). Or put differently, this dissociation leaves something out: “if the trace had an image, it would be the image of slicing or deleting, never a rhythm, never a figure, never a contour” (49). Implicit in the limits of the trace as Malabou conceives it are the possibilities of plasticity: “a rhythm,” “a figure,” “a contour.” According to Malabou, “*Writing will never abolish form. The trace will never pierce the figure*” (49). Plasticity names, then, what the trace leaves out, seeks to elide or to contest. As I have been suggesting, Tiresias’s other form, his metamorphic throbbing that cannot be reduced to essence, surpasses or doubles the presence implied in his traditional form, in which his body would be reduced to and regulated by an essence—as man *or* woman, as temporal being *or* atemporal being. Any reading of *The Waste Land*, such as that which posits the “mythical method” as interpretive frame, is therefore incapable of accounting for the metamorphic potential of Tiresias, and the poem more generally, without limiting in at least some capacity—for the sake of meaning or coherence—this very metamorphic force that drives the poem in a perpetual movement of de-creation and re-creation, or even explosion and annihilation.

In order to think through this annihilating force, it is worth turning to an implication elided in the previous discussion of “throbbing waiting”: the erotic. During an engagement with Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, in “L’étourdit,” writes that the “lack-of-sense (*ab-sens*) designates sex” and that sense depends on the exclusion of sex, “(*sens-absexe*)” (38). The erotic force in the poem, its plastic “throbbing,” threatens to undo any potential sense-making project, such as the very drive toward apprehending the sensible in Tiresias’s shift from seeing to perceiving. Tiresias’s erotic force cannot be accommodated by the linguistic model of the trace, and this force of the poem becomes even more explicit given the passage in which Tiresias appears. In a passage devoted largely to a narration of what reads like a rape of the typist by the “young man carbuncular,” we are given almost no bodily details for either character despite the explicit sexual nature of the scene. Instead, our focus is drawn to Tiresias’s body, “old man with wrinkled dug,” whose erotic description remains more implicit (l. 228). The text in this passage at once avows and disavows both the sexual act and delimited conceptions of biological sex. This double movement rehearses the way in which, for Lacan, sense emerges by the absenting of sex.

Arguably the sole description of the young man carbuncular’s body emerges in the Pope-like couplet: “Flushed and decided, he assaults at once; / Exploring hands encounter no defence” (ll. 239–240).<sup>18</sup> Here we see the young man “flushed,” and this flush seems particularly striking in an otherwise sterile or bodiless description. “Flushed” most obviously in this context refers to the man’s erotic feelings, heightened emotions, or blush—perhaps as a result of his emotional state or as sign of shame, embarrassment. Yet “flushed” also refers to an act of un-concealing, of flushing something out. What the passage seems to flush out is its own concealment, its own avoidance of the body in a very bodily sexual assault. By avoiding the sexual dimension, the text, mediated by Tiresias, allows

the production of ordered sense. The passage paradoxically announces the body in its partial elision of the body, in a way similar to what Sarah Cole theorizes as *The Waste Land's* simultaneous “enchantment” and “disenchantment” of violence: “This willingness to offer a poetic of enchantment that at the same time ruthlessly disenchant its own origins sets Eliot’s work off from many other engagements with violence in the period” (81).<sup>19</sup> In the context of plastic and graphic concepts, *The Waste Land* as a plastic form acknowledges its own graphic limits, and by doing so, the poem gestures beyond itself, beyond its own linguistic construction. Language cannot absolutely suppress or contain the body, the figure that intrudes upon and from within language, both in and outside of language. Tiresias, as an uneasy meeting of the two sexes, figures the violent meeting of the typist and young man carbuncular. Here, then, the figure—which is configured and reconfigured in any reading or interpretive act—gestures to that which is outside of, or concealed by, the language of the passage.

This scene (re)enacts the sexual violence that permeates *The Waste Land* as a whole, specifically the sexual violence enacted upon women and upon the female body. Perhaps nowhere is this more apparent than in Philomel, who is linked to the typist thematically as well as structurally, for we are reminded of Philomel’s rape and dismemberment two stanzas before Tiresias enters at the violet hour: “Twit twit twit / Jug jug jug jug jug jug / So rudely forc’d / Tereu” (ll. 203–206). Philomel, another allusion to Ovid and metamorphosis, exposes the bodily violence unable to be contained within a linguistic frame. The fragmentary and broken language in this allusion to Philomel emphasizes the limits of language, for her return in part III of *The Waste Land* reads markedly different from her earlier, more coherent elaboration in part II, “A Game of Chess”:

The change of Philomel, by the barbarous king  
So rudely forced; yet there the nightingale  
Filled all the desert with inviolable voice  
And still she cried, and still the world pursues,  
“Jug Jug” to dirty ears. (ll. 99–104)

What seems a potential creative act emerging from Philomel’s violence—“there the nightingale / Filled all the desert with inviolable voice”—is undercut by the final line, “‘Jug Jug’ to dirty ears.” Yet the lines that follow this passage further undermine any redemptive result of Philomel’s rape and assault by moving to a more explicit brutality: “And other withered stumps of time / Were told upon the wall; staring forms / Leaned out, leaning, hushing the room enclosed” (ll. 105–107).<sup>20</sup> The poem’s language, then, struggles to describe what cannot be adequately or justly described by linguistic means. Instead, language and the production of the sensible can only occur through excluding what exceeds the linguistic structure, namely, the plasticity that makes possible this very structure.

Philomel’s reappearance in “The Fire Sermon” marks a different approach in the poem’s attempt to produce an encounter with what cannot be represented

linguistically. Rather than through an excess or piling on of descriptions and references, this later passage truncates language in a stark minimalism: “Twit twit twit / Jug jug jug jug jug / So rudely forc’d / Tereu” (ll. 203–6). One striking feature here is the establishment of what Malabou refers to as a rhythm, a kind of patterning without any strict logic, that runs through *The Waste Land*. Given such a rhythm, we might be encouraged to interpret *The Waste Land* according to a relational logic, as Nancy Gish suggests in *Time in the Poetry of T.S. Eliot* (47–8).

Yet the rhythm might also be conceived of as a set of relations potentially without any governing logic. Philomel’s return before the typist scene of course encourages an alignment between the two figures and their somewhat shared experiences of sexual and bodily violence. Yet a reading that attends to the poem’s events—those moments that make up the rhythm—as accidents or as contingencies that cannot be reconciled easily as part of a narrative, perhaps better accounts for the dynamism of the poem. The body stresses, for example, the singularity of sexual violence, for though Philomel and the typist both experience sexual violence, their experiences are incommensurable. *The Waste Land*’s rhythm therefore becomes constructed, or experienced, as moments that may or may not lead to any logical patterning.

The difference is subtle, but it suggests a crucial implication in reading *The Waste Land*. In one reading, *The Waste Land* emerges as a poem ordered in such a way as to create an experience of disorder. In a second reading, however, *The Waste Land*’s excessive figures rupture its graphic surface and disorder the poem. *The Waste Land*’s rhythm, though it emerges from within language, cannot be adequately explained by purely linguistic concepts. Instead, as Malabou suggests, plasticity aids in our understanding of how *The Waste Land* exceeds our linguistic means of understanding and in fact announces its own plastic excess.

Reading Tiresias and *The Waste Land* in light of Malabou’s conception of plasticity finds an unlikely precedent in Eliot himself, especially in his dissertation on the philosophy of F.H. Bradley meant to satisfy a requirement of his doctoral program in philosophy at Harvard University. Numerous scholars reading *The Waste Land* have drawn on Eliot’s connection to Bradley for interpretive aid, but we can also read in this connection a potential for recognizing *The Waste Land*’s plastic form and its anticipation of problems articulated by Malabou’s work on form.<sup>21</sup> Harriet Davidson, attending to Eliot’s engagement with Bradley, implies in Eliot an uneasy move toward the finite in contrast to the transcendent:

Eliot’s prose writings of the time, especially his philosophical writings, show very clearly that the young Eliot believed that nothing transcends the finite and particular world. In these writings, particularly his dissertation written for a doctorate in philosophy, he challenges the philosophical notion of a transcendent Absolute, either Ideal or Real, and argues that *change and diversity alone are absolute, thus undermining the stability and unity of all ideas, things, and personalities*. But Eliot is no relativist; he admits that things, selves, and ideas often seem clear and fixed. Eliot’s philosophical position resembles the pragmatism of his professors at Harvard: the world is neither

objective nor subjective, nor empirically verifiable, but also not relative for each individual. (123, my emphasis)

Or, as Eliot puts it in the published form of his dissertation, *Knowledge and Experience in the Philosophy of F.H. Bradley*, “we find that we are certain of everything,—relatively, and of nothing,—positively, and that no knowledge will survive analysis” (157). Eliot argues, following his analysis of Bradley, for “the destructibility of everything” (*Knowledge and Experience* 157).

Eliot’s note on Tiresias in *The Waste Land*, then, might be conceived of as a pragmatic attempt to resolve the “change and diversity” of Tiresias, a figure that undermines any presumption to “stability and unity” of *The Waste Land* (Eliot, *Knowledge and Experience* 157). Yet Eliot’s notion of “the destructibility of everything” remains an appropriate description of the plasticity of Tiresias, as well as of plasticity’s potential for explosion that undermines and exceeds the pragmatic gesture of Eliot’s note.

Eliot’s note puts pressure on Tiresias to cohere *The Waste Land*, yet Tiresias’s insurmountable metamorphic excess explodes this impulse toward coherence in order to give a plastic form to the poem. In this reading, Eliot’s claim that Tiresias “is yet the most important personage in the poem” in fact turns out to be rather appropriate, for Tiresias’s plasticity radically reconfigures *The Waste Land* by producing a space in which the poem may be re-formed more dynamically (52n.218). *The Waste Land*, figured by Tiresias, perpetually “waits / Like a taxi throbbing waiting” for its next metamorphosis. Understanding *The Waste Land* as “throbbing waiting” ensures a perpetually renewable experience of the poem that privileges a materiality beyond the merely linguistic, for no reading or imposition can contain this metamorphic “throbbing.”<sup>22</sup> *The Waste Land* remains a poem moving in place, a poem that will never come to any kind of ordered or regulated rest.

Just as Tiresias realizes a form divorced from a metaphysical logic of essence, *The Waste Land* represents a text that cannot be contained in any logic of form that depends upon or is founded upon the static restriction of form-as-essence. This uncontainable quality is of course one quality of the literary dimension of language, and *The Waste Land* figures this unregulated excess. Tiresias displaces or defers any ontological containment of form-essence-presence, yet more radically Tiresias does not displace simply in a discrete logic but does so through metamorphosis. Neither Tiresias nor *The Waste Land* can be delineated by any formulation of “something is, as it is” unless the metamorphic force supplements the fixity of “is” with the logic of “change” (Heidegger 143). Whereas Heidegger, and later Brooker, locates in form and approaches to form a certain circularity, in which “we are compelled to follow the circle” organized around a center or central reference point (Heidegger 144), *The Waste Land*’s metamorphic potential, its plasticity and plastic form, moves beyond such circularity in a way that we cannot follow without rupturing the linguistic register.

In one of its more subtly haunting scenes, *The Waste Land* in “What the Thunder Said” seems to dramatize precisely this logic of change and its elliptical or

disseminating excess in the form of a supplement, something other that will always exceed fixed delimitation. Here the poetic speaker's question—"Who is the third who walks always beside you?" (l. 360)—announces the presence of a third figure, either "a man or a woman" (l. 365), who supplements the "I" and "you." This *other figure* will always exceed what can be known: "when I look ahead up the white road / There is always another one walking beside you" (ll. 362–3). We might ask, similarly, following the plasticity figured by Tiresias, who or what is on the other side of *The Waste Land*? Whenever we turn over the poem—to continue this spatial metaphor—there will be another turning that will be missed, for we cannot see all of the poem, all of its possible movements. Because *The Waste Land* turns at the same time we turn toward it, there can be no stability, no grasping or seizing of the poem's form.<sup>23</sup> The poem's plasticity, however, suggests that there will also be an annihilating force that threatens the very turning movement of trope. *The Waste Land* continually eludes us, for it will always be more than any reading can encapsulate. *The Waste Land* disseminates, then, at the same time that it figures dissemination.

*The Waste Land's* plastic form therefore resists all ordering impositions. The transformative, metamorphic, and plastic force of Tiresias, which in turn speaks to the force of *The Waste Land's* own plasticity, thus proposes "a radical decategorization" (Malabou 30) in which Eliot's text announces its own disordering force. Anticipating Malabou's philosophical interventions into ontological form, *The Waste Land* affirms a potential for thinking of literary form as plastic. "At the violet hour," *The Waste Land* moves through its own deconstruction, its own linguistic limits, and announces its radical plasticity. This effectively revises Heller's comment with which I began. *The Waste Land's* "experimental disorder" contaminates the intervention by Eliot's "orderly mind"; the text's disorder, exemplified by the plastic force of Tiresias from within the poem itself, persistently resists and threatens to annihilate the regulative aim of the ordering principles necessary for poetic form.

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### Notes

1. Years later, in his 1959 *Paris Review* interview, Eliot refers to *The Waste Land* more dismissively as "structureless" (Eliot and Hall 59).
2. See for example "Tradition and the Individual Talent": "The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them. The existing order is complete before the new work arrives; for order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the *whole* existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered; and so the relations, proportions, values of each work of art toward the whole are readjusted" (38).
3. In *Plasticity at the Dusk of Writing*, Malabou also states of plasticity "that this concept can signify both the achievement of presence and its deflagration, its emergence and its explosion. It is therefore

able to situate itself perfectly in the in-between of metaphysics and its other, playing to perfection the part of a concept that is some sort of mediator or smuggler" (8).

4. Plastic reading thereby proposes an approach to texts that at once follows and supersedes deconstruction. This essay focuses on mobilizing Malabou's concept for engaging with literature and does not directly engage with Malabou's claim of overcoming deconstruction by returning to an "other form" of metaphysics.

5. Malabou's passage is worth citing in full: "This structure, the structure of the formation of a pathway as a 'way out' in the absence of a 'way out' is central to my book. I name 'plasticity' the logic and the economy of such a formation: the movement of the constitution of an exit, there, where no such exit is possible. To put it differently, plasticity renders possible the appearance or formation of alterity where the other is absent. Plasticity is the form of alterity without transcendence" (66).

6. As A. David Moody elaborates, Eliot's Tiresias "has a considerable history," and Moody cites as examples the Tiresias of Homer, Sophocles, Ovid, Dante, Tennyson, and Pound (53).

7. There exists an extensive body of critical literature on Tiresias in *The Waste Land*. See Carol Christ for an approach representative of critical skepticism and debate over Tiresias with a focus on issues of gender in Eliot's poetry.

8. Bedient reads a totalizing protagonist governing the various voices and fragments of *The Waste Land*.

9. Brooker's formulation draws explicitly on Jacques Derrida's "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences": "By orienting and organizing the coherence of the system, the center of a structure permits the play of its elements inside the total form. And even today the notion of a structure lacking any center represents the unthinkable itself" (Derrida 278–279).

10. Nancy Gish makes a similar gesture in her reading of *The Waste Land* when she argues for a need "to recognise [sic] relations among its parts," though Gish qualifies this by stating that such recognition ought to be made without imposing an "artificial unity" (47–48).

11. Of this scholarly tendency, James Longenbach remarks, "Eliot was of course an influential critic as well as poet, and probably more than any other poet-critic in the English language, he had the fortune—as well as the misfortune—to have created the taste by which he was judged" (454). Longenbach proceeds to trace the history of what he considers to be misreadings of *The Waste Land*, from Cleanth Brooks, who was an early reader of *The Waste Land* through the "mythical method," to Terry Eagleton, who reproduces in a starkly different way Brooks's delimited interpretation (454–6).

12. Scholars have increasingly departed from and critiqued the reliance on the "mythical method." C.D. Blanton, in his exhaustive study, *Epic Negation: The Dialectical Poetics of Late Modernism*, exemplifies this shift. See especially the sub-section, "Allusion and Reference: Against the Mythic Method" (43–54).

13. Cyrena Pondrom argues, "although his body bears the marks of his past, Tiresias is not androgynous, but alternatively male and female" (428). While I agree with Pondrom's critique of claims for Tiresias's androgyny, I believe her language, "alternatively male and female," reproduces the static movement between two discrete gender positions described in Eliot's note. Tiresias's more unstable metamorphic force does not allow for such static conceptions to be maintained.

14. In Allen Mandelbaum's translation, Tiresias's metamorphoses appear as relatively stable changes between states, "from man to woman" and then from woman to man when "he regained the shape he had before" (89–90). Metamorphosis, in these instances, appears as discrete displacement.

15. The language of displacement appears in Ovid's Latin as well, as cited by Eliot in his endnote (52n.218). Ovid's "Forma prior rediit genetivaque venit imago," for example, implies the return of the previous state of being. Mandelbaum translates this phrase as, "he regained the shape he had before, / the shape the Theban had when he was born" (90).

16. Although such a consideration exceeds the limits of this paper, this metamorphosis of Ovidian metamorphosis points to what may be a plasticity particular to *The Waste Land*, distinct from



Malabou's concept. In her afterword to *Plasticity at the Dusk of Writing*, Malabou cites Ovid's *Metamorphoses* as an example of her conception; thus, *The Waste Land*'s doubling of the metamorphic movement from this passage in Ovid seems in excess of, or at least different from, what Malabou has in mind (68).

17. For my discussion of temporality, I am indebted to Martin Hägglund's *Dying for Time: Proust, Woolf, Nabokov*.

18. In the original drafts, "The Fire Sermon" contains a lengthy passage of couplets modeled on Alexander Pope, which Pound convinced Eliot to excise: "Pound '...induced me to destroy what I thought an excellent set of couplets;' wrote Eliot of his pastiche, 'for, said he, "Pope has done this so well that you cannot do it better; and if you mean this as a burlesque, you had better suppress it, for you cannot parody Pope unless you can write better verse than Pope—and you can't'" (*The Waste Land: Facsimile* 23n.1). See Lehman, "Eliot's Last Laugh: The Dissolution of Satire in 'The Waste Land'" for a discussion of the satire in Eliot's draft version, as well as the implications of Eliot's excision. Lehman's argument reappears as part of his longer project, *Impossible Modernism: T.S. Eliot, Walter Benjamin, and the Critique of Historical Reason*.

19. For Cole, "*The Waste Land* offers a way to understand literature as a self-conscious artifact produced out of and within a history of violence, recognizing its origins in a frightful set of half-forgotten tales. [...] It is one of the poem's unique accomplishments, indeed, that it can see in violence the genesis of beauty and form, and can also make vivid the human tragedies that are swept into that old, innocuous phrase 'the waste of war'" (81).

20. Cole also discusses this passage in her chapter, "Enchanted and Disenchanted Violence" (78–81).

21. For an example of such scholarly attention, see Brooker, *Mastery and Escape*, especially 191–206.

22. Although his concerns differ from those in this essay, Michael Coyle argues for a conception of *The Waste Land* as an "anti-narrative" that "foregrounds its own interpretation" (159, 163). *The Waste Land* offers a "commitment to poetry as experience" and in this way is a poem "about interpretation itself" (166–7).

23. Here I am drawing on Derrida's discussion of metaphor in "White Mythology": "metaphor means heliotrope, both a movement turned toward the sun and the turning movement of the sun" (251).

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