Authors' comments about their own work are deservedly suspect. However, one exception to this generalisation is T. S. Eliot. Although his enigmatic language and sometimes unfortunate phrasing have often obscured his intentions, he attempted in numerous ways to direct readers to his aesthetic philosophy and purpose throughout his career. For example, when he said that he was a 'classicist', he was pointing to a major aspect of his work in both conception and content; when he praised James Joyce's 'mythical method', he was indirectly speaking about his own classical strategies; and when he wrote about the necessity of borrowing from another author's work, he was describing and justifying his own allusional system. Yet, although Eliot may indeed be trusted to lead readers toward an understanding of his purpose, the classical dimension of his poetry has been relatively ignored. To rectify this critical oversight, this article will examine the extent and substance of Eliot's classicism, how it relates to his own allusional and 'mythical method', and how this classical context adds new meaning to Eliot's poems.

From the beginning of his career Eliot took certain classical poets and philosophers - that is, Homer, Heraclitus, Plato, and Virgil - and wove allusions to their work into the complex fabric of his poems and plays. By introducing Homer, for instance, at the beginning of his career and repeatedly integrating Homeric motifs, characters, and themes throughout his work, Eliot achieved several of his aesthetic objectives: the universality of historical repetition, the consistency and continuity of human character and experience through time, and unity of vision and design in his work. The integrity of his poetry as a long epic of literary, philosophical, and
personal evolution – made up of short and long lyric ‘songs’ – belies the fragmentation usually attributed to his work. Rather, his allusional method and the consistency of the classical tradition as the subtext of his work actualise the underlying unity of philosophy and structure that mark Eliot’s uniqueness as a poet throughout his career: ‘In my beginning is my end’.  

Although one could trace any of the other ancient authors through Eliot’s work, I have chosen Homer because he is the source of all subsequent treatments of Greek mythological subjects and themes, he is alluded to earlier, more frequently, and more obviously in Eliot’s poetry, there are relatively few references to Eliot’s use of Homer in criticism, and because Eliot’s prose repeatedly directs us to his admiration for the Greek singer of epic songs. A self-styled ‘classicist’, Eliot looked to Homer for the origin of a tradition that has marked Western literature and history even to the present day. For example, in ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’, the early presentation of his theory of art, Eliot states that a poet should not stand alone or apart from the history of literature but must be conscious of ‘the main current’ of literary tradition: the poet must create with ‘the historical sense’ which requires him to realise that ‘the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer . . . has a simultaneous existence’. Later, in ‘What is a Classic’, Eliot is still expressing the same idea: that Latin and Greek are the ‘blood-stream of European literature’. In much of his prose, Eliot acknowledges the ancient Greek influence on Western taste and imagination and measures authors of every age against the power and stature of Homer, particularly in the Odyssey. Such comments are significant in clarifying the nature of his mind.

Eliot was familiar with Homer before he entered college, for in his freshman year at Harvard College he studied ‘Greek B’, which required prior knowledge of Homer’s Odyssey and was ‘intended for students who [had] passed in advanced Greek for admission’. The repetition of and elaboration on Homeric images, plots, and themes through the centuries would have become evident the next year when he studied ‘Greek 2’ and subsequently Latin, British, European, and comparative literatures. The sense of universality, a long-recognised aspect of Eliot’s work, was certainly strengthened, and perhaps formulated, by his choice of courses.

It is in his student Chaucer text, however, the Eliot’s awareness of the extent and magnitude of the Troy tradition is manifest. Eliot wrote notes on Chaucer’s own contribution to the Homeric line of