If in his last years Lawrence partially restored his own psyche devastated by war, Eliot promised restoration to an entire culture by very different means and with different consequences. Lawrence’s novels did not shy from mentioning the war as the evil from which they turned, and while he repeated its violence in a series of abreactive discharges, he progressively distinguished this violence from his projected state of recovery. *The Waste Land* shared Lawrence’s abreaction of horror and impotence, however it also anticipated Eliot’s alternative development by not disclosing the relation of these feelings to the war. In Eliot’s later works the horror would subside into impotence, to be redeemed as spiritual resignation and martyrdom.

Eliot’s project in the Twenties consisted of a two-pronged attack: to reconstruct European unity from its cultural roots, and sideline the trauma of war into historical insignificance. However his position is more complicated than Lawrence’s since the return of the repressed did not only threaten him in memories of the First World War, but also in its historical manifestation as the Second World War. Hence during the Thirties he was subject both to traumas of the past, and of an anticipated future. His alternative narratives of literary Tradition and religious transcendence were accompanied by reminiscence of the past which enabled him to anticipate the future; but since memories of the previous war threatened him with their associated feelings of powerlessness, he turned to more benign memories to instil courage in himself, and escape into wish-fulfilment.

Compared to Freud’s criteria for successful therapy where “all the obscurities of the case are cleared up, the gaps in the patient’s memory filled in, the precipitating causes of the repressions discovered”,¹ Eliot’s aim in his poetry was to transcend personal history, not objectify it.
Again, as for Lawrence, we have to consider the implications of distortion through fantasy in the act of creative writing. Integral to his testimony, Lawrence’s distortions were a means of surviving trauma by what Dori Laub refers to as “breaking the frame” of one’s powerlessness. Distortion was part of the process of working over traumatic material, towards working through it. Eliot’s focus, though, was not to that end, but rather to sacrifice his personal experience for “Tradition”, and later God. In a purely therapeutic sense, his attitude can be compared to Pierre Janet’s technique of curing the patient by substituting the traumatic material with a benign alternative narrative – as opposed to Freud’s emphasis on the patient’s recovery through acknowledging experience.

In these terms Eliot is liable to the charge of what Robert J. Lifton calls “false witnessing”. Lifton explains that, instead of becoming a “survivor” by witnessing and testifying to the death of others, the false witness denies the anxiety of death within himself, imagining that he has mastered it. For instance the National Socialists denied the dead of the First World War by attempting to reverse the war’s outcome in the Second; on the other side, having stopped the slaughter of the First World War, Pétain gave false witness to this act by capitulating ignominiously to the Nazis and unconditionally giving in to their demands. Dominic LaCapra stresses the ethical importance, not only for the individual victim but for society as a whole, of accurate testimony as a publicly accessible collective memory to guide a legitimate polity for the future. Cora Kaplan defines true “witnessing” as an act which prompts an ethical response in the listener; it transforms the listener’s view of the world by taking on the victim’s subjectivity, and responsibility for their suffering.

Eliot’s lack of involvement in the subjectivity of the victims of his time has been observed by Hugh Kenner, A.D. Moody, Ronald Bush and Lyndall Gordon. This failing is apparent in “Notes on the Way” of 1935, an important series of exchanges with A.A. Milne on war. He reasoned through Milne’s unconditional pacifism: “I do not see how you can condemn War in the abstract unless you assert (a) that there is no higher value than Peace; (b) that there is nothing worth fighting for; and (c) that a war in which one side is right and the other wrong is inconceivable.” A week later Milne responded that “Mr. Eliot’s thoughts on war give nobody any clues as to what he really thinks about it. . . . I do not even know if he would be glad to wake tomorrow into a warless world.” His criticism was just, to an extent, as was Eliot’s riposte: “If everyone felt about war as Mr. Milne does, I am convinced that we should never have war; if everyone thought as he does, I do not know