

# Expressive Networks

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Poetry and Platform Cultures

Edited by

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## CHAPTER 3

# Not With a Bang But a Tweet: Democracy, Culture Wars, and the Memeification of T.S. Eliot

Melanie Walsh and Anna Preus

It was still unclear whether Donald Trump would be re-elected President of the United States on the night of the election, November 3, 2020. Even by morning, key swing states like Wisconsin, Michigan, and Pennsylvania were too close to call. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic and the unprecedented number of mail-in ballots, the outcome of the election would remain unclear for another three and a half days. In the meantime, the world watched, waited, and tweeted.

As early ballots rolled in, Twitter (X) users of all ideological stripes made fluctuating predictions about the election's outcome. When a few swing states seemed to tip toward Trump, a user named @CausticPop gloomily joked, "This is the way the world ends / Not with a bang but with a WI/MI/PA,"<sup>1</sup> a joke that was retweeted more than 5,000 times.<sup>2</sup> Hours later, another user struck an even stronger chord with the same apocalyptic



**Figure 3.1** Twitter user Caustic Pop quips on the evening of the 2020 election: "This is the way the world ends / Not with a bang but with a WI/MI/PA." Twitter (X). November 3, 2020.

pun — “And this is the way it ends. / Not with a bang but with a WI/MI/PA”<sup>3</sup> — garnering more than 26,000 retweets and more than 100,000 likes.

The thrust of this viral tweet, as the aptly named Twitter (X) account @JokesExplainer went on to explain in the replies, is that the state abbreviations “WI/MI/PA” resemble the final word in the famous lines, “This is the way the world ends / Not with a bang but a whimper.”<sup>4</sup> What the Twitter (X) account did not explain is that these lines are nearly 100 years old and come to us from the conclusion of T.S. Eliot’s 1925 piece “The Hollow Men,” a five-part, free-verse poem that offers a grim vision of barren landscapes and empty humanity, closing with the somber lines:

*This is the way the world ends  
This is the way the world ends  
This is the way the world ends  
Not with a bang but a whimper.*<sup>5</sup>

“The Hollow Men” reimagines a scene from the third canto of Dante’s *Inferno*, which depicts “a desolate plain” where “a horde of souls” perpetually roam, unable to enter either heaven or hell.<sup>6</sup> In Eliot’s hands, this scene becomes “a modern limbo,” a dry, dreary wilderness populated by “hollow,” “stuffed” men, whispering words as “quiet and meaningless / As wind in dry grass / Or rats’ feet over broken glass,” as souls pass by them into “death’s other Kingdom.” At the end of the poem, Eliot connects this human emptiness to a bleak forecast for the end of the world. Since the poem’s publication, these striking lines have often been interpreted as a prophetic comment on the decline of Western civilization and frequently invoked in print and popular media to comment on perceived moral failures in society and politics.

When Eliot died in 1965, the *New York Times* claimed in his obituary that these lines were “probably the most quoted lines of any 20th-century poet writing in English.”<sup>8</sup> According to our study, they may be among the most memed lines, as well. Through a computational analysis of data from Twitter (X), we found that more than 350,000 posts have referenced or remixed Eliot’s lines “This is the way the world ends / Not with a bang but a whimper” since the beginning of the platform’s history in 2006. While some of these posts cited Eliot directly (around 7%), most did not.<sup>9</sup> In many cases, the phrase has seemingly evolved from a clearly authored quotation into a common idiom or turn-of-phrase, where it is unclear whether users know that the phrase comes from T.S. Eliot or even that it comes from a poem. Linguists refer to this kind of construction as a “snowclone”<sup>10</sup>—a fixed phrasal template, often with a culturally salient source (e.g., a quotation from a book, TV show, or movie), that has “one or more variable slots” into which users insert various “lexical substitutions.”<sup>11</sup> Beyond the “WI/MI/PA” jokes, there were indeed thousands of other tweets and retweets that referenced Eliot’s words in relation to the 2020 US presidential election—“The end of the Trump presidency ... Not with a bang but with a desperate attempt at a prosecution avoiding whimper,” quipped actor and director Rob Reiner.<sup>12</sup> There were also thousands of tweets that commented on various other political elections and crises around the globe,<sup>13</sup> and thousands of tweets that used the lines in various other silly, serious, and unexpected ways: “Not with a bang but a gender



**Figure 3.2** Design and technology website Gizmodo advertises a novelty product by repurposing Eliot’s lines: “This is the way the world ends. Not with a bang but with a selfie stick for your butt.” Twitter (X). January 7, 2015.

reveal,” “Not with a bang but with a selfie stick for your butt,” “Not with a bang but with a bunch of millennials who don’t know how to mail things.”<sup>14</sup>

While social media has provided a new space for contemporary poets to share their work with a global audience (consider, for example, Rupi Kaur’s success on Instagram), the widespread memeification of Eliot’s words makes clear that the canon too is alive and well on the internet. On new digital platforms, the words of historical authors circulate alongside those of living writers, and they take on new life as users adapt and apply them to contemporary events and trends. In this chapter, we discuss the circulation of Eliot’s most famous lines on Twitter (X), considering what makes these words so amenable to being memed and what connection this contemporary circulation has to the lines’ original meaning and

to Eliot's broader artistic and political vision. We begin by offering a brief account of the poem's initial reception and increased usage in the years following the Second World War. We then turn to its recirculation on social media, discussing uses of the poem's closing lines on Twitter (X) between 2006 and early 2022. While references to the poem vary widely, we focus on two prominent political uses of the phrase: 1) cases where users invoke it to warn about the state of modern democracy, often from the left side of the political spectrum, and 2) cases where they use the phrase to critique political correctness, "cancel culture," and non-normative identities, often from the right side of the political spectrum. We also draw out how contemporary uses of the phrase retain roots in Eliot's own poetry, politics, and place in modernist history. Not unlike social media users, for example, Eliot was well known for his allusive style and treated past poetry, popular media, and widely read texts as his own creative material. Additionally, his stance on politics and culture often had reactionary undertones (and sometimes overtones) that resemble the twenty-first-century culture war conservatism that we observe in the tweets.

While we attend to the significance of these literary and historical throughlines and to the particular generativity of Eliot's poetic language, we also want to emphasize the essential role that both social media users and the Twitter (X) platform have played in the lines' recirculation. As Limor Shifman insists, "human agency should be an integral part of our conceptualization of memes," because memes fundamentally rely on the "technological, cultural and social choices made by *people*."<sup>15</sup> It is people, after all (along with perhaps a few bots), who elect to take up Eliot's poem and make it their own, who decide to insert his phrase into this or that conversation, who choose to reshare and amplify it with their own audiences. Eliot is dead, social media users are alive, and they use his poem in ways that both align with and cut against the grain of its original meaning. They fold Eliot's poetry into their own agendas, using the lines to advocate for justice and political harmony as well as to spread hate and to cause harm. The technical affordances of Twitter (X) as a social network, and its economic structure as a corporation, also necessarily shape the circulation of Eliot's words, and they shape our ability to study them, too. This fact became all too clear in October 2022 when Elon Musk took over as Twitter's CEO. Within months, Musk not only rebranded the platform as X, but, more consequentially, he also introduced technical and policy changes that fundamentally altered the platform and that gutted the academic research program that enabled us to study this phenomenon in the first place.<sup>16</sup> Even more relevant to this piece, as we will show below, Musk himself also tweeted Eliot's famous phrase, circulating it to his millions of followers and further establishing its apocalyptic tone as being in concert with Twitter's prominent doomscrolling, troll-baiting chorus.

Most broadly, what we seek to show is that social media platforms—even with all the limitations that their corporate structures entail—are spaces where dead poets and living people come together to construct new meaning from old words, a pastiche of recycled literary texts knit together with the news, political commentary, jokes, clichés, and everyday expressions of worry, hope, and hate. Such collaboratively authored texts resemble, in many ways, Eliot's own vision of poetry. He argues in his famous critical essay, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," that the words of dead writers persist in the words of the living, and he claims that though we often praise writers for their individuality and innovation, "if we

approach a poet without this prejudice, we shall often find that not only the best, but the most individual parts of his work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously.”<sup>17</sup> This is a striking claim to consider in the context of Eliot’s social media recirculation, since it seems to prefigure the kind of immortality that his own poetic lines have achieved. Eliot goes on to argue that,

No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists ... you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead.

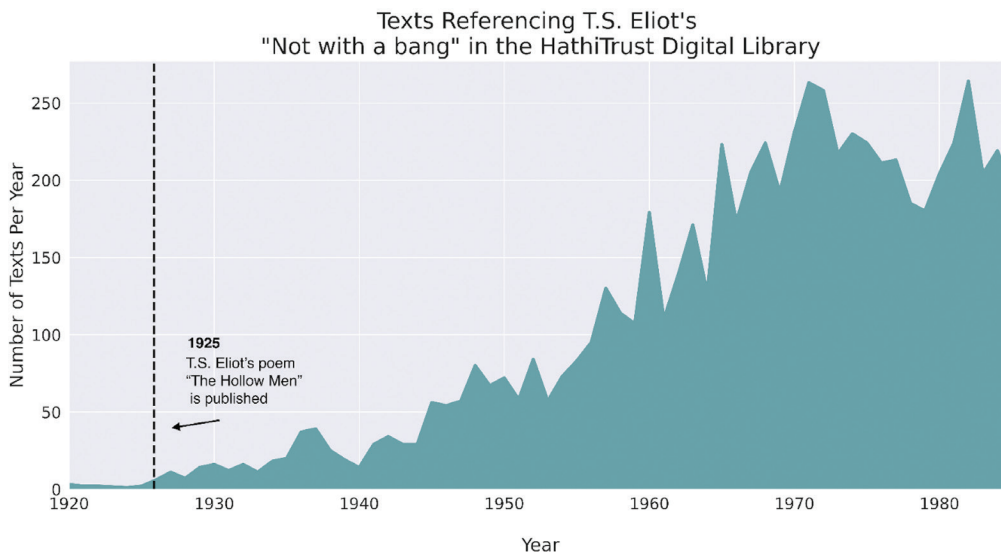
We accordingly seek to deepen our understanding of a contemporary Twitter (X) meme by setting it in relation to the dead poet who authored its original source material, and we seek to deepen our understanding of Eliot by considering the thousands of living people who speak (and tweet) his lines anew each day.

### 3.1 The Origin, Rise, and Repudiation of Eliot’s Prophecy

It is curious that the concluding lines of “The Hollow Men” are probably Eliot’s most widely circulated, considering that the poem is less well known than his other major works, in particular “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” (1915) and *The Waste Land* (1922), and considering that it received a lukewarm reception when it debuted. Eliot first published “The Hollow Men” just three years after *The Waste Land* took the literary world by storm.<sup>18</sup> While the piece shares *The Waste Land*’s sense of alienation and fragmented style, it made significantly less of a splash when it initially appeared in print. “The Hollow Men” was first published in its entirety in Eliot’s *Poems: 1909–1925*,<sup>19</sup> and although it was the only new piece included in the collection, contemporary reviewers tended to ignore it, choosing instead to focus on Eliot’s controversial, often difficult style and the formidable reputation he had already established for himself as the foremost modern poet. While an early reviewer of the collection acknowledged Eliot’s clout, for example—“It is said that Mr. Eliot has done more to influence and mould modern poetry than any other poet...”—he also panned the poetry itself: “Mr. Eliot, to be quite frank, I do not understand. I read what are probably the simplest of his poems again and again, and I could not for the life of me tell you what I have read.”<sup>20</sup> It is striking that this collection, which contains poetic lines still regularly spoken and shared by thousands of people every day, received so little attention upon its initial publication.

Early scholarly responses to “The Hollow Men” were also somewhat tepid, consistently relating the poem back to *The Waste Land*. F.R. Leavis, for example, characterizes “The Hollow Men” as developing “certain elements” of *The Waste Land* in “a kind of neurasthenic agony.”<sup>21</sup> Leavis’s analysis of “The Hollow Men” kicked off an ongoing conversation about the relationship between it and *The Waste Land*.<sup>22</sup> By the time this conversation was taking place, however, Eliot had moved on. “The Hollow Men” was the last new major poem that he published before his conversion to Anglo-Catholicism in 1927, which catalyzed a significant





**Figure 3.3** This chart shows a steady increase in the number of texts in the HathiTrust Digital Library referencing T.S. Eliot’s lines from “The Hollow Men” across the twentieth century.

shift in his style. When Eliot was interviewed about “The Hollow Men” years later (in fact just days before his seventieth birthday), he noted that he no longer liked the poem and that it represented “a period of extreme depression.”<sup>23</sup> He even explicitly disavowed its final lines: “When asked whether he would still write his famous prophecy, (‘This is the way the world ends, not with a bang but a whimper’), Mr. Eliot admits that he would not.”<sup>24</sup> Eliot’s repudiation of the poem’s conclusion stemmed from its inevitable association with nuclear warfare, which had not been invented when he originally penned the lines. Additionally, he claimed that he was no longer sure whether the world would end with either a bang *or* a whimper: “People whose houses were bombed have told him they don’t remember hearing anything.”<sup>25</sup> Eliot, it seems, was not prepared to answer for the way his words took on new meaning in the nuclear, post-World War II era.

In spite of Eliot’s own ambivalence about the poem and the way it was interpreted in relation to contemporary political events, references to the closing lines rose rapidly in the years following the Second World War. We searched for references to the phrase “Not with a bang” in the corpus of twentieth-century texts available in the HathiTrust Digital Library, which includes books, periodicals, academic papers, and government documents from the advent of print to the present. This reception data shows that in the years following World War II, citations of the poem grew steadily and began to pick up even more across the sixties and seventies. Between 1965 and 1975, for example, there were almost 2,000 texts that used the phrase represented in HathiTrust’s database, including evangelist Billy Graham’s popular polemic, *World Aflame* (1965);<sup>26</sup> poet Jeff Nuttall’s influential exploration of sixties counterculture, *Bomb Culture* (1968);<sup>27</sup> and prominent news anchor Walter Cronkite’s commentary on the state of society, *Eye on the World* (1971).<sup>28</sup> Because the distribution of the HathiTrust collection becomes more uneven after the eighties, we focus on the period



pre-1985, but we believe the overall pattern suggests that the phrase continued to gain popularity across the twentieth century.<sup>29</sup>

### 3.2 Tracking T.S. Eliot on Twitter

While the recirculation of Eliot's lines after the Second World War was significant, uses of the phrase began to take on more diverse forms and to circulate more widely in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Journalists writing for both national and local newspapers have, for example, consistently used Eliot's lines to punch up their prose. "The great Siberian natural-gas pipeline affair seems to be coming to an end not with a bang but a whimper," opened a 1982 *New York Times* piece about American sanctions against the USSR, which had hindered the construction of a 3,000-mile European gas pipeline and were slowly petering out.<sup>30</sup> Forty years later, a *Milwaukee Record* journalist lamented the city's continuing COVID restrictions with an adaptation of the same lines: "This is how it ends, Milwaukee. Not with a bang, not with a whimper, but with two and a half more weeks of an unenforceable mask mandate that many Milwaukeeans are completely unaware of."<sup>31</sup> (Interestingly, the linguistic concept of the "snowclone," which neatly describes the evolution of Eliot's lines, was, from its inception, closely tied to its employment by "lazy journalists and writers."<sup>32</sup> More recent scholars have, however, steered away from such negative connotations and accusations.<sup>33</sup>) Search for "not with a bang but a whimper" on Google Scholar, and you'll find dozens of academic articles that prominently include the phrase in their titles, with subjects ranging from organizational design to open data, and from earthquake science to HIV testing.<sup>34</sup> Eliot's lines have also been quoted or creatively cribbed in movies spanning from Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979) to Christopher Nolan's *Tenet* (2020), as well as in TV shows like *30 Rock*, *Mad Men*, *The Big Bang Theory*, and *Doctor Who*, among many others. The bestselling "party game for horrible people," *Cards Against Humanity*, has also featured "This is the way the world ends / Not with a bang but with \_\_\_\_\_" as one of its infamous fill-in-the-blank cards since 2011.

The transformation of Eliot's poem into a popular, playful word substitution game is a fitting literalization of the way the quotation is often employed as a "snowclone" or a meme,<sup>35</sup> where internet users propose and share numerous creative substitutions for the words "bang," "whimper," or "world," and where they contort and twist the syntax in other inventive ways. The rise of the internet and social media has indeed enabled even wider audiences to quote, share, and manipulate Eliot's lines, and this textual manipulation is particularly popular on Twitter (X). Twitter (X) is, of course, not the only or the most important social media platform, and Eliot's words have also been circulated on other platforms like Reddit, Facebook, and 4chan. But Twitter (X) is a prominent public space for political discourse and for cultural creativity—especially textual creativity (in contrast to the audiovisual creativity more prominently on display on platforms like TikTok)—which makes it a valuable place to study poetic lines commonly deployed in political contexts and reimagined in endless textual permutations. Additionally, in 2021, Twitter (X) made all of its data available to researchers for free, a gesture that had not been matched by other platforms.

Unfortunately, in 2023, after Elon Musk took over as the company's CEO, Twitter's free research program was shut down.<sup>36</sup> However, at the time that we conducted our research, Twitter (X) data was a unique, convenient resource that allowed us to quantitatively track the circulation of Eliot's lines and to compile an archive of the many thousands of posts that have referenced them. This data-driven approach to understanding contemporary literary reception also builds on our previous work and emerging trends in the fields of digital humanities and cultural analytics, led by scholars like Micah Bateman, Lisa Mendelman, and Anna Mukamal.<sup>37</sup>

Drawing from more than fifteen years of Twitter (X) data, we found that Eliot's lines have been circulated as much as some of the most famous lines in literary history and distinctly more than comparable poems that have received more hype in the press as uniquely viral poems, namely William Carlos Williams's 1934 poem "This Is Just to Say." To compile our data, we collected all publicly available tweets that included a quotation or variation of Eliot's "This is the way the world ends / Not with a bang but a whimper," including the common misquotations "This is *how* the world ends" and "Not with a bang but *with* a whimper" or "*with* a [fill-in-the-blank]." <sup>38</sup> This search returned a total of 351,666 tweets and retweets, which makes the circulation of Eliot's lines roughly on par with the popular Shakespearean phrases "all the world's a stage" (380K tweets) and "all that glitters is not gold" (317K) and with variations of Robert Frost's lines "Two roads diverged in a wood, and I— / I took the one less traveled by" (305k tweets). Eliot's lines are less commonly cited than old proverbs like "This too shall pass" (3M) and "an eye for an eye" (1.6M), and less cited than the popular titular phrase from Maya Angelou's poem "Still I Rise" (725K). But the lines are more commonly cited than Dylan Thomas's "do not go gentle into that good night" (318K), Walt Whitman's "I contain multitudes" (308K), Jane Austen's famous *Pride and Prejudice* opening "It is a truth universally acknowledged..." (177K), and Emily Dickinson's "Hope is the thing with feathers" (144K), and more than lines from popular contemporary poets like Amanda Gorman (189K) and Rupi Kaur (22K), as well.

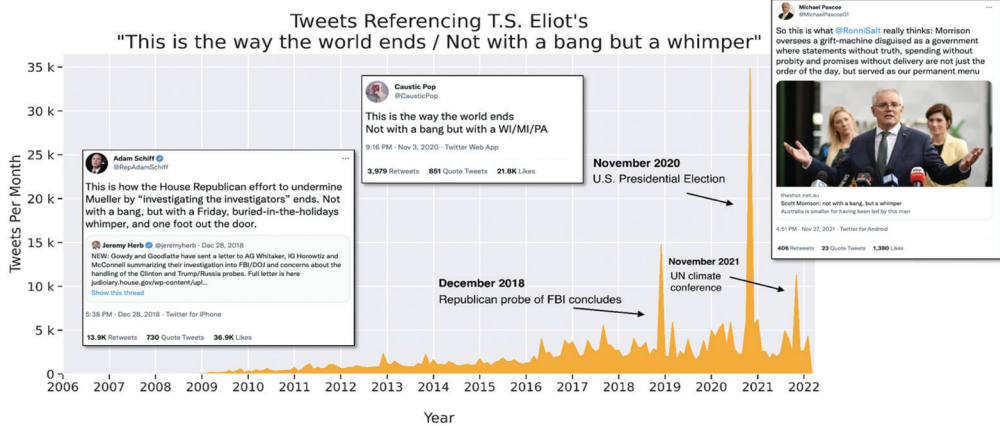
**Table 3.1** Popular literary quotations on Twitter (X)

Source/Author <sup>39</sup>	Year	Text	# of Tweets with Text
Persian Sufi poets	1000–1270	"This too shall pass"	3M
William Shakespeare's <i>Hamlet</i>	1603	"To be or not to be"	2M
Hammurabi's Code/ Bible	~1750 BC	"An eye for an eye"	1.6M
Maya Angelou's "Still I Rise"	1978	"Still I rise"	725K
Alfred Lord Tennyson's "In Memoriam A.H.H."	1850	"'Tis better to have loved and lost / Than never to have loved at all"	550K

Source/Author <sup>39</sup>	Year	Text	# of Tweets with Text
Charles Dickens's <i>A Tale of Two Cities</i>	1859	"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times"	506K
William Shakespeare's <i>As You Like It</i>	1623	"All the world's a stage"	380K
<b>T.S. Eliot's "The Hollow Men"</b>	<b>1925</b>	<b>"This is the way the world ends / Not with a bang but a whimper"</b>	<b>352K</b>
Dylan Thomas's "Do not go gentle into that good night"	1951	"Do not go gentle into that good night"	318K
William Shakespeare's <i>The Merchant of Venice</i>	~1596	"All that glitters is not gold"	317K
Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself"	1855	"Contain multitudes"	308K
Robert Frost's "The Road Not Taken"	1915	"Two roads diverged in a wood, and I— I took the one less traveled by"	305K
Amanda Gorman's "The Hill We Climb"	2021	"If only we're brave enough to see it / If only we're brave enough to be it"	189K
Edgar Allan Poe's "The Raven"	1845	"Quoth the raven"	187K
Jane Austen's <i>Pride and Prejudice</i>	1813	"It is a truth universally acknowledged"	177K
Emily Dickinson's	1891	"Hope is the thing with feathers"	145K
William Carlos Williams's "This Is Just to Say"	1934	"This Is Just to Say," "I have eaten / the plums / that were in / the icebox"	110K
e.e. cummings's "[i carry your heart with me (i carry it in)]"	1952	"i carry your heart with me"	72K
Gwendolyn Brooks's "We Real Cool"	1959	"we real cool"	34K
Rupi Kaur's <i>Milk and Honey</i>	2014	"i am a museum full of art"	22K

We also compared Eliot's lines with lines from Williams's "This Is Just to Say," which has attracted perhaps the most attention as a poetic Twitter (X) meme and received coverage for its virality in *Slate*, *Vox*, and *Buzzfeed*, among other outlets.<sup>40</sup> When interviewed in a 2015 *Intelligencer* piece, literary critic Stephanie Burt claimed that Williams's poem is potentially well suited for memeification because it is short, widely recognizable, and contains "simple and striking" language that is close to casual speech and lacks regular meter and rhyme, making it more available for amateur parody.<sup>41</sup> Eliot's lines share some of these key qualities—namely, they are widely recognizable, contain simple and striking language, and lack regular meter and rhyme, making almost any substitution for the words "bang" or "whimper" either fitting, funny, or dramatically discordant. While "The Hollow Men" is longer than "This Is Just to Say," a clear allusion to it can also be created in very few words—simply stringing together the clauses "not with" and "but with" can call up Eliot's apocalypse. However, the lines do not resemble casual speech, and the two authors had different stances on poetry and popular audiences. Burt connects Williams's memeification to the populist streak in his poetry, noting that he "really wanted to take poetry out of the hands of the Pounds and Eliots, with their classical references."<sup>42</sup> Eliot, of course, remains a symbol of poetic elitism, and "The Hollow Men" certainly contains the kinds of classical references that Williams eschewed, but Eliot's famously extensive use of allusion also extended to popular culture and contemporary texts. For example, the epigraph to "The Hollow Men" combines a quotation from Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, "Mistah Kurtz—he dead," with a phrase commonly spoken by children on Guy Fawkes day, "a penny for the old guy."<sup>43</sup> And just before the ominous ending of "The Hollow Men," Eliot includes a permutation of a popular nursery rhyme, "Here We Go Round the Mulberry Bush," substituting the familiar mulberry bush for the desert-like "prickly pear," almost like the Twitter (X) users who would make similar substitutions in his own lines one hundred years later: "Here we go round the prickly pear / Prickly pear prickly pear / Here we go round the prickly pear / At five o'clock in the morning." The phrase "Not with a bang" seems to itself be an adaptation of a line from Harvard professor George Santayana's essay on Dante in his book *Three Philosophical Poets* (1922): "and it all ends, not with a bang, not with some casual incident, but in sustained reflection, in the sense that it has not ended..."<sup>44</sup> Throughout this closing section, Eliot also repeats a truncated line from the Lord's Prayer: "For Thine is the Kingdom / For Thine is / Life is / For Thine is the." While Conrad and Santayana represent academic and literary sources, nursery rhymes and prayers are communal forms meant to be spoken aloud, repeated, and collectively remembered, and these qualities rub off on Eliot's ending, giving it a memorable, idiomatic feel that contrasts the classical allusions and may contribute to its historical popularity. These fragmentary, pastiche-like elements of Eliot's writing both resemble and lend themselves well to twenty-first-century reimaginations, whether he would have endorsed them or not.

When we examine just how widespread tweeted allusions to Eliot's "This is the way world ends / Not with a bang but a whimper" are, we can see that references have steadily increased since the platform launched in 2006. They have climbed from around 5,000 total tweeted references (including both tweets and retweets) in 2010, when the platform reached a critical mass of 100 million users, to a high of 70,000 tweets in 2020. And they were consistently referenced more than 25,000 times a year every year from 2016 through 2022. During



**Figure 3.4** This plot displays a gradual rise in the number of tweets referencing T.S. Eliot’s lines from “The Hollow Men,” with sharp spikes in December 2018, November 2020, and November 2021.

this time period, there were three significant surges of “not with a bang” memes, all three of which corresponded to political events: the US presidential election in November 2020, the conclusion of the Republican probe of the FBI in December 2018, and Australian prime minister Scott Morrison’s comments at the COP26 climate summit in November 2021. These concentrated tweet responses neatly represent a consistent use pattern that we observe in the tweets, which is that Eliot’s lines are often invoked to bemoan the fall of democracy as a result of inaction or small, ineffectual action, mostly tweeted from the left side of the political spectrum. We also tracked an almost opposite application of Eliot’s lines, which is to ironize the gravity of an inconsequential event, or what is presented to be an inconsequential event: “this is the way the world ends / not with a bang or a whimper / but with ‘deeply-offended-by.’”<sup>245</sup> By contrast, this move was often deployed by users from the right side of the political spectrum, especially to condemn more progressive responses to issues like racism, sexism, colonialism, or political incorrectness. The lines were essentially used as a poetic condemnation of “snowflakes,” the common slang term used to malign liberals and progressives as overly fragile and easily offended.

### 3.3 “Not With a Bang But a Bing Bong”: Empty Rhetoric and the Downfall of Democracy

Often Twitter (X) users invoked Eliot’s prophecy to express worry about the demise of democracy and to critique centrist or conservative political figures, and the two most prominently disparaged political figures in the dataset were former US president Donald Trump and former Australian prime minister Scott Morrison. When Twitter (X) users invoked or remixed the lines in relation to Trump’s presidency, “the world” of Eliot’s prophecy was often equated with US democracy, and the “whimper” that would lead to its end was equated with Trump or one of his actions. In some cases, the fateful action that Twitter (X)



users plugged into the lines' final syllables was a serious infraction, if still somehow a subtle one. For example, in December 2016, Twitter (X) user @hazydav shared a reimagining of Eliot's words above a split-screen image of Vladimir Putin and Trump speaking into cell phones, representing the leaders' November 2016 phone conversation and rumored alliance: "Apologies to TS Eliot ... this is how the Republic ends – not with a bang but a whisper..."<sup>46</sup> In other cases, "the whimper" was framed as something silly or ridiculous, and the



**Figure 3.5** Twitter user and former Democratic Congressman Alan Grayson shares an image of Donald Trump saying “bing bong” along with this Eliot-inspired joke on the evening of the 2020 election: “This is the way the world ends. This is the way the world ends. Not with a bang, but with a bing bong.” Twitter (X). May 6, 2016.

reimagined prophecy suggested that US democracy might collapse not because of Russian collusion but because of something stupid and small, like Trump's terrible haircut—"not with a bang but with a comb over"<sup>47</sup>—or his nonsensical public speaking style—"not with a bang but a bing bong."<sup>48</sup> The "bing bong" zinger, first shared by former Florida congressman Alan Grayson and subsequently reshared more than 4,000 times, was a reference to a 2015 Republican Party keynote speech that Trump had given, in which he criticized Hillary Clinton and Jeb Bush for being controlled by lobbyists and made puppeteer motions while saying the words "bing bing bong bong bong bing bing." A video clip of Trump making these bizarre noises went viral and became emblematic of his rhetorical style.

The second biggest surge in the entire corpus of "This is the way the world ends / Not with a bang but a whimper" tweets was the result of a single viral tweet from December 2018, a tweet that was *about* Trump but did not mention him directly. The tweet did directly lambast other US politicians, though, and it was even tweeted by a US politician: Adam Schiff, the California congressman who would become chairman of the House Intelligence committee only a month later. On a Friday afternoon in December 2018, just after Christmas and just before New Year's, Republican congressmen Bob Goodlatte and Trey Gowdy, who were both on the verge of retirement, announced that their year-long probe of the FBI had concluded. This probe was an investigation of the FBI's 2016 investigation of Hillary Clinton's emails and of Trump's potential collusion with Russia. "This is how the House Republican effort to undermine [Robert] Mueller by 'investigating the investigators' ends. Not with a bang, but with a Friday, buried-in-the-holidays whimper, and one foot out the door," Schiff tweeted, receiving almost 14,000 retweets and also inspiring quotations of the tweeted Eliot reference in newspaper headlines.<sup>49</sup> As Schiff's application of the phrase indicates, Eliot's lines are sometimes used not to herald the apocalypse but to highlight a particularly disgraceful ending to something that in turn reveals a broader sense of collective failure or moral decline.

This emphasis on shameful endings is also clearly on display in tweets surrounding the 2020 US presidential election, the most prominent period of Eliot quotations and parodies in Twitter's history. Often it was the famously bad-at-losing Trump himself who was framed as leaving office with a whimper, which was implied to be a subdued, humiliating disappearance rather than an honorable transition:

Donald Trump has barricaded himself in the White House, hasn't been seen in public today, hasn't tweeted in several hours. He had Eric handle his press conference. So far Donald Trump is going out not with a bang but with a whimper.<sup>50</sup>

The US democracy was not the only democracy of concern in these tweets, nor was Trump the only political leader who was prophesied to cause global catastrophe. There were also references to Brexit,<sup>51</sup> Russian aggression,<sup>52</sup> and South African elections.<sup>53</sup> But the most prominent flurry of Eliot-inspired political commentary outside the United States related to condemnations of Australian prime minister Scott Morrison. Most of the tweets that referenced Eliot's lines and criticized Morrison were tied to a single bombastic article from November 2021, titled "Scott Morrison: Not with a Bang, but a Whimper" and authored by



a snarky Australian political commentator who goes by the pseudonym Ronni Salt. The only place Eliot's words appear in this takedown is its clickbaity title, but they are the seven words that shoulder the most meaning: "not with a bang but a whimper" is presented as the self-evident precis of the piece, a clear verdict on Morrison and his weak leadership. In the article, Salt criticizes Morrison's lackluster showing at COP26, the United Nations Climate Change Conference, and while there are no direct allusions to "The Hollow Men" in the body of the piece, her characteristically scathing style seems inflected by Eliot's poem, echoing its emphasis on hollow leadership. In one quip popular among Twitter (X) users,<sup>54</sup> Salt characterizes Morrison as a "suit full of lies," calling up Eliot's "stuffed men" wearing "deliberate disguises."<sup>55</sup> In another popular quotation from the article,<sup>56</sup> Salt seems to mirror Eliot's emphasis on absence—"Shape without form, shade without colour, / Paralysed force, gesture without motion"<sup>57</sup>—by similarly presenting concepts shown to be devoid of a meaningful essence through the repetition of the word "without." She claims that Morrison's government is characterized by "statements without truth, spending without probity and promises without delivery."<sup>58</sup> Lastly, when she imagines the future of Australia under his leadership, she describes it in terms much like the "dead," "cactus land" that Eliot portrays in "The Hollow Men":

He's the do-nothing Prime Minister who insists on staying in charge, not to lead us to a better Australia, but to drag us into his own shrunken version of the place; a smaller Australia, one that has dried and atrophied itself down to meet his own limited expectations.<sup>59</sup>

Eliot's depiction of the hollow men reverberates through Salt's takedown of Morrison and through quotations from the article recirculated by Twitter (X) users in the weeks following its publication. But since Salt does not cite the poem directly, these references were usually shared without clear links to Eliot. This detachment of the poetic lines from Eliot himself is noteworthy because the popularity of the quotation in political discourse is in many ways at odds with the poetic reputation he established during his lifetime. Eliot was a darling of the New Critics, and his poetic success was tied to the fact that his writing worked well with a trendy form of literary analysis that placed value on the unity of individual literary objects removed from their social and political contexts.<sup>60</sup> As a critic, Eliot also aligned his perspective with this "apolitical" approach, arguing in *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (1933) that a poet should not "meddle with the tasks of the theologian, the preacher, the economist, the sociologist, or anyone else."<sup>61</sup>

Eliot's insistence on approaching poems as aesthetic objects separated from the conditions in which they were written is symbolized perhaps most famously by his efforts to ensure that the first Bollingen Prize in Poetry would be awarded to Ezra Pound in 1949. At the time, Pound's reputation was defined by his support for fascism and his vicious and vocal antisemitism, and he was incarcerated at St. Elizabeth's Hospital after having narrowly escaped trial for treason for his support of Benito Mussolini, the leader of Italy's fascist party.<sup>62</sup> Moreover, the piece honored with the prize, *The Pisan Cantos* (1948), was explicitly political, opening with a lament for Mussolini and his mistress Clara Petacci. Following this "tragic" depiction of Mussolini, Pound notably revises the closing lines of "The Hollow Men" for the post-WWII era, addressing his old friend Eliot directly by his youthful nickname, "Possum": "yet say this to the Possum: a bang, not a whimper, / with a bang not with

a whimper...”<sup>63</sup> Pound’s inversion of Eliot’s phrase in a poem in which he justifies his commitment to a dead fascist dream is striking. And equally striking is Eliot’s tacit endorsement of this usage through his advocacy for the poem in purportedly apolitical terms. Despite its controversial content, *The Pisan Cantos* was selected to receive the Bollingen Prize at Eliot’s urging, sparking an intense backlash that played out for weeks in the pages of literary and political periodicals.<sup>64</sup> Pound’s reference to Eliot is one of the first clear manipulations of the famous phrase in print, and while twenty-first-century social commentators and left-leaning Twitter (X) users have tended to use “not with a bang but a whimper” to critique the actions (or inaction) of centrist or conservative political figures, the phrase also maintains this longstanding history of advocacy toward anti-progressive ends.

### 3.4 “Not With a Bang ... But With a Woke”: Progressive Threats and the Decline of Culture

The other clear throughline we saw in the Twitter (X) data was indeed this use of Eliot’s apocalyptic prophecy as an anti-progressive, conservative affront, though this time it was re-crafted for the twenty-first-century culture wars, and the “whimper” of the prophecy was often equated with some aspect of liberal or progressive politics. The use of Eliot’s phrase as such a politically motivated dig is exemplified in the Twitter (X) history of author Joyce Carol Oates. The 83-year-old Oates has long been known as a prolific and accomplished writer, with a National Book Award and fifty-eight published novels to her name, but today she is also known as a prolific and sometimes offensive tweeter. @JoyceCarolOates has published more than 148,000 tweets during her ten-year Twitter (X) tenure, sharing a steady stream of ideas and observations that have been described as “fantastically strange” and “consistently derided.”<sup>65</sup> In a 2016 *Literary Hub* essay, “Is Joyce Carol Oates Trolling Us?,” Eric Thurm explored her sometimes funny and sometimes out-of-touch tweets, arguing that “most of her bad tweets have come from a position of near-total cultural insensitivity, whether in addressing the supposed ick factor of Asian diets ... casually insulting Islam ... or assuming that women aren’t harassed in neighborhoods that are rich and white.”<sup>66</sup> Being *overly* sensitive is, in fact, one of the cardinal sins that Oates condemns and consistently pokes fun at throughout her tweets. And this sensitivity is the centerpiece of the Eliot adaptation she tweeted in October 2017, which was retweeted 350 times:

this is the way the world ends  
 this is the way the world ends  
 not with a bang or a whimper  
 but with “deeply-offended-by”<sup>67</sup>

This reimagining of Eliot’s prophecy, especially when read within the context of Oates’s wider tweet oeuvre, suggests that culture is in decline because young liberals—the voices implied to be “deeply-offended-by”—are curbing free creative expression through their fragility. The phrase “deeply-offended-by” is not only the punchline of this particular parody but a running bit in Oates’s body of tweets, where she has used the words “offended” or “deeply offended”



**Figure 3.6** In this post, Twitter user and fiction writer Joyce Carol Oates uses Eliot’s lines to decry cultural-political oversensitivity: “this is the way the world ends / this is the way the world ends / not with a bang or a whimper / but with “deeply-offended-by.” Twitter (X). May 6, 2016.

literally dozens of times. In one revealing tweet, she explicitly stamped the phrase “deeply offended” with #CultureWar: “Why be only just ‘offended’ if you can be ‘deeply offended’? #CultureWar”<sup>68</sup> In another, she more specifically aligned the phrase “deeply offended” with the “young-left,” while also denigrating this group’s political ambition compared to older generations: “young activists of 1960s risked their lives for civil rights in Mississippi; young-left now searches for reasons to be ‘deeply offended’ in classrooms.”<sup>69</sup> In other cases, Oates directly connected the phrase to claims of racism and colonialism made by marginalized groups. After tweeting about the fact that certain sports mascots feel like “hate speech” to Indigenous communities, she replied to her own tweet and asked: “Yet, someone is likely to be ‘deeply offended’ by virtually anything. How to assess, adjudicate? What of ‘freedom’?”<sup>70</sup>

Tweets like these have rightly provoked outrage among Oates’s Twitter (X) followers and the literary community, and her incorporation of “deeply offended by” into “not with a bang but a whimper” is emblematic of a widespread pattern of use of Eliot’s lines. Liberal snowflakes, cancel culture, and social justice warriors are often the butt of “not with a bang but a whimper” jokes, sometimes in ways that are astonishingly on-the-nose: “This is the way the world ends, Not with a bang and not with a whimper, But with a woke.”<sup>71</sup> This kind of deployment of Eliot’s words can sometimes be expressly aggressive and hateful. For example, in one explicitly transphobic and homophobic case from early 2022, a Twitter (X) user named Ian Miles Cheong, who has been described as a “minor flunky of the bygone MAGA cultural revolution,”<sup>72</sup> shared a parody of Eliot’s lines along with a video of Sam Brinton, who was speaking about their campaign to stop gay conversion therapy. The video had been published years earlier, when Brinton worked for the Trevor Project, a crisis support

organization for LGBTQ youth. Brinton later went on to work for a nuclear waste start-up company and, in February of 2022, they were hired by the Office of Nuclear Energy of the US Department of Energy, making Brinton possibly “the first gender fluid person in federal government leadership.”<sup>73</sup> However, this landmark hire also became a lightning rod for conservative outrage, and it was picked up by tabloid-esque, right-wing outlets that excessively scrutinized and vilified Brinton’s personal life. This is the hateful vein in which Cheong shared his Eliot parody:

This person (identifies as genderqueer with they/them pronouns, his kinks are animal sexuality and “gay uncle” BDSM) is now in charge of overseeing America’s nuclear power plants. This is how empires end. Not with a bang, but with whatever the hell this is.<sup>74</sup>

In this tweet, Cheong casts Brinton in a bizarre fictional pastiche of Eliot’s lines to literalize the prejudiced idea that people with non-normative gender and sexual identities will somehow destroy America. The contorted phrase—“Not with a bang, but with whatever the hell this is”—dehumanizes Brinton, referring to them not with the personal pronouns that Cheong derided earlier in the tweet but with demonstrative pronouns that are normally reserved for objects.

It is worth noting that Elon Musk, who became Twitter’s CEO in October 2022, has replied to and openly agreed with dozens of Cheong’s reactionary tweets, and Musk has even used Eliot’s “not with a bang but a whimper” in reactionary ways himself. When Cheong claimed that it was time to stop appeasing “activists” on Twitter, for example, Musk replied to him directly and affirmed: “You’re right.”<sup>75</sup> In another instance, Musk asked his followers, “What do you think of the culture war?” to which Cheong answered: “A single ideology dominates and silences the rest, branding everything it disapproves of as ‘violence’ and a ‘threat to democracy.’ Criticism of wokeness is ‘stochastic terrorism.’ Only one narrative is allowed to prevail and it is promoted by the media.” “Accurate,” Musk replied, confirming this right-wing perspective of the culture wars. Journalist Luke Winkie has claimed that Musk and Cheong are “perfect bedfellows” and argued that their public social media relationship solidifies Musk’s role as a “fringe, sideshow mouthpiece for the Lauren Boebert wing of the GOP.”<sup>76</sup> In 2021, Musk himself even used Eliot’s phrase to draw attention to what he has claimed is the most urgent threat to humanity, “population collapse” or declining birth rates—an even more dire issue, he has insisted, than climate change, which both demographers and scientists flatly refute.<sup>77</sup> In response to a tweet about women having fewer children, Musk exclaimed, “This is a major problem! Between civilization ending with a bang or a whimper, this trend suggests the latter.”<sup>78</sup> He later followed up with the double-entendre joke, “Due to lack of banging, civilization might ended [sic] with a whimper!” and linked to a news article that reported that sales of adult diaper sales might soon surpass sales of baby diapers. (He repeated this joke in a 2023 interview with Tucker Carlson on Fox News and in a 2024 interview at the Milken Institute Global Conference.<sup>79</sup>) This sexualizing, masculinist rhetoric, used to bolster an argument that population decline is a more urgent problem than climate change, is yet again emblematic of the phrase’s anti-progressive uses. What’s more, because it was tweeted by the man who would become Twitter’s



**Figure 3.7** Future Twitter (X) owner Elon Musk jokes in response to a Reuters news item detailing the \$9 billion market for adult diapers. Twitter (X). July 14, 2021.

CEO and, many would argue, its most prominent troll, this kind of use is further elevated. It is clear that Eliot's phrase can be made easily harmonious with sensationalizing, right-wing social media rhetoric.

The right-wing bent of "not with a bang" allusions is more subtle, yet still clearly present, in other cases. For example, the actor James Woods, a conservative and long-time supporter of Donald Trump, shared a seemingly harmless parody of Eliot's words that nevertheless had reactionary undercurrents and inspired explicit racism, xenophobia, and anti-progressive attacks in its thousands of retweets and replies. Woods tweeted the exact quotation from "The Hollow Men"—"This is the way the world ends / Not with a bang but a whimper"—along with a screenshot of a social media post (possibly from Snapchat) that showed a Starbucks





**Figure 3.8** Actor James Woods uses Eliot's lines from "The Hollow Men" to caption a photograph of a Starbucks cup that says "Cark"—the result of a mistake by a Starbucks employee who had attempted to spell "Marc with a 'c.'" Twitter (X). September 29, 2017.

coffee cup with the word “Cark” scrawled onto it and with overlaid text that read, “I said my name was Mark with a ‘c’...”<sup>80</sup> The implied joke is that a Starbucks employee must have misunderstood that the “c” of the speaker’s name should have come at the end of their name (“Marc”) and not the beginning (“Cark”). On the surface, this tweet seems to fall under the umbrella of silly Eliot parodies, memes that ironically dramatize minorly unfortunate events by suggesting they would bring about the end of the world. But in the replies, many Twitter (X) users took the post more seriously. They imagined that the Starbucks employee in this scenario was young, non-English speaking, or an immigrant, prompting them to condemn millennials as the worst educated, most mentally unstable generation, to bloviate about the dangers of illegal immigration, and to criticize the \$15 minimum wage, a well-known liberal platform (presumably because a \$15 wage would be undeserved for such poor service).

Are Twitter (X) users who craft reactionary remixes of Eliot’s words tapping into the conservative overtones of his poetry and politics? Is there something within the lines themselves that make them especially amenable to being used as a weapon in the contemporary culture wars? Or are the lines simply so widely applicable that they can be put toward all different kinds of ends? It is difficult to answer these questions, but it is also difficult to ignore how contemporary uses of the lines align with some of Eliot’s own expressed politics. For example, in his published 1933 lecture, “After Strange Gods,” Eliot states outrightly:

The population should be homogeneous; where two or more cultures exist in the same place they are likely either to be fiercely self-conscious or both to become adulterate ... reasons of race and religion combine to make any large number of free-thinking Jews undesirable.<sup>81</sup>

Though Eliot later tried to keep this piece out of print, this casual expression of extreme antisemitism, which was made in the same year the Nazi party took control of the German government, is illustrative of the kind of views Eliot held—views that, of course, had an influence on his poetic writing and reception, even as they shifted over the course of his life. Eliot aligned himself with a hierarchical worldview, as illustrated in his famous self-description as a “classicist in literature, royalist in politics, and anglo-catholic in religion.”<sup>82</sup> Twitter (X) users who used “not with a bang” to signal the downfall of democracy tended to align their perspectives with established authority structures as Eliot did, lamenting the fact that a political newcomer like Trump could so completely upend the norms of American political life. By contrast, those who employed the phrase to criticize progressive cultural ideals seem to come from a different perspective in relation to systems of cultural authority. Yet by lamenting what they see as the imposition of political correctness by an oppressive liberal culture, they nevertheless reinforce dominant cultural narratives about the centrality of white, European and American, heteronormative identities, much like Eliot did.

When lifted out of the context of the poem, the demonstrative “this” and subject of Eliot’s closing lines—“*This* is the way the world ends / Not with a bang but a whimper”—is of course left ambiguous, and yet conservative connotations seem to persist within the language itself. The phrasing of the lines implies a negative change in relation to a better past, and the onomatopoeic final words—“bang” and “whimper”—are distinctly gendered, with the forceful, masculinized “bang” replaced by the weakened, feminized “whimper.” Even



when Twitter (X) users swap out these specific words, the overall language often retains the implication that an enervated, ineffectual contemporary society has supplanted a stronger, masculinized one. Even a silly tweet like “Not with a bang but with a selfie stick for your butt” implicitly blames a product that is symbolic of feminized vanity for social decline. Eliot, of course, traded in similar themes in much of his early poetry, depicting a decadent and impotent modern society, often in feminized terms. And though Eliot’s name has largely dropped out of the social media conversations that include his lines, it is striking to see some of these poetic views persist.

### 3.5 Not With a Bang But a Dataset for Future Study

The many ways in which “Not with a bang but a whimper” was invoked on Twitter (X) between 2006 and 2022 point to its far-reaching appeal and adaptability. Though we have focused on a few prominent use patterns here, the range of situations in which the quotation was invoked is dizzying. We also saw Eliot parody tweets shared in reference to COVID vaccines, hardcore pornography, the video game *Halo 3*, the 2020 Tokyo Olympics, the UK’s National Health Service, and the season 6 finale of television show *Dexter*. While we do not have the time or space to explore this complete kaleidoscopic variety, we have decided to share a dataset that includes unique identifiers for the Eliot-inspired tweets that we collected for this study (which can be used to retroactively access the public tweets via the Twitter API).<sup>83</sup> We hope that our analysis and this dataset both inspire and enable further exploration of how the words of dead poets intertwine with those of contemporary producers, how canonicity operates online, and how pieces of poems break away and flow through new digital environments.

At the end of his essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” Eliot reiterates the importance of a mutual relationship between poets of the past and of the present, claiming that in order to succeed, a poet must live “in what is not merely the present, but the present moment of the past” while also remaining conscious “not of what is dead, but of what is already living.” We can see that social media platforms provide a clear index of living language and a space where the present and present moment of the past commingle. While in some ways the meaning of T.S. Eliot’s words has shifted wildly from its original context, in other ways it has impressively maintained association with spiritual emptiness, moral bankruptcy, and societal decline. These adaptations and echoes of Eliot’s original poem, which was itself built from the words of earlier authors and from shared communal language like nursery rhymes, prove that the collaborative project of poetry continues on digital platforms, even if in unexpected and uncharted ways.

## Notes

1. Caustic Pop (@CausticPop), “This Is the Way the World Ends Not with a Bang but with a WI/MI/PA,” Twitter (X), November 3, 2020, <https://twitter.com/CausticPop/status/1323856614353522689>.
2. Note on our approach to user data and privacy: in this chapter, we have chosen to focus on tweets that have already been reasonably exposed to the public, which we establish as posts with

100 or more retweets or posts that have been tweeted by accounts with 5,000 or more followers. By taking this approach, we follow the model of Deen Freelon, Charlton D. McIlwain, and Meredith D. Clark, who used similar thresholds in their work to “make it less likely that our research will shine an unwanted spotlight on previously obscure content” and “to reduce the likelihood of exposing relatively unknown users to unwanted public scrutiny.” For more, see Deen Freelon, Charlton D. McIlwain, and Meredith Clark, “Beyond the Hashtags: #Ferguson, #Blacklivesmatter, and the Online Struggle for Offline Justice,” SSRN Scholarly Paper (Rochester, NY: Social Science Research Network, February 29, 2016), <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2747066>.

3. Will Roscoe (@Goodish\_Will), “And This Is the Way It Ends. Not with a Bang but with a WI/MI/PA.,” Twitter (X), November 4, 2020, [https://twitter.com/Goodish\\_Will/status/1323938729342439424](https://twitter.com/Goodish_Will/status/1323938729342439424).

4. Explainer of Jokes (@JokesExplainer), “@CausticPop @Fred\_Delicious This Joke Is Funny Because the Letters WIMIPA Are Phonetically Similar to the Word ‘Whimper’, and WI, MI, and PA Are the Abbreviations for Wisconsin, Michigan, and Pennsylvania (Who Appear to Have Voted to Reelect Trump),” Twitter (X) November 4, 2020, <https://twitter.com/JokesExplainer/status/1323979396986867713>.

5. T.S. Eliot, “The Hollow Men,” in *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, ed. Margaret Ferguson, Tim Kendall, and Mary Jo Salter (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2018), lines 96–99.

6. Everett A. Gillis, Lawrence V. Ryan, and Friedrich W. Strothmann, “Hope for Eliot’s Hollow Men?” *PMLA* 75, no. 5 (1960): 636.

7. Ibid.

8. “T.S. Eliot, the Poet, Is Dead in London at 76,” *The New York Times*, January 5, 1965.

9. Roughly 7% of the posts in this dataset included the word “Eliot” (regardless of case).

10. In 2003, Geoffrey Pullum, writing for the blog *Language Log*, argued that there needed to be a term for “a multi-use, customizable, instantly recognizable, time-worn, quoted or misquoted phrase or sentence that can be used in an entirely open array of different jokey variants by lazy journalists and writers.” Inspired by one of the examples that Pullum provided—the commonly repeated phrase “*If Eskimos have N words for snow...*”—Glen Whitman proposed the term “snowclone,” which Pullum declared the definitive term for this phenomenon. The term “snowclone” has since been embraced by both the public and scholars. For its origins, see “Language Log: Phrases for Lazy Writers in Kit Form,” <http://itre.cis.upenn.edu/~myl/language-log/archives/000061.html>; “Language Log: Snowclones: Lexicographical Dating to the Second,” <http://itre.cis.upenn.edu/~myl/language-log/archives/000350.html>.

11. Stefan Hartmann and Tobias Ungerer, “Attack of the Snowclones: A Corpus-Based Analysis of Extravagant Formulaic Patterns,” *Journal of Linguistics* (April 14, 2023): 1–36. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022226723000117>.

12. Rob Reiner (@robreiner), “The End of the Trump Presidency: Not with a Bang but with a Desperate Attempt at a Prosecution Avoiding Whimper,” Twitter (X), November 24, 2020, <https://twitter.com/robreiner/status/1331223856183296002>.

13. For example, the title of a *Wall Street Journal* article about 2019 protests in Hong Kong read: “Hong Kong’s Harrowing University Siege Ends Not With a Bang but a Whimper.” See *The Wall Street Journal* (@WSJ), “Days into the Standoff at Hong Kong’s Besieged Campus, Police Switched to a Softer Approach. The Wait-Them-out Policy Saw Protesters Gradually Walk out, Many Weary from Lack of Food or Emotionally Drained. <https://t.co/NeD69rcZKz>,” Twitter (X), November 29, 2019, <https://twitter.com/WSJ/status/1200293345395908609>.

14. @kendrawcandraw, “This Is the Way the World Ends Not with a Bang but a Gender Reveal,” October 30, 2019, <https://twitter.com/kendrawcandraw/status/1189578844136710144>; Gizmodo (@Gizmodo), “This Is the Way the World Ends. Not with a Bang but with a Selfie Stick for Your Butt. <http://Gizmo.Do/1L3NTov> <http://t.co/VqLaJ57JVY>,” Twitter (X), January 7, 2015, <https://twitter.com/Gizmodo/status/552895672136257537>; Matt Fuller (@MEPFuller), “So This Is the Way

the World Ends. Not with a Bang but with a Bunch of Millennials Who Don't Know How to Mail Things. <https://t.co/VzY1GROtpq>," Twitter (X), October 30, 2018, <https://twitter.com/MEPFuller/status/1057307756951166977>

15. Limor Shifman, "An Anatomy of a YouTube Meme," *New Media & Society* 14, no. 2 (March 1, 2012): 187–203, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444811412160>, our emphasis.

16. Kate Conger, "How Elon Musk Is Changing the Twitter Experience," *The New York Times*, April 7, 2023, [www.nytimes.com/2023/04/07/technology/elon-musk-twitter-changes.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2023/04/07/technology/elon-musk-twitter-changes.html); Chris Stokel-Walker, "Twitter's \$42,000-per-Month API Prices Out Nearly Everyone," *Wired*, March 10, 2023, [www.wired.com/story/twitter-data-api-prices-out-nearly-everyone/](https://www.wired.com/story/twitter-data-api-prices-out-nearly-everyone/).

17. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," *Poetry Foundation*, October 13, 2009, [www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/69400/tradition-and-the-individual-talent](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/69400/tradition-and-the-individual-talent).

18. Lawrence Rainey suggests that the publication of *The Waste Land* in 1922 "announced modernism's unprecedented triumph," detailing how the poem "generated an avalanche of publicity," which established the poem as "a reference point for the assessment of modernism by a wider public." See Rainey, *Institutions of Modernism: Literary Elites and Public Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 78.

19. "The Hollow Men, I-III" was published in the *Dial*, LXVII.3 in March 1925. These sections became parts I–II and IV of the poem. Part III was published in *American Poetry 1925: A Miscellany* under the title "This is the Dead Land." See Donald Gallup, *T.S. Eliot: A Bibliography* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1969), 161, 211.

20. C. Henry Warren, "Three Poets" in *The Bookman* 69, no. 413 (February 1926): 263–64. In a similar vein, a survey of new books in the *Saturday Review* notes that the collection "offers the admirers of Mr. T.S. Eliot by turns over-ingenuity, wit, nonsense, naughtiness, and, though rarely, poetry." See "New Books at a Glance," *Saturday Review of Politics, Literature, Science and Art* 140, no. 3657 (November 28, 1925): 630.

21. F.R. Leavis, *New Bearings in English Poetry* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1932), 115.

22. In his 1943 article "T.S. Eliot and the Hollow Men," Hyatt Howe Waggoner suggests that "Though what Eliot had to say in *The Hollow Men* had been said before in *The Waste Land*, the symbolic significance of the book is not greatly diminished by that fact." Writing almost twenty years later in 1961, Everett A. Gillis notes a shift in this conversation, highlighting "a noticeable tendency in recent expositions of T.S. Eliot's *The Hollow Men* to read some affirmation into a poem traditionally associated with *The Waste Land* as a work of sterility and desolation and thus to offer a degree of spiritual hope to Eliot's famous effigies." See Waggoner, "T.S. Eliot and the Hollow Men," *American Literature* 15, no. 2 (May 1943): 102; and Gillis, "The Spiritual Status of T.S. Eliot's *Hollow Men*," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 2, no. 4 (Winter 1961): 464.

23. The quotations reflect Henry Hewes's summary of his interview with Eliot. See Hewes, "An Interview with T.S. Eliot" (1958) in *T.S. Eliot: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Michael Grant (Oxon: Routledge, 1997), 702.

24. Ibid.

25. Ibid.

26. Billy Graham, *World Aflame* (New York: Doubleday, 1965), 197.

27. Jeff Nuttall, *Bomb Culture* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1968), 80.

28. Walter Cronkite, *Eye on the World* (New York: Cowles Book Co., 1971), 1.

29. There is currently no comprehensive published research on the coverage of HathiTrust holdings, but there has been ongoing conversation about this issue in the field of digital humanities. According to HathiTrust's own information on the scope of the collection, the raw number of volumes per year decreases after the 1980s. For the years 1980–1989, there are over 1,214,000 volumes in the collection; for 1990–1999, there are 1,152,000 volumes; and for 2000–2009, there are 821,000 volumes. Since the number of books published each year was increasing during this time, it suggests that the HathiTrust collection is less complete toward the end of the twentieth century. For this reason, we

ended our consideration of the HathiTrust data at 1985. See Lauren Klein (@laurenfklein), “I Know the Work on the Unevenness of the Google Books Corpus (@benmschmidt I’m Looking at You), but Is There Work on How HathiTrust Compares? Or Anything Else Citable on over/Underrepresentation of Genres Etc? @Ted\_Underwood Have You Written on This?,” Twitter (X), February 3, 2022, <https://twitter.com/laurenfklein/status/1489344657725210627>. See “HathiTrust Dates,” *HathiTrust Digital Library*, accessed 6 March, 2021, [www.hathitrust.org/visualizations\\_dates](http://www.hathitrust.org/visualizations_dates).

30. Myer Rashish, “Digging Beneath the Pipeline Affair,” *The New York Times*, September 8, 1982, [www.nytimes.com/1982/09/08/opinion/digging-beneath-the-pipeline-affair.html](http://www.nytimes.com/1982/09/08/opinion/digging-beneath-the-pipeline-affair.html).

31. Matt Wild, “Pray for Milwaukee: Unenforceable Mask Mandate Set to End in 19 Days Won’t End Early,” *Milwaukee Record*, February 9, 2022.

32. “It now occurs to me that we also need a name for another linguistic figure... the thing we need a name for is a multi-use, customizable, instantly recognizable, time-worn, quoted or misquoted phrase or sentence that can be used in an entirely open array of different jokey variants by lazy journalists and writers.” Pullum, “Language Log: Phrases for Lazy Writers in Kit Form.”

33. Hartmann and Ungerer, “Attack of the Snowclones.”

34. Kenneth J. Meier and John Bohte, “Not With A Bang, But A Whimper: Explaining Organizational Failures,” *Administration & Society* 35, no. 1 (March 1, 2003): 104–21, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0095399702250351>; Tom McClean, “Not with a Bang but a Whimper: The Politics of Accountability and Open Data in the UK,” SSRN Scholarly Paper (Rochester, NY: Social Science Research Network, 2011), <http://papers.ssrn.com/abstract=1899790>; Matthew Taylor, “Not with a Bang but a Whimper: Muen Shakai and Its Implications,” 17; Ronald Bayer, Morgan Philbin, and Robert H. Remien, “The End of Written Informed Consent for HIV Testing: Not With a Bang but a Whimper,” *American Journal of Public Health* 107, no. 8 (August 2017): 1259–65, <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2017.303819>.

35. Hartman and Ungerer argue that snowclones and memes should be considered distinct concepts, though they concede that there is sometimes overlap. “Attack of the Snowclones: A Corpus-Based Analysis of Extravagant Formulaic Patterns.”

36. Chris Stokel-Walker, “Twitter’s \$42,000-per-Month API Prices Out Nearly Everyone,” *Wired*, March 10, 2023, [www.wired.com/story/twitter-data-api-prices-out-nearly-everyone/](http://www.wired.com/story/twitter-data-api-prices-out-nearly-everyone/).

37. Melanie Walsh, “Tweets of a Native Son: The Quotation and Recirculation of James Baldwin from Black Power To# BlackLivesMatter,” *American Quarterly* 70, no. 3 (2018): 531–59; Micah Bateman, “Tweeting (in) ‘Dark Times’: Brecht’s Second Svendborg ‘Motto’ Post-Trump,” *Ecibs: Communications of the International Brecht Society*, no. 1 (April 6, 2020), <https://e-cibs.org/issue-2020-1/>; Lisa Mendelman and Anna Mukamal, “The Generative Dissensus of Reading the Feminist Novel, 1995–2020: A Computational Analysis of Interpretive Communities,” *Journal of Cultural Analytics* 6, no. 3 (November 19, 2021): 30009, <https://doi.org/10.22148/001c.30009>.

38. To collect tweets, we used Documenting the Now’s tool *twarc* and the Academic Research Track of the Twitter (X) API. We specifically searched for tweets that included any of the following exact phrases: “not with a bang”; “but a whimper”; “but with a whimper”; “this is the way” and “ends” and “not with”; “this is how” and “ends” and “not with.”

39. Mark Sussman, “What the ‘Plums’ Meme Has to Say About How Poetry Can Work on the Internet,” *Slate*, December 12, 2017, <https://slate.com/culture/2017/12/the-plums-meme-is-back-and-its-got-something-to-say-about-poetry-and-the-internet.html>; Aja Romano, “This Is Why There Are Jokes About Plums All Over Your Twitter Feed,” *Vox*, December 1, 2017, [www.vox.com/2017/12/1/16723210/this-is-just-to-say-plums-twitter-baby-shoes](http://www.vox.com/2017/12/1/16723210/this-is-just-to-say-plums-twitter-baby-shoes); Jarry Lee, “People On Twitter Turned This Poem Into A Hilarious Meme,” *BuzzFeed*, November 30, 2017, [www.buzzfeed.com/jarrylee/hilarious-tweets-about-that-plums-in-the-icebox-poem](http://www.buzzfeed.com/jarrylee/hilarious-tweets-about-that-plums-in-the-icebox-poem).

40. Annie Lowrey, “A Poem Becomes Meme. Forgive Me,” *Intelligencer*, <https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2015/07/poem-becomes-meme-forgive-me.html>.

41. Lowrey, “A Poem Becomes Meme. Forgive Me.”

42. Eliot, "Hollow Men," epigraph.

43. George Santayana, *Three Philosophical Poets: Lucretius, Dante, and Goethe* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1922), 133.

44. Joyce Carol Oates (@JoyceCarolOates), "This Is the Way the World Ends This Is the Way the World Ends Not with a Bang or a Whimper but with 'Deeply-Offended-By,'" Twitter (X), October 20, 2017, <https://twitter.com/JoyceCarolOates/status/921427926301671424>.

45. Nick UA #FBR #FBPE #BLM UA (@hazydav), "Apologies to TS Eliot ... This Is How the Republic Ends – Not with a Bang but a Whisper... <https://t.co/F2fPdJuvJH>," Twitter (X), December 19, 2016, <https://twitter.com/hazydav/status/810859112313581568>.

46. 🕊️ ❤️ 😊 (@bklynmike3), "This Is the Way the World Ends Not with a Bang but with a Comb Over," Twitter (X), July 26, 2016, <https://twitter.com/bklynmike3/status/758015741039931392>.

47. Alan Grayson (@AlanGrayson), "This Is the Way the World Ends. This Is the Way the World Ends. Not with a Bang, but with a Bing Bong. <https://t.co/QhULxAfouX>," Twitter (X), May 4, 2016, <https://twitter.com/AlanGrayson/status/727665398171062272>.

48. Adam Schiff (@RepAdamSchiff), "This Is How the House Republican Effort to Undermine Mueller by 'Investigating the Investigators' Ends. Not with a Bang, but with a Friday, Buried-in-the-Holidays Whimper, and One Foot out the Door," Twitter (X), December 29, 2018, <https://twitter.com/RepAdamSchiff/status/1078827491190558720>; Staff, "Trump-Russia: Republican Probe of Alleged FBI Bias Ends 'with a Whimper,'" *The Guardian*, December 29, 2018, [www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/dec/29/trump-russia-republican-probe-of-alleged-fbi-bias-ends-with-a-whimper](http://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/dec/29/trump-russia-republican-probe-of-alleged-fbi-bias-ends-with-a-whimper).

49. Palmer Report (@PalmerReport), "Donald Trump has barricaded himself in the White House, hasn't been seen in public today, hasn't tweeted in several hours. He had Eric handle his press conference. So far Donald Trump is going out not with a bang but with a whimper." Twitter (X), November 4, 2020, <https://twitter.com/PalmerReport/status/1324233548291809281>

50. Edwin Hayward 🐼 ✂️ (@uk\_domain\_names), "So This Is How the UK Dies. Not with a Bang, but with Ministers Forced to Speed-Read an Absurdly Complicated Brexit Agreement before Signing off on It. 'The Principal Document, the Withdrawal Agreement, Runs to More than 400 Pages of Dense Legal Text.' <https://t.co/ClQ8nnjZxQ>," Twitter (X), November 13, 2018, [https://twitter.com/uk\\_domain\\_names/status/1062410835421728768](https://twitter.com/uk_domain_names/status/1062410835421728768).

51. Lindy Li (@lindyli), "Russia cyberattacked our government, put bounties on our troops, interfered in our elections, poisoned Nalvany / Utter silence from Trump and the GOP (government of Putin) / Unreal. What will it take for them to criticize Putin? / The con man goes out 'not with a bang but a whimper,'" Twitter (X), December 15, 2020, <https://twitter.com/lindyli/status/1339038305132957707>.

52. News24 (@News24), "OPINION | President Cyril Ramaphosa Has Outsmarted Ace Magashule and Is in His Strongest Position yet as ANC President, Writes @AdriaanBasson <https://t.co/Gm8HjPEWx1>," Twitter (X), May 10, 2021, <https://twitter.com/News24/status/1391619133909909505>.

53. Richard Denniss (@RDNS\_TAI) tweeted this quotation, which was retweeted over 130 times: "Australia's Prime Minister is the Bermuda Triangle in human form, a place where nothing happens and yet everything disappears'...ouch" @RonniSalt doesnt miss #auspol #insiders," Twitter (X), November 27, 2021, [https://twitter.com/RDNS\\_TAI/status/1464775955147198470](https://twitter.com/RDNS_TAI/status/1464775955147198470).

54. Ronni Salt, "Scott Morrison: Not with a Bang, but a Whimper," *The Shot*, November 26, 2021, <https://theshot.net.au/general-news/scott-morrison-not-with-a-bang-but-a-whimper/>.

55. Michael Pascoe (@MichaelPascoe01) tweeted this quotation from Salt's piece, garnering over 400 retweets: "So this is what @RonniSalt really thinks: Morrison oversees a grift-machine disguised as a government where statements without truth, spending without probity and promises without delivery are not just the order of the day, but served as our permanent menu," Twitter (X), November 27, 2021, <https://twitter.com/MichaelPascoe01/status/1464758802234818563>.



56. Eliot, "The Hollow Men," lines 11–12.

57. Salt, "Scott Morrison: Not with a Bang, but a Whimper."

58. Ibid.

59. Discussing Eliot's work in relation to New Critical formalism, Alastair Morrison emphasizes that "As a critic no less than as a poet, Eliot was invoked by the Agrarians as a kind of patron saint." However, he goes on to clarify that the "confident postformalism of the last few decades of the twentieth century has suggested that it is conservative New Critical taste, rather than simple unambiguous greatness, which explains Eliot's imperial preponderance in the poetic canon." See Morrison, "Eliot, the Agrarians, and the Political Subtext of New Critical Formalism," in *Rereading the New Criticism*, eds. Miranda B. Hickman and John D. McIntyre (Ohio State University Press, 2012), 49.

60. T.S. Eliot, *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism: Studies in the Relation of Criticism to Poetry in England* (London: Faber & Faber, 1933), 154.

61. On Pound's treason charge and the Bollingen controversy, see Lem Coley, "'A Conspiracy of Friendliness': T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Allen Tate, and the Bollingen Controversy," *The Southern Review* 38, no. 4 (2002): 809–11.

62. Ezra Pound, Canto LXXIV in *The Cantos of Ezra Pound* (New York: New Directions, 1993), 445.

63. Robert A. Corrigan notes that there "had been a number of nominations, but on the final ballot, 10 of the 12 voting jurors selected *The Pisan Cantos*. The jury fully expected to be criticized for its choice, but it had no reason to assume the violence of the controversy. It began with an attack in *Senior Scholastic*, followed by a vicious harangue in *Masses and Mainstream*. It reached a high level of scholarly debate in *Partisan Review*. But by far, the most interesting phase of the controversy took place in the pages of the *Saturday Review of Literature*..." See Corrigan, "Ezra Pound and The Bollingen Prize Controversy," *Midcontinent American Studies Journal* 8, no. 2 (1967): 43.

64. Miles Klee, "Who's Afraid of Joyce Carol Oates?," *MEL Magazine*, October 12, 2021, <https://melmagazine.com/en-us/story/joyce-carol-oates-twitter>.

65. Eric Thurm, "Is Joyce Carol Oates Trolling Us?," *Literary Hub*, October 5, 2016, <https://lithub.com/is-joyce-carol-oates-trolling-us/>.

66. Joyce Carol Oates (@JoyceCarolOates), "This Is the Way the World Ends This Is the Way the World Ends Not with a Bang or a Whimper but with 'Deeply-Offended-By,'" Twitter (X), October 20, 2017, <https://twitter.com/JoyceCarolOates/status/921427926301671424>.

67. Joyce Carol Oates (@JoyceCarolOates), "Why Be Only Just 'Offended' If You Can Be 'Deeply Offended'? #CultureWar," Twitter (X), December 20, 2015, <https://twitter.com/JoyceCarolOates/status/678643855466565633>.

68. Joyce Carol Oates (@JoyceCarolOates), "Young Activists of 1960s Risked Their Lives for Civil Rights in Mississippi; Young-Left Now Searches for Reasons to Be 'Deeply Offended' in Classrooms. <https://t.co/ChpNhrj2LV>," Twitter (X), November 17, 2017, <https://twitter.com/JoyceCarolOates/status/931547565266489344>.

69. Joyce Carol Oates (@JoyceCarolOates), "@JoyceCarolOates Yet, Someone Is Likely to Be 'Deeply Offended' by Virtually Anything. How to Assess, Adjudicate? What of 'Freedom'?" Twitter (X), April 27, 2015, <https://twitter.com/JoyceCarolOates/status/592711497819758593>.

70. Seán Ono Lennon (@seanonolennon), "I Love That T.S. Eliot Poem: 'This Is the Way the World Ends, Not with a Bang and Not with a Whimper, But with a Woke,'" Twitter (X), March 10, 2021, <https://twitter.com/seanonolennon/status/1369496542395080706>. We are quoting a particular use of the word "woke" here, but it is important to note that the term has been appropriated from AAVE. Kashana Cauley discusses the history of the word, from its use within Black communities—as "a command to keep ourselves informed about anti-blackness, and to fight it"—to "a pejorative, uttered sarcastically or dismissively in order to target perceived liberal intellectual elitism." Tracing this history, she writes, "In 2008, mass audiences discovered the phrase 'I stay woke' in the popular Erykah Badu song 'Master Teacher.' Six years later, after the deaths of Michael Brown and Eric

Garner, ‘Stay woke’ became a rallying cry for the Black Lives Matter movement. But with its mass adoption, the word’s black activist history has faded, and its urgency has dulled. Now it functions merely as a nod to the speaker’s mainstream lefty positions, a smug confirmation that the speaker holds the expected progressive beliefs. What’s been left out is any reference to the structural and political systems that caused black leftists to adopt progressivism—or any understanding that maintaining woke views requires continuous work.” See Kashana Cauley, “Word: Woke,” *The Believer*, February 1, 2019, [www.thebeliever.net/kashana-cauley-word-woke/](http://www.thebeliever.net/kashana-cauley-word-woke/)

71. Luke Winkie, “The Redpilling of Elon Musk Isn’t Funny,” *Slate*, December 1, 2022, <https://slate.com/technology/2022/12/elon-musk-twitter-gop-redpilling-humor-posting.html>.

72. Sam Brinton (@sbrinton), “I’ll Even Be (to My Knowledge) the First Gender Fluid Person in Federal Government Leadership. But Most Importantly, I Am Going to Be Responsible for Finding Solutions to a Problem I Have Dedicated My Life to That Has Been Stymied for Decades,” Twitter (X), January 10, 2022, <https://twitter.com/sbrinton/status/1480600204579864576>.

73. Ian Miles Cheong (@stillgray), “This Person (Identifies as Genderqueer with They/Them Pronouns, His Kinks Are Animal Sexuality and ‘gay Uncle’ BDSM) Is Now in Charge of Overseeing America’s Nuclear Power Plants. This Is How Empires End. Not with a Bang, but with Whatever the Hell This Is <https://t.co/KvA6Q5VHwE>,” Twitter (X), February 10, 2022, <https://twitter.com/stillgray/status/1491878875856773120>.

74. Elon Musk (@elonmusk), “@stillgray You’re Right,” Twitter (X), November 4, 2022, <https://twitter.com/elonmusk/status/1588613591275827200>.

75. Winkie, “Redpilling.”

76. Jen Christensen, “Elon Musk Thinks the Population Will Collapse. Demographers Say It’s Not Happening,” *CNN*, August 30, 2022, [www.cnn.com/2022/08/30/health/elon-musk-population-collapse-wellness/index.html](http://www.cnn.com/2022/08/30/health/elon-musk-population-collapse-wellness/index.html); Matt Reynolds, “Elon Musk Is Totally Wrong About Population Collapse,” *Wired*, October 6, 2022, <https://www.wired.com/story/elon-musk-population-crisis/>.

77. Elon Musk (@elonmusk), “@SamTwits @TeslaOwnersEBay @Kristennetten @RationalEtienne @EvaFoxU @JohnnaCrider1 @TeslaChillMode @CodingMark @Model3Owners @WholeMarsBlog @AustinTeslaClub This Is a Major Problem! Between Civilization Ending with a Bang or a Whimper, This Trend Suggests the Latter,” Twitter (X), July 14, 2021, <https://twitter.com/elonmusk/status/1415380908216131586>; Elon Musk (@elonmusk), “@SamTwits @TeslaOwnersEBay @Kristennetten @RationalEtienne @EvaFoxU @JohnnaCrider1 @TeslaChillMode @CodingMark @Model3Owners @WholeMarsBlog @AustinTeslaClub Due to Lack of Banging, Civilization Might Ended with a Whimper! Adult Diaper Sales Growth Is Much Higher than Baby Diaper Sales Growth. <https://t.co/EYk3nJNf6s>,” Twitter (X), July 14, 2021, <https://twitter.com/elonmusk/status/1415397398134808577>. Note: these tweets are not actually included in our dataset because they do not include the exact phrases that we searched for (we needed to make our queries very specific to prevent the inclusion of tweets that were not actual references to Eliot’s lines).

78. “Elon Musk: Will Civilization End with a Bang or a Whimper,” Fox News (April 19, 2023), [www.foxnews.com/video/6325350959112/](http://www.foxnews.com/video/6325350959112/); <https://youtu.be/LCOe3a9EHJs?si=PRHc1LXH6jCu0UPQ&t=3044>; Elon Musk, “New Techoking Full Interview on How to Save the Human Race at #2024 Milken Conference,” 2024, <https://youtu.be/s5o5m7LP6YY?si=spdtcna-bLGBf2zO&t=2104>.

79. James Woods (@RealJamesWoods), “‘This Is the Way the World Ends Not with a Bang but a Whimper.’ <https://t.co/GQUnDAjHWJ>,” Twitter (X), September 29, 2017, <https://twitter.com/RealJamesWoods/status/913774150426165248>.

80. T.S. Eliot, *After Strange Gods: A Primer of Modern Heresy* (London: Faber & Faber, 1934), 19–20.

81. Eliot quoted in Barry Spurr, “Anglo-Catholicism and the Religious Turn in Eliot’s Poetry,” *Religion and Literature* 44, no. 1 (spring 2012), 136.

82. We share this data in two forms via the Social Media Archive (SOMAR) at the University of Michigan: 1) as a list of tweet IDs (unique identifiers that can be used to retroactively access tweets



from our data that have not been deleted); and 2) as a dataset of tweet counts per day. Twitter (X)'s Terms of Service tweets; sharing tweet IDs has been standard in the social media research community, and it was the approach recommended and supported by organizations like Documenting the Now. However, in April 2023, after Elon Musk's takeover of Twitter (X), the company announced that it was shutting down the academic track of the Twitter (X) API and changing the pricing structure of the non-academic API. These changes have made it much more expensive to download or "hydrate" full tweets from tweet IDs. Unfortunately, however, we are not able to share the full dataset through SOMAR at this time, and we are only able to share tweet IDs; we remain hopeful that the legal landscape may change and allow us to share full data in the future. Melanie Walsh and Anna Preus. "Not With a Bang But a Tweet: Democracy, Culture Wars, and the Memeification of T.S. Eliot." Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research [distributor], 2024-06-24. <https://socialmediaarchive.org/record/60>. For Twitter (X)'s API pricing, see: "Getting Started with the Twitter API," accessed April 16, 2024, <https://developer.twitter.com/en/docs/twitter-api/getting-started/about-twitter-api>.

83. We chose these comparisons based on our own estimations of what literary excerpts might be popular on social media, but to be clear we could have chosen many others. It is very difficult to know what the all-time most tweeted or memed lines of literature might be. Figuring this question out would be the subject of a fascinating though much larger and more challenging project. We also want to note that, for the most part, we searched for the original wording of these comparison phrases, unlike the more nuanced search approach that we took with Eliot's lines. The following are the keywords with which we searched for each citation on Twitter (X) in early 2022 (using the tweet counts API endpoint): 1) "this too shall pass"; 2) "to be or not to be"; 3) "an eye for an eye"; 4) "still i rise" or "still i'll rise"; 5) "better to have loved and lost"; "than never to have loved at all"; "than to have never loved at all"; 6) "best of times" and "worst of times"; 7) "all the world's a stage"; 8) "not with a bang"; "but a whimper"; "but with a whimper"; "this is the way" and "ends" and "not with"; "this is how" and "ends" and "not with"; 9) "gentle into that good night"; 10) "all that glitters is not gold"; 11) "contain multitudes" or "contains multitudes"; 12) "two roads diverged in a wood"; "I took the road less traveled by"; "I took the one less traveled by"; 13) "if only we're brave enough to see it"; "if only we're brave enough to be it"; 14) "quoth the raven"; 15) "it is a truth universally acknowledged"; 16) "hope is the thing with feathers"; 17) "this is just to say" and "plums"; "plums" and "icebox"; "plums" and "ice box"; 18) "i carry your heart with me"; 19) "we real cool"; 20) "i am a museum full of art."