Kateřina Straková’s BA thesis examines T.S. Eliot’s use of “mythical method” in his seminal poem The Waste Land (1922), which is read as “recount[ing] a mythical narrative” (12) and subjected to a series of critical analyses, mostly of the “archetypal” ilk. Following a brief discussion of Northrop Frye’s pioneering study, Anatomy of Criticism (1957), Ms Straková draws upon no fewer than thirty-odd different articles/books on Eliot’s poem to frame her close reading of the entire poem, section by section. This close reading comprises most of “Chapter II: Myth”, a better half of the entire thesis, which is brought to a close with a concise but relevant analysis of “Archetypal Imagery” (Ch. III) and a brief “Conclusion.”

The strength of the thesis lies in its background critical research & synthesising abilities. Also laudable is Ms Straková’s avoidance of lengthy summaries of the critical works used, which would necessarily distract her attention from the primary concern: Eliot’s poem and its use of myth. The thesis, last but not least, is well written, clearly articulated, and its style, formatting & language are up to par throughout.

However, several issues need to be addressed regarding the work’s general groundwork, context & thesis, which I detail below:

1. The work suffers from incorrect (if at all present) portrayal of the author’s & his poem’s background. No, The Waste Land did not “signal the advent of the modernist literary movement” (7) (if there ever was one) – if anything it marked the climax of early-phase modernism. By 1922, “modernist” writing had been around for at least a decade, of which Eliot was well aware – and which also influenced his poem.

2. For a thesis singularly devoted to Eliot’s “mythical method”, there is insufficient attention paid to the source text (Eliot’s essay on Joyce’s Ulysses), which only receives a mere paragraph at the end of the “Introduction.” Nothing is said regarding Eliot’s understanding of the myth in Joyce, and the obvious issue of applicability (Eliot, after all, is writing a year after The Waste Land, and about Joyce) is never addressed (see question 1).

3. There is no attention whatsoever (especially surprising given Ms Straková’s use of the Facsimile and Original Drafts version) paid to Ezra Pound’s co-authorship of the poem—his changes & emendations went well beyond what might still be called “editorship”—and his hand in its “mythological” appeal. As the drafts clearly indicate, it was Pound’s intervention into Eliot’s composition process that gave The Waste Land its mythical focus: something a thesis devoted solely to this one aspect must take stock of. Furthermore, Ms Straková’s depersonalised reading completely omits any reference to Eliot’s particular personal situation while composing his opus magnum (see questions 2&3).

4. Last but not least, there is a lack of a clearly stated thesis/purpose to Ms Straková’s work. A sample paragraph of her thesis usually contains 3-4 quotes from different critical
sources, more often than not quoted uncritically (cf. para on pp. 19-20: “Smith sees her as... Literary critic Tom Gibbons describes her as... George Williamson writes...”; or p. 28: “Williamson remarks that... Hoffman describes [them] as... Cleanth Brooks comments that... Langbaum writes...”). Furthermore, what Ms Straková quotes from these critics, half the time, is not as unproblematic or self-evident as to preclude any further reflection (see question 4).

My points for discussion follow from these four observations:

1. Regarding Eliot’s 1923 essay on *Ulysses*, what do we make of the fact that the term was originally applied (and, in my humble opinion, mis-applied) to Joyce’s prose, not to Eliot’s own poetry? How do we address the challenges of using a 1923 essay as a framework for a 1922 poem? How does *The Waste Land* differ from *Ulysses*, and how do we explain their similarities (Joyce, for one, thought Eliot had plainly plagiarised him)? Regarding Ms Straková’s point quoted above about “mythical narrative”, doesn’t Eliot himself in his article oppose his/Joyce’s “mythical method” to “narrative method”? How can/Shall we reconcile the two?

2. How do we read the dedication to Pound as “il miglior fabbro” and *The Waste Land* in the context of Pound’s *Cantos*? (Why) should we omit this inter/context? Also, (why) should we dissociate Eliot’s text from its author, esp. given *The Waste Land’s* references to “fragments shored against my ruin” and “by the waters of Leman I sat down and wept”?

3. A follow-up: even though the present context is archetypal criticism (and author under question a founding father of new criticism), shouldn’t we be aware that in excluding Eliot from the picture, we’re following the author’s own stage directions, as it were, reading him as he would wish us to? Is this necessarily a good thing, or something that goes without saying?

4. A further follow-up: What is the ideological import of associating *The Waste Land* with archetypical criticism (or vice versa)? A practical example: On p. 13 a highly relevant, and dissident, point is quoted of Marc Manganaro re “the ideology behind Eliot’s use of the mythical method,” and the exclusivist, totalitarian and—I daresay—proto-fascist ideology behind *The Waste Land*. No further comment is offered: and yet, if Ms Straková agrees with this quote, then perhaps this should have had wider implications for her entire thesis; if she disagrees, then a counterargument should have been presented. As it stands, Manganaro’s voice remains rather dissonant in the polyphony of the critical voices presented here, and a blind spot in Ms Straková’s thesis. So, a final obvious question: why quote for the sake of quoting?

Despite the shortcomings of the work’s content (perhaps to be addressed in the student’s further studies & work?), I recommend that Ms Straková’s thesis be graded either excellent, or very good – depending on her performance at the defence.

-------------------------------

Prague, June 7, 2016