

# LANGUAGE AS EXPERIENCE IN “GERONTION” AND *THE WASTE LAND*

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## ABSTRACT

This essay attempts some answers to the question, “How do we read *The Waste Land*?” It is a poem of many fragments and many voices, but the experiencing consciousness is one, symbolized by the impotent prophet Tiresias. The dramatic method, with its limited viewpoints and fragmented identities, derives from the Victorian dramatic monologue, filtered through the ironies of Jules Laforgue and the innovative versification of the Jacobean playwrights. This way of reading the poem is demonstrated through readings, first, of the monologue “Gerontion,” and then of key passages in *The Waste Land* itself.

KEYWORDS: T.S. Eliot, “Gerontion,” dramatic monologue, irony.

## LENGUAJE Y EXPERIENCIA EN “GERONTION” Y *LA TIERRA BALDÍA*

## RESUMEN

Este artículo procura responder a la pregunta: “¿Cómo leemos *La tierra baldía*?” Se trata de un poema de muchos fragmentos y muchas voces, pero la conciencia que vive la experiencia es una, simbolizada por el profeta impotente Tiresias. El método dramático, con su punto de vista limitado y sus identidades fragmentadas, deriva del monólogo dramático victoriano, filtrado por las ironías de Jules Laforgue y la versificación innovadora de los dramaturgos jacobinos. Esta forma de leer el poema se demuestra a través de la lectura, primero, del monólogo “Gerontion,” y luego de pasajes clave de la propia *Tierra Baldía*.

PALABRAS CLAVE: T.S. Eliot, “Gerontion,” monólogo dramático, ironía.



In Charles Dickens's novel *Our Mutual Friend* (1864-65), there is a foundling boy with the curious name of Sloppy. Sloppy has been taken into the home of a poor old widow, Mrs Higden, who finds that the boy brings benefits. "I do love a newspaper," she says. "You mightn't think it, but Sloppy is a beautiful reader of a newspaper. He do the Police in different voices" (quoted in Eliot 1971, 125). T.S. Eliot was a lifelong admirer of Dickens's novels, and it seems likely that his whole sense of the modern city –particularly of London– as a confused and troubling phantasmagoria, squalid yet hospitable to moments of illumination, has its roots in his childhood fondness for Dickens. So it is not surprising that when, in 1921, Eliot assembled a set of fragments united in part by their feeling for London life, the work of Dickens came to mind. At the head of the manuscript he wrote a Dickensian title: "He do the Police in different voices" (Eliot 1971, 4-5).

The fate of that manuscript is now a famous story. Eliot sent it to Ezra Pound for his opinion, and Pound went to work with his blue pencil, slashing whole pages, cutting lines and even half-lines, changing words, making suggestions. Eliot's wife Vivien likewise added comments and suggestions and, in the end, Eliot acceded to most of the proposed changes. Out of what seems at first sight an inchoate collection of bits and pieces, Pound constructed a form –or perhaps one should say that, like Michelangelo looking at crude stone in a quarry, he saw an implicit form– which he then exposed. Reading it today, however, one can still see something in it of Pound's contribution, for in its "ideogrammic" structure, it is much the most Poundian of Eliot's poems (Pound 1951, 26). But in the course of this radical process of collaborative revision, the Dickensian title disappeared to be replaced by a phrase that crops up a phrase that crops up in both Malory's *Morte d'Arthur* and E.B. Pusey's translation of the *Confessions* of St Augustine: *The Waste Land* –in the first case, a desert, both physical and symbolic; in the second, a metaphor for spiritual dereliction (Southam 1994, 135).

The new title was clearly the right one. It is a poem about sterility, and we need to be reminded of the Arthurian material that unites its symbolism. But the earlier title, "He do the Police in different voices," also has something to tell us about Eliot's method as he understood it. For *The Waste Land*, published in 1922, is a poem of many voices, overlapping and intercutting and juxtaposed. In a note on Tiresias, the prophet Odysseus seeks out in the underworld, Eliot writes as follows:

Tiresias, although a mere spectator and not indeed a "character", is yet the most important personage in the poem, uniting all the rest. Just as the one-eyed merchant, seller of currants, melts into the Phoenician sailor, and the latter is not wholly distinct from Ferdinand Prince of Naples, so all the women are one woman, and the two sexes meet in Tiresias. What Tiresias *sees*, in fact, is the substance of the poem. (Eliot 2015a, 74)

In other words, the police have different voices, ventriloquised by a single speaker: Sloppy or Tiresias or T.S. Eliot. It is interesting to learn that Tiresias is a "spectator" rather than a "character." As he says in the poem,



And I Tiresias have foresuffered all  
Enacted in this same divan or bed;  
I who have sat by Thebes below the wall  
And walked among the lowest of the dead. (Eliot 2015a, 64)

—which may remind us, not only of the other great Modernist masterpieces being written at this time— Pound’s *Cantos* and Joyce’s *Ulysses*, both similarly rooted in Homer’s *Odyssey*—but of Eliot’s most celebrated essay, “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1919):

[T]he more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates; the more perfectly will the mind digest and transmute the passions which are its material. (Eliot 2014d, 109)

The key word here is “suffer” —“the man who suffers,” “I Tiresias have foresuffered.” To suffer is, like the French *souffrir*, to experience, to undergo, to be passive to —the opposite of “to act.” But it is also impossible to avoid the more ordinary modern English sense of suffering —to experience pain— especially in collision there with “passions.” The experiencing consciousness is one, Tiresias, but the manifestations of that consciousness are multitudinous, and they all include suffering.

In “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” Eliot ran the conversational tone and manner of Jules Laforgue back through the dramatic method of Browning and Tennyson. It is not Eliot who speaks the poem, but J. Alfred Prufrock, if indeed Prufrock can be said to be one person (as opposed to a set of homogeneous utterances). But homogeneous as they are, there are also moments of universality, as when the poem looks beyond specific persons to a generalised human experience in utterances that any of us might make. Thus, a dramatic monologue by Browning is itself a fragment —it often begins *in medias res*, or at least in mid-speech— although part of the process of reading it is to imagine the speaker in the round, to locate a history for her or him, a body and a manner. But Prufrock remains essentially a man made of words, existing only in fragments: we may draw conclusions about him from the fragments, but we cannot turn him into a whole. There are, indeed, major considerations surrounding the character that cannot be clearly interpreted. (For instance, when he says “I grow old, I grow old,” are we to take him seriously? He seems much of the time a relatively young man and, of course, we are all growing old anyway, so what does it mean to say so? How old *is* he?) Though there is only one persona in “Prufrock,” it is not a complete and integrated persona (Eliot 2015a, 9).

In the next major poem after “Prufrock,” Eliot takes this matter of voice and identity a stage further. “Gerontion,” which appeared in the volume *Ara Vos Prec* (1920), was at one stage considered as a possible prologue for *The Waste Land*. Pound very wisely discouraged this: it would clearly have unbalanced *The Waste Land* and distracted from the very considerable virtues of “Gerontion” itself. Nevertheless, the two poems do share a great deal, not the least of which is the fact that “Gerontion,” though it appears to be a monologue, is in some sense a poem of many voices.



Looking back on his early poems in later life, Eliot recalled that he was in effect fusing what he'd learnt from Laforgue with elements he'd identified in Jacobean tragedy. In many respects, "Gerontion" is the first of Eliot's poems in which this fusion is plainly in evidence. Its tone and the versification derive, to a large extent, from Thomas Middleton and John Webster, while the allusiveness and kaleidoscopic intercutting are indebted to Laforgue and the Symbolists –though thanks to the Jacobean, the tone has shifted away from the Laforguean irony of "Prufrock." But let us begin at the beginning, looking very closely at the detail and sequencing of it:

### GERONTION

*Thou hast nor youth nor age  
But as it were an after dinner sleep  
Dreaming of both.*

Here I am, an old man in a dry month,  
Being read to by a boy, waiting for rain.  
I was neither at the hot gates  
Nor fought in the warm rain  
Nor knee deep in the salt marsh, heaving a cutlass,  
Bitten by flies, fought.  
My house is a decayed house,  
And the Jew squats on the window sill, the owner,  
Spawned in some estaminet of Antwerp,  
Blistered in Brussels, patched and peeled in London.  
The goat coughs at night in the field overhead;  
Rocks, moss, stonecrop, iron, merds.  
The woman keeps the kitchen, makes tea,  
Sneezes at evening, poking the peevish gutter.

I an old man,  
A dull head among windy spaces.

Signs are taken for wonders. "We would see a sign!"  
The word within a word, unable to speak a word,  
Swaddled with darkness. In the juvenescence of the year  
Came Christ the tiger (Eliot 2015a, 31)

The title looks like a name but, in fact, *Gerontion* is simply the Greek for "little old man." So already Eliot takes away with one hand what he gives with the other. We expect a Ulysses, an Andrea del Sarto or even a Prufrock, and we get a mere generality. Then there is the epigraph: the Duke in *Measure for Measure*, advising Claudio to accept death –which seems in its way not only to undermine the value of Claudio's youth, but also Gerontion's age. We expect the old to be wise, but more often than not they just descend into reverie, "an after dinner sleep," ranging without sense or order over their past lives: which is a fairly good description of the poem at first reading.



It begins with an apparently simple piece of scene-setting that recalls the method of Browning. We have a character, clearly not the poet, at a particular time of year –and perhaps of day: “an after dinner sleep” suggests the occasion– and as we are soon to learn, in a particular place. More than that, we appear to have a Browningsque interlocutor as well, a passive boy who can be expected to listen patiently, draw out the old man’s wisdom and/or confession and, for the reader, provide the obvious contrast to the speaker’s antiquity. And yet the boy is *reading* to Gerontion, so how can he be listening as well? Immediately, the convention is exploded, one effect being to convert dramatic monologue into interior monologue –or, as it is called in criticism of the novel, stream of consciousness.

Then, instead of the memories we might be expecting, we encounter a sequence of non-memories: “I was at none of these places where you might have expected me to be.” One of them gives us a further clue: “the hot gates” translates the Greek name Thermopylae, the scene of the great battle between the Persians and the Spartans in the Peloponnesian War, which can be taken as one of the defining moments in the creation of a European identity: Leonidas and his small band of Spartans holding the narrow pass, the entrance to the European domain, and keeping the Asian enemy at bay. The next image –“the warm rain”– presumably looks at the opposite situation: the expansion of Europe in the imperial age, the drive outside our frontiers. And then the *gates* admit us to the *house*. Hugh Kenner interprets the meaning of this very neatly; “the Voice,” he says,

searches out all the recesses of the “house”: the habitation, the family stock (not doomed like the House of Atreus but simply withered), the European family, the Mind of Europe, the body, finally the brain. (Kenner 1965, 108)

This is one of Eliot’s most brilliant bits of symbolism. The more one examines it, the more one sees that it works all through. At this stage in the poem, we are probably more aware of the house as a literal building than as a metaphor for the old man’s decaying body, the house of the mind that is revealing itself to us as we read. Yet the repetition of the word in one line –“My house is a decayed house”– prepares us for more, and the next line brings us to the notorious Jew, to whom Anthony Julius devotes some eight pages in his book on Eliot and anti-Semitism, without ever explaining the Jew’s significance in the structure of the poem’s symbolism (see Julius 1995, 41-49). Gerontion’s disgust at the Jew –we cannot *assume* that the disgust is Eliot’s own– is inescapable: he is *squatting*, *spawned*, *blistered*, *patched* and *peeled*. The same goes for the assumption that slum landlords are all of the same race. To dwell exclusively on such prejudices, however, is to miss another, more important significance. The European culture which had repelled the Persians at the hot gates has become a derivative culture. Its central system of belief, Christianity, is an Asiatic religion, the offspring of Judaism, and in this context the slum landlord –for whom it seems there was no room at the inn, the “estaminet of Antwerp”– is, at the same time in another sense, the Jew Jesus of Nazareth: “Christ the tiger,” as he next appears, but also the helpless infant (*infans* –unable to speak) and, paradoxically, the Logos, the source of all meaning, “The word within a word, unable to speak a word.”



Certainly the Jew is there, in a somewhat Poundian way, to point to a civilisation in hock to commercial interests, and to that extent his presence is viewed with disgust. But Eliot is no kinder to his Christian, whose impermanence and sterility make him an *alter ego* to the “rootless cosmopolitan” of anti-Semitic euphemism. This is related to the ubiquitous theme of deracination in Eliot’s work, which is shortly to re-surface in the list of foreign names –Mr. Silvero, Hakagawa, Mme. de Tornquist and so on– and which is at the heart of *The Waste Land*. So the Jew is both a type of modern humanity *and* the degraded heir of the great religion to which Western culture owes its existence.

“[T]he present,” wrote Eliot, “is no more than the present existence, the present significance, of the entire past” (Eliot 2014c, 142). One of the functions of dramatic monologue is to situate poetic meditations in the present moment, in the very circumstances in which we think and speak and have our being, which is also of course the time it takes to read the poem. “Gerontion” is like the voice of a culture haunted by its past, by its betrayals, failures and fears; but, dramatically presented, that historical past is also necessarily a personal one. This is the layered effect of post-Symbolist poetry, which reaches its acme in *The Waste Land*. But clearly, as in “Prufrock,” many of these betrayals, failures and fears are emotional and sexual, the personal symbolising the historical, and vice versa:

Think now

History has many cunning passages, contrived corridors  
And issues, deceives with whispering ambitions,  
Guides us by vanities (Eliot 2015a, 32).

What are these passages? The corridors in which Polonius whispers into the ear of Claudius, perhaps, or those which lead to the Hall of Mirrors in the Palace of Versailles, where the peace of 1919 had just been negotiated and which is no doubt remembered in the phrase “a wilderness of mirrors.” This image also recalls a lady’s dressing-table, the glass reflecting facets of a failed relationship, as in part II of *The Waste Land*. But “passages” also suggests the passing of time, episodes in a life or a narrative, sections of a text (Eliot’s own text is notably “cunning”) and –connecting “cunning” with *cunnus* and “contrived” with “cunt”– sexual passages, both affairs and vaginas. And indeed, such passages lead to *issue*. (A verb here, or a noun? We can’t immediately tell.)

It is through its sexual dimension that the poem leads us most radically away from its opening:

I would meet you upon this honestly.  
I that was near your heart was removed therefrom  
To lose beauty in terror, terror in inquisition.  
I have lost my passion: why should I need to keep it  
Since what is kept must be adulterated?  
I have lost my sight, smell, hearing, taste and touch:  
How should I use them for your closer contact? (Eliot 2015a, 32-33)



We have entered so far into Gerontion's unconscious mind that we have forgotten that he began by appearing to address the boy who reads to him. Moreover, is it Gerontion talking any more—whatever he was in the first place? The poem, though ascribed to one speaker, is more like an anthology of voices, though voices that blend into one seamless utterance. This is one of the discoveries that makes *The Waste Land* possible. The other we should notice at this stage is the versification, based on Jacobean blank verse, very different from the varying line-lengths of Prufrock's *vers libres*. The whole speech is, in fact, made up of echoes. There is not a line in it that does not have roots—rhythmic, verbal, or both—in Jacobean drama. There are other examples of this in the rest of “Gerontion.” This particular section is dominated by the manner of the playwright Thomas Middleton (1580-1627), “a great master of versification” in Eliot's view, and the lines he quotes in his essay on Middleton are clearly the main source of the passage we are discussing (Eliot 2015c, 128):

I am that of your blood was taken from you  
 For your better health, look no more upon't,  
 But cast it to the ground regardlessly,  
 Let the common sewer take it from distinction,  
 Beneath the starres, upon yon Meteor  
 Ever hang my fate, 'mongst things corruptible,  
 I ne're could pluck it from him, my loathing  
 Was Prophet to the rest, but ne're believ'd  
 Mine honour fell with him, and now my life. (quoted in Eliot 2015c, 128-129)

Eliot's point, I think, is that this immensely subtle versification—four of the eight lines deviate significantly from standard metrical practice—nonetheless has a compelling rhythm that draws the listener or reader on or in, not through the ordinary metrical alternation of slack and accented syllables, but through a sort of tranced syncopation. Middleton, like late Shakespeare, uses many feminine endings (“from you,” “distinction,” “loathing”) and very lightly accented masculine ones (“regardlessly,” “Meteor,” “corruptible”), which in this case have almost the effect of rhyme and must surely be the source for the Dantesque passage in Eliot's “Little Gidding,” where feminine endings alternating with masculine ones are used instead of rhyme to hint at the relentless forward movement of Dante's *terza rima*. The syncopation has to do with a sort of displaced accent. In the paragraph beginning “I would meet you upon this honestly,” Eliot imitates this effect very closely, but he takes it much further in other parts of “Gerontion” and *The Waste Land*. In the opening passage of “Gerontion,” for instance, we find several lines in which five accents can be located, but none of them serve to define iambic feet:

The goat coughs at níght in the field overhéd;  
 Rócks, móss, stónecrop, íron, mérd's.  
 The wóman kéeps the kíchen, mákes téa,  
 Snéezes at évening, póking the péevish gútter. (Eliot 2015a, 31)



The last of those lines almost restores the standard pattern –an essential feature of this method– but not quite.

An early essay of Eliot's, "Reflections on *Vers Libre*" (1917), comments on this "constant evasion and recognition of regularity." He notices that the metrist he most admires, John Webster, often ruptures the iambic pentameter "at moments of highest intensity" (Eliot 2014a, 513-514) –and he gives examples:

I recover, like a spent taper, for a flash,  
And instantly go out.

Cover her face; mine eyes dazzle; she died young.

You have cause to love me, I did enter you in my heart  
Before you would vouchsafe to me for the keys.

This is a vain poetry: but I pray you tell me  
If there were proposed me, wisdom, riches, and beauty,  
In three several young men, which should I choose? (quoted in Eliot 2014a, 514)

"The irregularity," he goes on to say, "is further enhanced by the use of short lines and the breaking up of lines of dialogue" (Eliot 2014a, 514). This is plainly the model for his own practice, except that he takes it a stage further, notably in *The Waste Land*, where the departure from the metrical norm opens the possibility for rhythms that are governed by no metrical principle at all. As a result, *The Waste Land* is written in a mixture of different prosodies: free verse (in the Poundian sense), blank verse (in the manner of Webster and Middleton), more or less orthodox rhymed verse, and bits of song and doggerel. It is remarkable that this variety is achieved in a poem which depends for its effect on a sense of uninterrupted movement. It *is* interrupted as narrative or in linguistic register, of course; but the discontinuous fragments that make up the poem can only be seen in relation to one another if the rhythm binds them together. Let us take two examples from the first section. First, a relatively straightforward one:

Unreal City,  
Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,  
A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,  
I had not thought death had undone so many.  
Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled,  
And each man fixed his eyes before his feet.  
Flowed up the hill and down King William Street,  
To where Saint Mary Woolnoth kept the hours  
With a dead sound on the final stroke of nine. (Eliot 2015a, 56-57)

We begin with a short and, in effect, extra-metrical line, which derives from Baudelaire, then proceed into a passage of blank verse, which is to say of iambic pentameter. The fourth, fifth and sixth of these lines are translated from Dante's *Inferno*, though taken from two different passages, and the second quotation begins





with the first of the passage's metrical disruptions: "Sighs, shórt and infréquent, wére exháled." This is the same sort of syncopation that we found in "Gerontion," but note how the placing of the five accents very much depends on our awareness of the underlying iambic pattern, which is then restored in the next line when we return from medieval Hell to modern London. The passage depends for its effect on a certain homogeneity of tone. A more remarkable instance comes a little earlier in the section:

'You gave me hyacinths first a year ago;  
'They called me the hyacinth girl.'  
–Yet when we came back, late, from the Hyacinth garden,  
Your arms full, and your hair wet, I could not  
Speak, and my eyes failed, I was neither  
Living nor dead, and I knew nothing,  
Looking into the heart of light, the silence.

*Oed' und leer das Meer* (Eliot 2015a, 56).

One more or less regular pentameter is followed first by a short line of three accents, then by a very irregular line that is nonetheless of five accents, and then – the syncopated effect again – a line of ten monosyllables with five accents irregularly placed. The startling enjambment – "I could not/Speak" – sets up a pattern of internal pause and fragmentation, so that the next line, though actually containing just four accents, seems to satisfy the requirements of line-length as it runs into another foreshortened line – "Living nor dead, and I knew nothing." The last English line restores the iambic pattern, though with variations, and suddenly gives way to a quotation from Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*. In just eight lines, we have speech, tensed inward meditation and a phrase from a German opera.

That is to offer a *technical* description of the "hyacinth girl" passage, but I have not begun to consider its emotional effect. Is there a more moving moment in the poem than the enjambment I have referred to, where the failure to speak anticipates the word "Speak"? It is as if the speaker's silence were built into the poem, an effect then reinforced by the commas and negatives that follow – "not," "neither," "nothing" – and by the metrical lacunae that prune away at the line-lengths. It is not the least of Eliot's achievements in this poem that, amid all the technical brilliance and the display of his own intelligence, he manages to convey the *limits* of verbal expression: in silences, in negations and, perhaps most strikingly, in noises: "Twit twit twit," "Jug Jug," "O O O O," "Weialala leia," "drip drop drip drop drop drop," "Co co rico" and, most importantly, "DA."

These noises and silences; the prosodic inventiveness I have been discussing; the notorious allusiveness of the poem, in particular to poems in languages other than English: these are all aspects of the same central paradox – that this is a work that shows mastery of the furthest reaches of language, that delights in language of all kinds, and yet indicates at every point that all attempts to explain or expound, denote or indicate, are in vain. Language is *essentially* expressive and therefore seems to contain the heart of the mystery, but it cannot give an account of the mystery



because it is limited by the characteristics of those who use it –and indeed, created it– and because words are not things. Yet language is itself a world. Can it express the world of phenomena by means of analogy?

*The Waste Land* is a poem that arises out of much the same spiritual condition as that which confronted the Tennyson of *In Memoriam* and the Arnold of “Dover Beach.” When faced with the spiritual desolation of modern life, Tennyson and Arnold tended to abandon the richly suggestive verbalism that, following their Romantic predecessors, it had been their main endeavour to develop. They abandon that to *argue* with the world. Eliot does not argue. Instead, he takes Victorian verbalism further. By enlarging the language of poetry, he also enlarges what it can touch upon and what it can imply, rather than state. Hence the preoccupation with prosody and, in particular with dramatic verse, since the development of Elizabethan and Jacobean drama is a progress of increasing inwardness. As dramatic skills developed, the dramatist moved further and further away from simple action and deeper and deeper into consciousness. This is what *Hamlet* is all about: the substitution of thought for action. Inwardness is also a preoccupation of the French Symbolist poets admired by Eliot –Laforgue, for example, and Paul Valéry: the interiorisation of the external world. But by a curious paradox, to interiorise is to imply a world independent of consciousness, which cannot be contained by it. In much the same way, inarticulacy –noises, silences– is often more expressive than lucid speech.

Let us take some examples. *The Waste Land* begins, as far as one can tell, with a party of foreign tourists by a lake near Munich. The speaker’s words suggest a deep unrest in the way of life described, a fear of reality matched by a fear of pointlessness, a spiritual void that needs filling. The response of the tourists to the awakening of spring may remind the reader of *The Canterbury Tales*, but Chaucer’s characters are pilgrims, not tourists: their journey has a goal as their life has a goal, and the cure of their physical sickness will be synonymous with the cure of their spiritual sickness. Where the spirits of the pilgrims revive with the new season, Eliot’s speaker retreats. She and her companions seem preoccupied with ways of filling time:

...we stopped in the colonnade,  
And went on in sunlight, into the Hofgarten,  
And drank coffee, and talked for an hour.  
Bin gar keine Russin, stamm’ aus Litauen, echt deutsch. (Eliot 2015a, 55).

That last sentence is the first instance in the poem of a language other than English, and indeed of quotation. New readers sometimes complain about Eliot’s élitism and the extent of his erudition; he expects us to understand German and Italian, they say, and to have read all the books that he has. Yet surely this particular line has failed if we find ourselves instantly understanding it. It exemplifies the specifically modern experience the poem has begun by evoking: tourism, petty nationalism, rootlessness, the fragmentation of culture. It is like walking through a popular tourist destination when the coaches have discharged their human cargo and we hear a Babel of many different languages, most of which we cannot understand.



To that extent, the line is to be compared to the noises mentioned earlier –to “Jug Jug,” “Weialala” and so on– but of course, it is also a quotation from a common European language, so, even if the listener has never learnt that language, the meaning can be guessed at and, eventually, translated and “understood.” Readers will know that “deutsch” means German. Most will guess that “Russin” means Russian, and so it develops until we get the whole line: “I’m not Russian at all, I come from Lithuania, genuine German.” Yet you cannot translate the *effect* and, indeed, what the translation primarily tells us is that what we took from the effect in the first place was, in substance, precisely the point.

It would of course be wrong to treat the quotations from poems in foreign languages –or even those from poems written in English– with the same casualness. Eliot was fond of making this point himself. On the lines from Dante I mentioned above, he commented that he meant the reader to recognise the allusion and that the reader “would have missed the point if he did not recognize it” (Eliot 2019, 484). This is undoubtedly true, though it is also true that Eliot believed in what he called “the ‘auditory imagination,’” and often asserted that poems make their impact on the reader in some cases before they are understood (Eliot 2015b, 664-665). This is especially true of *The Waste Land*. Moreover, what constitutes a quotation exactly? We can refer Dante back to his context, but can we do the same with the main source of that opening passage, the reminiscences of an Austrian Countess, whom Eliot happened to meet? (See Southam 1994, 14-16). Her book has no literary significance and the connection with *The Waste Land* was only discovered by chance. Is “Co co rico” a quotation? After all, we say “cockle-doodle-doo” in English, but “Co co rico” cannot be said to have any context more precise than the French language. Most interesting of all, what are we to make of the last line of the poem: “Shantih shantih shantih” –a Sanskrit word repeated three times? As we have noticed, even those who have never learnt any German at all will understand something in a German line, but only a specialised linguist will understand Sanskrit. Fortunately, we can consult Eliot’s notes, where we learn of “shantih” that “‘The Peace which passeth understanding’ is our equivalent to this word” (Eliot 2015a, 77). We needed to be told. But isn’t our need to be told an element of what is being said? Just as, quite trivially, the relative opacity of “Bin gar keine Russin” is expressive of the need we have to interpret the day-to-day human world, so here the very word exemplifies the difficulty of comprehending the peace of God –if that is what it is. At the same time, the sound of the word –the noise it makes– perhaps communicates a sense of peace to the “auditory imagination,” even before one has tried to comprehend it.

There is certainly erudition in *The Waste Land*, but we are missing the point if we see that as something set up to exclude us. On the contrary, the purpose of it is to engage us more: a principle Eliot seems to have learnt from his friend Ezra Pound, in such poems as the two-line “In a Station of the Metro:

The apparition of these faces in the crowd;  
Petals on a wet, black bough. (Pound 2003, 287)

–where the absence of any grammatical copula between the lines obliges the reader to supply one, such that the meaning of the poem seems to belong to the reader



rather than the writer. Eliot's debt to his friend is implicitly acknowledged in the poem's dedication: "To Ezra Pound, *il miglior fabbro* [the better craftsman]" (Eliot 2015a, 52). Eliot is doing something along these lines when, for example, the neurotic lady on her "burnished throne" at the beginning of Part 2 (Eliot 2015a, 58), is juxtaposed with the Cockney speaker's friend in the pub scene at the end of it. The reader recognises –without being told– that they are versions of the same type, one high class, the other low, but substantially the same figure. And it is in this process of identifying them that we detect the spiritual malaise shared by the whole society. This is an implied analogy that not many readers will miss, though they may not notice that it is they rather than the poet who draw the connection.

A much more problematic example of juxtaposition, and one where erudition is decisively involved, is the poem's closing paragraph, the last line of which has already been touched upon:

I sat upon the shore  
 Fishing, with the arid plain behind me  
 Shall I at least set my lands in order?  
 London Bridge is falling down falling down falling down  
 Poi s'ascose nel foco che gli affina  
 Quando fiam uti chelidon –O swallow swallow  
 Le Prince d'Aquitaine à la tour abolie  
 These fragments I have shored against my ruins  
 Why then Ile fit you. Hieronymo's mad againe.  
 Datta. Dayadhvam. Damyata.  
 Shantih shantih shantih (Eliot 2015a, 71)

In these eleven lines there are nine quotations from a total of five languages –six if we include the third of the lines quoted, which is from the King James Version of 1611, the classic English translation of the Hebrew Bible. The first two lines, in addition, allude to Eliot's primary source book, *From Ritual to Romance* (Weston 1920, *passim*). Only one line –"These fragments I have shored against my ruins"– is (as far as anyone knows) Eliot's own; and it is no accident that this is the line which gives meaning to the rest. Without it we would have only what we seemed to have at first reading anyway: a meaningless jumble of words, a cacophony, a versified Tower of Babel, a metropolitan street at the height of the tourist season. Once again, if we simply "understood" it, the point would not have been made. But if in our bafflement we take fragments to refer to the quotations that make up the rest of the paragraph, we may be led to pull them together in the Poundian way and draw connections. We will notice, for instance, that "ruins" appears to refer us back to "la tour abolie," which then connects with the fate of London Bridge in the nursery rhyme. Readers of Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* (1587) will know that "Ile fit you" is an agreement to write a play in "sundry languages" –like the poem we are coming to the end of (Kyd 1959, 112). And so on. Though the poem *appears* to be chaotic and formless, the activity of the reader discovers an order beneath the surface.

But this dichotomy of order and chaos gives expression to Eliot's own confusion, a confusion embodied in the poem's ambiguities. An important example



appears in this very passage. Do the fragments merely shore up a doomed building (prevent it from falling down) or do they save it (restore it to practical use)? Can the meaning we have lost in the world be reconstructed in the world as it can be in the poem? Does finding an order beneath the chaotic words just tell us something about language and our human need to make sense of things, or does our language—does language in general—embody some truth about the world that our intellects have not yet managed to grasp? There is a wonderful sentence in Eliot's eulogistic essay on the Jacobean divine Lancelot Andrewes: "Andrewes," says Eliot, "takes a word, and derives the world from it" (Eliot, 2014b, 822). We think we hear a homophone, but *world* and *word* are not the same and their difference, slight though it is, haunts *The Waste Land* and many of Eliot's other poems and essays.<sup>1</sup>

It provides the very substance of the final section, "What the Thunder Said." There the issue, put prosaically, is whether or not it rains. On the most literal of levels we must understand that, although we expect rain in a thunderstorm, it is possible to have thunder without rain. And then the thunder must *say* something, as the title affirms, but need what it says be connected with the water? For the coming of rain in the symbolism of the poem would signify the return of fertility to the waste land and the healing of the Fisher King's wound. The land's sterility, as we are by now more than conscious, is partly physical, sexual and emotional, yes, but it is also as importantly spiritual, psychological and religious. Would the resolution of the one be also the resolution of the other? Clearly not—and yet there seems an anticipation that it might be so. In so far as the word mirrors the world, the word may achieve a resolution but, in so far as it does not, the world will remain unchanged. Here is a crucial example from "What the Thunder Said":

If there were water  
And no rock  
If there were rock  
And also water  
And water  
A spring  
A pool among the rock  
If there were the sound of water only  
Not the cicada  
And dry grass singing  
But sound of water over a rock  
Where the hermit-thrush sings in the pine trees  
Drip drop drip drop drop drop drop  
But there is no water (Eliot 2015a, 68-69)

In this extraordinary passage, the poem creates water—or rather, the reader's imagination, prompted by the poet's language, creates water, though finally it is

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<sup>1</sup> In particular, see "Ash-Wednesday V" (Eliot 2015a, 94-95).



something on the very fringe of language, the verbalisation of the bird's song, that seems to give it to us, even as the syntax denies and removes it: "there is no water," the passage concludes. So *The Waste Land* does not end on a note of hope, though it does suggest where to look for hope. The fact of sterility cries out for water; the land is sterile because it needs water; *ergo*, the coming of water must be possible. We can only speak when we have a meaning to express, yet the world we live in seems devoid of what our language appears to tell us we need. Paradoxically, the language that comes nearest to offering hope in the desert is not on first hearing a human language at all. If it is identified as an echo of human language, it is barely articulate. Yet what it says with its two capital letters and one syllable seems to be everything that needs saying:

Dry bones can harm no one.  
Only a cock stood on the rooftree  
Co co rico co co rico  
In a flash of lightning. Then a damp gust  
Bringing rain

Ganga was sunken, and the limp leaves  
Waited for rain, while the black clouds  
Gathered far distant, over Himavant.  
The jungle crouched, humped in silence.  
Then spoke the thunder  
DA

*Datta*: what have we given?  
My friend, blood shaking my heart  
The awful daring of a moment's surrender  
Which an age of prudence can never retract  
By this, and this only, we have existed (Eliot 2015a, 70)

DA: the sound of thunder, the first syllable of the three Sanskrit imperatives from the *Upanishads*, "give" (imperative) in Latin, Italian and Spanish, "yes" in Russian, "father" in many languages, but –most important of all– one of the first two sounds a baby makes before it can speak. At the same time, it could be simply a hollow reverberation. Whichever it is, one cannot read *The Waste Land* without some sense of Eliot's need for a meaning outside himself and beyond language, and the quest for such meaning was to activate all of his subsequent work.

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