THE WASTE LAND AND THE ROAD TO EMMAUS

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Abstract

The game-changing status afforded to *The Waste Land* complicates any evaluation of the poem's quality, since it broke most of the old formal rules. To equate the poem with "Modernism" does not help. Some difficulties with reception can be removed (e.g. calling it *The Wasteland* makes readers think it is about the 1914-18 war, which it is not). The Notes can be demystified. This article spells out the Christian focus of Part V, which is often overlooked.

Keywords: T.S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*, voice, passion, Christianity.

LA TIERRA BALDÍA Y EL CAMINO A EMAÚS

Resumen

El hecho de que se reconozca un antes y un después en poesía respecto a *La tierra baldía* (*The Waste Land*) dificulta la evaluación de la calidad del poema, ya que hizo pedazos la mayoría de las antiguas reglas formales. Tampoco ayuda su equiparación con el "Modernismo". Se pueden eliminar ciertos problemas en la recepción (por ejemplo, el hecho de titularlo como "The Wasteland" hace pensar a los lectores que se trata de la Gran Guerra de 1914-18, lo cual no es así). Se pueden desmitificar las Notas. Este artículo hace hincapié en el enfoque cristiano de la Parte V, que a menudo se pasa por alto.

Palabras clave: T.S. Eliot, *La tierra baldía*, voz, pasión, cristianismo.

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The publication of *The Waste Land* in October 1922 met with bemusement, outrage, acclaim. Would it make a permanent impact or was it a passing phenomenon? Eliot himself rapidly achieved a remarkable ascendancy. In my schooldays, Eliot was still *the* modern poet. It was a school bus which took our class to East Coker in 1958, some years before Eliot was buried there; my *Four Quartets* contains the imprint of rose petals I picked there. We schoolboys had read *The Waste Land*, and been told to look up the references in Eliot's Notes to the poem. My teachers, I think, preferred the *Quartets* to *The Waste Land*, perhaps because the *Quartets* had appeared during the war which they had experienced; they may also have valued the Christian elements, which are far more explicit in the *Quartets* than in the earlier poem. If *The Waste Land* was a call to prayer from the ruins of the Tower of Babel, the *Quartets* show a poet simplifying, clearing his throat, attempting responses in varying levels of speech. Eliot's critical writing was also commended to us at school. His "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1919) taught us to mistrust Romantic afflatus, and we were led to think that there had been a "dissociation of sensibility" at the time of the Civil War.

I cannot exclude reference to my own experience of a poem I have known for sixty-five years. Many things have altered in this time, inside and outside the readership of poetry. Not many readers of this piece will share my views or experience. A revisiting is, among other things, a piece of personal reminiscence. I have read no criticism of the poem for some decades.

In February 1965, after Eliot's memorial service in Westminster Abbey, I went up to sympathise with a man standing in the cold outside the West front: Ezra Pound, to whom Eliot had dedicated *The Waste Land*. Pound had excised one third of the text Eliot had submitted to him, and Eliot had thanked him for his editing with the dedication: *il miglior fabbro*. I had visited Pound in Italy in 1962 to ask if he would accept the dedication of a book of verse translations on which I was engaged: *The Earliest English Poems* (1965).[1] I had been prompted to attempt these translations by Pound's version of the Old English poem, "The Seafarer." Pound's response to my request was "If you think it can be done without irony." I took this as conventional modesty, but it wasn't. After twelve years in a Washington mental hospital, and facing a transformed world, Pound's confidence in the merits of his writing had collapsed.

Back in 1922, *The Waste Land* had baffled older readers. Why should a poem in English have Latin, Greek and Italian on the dedication page, quote German, French and other languages in the text, and end up with a triple *Shantih* on the Ganges? The text was discontinuous, seemed incoherent, and crammed with erudite fragments from other writers. It broke the old rules.

Thanks to its polarised reception, and to the sharp distinction of his essays in the *Times Literary Supplement*, Eliot attracted attention. His cultural authority

[1] Two subsequent revisions were followed by a rewritten version, *The First Poems in English,* Penguin Classics, 2008.

accumulated: editor of the *Criterion*, editor at Faber and Faber (which he made the leading poetry publisher), author of a string of critical essays. According to Hugh Kenner, Pound once said to Eliot "You let *me* throw the bricks through the front window. You go in at the back door and take out the swag" (Kenner 1985, 83). Eliot did indeed get the cultural swag, but the front door had not been closed to him, as it had to Pound. Bertrand Russell commented on his "Etonian manners" –he looked like a superior kind of Englishman. Eliot eventually became a critical arbiter, a Dr. Johnson or a Matthew Arnold, albeit in a narrower space, pronouncing from a high altitude some old truths in a drifting world. In our less reflective age, his kind of critical authority seems unrepeatable.

In 1922 Eliot must have seemed, to the ordinary reader of poetry, both bizarre and intellectual. It is easy to forget that English poetry, a hundred years ago, had a large popular readership. The reason that the First World War produced a lot of verse is not just because the trench war was terrible and interminable, but because a lot of verse was what people were used to. People in the century before 1922 did not just admire poetry: they read it, knew poems by heart, saw it in newspapers, and even paid money to buy books of it.

If Eliot can be said to have had any kind of popular reception, this took decades to arrive, hindered as well as helped by his incorporation into university English degrees, which had recently begun at Cambridge. There the critic F.R. Leavis took ideas from Eliot and taught them to generations. At Oxford, Helen Gardner became a leading commentator on his work. Frank Kermode edited Eliot's essays. Christopher Ricks jointly edited an extremely detailed commentary on Eliot's poetry. All this made Eliot seem a poet for an educated elite –which, like Sidney, Spenser, Donne, Milton, Alexander Pope and Matthew Arnold, he was. Poems engage the elite parts of the mind as well as the un-elite parts.

Though *The Waste Land*'s novelty faded, and though it held a lofty position in English teaching for two generations, its power remains undiminished. The nature of the poem means that it retains its essential unfamiliarity, its publication marking the advent of Modernism in English poetry. This is, or was, a Good Thing. But good things for academics become Subjects to be taught –whether The Rise of the Novel or Post-Colonialism. A taught Subject is not revolutionary. The bursting out of Modernism turned out not to have brought about the lasting transformation effected by the Romantic movement, though it had some effects on poetry, both positive and negative. In Britain, there are extremely few, even in universities, who get through Pound's *Cantos*, and they need a helping hand.

Tastes change: an instance is the collapse in the readership of D.H. Lawrence. A generation ago, university teachers saw their students lose interest in Lawrence. The same thing may be happening with Joyce, who has been over-sold in the Irish diaspora; after the first third of *Ulysses*, interest drops. In England, after the initial shock, Modernism was ignored, modified, absorbed, digested into older traditions. One can say that after the First World War, fewer truths were "universally acknowledged," and writing had more succinctness, more irony, fewer ideals.

Modernism did not undo what had preceded it, and non-Modernism continued alongside it. The 1920s was the time in which the poetry of Thomas Hardy,

nearly all of which was published in the twentieth century, received full appreciation. In 1928 Hardy's ashes were buried in Westminster Abbey. The pallbearers included Housman, Shaw and Kipling, and representatives of Oxford and Cambridge. The leading pallbearer was the Prime Minister, Stanley Baldwin. Among the mourners was a representative of the King. Hardy, a survivor from a broader age of literature, was buried with greater public honour than any later writer, including T.S. Eliot. Public honour may not last, but this salute to Hardy testified to the standing in England, in 1928, of literature itself. This was also the year of Waugh's *Decline and Fall*, which features the Egdon Heath Penal Settlement, a dig at Hardy. A few years later, Waugh called his darkest novel *A Handful of Dust,* words taken from *The Waste Land.*

The high modernism of Joyce and Lawrence, of Pound and Wyndham Lewis, was hard to follow. In 1927 Eliot, five years after *The Waste Land,* became a British subject, calling himself "classicist in literature, royalist in politics, and anglo-catholic in religion" (Eliot 2015b, 513). When the shocks of 1922 subsided, it could be seen that Henry James, Joseph Conrad, and their European predecessors had warned of a cultural and moral disruption, but England was, generally, slow to recognise this disruption. Most of the modernists were not English. Eliot became English, yet this descendant of a long-established American family called his politics "royalist" –a term from French politics, not heard in England since the 1660s or in the USA after the 1780s.

One entirely English modernist was Virginia Woolf, whose name was known beyond the avant-garde, as were some of her works. In the 1970s, American feminists claimed that Woolf had been under-rated and neglected: my impression is that her feminism had not been neglected in England, though it is true that her academic hour was about to come. Her writing, however, her modernist fiction, had certainly not been neglected in England. Her major achievement, *To the Lighthouse,* was a set book at my boys' boarding school in the 1950s, as was her engaging critical writing.

Graham Greene once protested that the characters of Woolf and Forster "wandered like cardboard symbols through a world that was paper-thin." Greene missed in these Bloomsbury writers the religious sense which he found in Henry James. With the loss, said Greene, "of the religious sense... went the sense of the importance of the human act" (Greene 1969, 91). James had a deep sense of evil, and his urbanity does not conceal his strong moral sense, something which Bloomsbury was happy to have discarded. Lytton Strachey, mocker of eminent Victorians, found religion laughable. If religion did not bloom in Bloomsbury, neither did poetry. Virginia Woolf, who published Eliot, was baffled –outraged– to find how central religion was to his work. Like her father, Woolf had "a Victorian nonconformist conscience painfully detached from its God." This is the verdict of Penelope Fitzgerald, an admirer of Virginia Woolf, and a writer whose work, taken as a whole, constitutes, in my considered opinion, a more complete achievement than Woolf's (Fitzgerald 2003, 278).

How good a poem is *The Waste Land?* This question is not often raised, since it is hard to separate assessment from impact and reputation. There are some points to clear out of the way. Indeed, the purpose of the second half of this piece

is to remove, or lessen, one or two obstacles in the approach to the poem, with a final look at its Christianity and a glance at its formal qualities.

The title itself can pose problems. It is often printed as two words, not three. *Waste* and *Land* are two words, receiving equal stress. To call the poem *The Wasteland* raises expectations that it will be about the devastation of Europe; the ruined landscapes of Flanders are the visual frame for that war in British minds. In fact, though Eliot's poem mentions locations in Europe, and repeats that "London Bridge is falling down," there is little specific mention of the physical effects of the First World War on the European landscape. It is characteristic of Eliot's approach to give a reference a general application. The "maternal lamentation" belongs to Golgotha as much as it does to Europe, though the "endless hordes" do seem to belong to eastern Europe as well as invoking images of the end of the world. But the poem does not present trenches and broken trees. Rather we see Biblical deserts, bad sex in the city, the garden of Gethsemane and the Ganges awaiting the monsoon.

Eliot's first volume of poems, *Prufrock and other Observations*, 1917, had been dedicated to a French friend who died at the Dardanelles, but *The Waste Land* (though full of death and deathly forms of life) does not refer directly to the fatalities of the European war, unlike some of the reportage in Pound's *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*. So *The Waste Land* is not *The Wasteland*. This is a point which readers of this piece will hardly need to be reminded of, but one easily missed by those who have heard of this famous poem and know of its revolutionary status –but have not read it, and suppose it is about the war. It is not about the war, although it is shadowed by dark thoughts prompted by the war and also by wider doubts. A misunderstood title affects a work's reputation.

The title has a second, lesser problem, as it is a quotation from a medieval text, and its application may be missed by a student of the poem who reads the first of Eliot's Notes, since this note does not make it crystal clear that the words are from Sir Thomas Malory, an author more read in the century before 1922 than in the century since.

If the title can be misunderstood, the Notes can bewilder. The first publisher of the poem as a book asked Eliot to add something to fill up the pages to make the text long enough for a book. (Ezra Pound shortened the text to nineteen pages –"let us say the longest poem in the English langwidge," as he joked in his letter to Eliot of December 24, 1921 (Pound 1950, 168). The Notes that Eliot supplied have not helped the reception of the poem, though they are useful evidence of its gestation. They are not in the style common to modern notes to an older work, nor are they in a uniform style, so one does not know how to take them. Some stretch to a length which suggests that they are there to take up space. Others are mock-serious. A third kind refers the readers to the origin of Eliot's quotations, to show that he was no plagiarist but a knowing user of what he quoted. This third kind helps scholars, but for many readers it confirms the impression given by the epigraph to the poem, which mingles Latin and Greek, English and Italian. The preliminaries and the annotations to *The Waste Land* strongly suggest that this poem is for "fit audience though few" –like *Paradise Lost*. Though some readers like to feel that they are ahead of the game, the common reader's view matters in the end. Dr Johnson thought that

if a reputation lasted a hundred years, it was probably justified, and *The Waste Land* has its readers. Like Milton's epic, Eliot's *omnium gatherum* assumes a knowledge of classical and religious literature which has become rare, yet the mixed-language epigraph and bewildering notes turn out to be less alarming than the poem itself. Indeed, its first line upsets any orthodoxy by telling us that, contrary to what a lot of poets have previously told us, April is the cruellest month.

It is my experience that the poem that comes between the puzzling epigraph and the gallimaufry of notes –the poem itself, once it is actually read or heard, communicates immediately and often overwhelmingly. The poem is not a show of arcane erudition but a dramatic performance of many voices, an alarming witness to a cultural and spiritual agony general to humanity. Its memorable phrases, its rhythms, its incantatory language can enter deeply into the mind, long before a reasonable grasp, even of the English parts of the text, can be formed. The Notes have their uses, but they are an unfortunate necessity.

The notes that call for comment are those on Jessie L Weston, on Tiresias and the introductory note to "What the Thunder Said." Eliot's note on Weston's book, and on Frazer's vegetation ceremonies, point –though in an uninviting manner– to where the title of the poem came from –the Grail legend, as it is retold in *Le Morte d'Arthur*, which Sir Thomas Malory finished in 1470. Malory supplies the poem's title. The land, in Malory, is the "dead land', the waste land, of the poem's second line.[2] Nothing grows there, nothing will grow until the King of the land dies, though this is not explained by Eliot, and the King's death (which shadows the death and resurrection of Jesus) has to be learned from further reading. If the legendary background helps, as far as it goes –making the land doubly dead– it cannot be said that the legend adds much to the poem after its opening until the final section, which deals with the Agony in the Garden of Gethsemane. Christ's Passion, announced in part V, is followed by the Journey to Emmaus, and the fruit of the Passion, held in the Grail, the chalice of Christ's blood. The Grail is in the Chapel Perilous, which (as Malory makes clear) can be approached only by a man of pure life. As Eliot's poem makes clear, there are few, if any, such men –or women, not even Queen Elizabeth I (Eliot 2015a, 75).

The note on Tiresias presents the poet, commenting on his own poem, in a voice all too close to that of a graduate seminar. We learn that Tiresias has both sexes, that he witnesses mechanical and meaningless sexual encounters, and that all the women "are one woman"; so presumably all the men are one man. The conversation overheard in the pub is about the desirability of abortion: living children enter Eliot's poem only as voices singing in a church. (Abortion, it may need to be said, was at that time regarded as, at best, unfortunate. However sad the situation of the

[2] "...and so befelle there grete pestilence, and grete harme to bothe Reallmys; for there encreced nother corne, ne grasse, nother wel-nye no fruyte, ne in the watir was found no fyssh. Therefore men callen hit –the londys of the two marchys– the Waste Land, for that dolerous stroke," 581.

expectant mother, abortion was then regarded as a moral crime, not as a moral right of the mother.) In his *Usura* canto, Pound expresses the same view as Eliot implies: Usury "slayeth the child in the womb" (Pound 1975, 230).

The note to the final section mentions "the present decay of eastern Europe," which is the nearest the Notes come to touching upon contemporary politics. "Decay" suggests the moral chaos in the former empires of eastern Europe, notably the triumph of communism in Russia.

"What the Thunder Said" was written in one sequence by Eliot; no cuts were imposed upon it by Pound. It is a more spiritual, Biblical and metaphysical sequence than its predecessors. Its first British readers must have been struck by the three late quotations from Indian spiritual writing, three divine utterances which are given a climactic position in the poem, before its final collapse into fragmentariness. Eliot is careful to translate for us the meanings of the divine commands. Indian thought had affected American writers since Whitman and Emerson, and Eliot had spent two years studying Indian metaphysics as part of his philosophy course at Harvard.

Less strikingly obvious to some readers today will be the Christian frame and underlay to this fifth part. Such a frame is announced by the first of the Notes on the Grail legend and again in the reference to Emmaus in the note introducing Part v, although "Emmaus" may mean little to a reader unfamiliar with Christianity. (In California, in 1966, I taught a student who wrote in an essay that Christ had been killed in a cavalry charge. Spelling can be important.)

Part V opens with the arrest of Christ at dawn in Gethsemane, his "agony" on "stony" Golgotha, "shouting" (*e.g.* of "Crucify him!"), the "crying" of the women of Jerusalem, imprisonment, "palace" interrogation, and "reverberation." The Latin term behind "reverberation" means beating with blows, scourging. After a line which opens out towards beats of thunder and India's distant mountains, the opening paragraph returns to the abandonment felt by the followers of the crucified Jesus.

The deserts of Old Testament prophets lie behind the next two paragraphs. Then follows the post-resurrection journey of two apostles towards the shared meal at Emmaus, which broadens out into the visions of men labouring through a wilderness, and the mystery of a visionary companion. Then visions of the end of the European war and an apocalyptic image of a heavenly city cracking, re-forming and bursting again. After a more personal nightmare vision we approach the Chapel Perilous, in terms borrowed from Malory and from Browning's Childe Roland. We hear the cock of betrayal heard by St Peter and see the lightning which accompanied Christ's death. The longed-for rain that falls in India, even as new life is to begin on the arid plain of the waste land of the world... In bringing out the preoccupation with Christianity in the last part of the poem, I do not wish to minimise the Indian metaphysics which form a permanent element in Eliot's spiritual thought. Literary critics normally see this poem as one of spiritual doubt and frustration, but it is also a poem of spiritual quest, ending ambiguously.

I will end by emphasising that *The Waste Land* is a dramatic work for international voices (Eliot nearly called the poem "He do the police in different voices" (Eliot 1971, 125) –voices from Interpol, perhaps). The "different voices" become more evident when the poem is read aloud, and indeed any such reading

brings out by contrast the few happy moments in an often-agonised text –*les voix d'enfants chantant dans la coupôle,* the bird-song, the Ionian splendour of the church of St Magnus (a warrior-martyr who refused violence), the fishmen lounging at noon, the element of hope in the explanation of *Damyata*. The five-part arrangement of the text is musical, and the language of the text, despite its fragmentary textures, has unforgettable musical moments. Auden thought that the best definition of poetry is "memorable speech" (Auden 1935, v). *The Waste Land* meets this test. Eliot thought that the best lines in the poem were the water-dripping song, an entirely unintellectual sound. It is a poem of music as much as of ideas, and though the ideas may be important and easier for critics to discuss, I see the poem, which can at first seem like a prolonged and unintelligible scream, as a very well-edited scream, an often musical scream, one organised for orchestral performance. It is a poem of acute unhappiness seeking for a Yes: not finding it, but still seeking it.

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