

READING THE MORE-THAN-HUMAN WORLD IN T.S. ELIOT'S *THE WASTE LAND*

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ABSTRACT

This article offers an ecocritical reading of *The Waste Land*, arguing that Eliot's *magnum opus* can be read as an ecopoem that anticipates the woes of the Anthropocene, finding evidence for this in the many references to the human-induced environmental degradation and anthropogenic detritus that are scattered throughout the poem. In the aftermath of the Great War, amidst the disintegration of the mind of Europe in an increasingly secularised world, Eliot strives to find solace not only in the spirit, but also in the more-than-human world as represented by mountains, water and birdsong that emulates the sound of dripping water. Yet in Eliot's conceptualisation, the more-than-human world is tinged with the transcendent and the divine, as his ecologism is deeply ethical and spiritual.

KEYWORDS: T.S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*, ecopoetry, more-than-human, Anthropocene.

LEER EL MUNDO MÁS QUE HUMANO
EN *LA TIERRA BALDÍA* DE T.S. ELIOT

RESUMEN

El presente artículo ofrece una lectura ecocrítica de *La tierra baldía* y sostiene que la obra magna de Eliot puede ser interpretada como un ecopoema que anticipa los males del Antropoceno, como ponen de manifiesto las múltiples referencias a la degradación medioambiental provocada por el ser humano y al detrito generado por nuestra especie. Tras la Gran Guerra, en medio de la desintegración de la mente de Europa en un mundo cada vez más secularizado, Eliot trata de encontrar solaz no solo en el espíritu, sino también en el mundo más que humano que encarnan las montañas, el agua y el canto de un ave que emula el sonido del agua que cae. Con todo, tal y como lo concibe Eliot, el mundo más que humano está teñido de lo trascendente y divino, pues su ecologismo es de una naturaleza profundamente ética y espiritual.

PALABRAS CLAVE: T.S. Eliot, *La tierra baldía*, ecopoesía, más que humano, Antropoceno.

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A WHOLE MADE OF FRAGMENTS & RUINS

The Waste Land is the Modernist poetic manifesto par excellence, as well as the very embodiment of the ideas put forward by T.S. Eliot in his landmark essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1919): an organised view of “the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer” (Eliot 2014d, 106). As such, it has been variously interpreted as a sociological document mourning the disintegration of Europe after the Great War (Rabaté 2015), an intensely multivocal and allusive text marked by parody and pastiche (Longenbach 1994; Coyle 2015; Levenson 2015), a map of the changing geographies of postwar London (Morrison 2015), an exploration of violence, trauma and thwarted desire (Badenhausen 2015; Davidson 1994), a psychological, autobiographical poem informed by lived experiences (Sorum 2015; Gordon 2015), a philosophical and profoundly religious poem (Shusterman 2015; Spurr 2015) juxtaposing Western and Eastern ways of knowing, and an eco-poem exposing anthropogenic detritus in an increasingly industrialised world (McIntire 2015). That *The Waste Land* should have prompted such varied exegeses comes as no surprise, given its dense allusiveness, breaking down clear meanings and interpretations. Yet Eliot’s poem is much more than the extremely allusive, densely layered and complex poem made of fragments from myriad sources that Eliot’s own notes would suggest. In its form and deeply dense texture, interweaving textual threads from different literary and philosophical traditions, the poem enacts Eliot’s own attempt to make sense of his *self* amid a complex world in the aftermath of World War I, where people had become progressively alienated from reality, from each other and from the nonhuman world. In fact, like Pound’s *Mauberley* (1920), Eliot’s poem is “one of the first canonical works of modern Anglo-American literature to envision a dying society in the aftermath of world war” (Buell 1995, 288). In this regard, this article argues that, throughout the poem, Eliot deploys elements of the more-than-human world – to borrow ecophilosopher David Abram’s term (1996) – to shed light on aspects of existence that deeply matter to him. Most critical interpretations of Eliot’s poem to date have focused on its anthropocentric dimension, but an ecocritical (and posthuman) reading of *The Waste Land* is of particular relevance to the unprecedented current climate crisis facing humanity.

This article argues that *The Waste Land* mourns the state of exhaustion of Western civilisation and that it registers the first alarming signs of environmental degradation visible in nature. Through “collage-like juxtaposition of spaces that are geographically distinct but temporally simultaneous,” Eliot maps London and other “diverse geographies (desert, alpine, and jungle)” (Morrison 2015, 27) with an enhanced awareness of how human lives are inextricably situated in material space and enmeshed with the more-than-human world. The iconic Modernist poem is also possibly Eliot’s most explicit attempt at composing a polyphonic work mimicking the plurality, mutability and protean reality of what-is through the medium of conscious and subliminal allusions, the apparently random juxtaposition of fragments, musical and thematic self-echoes, the blurring of boundaries between texts, and a deft use of voice in different registers, with “the overlapping reverberations



and interpenetrating echoes [displaying] the indeterminacy of boundaries around persons” (Levenson 2015, 90).

Most interpretations of Eliot’s inexhaustible verbal artefact to date have emphasised the role of the human world –social and private behaviour, emotions, ideas, affects– and largely ignored the nonhuman. In this regard, such interpretations have tacitly acknowledged that the Modernist poem embodies the quintessence of the epistemology that has been prevalent in the West for the last five centuries: an epistemology of control, a style of thought stemming from Baconian science that seeks to understand, anatomise, and systematise its object of knowledge. The origins of this way of thinking can be traced back to Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*, where the Greek philosopher argued that all human beings desire to know and understand the world.¹ Like the pursuit of happiness, common to all humans from different cultures and civilisations, Aristotle conceived of the hunger for knowledge as a *cupiditas naturalis* that could not be easily appeased. In this connection, Barry Spurr has noted how the philosophical and religious concept of “the quest for the fullness of understanding” and of “the formidable obstacles confronting the undertaking, particularly in an increasingly secularized, anthropocentric world” (2015, 54) is a central theme in Eliot’s poetry. A quest for order and meaning and a desire for salvation are discernible near the close of the poem, as evoked by “Shall I at least set my lands in order?” (Eliot 2015, 71). To Eliot’s mind, “[l]oss of unity of feeling and thought accounts for the larger rupture of unity of being, which he believed to be the major cause of our divided culture” (Patea 2011, 15) and “the ills of the isolated, fragmented and alienated contemporary self” (17). As a point of fact, what he calls *dissociation of sensibility* “dates back to the development of scientific thought and its materialistic ethos” (17) in the cradle of modernity. A turning point in the history of humankind, the emergence of modern scientific thought “divests reality of its transcendent dimension and dangerously undermines its spiritual values, which remain relegated to the limited sphere of the ego” (17), whilst it “erodes the magico-religious structures of the Medieval and Renaissance imagination and gives way to disillusionment and ontological insecurity” (17).

In Lawrence Buell’s well-known definition, ecocriticism is the “study of the relation between literature and environment conducted in a spirit of commitment to environmentalist praxis” (1995, 430), and “environmentally oriented” writing is that which is primarily concerned with the representation of the nonhuman environment and the relations between human and nonhuman beings (1995, 7-8). Environmentally sensitive texts –as *The Waste Land* appears to be– are marked by a deep sense of commitment and denunciation of practices that are damaging to the more-than-human world. Yet culture and nature have come to be so deeply intertwined and enmeshed that scholars like Donna Haraway (2003; 2008) have posited the notion of *natureculture* to signify the entanglements of natural entities and humanmade artefacts in a vast network of material-semiotic relationships. In

¹ Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* opens like this: “All men by nature desire to know” (1552).



this gigantic “Commonwealth of Breath” (Abram 2014, 313), mutually constitutive and coevolving entities are intertwined and interact with each other, and the physical environment is “increasingly refashioned by capital, technology, and geopolitics” (Buell 2001, 5), to such an extent that the “natural” and ‘human-built’ dimensions of the palpable world” have become “increasingly indistinguishable” (Buell 2001, 3). As Cheryl Glotfelty lucidly puts it, “literature does not float above the material world in some aesthetic ether, but, rather, plays a part in an immensely complex global system in which energy, matter, and ideas interact” (1996, xix).

The Waste Land, this essay argues, is punctuated by the subterranean epiphany that this happens to be the case: that human beings cannot be separated from the land, that the land and the spirit are what we ultimately come from, that our bodies and minds are sensuously immersed in that larger more-than-human world we are a part *of*, not apart *from*. Eliot must have sensed the power inherent in poetry to impact the world and remind humans of their unbreakable bond with the nonhuman. Owing to “the capacity of environmental texts to model ecocentric thinking” (Buell 1995, 143), poetry can act as a powerful catalyst for action and ecological commitment, so badly needed in the face of today’s alarming environmental crisis. In this respect, Huggan and Tiffin have highlighted “the capacity of poetry to counteract the instrumentalism of hyper-rationalist and materialistic values and to celebrate ‘the totality of nature’ by engaging with human feelings and sympathies in a broadly intersubjective, mutually beneficial way” (2015, 104). Put succinctly, eco-writing has the “capacity to set out symbolic guidelines for the material transformation of the world” (Huggan and Tiffin 2015, 14), thus ensuring social justice by cultivating ecological justice. It follows that environmentally sensitive writing has an ethical mission of the greatest importance. Given the massive anthropogenic impacts on the Earth our times are witnessing, what is in order is “a stronger ethic of care for the nonhuman environment” (Buell 2001, 6), which will result in a more livable *oikos* for human and nonhuman beings alike.

This article suggests, in the first place, that *The Waste Land* is a polyphonic poem that interweaves human and nonhuman voices into the living fabric of what has proved to be an inexhaustible artefact, open to a mind-boggling array of critical interpretations over time following its publication a century ago; second, that *The Waste Land* is an ecopoem that unconsciously anticipates the woes of the Anthropocene, as evidenced by multiple references to human-induced environmental degradation and anthropogenic detritus in the poem (e.g., littered streets, vitiated air, industrially polluted rivers, arid landscapes and water scarcity); and, third, that Eliot strives to find solace in the spirit and the more-than-human world as represented by mountains, water and birdsong that emulates the sound of dripping water, in his attempt to set his lands –emotional and cultural alike– in order. Eliot’s more-than-human world includes the transcendent, the divine, “the third,” as his ecological postulates are of a deeply ethical and spiritual nature. In sum, this essay offers an ecocritical reading of *The Waste Land*, with a special focus on section v, “What the Thunder Said,” where the presence of the nonhuman world asserts itself more powerfully than in all the four preceding sections.



CITYSCAPES, HUMAN DETRITUS AND TOXICITY

The term ‘Anthropocene’ was first proposed by Crutzen and Stoermer to refer to the current human-dominated geological epoch in the face of the growing “impacts of human activities on earth and atmosphere” (2000, 17). Since the onset of the Industrial Revolution, human activities have become so pervasive and profound that our species has become “a major geological force” (18), likely to remain so “for many millennia, maybe millions of years, to come” (18). In 2007, pondering the kinds of anthropogenic impacts “pushing [Earth] into planetary *terra incognita*” (614), Steffen, Crutzen and McNeill noted that “[t]he Earth is rapidly moving into a less biologically diverse, less forested, much warmer, and probably wetter and stormier state” (614). As Robert Bringham has perceptively noted, the Anthropocene is “a geological *event*: a momentary though possibly momentous blip in the earth’s biography” (2018, 17) that is expressive of humankind’s hubris and its concerted attempt to destroy the biosphere as the home that life has patiently built for itself. The present course of Western civilisation is simply self-suicidal, argues Bringham. Reflecting on the interdependence of *homo sapiens* with the nonhuman and the moral imperative to radically rethink how we as a species relate to the biosphere, he writes: “The earth’s life is much larger than our own lives, but our lives are part of it. If we take that life, we take our own” (Bringham 2018, 12).

The biosphere is a vast space where meaning flourishes unaided. The central insight of biosemiotics is indeed that “*all* life –from the cell all the way up to– is characterized by communication, or semiosis” (Wheeler 2011, 270). In *The Waste Land*, Eliot is confronted with a living, communicative world that *means* –a universe where meaning-making processes are not the sole prerogative of human beings, but rather seem to be ubiquitous. Such processes are palpable not only in the cityscapes populated by humans adrift in the apathy and death-in-life that came in the aftermath of the Great War, but also in glimpses of the green world. Ezra Pound, *il miglior fabbro*, who “performed the caesarean Operation” (quoted in Eliot 2015, 551) and played such a decisive role in excising parts of the original draft of *The Waste Land*, was also sensitive to the fragility and beauty of the biosphere as the *oikos* of life. In Canto LXXXI, he writes memorably on Earth as being the guiding principle of a human life that comes into full bloom in conformity with the larger scheme of things: “Pull down thy vanity, I say pull down / Learn of the green world what can be thy place / In scaled invention or true artistry” (Pound 1996, 521). Being a tree-lover, Pound writes in Canto xc apropos arboreal existence: “Trees die & the dream remains” (609), as if anticipating the large-scale deforestation that is one of the woes attending the Anthropocene. In “Notes for cxvii et seq,” Pound writes of animals as being his guides to a transcendental world, whilst gesturing to humans’ Heideggerian responsibility to be guardians of being: “Two mice and a moth my guides– / To have heard the farfalla gasping / as toward a bridge over worlds [...] / To be men not destroyers” (Pound 1996, 802). An eminent ancestor of Eliot and Pound, John Ruskin claimed that “a maximum of woodland was needed in order to keep the air pure, that the growth of industrial manufacturing was not the answer to the problems of world poverty, and that the quality of human life



is not dependent on economic growth alone” (Bate 93). In the fifth letter of *Fors Clavigera*, which sums up the core of his ecological thinking, Ruskin dwells in prescient terms on “the dangers of pollution” and “the importance of trees for their effect on the atmosphere” (Bate 2015, 93):

The first three [principles of political economy] [...] are Pure Air, Water, and Earth. [...] You can vitiate the air by your manner of life, and of death, to any extent. You might easily vitiate it so as to bring such a pestilence on the globe as would end all of you. [...] [E]verywhere, and all day long, you are vitiating it with foul chemical exhalations; and the horrible nests, which you call towns, are little more than laboratories for the distillation into heaven of venomous smokes and smells, mixed with effluvia from decaying animal matter, and infectious miasmata from purulent disease. [...]

Secondly, your power over the rain and river-waters of the earth is infinite. [...] You might have the rivers of England as pure as the crystal of the rock; [...]. Or you may do always as you have done now, turn every river of England into a common sewer... (Ruskin 1890, 93-94)

The Waste Land is peppered with references to alarming indicators of environmental degradation, brought about by the increasing industrialisation of urban spaces in early twentieth-century England. Death-in-life is a central theme in the poem, and “the first death” the poem registers in its opening lines is that of “the death of nature” (Spurr 2015, 57). Ruskin’s air, water and earth are all subject to anthropogenic action in an ecosystem –that of the city– that is out of balance. As Gabrielle McIntire has perceptively noted, Eliot’s poem is extremely sensitive to “fragile or degraded environments” (2015, 178) and invites readers to “consider the analogies between compromised environmental exteriors and a complex range of similarly polluted interior states” (178). While gesturing towards myths of fertility and renewal, the very title of the poem points to Eliot’s central concern with land/ Gaia as the fundamental principle of life –an Earth that is being mercilessly and shamelessly overexploited in capitalist societies in the name of progress, profit, and comfort. The major myth informing the poem is that of “the impotent Fisher King of fertility stories, whose land is under curse and has been laid waste” (Spurr 2015, 56). Eliot is thus registering in *The Waste Land* “a barren, postwar land [...] marked by pollutants, vulnerable to smog, littered with trash, and, in a sense, dying, while [...] offering symbolic and metaphorical commentary on our own wasted (and wasteful) existences” (McIntire 2015, 178). Evidence of human detritus, waste and pollution is pervasive throughout the poem: a polluted river (Thames), littered streets, vitiated air, arid landscapes or deserts, and desolate cityscapes are all expressive of an incipient climate crisis.

Eliot’s fascination with pollution and debris in urban settings like London can be traced back to earlier poems, where the focus is on “the very *air* of the city and its diminished quality, an air that marks a fluid exchange between an uncannily porous and proximate interior and exterior –between self and what is Other” (McIntire 2015, 183), in ways that anticipate Nancy Tuana’s notion of *viscous porosity*. Because of the porous borders of our bodies and the permeability “between



our flesh and the flesh of the world” (Tuana 2008, 188), “the corporeal substance of the human is ultimately inseparable from ‘the environment’” (Alaimo, 2008, 238), an insight that seems to inform the Eliotic treatment of *natureculture* in his poem. In *The Waste Land*, outward landscapes and cityscapes reveal themselves to be metaphors of emotional and spiritual scapes.

To evoke the correspondence between the inner geographies of the human soul and the outer physical world, Eliot resorts in his poem to what could be termed an *enactive form*: the fragmentation, pastiche, parody and allusiveness deployed in his poem *enact* the environmental degradation without and the spiritual desolation within, given the alarming signs of pollution in cities and the disintegration of Europe after World War I. Detritus and polluted cityscapes are thus expressive of a post-pastoral world where nature is no longer pure or intact, but fallen, degraded, “vulnerable to wasting away” (McIntire 2015, 184). In brief, Eliot depicts a fallen green world that appears to have lost its healing powers for humankind. Because humans have lost touch with the land, “with the rhythms and the psychic nourishment of nature, a spiritual meaning [has been] lost” (Lehan 1998, 134). Eliot restores such spiritual meaning in rare moments of *The Waste Land*, offering, as will be discussed below, fleeting glimpses of an untainted, unmarred natural world.

Signs of environmental degradation are scattered here and there in *The Waste Land*. “The Burial of the Dead” opens with explicit references to a land that has lost all potential to bear fruit. The return of springtime defeats all expectations concerning the renewal of life on Earth, with April “breeding / Lilacs out of the dead land” and “stirring / Dull roots with spring rain” (Eliot 2015, 55). The natural cycle associated with the succession of the seasons holds no promise of renewal for Earth dwellers, and the green world has ceased to heal and restore. What the first part of the poem offers next is an eloquent description of a Biblical desertscape where the land is barren and desolate. Faced with this arid landscape, the lyrical subject wonders “What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow / Out of this stony rubbish” (Eliot 2015, 55), in words that evoke the prophetic voice in Ezequiel 2: 1: “And he said unto me, Son of man, stand upon thy feet, and I will speak unto thee.” The reader is then confronted with an apocalyptic view of the world stripped of awareness of the transcendent, one devastated by environmental catastrophe:

A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,
And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,²
And the dry stone no sound of water. Only
There is shadow under this red rock,³ (Eliot 2015, 55)

² In Ecclesiastes 12: 5 we read: “when people are afraid of heights and of dangers in the streets; when the almond tree blossoms and the grasshopper drags itself along and desire no longer is stirred. Then people go to their eternal home and mourners go about the streets.”

³ Eliot’s words recall Isaiah’s (32: 2) tidings concerning the Messiah’s arrival: “And a man shall be as a hiding place from the wind, and a covert from the tempest; *as rivers of water in a dry*



The London cityscape described in the closing lines of “The Burial of the Dead” suggests that air pollution and decay are pervasive in the “Unreal City,” as a “brown fog of a winter dawn” –which reappears as “the brown fog of a winter noon” in “The Fire Sermon” (Eliot 2015, 56, 63)– persistently lingers over the crowd of commuters flowing over Tower Bridge on their way to the financial district of the city, “so many, / I had not thought death had undone so many” (Eliot 2015, 57), which evokes scenes of dead crowds in Dante’s *Inferno* –people in limbo, those who “have made through cowardice the great refusal” (*Inferno* 3.60). A real experience informs this view of the workaday crowd, as in 1911-12 Eliot used to carry “a copy of Dante in his pocket and learned passages by heart on long train journeys” (Gordon 2015, 43) which must have persisted in his mind for over a decade. Air pollution is alluded to by the “short and infrequent” (Eliot 2015, 57) sighs of the commuters crossing Tower Bridge, as if they had serious difficulty coping with polluted air (McIntire 2015, 179) and existential *Angst*. The wasted cityscapes through which they walk as if they were dead in life constitute an objective correlative for their sense of spiritual barrenness.

Whereas the first part of *The Waste Land* concerns a land that is under ecological threat on account of the “irreversible damages left in the wake of warfare and pollution” (McIntire 2015, 179), “The Fire Sermon” dwells on water and river pollution. The section opens with the nostalgic evocation of an idyllic pastoral landscape where the lyrical subject “appeals to nature for solace, as if insisting that the healing powers” of a prelapsarian pastoral world “could still be active amidst a desolate modernity” (179), in a depersonalised metropolis like London. However, the lyrical voice tells us: “The river’s tent is broken; the last fingers of leaf / Clutch and sink into the wet bank” (Eliot 2015, 62). What is more, “The nymphs are departed” and the nonhuman world keeps on speaking a language of its own that has become unintelligible to us: “The wind / Crosses the brown land, unheard” (Eliot 2015, 62), lost to human perception (McIntire 2015, 179). Addressing the personified Thames in words borrowed from Edmund Spenser’s *Prothalamion*, the lyrical ‘I’ asks it to “run softly, till I end my song” (Eliot 2015, 62). In contrasting contemporary London with Spenser’s London, Eliot’s description suggests that Renaissance pastoral is perceived as though it were still real. While Spenser sought “to ease [his] payne” in the presence of the river waters, walking by the “shoare of silver streaming *Themmes*” (1989, 761), the current Thames reveals itself to be unpolluted just for the fraction of a second, “temporarily free of the signs of human detritus” (McIntire 2015, 180):

The river bears no empty bottles, sandwich papers,
Silk handkerchiefs, cardboard boxes, cigarette ends
Or other testimony of summer nights. (Eliot 2015, 62)

place, as the shadow of a great rock in a weary land” (our italics). *The Rock* (1934) is also a play by Eliot marked by clear ecological concerns.



These lines are expressive of the vitality intrinsic to the world, for, according to Jane Bennett, matter is not “raw, brute, or inert” (2010, vii). Rather, humans are part of a material-semiotic whole that comprises bodily natures, (in)animate creatures and (non)human beings, all of them partaking of a universal substratum of vibrant and communicative matter, with the proviso that, in Eliot’s mindset, the nonhuman always includes the supernatural, the transcendent, the divine. In this regard, the detritus marring the beauty of the river—even if it appears to be temporarily absent from the picture—forms an assemblage of agentive matter, which, Bennett argues, has its own trajectory and the power to impact the world. The garbage items momentarily absent from the river are all signs of modern debris and pollution; they gesture towards a consumerist society that conceives of the wild as “a portfolio of resources for us or our species to buy and sell or manage or squander as we please” (Bringham 2018, 12), not as what it truly is, “earth living its life to the full” (12). The crystalline waters of the Thames are only so because of the temporary absence of detritus that is otherwise conspicuous in urban landscapes where nature and culture become inseparable.

At a later point in “The Fire Sermon,” the Thames “sweats / Oil and tar” and “The barges wash / Drifting logs / Down Greenwich reach / Past the Isle of Dogs” (Eliot 2015, 65), which are clear indicators of pollution and deforestation (McIntire 2015, 180). The Thames ultimately reveals itself to be what Ruskin termed “a common sewer” (1890, 94) where filth reigns supreme. Despite Ruskin’s and other nineteenth-century intellectuals’ concern with pollution, industrial debris, noise and crowds in urban spaces became the norm for city denizens in the early decades of the twentieth century. Sensitive to the “massive upheavals in urban infrastructure” (Morrison 2015, 25) of his time, Eliot himself wrote in a 1921 “London Letter” to the *Dial* of the “barbaric cries of modern life” (Eliot 2014b, 370) and, in his Introduction to Charlotte Eliot’s *Savonarola: A Dramatic Poem* (1926), of how “perhaps the conditions of modern life (think how large a part is now played in our sensory life by the internal combustion engine) have altered our rhythms” (Eliot 2014a, 773). In this historical context, Eliot’s poem can be read both as “a memorial for what had already been lost or destroyed [a pastoral world of untainted nature], and as a harbinger for the ecological crises we are experiencing today [in the Anthropocene]” (McIntire 2015, 190).

ONLY ROCK & NO WATER

After a reading at Bryn Mawr in October 1948, Eliot observed, apropos the composition of *The Waste Land*, that whereas the first four parts were the fruit of hard labour, “What the Thunder Said” was “written down in one afternoon, and no corrections have been made” (Lehmann, quoted in Eliot 2015, 686). To Kenneth Allott he had confessed on 12 November 1935 that “the whole section was written at one sitting, and never altered” (Eliot 2015, 686), as if it had been the result of “almost automatic writing” (Spender, quoted in Eliot 2015, 686). Years later, in 1971, Valerie Eliot confirmed that in “The *Pensées*” of Pascal” (1931) the poet had had in



mind “What the Thunder Said” as he pondered upon the kind of writing that, after undergoing a long incubation, “may suddenly take shape and word” requiring “little or no retouch” (Eliot 2015, 686). Under such circumstances, the poet was “a vehicle rather than a maker” and the resulting text was but “a temporary crystallization of the mind” (687). In much the same way Coleridge composed “Kubla Khan” in a state of enhanced sensitivity, “What the Thunder Said,” like “Death by Water,” was composed as if in a state of spiritual trance at a sanatorium near Lausanne on Lake Geneva, in the care of Doctor Roger Vittoz. It is, therefore, no wonder that Eliot should consider the last part of his poem the strongest, as betrayed by the confession to Ford Madox Ford, dated 14 August 1923, that there were “about thirty *good* lines in *The Waste Land*. [...] The rest is ephemeral” (Eliot 2011b, 188) –by which he meant the twenty-nine lines of the water-dripping song of the hermit thrush. About three months later, in a letter dated 15 October 1923, he admitted to Bertrand Russell that “What the Thunder Said” was “not only the best part, but the only part that justifies the whole” (257).

As Ricks and McCue explain in their annotated edition of Eliot’s poems, the title of the closing section of *The Waste Land* is an allusion to John 12: 28-29, where the voice descending from heaven “thundered” (Eliot 2015, 687) to the people who heard it, and possibly also an allusion to Jane Ellen Harrison’s “The Rite of the ‘Thunders,’” chapter 12 in *Themis* (1912), “on the association of thunder with the voice of God and with purification in initiation and fertility rites” (Eliot 2015, 687). “What the Thunder Said” is gnomic poetry that captures a moment of revelation with the texture of transcendence; that the revelation comes by way of a nonhuman voice, that of the Thunder, is not a negligible fact. As such, it shows Eliot responding to the agency of matter and the vibrancy of the more-than-human world with enhanced sensitivity, and yet transcending it in search of an ultimate epiphany. In other words, the poet seems to be intellectually and sensuously alert to what Abram calls ‘the more-than-human world’ (1996) and a ‘Commonwealth of Breath’ (2014, 313). In the way of thinking dominant in the West, nature has been conceptualised as an external reality to be measured and conquered, a commodity to be exploited, and a set of potentially infinite resources. The root cause of such an attitude may be traced back to the Cartesian division between *res cogitans* (mind, soul, spirit) and *res extensa* (body, world, matter), or even further back in time to God’s injunction in Genesis for humankind to take dominion over the fowls of the air, the beasts of the land, and the fish of the sea. Christianity is possibly the most anthropocentric religion in the world, as it “not only established a dualism of man and nature but also insisted that it is God’s will that man exploit nature for his proper ends” (White 1996, 9-10). For his part, Abram notes that this has been the prevalent style of thought in the West ever since the birth of Baconian science:

After three and a half centuries spent charting and measuring material nature as though it were a pure exterior, we’ve at last begun to notice that the world we inhabit [...] is alive. [...] With the other animals [...] we’re all implicated within this intimate and curiously infinite world. (2010, 158)



“What the Thunder Said” opens with the episode of Jesus spending the night in prayer next to his disciples in the garden of Gethsemane, as related in John 18: 1-3, shortly before he is captured by a band of men led by Judas carrying lanterns and torches and taken to Caiaphas’ palace. What comes next is the beginning of the 29 lines Eliot considered the most accomplished of *The Waste Land*: the description of a desiccated landscape that anticipates the environmental woes of the Anthropocene – drought, desertification, barren lands, water scarcity. The incantatory lines read thus:

Here is no water but only rock
Rock and no water and the sandy road
The road winding above among the mountains
Which are mountains of rock without water
If there were water we should stop and drink
Sweat is dry and feet are in the sand
.....
There is not even silence in the mountains
But dry sterile thunder without rain (Eliot 2015, 68)

The passage recalls the Biblical landscapes of the desert envisioned by Christianity as a space of self-knowledge, sacrifice and trial “on the outposts of existence, courting death” (Gordon 2015, 42). A retreat to a place where “there is only rock and sand and (literally) no water” is expressive of “the possibility of spiritual renewal” through a radical stripping of “worldly connections” (Spurr 2015, 65). All four classical elements –earth, water, air and fire– are present in these lines. Notice how the whole litany –which seems to mourn the exhaustion of the land and the depletion of such essential resources as water– is articulated around the repetition of simple words signifying fundamental constituent elements of nature: *rock* (evoking the “red rock” or Christian Church from l. 25), *mountains* (a place of revelation, close to the divine), *water* (associated with nourishing or life-giving values) and *dry* (repeated twice here, in lines 337 and 342, and also in line 354). The sense of dryness and water scarcity is inspired by Psalm 63: 1: “my flesh longeth for thee in a dry and thirsty land, where no water is” (Eliot 2015, 689), where physical exhaustion (of the flesh) correlates to spiritual longing (of the soul) for union with the divine. The insistent “call for water” is “a cry for both the element itself and its symbolic, sacramental function of purification” (Spurr 2015, 65). The lines might have also been inspired by a real drought, as recounted by Charlotte Eliot in *Reminiscences of a Trip to London* (1924): “When we were in England in 1921, there was a drouth. Not only were the fields in the country parched and dry, but also the City Parks” (quoted in Eliot 2015, 689). Very much like the Metaphysical poets, the Eliotic syncretic literary imagination would have woven into the living fabric of his poem a heterogeneous range of sources, lifted from both his readings and lived experiences.

Water scarcity, possibly the most worrying threat of the Anthropocene, is further alluded to later by the “empty cisterns and exhausted wells” (Eliot 2015, 70) (inspired by Ecclesiastes 12: 6 and Jeremiah 2: 13 and 14: 2-4: “they come to the cisterns, they find no water... Because of the ground which is dismayed, since there is no rain on the land” (quoted in Eliot 2015, 697)) and “the arid plain” that evokes



the Fisher King sitting upon the shore amidst a devastated (almost apocalyptic) landscape, striving to set his lands in order (Eliot 2015, 71). The effects of drought and water scarcity are also felt in the lines “Who are those hooded hordes swarming / Over endless plains, stumbling in cracked earth” (Eliot 2015, 69), which, according to Eliot, were inspired by Hermann Hesse’s *Blick ins Chaos*, which “regarded as prophetic Kaiser Wilhelm’s “fear of the Eastern hordes, which ... might be enrolled against Europe,” *In Sight of Chaos* 23” (quoted in Eliot 2015, 694). But a land of rock and no water will give way to an entrancing songbird.

A SOUND LIKE WATER DRIPPING

References to animals are ubiquitous in *The Waste Land*. An exhaustive catalogue includes a cricket (l. 23), a Dog (l. 74), a (mock) dolphin (l. 96), a nightingale (l. 100), rats (ll. 115, 187, 195), gulls (l. 313), the cicada (l. 353), the hermit-thrush (356), bats (l. 379), a cock, (l. 390), a spider (l. 407), and the swallow (l. 428). Such biodiversity suggests Eliot’s sensitivity to the wild –a sensitivity that is inevitably mediated by culture, for “his crickets are Biblical” and “his nightingale sings like Ovid’s bird” (McIntire 2015, 188). Wilderness is thus inextricably bound to the human-built habitats of polluted cityscapes (as epitomised by London) and to Biblical deserts, the main ecosystems that the poet explores in *The Waste Land* alongside that of the sea in fleeting moments of “The Burial of the Dead” (“*Oed’ und leer das Meer*,” Eliot 2015, 56) and “Death by Water” (“the deep sea swell,” Eliot 2015, 67). Some of these wild animals are deployed for their symbolical or allegorical value in their respective contexts, for Eliot tends to give us a nonhuman world that is always “inextricably bound to culture, myth, and meaning-making” (McIntire 2015, 188). But there is at least one exception: the hermit-thrush (l. 357), which occupies a central position in “What the Thunder Said” and represents more “a signifier of pure (and purifying) experience than a metonym, metaphor or symbol” (McIntire 2015, 189) directing our attention somewhere else.⁴ Real birdsong enters the poem at this point, based on an experience that Eliot relates in one of his notes: “This is *Turdus aonalaschkae pallasii*, the hermit-thrush which I have heard in Quebec Province. Chapman says (*Handbook of Birds of Eastern North America*) ‘it is most at home in secluded woodland and thicket retreats. ... Its notes are not remarkable for variety or volume, but in purity and sweetness of tone and exquisite modulation they are unequalled.’ Its ‘water-dripping song’ is justly celebrated” (Eliot 2015, 76). Eleanor Cook notes that the young Eliot “may have heard the bird sing in 1904” (quoted in Eliot 2015, 691) in the Quebec woods, where exquisite thrush-song may have attracted tourists from May to mid-July. As Longenbach has pointed out, Eliot

⁴ Incidentally, trees are mentioned only twice in *The Waste Land*: the “dead tree” (l. 21) in “The Burial of the Dead” and “the pine trees” (l. 356) in “What the Thunder Said,” the only species alluded to in the poem.



“exercised a natural propensity to think through allusion” (1994, 181) in his poetry, prose and letters, a propensity which became “a structural principle” (181) in his poetry. Thus, folded in the lines related to the hermit thrush, there is also an allusion to Whitman’s “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d” (Longenbach 1994, 179). In Eliot’s rendering, the explicit bookish allusion to Chapman’s ornithological knowledge, the subliminal allusion to Whitman, and the episode from his youth are all metamorphosed into lines of crystal clarity and onomatopoeic musicality:

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 2015, 69)

Curiously, Ricks and McCue inform readers that Eliot’s scientific reference is inaccurate, for “neither Chapman’s *Handbook* nor other standard works mention a “water-dripping song,” but the phrase is found in relation to a different bird in Ernest Seton-Thompson’s story (set in Canada), *The Springfield Fox in Wild Animals I Have Known* (1898)” (Eliot 2015, 691). The “water-dripping” song was that of the saw-whet owl instead. According to the new materialisms, the nonhuman world is communicative and so nature is vocal and polyphonic. Eliot listens to nature speaking, to real birdsong, finding lasting beauty in it; and despite much time having elapsed, he manages to weave it into the allusive tissue of his poem. His intimation must have been that humans inhabit a many-voiced Earth where all beings have communicative capacities, and that both human and nonhuman beings share a richly communicative biosphere. As Abram puts it, “[a]ll things have the capacity for speech –all beings have the ability to communicate something of themselves to other beings” (2010, 172).

Like the secluded places (riverscapes, fleetingly evoked gardens, and the jungle near Himavant) described in *The Waste Land*, “sheltered from the city’s dysfunctions, haste, and noise” and from “the trials of the desert” (McIntire 2015, 187), the thrush song offers a glimpse of “a few remaining vestiges of the pastoral” as well as “respite from the poem’s existential bleakness” (187), while gesturing to an “almost epiphanic breakthrough to another order of things” (187), driven by some intimation of desire as spiritual thirst. The longing to transcend and escape the chaotic life of the barren waste suggests that “a world of [...] stability, order, and beauty must exist somewhere” (Davidson 1994, 123), perhaps out of reach. As Gordon claims, Eliot’s poem is, in fact, punctuated by “hints and guesses of something that is *not* waste, [...] a visionary alternative we cannot quite grasp before it fades and eludes” (2015, 49), and by “longings for places or symbols of natural purity” and desires for “places of respite and peace” (McIntire 2015, 188) sheltered from the persistent pollution and chaos of urban spaces, such as those evoked by lines as varied as “Looking into the heart of light, the silence,” “Filled all the desert with inviolable voice,” “those are pearls that were his eyes,” and the “Inexplicable



splendour of Ionian white and gold” in the awe-inspiring interior of St. Magnus Martyr (Eliot 2015, 56, 58, 59, 64).

After the recurrent imagery relating to dryness and barren desertscapes, life-giving rain does come, near the end of “What the Thunder Said,” to alleviate a thirsty, parched land that is dying and longs for reviving water, which is to say that there might be room for life-nourishing values and hope amidst acute spiritual barrenness and environmental crisis. In Eliot’s ecopoetics, after his sojourn in the desert, in an arid landscape consisting of only rocks and mountains, the lyrical subject appears to find solace in the green world, first in the song of the hermit-thrush and then in the life-giving rain that falls on the Ganges. Geographically speaking, the reader is now transported from a desert replete with Biblical associations to an exotic jungle in the East:

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. (Eliot 2015, 70)

Life-giving rain falls on the sacred Ganges (or Ganga, meaning ‘sacred water’) as the Thunder speaks the three short lyrics that elaborate on the wisdom condensed in the Sanskrit words *Datta*, *Dayadhvam* and *Damyata* (give, sympathise, control). It falls “metaphorically in the form of the revelation of the Word which Prajapati, the Lord of Creation, discloses to his disciples” (Patea 2007, 107), where “DA is the essence of the Ultimate Being and the universal law fundamental to existence” (107). Far in the distance, in Himavant, which is the Sanskrit word meaning ‘snowy’ for the Himalayan (meaning ‘snow-abode’) mountains, black clouds gather with the promise of rain and the whole world is hushed in silence, “[l]ooking into the heart of light, the silence” (Eliot 2015, 56) anticipated in “The Burial of the Dead.” It is no coincidence that the revelation of the Thunder should come with falling rain that brings back life to a barren land. “The fable of the meaning of the Thunder is found in the *Brihadaranyaka-Upanishad*, 5, 1. A translation is found in Deussen’s *Sechzig Upanishads des Veda*, p. 489” (Eliot 2015, 76). The wisdom contained in this Upanishad, a superb example of lyric philosophy and philosophical lyric, amounts to three ethical principles that are to be learnt and actively cultivated: giving, compassion and self-control, which are an antidote to the positivist, materialistic and individualistic way of thinking prevalent in the modern world. The promises of environmental regeneration and wisdom are thus hand in hand near the end of Eliot’s poem: the rain falls as the Thunder (Indra or Prajapati, the Creator and Lord of the universe) speaks its words of wisdom, reveals the dharma or the law of the universe, and the thirst for revelation is quenched. Ultimately, “Eliot’s Word transcends the scope of the Christian Logos and reconciles the tenets of Christianity, Buddhism and Vedanta” (Patea 2007, 107). What is more, after the DA-DA-DA lyrics, the poet resorts to another bird and voices the wish to be like the swallow: “*Quando fiam uti chelidon*” (Eliot 2015, 71), a line lifted from *Pervigilium Veneris* xxii: “She sings, we are mute: when is my spring coming? When shall I be as the swallow, that I may cease to be voiceless?” (Anonymous 1921, 362).



The endless fascinations that Sanskrit, the *Upanishads* and Indic Philosophy held for Eliot have been well documented (Kearns 1987; Jain 1992). After a year in Paris (1910-1911), Eliot returned to Harvard University and took a course in Sanskrit and Eastern Philosophy, where he studied “the sacred books of Buddhism” (Spurr 2015, 56), central to “The Fire Sermon,” which alludes to “the Buddha’s homily against sin” (Spurr 2015, 60) lifted from the *Maha-Vagga*, and to “What the Thunder Said.” At Harvard, he read “selected portions of the Vedas and Upanishads in the original... and more in translation” (Kearns 1987, 31). An editorial note to Eliot’s *Letters* reveals that, on 6 May 1912, professor Charles Rockwell Lanman, with whom the poet studied Pali and Sanskrit in 1911-1913, gave him “a Sanskrit edition of *The Twenty-Eight Upanishads* (Bombay, 1906), now at King’s. Tipped in is Lanman’s hand-written key including ‘Bṛhadāraṇyaka, 220 (v. 1, 2, 3), Da-da-da = dmyata datta dayadhvam” (Eliot 2011a, 117). According to Gordon, these words “remained lodged in Eliot’s memory until he wrote them down in December 1921 as the finale to *The Waste Land*” (2015, 42). In a letter addressed to Marco Pallis on 28 November 1939, the poet wrote: “At one time I had even conceived the ambition of studying the language in order to be able to read certain Buddhist texts which are not otherwise available” (quoted in Eliot 2015, 699). In the closing part of *The Waste Land*, a poem marked by cultural syncretism, poetry and philosophy reveal themselves clearly as forms of apprehending reality. In an essay titled “Vietnamese New Year in the Polish Friendship Centre,” Bringhurst writes:

The arts and the sciences are in their origin one pursuit. Biology, physics, mathematics, the painting of paintings, the telling of myths, metaphysical reasoning –all these are ways of listening to and speaking with the world. They are aspects of intelligence. What else is poetry for? (1986, 111)

Along similar lines, in “The Relativity of the Moral Judgement” (1915), Eliot argues that “there are all sorts of ways of setting the world in order; from the relative precision of physics to the relative confusion of theology” (Eliot 2014c, 198). It is surprising that he should have omitted poetry as a form of setting the world in order, but still Eliot draws on a curious syncretism of Western and Eastern philosophy in the composition of his *magnum opus*. In a letter to Egon Vietta dated 23 February 1947, he observed: “some of my poetry is peculiar in a kind of poetic fusion of Eastern and Western currents of feeling” (quoted in Eliot 2015, 556). As Spurr suggests, the poet’s “search for a spiritual explanation of the ‘overwhelming question[s]’ of human existence developed from his study of Western and Eastern philosophy as a student at Harvard” (2015, 55) and left an indelible mark on his work and thinking.

Whereas in all four previous sections of *The Waste Land* Western philosophy prevails, the closing part goes beyond Eurocentric references and embraces Eastern metaphysics and style of thinking, “thereby accentuating the sense of the fragmentation and exhaustion of Occidental civilization” (Spurr 2015, 64). Such allusions to Eastern thought are “striking because of their rarity, providing different perspectives [...] in relation to the Western philosophical, spiritual and religious



sources and ideas that [...] dominate Eliot's poetry, his thought and his life" (Spurr 2015, 56). What is more, the thought contained in the *Upanishads* as invoked by Eliot in "What the Thunder Said" seems to counteract the epistemology of control, prevalent in the West, which has been voiced in previous sections. The visionary alternative that the poem appears to point to may thus reside in the Indian scriptures. The Thunder's final revelation closes with the Sanskrit words "Shantih shantih shantih," which are, as Eliot explains in a note, "a formal ending to an Upanishad. 'The Peace which passeth understanding' is our equivalent to this word" (Eliot 2015, 77), whose Christian source is to be found in St. Paul's words to the early Christians in Philippians 4: 7 (Eliot 2015, 709). Thus, *The Waste Land* represents "an attempt to articulate the universal language of the common spirituality of East and West, Hinduism, Platonism and Christianity" (Patea 2016, 11). It closes in "incantatory language common to the spirituality" (Spurr 2015, 67) of both Western and Eastern religious traditions and in a harmonious mixture of languages, as befits a plurilingual poem.

The Waste Land might be interpreted as both a metaphysical elegy lamenting the loss of the divine and an eco-elegy or, more generally, as a poem about loss, which is "perhaps the ultimate philosophical problem" (Zwicky 2011, L89). According to Levenson, voicing in the poem is distributed across a wide range of speech acts including interrogation, demand and apology, but the central one is testimony. Throughout the poem, "characters turn back to their past, distant or near, and testify to loss, glimpsed possibility, and failure" (Levenson 2015, 91). But there is also room in the poem for the testimony of nonhuman voices, like that of Philomel, crying as the nightingale, that of the hermit-thrush heard sometime in Quebec, and that of the Thunder, which offers glimpses of another order, beyond the moral degradation, death-in-life and spiritual barrenness surrounding modern life.

As Edmund Wilson perceptively noted in his review of the poem in the *Dial* in December 1922, readers sometimes feel that the voice in *The Waste Land* "is speaking not only for a personal distress, but for the starvation of a whole civilization" (2004, 86). Eliot confessed that he did not intend his poem to express the postwar disillusion of his contemporaries; it was meant, he said to Otto Heller in a letter dated 5 October 1923, as "simply a struggle" (Eliot 2011b, 242) and a "personal and wholly insignificant grouse against life" (quoted in Eliot 2015, 577) to relieve his own feelings. But it does seem that "The peace which passeth understanding" with which the poem ends points to reconciliation, to hope and to what, for lack of a better word, might be called *phronesis*, the intellectual virtue identified by Aristotle by which he meant the cultivation of natural intelligence informed by moral virtue to achieve true wisdom – the wisdom to understand that humans can cultivate other styles of thought and manners of relating to the nonhuman; the wisdom to broaden our mindsets and embrace ways of thinking about the biosphere as true *oikos* that are not epistemologies of control of the other; the wisdom, in brief, to relate to the more-than-human world with a sense of duty and responsibility.

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