Our presence in The Waste Land

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The Waste Land is considered as one of the defining poems of 20th modernist literature. This essay offers an engaging and thorough analysis of the poem, that is considered notoriously difficult to read. Radeljkovic argues that T.S Eliot does in fact offer the reader a belief in a meaningfulness of our existence, or at least in the existence of transcendentalism - something that Eliot fears has been lost in the modern world of science and rationality.

Sometime between the end of 1927 and the beginning of 1928, thinking about the direction his literary work was taking, Ernest Hemingway wrote on the back of an envelope, perhaps as an ironic piece of advice to himself as regarded writing: “Water the waste land and make it blossom like a rose” [1]. Eliot’s poem was obviously on Hemingway’s mind as a signpost as late as five years after its publication, although he tried to thoroughly transform its original ambiance and meaning. In the words of American poet Delmore Schwartz, Eliot quickly became an “international hero” [2]. Even without a global communication device resembling today’s Internet, it did not take long before poets around the world, as if by osmosis, became aware that an American in England, employed by the Lloyds Bank in London, wrote a long poem that fundamentally changed and transformed the idea of poetry. Anything that had seemed, up until then, to be an important poetic standard, particularly the principles of unity and continuity, was absent from it. Instead, it included among other things numerous quotations and literary echoes in six languages (Sanskrit, Classical Greek, Latin, French, German and Dante’s Italian, apart from English) covering an astounding time range of over three thousand years. It was probably out of sheer surprise and confusion that the then famous English novelist Arnold Bennett (1867-1931) publicly wondered whether The Waste Land and its accompanying notes were not in fact a joke, and stated that, unless this were the case, he could not see the point of the poem. The reviewer of the Times Literary Supplement, the most trusted British source of information on newly published books, claimed, in what was probably a typically British understatement, that Eliot sometimes came very close to the edge of sense. W. B. Yeats saw Eliot first and foremost a as a writer of satire, not a poet, mostly on the account of The Waste Land. And yet, The Waste Land itself sold surprisingly well: even though it first appeared in two periodicals [3] without Eliot’s notes, the first book edition of 1000 copies published by the New York publishing house Boni and Liveright, when it finally appeared on December 15, 1922, sold very quickly. The second edition appeared within a few months, an event which happens rarely with
books of poetry.

The reason behind this was not only the bizarre quality of this complex literary work; but also the fact that Eliot’s poem, in spite of all its esoteric ambiguity, managed to express in its tone and images the mood of many Europeans and Americans three years after the ending of World War I – the “war to end all wars” as the official Anglo-American propaganda called it. The 433 lines of The Waste Land use a technique of double or multiple exposure to merge images of the mythical waste land from the legends and myths about King Arthur – a land infertile as its king (often called the Fisher King) is impotent – with realistic images of decadent Europe after World War I, where the poet lived, reminiscent of the mythical waste land at least in its spiritual climate. Within this framework, Eliot built on the complexity by introducing several typically modernist concepts: in his poetic world, various historical events overlap to produce an image of essential identity of events in futile human history. One could say that, for Eliot, history represents an image of the meaningless human gestures’ endless repetition, generating only suffering and pain for its protagonists and others, without changing anything in the human condition. So, for instance, the historic reference to the Sicilian port of Mylae (line 70), recalls not only the first sea battle between Rome and Carthage which took place in the First Punic War in 260 B.C., but also the sea battle of the civil war in 36 B.C., in which Agrippa triumphed over Sextus Pompeius – as well as any of the sea battles of World War I. This much can be deduced from the meeting with a war buddy, which Eliot described in this line. The same applies to many other situations that are touched upon or are central in the poem: the Egyptian queen Cleopatra, the lover of Julius Caesar and Mark Anthony who appears at the beginning of the second part of the poem, acts as double of the neurotic modern woman wearing synthetic perfume. Similarly, Elizabeth I, the English Renaissance Queen, acts as double of the modern woman from the jazz age, possibly the same one (lines 279-291 in third part), at least where the futility of her amatory plans is concerned. But matters get even more complex. Eliot is not satisfied merely to allude to the essential identity of various historical points; the analogy is used explicitly, when in the Note to line 218, he states that “all the women are one woman”; it may, therefore, be legitimate to conclude that all men are one man. In this way, history and destiny become inextricably linked to each other within a absurd circle that cannot be broken unless a significant change takes place, a change that would have to do – first and foremost – with human nature. It is as if one of the messages of The Waste Land were that human life is, and will always be, meaningless, unless… Such bizarre and deeply depressing concepts could perhaps be explained, at one level, by the poet’s biography and the conditions under which this exceptional poem was created.

I

In what might be his best known essay, written a few years before The Waste Land, Thomas Stearns Eliot (1888-1965) denies any connection between biography and literary creation by claiming that “the more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates.” [4] This American, born on the banks of the Mississippi, in St Louis, Missouri, made his home in London, after a period of studies at prestigious universities: Harvard (1906-1910), Sorbonne (1910-1911), Harvard once again (1911-1914) and Oxford (1915). Having completed his doctoral work, but without getting the degree, he married Vivian Heigh-Wood, an Englishwoman, and a little later – as befits a family man – found a job as a teacher in High Wycombe Grammar.
School, where he taught French, mathematics, history, geography, art and swimming – all for 140 pounds sterling a year, plus free dinner. Already in 1911, while still a graduate student at Harvard, he wrote a few crucial early poems, including “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”, which was published in the important “little” magazine Poetry, due to Ezra Pound’s insistence, only in 1915. The financial situation of the future Nobel Prize for literature laureate (1948) and arbiter of English literary taste was far from auspicious: after another high-school teaching post, which, under similar conditions as his previous one, brought an extra 40 pounds a year, Eliot followed the recommendation of a friend of his wife’s family, and obtained employment at the Colonial and Foreign Department of the Lloyds Bank in London. His job there was to fill in and analyze forms on the profit and expenditure of foreign banks, for a salary of 2 pounds and 10 shillings a week, which, once again, added up to barely 120 pounds sterling a year. Even with additional evening lecturing in philosophy and literature at a London lecture forum, and the position of assistant editor on the staff of the literary magazine, the money was still short, partially because of his wife’s frequent and not very specific “neuralgia’s and migraines”. In 1916 Eliot’s close friend Jean Verdenal got killed somewhere in the Dardanelles. It was to Verdenal that Eliot dedicated his first collection of poems, Prufrock and Other Observations (1917).

During 1918, Eliot made several attempts to get a commission, possibly seeking escape from personal and financial problems. He approached the navy first, then the infantry; but his efforts were unsuccessful, largely due to his American citizenship. In 1919 the New York publishing house Alfred Knopf refused his manuscript which contained a combination of poetry and criticism; however, The Sacred Wood, his first but influential collection of literary essays, was published by them in the following year. Although his salary at the Lloyds Bank had finally reached 500 pounds a year, his experiences and poor state of general health resulted in a nervous breakdown which Eliot suffered in September 1921. His wife [5] took him to the best specialist in London, probably a neurologist, who recommended three months of solitude abroad. To save money, Eliot first went to the English coastal town of Margate, which is mentioned in The Waste Land, and it was there that he continued working on the poem, which he had mentioned for the first time in a letter to his admirer, New York banker John Quinn, on November 5, 1919. He continued work on the poem in Lausanne, where he was seeing a “specialist for psychological problems”, Dr Vittoz, recommended by Julian Huxley, also a patient of his. After some six weeks in Switzerland, Eliot, visibly recovered, returned to London via Paris, where he left nineteen pages of manuscript of what was to become The Waste Land with his friend Ezra Pound, another expatriate American poet.

As many critics have pointed out, it is difficult to overestimate the importance of interventions Pound made, with Eliot’s consent, on the manuscript of The Waste Land. Pound was three years Eliot’s senior, and – as a poet, literary instigator, mediator and advisor – he played a crucial role in the shaping and spreading of modernism in poetry. In the second decade of the 20 century, Pound started at least two avant-garde Anglo-American poetic movements, imagism and vorticism, which helped shape modern poetic consciousness, at least for the English-speaking poets. Two years before The Waste Land appeared, Pound had published his first modernist poem “Hugh Selwyn Mauberley: Life and Contacts”, which, through a number seemingly unconnected poetic images, talks about the insipid contemporary English literary situation, but it contains magnificent lyrical passages as well. It was not only Eliot whom Pound helped: many other avant-
garde modernist writers such as Joyce, Hemingway, Tagore, William Carlos Williams, and Wyndham Lewis were indebted to him not only for help in publishing their works, but also for helping them resolve their fundamental existential problems. From 1913 to 1916 Pound associated intensely with the Anglo-Irish poet William Butler Yeats, and, according to some views, changed Yeats’ attitude towards modern literature by challenging him to leave the placid waters of neo-Victorian sentimentalism peppered with Irish mythology and set sail on the uncharted seas of modernism. [6] As for The Waste Land, Pound’s interventions helped turn this poem (which, at least in certain sections of its original form, resembled a parodic version of poetry by Pope, Tennison and Browning) into a prototype of a modernist poem, consisting of a sequence of seemingly unconnected fragments.

In the general form of the poem, Pound accomplished this by deleting several narrative parts: a pub-crawling expedition opening the poem (54 lines), a description of morning ablutions of Fresca, a fashionable courtesan with literary pretensions (42 lines), the description of London which followed the section about Mr. Eugenides in Part III (19 lines), and the flashback about the vagaries of sailors’ life in Part IV (83 lines). This constituted more than a quarter of the poem as it stands today. But Pound’s changes of the text were more intensive as well: many individual lines and parts of lines had been edited out in order to prevent the text from leaving an impression of conventionality and romantic poetic ease, thus also deleting certain common poetic devices: like the rhymed quatrains describing the tryst between the typist and the young man carbuncular, where 12 out of 16 verses of the original version were deleted. Pound’s suggestions about the epigraph also greatly contributed to the tone of the poem, as well as the poem’s prophetic theme. That said, it must be borne in mind that Pound did not add anything to the poem [7], nor did Eliot accept all of Pound’s suggestions (even though he did accept most of them). As Helen Gardner pointed out, the importance of Pound’s influence on Eliot lies in the fact that Pound offered Eliot his unconditional intellectual and emotional support at a difficult time of Eliot’s life, which helped create the poem in the first place. [8] In the last line of a parodic poem sent to Eliot in a letter dated “24 Saturnus, An I” [9] Pound precisely described his role in the birth of The Waste Land: “Ezra performed the caesarian Operation”. One could say that Eliot and Pound were two complementary Americans in Europe, both on a mission to preserve tradition and the relevance of poetry in the modern world – particularly in Europe, where awareness of the importance of poetry as well as tradition was beginning to fade. Pound’s poetic principle, “make it new”, which had to do with the idea that literary tradition can be meaningful only if alive, fitted into a new context, found its embodiment in Eliot’s use of tradition in the form of quotations and literary echoes in The Waste Land, which is in itself tradition revived in a modernist framework.

Despite literary prominence this poem has achieved, there are other important aspects of its greatness which should not be overlooked. Eliot, notorious for his reticence and secrecy which earned him the famous nickname of “Old Possum” [10], repeatedly stressed that The Waste Land was autobiographical in character, and, in doing so, almost protested too much. One of his most direct statements to this effect is as follows:

Various critics have done me the honour to interpret the poem in terms of a criticism of the contemporary world, have considered it, indeed, as an important bit of social criticism. To me it was only the relief of a personal and wholly
insignificant grouse against life; it is just a piece of rhythmical grumbling. [11]

It would appear that the tone of this quotation, particularly its last phrase, reveals a pseudo-humorous approach to both himself and his poem, and should – in the same spirit – not be taken too seriously. And yet, numerous critical texts, including a full-length book [12], were devoted to proving the thesis that The Waste Land is based first and foremost on autobiography, particularly those of its parts which the author would prefer to hide. Even if we take Eliot’s claims regarding demons [13] at face value – even though, to my mind, they are prevalently metaphorical – could the demons in question not be demons of creativity, and not necessarily those of homosexualism or impotence, as these critics have claimed? Of course, every artist begins from autobiography; since he is limited to this approach by his own experience, not knowing anybody better than himself, as Henry David Thoreau once wrote ironically, but this must not necessarily mean that autobiography is the be-all and end-all of a work. It is evident that the nervous breakdown which Eliot went through in the fall of 1921, which could have stemmed from impotence, resulted in it, or had to do with suppressed homosexualism, must have had an impact on the form, tone and potential messages of The Waste Land; but must this necessarily exclude other, broader meanings? Isn’t it possible to perceive oneself and the world simultaneously? The Waste Land may very well be an image of Eliot’s emotional state at the time of its gestation; but it is also much more than that: it is an image of the universal human condition in various historic moments, including that of contemporary Europe in year 1922 – and a commentary on the vanity of the strongest human wishes and desires, which remain unchanged.

II

Early in his Notes to The Waste Land, Eliot pointed out that “not only the title, but the plan and a good deal of the incidental symbolism of the poem, were suggested by Miss Jessie L. Weston’s book on the Grail legend, From Ritual to Romance”, adding that he believed this book would better elucidate the difficulties in understanding The Waste Land than his notes. On the other hand, much later, in his essay entitled “Frontiers of Criticism” (1956) he was equally eloquent in expressing regret for sending many readers on a wild goose chase for Tarot cards and the Holy Grail. Which statement, then, should be believed? From Ritual to Romance (1920) is study of anthropology and folklore, specifically concerned with the link between ancient fertility rituals (previously meticulously described and documented by Sir James J. Fraser in his Golden Bough) and the ostensibly Christian apocryphal legend of the cup that Jesus Christ used during the Last Supper – into which, while Jesus was on the Cross, Joseph of Arimathea collected his blood. The quest for the Grail, or the Holy Grail, as some writers called this cup, became a part of the theme underpinning the medieval cycle of works on King Arthur and his knights of the round table. Although there are many versions, the best known (Perceval by the French writer Chrétien de Troyes, written in the second half of 12th century, and Parzival by the German writer Wolfram von Eschenbach, from the beginning of 13th century) tell the story of Perceval, a young sinless knight, but also without experience and wisdom, who visits the Fisher-King, the Keeper of the Grail. The Fisher-King is wounded, ill, or sexually impotent, and his illness has somehow been transferred to his kingdom, which has become infertile – a waste land without rain. When the Knight, in the Chapel Perilous asks the right question and the Holy Grail appears on the wall, the King’s
ailment is cured, waters run again, and the kingdom is once more fertile. However, Jessie Weston established and proved that this legend is pre-Christian in origin, and linked it to the ancient fertility rituals. Her book does not find it surprising that Christian church had never officially accepted the legend of the Holy Grail, the reason behind this being that the learned dignitaries had been well aware that the legend is in fact a modification of the Dionysian fertility rituals. What Eliot seems to have adopted from Jessie Weston’s book are the terms “waste land”, “the Fisher King” and “The Chapel Perilous”, as well as related dominant imagery. His reason for it was a modernist quest for an alternative vision of human history, the state of humanity, and a search for images that could present that state; in this case more Celtic than mainstream Christian. One could also say that the idea of individual and collective salvation aided by the “primitive” rituals (described in detail by Jessie Weston) was used as one of the conceptual pillars of the poem [14], and a reflection of Eliot’s private belief.

However, even though Eliot never mentions this in either his Notes or elsewhere, the structure and poetic method of The Waste Land owe a great debt also to Richard Wagner (1813-1883), the German composer, poet and theorician of art, perhaps greater than to Jessie Weston. The poem contains only two quotations in German from Wagner’s opera Tristan and Isolde in Part I, while the three Daughters of Thames appearing in Part III act as counterparts to the Rhine-daughters, from Wagner’s opera Götzterdämmerung. If the quest for the Grail is to be taken as pivotal to the poem, this is confusing, as Wagner had, of course, wrote one of his operas about Parsifal, the Grail knight. In the first act of Parsifal (not mentioned or alluded to by Eliot), a character by the name of Gurnemanz, the first Parsifal’s tutor and the Master of the Swans, puts forward an Einsteinesque concept of time saying that the “space here becomes time” (“Zum Raum wird hier die Zeit”) [15]. But this is not the only parallel and it cannot be taken as just coincidental. Like Wagner’s opera, Eliot’s poem primarily functions through leitmotifs [16], namely a sequential shift of scenes from history and mythology, ranging from the Upanishads all the way to post-World War I Europe on the one hand, and scenes from the mythic waste land on the other hand, emphasizing the analogy mentioned above between various periods of history conveyed by merging of different characters (Philomel, Cleopatra, Elizabeth I, all the way to the London typist, probably from the fall of 1921). This may be what is meant by the suggestion in Wagner’s letter of 25 and 26 January 1854 to August Röckel from Zurich, where he claims that “the essence of reality lies in its multiplicity” [17]. Similarities extend as far as the main traits of their artistic methods and approaches: Wagner may have been the first prominent European artist whose oeuvre sought to combine contradictory, eclectic influences ranging from the ancient Greek theatre, Shakespeare, old-Germanic mythology and medieval (pseudo)Christian legends to the music of Beethoven. He is an artist whose work confirms in practice Eliot’s theoretical dicta on the pyramid of tradition posited in “Tradition and Individual Talent”, as well as their practical applications in The Waste Land. Although Wagner is essentially a Romantic composer, his works and ideas point the way towards modernism and have greatly helped Eliot in shaping his own literary method.

Another powerful influence on The Waste Land remains practically unexplored: not only are the rhythms of this poem closer to syncopation than to metronomic regularity, but the entire poem is reminiscent of a dirge, a blues lamenting the human condition and destiny. It is not surprising that the sensibility of a musician and writer such as Ralph Ellison, perhaps the foremost twentieth century African-American novelist, recognized this aspect
of The Waste Land; he mentioned it in a speech which he later turned into a literary and autobiographical essay, which was published in the book, Shadow and Act (1964). Reminiscing about his own education, he said:

"Somehow its rhythms [of The Waste Land] were often closer to those of jazz than were those of the Negro poets; and even though I could not understand then, its range of allusion was as mixed and as varied as that of Louis Armstrong. Yet there were its discontinuities, its changes of pace, and its hidden system of organization, which escaped me." [18]

Jazz also has an immediate presence in the poem, through the 1912 song called “That Shakespearean Rag” [19] (music by David Stamper and lyrics by Gene Buck and Herman Ruby), which the rich lady’s partner recalls, with aspiration (lines 128-130) as the only thing he has in his head. It is the pervasive presence of jazz in the poem that defines the very core of The Waste Land, its literary method: it was this quality that enchanted Ellison. In the recently published words of R.V. Young,

"Much as a jazz musician takes a well-known song and works bits of it into a series of variations and changes without ever playing the entire melody straight through, so the poet of The Waste Land evokes shadowy images of many of the great works of world literature, without ever actually narrating a complete version of any story." [20]

Just like a jazz musician, Eliot need not play out the complete melody either: the listener (or reader) is expected to recognize musical or literary allusions within their context or ambience, so that a word or a line does not bring only the flavor of a tune or a literary work but also its historical context. In this way, every detail of the complex edifice becomes important for itself as well as a part of the whole.

Eliot’s metrical scheme is typically modernist in its deviation from traditional prosody. The fundamental English narrative verse form, unrhymed iambic pentameter or blank verse, acts as the backbone of The Waste Land, but Eliot varies it constantly, dropping or adding an accent here, several syllables there, bringing the Twenties’ colloquial speech rhythms to life in spite of the poem’s basic elegiac tone. The syncopated rhythms of enjambment add a musical as well as a semantic dimension, emerging occasionally to reflect changes of versification, speaker or situation and bring form and content together. As the prosodist Harvey Gross put it perceptively: “The Waste Land was an experiment in the use of repeated thematic material as well as being orchestral in its elaborate handling of contrasted sonorities.” [21]

III

This is particularly well demonstrated by the title, epigraph, and the beginning of The Waste Land. The title is general enough to make sense outside the contexts of
anthropology or folklore and can be applied to any historic period, including very appropriately the one we live in. The epigraph, on the other hand, apart from imparting a flavor of classical antiquity through its combination of ancient Greek and Latin, stresses the terror of life in the waste land: Sibyl [Sibylla], who craves death but is unable to renounce the gift of immortality, is the image of human soul hopelessly suspended in the hopelessness of a meaningless existence. It is more effective than Eliot’s original epigraph drawing on a similar theme, a quotation from Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, ending in words “The horror! The horror!” Pound, however, understood that the horror implicit in the image of Sibyl – the prophetess who unconsciously brought her doom upon herself, and is found suspended in a bottle, immortal but yearning for death – far exceeds Conrad’s explicit exclamations of horror.

The famous opening lines on April being the cruelest month are yet another example of the modernist tendency to reverse traditional literary meanings. Just as Joyce ridiculed Irish and any other history on the very first page of *Ulysses*, as Hemingway reversed the meaning of rain in *Farewell to Arms*, so Eliot turns upside down not only Chaucer’s message, but also the concept of pastoral atmosphere and the romance of spring in general. In the waste land, renewal of life is painful and tedious, as it is in fact a return to awareness of life in death which was more pleasant and less noticeable in hibernation, while asleep; it mixes memory and desire to raise our awareness of that which can never return to us, or to life.

Line eight abruptly switches from the general to the particular; from the waste land, to the Central Europe of the first decades of the twentieth century, although it keeps the first person plural pronoun “we”. The aristocratic ambience reflects the characteristics of this
world: false national pride (line 12), but also fear and claustrophobia. Though seemingly cosmopolitan, this life is strictly limited by written and unwritten rules: the sense of freedom experienced in the mountains is a reminder of its absence in the valleys. Line 19 takes us back to the waste land from the beginning of the poem, among squalid vegetation sprouting from an unlikely place, “out of this stony rubbish”. In a splintered world where tradition - the mind of the past - becomes reduced to a heap of broken images, everything boils down to mere survival; the quotidian monotony of passing time. “Fear in a handful of dust”, which appears in line 31, has many meanings, one of which is surely the fear of too long a life. After all, Sibyl from the epigraph had asked Apollo to grant her as many years of life as there were grains of dust on her palm.

Further consideration of the futile existence’s horror is abruptly interrupted by a lyrical quotation from Wagner, in German. Tristan and Isolde are, as Denis de Rougemont showed, archetypal lovers of the European civilization, but also an image of unsuccessful attempts to overcome existential absurdity through love. The collapse of love (lines 35 to 41), an image of unrealized potentiality of love, illustrates Eliot’s determination to reject, like many other modernists, for instance Faulkner in The Wild Palms, a modern attempt to substitute religious and moral principles by sexual love. For such love, most eloquently invoked in Matthew Arnold’s Victorian poem “Dover Beach”, cannot last; it is subject to limitations, so that it can often turn into misunderstanding or indifference, as Eliot showed in this instance as well as throughout the poem. This is also what the second Wagner quotation means which ends this section: Tristan will never see Isolde again.

The next stanza builds on the theme of love’s insufficiency
(lines 43-60), where Eliot introduces a pack of Tarot cards, one of the strongest expressive devices of The Waste Land. One of the poem’s many layers is indeed dedicated to prophets: Sibyl, the clairvoyante, and Tiresias are all inarticulate and not very successful. Being a prophet in the waste land is, indeed, no easy task; a situation devoid of change makes it particularly difficult; there, the proverbial waiting period lasts a long time, if not forever. The clairvoyant Sosostris [22], a phoney prophet, does not understand the sacred mysteries of Tarot cards, which were once used to predict fertility of the land, essential for human survival. The modern-day clairvoyant has reduced everything to self-interest and, using the sacred for profane ends, tells her clients what they want to hear: what was once ritual has been turned into daily opportunism. But one must take into account that all women in The Waste Land are in fact Belladonnas, as claimed by Langbaum [23] and that all men are partly reminiscent of either the drowned Phoenician sailor, the man with three staves or the one-eyed merchant. And thus Tarot cards, though misunderstood and misused, still rule the world.

An image of the unreal city in which a crowd of bland clerks rush to work at dawn like robots or zombies, ends “The Burial of the Dead”, a ritual prayer for the poet’s own dead civilization. Here, Eliot draws parallels to Dante’s Hell (Limbo, to be more precise), Baudelaire’s nineteenth century Paris, and Webster’s Renaissance version of ancient nightmares, confirming unity and absurdity of history. Thus the reader - who also inhabits this modern world with lost moral and religious values - is indeed the poet’s double and brother in adversity. “The Burial of the Dead”, however, raises a question, particularly poignant in lines 71 to 75: is some form of resurrection of the European civilization possible? If Stetson is really a version of Ezra Pound, then this articulates the issue of
resurrecting literature by means of old literary corpses, perhaps only temporarily dead in the general sterility of modern life. The answer to this question will not, of course, appear in the poem in a direct and unambiguous form, but is, nevertheless, the central theme of The Waste Land, paraphrased by the medieval longing for the Grail. But what the poem also examines are the reasons why civilization died, why the waste land appeared.

The title of Part II, “The Game of Chess”, stresses the essentially conflicting relationship between women and men, instead of natural cooperation in creating new life, as one of the reasons for the death of civilization. The description of a modern rich woman at her marble toilet table - reminiscent of Shakespeare’s Cleopatra - does not aim at showing the exclusive superiority of the ancient to the modern world, but, like other such instances in the poem, rather introduces an essential identity of, in this case, historic female position, illustrated by the myth of Philomel and the king Tereus. Sex without ritual - stripped of its framework of tradition and form - is mere rape. Philomel’s response to violence - as well as the response encountered in other parts of The Waste Land - is to sing. But rape can come in other, more direct and indirect forms: is it possible that Cleopatra once upon a time truly fell in love with both Caesar and Anthony? Why did Dido’s love for Aeneas have to end in suicide? Is ambition for the creation of an empire more important than love? Have women forgotten their primary mission, the survival of the human race? Whatever the case, the modern rich woman of the poem is indeed - as Tate says [24] - surrounded by glorious works of art from the past, but she fails to notice them or understand the significance of the fact of Cupids, gods of love, surrounding her. “Withered stumps of time”, pictures on the wall mentioned in line 104, actually correspond with their modern-day incarnations. This part
of the poem presents two couples: a rich (lines 111 to 138) and a poor one (lines 130-172), but, apart from their financial status, there are no other significant differences between them. The lives of both, the rich and the poor, are hollow and squalid - but for different reasons: the rich woman is agonized by boredom and fear of loneliness, whereas poor Lil is surrounded by threats of excessive fertility, the consequences of numerous abortions as well as unprincipled sexual competition. In any case, lives of these two women, and consequently their partners, are empty and unsatisfying at both personal and social levels: they contain neither morality, nor faith or love. However, these relationships are relatively stable and predominantly monogamous; they reflect the state of long-term relationships. As far as more radical human relationships - such as passionate love affairs - are concerned, things are even worse.

The Buddhist timbre of the title to Part III of The Waste Land warns of the dangers lurking in the comforts of flesh. The autumnal landscape of its first lines vibrates between the modern and the Renaissance vision of the Thames shores, achieved by repetition of the line from Spenser’s wedding song “Sweet Thames, run softly...”, allusions to Marvell persuading his coy mistress to lovemaking as soon as possible, and the dilemmas of the Fisher King, all the way to modern nymphs - women of easy morals who consort with rich young heirs - finally incarnated in Mrs. Porter and her daughter, teamed up with the small-time gangster Sweeney. Their washing of the feet in a night-club orgy reminds Eliot, if not of Jesus, then of Verlaine’s Parsifal, who had to wash his feet before he could enter Chapel Perilous and face the Grail. But the tone of the poem constantly varies between the sublime and the vulgar; the washing of the feet is also reminiscent of contraceptive ablutions.
After a brief intermezzo (lines 203-206) which recalls the ancient narrative of rape and crime, the poet introduces an eight-line stanza in which Mr. Eugenides, a modern equivalent of the one-eyed merchant or the Phoenician sailor, makes an indecent proposal to the narrator, but he soon returns to heterosexual passion in the key stanza (lines 215-249) in which the prophet Tiresias, plays a double role of observer and commentator, modeled on chorus from Greek tragedies. Here, in a surreal merger of the sublime and the vulgar, like in line 225, we read of sexual intercourse between the typist and the young man painfully carbuncular, entirely mechanical, devoid of any pretence of feelings on either side. Tiresias, who has experienced sexuality from both male and female perspectives, who had known that it was Oedipus’ incest with Jocasta that caused the plague but was not allowed to say it, and who met Odysseus in the Hades but was not allowed to prophecy, stands as a representative of the human being from the Waste land who knows - but, akin to Sibyl from the epigraph or a modernist poet, may speak out only in riddles; sing mutely. Knowledge and awareness bring nothing but suffering and damnation for Tiresias and other inhabitants of the waste land.

In the next eight-line stanza, the focus shifts from Tiresias to the typist, who is aware of the misery of her relationship and yet ready to seek comfort in the mechanical music of the gramophone, without questioning a follow-up tryst, avoiding any thought of a deeper relationship. It is the music that connects this stanza to the next, whose nine lines speak of authentic music which can still be found somewhere in London, even if it is to be sought with humble fishermen, not the nobility or the city-folk. The lines also reveal the grandeur of certain architectural elements of the “unreal city”, which the city officials are, of course, keen to remove. The atmosphere of the waste land
is self-destructive.

What follows is the part which Eliot’s Notes call “The Song of the Three Thames-daughters”. Its first two stanzas depict the modern Thames (lines 266 to 278) as well as the Elizabethan one (lines 279 to 291); the only difference between them being that the royal barge which floated in it in the 16th century has been replaced by commercial barges of the 20 century. Each of the two thirteen-line stanzas ends in lament by the Daughters of the river, a quotation from Wagner. They evoke choral singing, followed by solo arias of each of the daughters (two quatrains and the third a five-line stanza). All three stories are in fact identical, and serve to highlight the theme of dissatisfaction or emptiness brought on by sexual desire or need. “The Fire Sermon” ends with the merging of Buddha’s words with a quotation from St. Augustine’s Confessions; the messages of both philosopher-saints, one Eastern and one Western, at least by the provenance of his followers, are the same - woe to the one who heeds the call of the flesh: for they will burn - if not in real hell, then in the metaphorical one.

Part IV of the poem, “Death by Water”, is its shortest and most lyrical segment. Viewed literally, one could say that Eliot in it discuses water in its other incarnation and function: it is not only a life-bringing liquid that could turn the waste land into a fertile land, it can also be deadly and it stands in direct contrast to the fire of passion of Part III: Eros is accompanied by Thanatos. But here we are no longer dealing with life in death, a monotonous, vegetative existence instead of life, but with real death that everyone should remember each day; death which comes as a final release, a deliverance from the illusory world of senses. Death can, as in Shakespeare’s The Tempest, lead to strange metamorphoses: bones into corals; eyes into
pearls. Phlebas’ death could be a ritual one, death could lead to rebirth, or resurrection. When it comes to choosing between the two contradictory Latin proverbs, Carpe diem or Memento mori, Eliot consistently opts for the latter; throughout the whole poem, but particularly in this part. Phlebas, who could very well be a character based on Jean Verdenal, Eliot’s lost friend who died at the Dardanelles, must pass through all the human ages in order to forget the world. Death by water is one of the ways to reach “peace that passeth understanding” which ends the poem.

Eliot himself says - this time in a letter [25] - that Part V of The Waste Land is for him the best of all. This does not only mean that it contains the best poetry, which is the gist of Eliot’s claim, but also that this part closely examines, if not resolves, the issues raised in the first four parts. A synthesis of Christian and Hindu attitudes towards existence, it most resembles Götterdämmerung, even though Wagner is never quoted, as Young points out in his essay. The key to the meaning of this part lies in its multi-faceted title: when the thunder speaks (and it could mean an intimation of rain, the beginning of the end of the waste land, or, according to the Hindu tradition, the voice of the supreme god) gods, demons and humans interpret what it says in three different ways. But all of the ways are correct, and all of them place demands on man, instead of man placing demands on life, particularly after a war catastrophe. The injunctions to “give”, “sympathize” and “control”, made in Sanskrit, are the final commandments of the poem, and make - as Pound claimed in 1924 - Eliot’s notes indispensable, even though the lines would also be understandable from their immediate context. Following these injunctions is the only way to overcome human limitations and thus limitations of life as well.

“What the Thunder Said”, however, begins in a short poetic
summary of Jesus Christ’s passion, moving from the garden of Gethsemane, and Khaifa’s palace, to the judgment of Pontius Pilate and the Golgotha crucifixion (9 lines). But there is no resurrection to be found in the poem: the verses that follow are the closest Eliot will have come to expressing a Christian world view:

He who was living is now dead  
We who were living are now dying  
With a little patience

This is a moment close to desperation; realistic in terms of human experience, but not necessarily far removed from salvation. The next stanza (lines 331-358) is the most detailed and evocative description of the waste land, and a part that Eliot considered to be the best. “Dead mountain mouth of carious teeth” are confronted with a dream of water. These are no longer the same mountains in which Marie from Part I feels a fleeting sense of freedom; the mountains are now filled with inimical natives, allegedly from Eastern Europe, whose “red, sullen faces sneer and snarl”.

From this point onwards the poem is focused on illusions, dream sequences and nightmares reminiscent of those from the Book of Revelations and its description of Judgment day. The seven-line stanza mixes or superimposes the image of resurrected Christ appearing in front of his disciples on the road to Emmaus onto the impressions of three men at the expedition to Antarctica in 1916, all of whom saw an unknown man who moved together with them and helped them survive. Are we, the readers of the poem, in a position similar to that of Christ’s disciples after the crucifixion, while still unaware that resurrection has taken place? The next, eleven-line stanza
is an eerily modern, prophetic account of the Western civilization’s cataclysm, the fall of the Judeo-Christian world in which there are “falling towers”, just like in New York in 2001, and “Jerusalem Athens Alexandria Vienna London” – the religious and cultural centers of this world acquire an aura of the unreal when crammed in a random, non-selective list. The following complementary eight-line stanza has another take on “upside down in air were towers”, but its poetic focus is turned on the brave, or possibly mad woman, who, amidst the chaos, plays on her hair, not heeding “bats with baby faces” and other horrors surrounding her. After this brief but extraordinarily dramatic sequence, Eliot beams us into an altogether different world: we find ourselves beside the Chapel Perilous, which could enclose the Grail. Here, where it is grass that sings, not disembodied voices coming from dried-up wells and cisterns like in the previous stanza; here, where “dry bones”, or, the presence of the past, can “harm no one”- we find the rooster singing “on the rooftree”: roosters are common domestic birds, but also mythical protectors against evil spirits. Lightning and moist gust of wind herald the rain, or salvation: the possibility that Grail would be found, and the waste land made fertile.

And then, again, a change of the ambiance takes place: the next sequence, a six-line stanza, takes us to the banks of the Ganges, the most sacred of Indian rivers, where the thunder will utter its message. The thunder, of course, says “DA”, which, in Sanskrit, one could suppose, represents an onomatopoeic clap, something like “boom” or “crash”. But gods, demons and humans will interpret this holy syllable in their respective ways, and the subsequent three stanzas of nine, six and five lines - each separated by the sound of thunder “DA” - present these different interpretations. But regardless of whether the thunder has commanded us to give, sympathize and control ourselves, the poem makes it
clear that, in our history so far, we have failed to observe those injunctions. Our greatest act of giving is the sexual act, because it is to this act that we owe our existence; and yet it is “secret”, and cannot be discussed, particularly within the bounds of Victorian decency, nor can it be mentioned in public documents. Instead of sympathizing with our fellow-men, that is all the people we meet, we lock ourselves up in the solitary cells of our personalities, vanities or perceptions like Dante’s or Shakespeare’s characters, forgetting that we are but a small part of a great whole, and do not have particular importance as individuals. Controlling oneself could be pleasant, like steering a sailing boat with well-skilled hands; but in our culture such askesis is simply not customary. We find it much more acceptable to reveal our emotions and motivations publicly, in various violent and non-violent ways, than to strive towards keeping them in check lest we endanger the rights or feelings or others. And so, with this statement, Eliot formally ends his sermon.

For a brief moment thereafter, in just three lines, Eliot takes us to the Fisher King, wondering if he will ever accomplish his task, turn his land into a well-organized community of a kind that many of us, his readers, wish for, even today. But it seems that the very ending of The Waste Land - the last ten lines - change focus, and turn away from characters which had been speakers of the poem up to that moment back to the poet. Not necessarily Eliot himself, but any poet in the world, once the message of the thunder is understood. From line 423 onwards, Eliot’s speaker is no longer the Fisher King, Tiresias or an impersonal narrator, as before. Now all his previously used personae overlap [26], again, in what seems a multiple exposure - together with the poet, who always gets the unenviable task of restructuring the world and investing it with meaning [27] after a cataclysm (regardless of what
kind, monotonous in its repetitiveness, no matter what the period of human history). This is why London Bridge is falling down (line 426), mostly so that we would wonder how we are going to rebuild it in the very words of the nursery rhyme. But in 1921, as he was writing the poem in Margate and Lausanne, Eliot was going through the initial stages of the religious conversion [28], and is likely to have believed - at least partially - in the possibility of purification or redemption, such as is experienced by Arnaut Daniel in Dante’s *Purgatory*. This is why the poet still speaks despite everything; he must utter something, even if somewhat hermetic and inarticulate. And so, unlike the voice saying the “Pervigilium Veneris”, he still sings. Eliot - or the generic poet, the speaker of the lines at the end of *The Waste Land* - resembles Nerval’s protagonist who sees himself in the role of a prince in a ruinous castle, but the road from there could very well lead to victory and triumph, even to rebuilding the castle. *The Waste Land*, Eliot seems to say at the end, resembles the drama of Hieronimo in that it proves the presence of method in what appears to be madness. The poet seeks to express the inexpressible. This is precisely what Eliot tried to articulate in his speech on the occasion of receiving the Nobel prize for Literature, where, at the very beginning, he states that words are beyond his command. [29] The possibility that one can change the world or write great poetry, is a tiny one indeed: but it exists nevertheless, and this is what the finale of *The Waste Land* is about. If the commands of the thunder were to be followed, the waters would flow; and the waste land would be no more.

IV

There can be no simple answer to the question of whether we should take Eliot’s notes to *The Waste Land* seriously, or consider them a literary joke. For, sometimes, they are a
humorous gesture: they are a device “Old Possum” uses to defend himself from his readers’ excessive interest in his models and reasons. In his notes for line 68, for instance, Eliot reflects on the dead sound of a London church bells; in the note for line 357, he provides the biological, Latin name of a bird, the geographical location of its habitat and related ornithological commentary - all of which is, in fact, meant to prevent us from thinking of the analogy with Whitman’s thrush. It may even be true that the length of his notes was determined by the printers’ request for material. [30] Things become even more complicated when, in the note for line 411, Eliot provides a quote from Bradley, the subject of his undefended doctoral dissertation:

My external sensations are no less private to myself than are my thoughts or my feelings. In either case my falls within my own circle, a circle closed on the outside; and, with all its elements alike, every sphere is opaque to the others which surround it. ...In brief, regarded as an existence that appears in a soul, the whole world for each is peculiar and private to that soul.

Bradley’s claim, in fact, negates the very idea of poetry: if my experiences are restricted to myself alone, if my world is “peculiar and private”, then poetry, which is a more or less organized and structured attempt to communicate poet’s feelings to the reader – is in essence impossible. If this were how things really stood, then The Waste Land would really be nothing more than “rhythmical grumbling”. But Eliot did not truly believe in such an idea, as his later poetry clearly shows; it is also debatable whether this was his belief at the time The Waste Land was being written. If every life were indeed completely opaque to other people,
Pound’s editorial work would be purposeless, and literature as such would lose any meaning. Eliot’s religious conversion - not to an obscure cult, but to England’s mainstream Christian denomination, the Anglican Church, bears witness to his faith in the power of collective thinking, if not salvation, not only in terms of his biography, but also poetry, from “Marina” (1930), where the thrush song of salvation is audible through the fog, to *Four Quartets*, which end in the merging of the fire and the rose.

Apart from its earlier canonical importance, *The Waste Land* is interesting to the 21 century reader because it bears the imprint of a poet’s doubting mind before his conversion. In this poem, Eliot searches for meaning, as poets have been doing from the beginning of time; the meaning of his own life, of course, but also the meaning of human life in general, in an unstable age in which the contours of the future world are yet unfocused or undefined, while the old world lies in ruins. Describing the world he never made, but was merely born into - a world of political turmoil and attempts to adjust to the framework of modernism sketched by the ideas of Einstein and Freud whose ideas nullified the known axioms of physics and psychology - a world so like ours, Eliot, helped by Pound, created a paradigmatic modernist poem, fragmented and irregular, characterized at times by the presence, and at times by the absence of traditional versification devices such as the rhyme or metre, leaning thoroughly on the established poetic traditions and parodying them at the same time in his use of quotations - and in this way, also parodying the historic moment in which the poem had been created and the way it marked the poem. Equalizing the past and the present within a space-time continuum [31], Eliot views the inadequacy and insufficiency of human endeavour up to now, in what is in fact an astoundingly
sincere, youthfully naive, very American vision of human potentials, which, of course, can be unlimited. Therefore quest for the Grail is an image which lends itself particularly well to Eliot’s poetic contemplation of the world. The Grail is a symbol of the belief placed in teleology - the belief in meaningfulness of our existence, or at least in the existence of something transcendent, lost in the modern world of science and rationality. And while, no doubt, we continue, with perhaps a little more cynicism, searching for the possibilities of a new world which we would build on the ruins of two world wars and many other wars (“After such knowledge, what forgiveness?”, says Eliot in “Gerontion”, in 1920) The Waste Land remains one of our signposts. At a time of the possible end or transformation of communism and capitalism, two opposed views on economy and organisation of human life, The Waste Land offers evidence that, in another time, other people - however different in language and customs from us - found themselves treading dusty paths that are similar, if not identical to ours, searching for the impossible.

Footnotes

1. Unpublished manuscript fragment, Catalogue No. 489, held in the Hemingway Collection in the John Fitzgerald Presidential Library in Boston, Massachusetts, US


3. First published in the first issue of the Criterion magazine in London, in October 1922, followed by
publication in the New York Dial magazine in the same month.


7. Apart from two word-changes in lines 139 and 212.


10. Opossums, American marsupials, have the reputation of being very good at playing sick or dead.


13. In his essay "The Three Voices of Poetry" (1953), Eliot speaks of the lyrical poetic voice, and says: "Or, to change the figure of speech, he [the poet] is haunted by a demon, a demon against which he feels powerless, because in its first manifestation it has no face, no name, nothing; and the words, the poem he makes, are a kind of form of exorcism of this demon." T. S. Eliot, "The Three Voices of Poetry", Poetry and Poets, The Noonday Press, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, New York, 1970, p. 107.


16. The expression 'leitmotif' was first used by Wagner's critic and commentator Hans von Wolzagen in 1876.


22. Judging by her traits, Sosostris could have been
modelled on the character of Helena Petrova Blavatsky, born a Russian noblewoman in 1831. In the West she was known as Madame Blavatsky. Apart from having founded a "spiritualist association" in Cairo, she is famous for her book of "theosophy" entitled The Secret Doctrine, in two volumes, published in London in 1888. One of her famous followers was W. B. Yeats, who gave an interview to The Irish Theosophist magazine a year after her death in 1892, in which he described their acquaintance. The interview is available on the Internet on www.blavatskyarchives.com/yeatsinterview.htm. Of course, Madame Blavatski was an opportunist like Madame Sosostris.


25. See the note accompanying the lines 331 to 359.


27. One of the first associations in modernist poetry to this common phenomenon is the majestic evocation of peace in Ireland from the W. B. Yeats poem "Meditations in the Time of the Civil War" (1923) in which the poet calls on honey-bees "Come build in the empty house of the stare".

28. The conversion took place in 1927, when Eliot was confirmed in the Anglican church and received British citizenship.

31. Einstein speaks clearly of this in his book Über die spezielle und die allgemeine Relativitätstheorie (1916):

   Since in this four-dimensional structure there no longer exists any cross-sections that objectively will represent "now", the concept of happening and becoming are to be sure not completely abandoned, but are now more complicated. It seems therefore more natural to conceive the physical reality as a four-dimensional existence rather than as until now the *becoming* of a three-dimensional existence.

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