



The Waste Land at 100 Comedy in Hell

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Abstract

After one hundred years, *The Waste Land* continues to appeal to new readers and performers while preserving its status as a monument of twentieth-century literature that conveys the spirit of the times more than any other poem of the period. Its numerous sources, borrowings and quotations have become familiar to generations of readers who have inherited the canon established by Eliot: Dante and his contemporaries, the Elizabethans and Jacobean, and the French Symbolists. But *The Waste Land* also brings together fragments of culture high and low and is a sympathetic portrayal of a modern inferno that the poet shares with the wraiths whose voices he intercepts. Thus it is a classic, a poem for all times and all people, a Shakespearean phantasmagoria that mixes classes, languages and cultures, and finally is animated by the zest and gusto of the eternal survivor.

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As the taste for my own poetry spread, so did the taste for the poets to whom I owed the greatest debt and about whom I had written. Their poetry, and mine, were congenial to that age. I sometimes wonder whether that age is not coming to an end.

T.S. Eliot, 'To Criticize the Critic', 1965

The Waste Land is now a century old. It has become part of our perception of twentieth-century literature and of literature in general, as Eliot suggested about important new work in 'Tradition and the Individual Talent'. *The Waste Land* is itself a reassessment of the Western canon; it feeds upon a number of texts, thus suggesting their relevance, if only by contrast, to the modern predicament. It reaches back to ancient Indian religious works in its quest for spiritual answers to the postwar moral vacuum, but chiefly rests its argument on Western tradition from the Bible to Dante, the Elizabethans and Jacobean (Spenser, Shakespeare, Middleton and others), and the French

Symbolists. Section I, 'The Burial of the Dead', closes with quotations from John Webster and Charles Baudelaire, the poet of the modern 'unreal city'. Eliot does not hesitate to terminate the section with the final line of 'Au Lecteur', the prologue to Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal*. The speaker addresses a companion in a past war, Stetson, first with words from Webster, then as 'You! hypocrite lecteur! – mon semblable, – mon frère!' (Eliot 2015, l. 76). (The straw-man Stetson morphing into the poem's implicit reader).¹ Eliot's borrowing has given new currency to Baudelaire's statement of complicity between reader and writer, so that today we can hardly tell if we know the line from Eliot or Baudelaire. I suppose many English-speaking readers would say that their source is Eliot, not a work that few enthusiasts read in the original.

It is also a question why Eliot's reader can be accused of hypocrisy, or of being the poet's brother accomplice. Baudelaire's eloquent poem lists a series of sins that beset mankind, of which 'ennui' is the worst, therefore the arraignment of the reader who is curiously parsing the poet's list of horrors is timely, like turning the tables on the detached onlooker. In Eliot it establishes a bond, it invents an audience similarly disposed and culpable, ready to enjoy the peep show from a distance. It is possibly also self-accusation, an unmasking of the distancing with which the previous pages have described the London crowd or recorded the talk of Marie, the Hyacinth girl, and Madame Sosostris. In any case, this unapologetic reuse of the punchline from a major predecessor as the final flourish in a new work establishes at least that we cannot do without Baudelaire if we are to write not only about the modern city but also about modern readership. On the other hand, the speaker who addresses Stetson (and us) with lines from Webster and Baudelaire is also a character in the poem, whose brain can't get rid of certain fragments and favourite quotations – like 'hypocrite lecteur'.

The phrase 'You! hypocrite lecteur!' has the quality of exactness and the sound of Eliot's own work, which tends to crispness, concision, crackling sounds, as in 'cruellest month' – unexpected collocations so striking that they become proverbial: the cruellest month, the winter of our discontent ... It must also be the rhythm that makes such phrases memorable, as in 'These fragments I have shored against my ruins' (l. 430) – a sonorous iambic pentameter, with the internal rhyme I-my, and the self-reflexive gesture of looking back from the finale (by way of a set of fragments) to *The Waste Land* as a whole.

The writers that Eliot foregrounds and pushes on our attention so that we cannot but follow him and become readers of Webster and Baudelaire, not to speak of Dante, present a highly dramatic vision of existence as tension and contradiction, damnation and salvation. They are tormented Christians with an awareness of, and unceasing confrontation with, sin and evil. This darkness to some extent envelops Eliot's work, sardonic though it often is – just as in Dante's *Inferno* we find occasional comedy. Eliot would have us share his preferred sources and touchstones for their magical sounds and for the aptness of the situations that they describe. This is true for example of Dante's phrase about the penitential fire, '*Poi s'ascose nel foco che gli affina*' (l. 427), which could serve as an epigraph to Eliot's entire poetic quest, which makes much of 'askesis' and renunciation, of a continuing process of 'purification of the motive' (*Little Gidding*, III, l. 49), of scrupulous puritanical examination of one's actions, that are mostly found wanting.

But there is, as I suggested, relief in Eliot's purgatory: music of course, fragments of beauty, panoramas of all times ... Eliot insisted that poetry must please, and 'can communicate before it is understood' ('Dante', in Eliot 1951, 238). For a century generations of readers of English

¹ All quotations of Eliot's poems are taken from Eliot 2015.

have been enchanted by the musical visions of *The Waste Land*, occasionally considering a passage more attentively to question its various implications, but chiefly fascinated by the movement of the poem, its endless presentation of a more or less horrible beauty: 'And bones cast in a little low dry garret, / Rattled by the rat's foot only, year to year' (ll.194-195). But we have also intimations of the paradisaic vision, 'Looking into the heart of light, the silence' (l. 41), and the fun of such figures as Madame Sosostriis, or Lil's talkative friend in the pub of 'The Game of Chess'.

Eliot is a ventriloquist, to some extent a realist, in this allegedly very literary and high-brow poem. His characters speak in their own voices. They are the damned or purging souls of his 'Comedy', just like the Prufrock and Gerontion of earlier soliloquies. They are individual characters with universal traits. There are class distinctions, as between the lady and the cockney in 'A Game of Chess', but they are equally given a sympathetic hearing. Likewise, in 'The Fire Sermon', the three Thames-daughters ('So rudely forced' – l.100), or 'the typist home at teatime' (l. 222) who waits for her unattractive lover. Eliot watches with some repulsion, as Tiresias, but is really complicit, 'hypocrite', as the everyday ordeal and senselessness of urban life is displayed before his and our eyes.

The hypocritical reader of *The Waste Land* is in possession of all that is necessary to follow the course of the poem. As mentioned above, Eliot claimed that such a work should please also those who, for example, forget who Tiresias was. After all, Tiresias identifies himself as an ancient Greek from (Oedipus') Thebes (l. 245). And the Rhine-daughters? (see note to l. 266, 2015, 75). Even among today's literate readers one can't always expect familiarity with *Tristan* and *Götterdämmerung*. The poem's quotations from Wagner may make sense even if we are unaware of their provenance. We are fortunate though if we know the children's choir in *Parsifal* and recognize it in the citation from Verlaine (l. 202). Critics have spoken of Eliot's 'echo chamber'. He introduces us into his mind, language and associations, which, if looked at in detail, are related to the poem's themes. Besides, a naïve reader does not exist. We pretend (hypocritically) to naïveté, but we share to some extent (or come to share) Eliot's culture and vision. There is no first reading. We may come to the poem after hearing the sonorous rendition given by actors like Robert Speaight or by Eliot himself (who, we remember, 'chanted' *The Waste Land* to Leonard and Virginia Woolf – Woolf 1978, 178). The rhythms have enthralled us, and so have the clear images and crisp sounds.

The Waste Land is possibly more theatrical than Eliot's plays, which today are rarely performed and looked upon as curiosities. They were successful and staged at home and abroad in their day because suitable to those 'tranquillized' times (to borrow Robert Lowell's adjective) and because of Eliot's authority. On the other hand, Eliot's poetry still finds readers in unexpected quarters, as in a short feature film by Lilya Lifanova, *Flight Over Wasteland* (2017), which shuffles around words and episodes in a fresh and creative performance. In one scene, the actors just sang the line 'Co co rico co co rico' (l. 392). It was revealing to listen to this music in a new sequence.

In *The Waste Land* Eliot took risks, courted nonsense and obscenity, but spoke to his readers. He objectified (to go back to a favourite formula) his personal drama and the drama of the times. The Woolfs, who had not responded positively to Joyce's monumental objectification of the same year, found the diffident and cultivated American more to their liking, and published *The Waste Land* with its somewhat tongue-in-cheek notes. Hundreds, thousands of readers followed suit and were captivated by the monstrous but sly poem. A lament from the depths – *de profundis* – of a nervous breakdown and a disastrous marriage which however kept its poise, was able to put the material into shape (benefiting from Ezra Pound's rough handling of the drafts), and finally was a triumph of simplicity, complexity, and directness. Eliot was

able to express his times, coming out of his library of fragments and echoes. He portrayed the crisis of a cultivated mind in ways not so different from the ways of his Prufrock (who is also haunted by his reading), but now there were many voices as in a theatre – or a dream – and Eliot could become, not without irony, the poet of modernity.

We discover his many voices whenever we turn to his work, and it is a relief to read some of his lighter prose and verse, especially because after the 1920s he became rather more solemn, justifying to some extent Pound's references to 'the Reverend Eliot' (1995, 231). But in *The Waste Land* and elsewhere (the Sweeney poems, *Sweeney Agonistes*) Eliot was able to mix reverence with irreverence, even with blasphemy, as his brother Henry pointed out in a notable essay-as-letter he wrote to the overzealous convert to Anglo-Catholicism (Eliot 2017, 748-761).

In his Harvard lectures of 1933 Eliot has an immensely amusing discussion of I.A. Richards' notion that 'poetry is capable of saving us', and his psychological instructions about how to go about evaluating work and being saved. These are pages that make one laugh out loud, as I suppose the Harvard audience must have done in 1933. For example, Richards invites his readers to contemplate among other things 'The facts of birth and death, in their inexplicable oddity'. Eliot comments: 'I cannot see why the facts of birth and death should appear odd in themselves, unless we have a conception of some other way of coming into the world and of leaving it, which strikes us as more natural' (1933, 132-133).

Eliot's sense of fun and incongruity, allied with his seriousness, was important in providing his work with the centrality and balance which it preserves even in its more radical gestures, as in the religious fervours of 'Ash-Wednesday'. A poem of penitence, it harks back to the close of Dante's 'Purgatory' and the *Vita Nuova* (about which Eliot wrote with unusual interest and perceptiveness), and uses directly passages from Christian services (just as section I of *The Waste Land*, 'The Burial of the Dead', is named after the Church of England funeral service – a point usually missed by non-Anglicans, i.e., the majority). But the Biblical and Pre-Raphaelite imagery of 'Ash-Wednesday' is 'religious' in no very strict sense. It is a dream of the spirit, a fantasy, a 'high dream' as Eliot called Dante's (1951, 262), and uses the beautiful language of the service just as *The Waste Land* uses Webster – and in fact 'Ash-Wednesday' opens by paraphrasing (appropriating, even defacing) Guido Cavalcanti and Shakespeare: 'Because I do not hope to turn / Desiring this man's gift and that man's scope' (ll. 3-4). It is again a suggestive, musical, use of language, images and ideas, to present or evoke human feelings that are shared by Christians and non-Christians alike.

Indeed it can be (and has been) argued that the liberal Unitarianism of Eliot's upbringing is hardly suppressed by his conversion to a more strict Christian position, and his religion remains even in the *Quartets* a religion as culture and acceptance (beneficence), which continues to turn to Dante as well as to the *Bhagavad Gita*, thus proclaiming a shared thirst for a moral and religious vision of the hardships and attainments possible in life, today as in the distant past.

Among these attainments is a place 'even [for] a very good dinner', as one is startled and delighted to find in the Reverend Eliot's solemn *Quartets* ('The Dry Salvages', II, l. 44). Or, on a profounder note, we see him stop in *The Waste Land* 'Beside a public bar in Lower Thames Street', to listen to 'The pleasant whining of a mandoline / And a clatter and a chatter from within' (ll. 260-262). Clatter, chatter, whining ... He picks up these sounds, basks in them and reproduces them. The world is present through its sounds, in a moment of listening and suspension. Here, in the purgatory and waste land of life, there is comfort and relief. Just stop and listen. As Eliot claimed, poetry should first of all give pleasure ('The Social Function of Poetry' in Eliot 1957, 18).

In the light of the evidence of new readings, editions, translations and adaptations of *The Waste Land*, Eliot's pessimism as to the survival of the tradition he created for himself (see the epigraph to this article), and consequently of his own best work, turns out to have been excessive. Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa once remarked (in the 1950s) that Eliot was a poet who still had to produce his masterpiece (2004, 1362). This is an interesting proposition, at least for the light it casts on the international response to Eliot, and on its historical and cultural vicissitudes. Yet Eliot himself (as we may expect) was able to describe most convincingly *The Waste Land* as the kind of work which writers can produce but once in a lifetime, and by which (whether they like it or not) they and their age will be remembered:

As for our literary reputation, remember that people like Joyce and myself may help to keep the temperature level, but we can't send it any higher. There is something an author does *once* (if at all) in his generation that he can't ever do again. We can go on writing stuff that nobody else could write, if you like, but the *Waste Land* and *Ulysses* remain the historic points. (To Geoffrey Faber, 15 April 1936, 2015, 578)

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