

HUGH KENNER

The Waste Land

This dust will not settle in our time.

—Samuel Beckett

i

The Waste Land was drafted during a rest cure at Margate (“I can connect Nothing with nothing”) and Lausanne (“In this decayed hole among the mountains”) during the autumn of 1921 by a convalescent preoccupied partly with the ruin of post-war Europe, partly with his own health and the conditions of his servitude to a bank in London, partly with a hardly exorable apprehension that two thousand years of European continuity had for the first time run dry. It had for epigraph a phrase from Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (“The horror! The horror!”); embedded in the text were a glimpse, borrowed from Conrad’s opening page, of the red sails of barges drifting in the Thames Estuary, and a contrasting reference to “the heart of light.” “Nothing is easier,” Conrad had written, “... than to evoke the great spirit of the past upon the lower reaches of the Thames.”

In Paris that winter, Ezra Pound has recalled, “*The Waste Land* was placed before me as a series of poems. I advised him what to leave out.” Eliot, from about the same distance of time, recalls showing Pound “a sprawling chaotic poem ... which left his hands, reduced to about half its size, in the

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form in which it appears in print.” Since “the form in which it appears in print,” with its many sudden transitions and its implication, inhering in tone and cross-references and reinforced by notes, of a center of gravity nowhere explicitly located, remained for many years the most sensational aspect of *The Waste Land*, this transaction requires looking into. The manuscript with the Conrad epigraph and Pound’s blue-pencilling has been lost sight of; John Quinn appears to have made a private bestowal of it before his collection was dispersed in 1924. From surviving clues—chiefly three letters that passed between Pound and Eliot in the winter of 1921–1922—one may hazard guesses concerning the nature of the original series.

The letters, though they were exchanged after the major operation on the poem had been performed, disclose Eliot still in the act of agonizing not only about residual verbal details but about the desirability of adding or suppressing whole sections. “There were long passages in different metres, with short lyrics sandwiched in between,” he has since recalled. The long passages included “a rather poor pastiche of Pope,” which was presumably the occasion of Pound’s dictum, elsewhere recorded, that pastiche is only justified if it is better than the original; “another passage about a fashionable lady having breakfast in bed, and another long passage about a shipwreck, which was obviously inspired by the Ulysses episode in the *Inferno*.” This would have led up to the “death by water” of the “drowned Phoenician sailor”; Victor Bérard’s speculations concerning the possible origin of the *Odyssey* in Phoenician *periploi* had been in print for twenty years and had occupied the attention of James Joyce. The deletion of these passages was apparently accepted without protest. The lyrics, on the other hand, contained elements Eliot struggled to preserve. After they have been removed from the body of *The Waste Land* he proposes putting them at the end, and is again dissuaded: “The thing now runs from ‘April ...’ to ‘shantih’ without a break. That is 19 pages, and let us say the longest poem in the English langwidge. Don’t try to bust all records by prolonging it three pages further.” One of the lyrics contained a “sweats with tears” passage which Eliot, after deletion from its original context, proposed working into the “nerves monologue: only place where it can go.” Pound vetoed it again: “I dare say the sweats with tears will wait.” It didn’t wait long; we find it in a poem contributed pseudonymously to Wyndham Lewis’ *Tyro* a little before the publication of *The Waste Land*, and later revised for publication in a triad of *Dream Songs*, all three of which may have descended from the *ur-Waste Land*.¹ Pound also dissuaded Eliot from installing *Gerontion* as a prelude to the sequence, forbade him to delete “Phlebas the Phoenician,” and nagged about the Conrad epigraph until a better one was discovered in Petronius.

These events are worth reconstructing because they clarify a number of things about the scope and intention of the poem. It was conceived as a somewhat loose medley, as the relief of more diffuse impulses than those to which its present compacted form corresponds. The separate preservation of the *Dream Songs* and the incorporation of some of their motifs, after much trial and error, into what is now *The Hollow Men*, testifies to Eliot's stubborn conviction that there was virtue in some of the omitted elements, whether or not their presence could be justified within the wholeness, not at first foreseen by the author, which the greater part of *The Waste Land* at length assumed. That wholeness, since it never did incorporate everything the author wanted it to, was to some extent a compromise, gotten by permuting with another's assistance materials he no longer had it in him to rethink; and finally, after Pound, by simply eliminating everything not of the first intensity, had revealed an unexpected corporate substantiality in what survived, Eliot's impulse was to "explain" the poem as "thoughts of a dry brain in a dry season" by prefixing *Gerontion*.

That is to say, the first quality of *The Waste Land* to catch a newcomer's attention, its self-sufficient juxtaposition without copulae of themes and passages in a dense mosaic, had at first a novelty which troubled even the author. It was a quality arrived at by Pound's cutting; it didn't trouble Pound, who had already begun work on *The Cantos*. But Eliot, preoccupied as always with the seventeenth-century drama and no doubt tacitly encouraged by the example of Browning, naturally conceived a long poem as somebody's spoken or unspoken monologue, its shifts of direction and transition from theme to theme psychologically justified by the workings of the speaker's brain. *Prufrock* and *Gerontion* elucidate not only a phase of civilization but a perceiving—for the purpose of the poem, a presiding—consciousness. For anyone who has undergone immersion in the delicate phenomenology of Francis Herbert Bradley, in fact, it is meaningless to conceive of a presentation that cannot be resolved into an experienced content and a "finite center" which experiences. The perceiver is describable only as the zone of consciousness where that which he perceives can coexist; but the perceived, conversely, can't be accorded independent status; it is, precisely, all that can coexist in this particular zone of consciousness. In a loose sequence of poems these considerations need give no trouble; the pervading zone of consciousness is that of the author: as we intuit Herrick in *Hesperides*, or Herbert in *The Temple*. But a five-parted work of 434 lines entitled *The Waste Land*, with sudden wrenching juxtapositions, thematic links between section and section, fragments quoted from several languages with no one present to whose mind they can occur: this dense textural unity, as queer as *Le Sacre du Printemps*, must have seemed to Eliot a little factitious until he

had gotten used to the poem in its final form; which, as everyone who has encountered it knows, must take some time. So we discover him endeavoring to square the artistic fact with his pervasive intuition of fitness by the note on Tiresias, which offers to supply the poem with a nameable point of view:

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

If we take this note as an afterthought, a token placation, say, of the ghost of Bradley, rather than as elucidative of the assumption under which the writing was originally done, our approach to *The Waste Land* will be facilitated. In fact we shall do well to discard the notes as much as possible; they have bedeviled discussion for decades.

The writing of the notes was a last complication in the fractious history of the poem's composition; it is doubtful whether any other acknowledged masterpiece has been so heavily marked, with the author's consent, by forces outside his control. The notes got added to *The Waste Land* as a consequence of the technological fact that books are printed in multiples of thirty-two pages.

The poem, which had appeared without any annotation whatever in *The Criterion* and in the *Dial* (October and November, 1922, respectively), was in book form too long for thirty-two pages of decent-sized print and a good deal too short for sixty-four. So Eliot (at length disinclined, fortunately, to insert *Gerontion* as a preface or to append the cancelled lyrics) set to work to expand a few notes in which he had identified the quotations, “with a view to spiking the guns of critics of my earlier poems who had accused me of plagiarism.”² He dilated on the Tarot Pack, copied out nineteen lines from Ovid and thirty-three words from Chapman's *Handbook of Birds of Eastern North America*, recorded his evaluation of the interior of the Church of St. Magnus Martyr, saluted the late Henry Clarke Warren as one of the great pioneers of Buddhist studies in the Occident, directed the reader's attention to a hallucination recorded on one of the Antarctic expeditions (“I forget which, but I think one of Shackleton's”), and eventually, with the aid of quotations from Froude, Bradley, and Hermann Hesse's *Blick ins Chaos*, succeeded in padding the thing out to a suitable length. The keying of these items to specific passages by the academic device of numbering lines—hence

Eliot's pleasantry, twenty-four years later, about "bogus scholarship"—may be surmised to have been done in haste: early in *What the Thunder Said* a line was missed in the counting. "I have sometimes thought," Eliot has said, "of getting rid of these notes; but now they can never be unstuck. They have had almost greater popularity than the poem itself.... It was just, no doubt, that I should pay my tribute to the work of Miss Jessie Weston; but I regret having sent so many enquirers off on a wild goose chase after Tarot cards and the Holy Grail." We have license therefore to ignore them, and instead "endeavour to grasp what the poetry is aiming to be ... to grasp its entelechy."

That the entelechy is graspable without source-hunting, and without even appeal to any but the most elementary knowledge of one or two myths and a few Shakespearean tags, is a statement requiring temerity to sustain in the face of all the scholarship that has been expended during a third of a century on these 434 lines. It inheres, however, in Dr. Leavis' admirably tactful account of the poem in *New Bearings*, and in Pound's still earlier testimony. In 1924 Pound rebutted a piece of reviewer's acrimony with the flat statement that the poem's obscurities were reducible to four Sanskrit words, three of which are

so implied in the surrounding text that one can pass them by ... without losing the general tone or the main emotion of the passage. They are so obviously the words of some ritual or other.

[One does need to be told that "shantih" means peace.]

For the rest, I saw the poem in typescript, and I did not see the notes till 6 or 8 months afterward; and they have not increased my enjoyment of the poem one atom. The poem seems to me an emotional unit....

I have not read Miss Weston's *Ritual to Romance*, and do not at present intend to. As to the citations, I do not think it matters a damn which is from Day, which from Milton, Middleton, Webster, or Augustine. I mean so far as the functioning of the poem is concerned. One's incult pleasure in reading *The Waste Land* would be the same if Webster had written "Women Before Woman" and Marvell the *Metamorphoses*.

His parting shot deserves preservation:

This demand for clarity in every particular of a work, whether essential or not, reminds me of the Pre-Raphaelite painter who

was doing a twilight scene but rowed across the river in day time to see the shape of the leaves on the further bank, which he then drew in with full detail.

ii

A Game of Chess is a convenient place to start our investigations. Chess is played with Queens and Pawns: the set of pieces mimics a social hierarchy, running from “The Chair she sat in, like a burnished throne,” to “Goonight Bill. Goonight Lou. Goonight May. Goonight.” It is a silent unnerving warfare

(“Speak to me. Why do you never speak. Speak.

“What are you thinking of? What thinking? What?

“I never know what you are thinking. Think.”)

in which everything hinges on the welfare of the King, the weakest piece on the board, and in this section of the poem invisible (though a “barbarous king” once forced Philomel.) Our attention is focused on the Queen.

The Chair she sat in, like a burnished throne,
 Glowed on the marble, where the glass
 Held up by standards wrought with fruited vines
 From which a golden Cupidon peeped out
 (Another hid his eyes behind his wing)
 Doubled the flames of sevenbranched candelabra
 Reflecting light upon the table as
 The glitter of her jewels rose to meet it,
 From satin cases poured in rich profusion....

This isn't a Miltonic sentence, brilliantly contorted; it lacks nerve, forgetting after ten words its confident opening (“The Chair she sat in”) to dissipate itself among glowing and smouldering sensations, like a progression of Wagner's. Cleopatra “o'erpicturing that Venus where we see / The fancy outwork nature”) sat outdoors; this Venusberg interior partakes of “an atmosphere of Juliet's tomb,” and the human inhabitant appears once, in a perfunctory subordinate clause. Pope's Belinda conducted “the sacred rites of pride”—

This casket India's glowing gems unlocks,
 And all Arabia breathes from yonder box.

The woman at the dressing-table in *The Waste Land*, implied but never named or attended to, is not like Belinda the moral center of an innocent dislocation of values, but simply the implied sensibility in which these multifarious effects dissolve and find congruence. All things deny nature; the fruited vines are carved, the Cupidons golden, the light not of the sun, the perfumes synthetic, the candelabra (seven-branched, as for an altar) devoted to no rite, the very color of the fire-light perverted by sodium and copper salts. The dolphin is carved, and swims in a “sad light,” not, like Antony’s delights, “showing his back above the element he lives in.”

No will to exploit new sensations is present; the will has long ago died; this opulent ambience is neither chosen nor questioned. The “sylvan scene” is not Eden nor a window but a painting, and a painting of an unnatural event:

The change of Philomel, by the barbarous king
So rudely forced; yet there the nightingale
Filled all the desert with inviolable voice
And still she cried, and still the world pursues,
“Jug Jug” to dirty ears.

Her voice alone, like the voice that modulates the thick fluid of this sentence, is “inviolable”; like Tiresias in Thebes, she is prevented from identifying the criminal whom only she can name. John Lyly wrote down her song more than two centuries before Keats (who wasn’t interested in what she was saying):

What bird so sings yet so dos wayle?
O ’Tis the ravishd Nightingale.
Jug, Jug, Jug, tereu, shee cryes,
And still her woes at Midnight rise.
Brave prick song! ...

Lyly, not being committed to the idea that the bird was pouring forth its soul abroad, noted that it stuck to its script (“prick song”) and himself attempted a transcription. Lyly of course is perfectly aware of what she is trying to say: “tereu” comes very close to “Tereus.” It remained for the nineteenth century to dissolve her plight into a symbol of diffuse *Angst*, indeed to impute “ecstasy” amid human desolation, “here, where men sit and hear each other groan”; and for the twentieth century to hang up a painting of the event on a dressing-room wall, as pungent sauce to appetites jaded with the narrative

clarity of mythologies, but responsive to the visceral thrill and the pressures of “significant form.” The picture, a “withered stump of time,” hangs there, one item in a collection that manages to be not edifying but sinister:

staring forms
 Leaned out, leaning, hushing the room enclosed.
 Then the visitor, as always in Eliot, mounts a stairway—
 Footsteps shuffled on the stair.
 —and we get human conversation at last:

“What is that noise?”
 The wind under the door.
 “What is that noise now? What is the wind doing?”
 Nothing again nothing.

“Do
 “You know nothing? Do you see nothing? Do you remember
 “Nothing?”

I remember
 Those are pearls that were his eyes.

“My experience 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.” What is there to say but “nothing”? He remembers a quotation, faintly apposite; in this room the European past, effects and *objets d’art* gathered from many centuries, has suffered a sea-change, into something rich and strange, and stifling. Sensibility here is the very inhibition of life; and activity is reduced to the manic capering of “that Shakespearian Rag,” the past imposing no austerity, existing simply to be used.

“What shall we do tomorrow?
 “What shall we ever do?”
 The hot water at ten.
 And if it rains, a closed car at four.
 And we shall play a game of chess,
 Pressing lidless eyes and waiting for a knock upon the door.

If we move from the queens to the pawns, we find low life no more free or natural, equally obsessed with the denial of nature, artificial teeth, chemically procured abortions, the speaker and her interlocutor battenning fascinated at second-hand on the life of Lil and her Albert, Lil and Albert interested only in spurious ideal images of one another

(He'll want to know what you done with that money he gave you
 To get yourself some teeth....
 He said, I swear, I can't bear to look at you.)

And this point—nature everywhere denied, its ceremonies simplified to the brutal abstractions of a chess-game

(He's been in the army four years, he wants a good time,
 And if you don't give it him, there's others will, I said.
 Oh is there, she said. Something o' that, I said.
 Then I'll know who to thank, she said, and give me a straight look.)

—this point is made implicitly by a device carried over from *Whispers of Immortality*, the juxtaposition without comment or copula of two levels of sensibility: the world of one who reads Webster with the world of one who knows Grishkin, the world of the inquiring wind and the sense drowned in odors with the world of ivory teeth and hot gammon. In Lil and Albert's milieu there is fertility, in the milieu where golden Cupidons peep out there is not; but Lil and Albert's breeding betokens not a harmony of wills but only Albert's improvident refusal to leave Lil alone. The chemist with commercial impartiality supplies one woman with "strange synthetic perfumes" and the other with "them pills I took, to bring it off," aphrodisiacs and abortifacients; he is the tutelary deity, uniting the offices of Cupid and Hymen, of a world which is under a universal curse.

From this vantage-point we can survey the methods of the first section, which opens with a denial of Chaucer:

Whan that Aprille with his shoures soote
 The droughte of March hath perced to the roote
 And bathed every veyne in swich licour
 Of which vertu engendred is the flour....
 Thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimages.

In the twentieth-century version we have a prayer-book heading, *The Burial of the Dead*, with its implied ceremonial of dust thrown and of souls reborn; and the poem begins,

April is the cruellest month, breeding
 Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
 Memory and desire, stirring
 Dull roots with spring rain.

No “vertu” is engendered amid this apprehensive reaching forward of participles, and instead of pilgrimages we have European tours:

we stopped in the colonnade,
And went on in sunlight, into the Hofgarten,
And drank coffee, and talked for an hour.

Up out of the incantation breaks a woman’s voice, giving tongue to the ethnological confusions of the new Europe, the subservience of *patria* to the whim of statesmen, the interplay of immutable fact and national pride:

Bin gar keine Russin, stamm’ aus Litauen, echt deutsch.

—a mixing of memory and desire. Another voice evokes the vanished Austro-Hungarian Empire, the inbred malaise of Mayerling, regressive thrills, objectless travels:

And when we were children, staying at the archduke’s,
My cousin’s, he took me out on a sled,
And I was frightened. He said, Marie,
Marie, hold on tight. And down we went.
In the mountains, there you feel free.
I read, much of the night, and go south in the winter.

“In the mountains, there you feel free.” We have only to delete “there” to observe the collapse of more than a rhythm: to observe how the line’s exact mimicry of a fatigue which supposes it has reached some ultimate perception can telescope spiritual bankruptcy, deracinated ardor, and an illusion of liberty which is no more than impatience with human society and relief at a temporary change. It was a restless, pointless world that collapsed during the war, agitated out of habit but tired beyond coherence, on the move to avoid itself. The memories in lines 8 to 18 seem spacious and precious now; then, the events punctuated a terrible continuum of boredom.

The plight of the Sibyl in the epigraph rhymes with that of Marie; the terrible thing is to be compelled to stay alive. “For I with these my own eyes have seen the Cumaean Sibyl hanging in a jar; and when the boys said, ‘What do you want, Sibyl?’ she answered, ‘I want to die.’ The sentence is in a macaronic Latin, posterior to the best age, pungently sauced with Greek; Cato would have contemplated with unblinking severity Petronius’ readers’ jazz-age craving for the cosmopolitan. The Sibyl in her better days answered questions by flinging from her cave handfuls of leaves bearing letters which

the postulant was required to arrange in a suitable order; the wind commonly blew half of them away. Like Tiresias, like Philomel, like the modern poet, she divulged forbidden knowledge only in riddles, fitfully. (Tiresias wouldn't answer Oedipus at all; and he put off Odysseus with a puzzle about an oar mistaken for a winnowing-fan.) *The Waste Land* is suffused with a functional obscurity, sibylline fragments so disposed as to yield the utmost in connotative power, embracing the fragmented present and reaching back to "that vanished mind of which our mind is a continuation." As for the Sibyl's present exhaustion, she had foolishly asked Apollo for as many years as the grains of sand in her hand; which is one layer in the multi-layered line, "I will show you fear in a handful of dust." She is the prophetic power, no longer consulted by heroes but tormented by curious boys, still answering because she must; she is Madame Sososttris, consulted by dear Mrs. Equitone and harried by police ("One must be so careful these days"); she is the image of the late phase of Roman civilization, now vanished; she is also "the mind of Europe," a mind more important than one's own private mind, a mind which changes but abandons nothing en route, not superannuating either Shakespeare, or Homer, or the rock drawing of the Magdalenian draughtsmen; but now very nearly exhausted by the effort to stay interested in its own contents.

Which brings us to the "heap of broken images": not only desert ruins of some past from which life was withdrawn with the failure of the water supply, like the Roman cities in North Africa, or Augustine's Carthage, but also the manner in which Shakespeare, Homer, and the drawings of Michelangelo, Raphael, and the Magdalenian draughtsmen coexist in the contemporary cultivated consciousness: fragments, familiar quotations: *poluphloisboio thalasse*, to be or not to be, undo this button, one touch of nature, etc., God creating the Sun and Moon, those are pearls that were his eyes. For one man who knows *The Tempest* intimately there are a thousand who can identify the lines about the cloud-capp'd towers; painting is a miscellany of reproductions, literature a potpourri of quotations, history a chaos of theories and postures (Nelson's telescope, Washington crossing the Delaware, government of, for and by the people, the Colosseum, the guillotine). A desert wind has blown half the leaves away; disuse and vandals have broken the monuments—

What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow
 Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,
 You cannot say, or guess, for you know only
 A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,
 And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,
 And the dry stone no sound of water....

Cities are built out of the ruins of previous cities, as *The Waste Land* is built out of the remains of older poems. But at this stage no building is yet in question; the “Son of man” (a portentously generalizing phrase) is moving tirelessly eastward, when the speaker accosts him with a sinister “Come in under the shadow of this red rock,” and offers to show him not merely horror and desolation but something older and deeper: fear.

Hence the hyacinth girl, who speaks with urgent hurt simplicity, like the mad Ophelia:

“You gave me hyacinths first a year ago;
They called me the hyacinth girl.”

They are childlike words, self-pitying, spoken perhaps in memory, perhaps by a ghost, perhaps by a wistful woman now out of her mind. The response exposes many contradictory layers of feeling:

—Yet when we came back, late, from the Hyacinth garden,
Your arms full, and your hair wet, I could not
Speak, and my eyes failed, I was neither
Living nor dead, and I knew nothing,
Looking into the heart of light, the silence.

The context is erotic, the language that of mystical experience: plainly a tainted mysticism. “The Hyacinth garden” sounds queerly like a lost cult’s sacred grove, and her arms were no doubt full of flowers; what rite was there enacted or evaded we can have no means of knowing.

But another level of meaning is less ambiguous: perhaps in fantasy, the girl has been drowned. Five pages later *A Game of Chess* ends with Ophelia’s words before her death; Ophelia gathered flowers before she tumbled into the stream, then lay and chanted snatches of old tunes—

Frisch weht der Wind
Der Heimat zu...

while her clothes and hair spread out on the waters. *The Burial of the Dead* ends with a sinister dialogue about a corpse in the garden—

Has it begun to sprout? Will it bloom this year?
Or has the sudden frost disturbed its bed?

—two Englishmen discussing their tulips, with a note of the terrible intimacy with which murderers imagine themselves being taunted. The traditional British murderer—unlike his American counterpart, who in a vast land instinctively puts distance between himself and the corpse—prefers to keep it near at hand; in the garden, or behind the wainscoting, or

bones cast in a little low dry garret,
Rattled by the rat's foot only, year to year.

The *Fire Sermon* opens with despairing fingers clutching and sinking into a wet bank; it closes with Thames-daughters singing from beneath the oily waves. The drowned Phlebas in Section IV varies this theme; and at the close of the poem the response to the last challenge of the thunder alludes to something that happened in a boat:

your heart would have responded
Gaily, when invited, beating obedient
To controlling hands

—but what in fact did happen we are not told; perhaps nothing, or perhaps the hands assumed another sort of control.

In *The Waste Land* as in *The Family Reunion*, the guilt of the protagonist seems coupled with his perhaps imagined responsibility for the fate of a perhaps ideally drowned woman.

One thinks to escape
By violence, but one is still alone
In an over-crowded desert, jostled by ghosts.

(Ghosts that beckon us under the shadow of some red rock)

It was only reversing the senseless direction
For a momentary rest on the burning wheel
That cloudless night in the mid-Atlantic
When I pushed her over

It must give this man an unusual turn when Madame Sosostriis spreads her pack and selects a card as close to his secret as the Tarot symbolism can come:

Baudelaire agrees:

Si le viol, le poison, le poignard, l'incendie,
N'ont pas encore brodé de leurs plaisants dessins
Le canevas banal de nos piteux destins,
C'est que notre âme, hélas! n'est pas assez hardie.

This is from the poem which ends with the line Eliot has appropriated to climax the first section of *The Waste Land*:

You! hypocrite lecteur!—mon semblable,—mon frère!

Part Two, *A Game of Chess*, revolves around perverted nature, denied or murdered offspring; Part Three, *The Fire Sermon*, the most explicit of the five sections, surveys with grave denunciatory candor a world of automatic lust, in which those barriers between person and person which so troubled Prufrock are dissolved by the suppression of the person and the transposition of all human needs and desires to a plane of genital gratification.

The river's tent is broken: the last fingers of leaf
Clutch and sink into the wet bank. The wind
Crosses the brown land, unheard. The nymphs are departed.
Sweet Thames, run softly, till I end my song.

The “tent,” now broken would have been composed of the overarching trees that transformed a reach of the river into a tunnel of love; the phrase beckons to mind the broken maidenhead; and a line later the gone harmonious order, by a half-realizable metamorphosis, struggles exhausted an instant against drowning. “The nymphs are departed” both because summer is past, and because the world of Spenser’s *Prothalamion* (when nymphs scattered flowers on the water) is gone, if it ever existed except as an ideal fancy of Spenser’s.

The river bears no empty boxes, sandwich papers,
Silk handkerchiefs, cardboard boxes, cigarette ends
Or other testimony of summer nights. The nymphs are departed.

From the “brown land,” amorists have fled indoors, but the river is not restored to a sixteenth-century purity because the debris of which it is now freed was not a sixteenth-century strewing of petals but a discarding of twentieth-century impedimenta. The nymphs who have this year departed

are not the same nymphs who departed in autumns known to Spenser; their friends are “the loitering heirs of city directors,” who, unwilling to assume responsibility for any untoward pregnancies,

Departed, have left no addresses.

Spring will return and bring Sweeney to Mrs. Porter; Mrs. Porter, introduced by the sound of horns and caressed by the moonlight while she laves her feet, is a latter-day Diana bathing; her daughter perhaps, or any of the vanished nymphs, a latter-day Philomel

(So rudely forc’d.
Tereu.)

Next Mr. Eugenides proposes what appears to be a pederastic assignation; and next the typist expects a visitor to her flat.

The typist passage is the great *tour de force* of the poem; its gentle lyric melancholy, its repeatedly disrupted rhythms, the automatism of its cadences, in alternate lines aspiring and falling nervelessly—

The time is now propitious, as he guesses,
The meal is ended, she is bored and tired,
Endeavours to engage her in caresses
Which still are unproved, if undesired.

—constitute Eliot’s most perfect liaison between the self-sustaining, gesture of the verse and the presented fact. Some twenty-five lines in flawlessly traditional iambic pentameter, alternately rhymed, sustain with their cadenced gravity a moral context in which the dreary business is played out; the texture is lyric rather than dramatic because there is neither doing nor suffering here but rather the mutual compliance of a ritual scene. The section initiates its flow with a sure and perfect line composed according to the best eighteenth-century models:

At the violet hour, when the eyes and back

which, if the last word were, for instance, “heart,” we might suppose to be by a precursor of Wordsworth’s. But the harsh sound and incongruous specification of “back” shift us instead to a plane of prosodic disintegration:

when the eyes and back
 Turn upward from the desk, when the human engine waits
 Like a taxi throbbing waiting,

The upturned eyes and back—nothing else, no face, no torso—recall a Picasso distortion; the “human engine” throws pathos down into mechanism. In the next line the speaker for the first time in the poem identifies himself as Tiresias:

I Tiresias, though blind, throbbing between two lives,
 Old man with wrinkled female breasts, can see ...

There are three principal stories about Tiresias, all of them relevant. In *Oedipus Rex*, sitting “by Thebes below the wall” he knew why, and as a consequence of what violent death and what illicit amour, the pestilence had fallen on the unreal city, but declined to tell. In the *Odyssey* he “walked among the lowest of the dead” and evaded predicting Odysseus’ death by water; the encounter was somehow necessary to Odysseus’ homecoming, and Odysseus was somehow satisfied with it, and did get home, for a while. In the *Metamorphoses* he underwent a change of sex for watching the coupling of snakes: presumably the occasion on which he “foresuffered” what is tonight “enacted on this same divan or bed.” He is often the prophet who knows but withholds his knowledge, just as Hieronymo, who is mentioned at the close of the poem, knew how the tree he had planted in his garden came to bear his dead son, but was compelled to withhold that knowledge until he could write a play which, like *The Waste Land*, employs several languages and a framework of allusions impenetrable to anyone but the “hypocrite lecteur.” It is an inescapable shared guilt that makes us so intimate with the contents of this strange deathly poem; it is also, in an age that has eaten of the tree of the knowledge of psychology and anthropology (“After such knowledge, what forgiveness?”), an inescapable morbid sympathy with everyone else, very destructive to the coherent personality, that (like Tiresias’ years as a woman) enables us to join with him in “foresuffering all.” These sciences afford us an *illusion* of understanding other people, on which we build sympathies that in an ideal era would have gone out with a less pathological generosity, and that are as likely as not projections of our self-pity and self-absorption, vices for which Freud and Frazer afford dangerous nourishment. Tiresias is he who has lost the sense of other people as inviolably other, and who is capable neither of pity nor terror but only of a fascination, spuriously related to compassion, which is merely the twentieth century’s special mutation of indifference. Tiresias can see

At the violet hour, the evening hour that strives
 Homeward, and brings the sailor home from sea,
 The typist home at teatime, clears her breakfast, lights
 Her stove, and lays out food in tins.

Syntax, like his sensibility and her routine, undergoes total collapse. A fine throbbing line intervenes:

Out of the window perilously spread

and bathos does not wholly overtopple the completing Alexandrine:

Her drying combinations touched by the sun's last rays.

"Combinations" sounds a little finer than the thing it denotes; so does "divan":

On the divan are piled (at night her bed)
 Stockings, slippers, camisoles and stays.

Some transfiguring word touches with glory line after line:

He, the young man carbuncular, arrives,

If he existed, and if he read those words, how must he have marvelled at the alchemical power of language over his inflamed skin! As their weary ritual commences, the diction alters; it moves to a plane of Johnsonian dignity without losing touch with them; they are never "formulated, sprawling on a pin."

"Endeavours to engage her in caresses" is out of touch with the small house-agent's clerk's speech, but it is such a sentence as he might *write*; Eliot has noted elsewhere how "an artisan who can talk the English language beautifully while about his work or in a public bar, may compose a letter painfully written in a dead language bearing some resemblance to a newspaper leader and decorated with words like 'maelstrom' and 'pandemonium.'" So it is with the diction of this passage: it reflects the words with which the participants might clothe, during recollection in tranquillity, their own notion of what they have been about, presuming them capable of such self-analysis; and it maintains simultaneously Tiresias' fastidious impersonality. The rhymes come with a weary inevitability that

parodies the formal elegance of Gray; and the episode modulates at its close into a key to which Goldsmith can be transposed:

When lovely woman stoops to folly and
Paces about her room again, alone,
She smooths her hair with automatic hand,
And puts a record on the gramophone.

With her music and her lures “perilously spread” she is a London siren; the next line, “This music crept by me upon the waters,” if it is lifted from the *Tempest*, might as well be adapted from the twelfth book of the *Odyssey*.

After the Siren, the violated Thames-daughters, borrowed from Wagner, the “universal artist” whom the French Symbolists delighted to honor. The opulent Wagnerian pathos, with its harmonic rather than linear development and its trick of entrancing the attention with *leitmotifs*, is never unrelated to the methods of *The Waste Land*. One of the characters in “A Dialogue on Dramatic Poetry,” though he has railed at Wagner as “pernicious,” yet would not willingly resign his experience of Wagner; for Wagner had more than a bag of orchestral tricks and a corrupt taste for mythologies, he had also an indispensable sense of his own age, something that partly sustains and justifies his methods. “A sense of his own age”—the ability to “recognize its pattern while the pattern was yet incomplete”—was a quality Eliot in 1930 was to ascribe to Baudelaire.³ One who has possessed it cannot simply be ignored, though he is exposed to the follies of his age as well as sensitive to its inventions. At the very least he comes to symbolize a phase in “the mind of Europe” otherwise difficult to locate or name; at best, his methods, whether or not they merited his own fanaticism, are of permanent value to later artists for elucidating those phases of human sensibility to the existence of which they originally contributed. This principle is quite different from the academic or counter-academic notion that art must be deliberately adulterated because its preoccupations are.

Wagner, more than Frazer or Miss Weston, presides over the introduction into *The Waste Land* of the Grail motif. In Wagner’s opera, the Sangreal quest is embedded in an opulent and depraved religiosity, as in Tennyson’s *Holy Grail* the cup, “rose-red, with beatings in it, as if alive, till all the white walls of my cell were dyed with rosy colours leaping on the wall,” never succeeds in being more than the reward of a refined and sublimated erotic impulse. Again Eliot notes of Baudelaire that “in much romantic poetry the sadness is due to the exploitation of the fact that no human relations are adequate to human desires, but also to the disbelief in any

further object for human desires than that which, being human, fails to satisfy them." The Grail was in mid-nineteenth-century art an attempt to postulate such an object; and the quest for that vision unites the poetry of baffled sadness to "the poetry of flight," a genre which Eliot distinguishes in quoting Baudelaire's "Quand partons-nous vers le bonheur?" and characterizes as "a dim recognition of the direction of beatitude."

So in Part V of *The Waste Land* the journey eastward among the red rocks and heaps of broken images is fused with the journey to Emmaus ("He who was living is now dead. We who were living are now dying") and the approach to the Chapel Perilous.

The quester arrived at the Chapel Perilous had only to ask the meaning of the things that were shown him. Until he has asked their meaning, they have none; after he has asked, the king's wound is healed and the waters commence again to flow. So in a civilization reduced to "a heap of broken images" all that is requisite is sufficient curiosity; the man who asks what one or another of these fragments means—seeking, for instance, "a first-hand opinion about Shakespeare"—may be the agent of regeneration. The past exists in fragments precisely because nobody cares what it meant; it will unite itself and come alive in the mind of anyone who succeeds in caring, who is unwilling that Shakespeare shall remain the name attached only to a few tags everyone half-remembers, in a world where "we know too much, and are convinced of too little."

Eliot develops the nightmare journey with consummate skill, and then manoeuvres the reader into the position of the quester, presented with a terminal heap of fragments which it is his business to inquire about. The protagonist in the poem perhaps does not inquire; they are fragments he has shored against his ruins. Or perhaps he does inquire; he has at least begun to put them to use, and the "arid plain" is at length behind him.

The journey is prepared for by two images of asceticism: the brand plucked from the burning, and the annihilation of Phlebas the Phoenician. *The Fire Sermon*, which opens by Thames water, closes with a burning, a burning that images the restless lusts of the nymphs, the heirs of city directors, Mr. Eugenides, the typist and the young man carbuncular, the Thames-daughters. They are unaware that they burn. "I made no comment. What should I resent?" They burn nevertheless, as the protagonist cannot help noticing when he shifts his attention from commercial London to commercial Carthage (which stood on the North African shore, and is now utterly destroyed). There human sacrifices were dropped into the furnaces of Moloch, in a frantic gesture of appeasement. There Augustine burned with sensual fires: "a cauldron of unholy loves sang all about mine ears"; and he cried, "O Lord, Thou pluckest me out." The Buddhist ascetic on the other

hand does not ask to be plucked out; he simply turns away from the senses because (as the Buddhist Fire Sermon states) they are each of them on fire. As for Phlebas the Phoenician, a trader sailing perhaps to Britain, his asceticism is enforced: "A current under sea picked his bones in whispers," he forgets the benisons of sense, "the cry of gulls and the deep sea swell" as well as "the profit and loss," and he spirals down, like Dante's Ulysses, through circling memories of his age and youth, "as Another chose." (An account of a shipwreck, imitated from the Ulysses episode in Dante, was one of the long sections deleted from the original *Waste Land*.) Ulysses in hell was encased in a tongue of flame, death by water having in one instance secured not the baptismal renunciation of the Old Adam, but an eternity of fire. Were there some simple negative formula for dealing with the senses, suicide would be the sure way to regeneration.

Part V opens, then, in Gethsemane, carries us rapidly to Golgotha, and then leaves us to pursue a nightmare journey in a world now apparently deprived of meaning.

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....

The whirling, obsessive reduplication of single words carries the travellers through a desert, through the phases of hallucination in which they number phantom companions, and closes with a synoptic vision of the destruction of Jerusalem ("Murmur of maternal lamentation" obviously recalling "daughters of Jerusalem, weep not for me, but for yourselves and your children") which becomes *sub specie aeternitatis* the destruction by fire of civilization after civilization

Jerusalem Athens Alexandria
 Vienna London
 Unreal

The woman at the dressing-table recurs:

A woman drew her long black hair out tight
 And fiddled whisper music on those strings;

her "golden Cupidons" are transmogrified:

And bats with baby faces in the violet light
 Whistled, and beat their wings
 And crawled head downward down a blackened wall

and where towers hang “upside down in air” stability is imaged by a deserted chapel among the mountains, another place from which the life has gone but in which the meaning is latent, awaiting only a pilgrim’s advent. The cock crows as it did when Peter wept tears of penitence; as in *Hamlet*, it disperses the night-spirits.

Then a damp gust
 Bringing rain.

There the activity of the protagonist ends. Some forty remaining lines in the past tense recapitulate the poem in terms of the oldest wisdom accessible to the West. The thunder’s DA is one of those primordial Indo-European roots that recur in the *Oxford Dictionary*, a random leaf of the Sibyl’s to which a thousand derivative words, now automatic currency, were in their origins so many explicit glosses. If the race’s most permanent wisdom is its oldest, then DA, the voice of the thunder and of the Hindu sages, is the cosmic voice not yet dissociated into echoes. It underlies the Latin infinitive “dare,” and all its Romance derivatives; by a sound-change, the Germanic “geben,” the English “give.” It is the root of “datta,” “dayadhvam,” “damyata”: give, sympathize, control: three sorts of giving. To sympathize is to give oneself; to control is to give governance.

Then spoke the thunder
 DA
Datta: what have we given?
 My friend, blood shaking my heart
 The awful daring of a moment’s surrender
 Which an age of prudence can never retract
 By this, and this only, we have existed.

The first surrender was our parents’ sexual consent; and when we are born again it is by a new surrender, inconceivable to the essentially satiric sensibility with which a Gerontion contemplates

... De Bailhache, Fresca, Mrs. Cammel, whirled
 Beyond the circuit of the shuddering Bear,

and requiring a radical modification of even a Tiresias' negative compassion.

The awful daring of a moment's surrender ...
Which is not to be found in our obituaries
Or in memories draped by the beneficent spider
Or under seals broken by the lean solicitor
In our empty rooms.

The lean solicitor, like the inquiring worm, breaks seals that in lifetime were held prissily inviolate; the will he is about to read registers not things given but things abandoned. The thunder is telling us what Tiresias did not dare tell Oedipus, the reason for the universal curse: "What have we given?" As for "Dayadhvam," "sympathize":

DA
Dayadhvam: I have heard the key
Turn in the door once and turn once only
We think of the key, each in his prison
Thinking of the key, each confirms a prison

—a prison of inviolate honor, self-sufficiency, like that in which Coriolanus locked himself away. Coriolanus' city was also under a curse, in which he participated. His energies sufficed in wartime (Eliot's poem was written three years after the close of the Great War), but in peacetime it becomes clear that "he did it to please his mother, and to be partly proud." He is advised to go through the forms of giving and sympathy, but

[Not] by the matter which your heart prompts you,
But with such words that are but rooted in
Your tongue ...

After his banishment he goes out "like to a lonely dragon," and plots the destruction of Rome. His final threat is to stand

As if a man were author of himself
And knew no other kin.

He is an energetic and purposeful Prufrock, concerned with the figure he cuts and readily humiliated; Prufrock's radical fault is not his lack of energy and purpose. Coriolanus is finally shattered like a statue; and if

Only at nightfall, aethereal rumours
 Revive for a moment a broken Coriolanus,

it may be only as the Hollow Men in Death's dream kingdom hear voices "in the wind's singing," and discern sunlight on a broken column. Do the rumors at nightfall restore him to momentary life, or restore his memory to the minds of other self-sufficient unsympathizing men?

DA
Damyata: The boat responded
 Gaily, to the hand expert with sail and oar
 The sea was calm, your heart would have responded
 Gaily, when invited, beating obedient
 To controlling hands

Unlike the rider, who may dominate his horse, the sailor survives and moves by cooperation with a nature that cannot be forced; and this directing, sensitive hand, feeling on the sheet the pulsation of the wind and on the rudder the momentary thrust of waves, becomes the imagined instrument of a comparably sensitive human relationship. If dominance compels response, control invites it; and the response comes "gaily." But—"would have": the right relationship was never attempted.

I sat upon the shore
 Fishing, with the arid plain behind me

The journey eastward across the desert is finished; though the king's lands are waste, he has arrived at the sea.

Shall I at least set my lands in order?

Isaiah bade King Hezekiah set his lands in order because he was destined not to live; but Candide resolved to cultivate his own garden as a way of living. We cannot set the whole world in order; we can rectify ourselves. And we are destined to die, but such order as lies in our power is nevertheless desirable.

London Bridge is falling down falling down falling down
Poi s'ascose nel foco che gli affina
Quando fiam uti chelidon—O swallow swallow
Le Prince d'Aquitaine à la tour abolie
 These fragments I have shored against my ruins

An English nursery rhyme, a line of Dante's, a scrap of the late Latin *Pervigilium Veneris*, a phrase of Tennyson's ("O swallow, swallow, could I but follow") linked to the fate of Philomel, an image from a pioneer nineteenth-century French visionary who hanged himself on a freezing January morning: "a heap of broken images," and a fragmentary conspectus of the mind of Europe. Like the Knight in the Chapel Perilous, we are to ask what these relics mean; and the answers will lead us into far recesses of tradition.

The history of London Bridge (which was disintegrating in the eighteenth century, and which had symbolized, with its impractical houses, a communal life now sacrificed to abstract transportation—

A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,
I had not thought death had undone so many.)

is linked by the nursery rhyme with feudal rituals ("gold and silver, my fair lady") and festivals older still. Dante's line focuses the tradition of Christian asceticism, in which "burning" is voluntarily undergone. Dante's speaker was a poet:

Ieu sui Arnaut, que plor e vau cantan;
Consiros vei la passada folor,
E vei jausen lo jorn, que'esper, denan....

"Consiros vei la passada folor": compare "With the arid plain behind me." "Vau cantan": he goes singing in the fire, like the children in the Babylonian furnace, not quite like Philomel whose song is pressed out of her by the memory of pain. The *Pervigilium Veneris* is another rite, popular, post-pagan, pre-Christian, welcoming in the spring and inciting to love: "Cras amet qui numquam amavit"; he who has never loved, let him love tomorrow; secular love, but its trajectory leads, via the swallow, aloft. Tennyson's swallow nearly two thousand years later ("Could I but follow") flies away from an earthbound poet, grounded in an iron time, and meditating "la poésie des départs." That poem is a solo, not a folk ritual. As for the Prince of Aquitaine with the ruined tower, he is one of the numerous *personae* Gérard de Nerval assumes in *El Desdichado*: "Suis-je Amour ou Phébus, Lusignan ou Biron?" as the speaker of *The Waste Land* is Tiresias, the Phoenician Sailor, and Ferdinand Prince of Naples. He has lingered in the chambers of the sea

J'ai rêvé dans la grotte où nage la sirène ...

and like Orpheus he has called up his love from the shades:

Et j'ai deux fois vainqueur traversé l'Achéron
 Modulant tour à tour sur la lyre d'Orphée
 Les soupirs de la sainte et les cris de la fée.

So *The Waste Land* contains Augustine's cries and the song of the Thames-daughters; but de Nerval, the pioneer Symbolist, is enclosed in a mood, in a poetic state, surrounded by his own symbols ("Je suis le ténébreux,—le veuf,—l'inconsolé"), offering to a remembered order, where the vine and the rose were one, only the supplication of a dead man's hand, "Dans la nuit du tombeau," where "ma seule étoile est morte": under the twinkle of a fading star. It is some such state as his, these images suggest, that is to be explored in *The Hollow Men*; he inhabits death's dream kingdom. The mind of Europe, some time in the nineteenth century, entered an uneasy phase of sheer dream.

These fragments I have shored against my ruins
 Why then Ile fit you. Hieronymo's mad againe.

Here Eliot provides us with a final image for all that he has done: his poem is like Hieronymo's revenge-play. Hieronymo's enemies—the public for the poet in our time—commission an entertainment:

It pleased you,
 At the entertainment of the ambassador,
 To grace the king so much as with a show.
 Now, were your study so well furnished,
 As for the passing of the first night's sport
 To entertain my father with the like
 Or any such-like pleasing motion,
 Assure yourself, it would content them well.

HIER: Is this all?

BAL.: Ay, this is all.

HIER: Why then, I'll fit you. Say no more.

When I was young, I gave my mind
 And plied myself to fruitless poetry;
 Which though it profit the professor naught,
 Yet is it passing pleasing to the world.

It profits the professor naught, like Philomel's gift of song; and pleases those who have no notion of what it has cost, or what it will ultimately cost them. Hieronymo goes on to specify:

Each one of us
 Must act his part in unknown languages,
 That it may breed the more variety:
 As you, my lord, in Latin, I in Greek,
 You in Italian, and for because I know
 That Bellimperia hath practised the French,
 In courtly French shall all her phrases be.

Each of these languages occurs in *The Waste Land*; all but Greek, in the list of shored fragments. Balthasar responds, like a critic in *The New Statesman*,

But this will be a mere confusion,
 And hardly shall we all be understood.

Hieronymo, however, is master of his method:

It must be so: for the conclusion
 Shall prove the invention and all was good.

Hieronymo's madness, in the context provided by Eliot, is that of the Platonic bard. If we are to take the last two lines of *The Waste Land* as the substance of what the bard in his sibylline trance has to say, then the old man's macaronic tragedy appears transmuted into the thunder's three injunctions, Give, Sympathize, Control, and a triple "Peace," "repeated as here," says the note, "a formal ending to an Upanishad."

iii

Within a few months Eliot found himself responsible for a somewhat bemusing success. The poem won the 1922 *Dial* award; the first impression of one thousand copies was rapidly succeeded by a second; it was rumored that the author had perpetrated a hoax; the line "Twit twit twit" was not liked; the "parodies" were pronounced "inferior" by Mr. F. L. Lucas; Arnold Bennett inquired of the author whether the notes were "a lark or serious," and was careful to specify that the question was not insulting. The author said that "they were serious, and not more of a skit than some things in the poem itself." Mr. Bennett said that he couldn't see the point of the poem. The *Times Literary Supplement* reviewer felt that Mr. Eliot was sometimes walking very near the limits of coherency, but that when he had recovered control we should expect his poetry to have gained in variety and strength from this ambitious experiment.

He had written a poem which expressed for many readers their sense of not knowing what to do with themselves; as he later put it, with Bradleyan subtlety, "their illusion of being disillusioned." He was credited with having created a new mode of poetic organization, as he had, though specific instances of the cinematic effect were as likely as not attributable to Pound's cutting. Also he was singled out as the man who had written an unintelligible poem, and *with notes*. The author and annotator of this "piece that passeth understanding" was not insensitive to the resulting climate of jest. Six years later he capped a comparison between Crashaw and Shelley by calling for elucidation of the "Keen as are the arrows" stanza of *To a Skylark*: "There may be some clue for persons more learned than I; but Shelley should have provided notes."

NOTES

1. Two of them, *The wind sprang up* and *Eyes that last I saw in tears*, are preserved in the collected volume as *Minor Poems*. The third is now part iii of *The Hollow Men*. The poem in *The Tyro* is called *Song to the Ophesian* and signed "Gus Krutzsch," a portmanteau-name of which Kurtz seems to be one of the components. There are many small signs that *The Hollow Men* grew from rejected pieces of *The Waste Land*.

2. This incredibly illiterate literary society seems to have been wholly unaware of the methods of Pope, or else to have supposed that a period allegedly devoted to "profuse strains of unpremeditated art" had rendered such methods obsolete.

3. The quoted phrases are from a book by Peter Quennell, which Eliot cites in his essay on Baudelaire.