

JOHN H. TIMMERMAN

*The Aristotelian Mr. Eliot:
Structure and Strategy in The Waste Land*

Agnostic though he was at the time, T.S. Eliot undoubtedly was searching for some degree of spiritual direction in his Waste Land Cycle of poems. His thoughts might well have been incarnated in Gerontion's words:

I have not made this show purposelessly
And it is not by any concitation
Of the backward devils.
I would meet you upon this honestly.¹

The pronoun "this" in the final line is strategically ambiguous. Does it refer to his earlier deliberation on the vacuity of human history and the soul-robbing lack of passion in the modern age? Or, more likely, does it refer to the immediate subject of the stanza in which it appears—the spring (appearance or leap) of the tiger in the new year (spring)?

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Since Eliot did consider "Gerontion" as a prefatory poem to *The Waste Land*, the questions are not without merit, both in their criticism of the modern age and also their search for the meaning of Christ in an age without

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apparent meaning. “Gerontion” sets against each other, in a tension typical of *The Waste Land*, the Logos of the Gospel of John, the sign already given, and a search for answers located within the age itself. Thus, while “Christ the Tiger” is divided in a profaned sacrament by such people as Mr. Silvero, the profanation itself causes the tiger to leap and snap our hollowness under its jaws. The pivotal passage on human intellectual history—“After such knowledge, what forgiveness?”—that also expresses Gerontion’s own rationalist defense against passionate commitment, whirls apart in mere words when the tiger springs.

Spiritual stultification marks Eliot’s modern wasteland. The individual self remains impotent to reach beyond itself in any directed commitment. The inhabitants of the waste spaces peer into mirrors, unable to escape the pitiless stare of their shrunken passion. *The Waste Land*, with its sustained deliberation on self-gratification and urgency, welds together the bleakness of modernism and the tense uncertainty of a culture mired in spiritual quicksand. Yet, *The Waste Land* also points toward a way out of the wasteland.

Many readers have recognized the lyrical and symbolic suggestiveness of Section V and have related it as a response to earlier sections. Only partially explored is the careful way in which the thunder’s commands respond to the debased trinity of earlier sections. Essentially, Eliot establishes a three-fold devolution in which passion becomes mere urgency, the quest for the divine becomes immediate gratification, and civilization becomes the Unreal City. In each of these patterns, moreover, Eliot carefully adapts the philosophy of Aristotle to nuance his analysis of the modern human condition. Particularly important to this study are Aristotle’s use of the *via negativa*, his analysis of animal and human distinctions in *Partibus Animalium* and *De Anima*, and his ideological ethics in *Nicomachean Ethics*.

Aristotle, Aquinas, and the *Via Negativa*

Eliot’s acquaintance with Aristotle was lengthy and profound already by the time of *The Waste Land*. Sections of his dissertation lauded Aristotle for his ability to combine realism and idealism in the *Physics*. In a 1916 essay on Leibniz, Eliot appreciated this balance of Aristotle: “Aristotle is too keen a metaphysician to start from a naive view of matter or from a one-sided spiritualism.”² In “The Perfect Critic” (1920), an essay that addressed the modern schism between intelligence and sense perception, Eliot turns again to Aristotle: “He was primarily a man of not only remarkable and universal intelligence; and universal intelligence means that he could apply his intelligence to anything. . . . There is no method except to be very intelligent, but of intelligence itself swiftly operating the analysis of sensation to the point of principle and definition.”³ This modulation of intelligence and sensation to

a syncretic whole became something of a lifelong creed for Eliot, affecting his life, essays, and poetic theory.

Aquinas' undertaking of the synthesis of Aristotelian philosophical system with Christian theology arose from Averroes' earlier translation of Aristotle, which, Aquinas believed, was invalidated by Averroes' commentary that cast Aristotle in a distinctly Moslem slant. Moreover, Aquinas believed that Averroes had misrepresented Aristotle's method altogether, thereby giving a twisted echo rather than a true translation. Thus, Aquinas set out not only to reappropriate that system for the west, but also to "baptize" Aristotle's First Mover⁴ as the Christian God. In this process he adopted Aristotle's method of negation to serve his own ends.⁵

The effort was intrinsically difficult, for Aristotle's First Mover is aloof, impersonal, and distant. Yet, one can know certain things about this Being by excluding those qualities limited to human sensory and verbal experience. These could not be properties that define the Unmoved Mover since our senses are always at variance. Although we will return to the qualities of the First Mover itself later in this study, it is important to recognize here that distinction between sensory and verbal experience and the epistemology acquired by mind (the Aristotelian *Nous*) and will. To this end the *via negativa* is essential.⁶

For both Aristotle and Aquinas, the idea of the *via negativa* begins with two characteristics of humanity—dependence and limitation. Only God is essential being. His nature is to exist. All creation depends upon and stands in relation to this higher cause. Furthermore, whatever we describe of God is anthropomorphic and linguistically limited. Our difficulty in knowing God, Aquinas points out, is that "any term that denotes perfection modified by a creaturely limitation cannot be predicated of God except in the manner of simile and metaphor."⁷ Consequently, human knowledge of God is often by means of analogy. We can at best describe what God is *like*, given the limitations of experience and language.

But at this point the logical progression of the *via negativa* comes to aid. The way of negation denies that we can know God's essence; only God himself knows that. Nonetheless, there are certain qualities that we can deny of God. We know, for example, that he is not material, else he would be confined to time and space as we know it. The more qualities we can deny of God, then, the better we can isolate qualities that we do understand.⁸ The value of the *via negativa* lies precisely in the fact that human knowing is so cluttered with sensory and experiential data that our tendency is to make truth claims based on those data. We "know" by self-reference.

The *via negativa* leads to epistemological conclusions. In this way also *The Waste Land* in its entirety may be read as a *via negativa*, exposing the way

of negation by which one lives in the modern age, excluding those as avenues of epistemological certitude, and drawing from them signs toward a positive way. Eliot offers two options: the ceaseless burning of the fire sermon, or the rumble of thunder. The burning of desire is wholly self-inclusive while the rumble of the thunder calls one away from self. Moreover, as this essay examines that conflict, it also becomes apparent that the very structure of the poem mirrors the dialectic.

To arrive at a full understanding of those directions, however, one has to follow Eliot's precarious way of negation. If one can identify and exclude qualities of the age that are not, or work against, enduring values, then one can begin to define those values that do endure and that are redemptive of the age.⁹ Seen in this way, *The Waste Land* is not one long lament over the desolation of the modern age, but a vigorous intellectual searching for a remedy to that desolation. This may be seen further in the primary structure of trinities upon which Eliot builds the poem.

The Debased Trinity

PASSION

Prior to *The Waste Land*, Eliot's characters often represent the absence of any gratification because of immobilizing stasis. For example, Prufrock's imagination leads him "to an overwhelming question," but also to a multiplicity of answers to the question. Consequently, he is paralyzed by inaction through his fear of others and what their responses might be. He typifies, as Eliot wrote in *The Hollow Men*, "Paralyzed force, gesture without motion."

Similarly, Gerontion stands as one who has "lost my passion." In his case, however, passion has been lost to the spinning gears of rationalization. "Inquisition" is necessitated by "terror," but what is lost is beauty. The vortex of the rational mind is figured in the spinning apart of the "fractured atoms" at the end of the poem. The substantive difference from Prufrock is the fact that Gerontion genuinely laments his state with its lost opportunities.

The Waste Land opens with the narrator's sensual yearning, the April rain stirring "memory and desire" out of the dead land of winter. Section I, as Lyndall Gordon has argued, takes the form of a spiritual confessional, where fragmentary and deliberately incomplete entries "demand a reciprocal effort" from the reader.¹⁰ From the outset, then, the poem demands that the reader join in the spiritual discovery of the poem: "The point lies not in their [spiritual confessions] context so much as in the reader's act of self-discovery and judgment."¹¹ If so, the attendant question is what self-discovery appears to be made in the narrator and reader in regard to passion? Are we simply mired again in Prufrock's social fear or in Gerontion's rational cage?

In *The Waste Land* the narrator suffers from a sensual passion that is self-consuming rather than transcending. His passion fails to find an end outside of self, but exists only to gratify the self. Even at this early point, Eliot's understanding of and appreciation for Aristotle comes to bear upon the poem.

In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle argues that "neither the virtues nor the vices are passions" simply because virtue and vice are choices, while passions are matters of character.¹² The question central to *The Waste Land* is whether characters act out of choice or passion. Making a determination on that issue leads directly toward uncovering Eliot's philosophy of ethics in the poem.

In his inventive and fascinating study *The Parts of Animals*, Aristotle argued that humans most nearly resemble animals in sensual passions. Consequently, he locates the source for sensual passion in the weighty, lower extremities. He reserves the source of intellect and choice in the head that deliberates and hands that enact.

Aristotle makes his clearest distinctions between animals and humans in *De Anima*, however. Common to each are the nutritive soul and reproductive soul, the basest qualities in all living things. In humans, as with animals, these may be manifested as pure appetite not governed by the will. Humans are distinguished by possessing, beyond nutrition, reproduction, and sensation, the power of mind or intellect, the highest form of soul, and that which allies us with the First Mover.¹³ This is a distinction he returns to in *Metaphysics*. In his prefatory discussion (Book I), Aristotle varies his premise only slightly: "The animals other than man live by appearance and memories, and have but little of connected experience; but the human race lives also by art and reasoning."¹⁴ One advances through sensation, memory, experience, and art, to theoretical knowledge, the essential for a study of being and substance. At its highest level, then, theoretical knowledge brings us into relationship with absolute being and substance—the First Mover.

In *The Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle casts his entire theory in ethical terms, and those are more precisely applicable to *The Waste Land*. If we say that nutrition and reproduction are intrinsic characteristics of all living beings (plant, animal, and human), humanity adds to these the capacity of theoretical knowledge. While in metaphysical matters this is capacity for knowing God (the First Mover), in ethical matters it is the power of virtuous choice: "Virtue, then, is a state of character concerned with choice, lying in a mean, i.e. the mean relative to us, this being determined by a rational principle, and by that principle by which the man of practical wisdom would determine it."¹⁵ Aristotle's claim that virtue constitutes a mean sounds problematic, suggesting relativity to individual inclination. Such is not the case. There are actions, Aristotle insists, that are intrinsically bad:

But not every action nor every passion admits of a mean; for some have names that already imply badness, e.g. spite, shamelessness, envy, and in the case of actions adultery, theft, murder; for all of these and suchlike things imply by their names that they are themselves bad, and not the excesses or deficiencies of them. It is not possible, then, ever to be right with regard to them; one must always be wrong. Nor does goodness or badness with regard to such things depend on committing adultery with the right woman, at the right time, and in the right way, but simply to do any of them is to go wrong.¹⁶

As Aristotle develops his theory, it becomes clear that any action that is “self-indulgent,” or purely for gratification of sensual desire, is a vice. At one point, Aristotle’s condemnation of vice sounds eerily like one of the thunder’s commands: “For it [self-indulgence] consists in two things, deficiency in giving and excess in taking.”¹⁷ On the contrary, the virtue of justice “does what is advantageous to another.”¹⁸

In *The Waste Land*, sensuality devolves into an increasingly negative pattern. In Section II, “A Game of Chess,” lust burns from the upper class woman to the pub-women. Some argue that three classes, including middle class, are represented in this section; the point, however, appears to be the social inclusiveness of gratification of mere desire. In the same pattern Tiresias, the mythic icon of debased sexuality, witnesses the seduction of the typist and a sequence of seductions on the Thames.

THE DIVINE

The second major pattern of debasement, also introduced in Section I, involves a spiritual quest. Although universalized as the Grail Quest in Section V, it is introduced here as the same need for immediate gratification when the narrator stops at Madame Sosostris to have his fortune told.¹⁹ Rather than seeking some sense of the divine outside himself, he seeks an immediate sign as psychological solace. Such is also the case with Gerontion’s “Christ the Tiger.” This divine sign, introduced in “Gerontion” as the *Logos*, has been given. Modern humanity debases the sign to the need for immediate answers.²⁰

Just as passion can either be debased to merely sensual gratification or direct humanity toward answers outside the self, so too the search for the divine can either be stripped to immediacy or direct humanity to transcendent sources. These dialectics also correspond with Aristotle’s aligning of humanity with the First Mover.

It has been suggested that Aristotle's philosophy may be summarized by two words—quality and quantity. The more properties a thing or being shares, the fewer of those things or beings exist. There are fewer animals, for example, than plants; fewer of different sorts of men such as slaves, “mechanics” or laborers, or husbandmen; and fewer still of masters, intellectuals, and rulers. The pyramid tops out with the First Mover. While the point is limited, it does encapsulate Aristotle's belief that all life is discrete while the supreme being is unity. In the same way the disjunctive nature of Sections I–IV of *The Waste Land* reveal characters far removed from any sense of a divine source for unity.

While we often turn first to Aristotle's *Metaphysics* to learn of his First Mover and the relation of humanity to it, hints of his theory appear throughout his works like a cohesive thread.²¹ *Metaphysics*, particularly Books IV and IX, does two things. First, it provides definition (which for Aristotle is always a process of separation). Second it relates humanity, albeit inconclusively, to the Unmoved Mover in a First Cause / Final Cause relationship—thereby providing humanity something of a teleology. But, since the First Mover is not at all involved in this world, does not really know this world, and has no plan for or ultimate interest in this world, that teleology itself is disturbingly vague. In effect, humanity struggles toward an ideal way of life that the *philosopher* sets out for it.

Aristotle, then, sought a rigidly fixed system, defined by careful parameters, in which the First Cause is also, at once, the Final Cause. The *Telos*, or end, of humanity is to be in accord with this Cause.²² The issue of humanity's relationship with the divine is much less rigid for Eliot, however. *The Waste Land* dramatizes for the reader the conflicts and choices universal to the human condition. The poem itself is a searching out, rather than a positioning of apodictic and universal truths or values. Indeed, even twisted or debased passions may in themselves become avenues of divine enlightenment. Such, for example, is also the view of Lyndall Gordon in her analysis of the confessional narrative in *The Waste Land*.²³

The characters of *The Waste Land*, however, lack both a sense of ethical imperative and also a divine source for those ethics. Lacking those, they look to the Madame Sosostrises for immediate signs. It is because they are unknowing and unknown. Yet their fear in this handful of dust that shapes their bodies compels them to look for something. Or, just anything. Precisely there, moreover, lies another example of the way of negation in *The Waste Land*, for if impulsiveness governs self-gratification, so too it governs humanity's search for the divine in the modern age. No sustained, concerted effort guides us, but merely a chasing after chimeras.

"The Fire Sermon," consequently, reveals the divine virtually disappeared from the arid land, reduced to the memory of "The king my brother's wreck / And . . . the king my father's wreck before him." The bones of the spiritual past now litter "a little low dry garret" for the musings of hermits. Not surprisingly, the Fisher King narrates here. His wounded genitalia represent both the absence of a vital life force in the land and also the pronounced separation from spiritual significance figured in the absence of rain, the fouled river, and the blasted aridity of the land.

THE CITY

The third major pattern of debasement, also introduced in Section I, appears with the "Unreal City," which represents modern civilization generally. Thereby, the movement of the three parts fluctuates among sensual experience, the debased spiritual quest, and the disillusionment of modern humanity. The city is unreal precisely because it holds no redemptive force. Rather, it is a force unto itself, an anarchistic mechanism running on its own engine of greed and relentless hurry. The parade of people on London Bridge in Section I is symptomatic. Each individual hurries in the crowd, but finally it is only the crowd, like so many lemmings, that one perceives.

Appropriately, Eliot links this mass of humanity with the sighing dead of Dante's *Inferno*:

So long a train
Of people, I never should have believed
Death had undone so many. (Canto III, 55–57)

The scene also evokes the narrator's acquaintance Stetson, who has buried something in his garden (Christ?) that he wants very much to keep buried. Like the dead without hope in the *Inferno*, sighing without hope, the crowd of humanity plods over London Bridge. Like Stetson, the crowd tries hard to bury the past. The closing line, taken from Baudelaire's "To the Reader," the prefatory poem to *The Flowers of Evil*, both reflects upon the scene of the crowd, and also extends outward to modern humanity. Baudelaire's poem scourges a humanity captive in sin: "Each day we take another step to hell."²⁴

The pattern of the "unreal" city, stripped of communal value and purpose, shapes a poetic backdrop that holds the other tensions in place. It is at once setting and central symbol. It is both the background noise of a tinny gramophone and "horns and motors," and also the reflective agent of a people rushing about in tumultuous, pointless hurry. "Teach us to sit still," Eliot implores in *Ash Wednesday*. In *The Waste Land* there is no still point, but only

people tumbling around the prickly pear. The unreal city of London introduced in Section I, wrapped in a brown fog in Section II, turns more universal as the poem emerges, including in its symbolic arms civilization generally. We sit with Tiresias by the wall of Thebes; we go with Augustine into Carthage. With the focus on the Grail Quest in Section V, the expanse broadens, for the loss of the Grail represents the loss of civilized values altogether. Now we watch the “falling towers of Jerusalem Athens Alexandria Vienna London Unreal,” even as we stumble to the tower of the Chapel Perilous.

In many respects Eliot's portrait of the debased Unreal City in *The Waste Land* also traces to Aristotle, and it is tempting to draw parallels. Similarities to Aristotle's *Politics* exist. For example, for Aristotle (as with other Greek thinkers) the state exists for an end—the supreme good of humanity evidenced in moral and intellectual virtues. The state thereby is a protectorate, insuring what Aristotle calls the “good life,” meaning precisely these virtues. All this would comport with Eliot's positive view of civilization as arrived at through the *via negativa* of the Unreal City.

Such a comparison, however, has limitations. These are partly due to the fact that what we have of the *Politics* is considered fragmentary and incomplete, that such portions as we do have—the slave/master relationship or the regulation of property, for example—are directed toward topics of little relevance to our subject.

If the patterns of human and spiritual debasement appear to reflect the imprint of Aristotelian ethics—the substitution of the gratification of sexual impulse for mind and will—then the degradation of the city appears to bear the imprint of Hobbes' concept of government, a theory Eliot believed to be ruinous of modern civilization.

In his essay “John Bramhall,” Eliot reconstructed the Archbishop's defense of the faith against Hobbes. Although Eliot takes pains to represent both sides of the argument, he takes few pains to disguise where his sympathies lay. In Eliot's estimation, Hobbes' attitude “toward moral philosophy has by no means disappeared from human thought; nor has the confusion between moral philosophy and mechanistic psychology.”²⁵ Rather, Hobbes' determinism has settled down like a vast, gray fogbank of relativism and fatalism upon the modern age. The tragedy of Hobbesian thinking, in Eliot's mind, is its easy appeal “to gentle people.”²⁶ In effect, the modern age is duped into believing that no alternatives exist to determinism. This attitude leads to Eliot's sharpest criticism in the essay: “His specious effect of unity between a very simple theory of sense perception and an equally simple theory of government is of a kind that will always be popular because it appears to be intellectual but is really emotional, and therefore very soothing to lazy minds.”²⁷ Ease of intellectual effort is the opiate of those who wander the wasteland.²⁸

Eliot's critique of Thomas Hobbes, "one of those extraordinary little upstarts,"²⁹ might almost serve as a compendium on *The Waste Land*, a reflection on the modern moral situation written a decade after the poem. Eliot makes little effort to disguise his contempt for Hobbes—"In Hobbes there are symptoms of the same mentality as Nietzsche: his belief in violence is a confession of weakness."³⁰ But where, precisely, do Eliot's points of contention lie?

His difficulty with Hobbes arises from two essential points of disagreement—on Hobbes' political thought and, more fundamentally, his moral system. By reducing human will and consciousness to a biological determinism, Eliot argued, Hobbes essentially rubbed out the individual integrity of human nature. Consequently, moral norms and ethical values are shoved out of the human picture. "For Hobbes," Eliot asserts, "all standards of good and evil are frankly relative."³¹ Having stripped humanity of free will and ethical norms, then, Hobbes institutes a thoroughly pragmatic government. Instead of enacting justice, for example, the role of this government is merely to keep order. In Eliot's view, "It will be remembered that Hobbes wished to maintain the activity of human legislation in his deterministic universe; so he considered that law acts as a deterrent force."³² The effect is that "the whole system ceases to have meaning, and all values, including his own value of good government, disappear."³³

It should be clear that in *The Waste Land* Eliot also exposes the maladies of the modern political age. The self-indulgent qualities manifested personally and spiritually prevail culturally and politically. His own constructive statements on the role of government accompanied his conversion in 1927 and didn't receive full articulation until the mid-1930s through World War II. In the Spring and Summer 1929 issues of the *Criterion*, Eliot defined several contemporary political perspectives and outlined his idea of loyalty to a monarch.

For many years he was quite wary of the church as ecclesiastical body playing any role in politics. In 1934 he wrote that "So long as the Sacraments are provided for the benefit of men, and the service for the glory of God, the Church is doing what is its *essential* business."³⁴ With the pressing concerns of World War II, however, Eliot's thinking changed dramatically. The reformation of his position insisted that both the ecclesiastic church and individual Christians bear a responsibility to address cultural wrongs.

His vision of a Christian society was developed more fully in "The Idea of a Christian Society" (1939), "Towards a Christian Britain" (1941), "Notes Toward a Definition of Culture" (1948), and "The Aims of Education" (1950). *The Waste Land* asserts the presence of a moral hollowness in culture and politics; the latter essays attempt to construct the framework of an ethically viable culture.

The Directive Trinity

It is fruitful at this point, as we trace the three primary patterns of personal, spiritual, and cultural debasement to the poem's concluding response, to be reminded of the epigraph to the poem. Taken from Petronius' *Satyricon*, Chapter 48, Apollo has granted the prophetess Sibyl as many years of life as she could hold grains of dust in her hand. She neglected, however, to ask for youth to go with it. At this point in the *Satyricon*, Sibyl is but a shrunken, dry form. Therefore, she croaks the words essential to the epigraph: "For I myself, with my own eyes, saw the Sibyl of Cumae hanging caged in a bottle, and when the boys said to her: "Sibyl, what do you want," she answered: "I want to die." Significantly, at this point in *Satyricon* the narrator stands on the threshold of Hades. Thereby the Sibyl's dusty, dry voice reflects the aridity of Eliot's modern wasteland as we, the readers, are led to the threshold of hell. Here, as line 30 has it, lies "fear in a handful of dust."

Is there a way out? Two important patterns suggest that there is. The first of these rests in the structural response of Section V to the rest of the poem.

In terms of the most basic structure of the poem, the common assumption is that Section I, "The Burial of the Dead," relates to the element of earth; "A Game of Chess" relates to air; "The Fire Sermon" to fire; "Death by Water" to water. The fifth section, "What the Thunder Said," appears to break the pattern; all the elements have been cited. But this section, Benjamin Lockerd argues in *Aethereal Rumors*, represents the aether, Aristotle's concept of a distinct element, nonetheless working in consort with the others. It is the spiritual element, not opposed to but commensurate with the physical elements. "Clearly," Lockerd writes, "something happens here [in Section V] which is quite different from what we experience in the first four sections."³⁵ Indeed, the revelation of Section V, counterpointing the harsh physicality of the first four sections, consists of spiritual directions for a way out of the wasteland.

The second pattern arises from three signs or signals to the wasteland wanderers—the signs of Gethsemane, the Road to Emmaus, and the Holy Grail. I called these "signals" because they point two ways. They are at once reflexive, or responsive to the debased trinity of *The Waste Land*, but also they are directive, pointing ultimately to the command of the thunder.

Even though the concluding lines of *The Waste Land* leave us in the whirling fragments of a self-indulgent age, much as "Gerontion" does, Eliot does formulate his tripartite command to the age as directions out of the personal, spiritual, and cultural desert.

Gethsemane

The first signal occurs when we are suddenly placed in Gethsemane, the garden where Jesus was arrested (Matt 26:36–46). After presiding over the

Last Supper—thus the link to the Grail Quest pattern—Jesus took Peter, James, and John with him to pray. Fully aware of his impending death and in sweating agony, Jesus implored God three times to take the cup (of suffering) from him. Each time Jesus returns to his three disciples to find them asleep. “The frosty silence in the gardens” deeply pains Jesus since he had specifically asked the disciples to “keep watch with me.” He is abandoned into the solitary. If solitary, however, Jesus’ sojourn in the garden is also selfless. He gives up self to the will of the father: “Yet not as I will, but as you will” (Matt 26:39, 42). The choice lies in precise counterpoint to the self-indulgence of the wasteland, and foreshadows the thunder’s command to give selflessly.

The following lines (324–330) quickly summarize the aftermath of Gethsemane. “The agony in stony places” captures the beatings and mockery; “The shouting and the crying” recall the crowd, the popular voice of the people, calling for the release of Barabbas; “Prison and palace” signal the appearance before Pilate. Suddenly, in this compact explosion of drama, the scene shifts to Golgotha. “The reverberation of thunder of spring over distant mountains” recalls the darkness at mid-day, the rending of the temple veil, and the earthquake (Matt 27:45–53). The scene ends with the blunt statement: “He who was living is now dead.”

The statement echoes a sequence of deaths in the poem. The narrator wonders if Stetson’s corpse, buried in the garden, has begun to sprout in this debased April of the poem. While the Gethsemane agony occurs in “frosty silence,” the narrator wonders if Stetson’s corpse has been heaved by frost. In “The Fire Sermon” the Fisher King recalls the death of “the king my brother” and “the king my father’s death before him.” Most notably, the narrator, who has been told by Madame Sosostriis to “Fear death by water,” hears of the death of Phlebas by drowning in Section IV and believes he is free of the prediction. He isn’t, of course, for the Gethsemane scene ends with these lines: “We, who were living are now dying / With a little patience” (329–330). Those in *The Waste Land* are all the living dead, walking through the threshold to Hades, in dire need of rejuvenation and direction. But here “red sullen faces sneer and snarl / From doors of mudcracked houses” (344–345).

The Road to Emmaus

The second major signal arises from another biblical analogue, the appearance of Christ on the road to Emmaus. The scene is recorded in only one of the synoptic gospels, that of the physician/historian Luke. On Resurrection Sunday, the women who had visited the empty tomb ran to where the disciples were gathered to tell them the news. Of the remaining eleven disciples only Peter ran back to the tomb for verification. The other

disciples remained skeptical. Two of Jesus' followers, Cleopas and another who is not named, set off for Emmaus, a village about seven miles distant from Jerusalem. On the road Jesus fell in step with them. The crux of the story is that the two walked side by side with the risen Christ but did not recognize him until Jesus explained the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies about the Christ. He then sat down with them and shared a meal. At this point, "Their eyes were opened and they recognized him" (Lk 24:31). Interestingly, they observe after Jesus leaves that "were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scripture to us?" (Lk 24:32).

The burning of the self-indulgent wasteland is transmogrified to an inner burning for spiritual answers that ultimately lie outside of self. The process is a stirring of the soul, or in Aristotle's terms the work of the *anima*. Furthermore, it correlates with the thunder's command to sympathize, or have compassion. This is the inward turning from self to others.

Search for the Sacred

The third pattern in Section V is the Grail Quest itself, which represents longing, seeking, and restoration of order. The Fisher King himself is an ironic antitype to Jesus, the fisher of men. The ancient symbol of the *Ikhthos*, the fish, was fashioned by early Christians so that anagrammic letters represented Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior. The figure of the Fisher King, however, is always fettered with irony. Wounded in the genitals, the Fisher King rules a kingdom cast into sterility and drought, a wasteland. He does have knowledge of the Grail's location, but, because of his wasted sterility, he settles into the discomfort of fishing. In Eliot's poem the Fisher King is pictured thus:

A rat crept softly through the vegetation
 Dragging its slimy belly on the bank
 While I was fishing in the dull canal. (187–189)

He himself lacks the strength to pursue the rejuvenating Grail. He can, however, direct others to it—if only they would ask him.

The Arthurian knights of the legend don't take time to ask. They scour the wasteland in a frenzied quest, not unlike the mindless crowds flowing over London Bridge. Lancelot loses his sanity. Arriving at the Chapel Perilous he finds the way guarded by rampant lions, his own heraldic device. He has to overcome himself to see the Grail—the most difficult quest of all. It is a wasteland out of control. To the modern age the Grail, the representation of Christ's passion and shed blood, is reduced to "the empty chapel, only the

wind's home" (389). Those who dwell in the wasteland live by impulse and sensation, unguided by reason and control. Control, as Aristotle argued, is an act of the will guided by reason. As the thunder proclaims, even our giving and sympathy are subject to control.

The wasteland qualities of personal experience guided by self gratification, spirituality debased by the quest for immediate answers, and the unreal city of modern culture are now offset by the suggestive patterns of Gethsemane, the Road to Emmaus, and the Grail Quest. However suggestive, they are not explicit. They lead the narrator to a point of receptivity where he can hear the inarticulate growl of the thunder and translate sounds into signals for a way out of the wasteland. The scene shifts. From wasteland imagery we move to lightning and black clouds. The dry rocks become a jungle, a metaphor for London, humped in silence. Even with the change in locale, however, the "limp leaves / Waited for rain" (96–97). But they are waiting, listening for the sounds that signal renewal. Three commands echo over the jungle.³⁶

Each of these positive commands is framed by a negative picture of how they are enacted in the present wasteland. Each positive command, then, is given authority by the way of negation. Thus *datta*, "give," is revealed in the wasteland as mere impulse:

The awful daring of a moment's surrender
Which an age of prudence can never retract.

Dayadbhvam, "sympathize," has been enacted as mere selfishness. The image of someone willfully locking him or herself into a self-contained prison is chilling. *Damyatta*, "control," fits into the lovely image of the expert sailor permitting the boat its essential freedom before the wind. Control fulfills being, or, in Aristotelian terms, permits entelechy—that condition of a thing whose essence is fully realized. It seems, at first glance, the one positive conjunction of command and image in the series. Yet a tone of wistfulness and loss haunts this image also, for the description continues:

Your heart would have responded
Gaily, when invited, beating obedient
To controlling hands. (421–423)

The use of the subjunctive mood draws attention to what might have happened had we been a people of personal control. Instead, all that we are stands in contrast to the loveliness of the image.

At this stage of the poem, the characters clearly are unable to enact the state of withdrawal from self concern in order to engage the active commands.

But perhaps the thrust of the poem is less an indictment of a miserable condition than a haunting evocation of our fundamental need.³⁷ From the inward searching of The Hanged Man, albeit ironically figured in the poem, to the fable of the Thunder in the *Bṛihadaranyaka-Upanishad*, *The Waste Land* sets side by side what we moderns are and what we could be. And if one is mindful of Eliot's admiration for Aristotle, we could add *should be*, for these also echo Aristotle's virtues for the ethical community.³⁸

The commands are repeated once more in the poem, as a response to the disorder that the Fisher King perceives in the wasteland (423–432). But their response also carries the sign of a promise—the three-fold *Shantih*.

At the end of the poem, the Fisher King sits huddled before the sordid canal. The arid plains stretch behind him. The cacophony of the wasteland beats upon his ears. He ponders whether he can set his own lands in order, but the various legends of the Grail Quest indicate the futility of his question. His land is under siege; no one pursues the correct questions to remedy the wasteland. In a sense, Eliot's whole poem is a question mark.

That question, in all of its fundamental simplicity, is whether we see anything beyond our immediate perception. Before there can be perception, argued Aristotle in *Categories*, there must be the perceptible: "The object of perception is, it appears, prior to the act of perception. If the perceptible is annihilated, perception will also cease to exist; but the annihilation of perception does not cancel the existence of the perceptible."³⁹ The denizens of *The Waste Land* have willfully blinded their perception of any existence beyond their own. Their perception is animalistic—of satisfying their own needs only. The impulse is akin to what Eliot described in his Clark Lectures as "Man-kind suddenly retires within its several skulls."⁴⁰

That distinction between perception and the perceptible, moreover, marked the development of Eliot's own literary theory. It appears nearly full blown in his essay on Dante, who Eliot prizes for the ability to fuse particular images to a significantly full vision of life. Reacting in part against Paul Valéry's claim that poetry intends to elicit a state of feeling, Eliot counters:

The true mystic is not satisfied merely by feeling, he must pretend at least that he *sees*, and the absorption into the divine is only the necessary, if paradoxical, limit of this contemplation. The poet does not aim to excite—that is not even a test of his success—but to set something down. . . . Dante, more than any other poet, has succeeded in dealing with his philosophy . . . in terms of something *perceived*. When most of our modern poets confine themselves to what they had perceived, they produce for us, usually, only odds and ends of still life and stage properties; but that does not imply

so much that the method of Dante is obsolete, as that our vision is perhaps comparatively restricted.⁴¹

Precisely such is the restricted vision of *The Waste Land* inhabitants.

As *The Waste Land* ends, we find ourselves still on the *via negativa*. While no direct answers, like a broad thoroughfare, appear on the desiccated plains, Eliot does nonetheless provide the road signs. The very ambiguity of those signs in the thunder's growl is essential. The way out of the wasteland is not merely corporate. No government can rush in, like Arthur's knights, to reinvigorate and redirect the citizens living in what is defined in "The Hollow Men" as "death's dream kingdom." Any redemptive action begins with a personal choice: the imposition of the intelligent will over sensual gratification. This, in turn, leads to the recognition of ethical and spiritual values that lie outside personal experience. Such values the searching mind apprehends. Only then may the ideal of the orderly city be found.

A just society, Eliot argued with the support of Aristotle, is at once ideal and real—a balanced power. It incarnates such ethical values as justice, kindness, and compassion in concrete actions. The concern of the just state always turns outward, working toward peace and harmony in the citizenry. These values are not just elusive in the wasteland with all its tumbling towers of civilization; they have been willfully abandoned at all levels for personal gratification.

The Waste Land, then, poses a trinity of faults that rive the political unity of the age. These keep the Fisher King, that emblem of renewal, hunched before his canal, face turned from the dry desert wind that sweeps across his back. Personal gratification, reduction of spiritual seeking to the need for immediate answers, the abandonment of ethical values that leads to the decay of modern civilization—these work like hammers to fracture the unity and wholeness of humanity.

But as he sits by the canal, the Fisher King says that "These fragments I have shored against my ruins" (431). The comment has been popularly understood in two ways. In one, the "fragments" refer to the whirling cacophony of the final ten lines, the unfinished thoughts, the jarring of juxtapositions. This view would suggest, then, that fragments are the only thing the Fisher King has to shore his ruins—not a very effective force. The second common view is that "fragments" refers to the entire poem, an even more disconsolate view for the Fisher King as he studies the bleakness of the land.

Perhaps the most significant word in the sentence, however, is not "fragments" but "shored." Read this way, the Fisher King—spiritual spokesman for the poem and a counterpoint to Tiresias—uses fragments to "shore against" ruins. He is constructing a bulwark, props to hold back the tide of destructive

living, out of fragments. Then the essential question becomes which fragments? The chaotic lines surrounding the sentence? The whole of the poem? Only in deepest irony, and in thorough resignation to disconsolation, would the Fisher King answer that way. Not unless Eliot is deliberately rupturing the essence of the myth, certainly a possibility. More likely, however, the “fragments” refer to the inarticulate growlings of the thunder, which only the narrator perceives as words. That trinity of words, however, certainly shore against the ruins of the wasteland trinity. Give, sympathize, and control form the Aristotelian ideals that provide transformation for the reality of fragmentary dissolution.

NOTES

1. T.S. Eliot. *Collected Poems 1909–1962* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Co., 1963). All quotations from Eliot’s poem *The Waste Land* are from this edition. All quotations from *The Waste Land* will be cited in the text by line number.

2. T.S. Eliot. “The Development of Leibniz’ Monadism,” *The Monist* 26 (Oct 1916). Reprinted in *Knowledge and Experience in the Philosophy of F.H. Bradley* (New York: Farrar, 1964), 188.

3. T.S. Eliot. “The Perfect Critic,” *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism* (London: Methuen, 1920, 1966): 10–11.

4. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, 689. Aristotle uses the term “First Mover” or “Prime Mover” for this absolute. The popular term “Unmoved Mover” is misleading, since, in his cosmological thinking, there may be several dozen of these, each associated with some planetary motion. See *Metaphysics*, Book XII. Although most of our modern understanding of the “First Mover” is taken from the *Metaphysics*, Aristotle laid the groundwork in Books VII and VIII of the *Physics*.

5. Aquinas’ fascination with Aristotle, both in logical method and a kindred sensibility, is unquestionable. Among his many volumes, Aquinas wrote commentaries on Aristotle’s *Physics*, *Metaphysics*, and *Ethics*.

6. It should be noted that during the 9th century, John Scotus, uninfluenced by Aristotle, developed his theory of the *via negativa* based upon linguistic limitations. See *On the Division of Nature* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1976).

7. Thomas Aquinas. *An Aquinas Reader*. Ed. Mary T. Clark (New York: Fordham University Press, 3rd Rev. Ed., 2000), *Summa Theologica*, I, 30. References to the *Summa Theologica* will be cited by textual source. The standard translation is the five volume work by the fathers of the English Dominican Province (Christian Classics, 1981). Its bulk and weight (12 pounds) makes the edition difficult to use. Because of the convenience, reputation, and availability of Clark’s edition, I will use its translation and page numbers.

8. See *Summa Theologica*, I. 14: “The chief way to consider divine essence is the way of negation, for by its immensity the divine essence transcends every form attained by our intellect; and so in apprehending it we do not know what it is. But by knowing what it is not we get some knowledge of it, and the more things we are able to deny of it, the nearer we come to knowing it” (139).

9. Some scholars deny that *The Waste Land* contains any intrinsic pattern or plan of renewal. For them, *The Waste Land* is the inextricable modern condition.

See, for example, Eloise Knapp Hay, *T.S. Eliot's Negative Way* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), where she argues that "Nowhere in the poem can one find convincing allusions to any existence in another world . . ." (49).

10. Lyndall Gordon, *T.S. Eliot: An Imperfect Life* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1999): 149.

11. *Ibid.*

12. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics, The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 1941): 957. Compare this passage also to "Gerontion," ll. 45–48.

13. See *De Anima*, Books II and III.

14. Aristotle, *Metaphysics, The Basic Works of Aristotle*, 689.

15. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics, The Basic Works of Aristotle*, 959.

16. *Ibid.*

17. *Ibid.*, 987.

18. *Ibid.*, 1004.

19. The figure of the fortune teller is ironically patterned upon the figure of Mr. Scogan in Aldous Huxley's *Crome Yellow*. At a charity fair, Mr. Scogan dresses in drag and passes himself off as "Sosostris, the Sorcerer of Ecbatana." The pose itself, man as witch, is a falsification, but so too are the theatrical pronouncements of Scogan/Sosostris. Scogan's closing words, tersely matter-of-fact, work as counterpoint to Eliot's: "Good afternoon. That will be six-pence. Yes, I have change. Thank you. Good afternoon." In both instances, Huxley's and Eliot's, the people swarm the sorcerer's tent. Aldous Huxley, *Crome Yellow* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1921, p. 134).

20. Much has been made of Madame Sosostris' prediction, especially what she does not find—The Hanged Man of the Tarot deck. The allusion functions ironically in the poem. The Hanged Man, the twelfth card in the *Major Arcana*, is thoroughly at peace. It is the card of suspension, not of life or death, where one looks inward in peaceful repose to find spiritual direction. He is at rest, unlike the harried, appetitive people of Eliot's poem. The irony continues in that The Hanged Man's planet is Neptune, or water. Sosostris tells the narrator to fear death by water; yet, no life will spring in the arid land until the commands of the thunder are heeded.

21. See, for example, the definitions of Perception, the Relative, and Substance in *Categories*, Chapter 7.

22. See *Partibus Animalium*, 644^b22–646^a4, and *De Anima* 408^a34–^b31–429^a10–439^a25.

23. See *T.S. Eliot: An Imperfect Life*, Chapter Five.

24. Charles Baudelaire, "To the Reader," *Les Fleurs du Mal* (Boston: D.R. Godine, 1983).

25. T.S. Eliot, "John Bramhall," *Essays Ancient and Modern* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1936): 28.

26. *Ibid.*, 36.

27. *Ibid.*

28. Eliot would take his own pattern of a passion guided by intellect from Blaise Pascal. For Eliot, Pascal represented "the type of one kind of religious believer, which is highly passionate and ardent, but passionate only through a powerful and regulated intellect . . . facing unflinchingly the demon of doubt which is inseparable from the Spirit of belief" (*EAM* 158). Mindful of the fragmentation that occurs in *The Waste Land*, Eliot commends Pascal to "those who doubt, but

who have the mind to conceive, and the sensibility to feel, the disorder, the futility, the meaninglessness, the mystery of life and suffering, and who can only find peace through a satisfaction of the whole being" (*EAM* 168).

29. T.S. Eliot, "John Bramhall," 26.

30. *Ibid.*, 36.

31. *Ibid.*, 35.

32. *Ibid.*, 30.

33. *Ibid.*

34. T.S. Eliot. "What Does the Church Stand For?" *Spectator* (19 October 1935), 560.

35. Benjamin G. Lockerd, Jr. *Aethereal Rumors: T.S. Eliot's Physics and Poetics*. Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1998: 182.

36. Two of the better studies of the thunder's commands in and of themselves include Jewel Spears Brooker and Joseph Bentley, *Reading "The Waste Land": Modernism and the Limits of Interpretation* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1990) and Richard Hanson, "A Grammatical and Idiomatic Analysis of the Sanskrit in *The Waste Land*," *Yeats Eliot Review* 16, 2 (Winter 1990): 34–39. For a general study of the influence of Eastern thought upon Eliot, see Cleo McNelly Kearns, *T.S. Eliot and Indic Traditions: A Study of Poetry and Belief* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 1987).

37. Such, for example, is the view of Robert Crawford who writes in *The Savage and the City in the Work of T.S. Eliot* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987) that "*The Waste Land* is a poem that leaves its readers in darkness" (148). And also, "The 'Shantih' at the poem's end may be simply a way of stopping . . . or it may be comparable to the exhausted collapse after the destruction at the end of 'Gerontion'" (149).

38. See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1107^a28–179^a6, and *Politics*, 1280^a7–1326^b24.

39. Aristotle, "Categories," *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, 21.

40. T.S. Eliot. *The Varieties of Metaphysical Poetry*. Ed. Ronald Schuchard. London: Faber and Faber, 1993: 80.

41. T.S. Eliot. "Dante," *The Sacred Wood*. London: Methuen, 1928, 1920.

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