

"These Emotional Experiences/Do Not Hold Good": Remembering Wagner in *The Waste Land*

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Abstract: This essay asks why so much Wagner has run aground in *The Waste Land*. Although the scope, style, and emotional range of their artistic projects might appear wildly at odds, Wagner and T.S. Eliot shared preoccupations with voice and memory, which produced receptions in some ways comparable. Investigating *The Waste Land's* desiccated Wagnerian inscriptions, it explores the poem's uses of Wagner, apparently so distanced from music and feeling. Since simultaneous fragmentation and over-saturation were already a part of the Wagnerian experience, audiences might come upon these fragments in comparable ways and traces a series of responses in different audiences, from George Eliot and Verlaine to Bergson and Nietzsche. Considering music's intimate philosophical connections to emotion and memory, it finds that by examining half-hearings and re-readings and moments of suppressed distanced recall of music's emotional connections, the poem cannot help but remember.

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We had better face it: weirdly, Wagner sounds silently through *The Waste Land*. It is disconcerting, even concerning, to find Wagner's art sluiced up from the wellsprings of Romantic expressivity in the characteristic art of the nineteenth century, only to run dry amidst such austere deserted verbal modernism. These artworks exist on different dimensions, incommensurate in size and medium, if not totalizing ambition. Why is Wagner's expanse of endless melodies so intimate yet truncated a part of T.S. Eliot's poem?

There are sound reasons for the poem, including Wagner: literally so. The most obvious fact is that the poem emerges from a milieu saturated with Wagner: any poem

navigating the cultural detritus of the nineteenth century is bound to find some Wagner washed up alongside. Their work shares concerns about audience, voice, dreams, difficulty, memory—and a long trail of scholarship. Nevertheless, it is also true that, however tacitly, the poem's Wagnerian words and syllable sounds gesture to sound's possibility, and thus to an idea of music and all its traditional appeal to emotion (which led Plato to restrict music from his *Republic*). Perhaps no music has ever striven so hard for emotional impact than Wagner's: and none of his operas for more emotional impact than *Tristan und Isolde*, a quotation from which marks the first italicised, indented and thus significant foreign intervention into the text of *The Waste Land*.

Wagner's emotional appeal had always faced resistance: another Eliot, George, commented, "*Lohengrin* to us ordinary mortals seemed something like the whistling of the wind through the keyholes of a cathedral". Nevertheless, she, too, retained "a real desire to hear [the operas] again" (Sutcliffe 317). According to Frances Dickey, T.S. Eliot's attitude to Wagner was characterized by anxiety and ambivalence (201). His close friend Jean Verdenal also contended with Wagner's emotional register:

Music goes more directly to the core of my being, and I have been listening to it quite a lot recently (still mainly Wagner). I am beginning to get the hand of *The Ring*. The obscure passages take on meaning each time the plot becomes more apparent. *Tristan und Isolde* is terribly moving at first hearing and leaves you prostrate with ecstasy and thirsting to return to it again. However, it is all so confused and complicated and impossible to put into words, and necessarily so (otherwise, no one would have felt the need to express it in music). (Eliot 28-31)

Altogether these responses raise more questions. How could such proverbial but bewildering emotional intensity be expressed in words, in fragments? Did T.S. Eliot resist, succumb, or

both? Should we imagine the familiar figure of an ironic, detached, sceptical Eliot shadowed by a committed, entranced, emotional Eliot at odds with his own sensibility? Another Eliot, who feared being crippled by feeling in aesthetics and unable to act in love, like Yeats's persona in *The Tower* barely able to "admit you turned aside/From a great labyrinth out of pride"? (305). For A. Walton Litz, the poem's "tragedy is that of one who can perceive but cannot act, who can understand and remember but cannot communicate" (21). He has the example of the epigraph's Cumean Sybil, but also Tiresias, that "Most important personage in the poem", who though enacting some of its "fore-suffered" action, is also doomed to witness: Eliot's notes over "what Tiresias sees, in fact, is the substance of the poem" (*The Poems* 74). What he hears might be equally important, and so much of this is Wagnerian, earworms emerging from the nineteenth-century unconscious. Could it be that even so dissected, they point to some profound emotional experience? Or is the impossibility of marking such experience in words the point? However, we answer Wagner seems to be what the poem cannot help but remember.

Philip Waldron has doubts about the "usual" interpretation of Wagner as "ironically contrasting a romantic, epic, fictionalized love with the impotence of the inhabitants of *the Waste Land*" (422). Agreed: the experience of both seems more closely connected. In a previous essay, I concentrated on what we can discover about Eliot's and others' experiences of Wagner's operas, but also all we need to learn about the blank tone of the poem and how to read it (Paterson 121-133). What is interesting is how Wagner came already premeditated, pre-experienced, by thousands of listeners: how few, perhaps including Eliot, heard the operas in full, and how, even if they did, could not do so innocently. So, for instance, the novelist George Moore could recall his pilgrimage to Bayreuth with the playwright Edward Martin: "we talked about the ring all the way to Dover, and on board the boat he whistled the motives, looking over the taffrail until it was time to go to bed" (147). Wagner's operas spawned a

cultural industry which thrived on the popularity of orchestral excerpts or Liszt's piano adaptations, the studying of scores, *libretti*, commentaries, and motivic fragments whistled only half-fittingly at sea. The kind of melomania thus inspired suggests a simultaneous fragmentation and over-saturation were already a part of the Wagnerian experience. Wagner was everywhere already quoted, rarely individually or innocently encountered. That such disconcerting reactions might feature in *The Waste Land* would make sense: they describe many people's experiences of the poem itself.

In trying to answer the above questions, this essay tries to conceive a listener to Wagner's operas who can read something of the emotional resonance of Eliot's allusions. They might have to be a public analyst of *The Waste Land* and private readers, in tune with both cultural memory and private memories. However, in either case, they must reckon with music's connections to memory and its translation in words and to music and words' previous hearings, overhearings, and re-readings. In gauging Eliot's own experience of hearing Wagner in "Opera", one unpublished early poem looms large:

Tristan and Isolde
And the fatalistic horns
The passionate violins
And ominous clarinet;
And love torturing itself
To emotion for all there is in it,
Writhing in and out
Contorted in paroxysms,
Flinging itself at the last
Limits of self-expression.

We have the tragic? oh no!
Life departs with a feeble smile
Into the indifferent.
These emotional experiences
Do not hold good at all,
And I feel like the ghost of youth
At the undertakers ball. (*The Poems* 236)

Resistance to the point of disgust at the performers' physicality is inscribed here: Wagner might have retorted that at least the instrumental players, as in Bayreuth, should be sunk out of sight beneath the stage. In this open performance, the persona's embarrassment at the visibility of emotion causes passions to be rendered as contorted, love "Flinging itself," "Writhing in and out," in a terrible parody of the movement of the music. The persona's only possible response is an assumed detachment which does not attain the indifference the poem specifies (if so, why speak the poem?). Looking closer, considerable ambiguity in language persists. Whose are meant in recalling "These emotional experiences"—those of the characters, the performers, or (most interestingly) the listener(s)? Furthermore, if they "Do not hold good at all," does that mean they are too forced or weak to persist; that they exist sincerely but do not last; or even, with moral implication, that they come to no good? Despite itself, the poem fails to keep its emotions entirely in check, desperately gripping a comic, ironic mask that could easily slip.

Dated November 1909, it needs to be clarified that the poem refers to a fully staged performance, or any more than orchestral excerpts, Wagner arriving in fragments again. Still, in a recently disclosed letter to Emily Hale on 20 January 1931, Eliot makes an oblique reference in French to her knowledge of potions. According to *Dickey Reports*, He clarifies by remembering an early occasion wherein his youthful companion took him to see *Tristan*

und Isolde. Indeed, Jean Verdenal's enthusiasm and urging Eliot to hear Wagner seems to have contributed to a reevaluation that left Stravinsky reporting, "Eliot's Wagner nostalgia was apparent, and I think that Tristan must have been one of the most passionate experiences of his life" (Stravinsky 125). Whatever his fragmentary, contradictory experience, Eliot's association of the opera with emotion, and importantly, with resistance to emotion, seems to have tied it in his mind with the aborted love affair with Hale, as well as Verdenal's fate at Gallipoli. All this attraction and resistance displays some continuity: Verdenal, too, writes of his effort to make sense of the difficulties of Wagner's operas alongside their addiction. As objects of study, they require intellectual rigour; as subjects of love, they demand considerable emotional capacity. Perhaps (for Eliot at least) always impossible to experience totally, they presented themselves instead, *The Waste Land* would eventually do: in unassimilable parts obsessed with voice and memory.

As this shows, as for so many others, the Wagner Eliot first knew was French. From January 1911 in Paris, Eliot attended lectures by celebrity philosopher Henri Bergson, suffering what he called "a temporary conversion to Bergsonism" (Sermon 5). Bergson's *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience* (1889, translated 1910 as *Time and Free Will*) sought to make philosophy address time as much as space. In the process, it became a treatise on experiencing the world as a Wagnerian melody. Bergson found that "sensations will add themselves dynamically to one another and will organize themselves, like the successive notes of a tune by which we allow ourselves to be lulled and soothed." Taken together, "the whole produce on us the effect of a musical phrase which is constantly on the point of ending and constantly altered in its totality by the addition of some new note" (Bergson, *Time* 104-6). Bergson's prose describes not an ordered Mozartian tune but Wagner's endless melody. If consciousness was thus embodied, Wagner's music itself might be expected to describe not only dreams, as Wagner himself claimed following Schopenhauer, but the *durées* of waking

consciousness. Bergson's *Matière et Memoire*, translated in 1910 as *Matter and Memory* further suggested the importance of memory's operation to perceiving this "rhythm of duration" as memory "inseparable in practice from perception, imports the past into the present, contracts into a single intuition many moments of duration" (Bergson, *Matter and Memory* 73). Perceiving a melody required both memory and anticipation and could itself be recalled successively—or as the earlier essay succinctly put it: a notion of *durée* "forms both the past and the present states into an organic whole, as happens when we recall the notes of a tune, melting, so to speak, into one another" (Bergson, *Time* 106). Organic wholes seem far from the action of Eliot's poem—but the action of "mixing/Memory and desire" is central to it (*The Poems* 55). So how to remember (or not remember) tunes becomes a defining action of consciousness in *The Waste Land*, as melodies, and memories of them, emerge in the poem.

In these surroundings, no wonder the poem remembers Verlaine's sonnet *Parsifal* from the *Revue Wagnerienne*. *The Fire Sermon* quotes the last line with one comma moved "Et O ces voix d'enfants, chantant dans la coupole!". Verlaine's poem is a classic piece of Wagneriana, at first more concerned with story and staging than music, and with remembering all that *Parsifal*, returning triumphantly to the throne à la Wagner's opera, tries to forget, including the talk and temptations of the flower-maidens ("*Les Filles, leur gentil/Babil and la luxure amusante*" (154)). In closing, it turns back surprisingly to something he might have never consciously remembered, exclaiming at the voices of boys singing in the dome. This is vocal music as disembodied as possible, Verlaine's last line a distant record of its hearing, Wagner's score directing that the choir boys should be out of sight of the audience in the performance. In Bayreuth, they sing invisibly from the dome, with accompanying music emerging from the pit. Further, the music they sing is different from the rest: a treble, youthful, virginal melody, as if in church. This moment is no obvious culmination: the boys' choir sings at the close of Act I, apparently excluding *Parsifal*, who may not even hear them.

The line thus emerges into *The Waste Land*, trebly silenced. Perhaps any performance would not live up to expectation, as another early Eliot poem notes: "Oh little voices of the throats of men/That come between the singer and the song" (*The Poems* 264). However, like *Parsifal*, we cannot hear these voices; we cannot, like George Eliot, hear the wind whistling through the cathedral keyhole of Wagner's music or follow the rest of Verlaine's poem. The line describes an aesthetic, really a religious experience to which we are almost completely denied access. Excluding so much necessarily expresses a lack, a blank.

However, involved in layers of denial, distancing, and repression, the line recalls the memory of a suppressed memory of music. Readers can question the continuing resonance of these voices from within the circular dome, even as the apostrophe "O" forms an appropriate symbol. Arriving to echo "O the moon shone brightly on Mrs Porter", any remaining gravitas appears spent in bathetic rhymes with "daughter" introducing a ritual "wash their feet with soda water", ironically recalling the grail vessel ("*le vase pur*", as Verlaine has it) (Eliot, *The Poems* 62). At the same time, evidence suggests this line is transformative. The only line in italics throughout *The Fire Sermon*, the only line ending with an exclamation mark, the apostrophe's "O" is key. So far, "O" in the poem has, unsurprisingly, been associated with the song, even as a whiff of doggerel clings to it. When used with a rhetorical flourish, it somewhat distances prophecy's potency ("O keep the dog far hence") and, in repetition, can undermine its musical force ("O O O O that Shakespeherian Rag" features Eliot's own riffing elaboration on a snatch of popular song). Later in *The Fire Sermon*, however, the apostrophe has gained some emotional weight, as in the sincere lamentation "O city city" and through the abasement of prayer "O Lord Thou pluckest me out." The Wagnerian sonnet fragment has enacted this transformation. If so, it mirrors the action of *Parsifal* in turning from youthful superficial vigour to authentic religious experience. Nevertheless, it seems more striking that it has done so by multiply distancing its "O" from all possible physical manifestations of music—

quadruply muted, the "O" barely survives as a sound marker, a received memory of some far-off emotional experience. In the poem, it leads directly to a deadened expression of birdsong: "Twit twit twit/Jug jug jug jug jug jug". Yet, however drily, these sound syllables drip themselves throughout the poem's consciousness. There they meet the Rhinemaidens' twice-repeated "Weialala leia/Wallala leilala" even as they falter into a fading "la la" (*The Poems* 66). These dislocations of language and memory are disconcerting, sometimes even horrifying (Verdenal had remarked how Tristan was atrociously moving "émeuvent atrocement"), but as they sit in terrible silence on the page, it is possible just about to remember their origins: at the beginnings of language, and at many removes, in music.

After Bergson, remembering music is a model for consciousness: Eliot's poem repeatedly records unsuccessful attempts to damn its stream. It is as if the playing of *Tristan und Isolde* cannot be stopped. After featuring the opera's Bavarian origins by the Starnbergersee, it spills out in the sea-borne sailor's love song "*Frisch weht der Wind*" (Eliot, *The Poems* 56). Although inaugurating the opera's sung portion, these words make an odd motif to employ: they point to an almost jaunty tune, easy to remember, to repeat, to sing: just the sort of thing to whistle on board ship on stage or on the way to Bayreuth. In fact, the implication, especially when repeated in the opera, is that the sailor has remembered the tune from somewhere himself. Its four-square repetition operates rather differently from Bergson's notion that *durée* (and memory) function like an endlessly unfolding melody. Cheerfully but terribly unforgettable, repeated more than once and at every performance, in the poem, it functions as a cypher for feeling, but maybe one whose repeats rather than progressions reproduce an empty duplication.

Different readers perforce hear these lines in different ways. Some readers can already hum (correctly or incorrectly) the sailor's jolly tune: more would know it if they heard it. To some, the words are familiar — others can look them up, and some fewer the music also.

Those less musically literate might still appreciate the tune if they came across it. Some readers, too, remain outside the ambit of its music, 'tone-deaf', in that unconvincing phrase, to its nuances. To them, the phrases of the poem are "neither living nor dead", as they remain "looking into the heart of light, the silence" On the other hand, this might be precisely the point. Trying not to hear Wagner's music at this moment in the poem might be as important as hearing it. Many readers (including Eliot's most intimate), having heard the tune, are never able to unhear or forget it, even perhaps in stammering senility. Like Tiresias, we might wonder if this is any less of a burden.

Notably, it is a burden shared by Tristan himself. Later in the opera, he is woken from a coma by a mordant melody from the shepherd's pipes, crying, "That old tune?/Why does it waken me?". This uneasy pastoral tune, "die alte Weise/sehnsuchtbang" [the old tune of yearning], familiar now to the opera's audience as we have heard it more than once, reminds him of his own origins and parents' death (Wagner 45). As its fourth and fifth leaps are elaborated into the opera's third act, it creates a musical charge seeking a "primal home amidst the piping of the pastoral metaphysical dance", as Nietzsche expresses it in *The Birth of Tragedy*, music through which we are faced with the full force of the Dionysian:

can [one] imagine a man who could perceive the third act of *Tristan und Isolde*, unaided by word and image, simply as a tremendous symphonic movement, without expiring at the convulsive spreading of their souls' wings? How can such a man, have laid his heart against the ear of the world will and felt the tumultuous lust for life as a thundering torrent or as a tiny, misty brook flowing into all the world's veins, fail to shatter into pieces all of a sudden? (101)

For Nietzsche, the only thing stopping this shattering of a musically sympathetic listener is the necessary preservation of that restrained musical but also visual and verbal

principle, the Apollonian, a "power aimed at the reconstitution of the almost fragmented individual". By its influence, music's dark collective becomes individualised: it is not us who suffers, and we suddenly imagine we can see only Tristan, motionlessly, gloomily asking: 'The old melody; why does it awaken me?' Furthermore, what before seemed a hollow sight from the core of things now tells us only how 'barren and empty is the sea'. Moreover, where before we breathlessly felt on the verge of extinction in the convulsive paroxysm of all our feelings, connected to this existence by a mere thread, the symbol of the myth preserves us from gazing directly at the supreme idea of the world (102).

In this reading, such melodies, coming into recognisable focus, here played on *orchestral cor anglais*, translated into words and individual reactions, can start to act as a preservative, a symbol: only too memorable and repeatable but thereby just able to stop us tipping into the abyss of endless longing. It is notable that long before Eliot's poem does, Nietzsche has picked out the line '*Oed' und leer das Meer*'. Sung by Tristan's companion Kurwenal to a neutral, flat melody, as such it is not exactly memorable, nor quite emotional, but as flat and dead as the shipless sea it observes, though potentially expressing depths like the sea in implied harmony. Like much of Wagner, it thus comes to Eliot's poem pre-read, pre-quoted. That Eliot steals it to close a section itself full of remembered speech ("they called me the hyacinth girl") just as it shudders into wracked silence is telling: bits of already-borrowed Wagner bookend maybe the most tormented passage in the poem (56). One bitter irony comes in these fragments' desiccation: their removal from the liquid music on which they float. Another is that they all represent something already heard, pre-experienced, "fore suffered", perhaps many times. The darkest irony is that however inert and silenced they lie on the page, something of their music and situation is impossible to forget: they record apparently unforgettable things.

Despite differences in size and genre, Wagner's and Eliot's methods are, then, comparable, especially when it comes to memory. Kenner notes their shared focus on small things: "'A master of miniature', wrote Nietzsche of Wagner, intuiting the method of the long Eliot poem" (198). Furthermore, through small details, mammoth things might be experienced. In his Clark lectures, Eliot comments: "in *Laforgue*, there is a continuous war between the feelings implied by his ideas and the ideas implied by his feelings. The system of Schopenhauer collapses, but in a different ruin from that of *Tristan und Isolde*." (Eliot 745). Puzzling but revealing, this comment's sense of doubleness, of unresolved conflict, surely survives into *The Waste Land*. Presumably, the ruin of Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* happens as the main characters break through the illusions of convention and the daily world to live through what Schopenhauer characterised as pure Will embodied in music. Rather than being released, they are destroyed by the experience, neither able to function in a lower world with no time for dreams and love; Tristan dies mortally wounded after a brief reconciliation, but so does Isolde, somewhat by choice. The different kind of ruin Eliot conceives is more like an arrested state, in which the worlds in conflict remain incompatible, irreconcilable, the horror in perceiving but not being torn asunder, and the collapse a restrained implosion, not generated through overwhelming consummation, but held in agonising persistence and repetition—the more agonising because somehow chosen. How much this recognises something of his stalled early love affair with Emily Hale is, for the moment, impossible to say. What we can say is that the tenor of this experience was orchestrated by Wagner and is everywhere marked by impossible-to-suppress memories of his musical dramas.

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