

## Presidential Address, MELOW Conference 2022

### Many People, Many Tongues: The Plurality of Perspectives in *The Waste Land*

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**Abstract:** This essay focuses on the inbuilt contradictions in T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, which straddles an uncertain territory between the public and the private. There are many voices that can be heard in the poem, and the voice of the poet himself—despite his insistence on impersonality—may be discerned as an undercurrent. In the initial years following the publication of *The Waste Land*, the private voice was not dominant, but, as Russian formalists tell us, the dominant element in the text shifts and moves, giving way to the subordinate elements. Thus, *The Waste Land* now presents multiple faces to the reader, many of them linked with Eliot's private experiences. This paper highlights some of these personal references that the poet tried to keep out of the public eye.

The year was 1922, and humanity was still reeling under the impact of the first World War. The world still lay in shambles, broken and fragmented. All nations' economies were destroyed, and leaders were looking for ways and means to return to some semblance of normalcy. Those who survived were grappling with issues in their personal lives and with their damaged psychological states. In London, a tense T.S. Eliot, having returned from his convalescence in a rehab centre in Switzerland, was still recovering from his nervous breakdown, still wrestling with matters related to the eccentricities of a brilliant but highly-strung starlet wife, and at the same time, waiting for his next poetic collection to hit the literary world.

Hit the world; it did! T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* was published by Faber in 1922, and the literary landscape was never the same again, for the long poem—with a battery of

notes appended to it—was nothing like the poetry that readers were familiar with. It did not have conventional structure or rhyme schemes; no daffodils were swaying in the breeze, no knights on lonely moors, no counterpart of Maud Gonne in its dedication, no love poetry, no Victorian pessimism, no optimism either, *no vers de societe*, no lyricism, in fact, nothing that could relate it to the preceding generations of poets or their verses.

Some critics hailed it as a masterpiece that spoke for a generation of lost souls, while others denounced it for its allusiveness. Take, for example, F.L. Lucas, who had no patience with the modernist movement, published a review of T.S. Eliot's poem *The Waste Land*, in *The New Statesman* in November 1923 and clearly stated the difference between real poets, and 'bookworms' like Eliot, like "maggots which breed in the corruption of literature." Lucas reflects that 'to attempt here an interpretation, even an intelligible summary of the poem, is to risk making oneself ridiculous: "the borrowed jewels he has set in its head do not make Mr. Eliot's toad more prepossessing," he said, convinced that an actual poem should not need notes and annotations.

This man is doing strange funny things to poetry: this was the general opinion. The early reviews of *The Waste Land* did nothing to lift Eliot out of his depression until his *miglior fabro*, Ezra Pound appeared on the scene as a literary dictator. He endorsed his work with an authority that none dare refute: "Eliot's *Waste Land* is I think the justification of the 'movement,' of our modern experiment, since 1900," he wrote shortly after the poem was published in 1922. Cleanth Brooks described *The Waste Land* as a "highly condensed epic of the modern age."

What most perplexed the readers was what we now call the intertextuality of the poem, the hundreds of references to other writers, thinkers, and critics from the world over. A great poet, according to Eliot, must have a broad horizon and be familiar with "the mind of Europe," as he said in 1919. However, in *The Waste Land*, it is not just the mind of Europe that the

reader encounters but snippets from across time and space, quotations that cut across chronotopic borders and are woven into the texture of the poem, from the world of Sappho in the 6th century BC and the *Vedic* age to the modern times with the polluted Thames flowing sadly through the city of London where sleazy encounters take place all the time. With all these allusions and references, some readers dismissed the poem as a scrap heap of quotations hastily put together in five uneven cantos, masquerading as poetry.

Adding to the confusion was Eliot's note on the characters we encounter in the poem: "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." The impression given to the reader is that here is a stage that is peopled by a motley crowd comprising men and women, young and old, real and surreal, going round and round in a circle, or as in a merry-go-round, rising and falling from time to time. As we are aware, the circulatory motion, the spiral staircase, and the wheel are recurrent symbols in Eliot's poetry. The long poem seems to revolve around them.

When we look at Eliot's note on the voices of the poem, what he leaves out—perhaps deliberately—is the voice of the poet himself: his voice, "infinitely gentle. Infinitely suffering," to quote from "The Preludes." This infinitely gentle and suffering voice is deliberately muted by the poet who believed in the theory of impersonality, who insisted time and again that the poet has no personality and that the poem needs to speak for itself. The question often asked is: why did the bard protest so much? What was he afraid of exposing? What did he wish to hide? Which aspect of his personal life or personality did he wish to keep from the public eye? Over the last one hundred years these questions have been tackled many times by critics and scholars.

Different viewpoints have been presented and overall, they have served to turn topsy-turvy the notion of the impersonality of the poet that had never really convinced the discerning reader. The “voices” of the poem that Eliot draws our attention to mingle time and again with the angst of the poet himself and connect with episodes from his personal life that he wanted to keep out of sight. Each voice presents a different perspective, and each presents a facet of the personality of the poet who was a self-professed "classicist in literature, royalist in politics, and Anglo-Catholic in religion."

While on the many voices and perspectives in the poem, it may be rewarding to pause and take a look at the idea of polyphony and polyglossia in Russian formalism. As Mikhail Bakhtin pointed out, there is always an interplay of many voices in a text. What we hear may not be the voice that the writer wished to prioritise; *au contraire*, it may be the one that he/she wished not to reveal. So it is in *The Waste Land* where the speaking voice that sounds loud and clear may be that of Tiresias, perhaps, or of Mrs Sosostriis, or the Fisher King, but faintly below the surface lies the voice of the poet, a broken man still trying to gather himself and shore his fragments together against the ruins. This almost unheard voice presents the perspective of the creator who has seen all and suffered all, like Tiresias. In fact, he is Tiresias, the blind old man with wrinkled dug, a fact that is endorsed in his personal letters where he occasionally signed himself as T. or Tiresias (Eliot papers at the Houghton Library, Harvard University).

Through Eliot’s personal letters to Ezra Pound much information may be gathered on the poems and what lies between their lines. Eeldrop and Appleplex were the names that Eliot and Pound used playfully in their written exchanges. The correspondence between the two lays bare valuable information on the composition and structure of *The Waste Land* and also on the more profound meaning beneath the apparent waste and aridity of projected landscape the characters who inhabit it.

Each of the numerous characters of the poem gives us a different perspective on the main theme of the poem which relates to the spiritual wasteland of the modern man. Each voice we hear is a commentary on a world torn by greed, lust, and avarice. Some of the voices of the poem were unheard in the initial years, suppressed as they were by the literary dictatorship of Ezra Pound and Eliot's harping on the impersonality of his poems. However, with the passage of time, these voices have been allowed to emerge and the readers have duly recognised them. What Roman Jakobson says about the dominant and shifting voices may well be applied here: that in any given text there are dominant voices that are loud and clear, but at the same time there are other voices that may emerge at a given time:

In the evolution of poetic form it is...a question of the shifting dominant, within a given complex of poetic norms...elements which were originally secondary become primary...The hierarchy of artistic devices changes within the framework of a given poetic genre. (Jakobson 182-87)

Alternatively, the dominant voice the reader hears may not necessarily be the one the writer wished to focus on. The muted voices, or the silences of the text that Pierre Macherey spoke of, become audible when the audience is receptive. What is not heard or said in a text, or the silent spaces and absences of the text, are as important as that which is obvious and heard (Macherey).

By contradicting his impersonality theory, Eliot himself described the poem as "the relief of a personal and wholly insignificant grouse against life...just a piece of rhythmical grumbling." He referred to the many personal experiences of a writer that go into the making of a text, the tunes we whistle, the ditties we hear in childhood, etc:

...the song of one bird, the leap of one fish, at a particular place and time, the scent of one flower, an old woman on a German mountain path, six ruffians playing cards at night at a small railway junction...they come to represent

depths of feeling into which we cannot peer. (*The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* 141)

So, evidently, what we have in *The Waste Land* is a poem that teeters on an uncertain terrain that is part private and part public. It owes its unique character to the poet's familiarity with the repertoire of world literature and at the same time the agony of his personal experience that gave birth to the creation. The personal experience, the anguish and pain that the poet went through, was not entirely the result of his unhappy first marriage; a major loss partly caused it that the poet suffered. I refer to the 1952 essay by John Peter who saw a hidden figure in the carpet of the poem and shocked the literary world with what Frank Kermode called the "homosexual interpretation of *The Waste Land*," comparing it with Tennyson's *In Memoriam*, delving deep into the warm relationship that Eliot as a young man had with a fellow boarder with whom he also spent some time in Paris. This young man, Jean Verdenal, to whom he dedicated his *Prufrock and other Poems*, was killed in the first world war and—as Peter's essay put it—Eliot could not come to terms with this loss: his "irrational response to it was his hasty and disastrous marriage to Vivienne," according to James E. Miller. This may explain the frequent references to "these April sunsets, that somehow recall. My buried life, and Paris in the spring" in Eliot's work:

I am willing to admit that my own single memory—touched by a sentimental sunset, the memory of a friend across the Luxembourg Gardens in the late afternoon, waving a branch of lilac, a friend who was later (so far as I could find out) to be mixed with the mud of Gallipoli. (qtd. in Miller)

His dear friend, Jean Verdenal, 1889–1915, mort aux Dardanelles (dedication to *Prufrock and other Observations*) lost "in the mud of Gallipoli" seems to lurk behind Phlebas the Phoenician, drowned and unable to come back to life again. "Look, those are pearls that were his eyes..." (*The Waste Land* 48).

Related to this attachment to the young man is Eliot's inability to forge a satisfying relationship with women in his personal life, and his frequent portrayal of men and women unable to communicate with each other in the sterile waste of the modern times. All these point towards the fact that, like J. Alfred Prufrock, the protagonist of the "Portrait of a Lady," the speaker in the Hyacinth garden, and the companion of the lady with bad nerves in "A Game of Chess," the creator of these characters inserted a part of himself into these characters. Their voices echo his own thoughts, painful and disjointed:

My nerves are bad to-night. Yes, bad. Stay with me.

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."

I think we are in rats' alley

Where the dead men lost their bones.

At the same time, the voice of Vivienne Haighwood, his first wife, is also heard through a comment—written in her own handwriting in the facsimile of *The Waste Land*—that reads "why do you get married if you don't want children?" and again in the lines "My nerves are bad tonight, yes bad..." we are reminded of Vivienne's personal ailment, that she had a "history of nerves" that contributed much to Eliot's depression. After T.S. Eliot walked out on her, Vivienne was later confined to an asylum where she spent her final years. So much for the "impersonal" nature of the poem that Eliot wanted his readers to believe in. One may understand why the poet did not wish to share his traumas with the world. Nevertheless, despite his efforts, the personal that crept into his poem was discovered and we, as readers and critics, agree that there is more in the poem than Eliot wanted us to see.

In the “unreal city” section it is again the voice of the poet we hear. Eliot, we are told, used to walk down London Bridge to his office daily, seeing the people around him “with their eyes fixed on their feet,” hearing the bells of the church ring as he passed by, noting the “hollow sound” on the final stroke. Again, Eliot himself was accosted by the “Smyrna merchant” called Mr Eugenides in the poem, invited to the Metropole, a Hotel popular with a specific section of society, infamous for its same-sex revelries.

Other than the “personal” voice of the poet, or that of Tiresias, there are other voices that rise and fall as one traverses Eliot’s *Waste Land*. The voice of the poet as Tiresias is stately and dignified, sadly commenting on what he “sees” through the legendary character’s unseeing eyes. Similarly, in the allusions to Augustine, Dante, or Baudelaire, to the Satyricon, or the Bible, the narratorial voice is that of a detached observer, commenting on scenes and situations that need to be addressed. These sombre voices form the commentary that weaves in and out of the various episodes of the poem, linking them together. We have been told that *The Waste Land* was composed in bits and pieces over a lengthened period: Eliot had been collecting scenes and situations that he saw and observed in and around London. These scenes were then linked together by a commentary in a voice supposedly that of Tiresias, mingling with other voices, in actuality expressing the thoughts and feelings of the poet himself. The poet as the silent spectator sees all and is pained by what he sees. If only the rot could be redeemed!

The serious voices, then, belong to the poet. However, most of the other voices that we hear are from a different socio-cultural milieu: they emerge from the lower classes, the under-privileged or exploited sections of society, from the sleazy underbelly of a superficially glitzy world, or from the nouveau riche class on whom “assurance sits like a silk hat on a Bradford millionaire,” or the get-rich-quick variety with a pocketful of currants, or the aristocratic classes who read much of the night and go south in winter—the fashionable,



touristy travels of the privileged class. Beginning with the first Canto, “Burial of the Dead,” we have Countess Marie Larisch who recounts her experience with an arch-duke cousin, and the Hyacinth girl who laments “You gave me hyacinths first a year ago/they called me the hyacinth girl.” Following almost at their heels is Mme Sosostriis with her wicked pack of cards. So, in the very first section these are at least three different takes on the modern waste land: the socialites who must compulsively travel whenever the season changes, the girl in tears because she no longer receives hyacinths from her lover, and the crafty woman engaged in some underhand dealing, trying to dodge the police. There are other voices, too, like those from Richard Wagner’s opera, Dante’s *Inferno*, or Baudelaire’s beloved Paris, or from anthropological studies of Jessie Weston or James Frazer. They all mingle, the plebeian, the sedate, and the stentorian, the timid and the assertive, and make the poem the collage it that it is. In the following sections, Eliot employs the diction of the working class. Servants, maids, and the way they talk.

Speaking of the “popular” voices of the text, it is essential to mention how Eliot uses nursery rhymes and popular music to parody the current situation. From time to time, Eliot turned to popular nursery rhymes. The “Mulberry bush” use in “The Hollow Men” is the most obvious example. In *The Waste Land*, too, in the final section, London Bridge is falling down, falling down because of the teeming millions of inhabitants of *The Waste Land* who walk over it daily, with their eyes fixed before their feet. Here, too, while referring to the nursery rhyme, what Eliot leaves unsaid – the silent spaces of the text – is of importance. In the children’s song there is “my fair lady” who may be able to build the bridge again. In *The Waste Land* the fair lady is not invoked. It is only in a later text, “Ash-Wednesday,” that Eliot brings in the Lady in the white gown, “blessed sister, holy mother,” who may redeem the world.

There are other references to popular songs, too. “O-o-o that Shakespeherian Rag,” for instance: note, it is not Shakespearean but Shakespeherian, in keeping with the syncopated

rhythm of the jazz music popular in Eliot's time, in particular referring to a hit tune by Gene Buck and Herman Ruby in 1912. Moreover, the reference to Mme Sosostriis and Mrs Porter, both evidently ladies "of situation," the former indulging in something underhand, the latter – borrowed from "The Ballad of Red Wing," an Australian song that soldiers sang when they landed at Gallipoli – in prostitution and immorality. Then there is Sweeney, who comes to meet the madame: he is the dubious character fleshed out later in *Sweeney Agonistes*, modelled on the notorious barber who would murder his clients and bake them into pies.

Much of "A Game of Chess" with its crude, earthy, down-to-earth straight talk of the lower section of society, is inspired by conversations that Eliot gathered from Ellen Kellond, the maid who served the Eliots. This is the lower strata of society which also includes the daughters of the Thames who have been compromised in depressing circumstances in "A Fire Sermon": helpless young women from the lower strata exploited by nouveau riche young men, the "loitering heirs of city directors" who have now departed, leaving no addresses.

All these voices merge with the voice of Tiresias which in turn blends with that of the poet who, keeping in mind the Inferno visualised by Dante, creates a living hell of his own when he sees the world breaking up into smithereens amid a cacophony of voices that flounder and flail from time to time, drawing attention to the fact that we are all living a death in life, in a world that is more living than dead, a barren, stretch where there is no rainfall, and over which the dry tree gives no shelter and the inexorable heat of the sun reduces everything to one big heap of stony rubbish, the irredeemable, all pervasive waste land which can only be redeemed if we set our lands in order, and if we give, sympathise, and control, to arrive at *Shanti Shanti Shanti*, the peace that passeth understanding.

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