

The Sense of *Shantih* in *The Waste Land*

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Abstract: From a reader's point of view, asking what 'Shantih' means or communicates in *The Waste Land* leads to a paradox. It demands an explanation knowing fully well that a simple making of a sense (worst, a paraphrase) is neither applicable nor in any way helpful. Yet, semantically—and in the poem, too—the utterance 'Shantih' signals an end of all explanations. Yet, against the knowledge of such paradoxical essays like the by now formidably established one by Cleanth Brooks—"What Does Poetry Communicate?"—this paper—through a survey of all the seven Sanskrit words in the poem—would make a humble attempt to understand what might be Eliot's intentions of ending this poem with 'Shantih', being not so satisfied with Eliot's notes about it as an appendix to the poem. The paper would seek guidance about the placement and significance of this word from Indian knowledge systems, with a concomitant awareness of the avant-gardist project by Modern writers to deliberately make their works difficult and elitist.

Keywords: *Shantih*, Paradox, Poetry & Communication, Indian Knowledge System, Avant-garde.

The end is where we start from

– Eliot "Little Gidding"

*The Waste Land*¹ has seven Sanskrit words: *Ganga*, *Himavant* (the syllable/utterance), *DA*, *Datta*, *Dayadhvam*, *Damyata*, and *Shantih*. All these seven Sanskrit words occur in *The Waste Land's* fifth and last section, titled "What the Thunder Said." *Ganga* is the least problematic, referring to the River Ganges. However, the swift change of the locale—from the Thames explicitly mentioned in section three, "The Fire Sermon", to the Ganges—is remarkable and is now recognised as the spatiotemporal sweep of *The Waste Land*, making it a universal work

of High Modern literature. It is interesting to note the description of these two rivers in the poem. Thames' "tent is broken" is what we come across at the opening of "The Fire Sermon," a not-so-easy phrase for the reader as one has to perceive what a 'river's tent' might mean. Going by the meaning of the word 'tent', a covering, maybe of the overhanging branches of trees (because there is mention of "the last fingers of leaf"); or, a shelter, one can associate then the sky as the 'river's tent' which has suffered a rupture and lies 'broken'.² The banks of the Thames are described as "brown land" (bereft of greenery, the season then would be autumn) across which there is a wind blowing, "unheard". There are no women (the 'nymphs') or men (friends to the nymphs, "the loitering heirs of City directors") visiting the Thames due to which the river is saved at the moment from being choked by pollution through the dumping of things like cigarette butts, cardboard boxes, liquor bottles etc. However, the speaker in the third section of the poem—the Celtic mythological Fisher King, or the Classical mythological Tiresias whom

Eliot designates in his 'Notes' as "the most important personage in the poem" (72), or the literary Ferdinand of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*—asks "Sweet Thames" to "run softly," meaning there is water in the river. So, the theme of aridity, which is a prominent one for *The Waste Land*, is suggestive only of the character or the soul of human beings and not of the external landscape. By contrast Ganga, the lifeline of millions of people in India and regarded by them as the most sacred river in the world, venerated through testimony right from *the Mahabharata*, one that washes away all sins, Ganga in this poem is mentioned as "was sunken" whereby there can be two interpretations: the mythological *descent* of Ganga on the earth all the way down to the netherworld through the sea³; and, the modern-day Ganga that factually comes down from the source in the Himalayas, but its water content had 'sunk' because—as mentioned in the poem—it "waited for rain" thereby indicating a reduction in the life-sustaining potency of the river⁴. Regarding *Himavant*, Eliot broadly uses this name to

mean the tall mountain ranges of the Himalayas. The word in Sanskrit comes to mean frosty or icy at the literal level. However, *Himvant* or *Himvat* is also a variation of *Himraj* or *Parvateshwar*, meaning lord of the mountains, which personifies the Himalayan range. So, at one level, 'lord of the mountains' might also mean the tallest peak, or Mount Everest.⁵

The following five Sanskrit words in *The Waste Land*: *DA*, *Datta*, *Dayadhvam*, *Damyata* and *Shantih* are all interrelated and drawn—as mentioned by Eliot himself—from the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upanisad*, Chapter V. It would be pertinent—to understand the first four of the above five words—to cite that section here (which I have taken from the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upanisad* with a commentary of Śankarācārya, translated by Swami Madhavananda of the Rama Krishna Math) and then see how Eliot alters these words in the poem:

Three classes of *Prajāpati's* sons lived a life of continence with their father, *Prajāpati* (*Virāj*) – the gods, men and Asuras. The gods, on the completion of their term, said, “Please instruct us.” He told them the syllable '*Da*' (and asked), “Have you understood?” (They) said, “We have. You tell us: Control yourselves.” (He) said, “Yes, you have understood.”

Then the men said to him, “Please instruct us.” He told them the same syllable, '*Da*' (and asked), 'Have you understood?' (They) said, 'We have. You tell us: Give.' (He) said, 'Yes, you have understood.'

Then the Asuras said to him, 'Please instruct us.' He told them the same syllable, '*Da*' (and asked), 'Have you understood?' (They) said, 'We have. You tell us: Have compassion.' (He) said, 'Yes, you have understood.' The heavenly voice repeats that very thing, the cloud, as '*Da*,' '*Da*,' '*Da*': 'Control yourselves,' 'Give,' and 'Have compassion.'

Therefore, one should learn these three—self-control, charity and compassion.

It can be observed from the above passage that: a) *Prajāpati* (or Lord Brahma) cross-checks with his three classes of male progeny each time after uttering the syllable 'Da' whether they have understood it right or not and, in fact, ascertains that all the three classes have indeed derived the proper meaning of the utterance as applied to them; and, b) the order of instruction by *Prajāpati* in the *Brhadāranyaka Upanisad* is the gods—to whom he states to practice self-control because being gods they were naturally egotistic and unruly—followed by men—to whom he instructs to give because they have the propensity to hoard—and followed in the end by the asuras or demons to whom he commands to be compassionate, as demons are by nature cruel. Interestingly, Eliot, in *The Waste Land*, alters this order to men, demons and then gods suggesting perhaps that in the twentieth century, neither gods nor demons exist; there are only men capable of possessing god-like and/or demonic qualities, and, therefore, the question of being attuned towards communication with a higher power was irrelevant. It can be recollected that the phase in Eliot's life leading up to 1922, when this poem was published, was a time when Eliot was intensely searching for faith to latch on to. Hence, this was also the exploratory—if not the agnostic—phase of Eliot's life.

Robert Crawford, in a relatively recent biography titled *Young Eliot*, mentions an incident in August 1919 when *Tradition and the Individual Talent* was in the draft stage that Eliot – on tour in France where he met Ezra Pound "revealed [to Pound] something of his ongoing wrestling with religion: 'I am afraid of the life after death.'... Even in the French sunshine, a dark substratum of religious anxiety continued to perturb him, filling him at times with a sense of dispossession, of emptiness, though usually, he hid this from his friends" (333). Another striking aspect is Eliot's acceptance of the equivalence of the Sanskrit words, especially that of *dayadhvam*, the English of which in Eliot's 'Notes' is '(to) sympathise' that—apart from connoting a hierarchy of fortune or, even power with one sympathised upon—reduces the expression of this feeling to a behavioural one allowing it to be expressed either

genuinely or as a put on. Whereas, the more accurate approximation of *dayadhvam*, i.e., 'to be compassionate' implies nurturing a quality such that it becomes intrinsic to the personality; after all, the objective of Brahma was to instil values into his progenies and shape them from within⁶. Eliot might have missed out on this vital aspect of translation because he was using the German translation of the *Brhadāranyaka Upanisad* by Paul Deussen, published in 1897 and titled *Sechzig Upanishads des Veda* (or, *Sixty Upanishads of the Veda*). In his 'Notes' to *The Waste Land*, Eliot again mentions this work. So, this could be either a misreading of the German translation or a mistranslation by Deussen himself.⁷ Whether German or English translations of the *Brhadāranyaka Upanisad*, it can safely be conjectured— although Eliot did learn Sanskrit from the renowned Professor Charles Rockwell Lanman at Harvard—that he did not read the *Brhadāranyaka Upanisad* originally in Sanskrit. However, it was because of his training in Indic Philology and attending Professor Lanman's Harvard lectures, where he drew parallels between Buddhist and Christian traditions, and his talks on *nirvāna*, that the early thoughts and jottings on what would finally become "The Fire Sermon" and "What the Thunder Said" in *The Waste Land* developed (Crawford 168-69).

Eliot also attended Lanman's courses on the *Bhagavad Gītā*, and critics have detected the influence of this seminal Indian text on many of Eliot's works; themes in *The Waste Land* distinctly bearing the influence is about life, death and re-birth, and that time and action/inaction.⁸ Another interesting aspect of translation is Eliot's choice of translating non-English words and phrases in the 'Notes' to *The Waste Land*. It can be observed that right from the epigraph to the poem to the use of words, phrases and lines in other European languages, Eliot provides no translation to the readers. But when it comes to the four Sanskrit words: *datta*, *dayadhvam*, *damyata*, and *shantih*—Eliot jots down their English equivalents in his 'Notes'. This could be part of the High Modernist project to make literary works deliberately complex and is presumably so because Eliot pitches this 'difficult' poem to those European

readers who would be—to borrow from I. A. Richards—'active' enough to get the meaning of the portions in European languages in the poem, but, knowing Sanskrit, even for them, would be asking for too much.

Finally, the last Sanskrit word in *The Waste Land*, i.e., *shantih*. It would be relevant here to note that the word *shantih* comes from the *shanti mantras* in the *Upanishads*. Although the word is generally translated into English as 'peace', the *shanti mantras* are uttered to reduce or overcome the ill effects of three types of obstacles: the first being that from the physical realm, or the external world like from wild animals, natural calamities, and even strangers (called *ādi-bhautika*); the second from the supernatural world, or from spirits, ghosts, deities and demi-gods (called *ādi-daivika*); and, third, from the internal realm which includes diseases, pain, laziness, and absent-mindedness—things arising from one's own body and mind (called *adhyātmika*). In other words, the *shanti mantras* reduce or remove chaos and bring peace and harmony. Besides the *Brhadāranyaka Upanisad*, *shanti mantras* are also in other *Upanishads* like the *Taittiriya*, *Kena*, *Chandogya*, *Aitareya*, *Mundaka*, and *Mandukya* among others. Eliot's last entry in his 'Notes' is *Shantih* which is mentioned as “*Shantih*.” Repeated as here, a formal ending to an *Upanishad*. 'The Peace which passeth understanding' is our equivalent to this word" (76). 'The Peace which passeth understanding' is from Philippians 4, verse 6, where God—if we turn to Him in crises—promises a lasting peace beyond belief and beyond understanding. Incidentally, one of the famous quotes by the Dalai Lama on peace has the *Upanishadic* keyword 'compassion' in it when he says: "Only through compassion and inner peace, can one spread peace in the world". Incidentally, *Upanishad* means [*upa + nishad*= by+sit down] (students) sitting down near a teacher while receiving spiritual knowledge. In this poem, there is indirect mention of two great teachers besides Brahma: Buddha (in "The Fire Sermon") and Jesus in the journey to Emmaus portion in "What the Thunder Said"⁹, but the Buddha section ends with a repetition of the word 'burning'; the

promise of the resurrection of Jesus goes unnoticed because it is not recognised, "Who is the third who walks always beside you?/...But who is that on the other side of you?" (67); and, tellingly, the end of the poem with the thrice repetition of *Shantih* misses the prefixed utterance *Aum*, as it ought to be, and as it is in all the Upanishadic closure with the *shanti* mantras. *Aum*, or *Om* as *A Concise Encyclopedia of Hinduism* explains, is the mystical and auspicious syllable whose "prolonged intonation is associated with the creative sound through which the universe came into being" (32). *Aum* consists of the first (a) and the last (u) vowel and the last consonant (m) of the Sanskrit alphabet and therefore encompasses all words (which consist of vowels and consonants). The *Mandukya Upanishad* identifies it with the four stages of consciousness (a-waking consciousness; u-dream consciousness; m-deep sleep; aum-fourth state). *AUM/OM* is used to introduce and conclude a religious work, an act of worship, or an important task (idem). One of the reasons to construct a poem—literally fragment by fragment — from the many canonical works of both Europe and the East (besides making his space through his 'individual talent' in the European literary 'tradition') alluding to grand narratives like *the Bible*, mythologies like that of *Tiresias and the Sibyls*, writers of the stature of World Literature like Dante and Shakespeare, and popular songs like the one about Mrs. Porter and her daughter was to subscribe to the poetic belief then held by the High Moderns that the newness of poetry — and indeed all art—lay in its difficulty. After all, the times were difficult after the just-concluded Great War. Eliot was to make this aspect explicit in an essay two years after the War and a year before the publication of *The Waste Land* titled "The Metaphysical Poets" (1921), where he stated: "It appears likely that poets in our civilisation, as it exists at present, must be difficult...The poet must become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, to force, to dislocate, if necessary, language into its meaning" (Lodge 70).

Hence, the many tongues that speak the poem create the semblance of a multitude of lost voices from different societies across space and time—Greek, Latin, Italian, French, German and Sanskrit, besides English—is part of the deliberate High Modernist avant-gardist agenda. However, Eliot did believe—and more so after his conversion to Anglo-Catholicism by 1928—in a world beyond just the phenomenal, and did evince in the poem itself the Platonic desire for peace and order to descend upon the world which was then just a 'heap of broken images'—one of the most poignant lines, tonally, uttered in the voice of the Fisher King, towards the end of the poem—"Shall I at least set my lands in order?" (69) Yet, this was also true, that at the time of writing *The Waste Land* often recovering from bouts of a nervous breakdown, the natural and the human world for Eliot seemed to be out of harmony with any cosmic or higher design. In this sense, etymologically, *The Waste Land* might be said to be anticipating the literature of the Absurd, as the Latin *absurdus* comes to mean 'out of harmony' in English. Hence, the reference to madness or insanity is just before the poem's end: "Hieronymus mad againe" (69). Hence the disjuncture between *Shantih*, which is uttered—as it ought to be—thrice, but without the cosmic syllable prefixing it, i.e., *Aum* (the first utterance reminding us that 'in the beginning was the word, and the word was with God, and the word was God'). Nevertheless, God seems to be absent, or at least is silent, in *The Waste Land*. For the inhabitants of *The Waste Land*—like 'the hollow men'—salvation and *shantih* are perpetually deferred.

Notes

1. Lines and phrases from this poem for this paper have been cited from T.S. Eliot's *Collected Poems 1909 – 1962* (Faber & Faber).

2. One is reminded of a similar unusual—'new' or Avant-gardist—description of the sky in *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, where it is described as "Like a patient etherised upon a table".

3. In one myth, Ganga's mother is Mena, and her father is Himavat, the personification of the Himalayas. Whereas, the myth about the creation of Ganga describes that when Vishnu, in his dwarf avatar, took a stride of the universe with his two steps, his toe accidentally punctured a wall of the universe spilling the waters of Ganga – then called Mandakini (mandāka in Sanskrit roughly translates as 'the Ganges of Heaven'). The sacred water of Ganga was — through a prior myth about a boon given to King Bhagiratha asked from Vishnu through a thousand-year penance—to wash and purify the ashes of Bhagiratha's 60,000 ancestors and permit their ascent to heaven. The rivers Bhagirathi and Alaknanda are the two headstreams merging at Devprayag in Garhwal, becoming, after that, the Ganga. The purifying power of the Ganga (making souls attain heaven) comes from this myth of King Bhagiratha.

4. 'Ganga' in Sanskrit means 'swift-goer' from the root gam 'to go'; an inflection of this same root becomes gwam, i.e., 'to come'. Knowing this helps the reader better contextualise this word's meaning in the poem.

5. Mount Everest is a relatively recent name given to the Highest Himalayan peak by Andrew Waugh, the British Surveyor General of India from the Royal Geographic Society. George Everest was Waugh's senior/predecessor.

6. I arrived at a similar observation during my (unpublished) doctoral research in the years between 2000 and 2002 entitled "Cultural Criticism: An Assessment with Special Reference to Matthew Arnold, T.S. Eliot, F.R. Leavis and Raymond Williams" (pp. 113 -114).

7. However, it has to be said that Deussen's translation of and commentary on the Upanishads is still read and referenced very widely in the West, the proof of it being his mention in Wikipedia on the Upanishads.

8. Siew-Yue Killingley's essay (referred to below) would be particularly helpful in studying this aspect.

9. It is a relevant piece of information to note here that "What the Thunder Said" was virtually left untouched by the editing scissors of Ezra Pound, as is evident from *The Waste Land: A Facsimile and Transcript of the Original Drafts Including the Annotations of Ezra Pound* edited with an introduction by Valerie Eliot.

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