

Trenches in the Mind: *The Waste Land* and Eliot's Confrontation of the Great War

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Abstract: Some recent accounts of T. S. Eliot's behaviour during the Great War has presented him as negative and playing safe. Vincent Sherry's *The Great War and the Language of Modernism* describes him as essentially an 'opportunist', assiduously networking and avoiding trouble during the war years. This paper will argue that not only was Eliot deeply affected by his experiences of being in wartime England but there is a need to re-evaluate the role of *The Waste Land* in the complex relationship between a confrontation with the traumas of the First World War and modernism's aesthetic strategies—in exploring the visceral psychological scars of War which in turn establishes the larger role of the poem in exploring its aesthetic impact beyond the specific post-WWI context. The paper builds on the work of scholars such as Carl Krockel to contextualise Eliot as a First World War modernist poet but also brings into play a comparative analysis with some examples of Eliot's other writings such as *Hollow Men* and, most crucially, a letter of detailing the horrors of the trenches he published in *The Nation magazine* in June 1917. This paper will develop a nuanced reading of Eliot's impact as a war poet, *The Wasteland* and its implications for understanding modernist and, specifically, American voices of the Great War.

Keywords: First World War, War Literature, T.S. Eliot, Trauma, Psychoanalysis, Poetics

When describing the perfect embodiment of the conceptual problem posed by war literature Samuel Hynes uses the anecdote of an American squad out on a night patrol in Vietnam from which only one wounded survivor managed to return to base. The wounded soldier dies before telling his comrades what happened to him and the squad. To Hynes's mind, this instance of a non-existent narrative perfectly illustrates one of the central issues when dealing with the

representation of War and its trauma in literature (15). The unanswerable question of 'what happened out there?' forms the central existential premise of writing aimed at communicating the trauma of armed conflict: one had to be there to understand the horror truly. The inaccessibility of uncommunicable trauma lends a unique frame to wartime literature. Hynes compares the witnessing of Modern War to a form of travel writing, documenting a psychological as much as a physical journey into the literal and metaphorical terrain of the warzone, with the exception that this 'destination' has been rendered inaccessible in time and space to future readers. To truly understand, you had to be there. However, Hynes's focus on a certain authenticity of experience when contemplating War may strike one as too limiting in delineating the nuances and complexities of the literary and cultural responses to major traumatic events.

The First World War was a uniquely traumatic event in the European psyche as the reality of industrialised mass slaughter on a global scale rendered moot all previous notions of heroism, gallantry, resilience and a more extensive understanding of the civilisational ethos of the West. The experience of modern War in this context unravelled the underlying social fabric and the grand narratives considered to be Western civilisation's hallmarks. The brutal realities of the trenches posed a severe conceptual challenge and created an imperative to reconceive an understanding of the Western world. In his seminal text, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, Paul Fussell makes a case for a creative rejuvenation of irony as a literary trope and conceptual tool to grapple with all the Great War had revealed and undone about realities of the modern world (4). In this vein, Vincent Sherry argues that postwar modernism was primarily a set of conceptual and aesthetic strategies to break from 19th-century traditions, which were rendered hopelessly outmoded for the 20th century, and to confront the anxieties produced by the experience of four years of catastrophic global War (11).

In reading the Welsh poet David Jones's poem *In Parenthesis*, Samuel Hynes concurs with Fussell and Sherry's view of how the Great War exposed the fault line and fundamental gap between an idealised notion of the world as it existed that last 'golden summer of 1914' and everything the 20th century would inflict on Europe after. The naivete of the British Army's traditional officer caste charging their hapless cavalry into the face of German machine gun nests at the outset of the War perfectly captures the irony of how the Great War was about to dramatically change the presumptions of the world about not just the conduct of conflict, but the very fundamental questions of the ontology of the human psyche brought under the enormous strain of grasping the changes wrought by history (Hynes 34). In taking a longer-term view of the literary and cultural impact of the Great War, it becomes crucial to truly understand the gravity of the problem of comprehension that artists faced at the time to articulate their understanding of the world after the traumas of 1914-1918. Sherry includes a long list of illustrious writers, including D.H. Lawrence, W.B. Yeats, James Joyce and T.S. Eliot, among others, who did not directly experience combat but were forced to re-imagine their postwar literary production with intimate confrontations with the legacies of the War. The anxieties produced by the demands placed on the literary scene by the contemplation of what the War had taken away and what the effects of the War demanded of the writer to confront in this new world was one of the underlying preoccupations of Eliot's writing in the aftermath of 1918.

For him, the conceptual challenge posed by the horrors of 1914-1918 required not only a rejection of the high-flung rhetoric of nationalism but also a new artistic and expressive schema to transcend the 'prosaic' and 'political' witness narratives of the war poets such as Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon among others. Reviewing E.B. Osborn's book *The New Elizabethans* in the magazine he edited, *The Egoist*, Eliot described fascination with the youthful dead as a form of dangerous sentimentality. This missed the larger truths and

revelations of the Great War to reproduce the same heightened emotions that allowed Europe to 'sleepwalk' to catastrophe in 1914. He felt the need for a 'superhuman honesty' to rebuild the artistic oeuvre, possibly literary language, to capture the new realities and contradictions in the postwar world (Krockel 95). Eliot dismissed two kinds of rhetoric, the first being the sentimental narratives of Rupert Brooke and Edmond Rostand and the second being the works of writers like Herbert Read and Sassoon. Eliot reportedly enjoyed Read's 'Naked Warriors', documenting his *lived experiences* in the trenches, but lamented the lack of a 'musical quality' to the verse (Krockel 96). For Eliot, the need to craft a narrative strategy that is not merely shackled to contemporary history but engages in a more holistic conversation with his conception of Tradition in a bid to seek out a more fundamental yet elusive 'truth-value' to contextualise the particular historical moment at War's end was paramount (Krockel 98).

How far was Eliot, the artist, able to base his work on this prescription? I would argue that the transformation of the deeply personal into the dissociated outward narrative thrust of his symbolism achieves the act of contextualising history while revealing a seminal tension and anxiety between the personal and the impersonal and, by extension, between repression and expression. Critics such as James Olney and A.D. Moody have argued that the narrative structure of a poem like *The Waste Land* is built around nodes of deeply personal experiences which, through the overlay of symbolic signification, proceeds towards a more significant generalisation while Hugh Kenner holds that in doing so, *The Waste Land* presents the reader with a singularly neurotic dream structure that makes explicit the psychological defence mechanism haunted by trauma (qt in Krockel 102). For Eliot, the War at the outset presented a unique difficulty, first as a non-combatant (he has rejected enlistment to the US Navy on medical grounds), and secondly through the artistic repercussions of his inner conflicts stemming from his difficult personal life with his wife Vivien at the time. "For Eliot, the

postwar world is marked by a loss of heroism, economic depression and the threat of foreign invasions...it is difficult to decide where reality stops and anxiety begins” (Tearle 104).

For Eliot, not having served in a combat role was one possible source of anxiety. However, he makes clear that being on the Home Front in England did not inure him from the enormous mental strain of wartime. At a fundamental level, Eliot perceived that the anxieties produced by contemplating the existential ramifications of the Great War were no less for a soldier than a civilian (Krockel 89). In a letter to his mother from 1917, Eliot acknowledged the profound changes wrought in his psyche by the continued War. He writes, 'We are all immeasurably and irremediably altered over here by the last three years' (Eliot qtd. in Krockel 89).' In envisioning the nerve-wracking tension of life amidst the 'swarming' masses of wartime London, between the strain of overwork at Lloyd's Bank, his wife's affair with Bertrand Russell and the latter's imprisonment due to his pacifism, Eliot's mental life-world was caught in a quagmire of anxieties, disillusionments and repressions as he manoeuvred (often unsuccessfully) through this psychological minefield. In a letter to Eleanor Hinkley, he believes the War created a 'double unreality' that juxtaposed the trauma of the trenches with the seemingly intolerable anxieties and privations of wartime civilian life (qtd. in Rabaté 13).

Eliot was most certainly personally aware of and confronted with the visceral realities of trench warfare as he had published his brother-in-law, Maurice Haigh-Wood's, letter detailing his experiences of serving in France. Additionally, working in the Colonial and Foreign Department at Lloyd's Bank, specifically overseeing accounts dealing with German reparations, Eliot was uniquely aware of the financial and territorial repercussions of the Treaty of Versailles that some of the other soldier-poets may not have had the exposure to appreciate (Sherry 18) fully. This also placed him at a juncture to fully grasp the sheer skullduggery of the Allied treatment of Germany, making him that much more critical and disillusioned by the high-flung rhetoric of Woodrow Wilson. “History has many cunning

passages, contrived corridors/And issues,” Eliot wrote in his poem *Gerontion* (qtd. in Sherry 18), which can arguably be read as a prologue of sorts to *The Waste Land*. The 'contrived corridors' he refers to is the Polish Corridor carved out of the German Empire to give the newly independent Poland access to the Baltic Sea through the port of Danzig, thereby dissolving West Prussia in the aftermath of Versailles. His similar allusion to a 'wilderness of mirrors' in the same poem is a likely reference to the Hall of Mirrors at Versailles Palace, where the peace treaty was signed. His keen awareness of the new global political order and the historical moment in 1919 also seeps into *The Waste Land* as Countess Marie Louise Larisch vehemently affirms her origin as a German of Lithuania, now no longer a part of the erstwhile Russian Empire, in the opening stanza (Eliot 57).

Disillusionment with the world at large, specifically with the stark reality behind the rhetoric of the Allies' supposed 'defence of civilisation' indelibly marked Eliot's understanding of the postwar world order. Far from the reaffirmation of a Western civilisational ethos, the Great War left the hollowness and ugly reality of the imperialistic avarice at the heart of the Western world. Despite the narrator's distance from the battlefield in *Gerontion*, he too is indelibly shaped by the conflict, and in speaking of “Unnatural vices/Are fathered by our heroism,” the poem forces one to ponder how a good intention may be perverted to unnatural vice (Sherry 21). These topical references in Eliot's verse suggest a more complicated relationship between the poet and his historical context than one of merely symbolically channelling Tradition to create a dissociated aesthetic contribution to literature.

While *Gerontion* presages some of the fissures and tensions present in Eliot's narratives and his representation of the world, discussion of the Great War's bearing on *The Waste Land* can only be thought through after looking at Jean Verdinal. Introduced to Eliot during the latter's sojourn in Paris in 1911, his death in 1915 during the Gallipoli campaign left an enormously traumatic effect on T.S. Eliot. Through all the layers of intertextual

references and complex symbolism, the trauma of War and the spectre of Verdenal haunts the text of *The Waste Land*, and for Eliot, the epitome of personal loss in the War is embodied in Verdenal's death. It appears in the nature of a subtle echo that a reader may perceive as marking the underlying melancholy of the world Eliot envisions in his poem. It is, in some fundamental ways, one of the significant factors that make *The Waste Land*, in Helen Gardner's opinion, topical regardless of Eliot's intentions (qtd. in Tearle 108). Eliot's vision of the postwar world is drained of a particular vital spirit, seemingly affirming Henri Bergson's diagnosis of the modern condition, essentially marked by a series of absences. For Jean Michel Rabaté, this locates *The Waste Land* squarely into the category of being a quintessentially postwar modernist poem (9). The postwar world is thus essentially marked by a series of conspicuous absences. For instance, Eliot presents a pristine Thames of Edmund Spenser's day by paradoxically focusing on the detritus of man-made garbage (Eliot 59). Purity is presented by its conspicuous absence. So too, are the presumably young men who left behind the aftermath of sexual encounters of long-gone summer nights, which in turn brings into the reader's midst the scale of loss through the youth consumed by the conflict (Eliot 60).

The dissipated world of sprouting corpses, which forces the narrator to confront just how many 'death had undone' functions both as a reference to Dante's confrontation with the lost souls in Purgatory while simultaneously grappling with the staggering losses incurred during the War. Eliot's style consistently builds on his thesis in *Tradition and the Individual Talent* in terms of locating his poetic imagery within a longer tradition of Western literature as a means of making sense of the seeming senselessness imposed by the pyrrhic victory of the First World War for Britain, and in doing so successfully encodes the more traumatic memories of the same (Rainey 39). Krockel takes recourse to Shoshana Felman's conception of 'silenced memory' to analyze the underlying narrative of *The Waste Land*. Felman's concept argues that trauma has a complex and subtle mode of infusing the life of the survivor. Silence

then provides the underlying structure to read the presence of a loss in a significant way embodied by Verdenal in the text. Phlebas, the drowned Phoenician sailor goes through a metaphoric process of grief and loss as “He passed the stages of age and death/Entering the whirlpool (Eliot 66-67).” Here again, we see the juxtaposition of a language borne by the literature of the past in a bid to both shield and experience the intimacy of grief borne by the fractured reality of the present as the whirlpool of Scylla and Charybdis from *The Odyssey* intermingles with the echoes of Verdenal's death. Phlebas is probably the closest direct reference to Jean Verdenal that Eliot includes in the section titled 'Death by Water', a fitting evocation of the fact that Eliot had believed that his friend had died by drowning in the Dardanelles (Krockel 105). Similarly, Krockel reads the imagery of the hyacinth garden as a combination of the Ancient Greek myth of the tragedy of Hyacinthus and Apollo, wherein Apollo's beholding the tragic loss of his love by the actions of Zephyr overlay the floating spectre of a drowned Verdenal in the water (104).

There appear dual impulses within the narrative structure between creating its own uniquely imagined space while simultaneously obliquely attempting to channel the traumatic losses of the War. “Verdenal and the dead of war form the ordering silence of *The Waste Land*” (Krockel 104). Eliot was more forthcoming in his 1934 commentary on the poem, where he revealed that his reference to lilacs in the poem was intimately connected with his memories of his friend and their time in Paris, where Verdenal was fond of the flowers (Krockel 106). “Anxiety and conflicting legacies of traumatic memories serve as the narrative voice while structuring the transitions between the voices that form the poem as a whole (Krockel 105).” While these fragments are, in turn, infused into the discursive stream of literary history by being in continual conversation with the Western canon, roving between Dante and St. Augustine and others, the twin impulses of melancholy and mourning remain at the heart of the text. Krockel analyses this by bringing the Freudian conception of

'melancholia' and 'mourning' into his analytical frame, here the former indicates an internalization of the ego and consequent dissipation of libidinal energy and the latter is understood as an outward movement of the ego to digest the manifest reality of terrible loss. In a sense, Eliot may be perceived as grappling with the loss of Verdenal through a complex interplay of victimhood and survival (Krockel 94-96). Cathy Caruth, when discussing trauma memory, theorised the existence of a 'double telling' which marks the narratives of the traumatic event as an oscillation between the extremes of a 'crisis of death' in the trauma of confronting the catastrophic event properly and a 'crisis of life', confronting the implications of surviving the event and the guilt associated with recuperating from loss and processing trauma (qtd. in Krockel 107).

To this, Eliot adds his unique artistic form in the form of an aesthetic contemplation of the postwar world in a series of allusions to canonical texts while also fashioning an intimate psychological defence mechanism to create a space for himself in his poet persona to access and comprehend his personal wartime trauma. He creates layers of irony and allusions which encode these oscillating impulses. Trauma can thus be integrated into an outward narrative. In this context, we get the double images with which *The Waste Land* is replete, which both subvert and subsume the text in narrative moments by evocatively bringing past and present into a single frame. Thus, the barren land of the wounded primordial Fisher King is brought into sharp contrast with Lil's fecundity while also overlaying her sexual infidelity and self-destruction from a dubious abortion in the context of Albert's demobilization and the emotional wreckage that both of them have to confront at War's end (Eliot 62-63). Demobilization is consistently overlaid by the dissipation of the vital energy of the human psyche and the demoralization of the postwar world captured in the death of eros seen in the sexual encounter between the typist and the clerk or in the ironic subversion of rebirth within the image of the wolf 'resurrecting' a corpse by digging it up. Images and times bleed into one

another as the wolf signals the anti-landscape, simultaneous rot, and symbolic rebirth (or resurfacing) of No Man's Land while referencing John Webster's *White Devil*. In contrast, the image of the ancient Roman victory over Carthage at Mylae during the First Punic War serves to actualize the spectre of the catastrophic Gallipoli campaign.

In the final section of *The Waste Land*, titled *What the Thunder Said*, Eliot contemplates the crisis of Western civilization by turning towards the East, borrowing from the Upanishads to sketch a field of possibility for rejuvenating the world. Eliot quotes from Hermann Hesse's text considering Dostoevsky, titled *The Brothers Karamazov* and *the Downfall of Europe*, where he refers to the upheaval in Eastern Europe in the aftermath of the Bolshevik Revolution as a seemingly irrational eruption (Eliot 68-70). However, Rabaté argues that in referencing Dostoevsky, both Eliot and Hesse are confronting a fundamentally Nietzschean conundrum, in the immediate sense posed by the implications of the Russian Revolution, that being the need for a genuinely transcendental conceptualization of politics to combat the bourgeois complacency which allowed the 'sleepwalkers' of Europe to go to War in 1914 (15). Eliot's methodology of the outward narrative makes sense of wartime as being a part of the hysteria of a Dostoevsky novel but acknowledges that the paradoxical awakening of spirituality may indeed lie in the rupture of fixed values. To conclude the discussion of analyzing Eliot as a war poet (or possibly, more appropriately, a poet of War), I return to a critical formulation given by Samuel Hynes. He made a distinction between War as preconceived by the people yet to experience the realities of wartime versus the actuality of War, a defining characteristic to comprehend an experience as disruptive as War. For the American teenagers caught up in the draft and sent to Vietnam, that 'war in the head' (to use Hynes's phrase) was shaped by John Wayne movies.

In contrast, the English public-school boys of 1914 were raised on a steady diet of Walter Scott novels and tales of the Duke of Wellington during the Napoleonic Wars of the

previous century (Hynes 56). Tradition here crafted a lens through which the horrors of combat reality were filtered. In that sense, Eliot represents a unique modernist moment in his use of the language of allusion and Tradition to comprehend War in its aftermath, but therein indelibly, in turn, infusing the traumatic moment in turn with his own 'individual talent'.

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