

RESEARCH PAPERS

SPECIAL SECTION ON THE WASTE LAND

1

The Waste Land: Trauma and Healing

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Abstract

The Waste Land was first published a century ago at a time, like the present, of global trauma due to war, a pandemic, and a host of other perturbing problems. This essay examines key aspects of the innovative structure and style of the poem, such as its fragmented “jump-cut” technique, its use of allusion and direct, but unsourced, quotations and translations from world literature, its wide range of cultural, linguistic, geographical and temporal references, and its vivid but economical evocation of a variety and multiplicity of fleeting situations and characters. It considers the forceful objections to these features and the justifications for them offered by Eliot and by sympathetic critics. The essay goes to relate these features to The Waste Land’s sustained engagements with individual and collective physical, social, moral and spiritual traumata and to explore its tentative but often beautiful intimations of the possibilities of healing and hope.

Keywords: Trauma, war, transformation

T. S. Eliot’s great Modernist poem *The Waste Land* was first published 100 years ago, in 1922, at a time when the world was trying to recover from a global trauma, or rather two combined traumas of a kind with

which we are all too familiar today: war and pandemic. It was four years after the end of what is variously called the Great War or the First World War, which lasted from 1914 to 1918 and claimed the lives of over 9 million soldiers. The Great War began in Europe but spread to encompass Russia, the USA, and the countries of what was then the British Empire, including India, which supplied around 1.3 million soldiers, of whom more than 74,000 died in the conflict. Soon after the Great War came a global pandemic of influenza that lasted, in successive waves, from February 1918 to April 1920 and that killed more people than the First World War, perhaps between 50 and 100 million. But it was not only the huge death toll of these two events that was traumatic; there had been murderous wars and lethal pandemics in previous centuries. There was also a sense of epochal change, like the change in Europe from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance; a feeling that an old world that had endured for centuries, since the Renaissance in fact, was breaking up and that life – and art – would never be the same again. This was highly disturbing but not wholly negative; there was also the feeling that it liberated energies, freed people from constricting patterns of behaviour and constraining artistic practices. In the arts, this was evident in those changes that we have come to call Modernism – or today, we might prefer to say “Modernisms”, in the plural, to stress that there were many varieties of artistic modernism in many different parts of the world in this period. Modernist innovations appeared across the traditional arts, in poetry, fiction, painting, sculpture, music and dance, and the new medium of cinema, if not yet fully accepted as an art form, was an innovation in itself. For some of those familiar with traditional art forms, modernist innovations could be shocking but to others they could seem exciting.

The initial reactions to *The Waste Land* when it first appeared in 1922 illustrate these mixed responses. Some more traditional readers of poetry found it incomprehensible and rejected and condemned it, just as people rejected and condemned the Cubist paintings of Picasso or the music of Stravinsky that pulverised traditional symphonic form; others, particularly younger readers and artists, found it exciting. The reasons for these different reactions to *The Waste Land* lie in the form of the poem itself. There are two lines in *The Waste Land* that, in a sense, sum up its technique, though they

were not designed to do so. Line 22 of the poem uses the phrase “A heap of broken images” and line 430, which is the fourth line from the end of the poem, says “These fragments I have shored against my ruins”; and *The Waste Land* can indeed seem like a “heap of broken images” or a collection of “fragments”. Compared to earlier English examples of long poems, such as Lord Byron’s *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* (1812-18) or William Wordsworth’s final version of *The Prelude* (1850), *The Waste Land* is quite short – it consists of 433 lines in all, divided into five sections – but it covers an enormous amount of geographical, historical, psychological, social and cultural ground. It moves very quickly from one time and place to another, using a technique akin to what came to be called, in the new medium of cinema that was developing at this time, a “jump-cut”, an abrupt transition from one scene to another that asks the audience to make the connections between them. This technique of “jump-cutting” in *The Waste Land* also anticipates the way in which, today, in the digital era, people surf the internet, on their laptops or iPads or mobile phones, moving almost instantly from one site to another, googling terms that come to mind or clicking on hypertextual links.

Much of *The Waste Land* is set in 1920s London but the poem also takes in Margate on the southern coast of Kent in England, Munich in Germany, unnamed but strongly evoked desert and mountain landscapes, the river Ganges, which the poem calls “Ganga” (l. 395), and the Himalayas, which the poem calls “Himavant” (l. 397). The poem goes back in time to Elizabethan England and ancient Greece and India. It is written mainly in English but incorporates words, phrases and sentences, mostly untranslated, from German, French, Italian, Latin and Sanskrit; Eliot had studied Sanskrit at Harvard, though not in great depth. *The Waste Land* also includes quotations from a wide range of sources including the ancient anonymous Latin poem *Pervigilium Veneris*; the Christian Bible; the Upanishads; Dante’s *Inferno*; Shakespeare’s *Tempest*; poems by Edmund Spenser, Andrew Marvell, Paul Verlaine, Gérard de Nerval; and the libretto of Richard Wagner’s opera *Tristan und Isolde*. These quotations are not sources within inverted commas, which is the usual means, in an academic paper for example, by which one author indicates that he is citing the words of another author. This was a further element of *The Waste Land* that shocked some of its first readers; the poet seemed to be

cheating, plagiarising without acknowledgement. Eliot, however, was unashamed about this and indeed, in a pre-emptive way, he doubled down on it (as we might say today) in advance, declaring, in a 1920 essay on Philip Massinger: “Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal; bad poets deface what they take, and good poets make it into something better, or at least something different” (Eliot 1941, p. 206). Now Eliot, when he “stole” lines from Shakespeare or Spenser and put them into *The Waste Land*, would not have thought that he was making them into something better, but he would have seen that he was making them into something different by inserting them into a different context. As he goes on to say in that same essay, “The good poet welds his theft into a whole of feeling which is unique, utterly different from that from which it was torn” (p. 206), and he adds that the good poet’s sources will usually be the texts of “authors remote in time, or alien in language, or diverse in interest” (p. 206). This is what he does in *The Waste Land*.

As well as its direct quotations, the poem also alludes indirectly but widely to Eastern and Western literature, philosophy, mysticism and religion. Along with Sanskrit, Eliot had studied Indian religion and philosophy at Harvard, and it had fascinated him; in *After Strange Gods* (1934), for example, he said of Indian philosophers that “their subtleties make most of the great European philosophers look like schoolboys” (Eliot 1934, p. 40). *The Waste Land* evokes a wide range of situations and characters, sometimes in a few lines, sometimes in a more extended way, as if you were quickly dipping into, or surfing through, a succession of novels and short stories – or perhaps as if you were listening to a radio and turning the tuning control so that you heard snatches of dialogue and declarations from a wide variety of sources. It is through different voices that the different characters in *The Waste Land* emerge.

This raises a question, however, that concerned some early critics of *The Waste Land*. If the poem has these sudden jump-cuts, if it has this range of quotation and allusion, if it breaks at key points into foreign languages, usually without translations, which not every reader may know, if it offers you glimpses of a lot of characters and situations without following them through, if it is such a heap of broken images or fragments, is it not too complicated, too abstruse, too obscure, to speak directly to people? Eliot further complicated the

problem by adding a series of notes at the end of *The Waste Land* that gives the sources of, and apparent rationale for, certain lines; it is by no means a complete series of annotations and parts of it can seem misleading and sometimes satirical, as if Eliot were mocking an academic approach to poetry; nonetheless, Eliot's notes have become almost a part of the poem. People reading, studying or writing about *The Waste Land* in a sustained way will be aware of, and often refer to, those notes, as this paper will. It might be said, however, that if you need notes to appreciate and understand a poem, particularly if the author supplies them himself, this shows that the poem is not really successful; surely it should be able to stand alone?

We can answer this objection with another well-known quotation from Eliot – he was quite good at creating, in his insightful and influential literary criticism, a justification for his practice as a poet in *The Waste Land* and elsewhere in his poetry. In his 1929 essay on Dante, he declared: “genuine poetry can communicate before it is understood” (Eliot 1941, p. 238). In other words, we do not need fully to understand a poem for it to convey something significant to us, even if we cannot readily put it into words. If we think of encountering a poem in a language that we do not know or with which we are only partly familiar, especially if that poem is read aloud, we can often grasp something about it, because poetry works through sound, through rhythm as well as through the kind of meaning we can paraphrase, put into words. *The Waste Land* is an erudite, allusive poem; but it also communicates on the level of sound, of rhythm, of rhyme, of repetition, of variation; it goes back to the primal roots of poetry in ritual, in song, in chant, in dance; and in this sense its sound does support its overall meaning, because *The Waste Land* indicates that, in order to heal the global traumas of its time, and perhaps of our own, we need to reconnect with these ancient roots that once seemed to bind society together.

Some literary critics have tried to extract a coherent narrative from the fragments of *The Waste Land*, treating the poem as if it were a puzzle to be decoded that would eventually reveal an integrated pattern. Those attempts to find a coherent narrative can be very interesting but they are not finally convincing; critics have always come along with new interpretations. The sense that it is an example of one of the most ancient forms of narrative, the quest narrative, is

useful, but it is not a quest that has a coherent protagonist, a clear itinerary and a definite ending; it is not, for example, a twentieth-century version of the quest for the Holy Grail or of an ancient vegetation ceremony designed to ensure the renewal of the annual crops on which life depends, although looking at it in those ways can be fruitful to some extent. What we will do here is to look at *The Waste Land* in terms of two interrelated categories: trauma and healing; the poem assembles a range of examples of trauma and offers, not a cure or a complete recovery, but intimations, hints, “aethereal rumours” (l. 415) of healing possibilities.

Trauma

We can start with the poem’s very first line: “April is the cruellest month”. In other words, April is the most traumatic of months. This subverts a much more familiar formula in English poetry, in which April is not the cruellest but perhaps the kindest month because it is the beginning of spring, the season when life starts to reawaken after the long chill quietude of winter, the renewal of hope. If we go back to the very dawn of English poetry, the General Prologue to Geoffrey Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* opens with these lines, here in the original Chaucerian English, Middle English:

Whan that Aprille with his shoures soote,
The droghte of March hath perced to the roote,
And bathed every veyne in swich licour
Of which vertú engendred is the flour.

We might cast this into modern English along these lines:

When April with its showers so sweet
Has pierced the drought of March to the root
And bathed each vein in liquid of such power
That has the force to engender the flower.

At the very start of *The Waste Land*, however, April is the cruellest month. Why? The poem does not ignore the life-quickenning qualities of Spring, as we see if we follow it across the next three lines, which include the present participles – “breeding”, “mixing”, “stirring” (ll. 1-3), giving a sense of active, animate life in process, and mention “[I]lilacs” (l. 2), which are fragrant and visually beautiful, and “spring rain” (l. 4), which is refreshing and life-giving. How can this be cruel? Because it awakens “[m]emory and desire” (l.

3), because it makes you recall the past and long for things in the future, and, this is painful, an agonising rebirth. In contrast, winter provided security, keeping us warm, covering the world with “forgetful snow” (l. 6), maintaining a minimal level of existence. We find here what we might now think of as a classic response to trauma: you try to limit the damage, of whatever kind, by shutting down your system, your consciousness and memory, your psychological and emotional pain receptors, and it is painful to awaken from that. Nonetheless, the awakening, while one continues to live, is necessary, perhaps inevitable.

In *The Waste Land*, however, it is, at first, an awakening to nihilism, to despair: we shift into a barren, arid desert landscape of stone and remorseless sunlight. The only shade is beneath a “red rock” (l. 25), but this is a place for a frightening and nihilistic display: “I will show you fear in a handful of dust” (l. 30). The imagery of drought, physical and spiritual, is important in the poem, and is counterpoised by the contrasting imagery of water from natural sources, of rain, rivers, and the sea. In the section in Part I of the poem in which Madame Sosostris lays out the fortune-telling Tarot cards, she finds a card that shows “the drowned Phoenician Sailor” and she interprets this as a warning: “Fear death by water” (ll. 47, 55). But there is also a suggestion that “death by water”, in the sense of a ritual cleansing and purgation, may be necessary for rebirth, for escape from the Waste Land.

Then comes, at the end of Part I of the poem, the vision of post-World-War-One London as an “Unreal City” (l. 60) – a phrase that will recur. In lines that incorporate a translation and partial adaptation from Dante’s *Inferno*, the speaker of the poem at this point (whom we should not identify as Eliot himself) sees the crowd flowing over London Bridge as living in a kind of hell, consisting of dead people walking, animate spectres taken over by the automaticity of modern urban life. “I had not thought death had undone so many” (l. 63). In light of the Great War, these might be seen as dead soldiers returned to a phantasmal life, or as a hallucination of these, or as living people who are haunted by the memories of comrades and loved ones who died in the conflict.

The second part of *The Waste Land*, “A Game of Chess”, contrasts two other kinds of trauma; on the one hand, there is the fashionable upper-class lady in her boudoir, caught in a tense relationship, bored, discontented and highly anxious, rapping out her demands in staccato fashion, wanting her partner to stay, to speak to her, to know her thoughts. The scene then shifts to a group of working-class women in a London public house where one of them is telling her companions about her conversation with another woman called Lil (who does not seem to be present herself at that point); Albert is Lil’s husband. Here Eliot employs the vernacular and conveys quite well, if with more than a tinge of snobbery, a demotic London accent and register. From what the woman says, we thus infer that Lil is a woman with five children who nearly died giving birth to her last child, who seems to have got rid of one baby by abortifacient tablets that have aged her prematurely, and who is apparently at the mercy of her husband’s desire. So, the romantic and sexual relationships that might be expected to bring fulfilment and fruitfulness are traumatic; emotionally and sometimes physically painful and damaging.

It should be said that Eliot has been criticised for the attitudes implied in this section and elsewhere in the poem, charged with being too negative and for indulging a strong streak of misogyny – it is the women who are shown as neurotic and damaged and demanding, not the men – or at least when the men are shown as demanding it is accepted as an inevitable part of life. “Well, if Albert won’t leave you alone, there it is, I said” (l. 163). These criticisms are true to a considerable extent: *The Waste Land* does offer a largely negative view of human existence and women are sometimes portrayed as demanding and hysterical or sadistic and self-satisfied. But it is not the whole story. In regard to its portrayal of women, we might observe, from a twenty-first century perspective, that *The Waste Land* is particularly aware of sexual violence against and the sexual exploitation of women. A key motif in the poem is what it calls in Part 2 “[t]he change of Philomel, by the barbarous king / So rudely forced” (l. 99). This refers to an ancient Greek myth that exists, like most ancient myths, in several versions; but the one to which *The Waste Land* alludes tells us that King Tereus raped Philomel, his wife’s sister, and cut off her tongue to try to stop her from calling out

violation: this is still a very powerful image of the forcible silencing of sexually abused women. In the myth, Philomel is eventually changed into a bird, the nightingale, who sings, as *The Waste Land* puts it, “with inviolable voice” (l. 101). This is the paradigm for several other key examples of such violence in the poem. In regard to the more general charge of negativity, the poem is indeed quite negative in its vision of human existence and human relationships, but it does also offer hints and intimations of other, more fulfilling relationships and ways of living, even if these are no more than glimpses that seem difficult or almost impossible to realise in actuality.

Part 3 of *The Waste Land* is called “The Fire Sermon” – the Sermon preached by the Buddha against lust, envy, anger and other passions that consume human beings; but it is lust on which the poem focuses here, and on men’s sexual exploitation of women. Again it is set mainly in London and evokes the end of Autumn when the illicit couplings in the open air on the banks of the River Thames have ceased and what the poem calls “the loitering heirs of city directors” (l. 180), wealthy, idle young men who possess young women on the banks of the River Thames at night have departed leaving “no addresses” (l. 181) – so that if any of the young women became emotionally involved with the men and wanted to continue their relationship and/or became pregnant, they would have no way of contacting them and could not expect the fathers of their babies to offer any support. Moving from the upper-class heirs to the lower middle class, *The Waste Land* goes on to evoke the “young man carbuncular” (l. 231), a clerk who thrusts himself upon an unresisting but indifferent typist in her bedsitter: their uninspiring carnal exchange leaves her with the vague thought: “Well, now that’s done: and I’m glad it’s over” (l. 252). The poem then shifts back in time to allude to the dubious relationship of Queen Elizabeth I and her courtier the Earl of Leicester and returns to the present and to a young woman who is seduced, or raped, in a canoe floating down the Thames. Towards the end of “The Fire Sermon”, the poem, so to speak, flows down the river Thames and out of London to the Thames Estuary and to the seaside resort of Margate on the English South Coast in Kent and evokes a sense of fragmentation: “I can connect / Nothing with nothing” (ll. 301-02). As it concludes, this part of the poem mounts in intensity; having invoked the Buddha’s Fire

Sermon in its title, it now invokes a passage from the start of Book 3 of the *Confessions* of Saint Augustine (354-430 CE): “To Carthage then I came” (l. 307). The full passage reads, in the translation Eliot gives in his notes, “to Carthage then I came, where a cauldron of unholy loves sang all about mine ears” (p. 84, n. 307). The last lines of Part 3 become incandescent and almost incoherent: one line consists only of the present participle “burning”, repeated four times with no punctuation (l. 308), and a desperate, fragmented plea for rescue by divine agency follows this (ll. 309-10). The final line of “The Fire Sermon” presents just one isolated word, “burning” (l. 311), repeated for the fifth time; we have moved away at this point from any conventional sentence structure: there is a breakdown of language suggesting a psychological breakdown and the breakdown of a culture and a society.

The fourth part of *The Waste Land*, at only ten lines much shorter than the other sections, is called “Death by Water”, so that it metaphorically extinguishes the fervent, frantic fires, which burnt so intensely in the previous section, but also opens the possibility, to which we shall return, of renewal and regeneration. When we move, however, into the fifth and final section of the poem, “What the Thunder Said”, we return to the arid and barren desert landscape of the second section of Part 1 of the poem. The desire for water becomes desperate and desolate and is expressed in an unpunctuated and fragmentary passage that repeats the words “rock” and “water”. This unassuaged thirst then extends into a more general vision of fleeing peoples, calling to mind the refugees of the 1920s and the 2020s, and offers a roll-call of the successive destruction, represented by the image of “[f]alling towers” (l. 373) of civilisations, represented by their capital cities: “Jerusalem Athens Alexandria / Vienna London” (ll. 374-75). In this perspective, London, the “[u]nreal city” that the first and third sections of *The Waste Land* have evoked (ll. 60, 207) is the latest in a line of cities doomed to decay. Eliot is writing when the British Empire is still very powerful, dominating a large portion of the globe, but after World War One, the cracks are starting to show and the poem registers this.

Healing

Later in the fifth section of *The Waste Land*, however, there is, not a complete healing of these traumas, but tentative signs of this. Before exploring this, however, we can go back and trace some of the earlier intimations of healing, of ways out of trauma, in the poem. We can start with the lines in Part 1, "The Burial of the Dead," that evoke "the hyacinth girl" (ll. 35-41). This appears to be a dialogue that gives a fleeting glimpse into a romantic relationship. At first, it seems like a fragment of a lyric poem evoking the girl with her arms full of hyacinths and with wet hair. This appears, however, to produce almost a kind of dumbness and blindness in the other participant in the exchange, who, after his initial glimpse of her, can no longer speak or see. That might sound negative, but we could also see it as a prelude to a heightened state of consciousness: the speaker enters an interzone between life and death and knowledge breaks down. This breakdown of ordinary cognition and perception, however, results in what sounds rather like a mystical vision: the speaker found himself "[l]ooking into the heart of light, the silence" (l. 41). This is akin to the kind of vision described in mystical texts, the kind of state that those who, for example, practise long and intense meditation can attain, although in this case, it seems to have been produced by romantic love, which can of course sometimes generate exalted states akin to mystical ones. As we have already noted, "nothing", used here in the phrase "I knew nothing", is a recurrent keyword in *The Waste Land* and can have very negative connotations; but here it is implied that knowing nothing, reaching a cognitive limit, can also be the prelude to spiritual illumination.

Soon after this in Part 1, the poem introduces the idea of "death by water", when the fortune-teller, Madame Sosostris, warns that it to be feared (l. 55). But as we have already suggested, death by water may also stand for a process of ritual cleansing, transformation and regeneration. *The Waste Land* contains two key references (ll. 125, 191-92) to Shakespeare's play *The Tempest* (1611), which is set on a small, barely inhabited island in which some of the characters are believed to have been drowned in a shipwreck. In the play, however, all the characters who are apparently drowned turn out eventually to have survived, and everyone on the island undergoes some kind of

transformation. It is summed up in the lines that the spirit, Ariel, sings to Ferdinand, who believes his father has drowned:

Full fathom five thy father lies.
 Of his bones are coral made;
 Those are pearls that were his eyes;
 Nothing of him that doth fade
 But doth suffer a sea-change
 Into something rich and strange. (Act 1, Scene 2, lines 399-404)

Shakespeare's image of a "sea-change", a term that we still use in modern English to denote a fundamental, large-scale transformation, is very significant in *The Waste Land* and it encompasses both trauma and healing: trauma may open the way to transformation of a positive kind, a change into "something rich and strange". In the section in Part 2 of *The Waste Land* that we discussed earlier, in the exchange between the upper-class lady in her boudoir and her interlocutor, there is an insistent emphasis on that key word in *The Waste Land*, "nothing", repeated here no less than five times in four lines, with its nihilistic connotations of emptiness, the void; but, as we saw in the use of the word "nothing" in the dialogue with the hyacinth girl, experiencing nothingness may also be a prelude to illumination: and in this section, the fifth occurrence of the term "nothing" is immediately followed by "I remember / Those are pearls that were his eyes" – and "Those are pearls that were his eyes" is, as we saw above, a quotation from *The Tempest*, an example of a transformation "into something rich and strange". So there is a hint, even in the very fraught situation evoked in Part 2 of *The Waste Land*, of a possible positive transformation.

"What the Thunder said", however, the fifth and final part of *The Waste Land*, offers the most positive possibilities in the poem and it is significant here that Eliot goes East – that the poem cannot find, in the Western culture of its time, sufficient resources for hope and affirmation. Clearly there is a significant element of Orientalist and Imperialist appropriation in this movement away from the Occident, the Westerner turning to an idea of the East as the place from which to raid spiritual resources; but there is also an acknowledgement that the East may offer elements that have been forgotten, obscured, repressed in Western culture; and in that sense the movement of the poem is anti-imperialist, challenging the notion of Western

superiority. The penultimate section of the last part of *The Waste Land* moves to the East, to India, to Sanskrit. It opens with the invocation of “Ganga” (l. 395), that is, the sacred river Ganges – waiting for rain as the black clouds assembled and thicken above “Himavant” (l. 397), a holy mountain in the Himalaya range. There is a sense of tension, of expectancy in the jungle, which is imagined as a crouching beast, silent and still, waiting to pounce. Then the thunder speaks, and it speaks in Sanskrit, in three words that the poem then glosses, after each word, in English: “Datta”; “Dayadhvam”; “Damyata” (ll. 401, 410, 417).

Eliot’s notes translate the first, “Datta”, as “Give” (p. 85, n. 401) and illustrates this with the example of an impulsive action that can never be retracted. The idea is by casting off your inhibitions, giving yourself to forces larger than yourself is a hazardous enterprise that may nonetheless generate an intensity unavailable in a more cautious existence. The second term, “Dayadhvam” is translated in Eliot’s notes as “sympathise” (p. 85, n. 401), though some other translations render it as “be compassionate”; but Eliot links it with the idea of being imprisoned in oneself, in one’s own ego as in a prison. Eliot’s notes translate the third term, “Damyata”, as “control” (p. 85, n. 401), which, if we think of it as applied to other people, is a questionable term at this stage of the twenty-first century; for example, we speak of a “control freak” to indicate a person who seeks to dominate and coerce others. Alternative translations, however, render “Damyata” as an injunction to restrain *yourself* or control *yourself*, which would eliminate or reduce the element of controlling other people, but the example of “control” that *The Waste Land* gives does seem to involve controlling another person: it could refer to some botched erotic opportunity, perhaps with “the hyacinth girl” evoked in Part 1 of the poem (l. 36): the implication is: if I had been as skilful with her as I had been when steering a boat, she would have responded gladly; the phrase Eliot uses in this section, “controlling hands” (l. 422), could sound rather creepy today; but it could also indicate an aspiration to a consensual relationship in which one person willingly yields to another. We have an area of ambiguity here and, as with the many other ambiguities in *The Waste Land* it is more rewarding to acknowledge and explore it as such rather than to try to revolve it into one unitary unequivocal meaning.

The last eleven lines of *The Waste Land* are a kind of microcosm, a demonstration in miniature, of the technique of the poem as a whole: they mix together English, Italian, Latin, French and finally, once again, Sanskrit; they include the refrain of a nursery rhyme for children and lines or fragmentary quotations from Dante, from an anonymous pre-Christian Latin poem, from the nineteenth-century English poet Tennyson and from the nineteenth-century French poet Gérard de Nerval, and from the Upanishads. They start on a note of tentative hope and end with a temporary but deep peace. The first two lines imply that the speaker of the poem has crossed the Waste Land – the “arid plain” is *behind* him (l. 424) – and that he has reached the shore of a sea that may offer the possibility – no more than that – of what Shakespeare’s *Tempest* calls “a sea-change / Into something rich and strange” (Act 1, Scene 2, ll. 403-04) of positive transformation; in the meantime it is possible to take some provisional action, symbolised by “fishing” – searching for psychological and spiritual nourishment – and “sett[ing one’s] lands in order” (l. 425) – taking stock of one’s present and future resources. The prospect of apocalyptic collapse is still present, signalled in the line from the nursery rhyme, “London Bridge is falling down falling down falling down” (l. 426), which refers to a literal historical reality of the eighteenth century. London Bridge, which had been the capital’s only bridge over the river Thames until 1750, was indeed “falling down”, top-heavy with houses and shops and with its structure crumbling. Here *The Waste Land* takes an example of imminent collapse from the past and applies it to early twentieth-century London, the latest in the succession of “falling towers” (l. 373), of great cities cracking up and collapsing and also, we have suggested, the harbinger of the break-up, across the twentieth century, of the British Empire. But the nursery rhyme from which Eliot quotes does go on to say that the bridge can be built up again, more solidly, with wood and clay, bricks and mortar, iron and steel, silver and gold – although each of these is also ultimately perishable. Nonetheless, the nursery rhyme does adumbrate the possibility that a structure that has collapsed may be built up again more strongly than before. The following line in the last section of the *Waste Land* is from Dante’s *Inferno*, “Poi s’ascose nel foco che gli affina” (l. 427) and means “Then he dived back into the fire that refines”, so we have, as in

earlier sections of the poem, the idea that fire, like water, may be destructive but can also ultimately be purging, purifying and renewing.

In his original note to the last three words of *The Waste Land*, “Shantih shantih shantih”, Eliot said: “Repeated as here, a formal ending to an Upanishad. ‘The Peace which passeth understanding’ is a feeble translation of the content of this word” (Eliot 1971, p. 149, n. 433). Thus in 1922 he is saying that Western Christianity can offer nothing equal to the profound meaning of “Shantih”. Later in his career, however, after he had become an Anglo-Catholic Christian, he altered the last part of the note so that it read: “The Peace which passeth understanding is our equivalent to this word” (Eliot 1974, p. 86, n. 433) – that is, he later juxtaposes “Shantih” and “The Peace which passeth understanding” as equals that mean pretty much the same thing and carry the same force. But that was not his original view. For Eliot in 1922, Christianity could no longer supply the answer to the problems *The Waste Land* poses. This does not mean that it could not be the answer for some of his readers and critics; but it is the readers and critics who supply it, not the poem. *The Waste Land* does not finally suggest, then or now, that there is some big, complete positive answer: but neither is it wholly pessimistic. It painfully explores trauma but it does offer tentative and often beautiful hopes of healing.

Abbreviations in references: l. = line; n. = note; p. = page.

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