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GABRIELLE MCINTIRE

Introduction

Many have called T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* the greatest poem in English of the twentieth century. In its particular historical moment of 1922 the poem articulated and helped to define both an epistemology and an ontology – a new way of thinking and being during an era that W. H. Auden in 1947 would retrospectively call "The age of anxiety."[1] The poem dramatically shattered old patterns of form and style, proposed a new paradigm for poetry and poetic thought, demanded recognition from all literary quarters, and changed the ways in which it was possible to approach, read, and write poetry. *The Waste Land* also insisted unequivocally on the fractured nature of modern subjectivities by exerting pains to expose the complex and sometimes disordered nature of the human mind. If Stéphane Mallarmé had declared a crisis in verse during his lecture tour in England in 1895 – "They have done violence to verse"[2] – then Eliot was one of his most important modernist inheritors, mingling free verse with old formal patterns to generate a poetic rupture with past practices that nevertheless remained profoundly self-conscious about its debts to literary tradition.

The Waste Land became monumental nearly as soon as it was published, ensconcing T. S. Eliot as arguably *the* major poet of his generation. The piece still stands as a key culmination point within British and Anglo-American literature, published in that dramatic Rubicon year of modernism in which James Joyce gave the world *Ulysses*, Virginia Woolf published her first experimental novel, *Jacob's Room*, and Marcel Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu* was translated into English as *In Search of Lost Time*. Among other epochal shifts, Benito Mussolini, leader of the National Fascist Party, became prime minister of Italy; and, closer to Eliot's adopted home, the Irish Free State was formed. The immediate postwar period of 1918–22 had seen astonishing changes to the face of Europe, its allies, and colonies – politically, culturally, sociologically, and psychologically – and by the time of *The Waste Land*'s composition in 1921, the horrors of the First World War were still barely receding. As Michael North points out, "1922 was for

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England the first real postwar year," when, as the *Daily Mail* noted at the time, "'signs of, and restrictions connected with, the Great War were finally abolished.'"[3] If many, like Paul Fussell, in his influential *The Great War and Modern Memory*, have convincingly argued that the First World War helped to inaugurate the "modern" age,[4] we might consider *The Waste Land* as *the* exemplary ur-modernist poem: completely original and unforgettable, the poem reflects some of the deepest concerns of its era while also asking its readers to see the world from radically new, "modern" perspectives. It has cast a long shadow of influence over subsequent generations of writers and thinkers, and even today Eliot continues to be one of the most-cited poets in popular media, appearing with striking frequency in newspapers, blogs, magazines, and online discussions. Despite the difficulty and sometimes seeming impenetrability of his work, Eliot continues to compel and enthrall an extensive body of readers around the world.

What is *The Waste Land* about? The essays assembled here suggest that the only brief answer to this question is *many things*. Certainly it concerns the year, 1922, in its march through temporality and history, and the poem is replete with reflections and fragments from Eliot's time and milieu, including snippets from the popular cultures, technologies, and arts of the period that were very alive to Eliot – from emerging musical genres like jazz, to the rise of film, popular interests in horoscopes and tarot cards, the nascent technologies of the gramophone, and newly motorized cars and taxis. And, in a poem entitled *The Waste Land*, Eliot offers us a sustained meditation on the very meaning of locale, spatiality, and topography, juxtaposing the recently bombed London cityscape with mythic desertscapes, a bleak seascape, and named sites throughout Europe, Canada, South Asia, and North Africa. Place in the poem becomes a subject in and of itself, existing as both a theme and a ground. Eliot also shows an ecological awareness about the polluting effects of modern, industrialized society on the natural environment, pointing to such indicators of degradation as "the brown fog of a winter noon" (208), and the river that "sweats/ Oil and tar" (266–7), while elegiacally longing for the pure simplicities of a clean and soothing "Sweet Thames" (176 and ff.).[5] Yet even while the poem recognizes crisis and devastation as (almost) normalized states of being in the modern world as its speakers struggle to discover strategies for survival – "these fragments I have shored against my ruins" (430) – *The Waste Land* never gives up striving for transcendent meaning that would help resolve the catastrophes of the present.

The Waste Land also relentlessly experiments with form, style, and poetics. Through self-conscious intertextual borrowing, mimicry, and pastiche, Eliot engages with a host of literary, religious, artistic, and mythical antecedents ranging from Ovid and Homer to the Bible, Dante, Chaucer,

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Shakespeare, Donne, and Wagner, among others. His textual juxtapositions of past and current literary history sought to revise and remake as part of the new avant-garde, following his own maxim to the letter from a recent essay of 1920 that "Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal."[6] Importing lines, tropes, and motifs from other people's work into the fold of *The Waste Land* as if they were his own, he implicitly and metacritically commented on the hermeneutics of such dialogic exchanges. *The Waste Land* thus tells us about the processes of writing itself, including what it means to compose and revise literature with the collaborative help of both his wife, Vivien Eliot, and his friend and mentor, the poet Ezra Pound. The poem was not completed in isolation, and each of Eliot's interlocutors left a significant stamp on the final poem. In terms of form and aesthetics, Eliot made it so "new" in *The Waste Land* that there could be no looking back. There could be no imitations of the singularity he struck to the page with the advice of Pound especially, to whom he dedicates the poem with the enigmatic epigraph: "*il miglior fabbro*" – the better maker – as if Pound were the master and Eliot the apprentice.

This *Companion* also wants to make the point that contrary to Eliot's fascinating claims in his 1919 essay, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," where he insists on the poet's radical "impersonality,"[7] *The Waste Land* is surprisingly personal, too. It concerns, for instance, Eliot's attempts to come to terms with his ongoing and sometimes disabling personal, familial, medical, and marital crises. At the same time, the poem explores and critiques the loosening up of early twentieth-century gender roles and sexual identities, particularly by making the transgendered figure of Tiresias, Ovid's blind seer who haunts the work, "the most important personage in the poem." [8] Tiresias presides over the poem's central scene of sexual violation between "The typist home at teatime" and "the young man carbuncular" (222; 231), and, in witnessing this traumatic encounter, he suffers too. Yet this is only one of several tableaux about failures of intimacy and the dysfunctional and even violent character of contemporary de-romanticized sexual relations that Eliot presents. Indeed, these renditions of the personal punctuate the poem in ways that indicate Eliot's own interests in emerging perspectives on early twentieth-century psychology and Freudian and post-Freudian psychoanalysis – as if he is seeking both to grasp and deploy new mappings of the psyche.

The Waste Land continues to move us and change our worlds. It remains one of those rarest species of literature that feels almost *world-generating*, as the philosopher Martin Heidegger might propose. One of Eliot's early eminent interpreters, William Empson, writes in 1958 – more than thirty-five years after the poem's publication – "I do not know for certain how much

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of my own mind [Eliot] invented, let alone how much of it is a reaction against him or indeed a consequence of misreading him. He has a very penetrating influence, not unlike an east wind."[9] This is a poem that invites itself into the very fabric of our being. It addresses so much of what is difficult and important about human experience, while presenting what is tragic in a light that dignifies it and gestures toward redemption. For tragedy in the poem is simultaneously the pathos of the ordinariness of modern everyday life – infused as it is with a proto-existentialist sense of emptiness and banality – and the pathos expressed in the great Eastern and Western myths and religions that Eliot weaves into his poem. Ovid's reflections in the *Metamorphoses*, the mysteries of Christ on the journey to Emmaus, and the thunder of the Hindu *Upanishads* are as present to the poem as the "crowd" that "flowed over London Bridge" (62) or the noisy clamor of modern city life with "The sound of horns and motors" (197) in the street.

The Waste Land, then, frames the tensions between different temporalities – and between the ordinary and the transcendent – as participating in dynamic exchanges where each is ever-present. In a poem that is haunted by countless spectral figures ("so many/ I had not thought death had undone so many," 62–3), the shifting narrative voice asks in part V, "Who is the third who walks always beside you?" (359), as if insisting that there is "always" a case for a missing third, "always" an Other realm that shadows the everyday. Yet, the transcendence that the poem leans toward remains elusive: just as Madame Sosostris, the "famous clairvoyante" (43) does not "find/ The Hanged Man" (54–5), neither does the poem find God. Still, Eliot asks us to consider our own brokenness and personal ruins as inviting the wisdom of three great world religions – Hinduism, Buddhism, and Christianity – even as he challenges us to experience this through a radical experiment in poetic form. The tentative redemption the poem presents is never didactic, and *The Waste Land* ends by uttering a prayer for peace ("Shantih shantih shantih," 433): a repetitive chant with no final punctuation, as if these words might carry us to a redemptive elsewhere beyond the page and beyond the poem's end.

The essays collected here reflect an exciting range of styles, approaches, generations, and modes of reading that attest to the vibrancy of ongoing critique and debates about the complexities and inspirations of *The Waste Land*. The collage of perspectives brings to bear some of the most current lenses of critical thinking about *The Waste Land* while always keeping the poem at the forefront, and each essay complements the others by conveying an underlying sense of the poem's continued originality and urgent ways of speaking to us. The book is divided into three parts, with thirteen independent essays, although turns to favorite passages recur: the strained

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dialogue where communication fails between what seems to be a husband and wife in part II, "A Game of Chess," and the colloquial chitter-chatter about abortion, modern medication, and war veterancy in the pub scene catch the imagination of several critics here, as do the figures of Tiresias and his modern-day counterpart, Madame Sosostris. Biographical and literary historical criticism also undergird many of the chapters.

No new *Cambridge Companion* to T. S. Eliot or to any of his works has been published since A. David Moody's wonderful 1994 *Cambridge Companion to T. S. Eliot*. Much has, of course, changed in these more than two decades of criticism. Perhaps most importantly Eliot is being understood through broader and more diverse lenses than ever, including perspectives from gender, queer, ecocritical, new historical, trauma, psychoanalytic, religious, and cultural studies. Readers have also had access, for the past several years, to Eliot's published letters beyond the talismanic end date of 1922, which had been the finite horizon of most of our glimpses into his private life ever since Eliot's widow, Valerie Eliot, published *The Letters of T. S. Eliot: Volume One, 1898–1922* in 1988. We waited a long time, but beginning in 2009, under the editorship of Valerie Eliot and Hugh Haughton, five new volumes of Eliot's letters have been published, covering the period from 1922–1931. More are on the way. This opening up of the Eliot archive has allowed the contributors here to write with greater knowledge about who the Eliot of 1921 – composing *The Waste Land* – would become as a man and poet through the 1920s. Further, the first two volumes of *The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot: The Critical Edition – The Apprentice Years (1905–1918)*, and *The Perfect Critic (1919–1926)* – have recently gone live online, with more soon to come. The *Complete Prose* volumes will include essays that have hitherto been uncollected, inaccessible, or available only to those able to undertake archival research. We are thus on the cusp of yet more revelations about T. S. Eliot and his oeuvre, even as we find ourselves at the centenary of Eliot's publishing career – "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," "Preludes," "Rhapsody on a Windy Night," and "Portrait of a Lady" all appeared in 1915. We are still yet beginning again, and always learning to read *The Waste Land* afresh, "renewed, transfigured, in another pattern" (*Little Gidding*, 166).

NOTES

1 W. H. Auden, *The Age of Anxiety: A Baroque Eclogue* (1947; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).

2 Stéphane Mallarmé, "Crise de vers," "Variations sur un sujet," *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. Henri Mondor and G. Jean-Aubry (Paris: Gallimard, 1945), 643–4.

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3 Michael North, *Reading 1922: A Return to the Scene of the Modern* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 5. G. A. Leask, "Changing London," in David Williamson, ed., *The Daily Mail Year Book for 1923* (London: Associated Newspapers Ltd., 1923), 77, qtd. in North, 5.
4 This is a thesis that runs through the book. See Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975).
5 T. S. Eliot, *The Complete Poems and Plays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1969). Subsequent references to *The Waste Land* and *Little Gidding* will be cited parenthetically by line number.
6 Eliot, "Philip Massinger," *The Sacred Wood* (1920; London: Methuen, 1969), 125.
7 Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," *Selected Essays* (1932; London: Faber and Faber, 1999), 22.
8 Eliot, note to line 218 of *The Waste Land*.
9 William Empson, "The Style of the Master," in *T. S. Eliot: A Symposium*, ed. Tambimuttu and Richard March (1948; London: Frank Cass and Co., 1965), 35.

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PART I

Historical, Cultural, and Personal Contexts

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JEAN-MICHEL RABATÉ

"The World Has Seen Strange Revolutions Since I Died"[1]: *The Waste Land* and the Great War

The devastation brought by the First World War to Europe had incalculable consequences that still shape our world; there were also calculable costs, whether financial or moral. T. S. Eliot took on the task to reckon with these, first as a clerk working on German debts and reparations at Lloyds Bank in London, then as a poet who tried to rethink the foundations of the world order emerging after 1918. A war first imagined as a Napoleonic campaign, with swift defeats and victories, had turned into a general stalemate, a mechanized mass slaughter in a bitter tussle of attrition in which most industrialized nations were forced to participate. Never a "war to end all wars," World War I would soon herald worse times to come, partly because the map of the world changed radically after the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the Ottoman Empire. Europeans had discovered that, indeed, "civilizations were mortal," as Paul Valéry wrote in 1919, when he analyzed the current "crisis of the spirit."[2] The European "spirit" was a Hegelian *Geist* that was turning into ghosts, into too many ghosts, whereas the geography of Europe revealed itself to be just the tip of a "peninsula," an excrescence from a continent redefined by the new awakenings of Russia and Asia. A similar ontological crisis was condensed in Eliot's lines from *The Waste Land*:

> Falling towers
> Jerusalem Athens Alexandria
> Vienna London
> Unreal[3]

I. Places

Like Valéry, Eliot included Smyrna (in Turkey) and Alexandria (in Egypt) in his map of Europe, while he, too, perceived that Europe had "exhausted its modernism."[4] In its symbolic geography, *The Waste Land* is thus more a modernist postwar poem than a modernist war poem. This holds true of its themes and its gestation, much as *Ulysses* and *In Search of Lost Time*

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would not be the same texts they are today without the delays in publication brought about by the war. The difference between the authors' processes is that Joyce and Proust used the extra time they gained to expand and revise their novels. Eliot, collecting and rearranging previous texts, writing in the aftermath, attempted to make sense of the collective and personal traumas by condensing and refining (with the help of Ezra Pound) a sprawling mass of manuscripts and typescripts until he reached just 433 lines. Its incantatory and exhortatory affirmation of "Peace" – "Shantih" in Sanskrit – from the *Upanishads* at the end of the poem looks to a dim European future with a mystical assertion of hope while the poem attempts to give a diagnosis of the causes of the Great War.

If Joyce analyzed a prewar society in Dublin, Eliot looked to the future, as did Franz Kafka. In the end, from two different sides in the conflict, Eliot and Kafka had made similar career choices, both positing a strong link between the raging military conflict and "war" in the sentimental and sexual domains. This link can be exemplified for Eliot by a short story of which he was fond. In December 1917, when the war was raging, *The Egoist*, of which Eliot had become assistant editor, published "War," a story by his friend Mary Hutchinson.[5] Mary had passed it first to Vivien, who then made sure her husband would get it published.[6] Readers must have expected a war story, whereas it mostly deals with love. It begins with a conversation between Jane, a rich, married, and fashionable young lady of twenty-five, and her new would-be lover, Mr. Giniver, a writer, traveler, and self-declared cynic. Their talk is interrupted by drums and a brass band. They see soldiers at drill, marching through a London street. A little later, Jane confides to her friend Sabine that she feels drawn to Giniver. Sabine asserts skeptically that Jane will be a mere diversion for him. Jane grows "hysterical" (171) and convinces herself that she is in love. At night, Giniver reappears for a night visit that proves decisive. He has brought a manuscript but decides not to read it to her. They are both nervous, irritable, embarrassed; their conversation trails off and they keep nagging each other. Finally, silence reigns. Giniver, sensing the chill, cannot seize her hand; Jane makes the break-up final, saying: "I don't suppose we shall meet again for some time" (172). Giniver takes leave abruptly and Jane remains alone, inert. She falls asleep, to be woken up by a bugle sounding the reveille in the nearby barracks. The reminder of a war outside brings relief. The text ends on these words: "Afterwards she slept as though she knew the earth to be a spherical and comfortable place" (172). This is one of the meanings of "war," a meaning to which Eliot was attuned, a delicate blend of the war of sexes, with its tangled strategies of seduction, hysteria, and

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