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## “THE WASTE LAND” AS A POETIC ATTEMPT TO UNIFY COMPETING REALITIES

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**Abstract:** The article attempts to establish the relation between the possibly most contested topic of the modern art – that of the insecurity about the way reality appears to us – and its artistic and philosophical explication in the poetry and critical work of T. S. Eliot. Although the motive of the questionable reality that surrounds our mundane life is present in most of his poetry, *The Waste Land* stands as a pivotal attempt to tackle the confusing sense of the possibility of the unreality of the world that has been bothering modern men ever since. In that respect, *The Waste Land* – by dramatizing the anxiety of the whole civilization – effectively offers a transcendental insight into the way the reader should organize his experience of the world. What has started as a result of his nervous breakdown turned out to become *the most valuable poem of the age*. Reflecting on the influential philosophy of F. H. Bradley, the latest discoveries of the quantum physics and the revolution of the artistic expression before the WWI, the poem brilliantly exposes the dilemmas of the age and provides precious insights into the reality of our association with the world. The poetic work in this respect acts as a tool that amalgamates competing realities in a form of an imposed multi-perspective unity. In the end, in conjunction with the experience of the myth, art allows us to see what others cannot see: a position of clarity, a fourth dimensional look as Bradley puts it. Still the question remains: is the price to know the substance of the world equals the risk of losing your substance as a subject who know?

**Keywords:** T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*, myth, F. H. Bradley, Cubism

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Unlike his fellow American Ezra Pound, Eliot did not have a conflict with the system. Quite the contrary, he has very charming personality and beautiful looks that made him a darling in the bohemian circles of London. Although being born in St. Louis, Eliot always conceived himself to be British, largely due to his British heritage on his mother's side. When he graduated from University of Oxford he settled down in London and did everything he could to be and to look more British than the British. The subsequent marriage to Vivienne Height-Wood, a daughter from a high-class family from Hampstead, seemed to have cemented his status among the London elite. Pushed by his father-in-law, a member of the *Royal Academy of Arts*, Eliot got a well paid job at Lloyds Bank. Everything seemed perfect. It turned out that Vivienne was suffering from mental illness, partly due to her bad health since childhood. Eliot spend 18 years supporting her. In between, being constantly neglected as a woman by Eliot, it is believed that she had an affair with their close friend, the philosopher Bertrand Russell. Though Vivienne became a heavy burden for Eliot, she persisted in the idea that Tom should leave the boring banking job and be a poet. Eliot was thus leading what we may call “a double life”: while he was performing the tedious banking assignments during the day, during nights he was writing what many considered to be the best poetry of the century. The strain of having to live two lives resulted in his nervous breakdown at the beginning of 1920s. Still, as a result of the breakdown, Eliot created *The Waste Land*. Eliot sister-in-law would later comment, “Vivienne ruined Tom as a man, but she made him as a poet.”

### 2. WHAT IS *THE WASTE LAND* REALLY ABOUT?

As a reaction to his nervous disorder, Eliot produced a poem that struggled to contain multiple fragments that simultaneously affected his mind. The deleted memory releases one from the weight of time but Eliot's comment, “After such knowledge, what forgiveness” clearly denotes his inability to surpass the rift between knowing, thinking and acting. Like somnambulists, characters in *The Waste Land*, remember the mythological remnants deep inside their psyche – “those are pearls that were his eyes” – but fail to act upon it. Strangely enough, these moments of hesitation and weakness caught the sensibility of the age, making *The Waste Land* an instant phenomenon. In a complete state of confusion and adding to the mystery, Eliot added some footnotes to help the readers discover the logic of the poem. That produced even more chaos. The last surgery was of course made by Dr. Pound who dissected the poem to almost a half of the original length. Up to this day, a centenary after the publishing, a whole army of commentators still try to unravel the meaning of the poem. For Eliot, *The Waste Land* became a starting point on his journey towards the outer reaches of his consciousness. Mayer refers to this transformation,

*Eliot's philosophical quest now coincides with his psychic quest; the urge to significance compels him to explore the full potential of consciousness.*

It comes as no surprise then that the central mythological character in *The Waste Land* is the figure of the prophet Tiresias. As Eliot explains in his footnotes, “what Tiresias sees, in fact, is the substance of the poem.”. There are certain reasons for his placement in the poem: Tiresias acquired his prophetic power after an incident when he saw the copulation of two snakes. As a punishment from gods, he had to spend seven years as a man and seven years as a woman. Later – knowing that Tiresias had experience of both sexes – Hera and Zeus asked him to be the judge as of who experience more pleasure in sex – men or women. When Tiresias voted in favor of women, Hera, who lost the bet, turned him blind. Zeus in return, gave him a prophetic power including the ability to communicate with the dead. To Eliot, Tiresias was the ideal voice of the prophet who could communicate the ghosts (in Eliot’s case, the voices of the poets from past) and most importantly, who knows the secret of the sexuality. That way, by foreseeing the secrets and the outcome of the sexual encounters from the detached position, well above ordinary life, Tiresias gave universal meaning to Eliot’s personal nightmares regarding feminine sexuality. In a famous scene from Part III, Tiresias predicted the sexual act between the typist and the small time carbuncular businessman. He knew that the very act would be empty and insignificant, but as a true prophet he did not act to prevent it. His “seeing” turns into an “insight”, and that is what Eliot needed to transform his poem from the psychological investigation of his private voices into a universal, impersonal voice of prophecy about the diseased civilization. And now, the shy and insecure Tom, could finally use his restraint as a sign, not of weakness but of renewed prophetic power.

### 3. THE OVERDRIVE OF THE REALITY IN *THE WASTE LAND*

*Eliot, like Wagner, regarded modernity as the nightmare of history from which one could awaken only by baptism in the waters of myth.*

Jed Rasula, *What the Thunder Said*

If we go deeper into the reasons behind the use of mythological narrative in *The Waste Land*, we have to investigate Eliot’s academic background. Unlike Pound, Eliot studied philosophy in some of the most prestigious universities in the world, so he was completely aware of the philosophical issues that dominated the intellectual scene of Europe at the time. The main issue of his research was the insight into the nature of reality, or how things appear to our perception. The conclusion of his doctoral thesis was quite unsettling: ordinary humans are unable to perceive the true reality of the world, therefore, whatever they perceive is not real. Still, they are unable to even confirm that the world they inhabit is not real as the unreality of the world could only be witnessed by the higher spiritual authority. There enters Tiresias, the prophet. In their book, *Reading The Waste Land*, Jewel and Bentley pay special attention on the importance of the prophet Tiresias as the central focal point in *The Waste Land*. In their view, Tiresias stands for the intersection of two conflicting realities, a criss-crossing of “the time with the timeless”, as Eliot would note in his later poetry. The two perspectives (the one that sees nothing but acts, and the one that sees everything but does not act, or in short, the human and the mythological perception) converge each other asking for the reader to be a prophet himself, to perceive the poem by seeing the big picture. Jewel and Bentley argue,

*Tiresias defines a binary perspective that serves as the point of view of the poem. He is a figure from the ideal order of myth; yet he is spying on the sordidly historical typist and clerk. By saying that Tiresias is spying on all the characters, Eliot is suggesting that the reader make an effort to perceive them in an equivalent way, from both internal and external perspectives. From a position inside the modern world, the characters are distinct and separate, but from the Tiresias or mythic position, the characters “melt” into each other.*

The final observation which announces the melting of characters into each other is crucial in understanding the position of the mythical seer in *The Waste Land*. To grasp the meaning of the “mythic position” that Tiresias holds in the poem, it is instructive to delve first on the ordinary human perception of the reality. Reflecting on the inability of humans to perceive the ultimate reality, Eliot consulted the teachings of the famous British philosopher, F. H. Bradley. In his most famous book, *Appearance and Reality*, Bradley attacks the idea of a coherent self that is one with the reality of the world. His conclusion, the one that will strongly resonate in Eliot’s poetry, is that the identity of the self is unreal, nothing more than an apparition, a ghost-like appearance with no substance,

*...while it will be certain that the self and its identity somehow belong to reality, it will be equally certain that his fact has somehow been essentially misapprehended. And our conclusion must be that, since, as such, it contradicts itself, this fact must, as such, be unreal. The self also will in the end be no more than appearance.*

In the experience of the self-consciousness, Bradley notes, the self has itself as its object. Epistemologically and ontologically, this is an impossible position as the subject cannot totally perceive (reflect) itself as an object. In

other words, if the subject projects itself (ontologically speaking, appears to itself) totally in the object, as in the experience of the self-reflection, the self of the subject is completely vacated, so there is no subject left that can perceive itself (in epistemological terms, have a knowledge of itself) in the object. Bradley concludes,

*...the actual subject never feels that it is all out there in its object, that there is nothing more left within, and that the difference has disappeared. And of this we can surely convince ourselves by observation.*

*The subject in the end must be felt, and it can never (as it is) be perceived.*

This experience, that Bradley calls “relational”, makes impossible for the subject to perceive the world in its totality. So, either you act as a substantial subject having no knowledge of the objective world around you, or you are one with the world but have no substance as a subject. Jewel and Bentley provide a very succulent account of the way Bradley’s perspectivism – in relation to the restrictive human perception of the reality – influenced Eliot’s poetry in general, but especially in *The Waste Land*. After all, Eliot’s graduate thesis, while studying philosophy at Harvard, was dedicated to Bradley’s philosophy. Jewel and Bentley remarked on this connection,

*The usual human situation, as we have pointed out, is one Bradley calls relational experience. The knower is limited to a single perspective, and although the perspective changes from moment to moment, it is single in any given moment. He perceives the world not as a whole but as a constantly shifting array of patterns, with images continuously appearing and dissolving, forming and re-forming in the air. The perspective changes even if the knower stays in the same spot, for he is in time, and the world around him is in time. Because all of the perspectives in an endless series of perspectives are within a system, the series is bound to generate a feeling of disorder. As Eliot puts it in his dissertation, the knower does not have the luxury of contemplating one consistent world; he has, rather, “the painful task of unifying (to a greater or less extent) jarring and incompatible ones, and passing, when possible, from two or more discordant viewpoints to a higher which shall somehow include and transmute them.*

The unification of the incompatible worlds became an obsession to all the modernist artists. Cubism figuratively depicted the multi-perspective view of the object. Interpreted as such, *The Waste Land* was constructed as one great cubist poem that, by using the mythical point of view (the one that sees everything from the position of eternity), dislocates the temporal fixation of the events and the characters portrayed in the poem, and liquefies them on the spatial multi-level platform where they got dispersed into each other. This is in line with Eliot’s conception that human experience over history is basically the same, and that the same characters and the same events constantly repeat each other. Therefore, all women are actually one woman; the same referring to male characters as well. That is how Tiresias can foresee the future, as identical patterns of experience tend to repeat themselves. Tiresias’s centrality in the poem thus reflects his dominant point of view that we may call transcendental, or mythical. Jewel and Bentley make a subtle distinction between the partial view of the human subject as presented by the modernists’ art and the view that sees everything of the mythic prophet,

*Perspective in cubism is not only multiplied but destabilized as the viewer is put into motion. The relation between the subject and object goes from fixity to fluidity. And in *The Waste Land* there is a continuous instability in which images dissolve, re-form, melt, and overlap. Related to the multiplication and the destabilization of perspectives is an assumption that any glimpse of the object is partial. The traditional assumption of wholeness is abandoned, as the artist uses not objects but bits and pieces of objects arranged in various patterns. Any presentation of wholeness would have to be made from a transcendent point of view.*

The melting of characters, events, perspectives and temporal dimensions was a formidable artistic statement against the dominant representational strategies of the power structures, that desperately cared to produce an image of wholeness and unity to their citizens. In this respect, it is worth noting Worringer’s thesis of the history of art, mentioned by Jewel and Bentley. Worringer takes the epistemological stance to differentiate between two opposing art practices. In his view, the comfort the society exhibits in the way the world appears or is portrayed to us – gives birth to the representational art. Jewel and Bentley argue that,

*Art of this sort is controlled by what Worringer calls “empathy,” an impulse to identify with one’s object and to trust its appearances as reality, or, at least, as indicative of a congruent and manageable reality. Form is representational with emphasis on curvilinear and organic shapes which call forth feelings of sympathy or identification. Worringer’s examples include Greek, Renaissance, and romantic painting and sculpture.*

In contrast, when the world could not achieve epistemological stability, when “the time is out of joint”, to quote Hamlet, the artist,

*...tend to produce abstract art. Art of this sort is controlled by “abstraction,” an impulse to withdraw from the appearances of a world they neither trust nor understand and to take refuge in pure form. Form*

*is abstract and rectilinear and tends to create emotional distance and detachment. Worringer's examples include both primitive and modern art. In primitive art, abstraction is due to a lack of knowledge about the world and the fear that comes from not knowing; in modern art, abstraction is due to an excess of knowledge and the radical scepticism that comes from knowing too much.*

Further on in the same direction, Jewel and Bentley contain that, much earlier than the quantum mechanic's epochal discovery based on Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, the artists reacted to the basic uncertainty of the world, from the macro to the micro level. The retreat into the self-referentiality, the collapse of the reality, was an obvious move,

*The uncertainty about appearances ... leads to reflexivity in art, to a displacement of attention from what is depicted to the medium that is used to depict it. Painting becomes self-referential, calling attention to itself as paint and lines on canvas instead of pointing beyond itself to something else. Literature becomes self-referential, calling attention to itself as language, to words as words instead of words as signifiers. This self-referentiality in art is clearly a rejection of dualism, a collapse of the object into the subject.*

Instead of the ideological interventions, bent on the production of the illusory stable appearance of the reality that will allow the subject a clear perceivable distance from the object (the world), modern art presents the inability to hold the illusion of the subject-that-is-supposed-to-know any more. Confronted by the shocking object he could not understand (what modern art is all about), the subject affronts multi-perspective realities of the artistic work collapse on him. As Baudrillard would comment later on, the object does not care to please the subject any more by appearing in the format perceivable to human's senses. Modern art does not care to be understood. Its power lies in its indecipherability.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The philosophy of F. H. Bradley and his distinction of the way things appear to us, and what they really are, resonates throughout Eliot's early poetry. Bradley argues that the person who is entrapped by the singular perception relies only on the relational experience of the world that is presented to him as a whirlwind of conflicting orders of reality. To reach synthetic, or transcendental perspective (the one sees everything) modern man has to ask assistance from the myths who operate in the region outside of our conceptions of space and time. It is there where art should find its function as the mythical chronicles,

*...makes the modern world possible for art by enabling it to be seen or perceived from an ideal or imagined position similar in some ways to a fourth dimension. The modern world is altered to make it viable matter for art by inventing a perspective on it. Myth provides the raw materials out of which the synthetic transcendent perspective is manufactured... myth provides a common ground, a sort of fourth dimension, from which viewers can look at the contemporary world from a sufficient distance to make that world appear to have an order.*

In these circumstances, being aware of the reality contradictions, and intending to find the way out of the limitations imposed to the human condition, Eliot reverted to the spiritual experiences of the various religious figures and mystics. They all pointed to the necessity of choosing the right path; to locate the passage beyond the temptations of the material world, and discover the route that leads towards illumination.

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