

An Ecomythic Reading of T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*

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INTRODUCTION

Eliot's visionary poem, *The Waste Land*, gnaws at the bones of twentieth-century Anglo-American society to reveal the alienation of the modern west from the non-human world, alongside a desperate but convoluted longing to re-commune with organic elements and forces. The poem's arid world of shattered and scattered images conveys the fragmented state of the urbanized soul as well as its desacralized environment. A reflection upon metropolitan life across the ages, from Jerusalem, Athens and Alexandria, to London and Vienna (l. 375-6), the narrative voice ponders the way pedestrians in the "Unreal City" (60 and 377) seem to exist in a lifeless state: "A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many/I had not thought death had undone so many" (62-3). The quintessential modern environment is experienced, by Eliot's first-person narrator, as a series of "fragments I have shored against my ruins" (431). London Bridge is "falling down" (427), as are the towers of cities around the world, with traditional forces of fertility struggling for recognition among the devastating consequences of technological society. Urbanization so often works to alienate its populace from the non-human world, while the individual is imagined by Eliot to be locked inside the body as if this were a form of punishment. When Eliot writes that "We think of the key, each in his [sic] prison" (414), his harrowing appraisal touches such a deep nerve not only because it identifies the personal mind or body as a form of incarceration but because it indicates the way that the modern psyche in general senses its alienation from the rest of nature. Eliot's wasteland succeeds in displaying modernity's failure, existing both within the psyche and without it, in the world, illuminating the existential dilemma of twentieth-century life as well as anticipating the ecological crisis looming from within the shadows of the very project of urban civilization itself.

SACRIFICIAL KINGS, SACRED MARRIAGE AND FAILED REGENERATION RITES

The Waste Land stands as a paradigmatic example of high modernity operating in its nostalgic mode.¹ Eliot's own "Notes" to the poem make clear the centrality of western mythic history and its dispersed traditions of regeneration rituals. For instance, Eliot suggests with his first note that Jessie Weston's 1920 anthropological study, *From Ritual to Romance*, suggested "a good deal of the incidental symbolism" in the poem, as well as the

¹ Peter Barry, *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), 83-84.

title and the plan. Her book revealed traces of ancient vegetation rites in Arthurian Grail literatures (specifically of the twelfth century). The nod towards anxieties around environmental fertility – the Grail is sought, we may recall, when the land is laid waste – is extended when Eliot's Notes also specify a debt to the generationally influential *The Golden Bough* by Sir James Frazer. Both Frazer and Weston recognize a deep cultural link – ostensibly eclipsed by intervening centuries – between the vitality of the ruler and the health of the land.² Both models give the assurance of plenty through association with the vigor of a king, who symbolically represents the land and its fecundity. This homologous relationship then allows for a quest that could potentially return potency to both a kingship and the land at once. For Weston, the king, symbolically wounded in the genital region, must be healed in order for balance to be restored to the land; while for Frazer, a king's blood must be shed towards the same end, before the regent's age or any ailment that threatens his vitality likewise causes the land to become infirm. I want to explore further the poem's nostalgic yearning for a lost order of holistic regeneration – of the individual and the whole – as paradigmatic of an environmental anxiety that has shadowed large-scale settlement civilizations since their inception.³ In this context, the aridity that marks *The Waste Land* throughout represents the failure of urban rites of regeneration, resulting in a sense of loss that sees the natural landscape reduced to a "flat horizon" (371).

While Eliot offers the Fisher King of the Grail as one key to the poem, he also suggests that Tiresias represents another.⁴ Eliot alludes mainly to the episode from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* in relation to Tiresias's dual-gendered qualities, because in this adventure the seer became a woman after striking mating serpents, returning to manhood when he struck them again seven years later.⁵ Eliot's Ovidian Tiresias is beyond the duality of gender, capable of seeing through aporia to the ancient rites that Frazer, as well as Carl Jung and Walter Burkert, explored as a "Sacred Marriage," which brings aspects of masculine and

² Jessie Weston, *From Ritual to Romance* (New York: Dover Publications, 1997 [1920]). Sir James Frazer, *The Golden Bough; A History of Myth and Religion* (London: Chancellor Press, 2000 [1890]).

³ Some well-known, pioneering examples of ecological analyses that have diagnosed this long-standing malaise include Lynn White Jr., "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," *Science* 155, no. 3767 (1967): 1203-07; Theodore Roszak, *Where the Wasteland Ends* (Garden City: Doubleday & Co, 1972); Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm (eds.), *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1996); Jonathan Bate, *The Song of the Earth* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000); and Carolyn Merchant, *Reinventing Eden: The Fate of Nature in Western Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

⁴ Eliot's note to line 218 indicates that Tiresias united all of the other characters, beyond gender or any other dualities.

⁵ Ovid, *Metamorphoses* (trans. Rolfe Humphries, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983), 67. A valid feminist question persists here, however: perhaps Tiresias actually subsumes difference under the dominant signifier of the Eurocentric "he"?

feminine principles together to ensure successful fertility.⁶ This ritual, utilized since Mesopotamian times at least, was a New Year's invocation for propitious climatic conditions.⁷ But Tiresias' wisdom does not only see beyond the seeming division of the sexes towards a more fecund potential within and without; in the seer's most famous other role, he plays the unheralded counselor to King Oedipus in Sophocles' Theban tragedy.⁸ The blind seer here signals the specter of famine, plague, or lack by pointing out the ignominy behind the king's seemingly successful rule; Oedipus may still possess vitality but his path towards leadership is strewn with ruin and this unstable foundation threatens to undo the health of the realm. Ironically, it is Oedipus' desire for truth that holds up the mirror to this disintegration from within.

Freud's groundbreaking interpretation recognized in the Oedipal drama the tragic king as ego, the personalized ruler of every individual's psyche (and body).⁹ But Freud's interpretation of Oedipus' role glosses over the fact that it is a social and environmental dilemma that inspires the king's quest for the truth. Plague has struck the city of Thebes and, in accordance with the ancient law of holism, there must be some symbolic cause behind the physical symptom. The Theban wasteland threatens city life like a shadow across the walls of the polis, a reminder of the perennial law of nature: all that lives must die. In Eliot's *Waste Land*, people have succumbed to the modern version of this shadow, the machine-like nature of technological society providing a backdrop against which its figures seem as if they are the walking dead, or cogs in a spiritless machine. This is reflective of the way the world has been interpreted along the course of agricultural, then industrial, and digital revolutions. The cultural attempt to master the non-human world, to cull order from a "nature" defined as chaotic or inert, is revealed as the disastrous dream of patriarchal

⁶ Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, Chapter 31. Jung, like Eliot, is concerned with psychic harmony beyond disintegration, and treats the sacred marriage in modern terms as an inner union of opposites, in spite of its "pagan source" as a set of fertility rites; see *The Psychology of the Transference* (extracted from Volume 16, *Collected Works*; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), par. 355. Walter Burkert investigates the classical Greek rites of heiros-gamos, ostensibly the marriage between Zeus and Hera but also in some metaphorical way a ritual promoting fertility. Burkert, *Greek Religion* (trans. J. Raffan, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), 108. To sum up the link between the Sacred Marriage and Eliot's concerns in *The Waste Land*, the aim of the ancient rite was to ensure a good fate for king and land; see Pirjo Lapinkivi, *The Sumerian Sacred Marriage in the Light of Comparative Evidence* (Helsinki: The Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, University of Helsinki, 2004,) 3-13.

⁷ Samuel Noah Kramer, *The Sacred Marriage Rite* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1969); Henri Frankfort, *Kingship and the Gods: A Study of Ancient Near Eastern Religion as the Integration of Society and Nature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 295-96.

⁸ Eliot notes the Sophoclean allusion briefly at line 245.

⁹ Sigmund Freud introduced the idea in his seminal *The Interpretation of Dreams* (trans. J. Strachey, New York: Avon Books, 1965 [1899]), see especially Chapter V "The Material and Sources of Dreams," 296.

civilization.¹⁰ Eliot's poem ironically suggests to its reader a homologous world in which material and symbolic (or inner/psychic) worlds are experienced as one – the broken city of *The Waste Land* reflects exactly the psychic disintegration of the narrator. But the modern individual no longer benefits from the succor once available in this mythic vision, since the perennial fertility symbols and cycles of non-human nature have had their potency appropriated by technological powers, such that the urbanite's immediate environment and psyche reflect each other, as worlds broken out of their former unity. *The Waste Land* in part thus asks whether renewal, of psyche or land, is possible in a world where the fresh lilacs of spring bring only cruel memories – seasonal cycles continuing to stir something we thought we had lost, for better or worse: "mixing / Memory and desire, stirring / Dull roots with spring rain" (2-4).

A key question driving *The Waste Land* is that same vital one posed by protagonists of the Old Testament, the Grail cycle and the Oedipal dramas: "Shall I at least set my lands in order?" (426) With its repetitious reference to aridity and the lack of water (331-59), filthy rivers and a cultural desert of "broken images," "stony rubbish," exhausted elements (19-24),¹¹ and profaned purification ceremonies (199-201), *The Waste Land* responds to Oedipus and Isaiah's questions in a manner that could be regarded as a modernist attempt at ritual designed to heal the modern psyche, if not the land. The constant invocations for fresh water – beginning with the lament in "The Burial of the Dead" that from the "dry stone" there is "no sound of water" (24), and continuing through to the final section, "What the Thunder Said" – reiterate the narrator's desperation in an almost trance-like manner. Eliot's chant, along with his reference to the all-seeing Tiresias, summons the spirit of regeneration against all reason and this is part of the poem's enduring power. Yet the rites remain ineffective, unless we accept the closing invocation of "Shantih shantih shantih" (434, literally "The Peace which passeth understanding" in Eliot's note) as a reiteration of timeless truth beyond the everyday tragedy of a devastated world. Sadly, the damage being wreaked by technological forces upon the world leaves little ethical space for such transcendental hope, which seems disconcertingly disembodied in the context of an unfolding ecological crisis. As modern literary mythopoeia, *The Waste Land* seems most convincing when it mocks the desacralized rituals of modern life, proposing that they are destined to fail due to an inability to successfully invoke symbolic powers of regeneration. The fire and water that should work as purification, leading to renewed vigor, become

¹⁰ For an extended treatment of the way "nature" has been defined as either chaotic or inert across the course of western civilization, see my PhD thesis: https://www.academia.edu/1194823/Under_the_Dominion_of_Light_an_ecocritical_mythography

¹¹ We, the "son of man," cannot know what may grow out of "this stony rubbish" because we have only a "heap of broken images" (19-22, with Eliot's notes referencing the books of Ezekiel and Ecclesiastes).

instead images empty of any potentially real transformation of the psyche: the burning sun merely desiccates the soul (25-30) and feet are ritually bathed and anointed in profane “soda water” (199-201).

Tiresias is the prophet capable of walking the perennial “wasteland” of civilization without being defeated by its propensity for doom. He is the master of paradox, the blind man who sees more than any other, who reveals Oedipus’s greatness as his downfall and warns that the king’s talent – for solving puzzles like that of the Sphinx – would also prove his misery, as it does at the culmination of the Theban tragedy. Tiresias sees the substance of the poem:

*I Tiresias, though blind, throbbing between two lives,
Old man with wrinkled female breasts, can see
At the violet hour, the evening hour that strives
Homeward, and brings the sailor home from sea,
The typist home at teatime . . . (218-22)*

Eliot’s seer is a dual-gendered creature of the dusk who inhabits a liminal space, where ritual converses with the powers beyond the rational, auguring danger as well as regeneration from the gaps between (or beyond) the signs that make up conventional discourse.¹² Tiresias represents a meltdown in differentiations between night and day, inhabiting the twilight between worlds, as well as the night itself. “Evening, bringing all that light-giving dawn has scattered,” writes Sappho (whom Eliot cites at line 221), reminiscent of the fishermen (or today the typists) at the end of their day, falling back into the great night out of which they came.¹³ This points us towards the regenerative forces beyond mere human powers, beyond the lifelessness of the cultural desert of daylight rationality, into the darkness that is not lack but womb and relief.

This mythic, more-than-human power, which we may call the “sacred feminine,” is dangerously fertile. It is often symbolically equated with darkness in both regenerative and destructive aspects; with birth and death, as well as with night, which serves as her great reminder.¹⁴ But of course the kind of complete transformative power *The Waste Land* tantalizingly relates as its underpinning hope must arise from within while also including ecological relations in its purview if it is to succeed in renewed fertility of psyche and land. Unfortunately patriarchal civilization has long considered non-human nature merely the

¹² Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969).

¹³ Rebecca Hague gives a wonderful explication of the fragment in her “Sappho’s Consolation for Atthis,” *American Journal of Philology* 105 (1984), 29-36.

¹⁴ Just as Novalis saw in his hymns to the great mother darkness, *Hymns to the Night and Other Selected Writings*, trans. Charles Passage (Indianapolis: The Library of the Liberal Arts, 1960).

background and resource for humanity's achievements. The poem exposes the limits of the early twentieth-century anthropological conjectures, which excited its author and so many of his generation. Intellectuals such as the Cambridge Ritualists (a loose affiliation of writers that included Frazer and Weston) seemed to pinpoint hope for those seeking a panacea for the modernist breakdown of faith in both religious and technological visions of reason, along with anxieties that atonement, the good life, and/or progress were no longer fully achievable. But the way modernist nostalgia turned beyond contemporary conditions of urban existence – either to exotic cultures or ancient rites – indicates the symbolic and ecological bankruptcy of its own mechanized visions of regenerative powers. Ironically, the developing technologies of patriarchal civilization can provide abundance (agriculture increasing crop yields, industrial machine power amplifying the use of fossil fuels and so on), but they damage ecological resilience and traditional links between humanity and the non-human world at the same time. Ultimately, for Eliot, we are left to sing a “maternal lamentation” (368), presumably in the context of this loss of the sacred marriage in modern culture, where land (or body) and psyche (or mind) have become separate realms that cannot be united, let alone healed.

CONRAD AND AUGUSTINE – AND ELIOT'S MEDIEVAL DEMONS

One of the central concerns of *The Waste Land* is the notion of degradation, including the bastardization of a culture that no longer values the transcendent potential available via rites of purification. *The Waste Land* seems to ask, what hope is there for the alienated psyche wandering lost in the cultural desert of modernity? Eliot is clearly anguished by the loss of religion's promise of resurrection and exemplifies the modernist quest for revivifying forces from beyond the boundaries of traditional empire. I have previously pointed out the way the poem exercises this quest alongside an analysis of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, with both texts seeking new potency for an ailing world from beyond the boundaries of “civilization.”¹⁵ David Trotter notes that this tension is intimately linked to late-nineteenth and early twentieth-century fears about the apocalyptic tendencies of empires, which “decay from the heart outwards, unless they can be reinvigorated by contact with the colonial periphery, the frontier-zone where civilization meets barbarism.”¹⁶ London's stagnant decadence required a shot of undomesticated energy to its dead heart and a journey from there to the frontier at least offered the chance of regeneration.¹⁷ Eliot's original desire to use Kurtz's final words as the epigraph to his poem makes perfect sense in

¹⁵ Geoff Berry, “Modernism, Climate Change and Dystopia: An ecocritical reading of light symbology in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Eliot's *The Waste Land*,” *Colloquy: text theory critique* 21 (2011), 81-100.

¹⁶ David Trotter, “Modernism and Empire: reading *The Waste Land*,” *Critical Quarterly* 28: 1 & 2 (2007) 143-53 (p. 145).

¹⁷ Trotter, “Modernism and Empire,” 146.

these terms; the poem's mixture of frontier-myth and spiritual autobiography mirrors Marlow's voyage, which also attempted to tell of the dangers involved in blindly accepting the stultifying routines of urban life, while indicating the revivifying energies available in the rituals of those still intimately associated with the nonhuman world around them.¹⁸ Eliot, like Conrad before him, seems fascinated by the dangers he sees in wild "nature," especially when these are interwoven with a mostly intangible sense of kinship with such a world of primordial power. But alienation from this world means that a longing for satisfying relationships with it remain beyond the realms of lived reality for most modern individuals.

Eliot's sensibility for the tragic recognizes that impersonal regeneration feeds upon death and that true spiritual rebirth ironically comes when all vestiges of who we are are scattered to the (anonymous) winds and depths of the sea (as in Phlebas's "Death by Water"). Eliot recognizes the modern desire to return to "nature" but sees it as cut off at the root, or at least only flowering as pain, lilacs destined to mix "[m]emory and desire" as a "stirring [of d]ull roots" out of "dead land" (1-4). As Sagar points out, Eliot's poem critiques a deep western ambivalence towards the more-than-human world.¹⁹ Medieval Christendom regularly demonized worlds of physical nature and instinct and such habits do not die easily. It is no wonder that the source of impersonal regeneration remains for the modernized urbanite an unknown, even feared, antagonist, compared to the technological nature with which we are most at home. In regards to the refructification of a landscape laid to waste, ancient and distant worlds stand in as sites of wish fulfillment. Weston and Frazer's perception of rites that survived into more modern literature become the perfect place to find allusions to both the tragic and promising elements of regeneration. The east meanwhile, represented by the Buddha's "Fire Sermon" of Part III, offers a path traditionally invested in the concept of selflessness, the perfect accompaniment for Eliot's nascent religious longing.

For the ascetic of *The Waste Land*, life is suffering, while joy is a passing phenomenon that only seems to perpetuate our imprisonment in the material world. Eliot's deference to Augustine could shed a little more light on this aspect of the poem and its relation to more-than-human nature. When Augustine came to write against Manichaeism – a faith of which he was an adherent for some ten years – he could not at the same time entirely expunge from his own oeuvre the traces of this influence. Van Oort notes that Augustine's spirituality was "one of the most important channels through which the Gnostic religion of

¹⁸ Trotter, "Modernism and Empire," 149.

¹⁹ Keith Sagar, *Literature and the Crime Against Nature* (London: Chaucer Press, 2005). For Sagar, Eliot means this as a comprehensive eco-critique of western civilization in general, and the inversion of the beginning of the *Canterbury Tales* at the start of *The Waste Land* is a specific attempt to "create a sense of the loss of harmony between human feelings and the seasonal rhythms of the natural world" (178).

Manichaeism has exercised a lasting influence on western culture.”²⁰ While protesting too much, Augustine unwittingly perpetuated the heresy. The protagonist of *The Waste Land* seems caught in a similar bind; longing for escape from the tortuous prison of this embodied life, while finding the transcendental hope he yearns after remote at best. Failure to overcome this aporia leads to unsuccessful rites of regeneration. Thus, at a beachside resort we fumble, accosted by desire and incapable of making any connection at all, broken, sinful and scattered: “I can connect / Nothing with nothing. / The broken fingernails of dirty hands” (301-3). Isaiah’s people in the Old Testament desert were likewise reminded of their spiritual inabilities and Eliot again cites Augustine, with allusion to a recollection of the fallen nature of Carthage, “where a cauldron of unholy loves sang all about mine ears” (note 307). What chance have we moderns, in the face of not a cauldron but an information superhighway of temptation?

The cleverness of technological society once seemed to promise that the age of cyclical “feast and famine” might be over, that material successes over the earth would progressively transform more of the planet to humanity’s purposes. But of course Tiresias revealed to Oedipus that “success” could also be a grand illusion and now climate science warns us that an assumed mastery over the earth is resulting in similarly tragic results. As ecocritique, the poem and its nostalgic desire to commune with the more-than-human world into which we are born only highlights how far from this state of “natural grace” the modern, urbanized individual finds him- or herself. Paul Shepard claims that the schism our ancestors placed between people and the non-human world is internalized with each generation, as initiation rites are reduced to and compacted within urban processes of socialization.²¹ Eliot would seem to be sympathetic to an ecopsychological intuition like this, as modern individuals are cut off from wells of replenishment once offered in the mythic rites of wisdom traditions or in experiential immersion in their environment. Yet, as the threat that resides beyond the city, or in the unconscious of the urbanized psyche, “nature” continues to haunt the modern psyche with its impossible-to-capture allure.

That our “environment” is rapidly becoming a wasteland in the real sense of the term has been noted as part of the poem’s multilayered insight. Robert Pogue Harrison asserts that *The Waste Land* despairs over civilization’s spiritual decay but also registers the physical effects of changing climate by focussing on desertification.²² Laurence Buell, in stressing the literary tradition of apocalypse, sees the poem largely focused on this sense of crisis, even

²⁰ Johannes Van Oort, “Manichaeism: Its Sources and Influences on Western Christianity” in *Gnosis and Hermeticism From Antiquity to Modern Times*, ed. Roelof van den Broek and Wouter J. Hanegraff (New York: State University of New York Press, 1998), 46-47.

²¹ Paul Shepard, *Nature and Madness* (San Francisco, Sierra Club Books, 1982).

²² Robert Pogue Harrison, *Forests: The Shadow of Civilization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 149.

going so far as to maintain that Eliot had written “one of the first canonical works of modern Anglo-American literature to envision a dying society.”²³ I see no reason why this should not be the case. It is well known that Eliot was at the time desperately in need of therapy and it would have been the artist’s role to recognize the malaise pervading modern society as a symbolic whole at the same time. After all, it had already been over a century since Romantic poets had registered an initial phase of concern about the devastation being wrought upon the earth by the industrial revolution. *The Waste Land* may then be regarded, as it is in David Gilcrest’s estimation, as “a prototype of the remedial or therapeutic poem,” which reaches beyond a devastated landscape to maintain an optimism against all odds that “derives ultimately from Eliot’s faith in poetry” to “make a difference” to all members of the human community.²⁴ Perhaps Eliot’s Shantih-like hope reflects both the splintered nature of the alienated modern individual as well as a perennial yet indefinable human faith that some kind of higher or deeper order exists within the cosmos and the world.

THE TRAGIC INDIVIDUAL: EPHEMERAL CONSUMPTION IN THE DISENCHANTED CITY

Sadly, according to Eliot’s high modernist aesthetic, modernity cheapens everything – even (especially?) our suffering – and any sacrifice we have to offer in terms of regenerative ritual has thus become particularly hard to purify. But Eliot has some advice for us and, in this context, calling him the high priest of modernist poetry may not be so far from the truth, whether we like his advice or not. His sermon promises that all our sins will be met with a pox, if not a plague, which looms throughout the poem in Biblical proportions. Exiled to this alien home, as from the Garden of Eden, with “The shouting and the crying” in “Prison and palace,” “We who were living are now dying” (325-9). But in spite of our desperate need, the ritual healing or killing of the king fails due to the degraded nature of its scapegoat, the new Actaeon Sweeney (198).²⁵ No real sacrifice is made and not only is our offering insufficient, it is not adequately purified. Eliot underscores the perpetual correlation between sex and power as potential panaceas for existential disaffection as well as the inevitable failure of these addictions to satisfy deeper longings. Such immoderation ends in ruin whether in bar crowds or classic dramas; the first half of Part II, “A Game of Chess,” references Dido and Cleopatra, along with suicide as an accompaniment to their lascivious wealth (77-110). Soon after, we find the pub crowd guzzling down beer until closing time (139-72), just as excessive in their indulgences and equally unable to escape civilization’s discontents. The desacralized nature of our rituals is associated with unsatisfying sex, which

²³ Laurence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1995), 288.

²⁴ David W. Gilcrest, “Rhetorical Redemption, Environmental Poetics, and the Case of the Camperdown Elm,” *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 8.2 (Summer 2001): 169-180 (170).

²⁵ See also Eliot’s note to this line.

is now mere pleasure devoid of any higher association (Albert 142-67; the “typist” and the “young man carbuncular” 231-56). The modern consumer seems, for Eliot, as destined as the mythic Erysichthon to experience a never-ending appetite as recompense for their transgressions against the natural world.²⁶

The tawdriness of modern consumption convinces us to worship the body as a site of endless, soulless consumption; we are invited to look and feel ever-younger, to deny death at every turn and to never stop feasting on the desacralized bounty brought to us by technologically-driven modernity. In order to help ensure regeneration, the narrator of *The Waste Land* seems to insist that we must learn to put our selfish desires aside. This is easier said than done, of course, in a modern paradigm wherein the individual is hyped as a fundamental value (with undoubtable value in terms of political agency and human rights). While the ritual breakdown of self is a core facet of much religion, whether it concerns vegetative fecundity or the more abstract notion of an afterlife with a God, the worship of individuality in the modern world makes the loss of our personal sense of self anathema. For Eliot, it seems possible, while difficult, that this challenge can be met through art, just as Parzival worked hard for years to reverse his initial failure with the Grail.²⁷ The problem remains that while Eliot’s archetypal “king ego” might well cry “O Lord Thou pluckest me out” of the fires of life due to the enormity of his crimes,²⁸ we modern spiritual cripples, according to *The Waste Land*, are merely broken and desacralized. What is the alienated ego to do with this near-impossible set of circumstances but compose tragedy?

While this desacralizing problematic is certainly central to technological civilization’s ecological dilemmas, there is something disturbing in Eliot’s insinuated response to it here. *The Waste Land* suggests that through Gnostic/ascetic denial of the body, the modern individual can overcome the sense of imprisonment he or she experiences as part and parcel of their sociocultural constraints. The otherworldliness of such an idea perpetuates the medieval Christian notion that we are cursed in the body and on the earth. The solace Eliot seems to be seeking may be found in a disembodied suggestion of “the Peace which passeth understanding” (note 433); but this conventional idea of Grace does little to allay fears that everyday society will continue to be entranced by the desacralized magic of

²⁶ Erysichthon remains insatiably hungry no matter how much he eats, with tragic results. For an outline of the myth and its relevance to the ecological crisis, see Jill Da Silva, “Ecocriticism and myth: The Case of Erysichthon,” *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 15.2 (Summer 2008): 103-16.

²⁷ At least in Wolfram von Eschenbach’s famous version, *Parzival*, trans. A.T.Hatto (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980).

²⁸ See lines 307-11 plus Eliot’s notes to these lines, which reference Augustine and Buddha’s ascetic remonstrations against licentiousness. The title of Part III, “The Fire Sermon,” borrows from the Buddha, while Eliot cites Augustine as his chosen representative of western asceticism, who may be able to guide us better to overcome our self-centered lusts and be plucked, like Joshua, out of this worldly fire in which we burn.

technologically provided abundance and consumerism. In fact, in spite of the corporeal gratification promised by consumption, which should work to confirm ascendancy over “dumb” matter as it quickens the human pulse, the modern, fragmented individual discovers in consumption an experience of ephemeral transcendence and a disenchanting earth. This system trades on a traditional faith in an eternal elsewhere, which offers the vague hope that things will be better in that other place we could be (or state we could experience) soon. . . . Shantih. But it also hides the more opaque ecological cost of its tendency to destroy the very ground upon which it is constructed (the earth). A false order of mastery threatens its own foundations.

The almost ascetic discomfort with the body, and especially with sex, displayed in *The Waste Land* reveals a strain of Manichaean Gnosticism that continues to mark postmodern consumerism today. The irony here is that, in an era devoted more than ever to the pleasures of the body, we are clearly uncomfortable with its actual realities. The dominant paradigm trades on a utopian dream of eternal youth in a city of unending plenty.²⁹ Eliot’s poem reveals the shadow of this vision, where the modern city is more like a spiritual desert, beaten down by an Old Testament sun that provides no “shelter” (22). The urbanite is offered respite only “under the shadow of this red rock” (26), where we may enter a liminal space that offers no hope or help: “I was neither / Living nor dead, and I knew nothing, / Looking into the heart of light, the silence” (39-41). Just like Coleridge’s *Ancient Mariner*, we are surrounded by water, water everywhere, but without a drop to drink; the next line, written in German, translates to “Empty and waste the sea” (42).³⁰

This is a powerful image of the impossibility of spiritual regeneration in the machine age of individual alienation and ultimately unsatisfying (as well as dangerous) consumption. The tension between metaphors of compelling aridity and hoped-for fecundity marks the whole poem, as it has the ongoing project of large-scale settlement civilization. Without access to a truly regenerative element of selflessness, Eliot indicates that we walk through an “Unreal City” (60) as living dead. Londoners trudge along, eyes down and sighing, for all the world as if they were crossing the River Styx rather than the Thames. The poet’s note indicates that he is citing Baudelaire from *Les Fleurs du Mal* of 1857 (and the opening lines to “The Seven Old Men”): “Swarming city, city filled with dreams / Where the specter in broad daylight accosts the passerby.” As Lee Rozelle points out, disintegration of the urban space results from the “loss of a unifying organicism” that accompanies the modern vision of “a

²⁹ See Geoff Berry “The Symbolic Quest Behind Today’s Cities of Light – and its Unintended Ecological Consequences”, *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture* 7.1 (2013) 7-26; and Geoff Berry “Afterword: the Utopian Dreaming of Modernity and its Ecological Cost,” *Green Letters: Studies in Ecocriticism* 17:3 (2013), 281-94.

³⁰ See Eliot’s note to this line, which offers the translation.

mechanical and soulless cosmos.”³¹ Eliot recognizes in the machinations of modern productivity a depersonalizing force that can crush the poet’s spirit just as it transforms nature; both inner potential and the outer world become so much grist for the mill of profitability and empire.

The peace that surpasses understanding may compose a conciliatory force for lost souls, but it hardly begins to recombine modernity’s broken images into any kind of hopeful ecological vision. Eliot composes the modernist dilemma – that Eurocentric society could now be considered a failure due to the enormity of its success – and accompanies this with an equally hollow chant. Truly complex relationships with a living world, wherein human culture is identified as a part of wider nature, are beyond the modernist dream, which quests merely after the memory of holism it hopes survived “the horror, the horror” of the rapacious history of civilization (to quote Conrad’s Kurtz). Eliot has named the modern individual as an “everyperson” divorced from the earth upon which they depend, alienated and huddled in the prison of its own egoic world, desperately clutching at exotic and ancient promises of regeneration, of rites no longer available to lost urban souls, the living dead who could not regenerate because they could not even die properly.

CONCLUSION

In a way that became influential due to its profitability, the earth has often been defined as a mechanical mass available for the purposes of civilization, made “dead” so that it cannot threaten the imperial throne of human (or patriarchal) hubris. But in this sleight of hand, large-scale settlement civilization is its own worst enemy, casting non-human nature as a foe in a perennial psychodrama. Eliot’s yearning to retain faith in transcendental regenerative forces leads him to seek his Grail in the dissolution of form. This is the place where the liminal mysteries of ritual revivify, such that we regain some sense of a relationship with the rest of nature beyond the civilized and alienating habits of mastery, consumption and profit. Sick and blinded by the dazzling brilliance and corruption of civilization, Eliot captures the modernist dilemma of a people ironically divorced from regenerative forces by the very success of their transformative technologies. In place of this arid desert of the soul, Eliot as Old Testament prophet seeks symbolic death, for ritualistic rebirth into a magical sense of connectedness to a world we desperately want to experience as vital, strong, regenerative and hopeful. In his depths Eliot remains attracted to nonhuman nature but incapable of reconnecting with it. Recognizing that he was immured by privilege behind the walls of civilization – almost as if a prisoner – he continued this line of thought

³¹ Lee Rozelle, “Ecocritical City: Modernist reactions to urban environments in *Miss Lonelyhearts* and *Paterson*,” *Twentieth-Century Literature* 48: 1 (Spring 2002) 100-15. This stultification of nature continues to influence flawed “modernist approaches to the natural environment that interpret those places as replicable and disposable parts.” (102)

throughout his career, to later reflect (among other things) upon the despoliation of the planet on behalf a mechanized, soulless process of modernization.³² And hence we hear Tiresias once again, warning Oedipus that his talent is at once his misery, that the truth he will discover at the culmination of his quest may be the worst thing he ever found, just as the Grail of modernity – the eternal youth and feasting of its technotopian paradise – may be leading the entire planet towards the nightmare in civilization's shadow: the wasteland that is already here.

³² See especially T.S. Eliot, *The Idea of a Christian Society* (1939).