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Eliot's Masterpiece and Downfall: New Poetics and *The Waste Land*

Lindsay Hawley

In the early 1900s, T.S. Eliot aimed to create a poetry that relied on the creation of images rather than rhetoric, that denied complete unity of theme in favor of individual feelings, and that acted as a medium for the communication of the poet's subconscious. Additionally, he desired that, after its creation, poetry be criticized not in terms of its ideological content or meaning, but rather its artistic value and its ability to create emotion in the reader. Eliot's method both succeeded and failed in his poetic work, *The Waste Land*. Although this work aptly followed each of Eliot's poetic guidelines and became an admirable embodiment of his "new poetic," criticism of the work paid less attention to its artistic worth and more to its implied meaning and function as a reflection of the author. The failure of the work to be viewed as Eliot wished it to be can be attributed to both the nature of literary criticism and, ironically, the success of the artist in making his art as he wished it to be, a manifestation of the poet's subconscious.

The poetic method of T.S. Eliot proved a stark contrast to all that it followed. Eliot and those in accordance with his views, such as Ezra Pound, opposed poetry that aimed solely to please the public—poetry that preached a consistent message that ran in accordance with current public sentiments (Stead 96-7). Instead, these writers wished to shift the focus of poetry from the promotion of the poet's ideology or "meaning" to the creation of images that would evoke a wide range of feelings in the reader. Eliot's poetry was not to be "the gushing nonsense of popular poetry"; it was "an observation recorded, not a feeling expressed" (Lentricchia 242). Rather than explicitly stating the emotional state of the poem, directly telling the reader how to feel, the poet should arouse sentiment through the description of events, characters, and objects. These depictions are the "images" of the poem that come together in its structure, or as Eliot labels it, the "objective correlative" (Stead 130).

In his quest to make poetry dependant on images rather than rhetoric, to create a work conveying disparate feeling through seemingly objective depiction, Eliot succeeded with *The Waste*

Land. Composed of a variety of voices, depicting a barren, dry land, an adulterous affair and a man's return from war, among other things, set in Germany, London, France, the ancient world and beyond, *The Waste Land* proves a virtual gallery of disparate images. These depictions create emotion through description, rather than by the poet's explicit declaration of feeling. In "The Fire Sermon" section of the piece, Eliot creates an uneasy atmosphere through disturbing, disgusting images. He writes, "A rat crept softly through the vegetation / Dragging its slimy belly on the bank... White bodies naked on the low damp ground / And bones cast in a little low dry garret / Rattled by the rat's foot only, year to year" (Eliot lines 187-8, 193-5). In this passage, Eliot utilizes the rat, often viewed as a diseased and unclean animal, combined with "slimy," an adjective associated with filth, to evoke a sense of disgust in the reader. Following soon after the rat image, the "white bodies naked" provide a stark and disturbing picture. Eliot's use of the term "bodies" rather than "humans", implies a lack of emotion in these entities, which indicates that they are corpses, a judgment further validated by their position "on the low damp ground," where the deceased are buried. That these bodies are naked proves shocking and unsettling, as typically corpses are not buried unclothed. Into this picture, the rat enters, to "rattle" the "bones" of the bodies, wedding the disgusting to the disturbing and creating a general sense of uneasiness in the reader. In this section, Eliot conveys emotion solely through his images. He never explicitly describes the scene as disgusting or jarring, and does not elaborate on the emotions of a person viewing the scene. The images speak for themselves. And this is but one example of the many images that functions the same throughout *The Waste Land*. Therefore, Eliot follows his poetic guidelines, transmitting emotions through the description of images rather than explicit expression on the part of the poet.

Images contained within the same poem, according to Eliot, do not have to communicate similar emotions. Each description embodies a feeling that will be juxtaposed against other, possibly disparate, depictions. A piece of writing may have some emotional unity, but what makes it "poetic" is not uniformity of meaning. Rather, the poetry is found in the "floating feelings" created by the different images, and these feelings are often, in Eliot's words, "chaotic, irregular, and fragmentary," defying any

semblance of unity (Perloff 9). Because the poet is interested in generating disparate emotions rather than promoting any certain meaning, the poem does not have to maintain a consistent theme. Its images may therefore convey a multiplicity of contradicting feelings and still succeed as poetry by Eliot's definition.

Believing that poems did not require an overriding, unified emotional tone, but rather could and should explore variant emotions, Eliot created images in *The Waste Land* that evoke often conflicting feelings. This poem "has no coherent thread upon which the items of the poem are strung" (qtd. in Stead 162); it defies any attempt to identify a singular, united theme. The poem accomplishes this through juxtaposition of divergent images and contradicting implied emotion. Throughout the work, competing images inhabit close quarters. Harriet Davidson speaks of the poem's "lack of thematic clarity," of its "careful refusal of connections between images, scenes and voices" (Davidson 122). Indeed there exist many contrasting images in *The Waste Land*. Such divergence makes it impossible to pin down a singular, overriding theme for the work. In certain instances, *The Waste Land* appears to betray the poet's despair. The work resonates with bleak pictures of the nothingness and ruin of the landscape, described as "this stony rubbish" and "A heap of broken images / where the sun beats / And the dead tree gives no shelter / the cricket no relief" (Eliot 19-24). Perhaps the most despairing element of these images is their implicit lack of hope for the future. Eliot writes, "If there were water we should stop and drink ... If there were only water amongst the rock" (335, 338), implying that in water hope exists for the future. He continues, "But there is no water" only "dry sterile thunder without rain" (358, 342)—images of hopelessness that run throughout the work.

However, one cannot take *The Waste Land* as an entirely despairing work lamenting the loss of society. For these hopeless depictions of decay and drought are interwoven with optimistic images of growth and rain. The poem opens with such imagery, blending in with the aforementioned pictures of despair: "April is the cruelest month, breeding / Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing / Memory and desire, stirring / Dull roots with spring rain" (1-4). Here the deadness of the "dull roots" is contradicted by the image of the Lilac coming "out of the dead land," a sign of growth in ruin. The passage alludes to the coming of the "spring rain," the

water that is the cure for the hopelessness of the dry rock. The work also finishes with a sense of hope mixed with the despair, describing “a flash of lightning. Then a damp gust,” again “[b]ringing rain” (393-4). These images of impending rain and water contradict the dryness and ruin of the despairing passages. However, because each of these images, of despair and hope, continues throughout the entire poem, and neither proves more abundant or predominates, neither can be considered the dominant theme of the poem. It remains a series of images that evoke contrasting emotion, negating the establishment of a clear message. *The Waste Land* implies themes only to negate them; it “suggests these meanings but then denies them any stability” (Davidson 128). As such, it proves to be a piece of poetry that fits Eliot’s guidelines. Instead of pursuing a unified theme and imposing this meaning on its audience, *The Waste Land* instead acts as a medium for multiple and different “floating feelings,” just as Eliot desired for poetry.

Although Eliot succeeds in fulfilling the characteristics of his new poetics, his poems fail to be criticized in the manner in which he hoped this innovative poetry would be reviewed. In Eliot’s view, a poem should be judged on its “being” rather than its “meaning” (Stead 110). A poem may contain fragments of meaning, but this is not what Eliot desires critics to explore. Critical focus should be not on poet’s intentions, but rather should analyze the poem in terms of its technique and artistry. Reviewers should, in Eliot’s opinion, evaluate the quality of the images created in the poem and their ability to translate particular emotions, rather than postulating on the poet’s beliefs. *The Waste Land* appears conducive to Eliot’s desired critical technique. As a poem which defies unity of theme, one would think that critics would cease to conjure up a notion of the poem’s overriding meaning and would evaluate it as set of images as Eliot intended. However, ironically, *The Waste Land* is often not reviewed in such a manner. Critics often analyze it “to construct a formula, a ‘statement of beliefs’ which is then said to be in the poem itself” (Stead 165). Rather than accepting the thematic disparity of the poem, critics often try to regulate Eliot’s “idiosyncratically intricate and subtle mind into principles that could put his blend of wishes and insights on what seemed a firm foundation” (Altieri 195). Additionally, critics often attempt to evaluate the poem as a

manifestation of Eliot's psyche. Critics investigate his background, the conditions under which he wrote the work, his beliefs and ideals, and attempt to evaluate how these influence his work. Despite his success in making *The Waste Land* exactly as he believed poetry should be, Eliot ironically faced criticism diametrically opposed to how he thought the new poetics should be reviewed.

The reasons for this type of critical reaction to Eliot's work are twofold. First, the response to Eliot's work proves simply the natural reaction of literary critics to any piece of literature. Critical reaction to *The Waste Land* identified its themes as "lust and death," "life," "life and the church," and no doubt hundreds of others (Stead 164). Despite Eliot's specific pleas to the contrary, critics did and continue to evaluate his work in this manner. Eliot realized that this would be the case, stating that identifying the "meaning" was "a habit of the reader" and that each poem has the appearance of a surface meaning merely to "keep his [the reader's] mind diverted and quiet while the poem does its work on him" (Stead 121). Eliot rightly declares that the search for meaning is so ingrained in the human mind that reviewers could not help but attempt to identify the "theme" of his work. The very fact that critics continued to search for meaning even when faced with the nearly incomprehensible and entirely fragmented *The Waste Land* indicates the strength of critics' desire to regularize meaning and find uniformity of theme in every literary work. Seen in this light, there proves no way that Eliot could avoid having his work interpreted in this manner, no matter how strictly he adhered to his new poetic guidelines.

However, in a way Eliot has himself to blame for the manner in which critics responded to his work, due to a contradictory part of his new poetic theory. In addition to his notions of "images" and disunity of theme, Eliot also believed in the poem as a manifestation of the poet's subconscious mind. He believed that poems "should write themselves" and that the conscious mind of the poet was merely the "editor" to the writings of his or her subconscious (Stead 131). In Eliot's view, the poem could be seen not only as a reflection of the author, but also of the impact of society on the writer. He claimed, in evaluating the work of another poet "we cannot isolate him from the environment in which we find him" (Perloff 23). This statement demonstrates his

belief that the author, as a product of his or her society, reveals the impact of this society on its inhabitants through his or her work. Taken this way, Eliot promotes a view of poetry as a reflection of both the author and his or her society. Knowing that Eliot possessed such beliefs begs critics to examine how Eliot's personal beliefs and society's impact upon him show through in his writing. Therefore, it is difficult to blame critics for delving into Eliot's personal life and past to understand *The Waste Land*, when the poet himself all but directs them to do so. In this way, Eliot drives the critic away from his writing and into his personal world, shifting the focus from artistry to artist, from analysis of poetic technique to the very search for meaning and explanation of his work that Eliot did not desire.

Still, in this area of the subconscious, Eliot appears to have again aptly followed his new poetic guidelines. Indeed, *The Waste Land* can logically be viewed as an accurate representation of what might have been playing in Eliot's mind at the time of its construction. The Eliot writing this work had just, along with millions of others, lived through the horrors of the First World War. The war, he felt, made people "so swallowed up in the one great tragedy that one almost ceases to have personal experiences or emotions" (Perloff 35). In *The Waste Land* Eliot proved a more pessimistic and disillusioned poet than in his earlier works. He is a poet who fears the cultural decay of his society and the "immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history" (Lentricchia 268), a poet who worries about the demise of tradition, how the "European past" was decaying into something "stifling" which is "existing simply to be used" (Kenner 134). Effectively, he is a poet witnessing a dying society just as affected by the war as he is, and losing touch with the cultural richness of the past.

These sentiments are reflected in the words of *The Waste Land*. The poem contains numerous images of an ill civilization, a dying past. The first image the reader encounters blatantly conveys this message in Eliot's allusion to the story of Sybil, a prophetess slowly aging and dying while trapped in a bottle. He writes, "With my own eyes I saw the Sybil of Cumae hanging in a bottle; and when the boys said to her: '[Sybil, what do you want?]' she replied, '[I want to die]'" (Eliot Epigraph). Sybil, as a subject of this classic tale and a representation of the rich mythical Greek

culture, subsequently represents the gradual decay of said culture, as time passes. This image of a crumbling past nearing death continues throughout the work. Eliot writes of the "Falling towers / Jerusalem Athens Alexandria / Vienna London / Unreal" (373-6). Here he depicts not only the decay of the ancient past, symbolized by Athens, Alexandria and Jerusalem, but also the European present, embodied in Vienna and London. Here the loss of connections with these classical cities and their culture proves to also be impacting contemporary times. This notion repeats itself in *The Waste Land*, such as when Eliot writes "The nymphs are departed. / And their friends, the loitering heirs of city directors; / Departed, have left no addresses" (176-8). With these lines, Eliot equates the loss of the "nymphs," representatives of the myths of the past, with "city directors," the inhabitants of contemporary times. Both have gone, ancient culture with the passing of the nymphs and the present decays and dies, or leaves, at least in the opinion of this work.

What comes across, then, in *The Waste Land*, are varied images of the destruction and loss of ties to classic cultures, which leads to the destruction of the present society. So as not to unfairly characterize this as a theme in a themeless poem, it must be acknowledged that these images contradict the aforementioned depictions of hope, life, and growth. However, these images of decomposing society still do exist in the work. Eliot was preoccupied with the preservation of tradition, as the sheer number of his classic allusions in *The Waste Land* reveals, and the sentiments expressed in these images can logically be labeled reflections of Eliot's subconscious mind. Hence, Eliot again follows an aspect of his requirements for poetry--that the poet write from his subconscious and create a work which is a reflection of his innermost feelings. However, by being successful in this area he simultaneously validates the work of all those who look to his personal life for critical material rather than focusing solely on the aesthetics of his poem.

By making his poem so reflective of his beliefs, Eliot encourages critics to continue to evaluate poetry in this manner—to continue to delve into the poet rather than solely his or her work. Therefore, by writing from his subconscious Eliot simultaneously adheres to his poetical beliefs and alternately subverts them by encouraging criticism that opposes his desire for

evaluation of worth in terms of artistry. Eliot, then, can be seen as the instrument that both promotes and destroys his new poetics. By writing in his desired style of disparate, emotive imagery, Eliot sent his new poetry into the world and exposed it to general readers and critics alike. However, by adding in the element of the subconscious, he complicated his new poetics and ironically subverted its aims, driving critics back to the very evaluation of poet over poetry that he railed against. Eliot holds much in common with his *The Waste Land*: both engage in self-contradiction, will continue to be the topic of intense debate, are brilliant but controversial, and fascinating even if nearly incomprehensible.

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