



The “blossoming of lilac-bush”: A Study of the Post-War Reception of *The Waste Land*

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Abstract

T. S. Eliot's 'The Waste Land' has developed a contemporaneity by effectively transcending the Modernist context within which it is born. The poem exhibits certain features that have stayed relevant for the later generations of poets and readers even after much of the Modernist intentions have ceased to exist. In our presentation, we will identify those features by providing a brief analysis of the responses to the poem from multiple poets, mostly those after World War I. The principal observation resulting from the readings would be that the poem contains a restorative promise which proved commensurable with the democratizing tendency characterizing much of the post-war era at a time when a critical attitude towards Modernism was developing among the Late-Modernist and Postmodern poets. While not denying the essentially Modernist nature of 'The Waste Land', this paper will show how almost all the conflicting receptions of the poem have converged upon the vision of revitalization.

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Introduction

Undoubtedly the most influential long poem in the English language in the twentieth century, *The Waste Land* (1922) by T. S. Eliot strikes us as still quite a recent work despite the centenary we are having right now. Written during the devastating inner-war period,

the poem speaks of a time fret with political, cultural, psychological, and intellectual tensions. One of the evident signs of this influential nature is the proliferation of long poems in the twentieth century, poems that have similarly attempted to capture the present world and its desolation. It is not as if long poems were absent in the history of English literature before *The Waste Land*. However, the importance of the genre of the non-narrative long poem as the vehicle of any particular poet's representative voice has increased considerably. Poetic works belonging to the different schools of poetry that emerged after 1945 have often been such long poems, be it *Howl* by Allen Ginsberg, the Beat poet, *Of Being Numerous* by the Objectivist poet George Oppen, or *My Life* by the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poet Lyn Hejinian, *Paterson* by William Carlos Williams, *The Whitsun Weddings* by Philip Larkin, *Gunslinger* by Ed Dorn, and *Station Island* by Seamus Heaney are some of the other important poems of the century that bear traces of Eliot's work.

Objectives

Given the multitude of responses that T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* has generated in the year 1922, it would be impossible to bring every one of them together in one paper-length study. So, instead, this paper intends to arrive at certain observations that can sum up those responses. The objective of this paper is to provide a study of the reception of this key text from modernist literature to show not only the evolution in the reception of Eliot over the years but also the changing idea of Modernism as such. As we move into Late-Modernism and Postmodernism, the diversification in the reception of *The Waste Land* becomes very symbolic of the evolution of Western aesthetics in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Literature Review

While *The Waste Land* received much appreciation from Eliot's Modernist contemporaries, a considerable number of readers were instead shocked by the apparent lack of coherence of the poem. 'Waste Paper – A Poem of Profound Insignificance' by H.P. Lovecraft, written in 1923, is representative of those who found the poem too meaningless to be taken seriously. The epigraph for Lovecraft's poem reads 'All is laughter, all is dust, all is nothing, / for all that is cometh from unreason' (Lovecraft). While Lovecraft's poem is a parody, *Paterson* by William Carlos Williams is one of the most profound poetic responses that *The Waste Land* elicited from a Modernist

contemporary. Williams' poetics has indeed emerged as a more tonally American alternative to the form of Modernism represented by Eliot and Pound. The competition between the two poets becomes apparent when Williams recalls the publication of *The Waste Land* as 'the great catastrophe to our letters' (Williams 1948, 146). Williams says that not only did *The Waste Land* come to dominate the form of Modernism, but it quite disturbingly made the genre of poetry a property almost exclusively for the academic world. So, the Late-Modernist poets like George Oppen sought 'unaudenized and diselioted' (Oppen 1990, 31) poetry to rescue poetry from its intellectualization by Eliotesque modernity.

Methodology

By the aim of the paper, the primary methodology applied in this paper is that of close reading. This paper does not engage in a survey of the critical works that have been written on *The Waste Land* over the years since the intention is not to look at the evolution of critical opinions. Rather, it wants to exclusively see how Eliot's work has influenced other poets. The best assessment of that would be possible upon overserving exactly how we can find resonances of *The Waste Land* in other poets' themes and choice of imagery. Only a close reading can locate the spectral presence of Eliot in the diction and theme of other poets. The paper also applies a comparative reading of the poetic works and professions of aesthetic theory issued from particular poets. Thus, while the close reading is not supposed to be exhaustive, it is meant to be intensive, so that certain key underlying tendencies can come up to the surface.

Analysis

The close readings, thus engaged, tell us that the truly relevant aspect of *The Waste Land* is not its apparent senselessness or its elitist erudite. Rather, the real gift of the poem is a rejuvenating strength that lies somewhere deep within the wasteland. While Yeats's honey bees 'build in the crevices / Of loosening masonry' (The Stare's Nest By My Window. Yeats 208) or Marianne Moore populates her 'imaginary gardens with real toads' (*Poetry* Moore 267), Eliot's poem ends with the sound of thunder and the promise of rain (Eliot 18). Certain works like Heaney's *Station Island* or John Riley's *Czargrad* resonate with Eliot's project of spiritual restoration. Hence, Riley's poem begins with the mention of the 'blossoming / of lilac-bush' (Riley 605), a phrase that serves as the title of this paper, and reminds us of the lilacs that are present at the

beginning of *The Waste Land*. Unlike Riley, Heaney, or Eliot, other poets envision this project in more secular terms. The diversity of the visions rising out of Eliot's wasteland outweighs the ideological or religious affiliations of the original poet. Hejinian identifies that the senselessness that Eliot projects is not meant to be discouraging. What one encounters is actually 'the infinite potential for meaningfulness' as presented through a language that is 'not-yet-sense' (Hejinian 2000, 164).

One remarkable proof of Eliot's malleable influence can be found in Philip Larkin's 'The Whitsun Weddings'. Given that Larkin's professed stance was anti-modernist, it is unexpected that the poem can concur with Eliot's vision. But the critic John Osborne notes that in many ways 'The Whitsun Weddings' mirrors *The Waste Land*, be it the description of major rivers being polluted by industrial waste, or the reference to London and its blackened walls (Osborne 129). Most importantly, both poems open with the atmosphere of heat and drought and end with the promise of rejuvenating rain (129).

Discussion

Lytard regards postmodernism as characterized by an incredulity towards metanarratives. Eliot's profession of faith in theological agency, particularly the Christian divinity, does not coalesce with the attitude of postmodernism. Thus, Oppen's call for a 'de-elioted' (Oppen 1990, 31) poetry is symbolic of an era that has come to regard metanarratives with incredulity. Instead, Oppen's *Of Being Numerous* would speak of the plurality of being and therefore the culture of micro-narratives. The lasting include of *The Waste Land* tells us that while the later generations may not always share in Eliot's belief, the longing for some redemptive presence as expressed by Eliot is still a compelling idea for the later generations. Not every poet has shared Eliot's spiritual belief. However, the diagnosis of the human condition as available in the poem has been its most compelling resource.

The current paper has limited itself to the reception of *The Waste Land* as found in the works of poets from England and the United States. Further research in this direction can be undertaken by studying the influence of Eliot's poem on poets from other nations of the world. In particular, the Kallol group of poets in Bengal incorporated the Modernist aesthetics of Eliot, and many European poets have similarly found interesting aspects to the poem. The study can further be extended by categorizing the responses according to the gender, class, and nationality of the poets. In particular, the responses from women

poets like Sylvia Plath or Elizabeth Bishop would merit a separate study. Further, from just *The Waste Land*, we can extend the survey to the reception of the other works of Eliot, such as poems like ‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock’, ‘Hollow Men’ and *Four Quartets* and plays like *Murder in the Cathedral* and *The Elder Statesman*.

Conclusion

The intention of the paper is to demonstrate how poets often develop their voices by engaging with other poets. A poem is very often in dialogue with other poems, and this exchange can be understood when attention is paid to the imagery and form of the poem. As the line from *Czargrad* which has served as the title of this paper illustrates, poets can take a cue from specific lines or words used by other poets, and an awareness of the general poetic tradition can let us know how this dialogue is being extended via multiple poems. This process of dialogue keeps multiple works alive in other works, and Eliot himself has been one of the biggest proponents of this practice, as intertextuality is a key feature of his poetic composition.

With time, we can see a rarefication of the original work, as the particularities of the ideological position of the poet become less relevant. As authorial intention thus recedes in the background, aspects that are universal in the work come to the surface. The same process also ensures that works that are void of any universal feature will pass into oblivion. Examples like that of Larkin and Hejinein show that the universality of the poem *The Waste Land* lies in the fact that it can speak to so many people across time and space, and serve as an indelible model for poets seeking to capture the spirit of an age. So, time has attested to *The Waste Land*’s claim to be a masterpiece of English literature. Now, in the post-covid world, Eliot’s images are as relatable and poignant as ever.

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