

From April to *Shantih*: Man and Nature in T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*

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Abstract: On the basis of an eco-critical perspective, this work aims at investigating the relationship between man and nature in T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, illustrating the manner in which it may evolve from deterioration and sterility to a harmonious organic communication, mystically achieved — after a necessary spiritual detachment — in an unreal dimension, where a transcendental plenitude and a genuine nature substitute the emptiness of the modern world. After a succinct introduction, where the necessary coordinates about the text are given, this paper will focus on how man and nature mutually influence each other, describing the landscaped sceneries of a reality completely devoid of ideal values and uniquely devoured by alienation and moral vacuity. Finally, it will unfold Eliot's alternative escape from the emptiness of the modern world and his path towards salvation.

Keywords: Modernism; T. S. Eliot; *The Waste Land*; Ecocriticism; Man; Nature

In their Preface to the undergraduate volume of Oxford Poetry 1926, Charles Plumb and W. H. Auden brazenly stated, "if it is a natural preference to inhabit a room with casements opening upon Fairyland, one at least of them should open upon *the Waste Land*" (Plumb and Auden 3). By reading this concise quotation, one may assume that Eliot's poem is concerned with supernatural and unrealistic features, which linguistically and thematically construct a troublesome but very intriguing text. However, the title does not grant any euphoric preconception since the reader is instantly conveyed the image of a barren scenery which anticipates the rotten condition of a world that is reduced to a mere *land*. Here is the modern land, a wasteland, carefully depicted in every elementary aspect (air, water, earth and fire) and

proposed as the emblem of a decayed, sterile universe where man will never achieve regeneration.

This was the consequence of the pressure of the new and more advanced technologies and also of the dramatic changes in the greatest urban spaces of the early twentieth century (Levenson 88). Admirably recording these latter, and denouncing the sense of inhuman desolation which pervades London, Eliot's poem also represents his personal and poetic journey from empirical involvement to spiritual meditation and mysticism, that 'visionary power' which allowed him to "transcend the 'normal equipoise' and perceive the 'systematic' interconnectedness of all things, earthly and ethereal, past and present" (Childs, pref.).

Indeed, *The Waste Land* bequeaths a dismal atmosphere which is actually the air that each huge modern *polis* can breathe, an aesthetic and spiritual desolation which unleashes vivid and transient images, distills brief pure moments of commotion, but continues to point out the presence of unnamed people with sordid and feeble pleasures, of indistinct individuals with failed ideals, of a mock reality devoid of any coherence or seriousness, where men are completely separated from their own lives (Wilson 102-06). 'The Burial of the Dead', the first section of the poem, introduces the civilisation of *The Waste Land*, one which oddly considers April "the cruellest month" (line 1), incapable of rejoicing in the new birth and regeneration that warm spring will bring, preferring, on the contrary, the barrenness of the dead winter and the frigid atmosphere of a world where generation is not possible. The usual connection between April and the rebirth of Nature is therefore cracked. The title of the section seems to highlight this fracture through its multiple references to a mournful circumstance: 'The Burial of the Dead' specifically indicates the memorial service celebrated according to the Anglican rite (whose appellation is *The Order for The Burial of the Dead*). It also mythologically evokes the burial of the effigy of the god, which represented a pledge of a resurgence in the fertility

rites. Still, notably, the headline relates to the burial of the dead in the modern world as a metaphorical sepulture of *hollow men* who refuse to awaken to the drama of life (Serpieri 84).

In the squalid atmosphere of *The Waste Land*, which “suggests that as the city lost touch with the land, with the rhythms and the psychic nourishment of nature, a spiritual meaning was lost” (Lehan 134), the reader is thus led through a desert landscape which mirrors the interior state of its inhabitants: it is a place governed by aridity, both literal and symbolic, a perpetual draught which still awaits regeneration, a rainfall of water that, nevertheless, does not seem to pour down.

Man ardently craves water in such a barren land dotted only with “dry stone” (line 24). The dearth of roots, which fail to sprout and thus prevent both spiritual and vegetal life from renewing, provokes a decomposition of a world where neither a concrete recovery nor a metaphysical resurrection can be granted since “the dead men lost their bones” (line 116) and are not able to exploit them for their ultimate rebirth. It, therefore, sounds apodictic that those dead individuals are a projection of the living, living dead fatally bound to a larval existence, exiled to the infernal City, reduced to mere boneless, empty men.

The hollowness characterising the very essence of these individuals, who are “neither/Living nor dead” (lines 39-40), broadens to embrace their whole experience, one which “remains held in suspension in the memory to criticise and render barren the world of ordinary emotion” (Ward 80): an experience made of dead passions and desires. These ineffective feelings are remembered with tender regret but also with pain.

The tempestuous and overwhelming lasciviousness that unavoidably corrodes the individuals and their amorous bondage is submerged by a destructive river, which shares the natural element of water as a ruinous and detrimental factor, one which keeps bringing and bearing the enormous harm of humankind, continuously baptised as the origin of existential turpitude. The “Sweet Thames” (line 176) of the third section may epitomise this decay, the

river projecting and witnessing different epochs of human vices, first and foremost lust. Sweating “oil and tar” (line 267), filled with markers of trade, consumption, and deforestation, the personified “dull canal” (line 189) also ferries the indifferent violation and stagnation of sexuality: in its autumnal ambient setting, “the nymphs are departed” (line 175), depriving the contemporary age of mythical, dazzling decency. Indeed, the gone-by splendour is now replaced by “empty bottles, sandwich papers, / silk handkerchiefs, cardboard boxes, cigarette ends” (lines 177-78), all nasty testimonies of the squalid, contaminated spectacle of the urban civilisation.

The river cannot foster any redemption or regeneration, its waters exteriorising the intimate pollution of contemporary men, who are now used to “fishing in the dull canal / On a winter evening round behind the gas-house” (lines 189-90), and to seeking their spiritual catch in an industrially contaminated medium. Instead of promising rebirth, thus water only guarantees a pernicious death, which men timorously ought to be afraid of: “Fear death by water” (line 55), the scary admonishment of a deceitful fortune-teller who has supplanted the Biblical prophecies, forewarns the deluded believers of the dangers that the natural element might dispense. Moreover, the peril is even exacerbated by the revelation of their (un)fortunate card, “the drowned Phoenician Sailor” (line 47), for whom the “current under sea” (line 315) has prepared a sepulchre.

However, if the sea (and, by analogy, water) constitutes the *ναηγοῦ τάφος*,⁴ fire (and, *mutatis mutandis*, land) represents the hopeful possibility of salvation, its desert, rocky environment paradoxically allowing the mystic Eucharist and Biblical purification (Serpieri 63). The messages of a potential catharsis for the corrupted individuals of *The Waste Land* are, in fact, entrusted to Buddha’s burning flames and to the peremptory Upanishad Thunder, which, at a forlorn point of desperation and dryness, when the entire nature hungrily “waited for rain” (line 396), propitiously speaks. Accompanied by favourable rainfall, yet its

actualisation occurs in a world “far distant, over Himavant” (line 397), within an ecosystem that is sheltered from urban decadence.

But, while the spiritual moment of dialogue between men and God, between the earth and the Heavens, seems to portend a new beginning, the wastelanders continue to live in a liminal space, sitting “upon the shore / Fishing” (lines 423-24), waiting to be purged of their sins in the purgatorial “*foco*” [“fire” (line 427)] which, nonetheless, has relinquished “the arid plain behind” (line 424) them. The hope for a potential transformation of the subjects, who, “*uti chelidon*” [“as the swallow” (line 428)], might regenerate in the spring of a non-cruel April, nevertheless obliges them to “set (their) lands in order” (line 425), even though their historical macrocosm “is falling down” (line 426): like “*la tour abolie*” [“the tower in ruins” (line 429)], indeed the whole tradition is collapsing, and men can eventually realise that their experience is uniquely “a heap of broken images” (line 22) (Sabbadini 374).

Here is Eliot’s *Unreal City*, which outstandingly accommodates the complex of simulacra and contingent truths resulting from the virtual appearances of metropolitan experience (Yang 204), where lust and desire constitute “the inescapable starting point for a mythical cycle of decay” (Potter 139). Contemplating both the devastating effects of the First World War on individual bodies and minds and the deadened landscape they inhabit, *The Waste Land* unfolds the psychological damages of fragile individuals whose insanity often extends to potential physical traumas, exposing the suffering of unconscious victims whose misery cannot be relieved (Badenhausen 147-48). Where, thus, can life be either discovered or, whenever possible, recovered?

The physical and spiritual desertification evoked and reiterated by the poem, from the initial title to the final line, logically infers the inevitable waiting for a redeeming moment of fertilisation, which might eventually allow the evasion from the harmful symptoms of modern malaise. The painful pursuit for a sign of redemption and fecundity which *the Waste*

Land craves, yearning for that “spring rain” (line 4), which cruel April delays conceding, in a ravaged London crawling with human vices and natural putrescence, clearly cannot be solved in the decayed modern world, too entrenched in its heretic and slothful doctrine (Sultan and Shihab 95).

The quest must therefore diverge from the mundane earth towards an alternative realm, an *Unreal* environment where the current state of degeneracy, flaunting selfishness and lust, can be annihilated, where all fragments can reassemble in order to recover the lost integrity, where “you feel free” (line 17) from the torments of the terrene world (Bellour 428).

The ideal resolution “to revive the exhausted wells of Western Christianity and, thereby, Western civilisation” (Spurr 67), is thus assigned to the incantatory “Shantih” (line 433), which solemnly concludes the poem, “The Peace which passeth understanding” (Eliot, “Collected Poems” 76),⁵ formal Sanskrit ending to prayer in the Upanishads. In the arduous attempt to reconcile the ineffable gap in the interrelation among fragmented ruins, the threefold formula comes to be the only answer to the paralysed contemporary condition: a benediction, the assertion of and wish for peace, also constitutes *The Waste Land*’s ultimate appeal to wisdom, enacting a transcendental movement from the false spring of illusive world towards the harmony that heralds liberation from rebirth (Kearns 210). “The thing now runs from ‘April...’ to ‘shantih’” (Pound 234), as Pound declared, and the miraculous regeneration of the dead men makes its way through an oncoming purgatorial path, one in which the pilgrims abandon civilization and its history in search of a new life.

In conclusion, by both pointing out the alienating urban experience of modernity and noticing its consequent harmful impact on individual and cosmic well-being, Eliot’s *The Waste Land* assumes the configuration of a journey through scenarios that aim at communicating the negative effects of a potential separation from the natural world, and

calls for a renewed environmental responsibility for the benefit of human and non-human life.

The contemporary world, where frantic urban rhythms and loud human noises have supplanted the flourishing voices and colours of the garden—now downgraded to a barren, dry desert –, ends up configuring as the actual projection of a depersonalised humanity, a universe of shattered identities whose life is reduced to an inexorable, repetitive sequence.

The infecundity typifying the modern realm epitomises an objective situation whereby a personal paralysis is mirrored in a broken natural landscape, where the distant glimpse of a providential spring turns out to be the destructive flux of an impetuous river which carries along the shattered hopes of impotent subjects, a powerful stream whose waters can only guarantee a mournful fatality, and whose turpitude reflects the dirty consciousness of hollow people, floating wrecks submerged by the eternal force of lust.

The infernal contemporary den of iniquity, entirely dotted with harsh rocks which, far from proffering a shelter, exemplify the arid souls of faithless and inept men, becomes the valley of tears for desperate penitents who urgently necessitate a religious renewal, in order to be purified and then reconstitute the frail natural framework where they abide.

Indeed, it is only when men have abandoned the corrupted, sordid region of materiality, and have gradually conquered a detached, spiritual state of sanctity, that their effective communication with the surroundings can occur. Therefore, if the sinful, temporal world must be indubitably evaded, then an *atemporal* dimension must be achieved, a mystic zone where what is actual in time and place intersects with eternity, and where people can individuate and enjoy their true, emotional ties with the beauty of the earth.

This transcendental movement—synthesised in Eliot's final work, *Four Quartets*, where the craved reunion between human being and Divinity eventually takes place, and where each element is integrated within the universe—allows the plausibility of a linkage

between nature (i.e. environment) and mysticism, and thus the exhibition of a new and different overview of *The Waste Land* in exquisitely environmental terms.

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