

INTRODUCTION

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For Ezra Pound, literature is “news that STAYS news” (Pound 1987, 29). Does *The Waste Land* stand the test of time one hundred years after its publication? What does it mean to us now? Is it still a revolutionary poem? Does it mean something different in the twenty-first century than in the twentieth? After the many exegeses, which have become an industry, is the poem still the avantgarde revolutionary poem it was in 1922? In what way did it influence later generations of poets? Thinking of the one hundred years that have elapsed, is the poem as timely in 2022 as it was in 1922? Do the voices we hear in the poem speak from the same fears and weariness that people have one century later? This commemorative issue of *The Waste Land*, as it celebrates its centennial, seeks to provide answers to the many questions the poem raises today.

When *The Waste Land* was published in 1922, the *annus mirabilis* of Anglo-American letters, it became an “instant” classic. As soon as it was published, it enshrined Eliot as one of the most authoritative voices as poet and critic of his time. Pound recognized the poem as “the justification of the ‘movement,’ of our modern experiment, since 1900” (Pound 1950, 180),¹ which is to say that *The Waste Land* epitomizes not only Eliot’s personal achievement, but the coming of age of modernism as a movement, the investment of twenty years in the creation of the modernist idiom.

A polyglot poem, written in seven languages, *The Waste Land* is an encyclopedic epic ranging across different cultures and literary periods. From “April is the cruellest month” to “Shantih shantih shanti”, the poem spans 433 lines, full of allusions to Hindu, Buddhist and Christian texts, ancient and modern literature, and popular music. With its juxtapositions, collages, unprecedented shifts in tone, time and space, *The Waste Land* shaped a new poetic language based on the technique of non-figurative visual arts. The dazzling gaps, ruptures and discontinuities marked a turning point in English poetry, a watershed as important as that of the advent of the *Lyrical Ballads* in 1798. In his relentless experiment with form, style, meter, and voice, Eliot did away with stable literary conventions, with patterns of form and style, while forging new paradigms for poetic expression and systems of belief. Soon *The Waste Land* became part of modern consciousness. It is without doubt one of the most significant poems of the twentieth century, presiding over poetic language well into the twenty-first.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25145/j.recaesin.2022.85.01>

REVISTA CANARIA DE ESTUDIOS INGLESES, 85; octubre 2022, pp. 11-17; ISSN: e-2530-8335



The Waste Land is a succession of dramatic monologues in different voices, serving as a survey course in comparative literature of the European tradition and beyond. It provides a poetic illustration of Eliot's "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1919), a text that can be considered his modernist manifesto, where he defined his concept of tradition and of the mind of Europe, "which abandons nothing *en route*, which does not superannuate or wither Shakespeare, or Homer, or the rock drawings of the Magdalenian draughtsmen" (Eliot 2014a, 107) – a mind which also plunges its roots into archaic cultures and Oriental religious and philosophical texts.

The Waste Land is also an illustration of a new method of composition, "the mythical method" (Eliot 2014b, 479). In "Ulysses, Order and Myth" (1923), Eliot credits Joyce with its invention, but the article indirectly expounds the principles that informed his own poem. Eliot defined the mythical method as a "continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity," which implied "a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history" (Eliot 2014b, 478). Joyce used Homer's *Odyssey* as a plan for/of his *Ulysses* (1923); Eliot, in turn resorted to the web of classical and anthropological sources in which he grounds *The Waste Land*. Thus, as he remarks in his notes to the poem, the plan, title and set of values draw on Frazer's *The Golden Bough* and Jessie Weston's *From Ritual to Romance*, two studies that center on the quest for the font of life and regeneration. *The Waste Land* is a vortex of many interweaving paths constructed from fragments of history, pagan rituals, medieval legends and romance, biblical journeys and modern expeditions, which melt into the present consciousness of the narrating voice. Action becomes archetypal, transcends the boundaries of a single culture and epoch. The various narratives unfold simultaneously in historical, mythical and psychological times, and take on the shape of an internalized quest for consciousness. In its search for origins and identity, *The Waste Land* looks beyond the founding monuments of Western tradition into the more remote beginnings of Eastern culture – it refers to the Upanishads and Buddhist scriptures – and further back into archaic myths.

From the very beginning, *The Waste Land* became a cultural icon of modern pessimism and post-war desolation. For Edmund Wilson, it expressed the spiritual "drouth" of the modern world. Eliot was "speaking not only for a personal distress, but for the starvation of a whole civilization – for people grinding at barren office routine in the cells of gigantic cities, drying their souls in eternal toil" (Wilson 2004, 86). I.A. Richards saw in the poem what continues to be the prevailing interpretation today: the expression of a "sense of desolation, of uncertainty, of futility, of the groundlessness of aspirations, of the vanity of endeavor, and a thirst for a life-giving water which seems suddenly to have failed" (Richards 2004, 140). Today we still read *The Waste Land* as a post-apocalyptic cry, "one of the most

¹ Pound in a letter to his former teacher Felix. E. Schelling written on July 9, 1922: "Eliot's *Waste Land* is I think the justification of the 'movement,' of our modern experiment, since 1900".



terrifying poems of a terrifying century” (Bush 1984, 71). Yet Eliot dismissed the pessimism scholars attributed to a generation as a “simple grouse against life” (Eliot 1971, 1). In time, the radical poet of impersonality proved to be quite personal, in his confessions of his own suffering and of the marital crisis out of which the poem was born. This autobiographical dimension is strengthened with the publication of the sealed correspondence between Eliot and his lover, Emily Hale, on January 2, 2020,² through which light has been shed on the last mysteries of Eliot’s poems.

A hundred years after its publication, *The Waste Land* continues to make an impression on us; it has become part of our postmodern consciousness. Because it addresses the eternal questions of human beings about their position in the universe, it is timely as well as timeless. Its poetic expression and ongoing relevance apply to “current events” as well as to the articulation of selfhood. This emptiness resonates in the music and rhythm of the poem, thereby sustaining language in a way that creates the foundation for renewal. It expresses despair, yet this despair is projected in a framework of poetry that creates a potential foundation for renewal while beautifully providing its readers with perspective and sustenance.

Although the many explications and exegeses have tamed its spirit, the poem still strikes a student reader in a much the same way that it struck readers in 1922. Its novelty may have faded, yet its power remains.

This special issue, dedicated to the hundredth anniversary of Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, presents new global perspectives of this epochal poem, one that has become a hallmark of modernity, and which remains an icon of our postmodern age. This centennial issue is divided into two parts: Part I comprises fourteen critical, scholarly, essays on *The Waste Land* by scholars from five different countries (Spain, USA, UK, Germany, and Russia). Part II is dedicated to creative artwork in commemoration of Eliot’s poem, including poetry written by four poets from the USA, Spain and Mexico, paintings by two artists from Germany and Spain, and a special section on music (the recording of a recital titled “Then Spoke the Waste Land: Songs and Fragments,” performed in 2022).

The essays reflect various approaches of scholars from different generations, renowned Eliotians, who have shaped our understanding of the poet as well as a younger generation of scholars who approach the vibrancy and complexities of the poem from different angles and that attest to its freshness even today. While these authors raise new questions, address some continuing ones, or offer new discoveries on Eliot’s text, they consistently open his work to avenues worthy of further exploration. This special issue offers international and cross-cultural perspectives on *Eliot’s The*

² To be edited by John Haffenden, Eliot’s *Letters to Emily Hale* will be published in 2022 (see especially, Brooker 2022).



Waste Land, covering areas of interest ranging from poetry criticism to literary theory, translation studies and philosophy.

Readers already familiar with Eliot scholarship will recognize the names of distinguished Eliot scholars in this volume: Jewel Spears Brooker, Michael Alexander, Clive Wilmer, Charles Altieri, and Teresa Gibert, as well as well-established critics in other fields of research such as Fiona Sampson, poet and nineteenth century biographer and critic, and Francisco Collado, an eminent Spanish scholar in the field of the postmodern novel. This special issue also hosts a younger, highly accomplished generation of scholars such as Natalia Carbajosa, Rhett Forman, Leonor María Martínez, Santiago Rodríguez Guerrero-Strachan, or Anna Kurasova. They not only present an eclectic, international gathering of ideas, but they also invigorate Eliot studies in new areas.

Jewel Spears Brooker's "Inside / Outside: Eliot, Perspective, and the Modernist Moment" approaches the poem from a philosophical perspective and enquires into the possibility of knowing time while still living in time; it argues that Eliot advocates, in his prose and in poems such as "Gerontion" and *The Waste Land*, the need to adopt a binary perspective: a platform inside history based on the philosophy of F.H. Bradley, which ensures its veracity, as well as a point of view outside history, based on James Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, which guarantees its understanding. Charles Altieri investigates the way in which Anglo-American modernist poets distinguish themselves from their nineteenth century predecessors in their rendering of subjectivity through the philosophical lens of William James, F.H. Bradley and Hegel. Altieri defines Eliot's impersonality as "transpersonality," which consists in an interweaving of subject and object within experience, leading Eliot to a concrete poetic language, "an invitation to feel in terms of what is experienced rather than in terms of the needs of the ego." This faith in concreteness and immediate sensuousness changes mere evocative presentations of situations or direct statements of feelings into a new language of impersonality and experience, that is, of subjective states, different from mere interpretation: "What matters is not who the self is, but how it can find a ground that resists the value of diversity and cultivation, and instead offers the possibility of total commitment." Clive Wilmer, a distinguished poet and critic, traces Eliot's evolution from his earlier poems, "Prufrock" and "Gerontion." In "Language as Experience in 'Gerontion' and *The Waste Land*," he pursues the notion of experience and language in Eliot's dramatic monologues in *The Waste Land*, illustrating his debt to his Victorian predecessors, and to the versification of the Jacobean playwrights as well as to Jules Laforgue's irony; they all helped Eliot create a poem of many fragments and voices that coalesce in one experiencing consciousness. Dídac Llorens-Cubedo further the investigation of the dramatic nature of *The Waste Land*, reading the poem as a proto-dramatic text and a springboard for Eliot's future career as a dramatist, while tracing the symbolism and imagery of the poem in his later dramas.

In his moving memoir, poet and reputed medieval scholar, Michael Alexander, focuses on the impact and reputation Eliot's poem had in the nineteen twenties in literary circles, especially from the Bloomsbury group of writers. He traces Eliot's source for the Grail legend in Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte D'arthur* (1470)



and unearths the many biblical connotations of Eliot's symbols. He focuses on the Christian dimension of the poem, which most critics overlook, and re-interprets the final message of a poem famous for its apocalyptic pessimism, providing an in-depth analysis that changes the paradigm through which the poem has been read until now. Along the same lines, poet and critic Rhett Forman's "Reading *The Waste Land* in Our Ideological Age" makes a case for the religious and spiritual message of the poem, which has quite often been minimized. Pursuing the theoretical implications of allusions, as studied by Robert Alter's *The Pleasures of Reading in an Ideological Age* (1989) and Ziva Ben-Porat's "The Poetics of Literary Allusion" (1976), Forman focuses on "The Burial of the Dead" as a case in point, highlighting the hidden religious connotations and many Biblical ramifications in relation to the "The Order for the Burial of the Dead" from The Book of Common Prayer. Viorica Patea's "'With Inviolable Voice': Eliot's Redeeming Word in *The Waste Land*" advances a reading of the poem's despair and notion of selfhood, taking Soren Kierkegaard's *Sickness unto Death* (1849) as a reference. This article offers a reading of the poem's "despair" in the light of Kierkegaard's Christian existentialism as being congenial with the philosophy of the Vedanta and Buddhism in which Eliot grounds the poem. In this sense, Eliot is a twentieth-century Dante who goes beyond the frontiers of European culture in a quest for its origins. Eliot does not pursue a form of syncretism; he preserves the specificity and concreteness of each system of belief while showing the self's call to the transcendent which is a common impulse, regardless of the culture one belongs to.

Leonor Martínez's "Reading the More-Than-Human World in T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*" opens a new approach to Eliot's poem from the most recent eco-critical theoretical presuppositions. She interprets *The Waste Land* as an eco-poem that anticipates the challenges of the Anthropocene, focusing her attention on the multiple references to waste and environmental degradation in the aftermath of the Great War, which brought the world to the brink of collapse. She contends that, in a secularized atmosphere, Eliot seeks solace in the "more than human world," which includes nature and the transcendent. Poet and scholar Fiona Sampson and Francisco Collado-Rodríguez peruse the poem from a postmodern perspective. Sampson's "*The Waste Land: Meaning and Multiplicity*" views the poem from within the British twenty-first century lyric tradition, and argues that the current mode of contemporary postmodern poetics—keen on the proliferation of meanings, multiplicity of sources of authority or identity politics—represent a counter example to *The Waste Land*'s need for coherence. From a different angle Collado, in "*The Waste Land and the Release of Social Energy*," underscores Eliot's appeal to postmodern writers. He offers "an Eliotean reading of Thomas Pynchon's fiction" and pursues Eliot's bearing on Pynchon's oeuvre, highlighting the latter's adoption of many Eliotian symbols, motifs and images. The narrator's bouncy character, the condition of some characters as both living and dead, the evocation of the violet hour, and the appearance of Belladonna or the "lady of situations": all these are constants in Pynchon's complex experimental style throughout his narrative oeuvre.

The last group of essays center on Eliot's influence. Anna Kurasova undertakes a comparative approach between Eliot's poem and the poetry of the



great Russian poet Anna Akhmatova, who believed Eliot was a kindred spirit. In her comparison, Kurasova finds another source for Eliot's "third" and traces it back to Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*. The remaining three essays focus on translation and Eliot's bearing on Spanish poets. Santiago Rodríguez Guerrero-Strachan, in "Romantic Eliot: The Reception of T.S. Eliot in Spain in the Second Half of the Twentieth Century," offers a general overview of Eliot's reception in Spain and the poets he has influenced, with a particular interest in three Spanish poets: José Ángel Valente, Andrés Sánchez Robayna and Antonio Colinas. He contends that postwar poets looked up to Eliot as a mentor who showed them how to renew poetic language and argues that Spanish poets considered Eliot not a modernist, but a romantic forebear. Natalia Carbajosa's "*The Waste Land* in Spanish a Hundred Years Later: The Case of Claudio Rodríguez" follows the path of influence through translation but not of Eliot's admirers but of those poets who were distanced from the Eliotian doctrine, like the Spanish poet Claudio Rodríguez, who was nevertheless influenced by him and who translated *The Waste Land* and other poems. Last but not least, Teresa Gibert both revisits and extends her pioneering work on Spanish translations of Eliot's poetry with "*The Waste Land* in Spanish Translation (1930-2022)," discussing the many linguistic challenges that thirty-five translators, poets, amateurs, and scholars have faced, and the solutions they have come up with.

As editors of this special issue, we would like to thank both the *Revista Canaria de Estudios Ingleses* and the scholars, poets and artists whose work and enthusiasm have made it possible. Their contributions attest, one hundred years after its publication, to the richness, vitality and contemporary significance of T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*.³



³ This special issue has received funding from the research project "T.S. Eliot's Drama from Spain: Translation, Critical Study, Performance (TEATREL-SP) (PGC2018-097143-A-I00)".

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