

THE WASTE LAND: POTENTIAL DRAMA, PERSISTENT POETRY*

Dídac Llorens-Cubedo
UNED (Spain)

ABSTRACT

Late in his career, when he was fully devoted to dramatic writing, T.S. Eliot made the provocative statement that his early poetry was “striving ... toward the condition of drama.” This paper examines dramatic elements in *The Waste Land* (1922): scenes, voices/characters, and dialogue. In analysing the poem as a proto-dramatic text, it also considers Eliot’s future career as a dramatist (mid-1930s-late 1950s), as well as his contemporary essays on drama, and the unfinished play *Sweeney Agonistes* (1926-1927). Finally, this study explores the pervading presence of “Waste Land” imagery, moods, and diction in Eliot’s later plays. The dramatic quality of *The Waste Land* prefigures the plays, while these –as modern verse drama– hark back to the poem.

KEYWORDS: dialogue, plays, scenes, T.S. Eliot, voices.

LA TIERRA BALDÍA: TEATRO EN POTENCIA,
POESÍA PERSISTENTE

RESUMEN

Hacia el final de su carrera, ya plenamente dedicado a la escritura teatral, T.S. Eliot hizo la provocadora afirmación de que su poesía temprana “luchaba por convertirse en teatro”. Este artículo se centra en elementos dramáticos de *La tierra baldía* (1922): escenas, voces/personajes y diálogos. Al analizar el poema como texto proto-dramático, también tiene en cuenta la futura carrera como dramaturgo de Eliot (desde los años treinta hasta los cincuenta), así como sus ensayos contemporáneos sobre teatro y la pieza teatral inacabada *Sweeney Agonista* (1926-1927). Por último, este estudio se ocupa de la permanencia de imágenes, atmósferas y dicción propias de *La tierra baldía* en el teatro posterior de Eliot. El carácter dramático del poema anticipa las obras teatrales, que a su vez evocan el poema al ser ejemplos de teatro poético moderno.

PALABRAS CLAVE: diálogo, obras teatrales, escenas, T.S. Eliot, voces.

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INTRODUCTION

Logically, this exploration should begin in or around 1922, the year of the publication of *The Waste Land*. However, our point of departure will be 1959, towards the end of T.S. Eliot's career. On the occasion of the premiere of his last play, *The Elder Statesman*, in Kassel (Germany), Eliot wrote a note for the production's programme where he looked back on his formative years:

The theatre has always been of first importance in my career as a writer. Among the English influences upon my development as a poet, the verse dramatists of the age of Shakespeare took first place: many of my early poems appear, in retrospect, to have been striving, so to speak, toward the condition of drama.¹ (Eliot 2019a, 368)

The Elizabethan dramatists whom Eliot acknowledges were also the subject of insightful and influential essays: in 1919 alone, he wrote "Ben Jonson," "Hamlet," and "Christopher Marlowe." Furthermore, well-known poems from Eliot's first two published books, such as "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" (*Prufrock and Other Observations*, 1917) and "Portrait of a Lady" (*Poems*, 1920), rely on the dramatic monologue—the result of the combined influences of Robert Browning and Jules Laforgue—and are structured as scenes.

Given that Eliot's "early poems" are those written before his adoption of Anglo-Catholicism in 1927 –a factor that was to have a decisive bearing on his oeuvre– my claim is that *The Waste Land* does "strive to the condition of drama." Accordingly, I consider its dramatic features (scenes, voices/characters, and dialogue), seeking to establish connections with relevant contemporaneous works by Eliot, including his criticism on verse drama, and his unfinished play *Sweeney Agonistes*. Finally, I examine echoes of *The Waste Land* in the plays Eliot wrote as a committed dramatist from the 1930s onwards, and which bring to fruition the "condition of drama."

THE WASTE LAND, "STRIVING TOWARD THE CONDITION OF DRAMA"

Mayer argues that the "scenically conceived structures" of some of Eliot's early poems reappear in *The Waste Land*, "a kind of five-act 'play'" (1989, 244, 251). It follows from these theatrical metaphors of the poem as a play, and of its parts

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¹ The phrase "condition of drama" alludes to Walter Pater's dictum that "all art constantly aspires towards the condition of music," formulated in his essay "The School of Giorgione" (1873).



TABLE 1. PROPOSAL FOR A DIVISION OF *THE WASTE LAND* INTO SCENES

I. THE BURIAL OF THE DEAD	II. A GAME OF CHESS	III. THE FIRE SERMON	IV. DEATH BY WATER	V. WHAT THE THUNDER SAID
I.1. Spring opening	II.1. Neurotic woman	III.1. Sweet Thames	[Single scene]	V.1. Lamentation in the desert
I.2. Marie Larisch's recollections	and husband	III.2. Fishing in the dull canal		V.2. The third walking beside you
I.3. Prophetic vision	II.2. The pub	III.3. Unreal City: Mr. Eugenides' proposition		V.3. Falling towers
I.4. Hyacinth garden		III.4. The violet hour		V.4. The Chapel Perilous
I.5. Madame Sosostris' cards		III.5. Lower Thames Street evocations		V.5. The voice of the thunder
I.6. Unreal City: Stetson on London Bridge		III.6. The Thames daughters' songs		V.6. Fragments shored against ruins
		III.7. Burning (Buddha and St. Augustine)		

as acts, that a division into scenes is possible. *Scene* can be defined as a dramatic unit representing “actions happening in one place and at one time” (Baldick 1990, 300). The events in each scene will direct the dramatic action of the play towards its resolution. Such narrative progression does not occur in *The Waste Land*, a modernist poem that unfolds “shifting from scene to scene, very much like Pound in *The Cantos* and Eisenstein, Vertov, and Kuleshov in their films” (Probstein 2008: 183-184) –film, like drama, being a scene-based art form. At best, we could identify a quest whose protagonist, “through a strategy of dramatic encounter” (Mayer 1989, 244), deals with a personal crisis, witnesses discouraging circumstances and interactions, and finally glimpses hope. Although some structural units in Eliot’s poem lack action –which is also true of certain forms of contemporary drama– they may all be considered scenes on account of their cumulative contribution towards the quester’s transformation.

Scenes are conventionally delimited by “a curtain, a black-out, or a brief emptying of the stage” (Baldick 1990: 300), and, we may add, by the entrance or exit of characters. If we extend the metaphor, the opening of a new scene in *The Waste Land* is marked by a change that may involve one or several of these elements: speaker(s), tone, style, register, metrics, quotation/allusion, imagery, focus, time, or place. Table 1 is a proposal for a division of Eliot’s poem into scenes.

Most of these divisions conform to the unity of place characteristic of scenes. We know that “the Waste Land” is an archetypal motif taken from Jessie L. Weston’s *From Ritual to Romance* (1920), a study of Arthurian literature.² But we should bear in mind that the title of Eliot’s poem primarily designates a place: a land become waste because of the illness of the king, where regeneration can be achieved if the

² “Waste Land” is not italicised when the reference is to this archetypal image as described by Weston, and not to Eliot’s poem.



ruler is restored to health. One of Eliot's modern adaptations of this mythic space is the "Unreal City," recognisable as London, the unreality of whose urban wasteland is the result of its atmosphere of alienation and materialism. The main poetic speaker, a perplexed flaneur in "The Burial of the Dead" (the poem's opening section), is familiar with its streets and landmarks:

Unreal City,
Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,
A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,
I had not thought death had undone so many.
Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled,
And each man fixed his eyes before his feet.
Flowed up the hill and down King William Street,
To where Saint Mary Woolnoth kept the hours
With a dead sound on the final stroke of nine. (Eliot 2015, 56-57)

If we prioritise space as a criterion for outlining scenes, we could use locations of the Unreal City as identifying labels: "the London Bridge scene" (to which the above lines belong, and where the poetic speaker watches the City workers, recognising an old acquaintance, Stetson), "the Sweet Thames scene" in "The Fire Sermon" (where the same speaker, on the riverbank, laments the reigning desolation), or "the pub scene" in "A Game of Chess," where one evening at the end of the war, a patron (presumably a woman) reports a tense conversation with a friend, while the publican announces closing time:

When Lil's husband got demobbed, I said—
I didn't mince my words, I said to her myself,
HURRY UP PLEASE ITS TIME
Now Albert's coming back, make yourself a bit smart.
He'll want to know what you done with that money he gave you
To get yourself some teeth. He did, I was there.
You have them all out, Lil, and get a nice set,
He said, I swear, I can't bear to look at you.
And no more can't I, I said, and think of poor Albert,
He's been in the army four years, he wants a good time,
And if you don't give it him, there's others will, I said.
Oh is there, she said. Something o' that, I said.
Then I'll know who to thank, she said, and gave me a straight look. (Eliot 2015, 60-61)

The Unreal City is arguably the most emblematic spatial setting in *The Waste Land*, but not all scenes in the poem are urban or distinctly set in London: the dreamlike hyacinth garden in "The Burial of the Dead," for example, the richly furnished room described at the beginning of "A Game of Chess," or the rocky desert we traverse in "What the Thunder Said." These scenes are less realistic in their spatial, as in their temporal references. We may assume that the time of the poem coincides with the time of its composition and publication during the post-



traumatic years following the First World War. However, Eliot's characteristic assimilation of ancient and modern times, of myth and reality—in other words, his own application of the “mythical method” that he identified as ground-breaking in Joyce's *Ulysses*—challenges this assumption. For example, the aforementioned London Bridge scene blurs temporal distinctions by characterising Stetson simultaneously as a City officer and as a soldier in the battle of Mylae, which took place in the context of the Punic Wars.

Another instance of Eliot's mythical method is the anachronistic presence of the Greek diviner Tiresias in the Unreal City, where he takes the prophetic role of critical observation. As he tells us in “The Fire Sermon,”

At the violet hour, when the eyes and back
Turn upward from the desk, when the human engine waits
Like a taxi throbbing waiting,
.....
I Tiresias, old man with wrinkled dugs
Perceived the scene, and foretold the rest— (Eliot 2015, 63)

“The violet hour”, as “a winter dawn” or “a winter noon”, is a memorable, more specific temporal marker of this *scene*. It is significant that Eliot has Tiresias, whom “we actually see and hear ... as if he were on a stage” (Probstein 2008, 193), choose the word “scene.” He is not involved, however, and witnesses only the loveless sexual encounter between the typist and “the young man carbuncular,” “enacted” —another semantic connection with drama and performance— in the former's flat (Eliot 2015, 63).

In discriminating cohesive scenic units in *The Waste Land*, we may focus on space (locations in the Unreal City of London, or symbolic settings) and time (contemporaneity interlocking with history and myth). However, spatiotemporal concreteness and action are absent in some scenes, given that the speaker is inclined to reflect, reminisce, lament, or admonish: these passages may therefore be compared to dramatic soliloquies.

Lyrical or prophetic in tone, they may constitute a complete “act” (“Death by Water”), function as a transition (in “The Fire Sermon,” for example, the speaker's pleasant thoughts of traditional music and architectural beauty, surfacing after the encounter at the violet hour and before the Thames maidens' songs), or an opening, as in these lines from “What the Thunder Said”:

After the torchlight red on sweaty faces
After the frosty silence in the gardens
After the agony in stony places
The shouting and the crying
Prison and palace and reverberation
Of thunder of spring over distant mountains
He who was living is now dead
We who were living are now dying
With a little patience (Eliot 2015, 68)



Rather than setting the scene, the anaphoric use of “after,” the combination of past and present tenses, and the images evocative of place and time convey the hopelessness of a Passion without a Resurrection.

If Eliot’s poem can be read “as a series of small-scale scenarios” (Levenson 2015, 92), character—as an essentially dramatic aspect—is equally relevant. But are the dwellers of the Waste Land “characters” in the same sense as the people in a play? Eliot’s “The Three Voices of Poetry” (1953) elucidates this point: he considers a category of “quasi-dramatic verse,” not written expressly for performance, and refers to *persona*, the term used by Pound for his dramatic monologues, which suggests an impression of personality (2019b, 817, 822-823). These masks or *personae*, however, are inadequate for strict dramatic verse, where “character is created and made real only in an action” (Eliot 2019b, 823). From Eliot’s remarks, we may conclude that *voice*—as used in the title of his essay, different from Pound’s legendary *personae*, and not necessarily realised through action—is the most accurate synonym for “speaker” in *The Waste Land*. After all, the working title for the first two parts of the poem, inhabited by its most memorable people, was “He do the police in different voices,” a quotation from *Our Mutual Friend* (1865) by Charles Dickens, whom Eliot greatly admired for his vivid characterisations. Introducing a reading of *The Waste Land* in 1988, Ted Hughes famously called it “a drama for voices,” recalling Dante’s *Commedia*, and specifically his *Inferno*: “voices in a Dantesque, infernal space, where they cry out, relieve their unforgettable moments, and see strange hallucinations” (1992, chap. 2).³

Mayer (1989, 241-291) has insightfully analysed *The Waste Land* as an interplay of voices, distinguishing between personal or impersonal—in other words, character-like or disembodied. Yet, conceptualising all the poem’s figures as voices is not completely exact: some (Madame Sosostris, or the woman at the pub) are so effectively portrayed that we cannot help but think of them as characters; some (Stetson, Lil and Albert, or Sweeney) are important, despite being only addressed, or alluded to; finally, some (the typist, or the bank clerk) speak very little, if at all, but are defined through action, thus qualifying as dramatic characters. Levenson suggests “voicing” as preferable to “voice,” “since the acts of speech pass too quickly to establish any stable personhood” (2015, 90). In any case, and although distinctions are not always clearcut, it is useful to refer to both “voices” and—to employ Eliot’s adjective for a variety of verse in “Three Voices”—“(quasi-)dramatic characters.” Table 2 is a proposal for the classification of the *dramatis personae* of *The Waste Land*, contemplating four different, nuanced categories:

As the poem’s spatiotemporal settings, these voices and (quasi-)dramatic characters are heterogeneous in their origins (fictional, historical, mythical) and in their role within the poem. Tiresias, discussed above as the witness of the “violet hour

³ Hughes’s phrase “drama for voices” also brings to mind another twentieth-century classic: Dylan Thomas’s *Under Milk Wood* (1954), originally written for the radio and subtitled “*A Play for Voices*.”



TABLE 2. PROPOSAL FOR CLASSIFICATION OF VOICES AND (QUASI-)DRAMATIC CHARACTERS IN *THE WASTE LAND*

i) Actual first-person voices, spoken or rendered as thoughts (mostly Eliot's creations)	The protagonist/quester/seeker, Marie Larisch, the hyacinth lovers, Madame Sosostris, the neurotic woman and her husband, pub patrons (Bill, Lou, May), publican, Tiresias, the typist
ii) Quasi-dramatic characters whose speech is implied or reported (Eliot's creations)	Stetson, Mr. Eugenides (the Smyrna merchant)
iii) (Quasi-)dramatic characters who do not speak, but whose actions/presence are relevant (Eliot's creations)	The Phoenician sailor/Phlebas the Phoenician, the young man carbuncular
iv) Voices of tradition speaking/singing through quotation – not allusion (from the Bible, myth, literature, opera)	The Sybil of Cumae (<i>Satyricon</i>), Ezekiel, the Preacher (Ecclesiastes), a sailor and a shepherd (<i>Tristan und Isolde</i>), Ferdinand (<i>The Tempest</i>), Philomel (as a nightingale), Ophelia (<i>Hamlet</i>), Olivia (<i>The Vicar of Wakefield</i>), the Rhine maidens (<i>Götterdämmerung</i>), St. Augustine (<i>Confessions</i>), the Thunder (<i>Brihadaranyaka Upanishad</i>), Arnaut Daniel (<i>Purgatorio</i>), Hieronymo (<i>The Spanish Tragedy</i>)

scene,” has a special significance. In one of his notes to *The Waste Land*—which, in line with our metaphor of the poem as a play, we might think of as stage directions determining the performance of reading—Eliot tells us that “Tiresias, although a mere spectator and not indeed a ‘character,’ is yet the most important personage in the poem, uniting all the rest” (2015, 74), male and female. The prophet of myth and modernity, who has lived both as man and woman, literally blind but able to foresee the future, is then a “personage” —suggesting greater importance— and not a “character”. He is also a “spectator” in the drama of *The Waste Land*, making those he watches “actors” who “do things [...] move in a world of appearances only, performing roles for ends they cannot see, on a stage they cannot comprehend” (Mayer 1989, 250). The protagonist (the quester or seeker) is one of these actors; although primarily the voice of the lyrical or prophetic vein that runs through the poem, he momentarily seems to take on other roles (one of the lovers in the hyacinth garden, or the neurotic woman’s husband), eventually assuming Tiresias’ “prophet-role” and “his moral make-up and reality of vision” (Mayer 1989, 251). Tiresias’ vision, therefore, is “the subject of the poem” (Eliot 2015, 74) in as much as it complements that of the protagonist’s.

What the quester and his mythical alter ego see is widened by the voices of tradition, belonging to different periods and cultures and emerging in the dismal world depicted by Eliot. The multiplicity of personal and traditional voices in *The Waste Land* suggests the Bakhtinian notions of polyphony and dialogism —even if Bakhtin applied these exclusively to the study of fiction. The quotations and allusions punctuating the text allow “a dialogue in time and space with its predecessors,” reinforcing its dramatic and dialogic nature: “the poem is essentially dramatic, and it is dialogic imagination embracing centuries and civilizations that makes the poem a human drama” (Probstein 2008, 182, 184). Nowhere is this more evident than in



the closing stanza, a multilingual allusive collage that refers readers to Arthurian romance, the Bible, popular nursery rhymes, medieval Italian and Provençal poetry, late Latin poetry, Victorian English poetry, French Romanticism, Elizabethan tragedy, and the Hindu Upanishads:

I sat upon the shore
Fishing, with the arid plain behind me
Shall I at least set my lands in order?
London Bridge is falling down falling down falling down
Poi s'ascose nel foco che gli affina
Quando fiam uti chelidon –O swallow swallow
Le Prince d'Aquitaine à la tour abolie
These fragments I have shored against my ruins
Why then Ile fit you. Hieronymo's mad againe.
Datta. Dayadhvam. Damyata.
Shantih shantih shantih (Eliot 2015, 71)

The Waste Land may be read as its protagonist's existential drama, as well as a drama of intertextual dialogism. Within the text, however, dialogue is not used conventionally, as an effective means for communication. As Ted Hughes remarked, "these voices do not speak to each other, or really to us" (1992, chap. 2). According to Levenson, "the absence of dialogue must stand as one of the signal formal aspects of the poem" (2015, 94). But we find hints of dialogue, even if only implied, in the three scenes of estranged or doomed love, in "The Burial of the Dead" and "A Game of Chess." In the pub scene, there is only one speaker, except for the patrons' farewells at the end; this speaker's part in turn reports a conversation with Lil, while others presumably listen without contributing. In the hyacinth garden scene, the girl speaks, and this is signalled by the use of quotation marks. Her lover seems to reply, but there are no typographical signs for his part of the dialogue, which, together with the reminiscing tone, makes it appear thought rather than speech:

'You gave me hyacinths first a year ago;
'They called me the hyacinth girl.'
–Yet when we came back, late, from the Hyacinth garden,
Your arms full, and your hair wet, I could not
Speak, and my eyes failed, I was neither
Living nor dead, and I knew nothing,
Looking into the heart of light, the silence. (Eliot 2015, 56)

The same combination of a woman's speech between quotation marks, and a man's introspective, silent thought characterises the frustrated dialogue between the neurotic woman and her partner:

'My nerves are bad tonight. Yes, bad. Stay with me.
'Speak to me. Why do you never speak. Speak.
'What are you thinking of? What thinking? What?
'I never know what you are thinking. Think.'



I think we are in rats' alley
Where the dead men lost their bones.

'What is that noise?'

The wind under the door.

'What is that noise now? What is the wind doing?'

Nothing again nothing. (Eliot 2015, 59)

Although the dramatic features of *The Waste Land* analysed so far were obviously not adopted by Eliot with performance or the stage in mind, they are indicative of an inclination –indeed, the poem's "striving"– towards theatrical conventions. As we will see, other writings by Eliot from the 1920s confirm both his theoretical and practical interest in drama.

THOUGHTS ON/OF DRAMA, AND AN UNFINISHED PLAY

Eliot did not employ dramatic elements (scenes, voices and quasi-dramatic characters, pseudo-dialogue) only in his early poetry, including *The Waste Land*. In several reviews and essays from those years, he also reflects on aspects of drama and its potential modernisation through verse. He first makes a theoretical distinction between lyrical and dramatic voices in "Rhetoric' and Poetic Drama" (1919): "if a writer wishes to give the effect of speech he must positively give the effect of himself talking in his own person or in one of his rôles [*sic*]" (Eliot 2014d, 84). In "The Poetic Drama" (1920), he relies on a chemical metaphor to posit Browning's dramatic poetry as a model for successors: "to distil the dramatic essences, if we can, and instil them into some other liquor" (Eliot 2014b, 240). Finally, in "The Possibility of a Poetic Drama" (1920), Eliot presents theatre as the artistic expression that can best represent society and argues that dramatic language should aspire to the highest level of achievement, without mistaking its purpose: "the majority of attempts to confect a poetic drama have begun at the wrong end; they have aimed at the small public which wants 'poetry'" (Eliot 2014c, 278, 282, 283).

It seems clear that the "possibility" of verse drama in the heyday of modernism was very much in Eliot's mind; as Hammond puts it, "long before he began writing plays ... Eliot was planning his escape from poetry" (n.d.) –paradoxically, even before he wrote the poetry that would bring him fame in the 1920s. Apart from experimenting with the dramatic mode in these poems, Eliot also attempted to write an actual play in a creative context, featuring Bertolt Brecht, Eugene O'Neill and Luigi Pirandello as successful modernist playwrights. He started work on *Sweeney Agonistes*, his first play, shortly after the publication of *The Waste Land*. Several continuities linking the works can be identified: the urban London setting, the symbolism of card reading, the lack of sentiment in human relationships, the threat of physical violence to women, the remoteness of spirituality in a materialistic world, and the presence of literary tradition (in *Sweeney Agonistes*, the two opening epigraphs, quoting St. John of the Cross and Aeschylus, and the adaptation of the structure of Aristophanes' comedies). Grover Smith also noted a connection between



Eliot's original conception of Sweeney as having multiple personalities, and that of Tiresias as a superordinate character in *The Waste Land* (quoted in Ricks and McCue 2015, 787). Furthermore, as he was still working on *The Waste Land*, Eliot read with admiring wonder the manuscript of "Circe," the dramatic episode of *Ulysses*; the impact of its "gestural theatricality" on Eliot's poem (Levenson 2015, 98) should be extended to *Sweeney Agonistes*.

Eliot's first play reflects his interest in the ancient coexistence of drama and ritual, his vindication of the music hall as a truly popular form and a model for modern drama, and his fascination with the rhythms of jazz, which, as can be observed in the dialogue below, he attempted to reproduce through repetition and call and response patterns. Sweeney (an incongruous combination of brutality and sensibility, appearing in Eliot's 1920 *Poems* and briefly in *The Waste Land*), and Doris (a prostitute, associated with Sweeney in *Poems*, and here able to read the cards) indulge in a cannibalistic fantasy, a travesty of romance:

SWEENEY: I'll carry you off
To a cannibal isle.
DORIS: You'll be the cannibal!
SWEENEY: You'll be the missionary!
You'll be my little seven stone missionary!
I'll gobble you up. I'll be the cannibal.
DORIS: You'll carry me off? To a cannibal isle?
SWEENEY: I'll be the cannibal.
DORIS: I'll be the missionary.
I'll convert you!
SWEENEY: I'll convert *you*!
Into a stew.
A nice little, white little, missionary stew. (Eliot 2015, 121)

Despite *Sweeney Agonistes*' promise as a project of theatrical innovation, Eliot was unable to complete it. It appeared as two separate scenes in *The Criterion* in 1926 and 1927, coinciding with Eliot becoming an Anglo-Catholic. After conversion, faith became the axis of his poetry, causing Eliot to distance himself from his earlier production. Later in his life, the poet would refer to *Sweeney Agonistes* as "in a sense, pre-Christian fragments" (quoted in Ricks and McCue 2015, 784). Faber and Faber first published these "fragments" together as *Sweeney Agonistes. Fragments of an Aristophanic Melodrama* in 1932. They were eventually included in *Collected Poems 1909-1935* (1936) –as an "unfinished poem" rather than an "unfinished play," probably indicating Eliot's reluctance to present himself, at this stage and with only a fragmentary text, as a dramatist. It was performed on rare occasions in minority venues.⁴

⁴ From the few productions of *Sweeney Agonistes*, the jazz version by Stage Sixty Theatre Club, directed by Peter Wood and with music by John Dankworth, is especially interesting. It was



Eliot's most comprehensive essay on poetic drama followed the first publication of the *Sweeney* fragments, and his adoption of a new religious identity. "A Dialogue on Dramatic Poetry" (1928) is written in dramatic form, resembling a Socratic dialogue in which a group of speakers discuss their views. Interestingly, in the preface, Eliot clarifies that these speakers –each identified with a capital letter instead of a proper name– "are not even fictions" but "merely voices" (Eliot 2014a, 397), which recalls the polyphony and loose characterisation of *The Waste Land*.

One of Eliot's speakers argues for the presence of dramatic elements as distinctive of good poetry; the most important of these –which, as we have seen, Eliot also associated in "Three Voices"– are action and character:

What great poetry is not dramatic? Even the minor writers of the Greek Anthology, even Martial, are dramatic. Who is more dramatic than Homer or Dante? We are human beings, and in what are we more interested than in human action and human attitudes? (Eliot 2014a, 403)

Another speaker assertively makes the case for the suitability of verse in dramatic texts –indeed, for its expressive superiority over prose:

prose drama is merely a slight by-product of verse drama. The human soul, in intense emotion, strives to express itself in verse ... The tendency, at any rate, of prose drama is to emphasise the ephemeral and superficial; if we want to get at the permanent and universal we tend to express ourselves in verse. (Eliot 2014a, 399-400)

Yet a different speaker claims that verse drama should be revived as a modern equivalent of Elizabethan drama in its power to appeal to a wide cross-section of society, and the versatility of its language: "We must find a new form of verse which shall be as satisfactory a vehicle for us as blank verse was for the Elizabethans" (Eliot 2014a, 407).

The main thesis of Eliot's "Dialogue" is formulated as the chiasmatic statement that "all poetry tends towards drama, and all drama towards poetry" (Eliot 2014a, 404). The poet's generalisation applies to the evolution of his work, first as a poet and later as a dramatist. His early poetry, and particularly *The Waste Land*, "strived toward the condition of drama," at a time when he was considering the feasibility of modern dramatic poetry and went on to write his first play. On the other hand, Eliot's finished plays contain echoes of *The Waste Land*, the poem where he most effectively imagined the reality of despair and the possibility of hope.

performed as part of a "Homage to T.S. Eliot" on 13 June 1965, shortly after the poet's death. It can be listened to on YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M_yaqANQDt4.



THE WASTE LAND, A BACKDROP IN ELIOT'S PLAYS

In his new life as a pious Anglo-Catholic, Eliot would mostly devote himself to poems of religious affirmation: *Ash Wednesday* (1930), *Ariel Poems* (1927-1954), and *Four Quartets* (1936-1941). However, he would gradually feel constrained as a meditative poet, and –despite the relative failure of *Sweeney Agonistes*– increasingly drawn to drama as an enticing alternative. As regards *The Waste Land*, Eliot famously belittled its social and historical relevance in those years, defining it as “the relief of a personal and wholly insignificant grouse against life” and “a piece of rhythmical grumbling” (Eliot 2010, 1).

Despite Eliot's dismissive attitude towards his most emblematic poem, *The Waste Land* is unquestionably a referent when we examine his subsequent work, and more so if we consider how this work evolved. As has been shown, *The Waste Land* gravitates towards the dramatic, but it is equally true that Eliot's properly dramatic texts hark back to the poem in significant ways. With extraordinary humility, Eliot “spent the second half of his career retraining himself as a playwright” (Chinitz 2014, 68). He did so under the guidance of E. Martin Browne, a genuine man of the theatre who had established his reputation as a specialist in religious drama. When Eliot writes for the stage, over a decade after *The Waste Land*, scenes contribute to the development of a unified dramatic action, voices must become full-fledged characters, and dialogues effectively present human interactions. But, as a persistent archetypal image of hopelessness and devastation, the Waste Land is still there.

Eliot's first complete play was *The Rock* (1934), a pageant commissioned by the Forty-Five Churches Fund, which aimed to raise money for the building of churches in new residential areas of London. Its scenic structure, interspersed with first-person passages (individual or choral), may vaguely remind us of *The Waste Land*, but scenes in *The Rock* are purposefully developed and arranged to trace the ecclesiastical history of London. Yet, the pageant's depiction of modernity evokes the Unreal City –its motorcars driving for daytrips on the Sabbath, or the dull pastimes of its dwellers:

I journeyed to the suburbs, and there I was told:
We toil for six days, on the seventh we must motor
To Hindhead, or Maidenhead.
If the weather is foul we stay at home and read the papers. (Eliot 1934, 8)

These lines, spoken by the Chorus, echo the prophetic voices of *The Waste Land*. So does the response given by the allegorical character of the Rock, where he equates the Unreal City, including its impersonal mass of commuters in tube trains, with a desert –a desert of the soul:

The desert is not remote in southern tropics,
The desert is not only around the corner,
The desert is squeezed in the tube-train next to you,
The desert is in the heart of your brother. (Eliot 1934, 9)



Murder in the Cathedral (1935) followed *The Rock*. It was also a commissioned play, written for the Canterbury Festival. It dramatizes Archbishop Becket's return from exile to Canterbury, where he faces a martyrdom that is both feared and witnessed by a chorus of women. In these lines, their grim premonitions are translated into images of hostile, disturbed seasons, such as the "ruinous spring" that, like "the cruellest month" of April, with its "dull roots" (Eliot 2015, 55), brings neither regeneration nor hope:

Now I fear disturbance of the quiet seasons:
Winter shall come bringing death from the sea,
Ruinous spring shall beat at our doors,
Root and shoot shall eat our eyes and our ears,
Disastrous summer burn up the beds of our streams
And the poor shall wait for another decaying October. (Eliot 2004, 240)

We find similar imagery in *The Family Reunion* (1939), where Eliot faced the twin challenges of using verse and of transposing Aeschylus's *The Furies* to a contemporary setting. The play is set on a country estate (Wishwood), shrouded in a Gothic atmosphere, which we might think of as the aristocratic, rural counterpart of the Unreal City. Harry, the oldest son, is received by his family after years of absence, but he surprises them with a confession of murder. His cousin, Mary, represents the promise of love, symbolised as a garden. Harry might love and marry Mary, but his present situation is a "cold spring," an "evil time, that excites us with lying voices" (Eliot 2004, 309). Mary, in turn, responds with a negative picture of tortured natural growth:

The cold spring now is the time
For the ache in the moving root
The agony in the dark
The slow flow throbbing the trunk
The pain of the breaking bud
These are the ones that suffer least:
The aconite under the snow
And the snowdrop crying for a moment in the wood. (Eliot 2004, 310)

A special closeness brings Harry and Mary together, but his deranged confusion creates an insurmountable gap. Harry ends up rejecting Mary, and the poignant frustration of their love connects them with the hyacinth lovers in "The Burial of the Dead."

Eliot's dissatisfaction with *The Family Reunion*, which was coldly received, together with his belief in drama as a popular art, led him to comedy—specifically, to the drawing-room comedy of the London West End. Eliot adapted to this commercial genre without forgetting the goal of a natural and supple verse, nor relinquishing the religious orientation of his post-conversion work. In the first of his comedies, *The Cocktail Party* (1949), Edward and Lavinia face a marital crisis; he feels they are "in the trap," "each taking the corner of the cage" (Eliot 2004, 310)—curiously, "A Game of Chess," where the male voice thinks that he and his wife "are in rat's alley"



(Eliot 2015, 59), was initially called “In the cage.” Another character in the play, Celia, a young woman living a glamorous life in London, is in fact disenchanted with an existence that avoids spiritual commitment. The description of this veritable –and dreadful– Waste Land of the soul almost quotes “The Burial of the Dead”:

...the final desolation
Of solitude in the phantasmal world
Of imagination, shuffling memories and desires. (Eliot 2004, 419)

In Eliot’s second comedy, *The Confidential Clerk* (1953), Colby’s symbolic garden of spiritual fulfilment is set against the squalid urban wasteland where Lucasta grew up, and which still undermines her self-esteem. The metaphor that she chooses for herself, after admitting that she has still not found her garden, is evocative of the imagery with which “The Fire Sermon” opens:

If I could find it!
No, my only garden is... a dirty public square
In a shabby part of London –like the one where I lived
For a time, with my mother. I’ve no garden.
I hardly feel that I’m even a person:
Nothing but a bit of living matter
Floating on the surface of the Regent’s Canal. (Eliot 2004, 473)

These lines belong to a key dialogue between Lucasta and Colby. In contrast with the communicatively ineffective dialogues of *The Waste Land*, the first two acts of *The Confidential Clerk* are masterly structured as a succession of dialogues between two characters, or duologues (Jones 1960, 173).

Finally, in *The Elder Statesman* (1958), Lord Claverton faces the last stage of his life dreading the emptiness ahead. Like Petronius’ Sybil of Cumae in the epigraph to *The Waste Land*, he longs for death in his old age. Both the sense of aimlessness that he experiences (even if more articulately expressed in the mystical paradoxical language of *Four Quartets*), as well as the chilling metaphor of the empty waiting-room, evoke the Waste Land of empty souls and suburban alienation:

How gladly would I face death! But waiting, simply waiting,
With no desire to act, yet a loathing of inaction.
A fear of the vacuum, and no desire to fill it.
It’s just like sitting in an empty waiting-room,
In a railway station on a branch line,
After the last train, after all the other passengers
Have left, and the booking office is closed
And the porters have gone... (Eliot 2004, 530)

The reverse image is the garden of the convalescent home where Lord Claverton will peacefully die, having made the life-changing discovery of selfless love –also a contrast to the hyacinth garden of ill-fated love in “The Burial of the Dead.” But unlike the voices in *The Waste Land*, the characters in Eliot’s plays can hope for, and attain, the garden of a fulfilled Christian life.



CONCLUSION

With *The Elder Statesman*, we are back where we started. As a backdrop, *The Waste Land* is there in Eliot's last play, as it is in those that came before it: in evocations of spatial settings, images of physical and emotional barrenness suggesting despair, or similarities between voices/characters and the situations in which they find themselves. The dramatic qualities of Eliot's poem prefigure its author's commitment to the theatre –to echo the opening lines of “Burnt Norton,” the “time future” of drama is “contained in [the] time past” of poetry. The projection of *The Waste Land* onto the plays is combined with the ways they retrospectively connect with it.

A number of dramatized readings of *The Waste Land*, both by highly regarded actors (Alec Guinness, Eileen Atkins, Michael Gough, Edward Fox, Jeremy Irons, Harriet Walter) and by Eliot himself, illustrate and attest to the text's dramaticism. Notable stage productions include Deborah Warner's, featuring Fiona Shaw (1995-2010), and Daniel and Christopher Domig's (2015). Both are one-actor performances, relying on various resources: lighting and sound effects, use of stage space, movable props, music-hall conventions, pauses or simulated reading –most of which effectively reproducing the poem's scenic structure. Its variety of voices and their frustrated dialogue is conveyed through role-play, impersonation, and ventriloquism, with the actors' physical presence as an amalgamating principle: “The actor's body obtrudes in the gaps between the voices and, far more insistently than any textual Tiresias, binds them into one... Eliot's assertion that all the personages of the poem are in fact one is made relentlessly manifest in the plain fact of the actor's body” (Query 2015, 13). This is lost in radio drama, which can alternatively emphasise the poem's polyphony –with a cast of different actors– and soundscape, as in the recent BBC Radio 3 dramatization “He Do *The Waste Land* in Different Voices.”

In a recent interview, Deborah Warner refers to Samuel Beckett as the last great renovator of contemporary drama (Allfree). When her production of *The Waste Land* was presented in Madrid in 2010, she stressed the dramatic potential and currency of Eliot's poem, which had provided her with “exciting material for the stage” (Perales). Although Eliot sought renovation while counterproductively evolving towards the theatrical establishment, the bold experimentalism of *The Waste Land* and *Sweeney Agonistes* –the drama that might have been– predates Beckett's theatre of the absurd or Osborne's kitchen-sink drama by several decades. Although, despite their continuities with his canonical poetry, Eliot's plays are stigmatised as failed or regressive, *The Waste Land* continues to enjoy its reputation as the quintessentially modern poem. We may think of it as a foundational text that caused Eliot's cohesive imagination to crystallise, and from which he evolved to become first a meditative poet, and then a modern verse dramatist.

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