

# “WITH INVIOLEABLE VOICE”: ELIOT’S REDEEMING WORD IN *THE WASTE LAND*\*

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## ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes the notions of despair and selfhood in *The Waste Land* through the prism of Soren Kierkegaard’s *Sickness unto Death* (1849). It contends that despite the sense of loss and meaninglessness of existence, *The Waste Land* traces the journey of the self from ignorance and suffering, from being bound to temporality and sensual thirst, through “the dark night of the soul” to a vantage point from where it can see into “the heart of light.” Furthermore, it claims that Eliot is a twentieth century Dante who goes beyond European frontiers and attempts to reconcile Christianity, Buddhism and the Vedanta with an existentialist discourse.

KEYWORDS: T.S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*, Soren Kierkegaard, *Sickness unto Death*, despair.

“CON VOZ INVIOLEABLE”: LA PALABRA REDENTORA DE ELIOT  
EN *LA TIERRA BALDÍA*

## RESUMEN

Este artículo analiza la desesperación y la noción de identidad en *La tierra baldía* a la luz del libro *La enfermedad mortal* (1849) de Soren Kierkegaard. Argumenta que, a pesar de la sensación de pérdida y falta de sentido de la existencia, *La tierra baldía* traza el viaje del ser desde la ignorancia y el sufrimiento, desde la sujeción a la temporalidad y la sed de lo sensual, a través de la noche oscura del alma hasta una perspectiva desde la cual se puede acceder al “corazón de la luz”. Se afirma que Eliot es un Dante del siglo xx que va más allá de las fronteras europeas e intenta reconciliar el cristianismo, el budismo y la filosofía vedanta con un discurso existencialista.

PALABRAS CLAVE: T.S. Eliot, *La tierra baldía*, Soren Kierkegaard, *Enfermedad mortal*, desesperación.



*The Waste Land* has become an icon for a civilization on the edge of disaster, a poem documenting the collapse of its values. It has inaugurated a new poetic language as well as a new *Weltanschauung*, valid even in our postmodern age, a continuation of what Soren Kierkegaard called “the age of despair” in 1836 (ix), and which Auden termed “the age of anxiety” a century later. The poem became a relentless experiment with form, style, meter and voice, and in the process, it shaped new paradigms of poetic expression and systems of belief. Eliot’s quest for a new form created poetic equivalents for the new techniques with which nonrepresentational avant-garde arts did away with mimetic principles (Altieri 2015).

From the beginning, *The Waste Land* was recognized as a cultural icon of modern pessimism and post-war desolation. We still read *The Waste Land* as a post-apocalyptic howl, the poetic equivalent of Munch’s cry, yet this modernist revolutionary poem is also a document of faith, and an affirmation of spiritual values. In fact, the poem’s “despair” when considered in the light of Kierkegaard’s Christian existentialism<sup>1</sup> can be read in a way that is congenial with the philosophy of the Vedanta and Buddhism in which Eliot grounds the poem.<sup>2</sup> Although *The Waste Land* is a poem about people who experience a sense of loss and despair, for whom life is meaningless, the poem gradually awakens to the reality of the transcendent. In defiance of the frequent tableaux of failed intimacy, dysfunctional relationships, lovelessness, and scenes of “falling towers” of “unreal” cities, the poem’s sense of an ending is not final; rather, it constantly seeks a strategy of perseverance, conceived to override the wreckage. Beyond its apparent pessimism, the poem manages to fill “all the desert with inviolable voice” (Eliot 2015, 58).<sup>3</sup> As a poem of “fragments ... shored against my ruins” (71), Eliot’s epic finally serves to save the self and the world from collapse. Despite the desolation it portrays, it makes an apology for ultimate love and ends with the revelation of the Word, a resolution to act, and a benediction in a strange language: “shantih shantih shantih” (71). It stages a quest for a forgotten language that gives voice to a buried life in which the self recovers its spiritual identity and defeats the void that lies at the core of existence. *The Waste Land* traces the journey of the self from ignorance and suffering, from being bound to temporality and sensual thirst, through the dark night of the soul to a vantage point from where it can see into “the heart of light” (56).

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<sup>1</sup> For studies of the Eliot’s poems in the light of Kierkegaard’s philosophy see Paul Murray (1991), Aaron Graham (2013).

<sup>2</sup> On Eliot and Hinduism, see Kearns (1987), Rao (1977), Sri (1985), Jain (1992). On Eliot and Anglo-Catholicism, see especially Spurr (2010) and Spurr (2015).

<sup>3</sup> All quotations from Eliot’s poetry in this essay are from Eliot 2015, edited by Ricks and McCue.



Eliot poeticizes this quest within a secularized anthropocentric world that has lost its vital relationship, in an age in which traditional religious forms of thought have lost their currency, with those symbols that once formed part of its cultural heritage. His poetics derives primarily from the memory of a lost language, of “conscience and consciousness” (Donoghue 2000, 128). The poem facilitates the possibility of salvation from the drudgery and emptiness of ordinary life, drawing on the eastern and western metaphysics that lie at its foundations. Their spirituality is in consonance with Kierkegaard’s existentialism.

## THE SELF BETWEEN TIME AND ETERNITY

Like Jacques Maritain, Nikolai Berdyaev and Simone Weil, Eliot believed that man’s existence unfolds in time, yet belongs equally to a reality that transcends time. Eliot’s notion of selfhood is better understood in the light of Soren Kierkegaard’s Christian existentialism: that “[a] human being is a synthesis of the infinite and the finite, of the temporal and the eternal, of freedom and necessity” (1980, 13).<sup>4</sup> In *Sickness unto Death* (1849), Kierkegaard defined the human condition as an essential tension between the temporal and spiritual aspect of the self: “A human being is spirit” and “Spirit is the self.” The self is composed of opposites and operates through their tensions: “The self is a relation that relates itself to itself or is the relation’s relating itself to itself in the relation; the self is not the relation but is the relation’s relating itself to itself” (13). However, “[a] synthesis is a relation between two. Considered in this way a human being is still not a self” (13). A synthesis of these tensions is not the result of a thesis and an antithesis, as in Hegel, but is rather the activity of their interaction, which Kierkegaard calls the “relation’s relating,” and which is contained by a third “as a negative unity.” The human self is a “derived, established relation, a relation that relates itself to itself and in relating to itself relates itself to another” (13-14). The self has a pluralistic nature, which comprises the infinite and the finite, the eternal and the temporal, and is not static; the self relates back to the infinite that has created it and establishes an inner dialogue. The physical and the spiritual form a relation that relates “in the relation to the relation. If, however, the relation relates itself to itself, this relation is the positive third, and this is the self” (13). To become a self, one must be conscious that the ground of the self is the power that

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<sup>4</sup> Eliot held Kierkegaard in high esteem: he believed he was the first among a number of the theologians, such as “Maritain, Niebuhr, Buber, Tillich, Berdyaev, Simone Weil,” who had “increased the intellectual prestige” of religion (Eliot 2019b, 400). Most probably he did not read him before 1922 yet the similarity of their beliefs is striking. Kierkegaard’s works were reviewed in *The Criterion* as early as 1936, and Eliot expressed interest in the publication of his *Journals* in 1938 (Murray 110). He believed that theologians like Karl Barth and Kierkegaard had a great influence on the younger theologians of his time (Eliot 2015a, 46), and considered that Kierkegaard and Ibsen were proof of how “a single man of genius in one of the smaller nations,” can exercise “immense power over minds everywhere” (Eliot 2019a, 813).



created and sustains it. However, the conflicting relations within the self can cause despair, which arises from a misrelation between the eternal and temporal aspects of the self. The incapacity to harmonize the physical and the spiritual aspects of the self leads to a violent desire to get rid of one of them. Denial of one of these constituents implies loss or denial of the self, causes the inability to reconcile the spiritual and physical aspects of the self and, hence, creates despair and anxiety resulting in a sickness unto death. When one aspect of the self is eliminated, selfhood is at stake, and not accepting one's self, for Kierkegaard, leads to spiritual death. The self is a relationship between both selves, inserted into a larger relationship with the power that has constituted it and which is the loving God. One of the forms of despair, he contends, is being unconscious of having a self, "not to will to be oneself, to will to do away with oneself" (14) or, on the contrary, to affirm oneself against God (the sin of pride). Despair is the attribute of the spirit "that is related to the eternal in man" (17). Despair disappears once the self stops rejecting its eternal dimension, as Kierkegaard asserts "the opposite of sin is faith" (82).

By itself, despair is neither good nor bad: it can take the form of a sickness unto death that leads to perdition, yet it can also spurn the self's awakening to its own spirituality, and in this case, it becomes "an infinite advantage." Thus, despair is "man's advantage over the animal" that "distinguishes him in quite another way than does his erect walk, for it indicates infinite erectness or sublimity, that he is a spirit." (15). And to be aware of this is the spiritual man's advantage "over the natural man" (15). Moreover, despair is a generalized form of living, not a rarity, even though the majority of people live without being aware that they have a spiritual destiny.

In effect, despair is a paradox that may seem gloomy and depressing; however, at the same time it can be uplifting, since it produces an awakening, and leads the self to the highest demands made upon it, that it be spirit (32). Most people who enjoy fictitious health are unaware of being in despair, except for those few cases in which people have found a balanced relationship between their finitude and their infinitude, while a very small number have conquered despair and won real peace. This is the "peace," moreover, with which *The Waste Land* ends, "shantih," "Datta. Dayadhvam. Damyata," or in Eliot's equivalencies "the peace which passeth understanding" (Eliot's note to line 433, 77).

## THE DESPAIR OF THE LIVING DEAD

*The Waste Land* is a poem steeped in despair, yet like Kierkegaard's book subtitled "A Christian Psychological Exposition of Upbuilding and Awakening," it traces a process of inner awakening to eternity's claim over the self while it stages the self's quest to become itself and become conscious of itself as spirit. The drama of Eliot's wastelanders is that they are unconscious of having a self, because they are ignorant of the transcendent dimension of existence. They perceive themselves only on the horizontal dimension of temporality and accept only their immediate, finite nature.



For Kierkegaard, the formula of all despair is “To despair over oneself, in despair to will to be rid of oneself” (1980, 20). This is the predicament of the wastelanders, who are in strife with their condition as spirit. Since they ignore this, they are destined to the spirituality they experience being a muted form of despair:

April is the cruellest month, breeding  
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing  
Memory and desire, stirring  
Dull roots with spring rain.  
Winter kept us warm, covering  
Earth in forgetful snow, feeding  
A little life with dried tubers. (Eliot 2015, 55)

The poem begins with a title that significantly characterizes the wastelanders' condition: “The Burial of the Dead.” Their lives have retreated to the level of “dull roots” leading “a little life with dried tubers.” They have withdrawn to a vegetative level, “winter kept [them] warm” “covering / Earth in forgetful snow.” Life has receded underground and is merely a form of survival. “April is the cruellest month” because it reawakens longings of “memory and desire” that disturb their unproblematic nonbeing and disrupt the self's spiritual lethargy. Spring is not a joyful month of rebirth, it does not come to trees and birds, to men and women who fall in love, or to people who as in Chaucer start a pilgrimage for spiritual renewal, but to the living dead. We do not get Wordsworth's romantic bird's eye view, as in “I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud” or “Tintern Abbey.” Instead, Eliot's perspective is from below, from the point of view of roots, seeds, and corpses. Significantly, the poetic persona has retreated to the level of latencies, to what Kierkegaard calls the “basement” (1980, 43) of consciousness. It is to them that Kierkegaard addresses the words of the Gospels in reference to Lazarus who died “This sickness is not unto death” (John 11: 4; Kierkegaard 1980, xi). The wastelanders inhabit this realm of the sub-human and merely vegetative existence. Sometimes they descend to animal level, as the silent interlocutor in “A Game of Chess” confesses: “I think we are in rats' alley / Where dead men lost their bones” (Eliot 2015, 59). When he seals his thoughts off from the aristocratic lady, he conjures images of death: “Nothing again nothing” (59). Later, the bodies lie “naked on the wet damp ground / ... Rattled by a rat's foot only” (62). The characters' spiritual demise triggers recurrent images of death and nothingness: one of the modern Thames nymphs laments her sad story of abandonment: “I can connect / Nothing with nothing” (66). Quite frequently, the speakers perceive themselves as dead: “I was neither / Living nor dead, I knew nothing” (56). Furthermore, they often ask themselves an existential question: “Are you alive, or not?” (59). The poem builds an answer to this overwhelming question.

The poem is prefaced by the Sybil's desire to die. The epigraph introduces the tension between mortality and eternal life that provides the backbone for the whole poem. As prophetess to Apollo, the Sybil is granted a wish and asked to live for as many years as there are grains in a handful of sand; yet as she has forgotten to ask for eternal life, she becomes old and weary of life. In Petronius's



*Satyricon* (1 A.D.) Trimalchio, given to scoffing, meets the Sybil, decrepit, hanging in a bottle, and when he repeats Apollo's question, this time the Sybil responds that she wants to die. By wishing for a long life, the Sybil is concerned only with temporality, not with the fount of life, and henceforth she is doomed to hopeless finitude. She, like the wastelanders, dwells in death in life, to which she seeks an end; however, the Sybil cannot die, nor can the wastelanders. The torment of their despair derives from this inability to die that Kierkegaard calls the "sickness unto death" and identifies as "the hopelessness ... that there is not even the ultimate hope of death" (18). Despair results from this inability to die; this conflicting relationship within the self, the self's unwillingness to accept one of its constitutive components, causes despair which becomes "a sickness unto death." Kierkegaard explains this paradox:

[D]espair is the sickness unto death, is this tormenting contradiction, the sickness of the self, perpetually to be dying, to die and yet not to die, to die death. For to die signifies all is over, but to die death means to experience dying, and if this is experienced for a single moment, one thereby experiences it forever. If a person were to die of despair as one dies of a sickness, then the eternal in him, the self, must be able to die in the same sense as the body dies of sickness. But this is impossible; the dying of despair continually converts itself into a living. The person in despair cannot die; "no more than the dagger can slaughter thoughts" can despair consume the eternal, the self at the root of despair, whose worm does not and whose fire is not quenched. (1980, 18)

As a "gnawing canker" that delves deeper and deeper, despair causes self-consumption yet still cannot rid the self of the spiritual inherent in it.

The cruelty of April underlines the spiritual apathy of the wastelanders, who cannot rouse themselves from the torpor in which they waste their lives. Safe forgetfulness seems to be preferable to any psychic turmoil that might awaken them from their cosy lassitude, therefore, making winter "warm." Death in life is attractive and comfortable, a security blanket against problems of conscience. For Kierkegaard, this sense of security, deriving from the unconsciousness of being in despair, is the moment furthest away from an awareness of one's own spiritual potential: "not to be conscious of oneself as spirit –is despair, which is spiritlessness, whether the state is a thoroughgoing moribundity, a merely vegetative life or an intense, energetic life, the secret of which is still despair ... This form of despair (the ignorance of it) is the most common in the world" (44-45). Yet this form of escape in the immediate that allows an unproblematic existence, one exempt from complications of consciousness, is fictitious, proving to be a renewed form of despair, since unconsciousness only fuels further despair. Paradoxically, those who are aware of despair and have experienced it are closer to becoming aware of the spirit.



## THE FACELESS WASTELANDERS

According to Kierkegaard's categorization of despair, by ignoring their spiritual calling Eliot's characters do not will to be themselves as they are called to. Sometimes they wish to do away with the self, and thus become enchained to temporality, fastened to the revolutions of the wheel that drags them in incessant rotations. They are all bound to circumstance, to the contingent and the particular, dooming them to the same rounds, that make them less and less human, more and more ghostlike, an amorphous mass of beings with no identity:

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. (Eliot 2015, 57)

Eliot's note to lines 63 and 64 identifies them with the ghosts in Dante's Limbo (*Inferno* 3: 55-57), those who lived beyond the notion of good and evil, the neutrals "with no blame and with no praise" (*Inferno* 3: 36), "who made, through cowardice, the great refusal" (*Inferno* 3: 59-60). Their plight is to have been ignorant of the Word, and hence of life itself.

Eliot's characters do not perceive themselves to be a synthesis of infinitude and finitude whose task is to become a self in the Kierkegaardian sense of the word. Since they live in a constant denial of their infinite spiritual potential, they do not recognize themselves as a fusion of body and spirit so that, due to the lack of infinitude, they dwell in despair over their finitude.

The universe of *The Waste Land* consists of a world of merchants, soldiers, typists, clerks, fishermen, aristocrats and plebeians, pawns and queens, bartenders, villains, "loitering heirs of City directors" (62), on one hand, and prophets, rain and thunder gods, on the other. Often faceless, nameless, sometimes they are defined only by the instrument of their jobs. Isolated, cut off from the natural and spiritual sources of life, they "think of the key, each in his prison" (70). They are conscious to a greater or lesser degree of their rootlessness and isolation as modern exiles, dispossessed: "the hooded hords swarming / Over endless plains, stumbling in the cracked earth / Ringed by the flat horizon only" (69). Existence for them unfolds "only" along the immediate horizontal plane; there is no vertical axis. The poetic persona identifies himself as an exile adapting the Psalm (137: 1) to a modern Babylonia: "By the waters of Leman I sat down and wept" (62). Not whole beings, they are but mere fragments cut out of a cubist canvas, such as indicated by Lil's missing teeth or the "broken fingernails of dirty hands" (66) of the modern Thames

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<sup>5</sup> "By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion." (Psalm 137: 1).



nymphs. Sometimes the wastelanders are even invisible, defined only by the objects of their surroundings, like the aristocratic woman in the boudoir in “A Game of Chess.”

Tortured by this sense of vacancy, they all experience a similar emptiness at the core of being, which is “the substance of the poem” (Eliot’s note to line 218), a vacancy they remain unaware of, but one observed by, Tiresias, the blind prophet, the personification of a timeless universal consciousness, who bears witness to their loveless encounters “[e]nacted on this same divan or bed” (64). Yet as, the central subject of the poem, this sense of despair, isolation, and loss is not the hallmark of modernity but something pervasive throughout history.

For the most part, the wastelanders are incapable of communication with each other. “Speak to me. Why do you never speak. Speak” (59) is a common grievance. Their greatest failure is a failure of love, a love debased by the absence of love and degraded to mechanical sexuality. Eliot portrays a denial of the tradition of romantic passion as represented by Shakespeare’s Cleopatra, Virgil’s Dido, and Wagner’s *Tristan and Isolde* (Moody 1980, 85-87; Kenner 1989, 132-133). Whether the rich or the poor, the typist and the young man carbuncular, Lil’s friend, Lil and Albert (their *menage à trois*), the aristocratic woman in her boudoir and her neurasthenic lover, the Thames daughters or Elizabeth and Leicester, all fail to love. Theirs is not an existential encounter, but a mere sexual drive that instrumentalizes the other for the sake of vanity (the young man carbuncular), self-gratification of appetites, power, political intrigues (Elizabeth and Leicester), or merely as an attempt to eschew boredom (the typist). Sexuality is devoid of an infinite yearning for the other or of the desire to give. It is a failed attempt to escape from *ennui*. For the young man carbuncular, love is a question of power, a game of strategy that obeys the rules of military tactics: a matter of finding the “propitious” moments, once “the meal is ended, she is bored and tired,” so as to catch the typist off guard and be sure of the triumph of his conquest: “Flushed and decided, he assaults at once” while “exploring hands encounter no defense.” This type of “lovemaking” makes “a welcome of indifference” (64). Similarly, in “A Game of Chess,” “love” is ruled by the laws of the marketplace, of supply and demand, of good looks, enticing appearances and sexual gratification. The other is not the beloved, but an instrument that fulfils a goal, an object to be possessed:

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 give me a straight look.  
HURRY UP PLEASE ITS TIME  
If you don’t like it you can get on with it, I said.





Others can pick and choose if you can't.  
But if Albert makes off, it won't be for lack of telling. (Eliot 2015, 60)

As in the conversation reported by Lil's friend concerning her husband returning from the war, the *personae poeticae* act blindly, remaining for the most part ignorant of the cause of their despair and also of what would set them free. Futility and sterility strike equally the upper classes in the luxurious boudoir and the lower classes in the pub, despite their biological prolificacy.

Their secular mentality attributes infinite value to the trivial and the banal. Eliot's personages lose their selves because they are entirely finitized, sunk into matter, in commonness and dailiness. Instead of becoming selves, they become quantifiable machines and numbers, living robots, without personality or identity, a "man in the crowd," a programmed device: "the human engine waits / Like a taxi throbbing waiting" (63). As the sexual performance becomes automatic and mechanical, they are given over to pure immediacy, to sensuousness, and to finitude, and they succumb to the pressure of outward circumstance.

There is inauthenticity in being that blocks bringing being into being. The wastelanders do not will to be complete selves; they fill their lives with meaningless routines and live in set patterns and set phrases. They blindly and unknowingly enact a predetermined script. The poem is haunted by anguished questions: "What shall I do now? / What shall I do? / ... / What shall we do tomorrow? / What shall we ever do?" (59) that echo through the poem. The question refers to the immediate present, yet its repetition strives towards a muted yet larger meaning. It expands from "now" to the more general "What shall I do?" then it reaches into the future "What shall we do tomorrow?" and grows into an existential question "What shall we ever do?" which, though articulated, is only half understood by the lyric "I," who is unaware of the wider implications. The answer comes from the sphere of commonness and dailiness: "I shall rush out as I am, and walk the street / With my hair down, so" (59). It is a banal way of filling time and life: "The hot water at ten. / And if it rains, a closed car at four. / And we shall play a game of chess, / Pressing lidless eyes and waiting for a knock upon the door" (59-60). These second meanings of the ordinary are hidden, never to enter the character's consciousness. Nor is she aware that, despite their banality, her gestures repeat ancient scripts (Dido roaming distressed through the streets of Carthage after Aeneas's departure before she commits suicide) nor that "the hot water at ten" suggests an ancient ritual of purification, a mystical washing away of sin. The ominous "knock upon the door" (*Macbeth* II, iii), announcing imminent death in Shakespeare's tragedy, sounds like a fatal death knell muted in the speaker's consciousness. Unable to realize their suffering or verbalize it, the wastelanders don't know how to cope with their own emptiness.

Like pawns on a chessboard, enmeshed in insignificant and trivial activities, they conform to established patterns of everyday life assigned to them. Not understanding their own potential spirituality, they lead an inauthentic existence, dominated by banal routines and subservience to what others think of them: "What did you get married for if you do not want children?" (60). When not banal, their



talk is superficial, whether the chit chat of rootless cosmopolitan tourists in a café, lamenting past and contemporary upheavals of history, or the vulgar pub gossip of seduction and sexual infidelity, as recounted by a false friend. Either way, their comments are insensitive, anguished, and disloyal.

## INTIMATIONS OF “THE HEART OF LIGHT”

Despite the preponderance of despair, the universe of *The Waste Land* is neither closed nor opaque. Rather, it is full of hints of something beyond the devastation, intimating that the immediate and temporal world is not the “only” reality. The transcendent remains a constant axis of the poem. As Kierkegaard suggests, anxiety and anguish make inroads into the self’s potential being. Thus Eliot’s characters cannot withstand April’s stirrings of “memory and desire,” which activate a process of awakening and agonizing soul-searching through various luminous moments: the encounter in the hyacinth garden, an ecstatic moment of erotic and mystical intensity, one that offers a glimpse into “the heart of light” (Eliot 2015, 56), the memory of which makes the lyrical “I” survive, whose retrieval dramatizes the journey or “plot” of *The Waste Land* (Langbaum 1973, 112) and whose meaning is fully realized in the Fable of the Thunder; the moment of communal life at Saint Magnus Martyr, in the shadow of its “Inexplicable splendour of Ionian white and gold” (64), a counterpoint to the mass of flowing zombies over London Bridge. And finally, Philomel’s and Ariel’s song, which announces a spiritual transmutation: a drowning that is not death but a metamorphosis, a “sea-change into something rich and strange” (Shakespeare *The Tempest* I. ii: 402), while Philomel’s “Twit twit twit” (62), transforms inner waste into lyrical utterance in consonance with Rilke for whom “Gesang ist Dasein” (1922), in Sonnet III of his *Sonnets to Orpheus* (Rilke 1977, 88; Moody 1974, 61). A symbol of regeneration, Philomel recovers the ability to feel and gives meaning to her tragedy in song while affirming the fundamental powers of being. Like Orpheus, she brings the dead back to life. These luminous moments covert a subtle system of values, tracing an ideal dimension that counteracts the pervasive sordidness of existence. Moreover, they offer guidance for piercing the lethargy of the wastelanders and shaking them out of their present state of inauthenticity.

## THE PROPHETS: “I WILL SHOW YOU SOMETHING DIFFERENT”

Of the plethora of voices of prophets, sages and rain and thunder gods who try to awaken the wastelanders out of their torpor, the first is Ezekiel, a prophet of the sixth century B.C. He addresses the wastelanders in terms of doom and berates their ignorance and fragmentary knowledge: “Son of man, / You cannot say, or guess, for you know only / A heap of broken images” (Eliot 2015, 55). “Son of man,” a phrase from the Old and New Testaments (appearing in the latter more



than 80 times) alludes to Christ. But Eliot's first note to the poem concerns Ezekiel 2: 1, summoning the precise moment when he received the divine vocation to be a prophet during his and his people's Babylonian captivity. The fact that Eliot brings to mind precisely the passage when the spirit of God enters Ezekiel and addresses him as "son of man" proves a telling moment that sets up a parallel with the revivifying knowledge that his poem is about to disclose, at the same time it introduces the themes of exile and bondage.

Ezequiel predicted the fall of the Temple of Jerusalem which occurred in 587 B.C. and later prophesied both its reconstruction and God's help with the return of the people of Israel. To those who know only "a heap of broken images," the prophet reveals a superior knowledge, one not confined to mere temporality and the Cartesian categories of time and space, an apprehension capable of redeeming the wastelanders from their monotonous empty rounds: "And I will show you something different from either / Your shadow at morning striding behind you / Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you" (55). To pursue this wisdom, he extends an invitation to enter "the shadow of this great rock." Indeed, superior comprehension starts with an awareness: "I will show you fear in a handful of dust." Moreover, in the desert a shadow is a lifesaving refuge, and this is how Isaiah foretells the coming of the savior: "And a man shall be as an hiding place from the wind, and a covert from the tempest; as rivers of water in a dry place, as the shadow of a great rock in a weary land" (Isaiah 32: 2). The invitation to enter "the shadow of this red rock" is also a reference to Peter, Petrus in Latin, the rock, on which the church is built: "And I say also unto thee, that thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (Matthew 16: 18).

Following the prophet's cryptic invitation and promise, he enquires into the possibility of new life in the waste land, which Eliot describes in his second note in the words from Ecclesiastes (12: 5): "What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow / Out of this stony rubbish?" This is a recasting of Ezequiel's Biblical question, when God asks him if he believes that the valley of bones with the remains of the people of Israel will come back to life: "And he said unto me, Son of man, can these bones live? And I answered, O Lord GOD, thou knowest. ... Thus saith the Lord GOD unto these bones; Behold, I will cause breath to enter into you, and ye shall live" (Ezekiel 37: 1-6). At the end of "Burial of the Dead," the same conversation into the possibility of rebirth and metamorphosis is taken up again in the conversation on gardening across ages: "That corpse you planted last year in your garden, / Has it begun to sprout? Will it bloom this year? / Or has the sudden frost disturbed its bed?" (57). Since corpses are endowed with the possibility of new life like plants, there are no stable frontiers between life and death.

The answer to this question, provided obliquely by the title of this section, derives from "The Order of the Burial of Dead" from the Book of Common Prayer, the liturgical book of the Church of England. It suggests that in this section we have been watching a ritual of resurrection. The hallucinatory question regarding the blooming of a corpse sends us back to the motif of the annual return of the spring of the first lines of the poem and to the prophet's inquiry about the possibility of life in the wasteland: "What are the roots that clutch?" But now death is reinforced



by Saint Paul's words at the burial rite: "the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed" (I Corinthians 15: 52).

The revelation "I will show you fear in a handful of dust," reminiscent of "for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return" (Genesis 3: 19), leads us to the Biblical assertion that awareness of human finitude is the beginning of wisdom, which is also an essential first step in the existentialist quest for authenticity. The prophet warns that there is no escape from the limitations of the human condition, and not perceiving them as real and eschewing the cycle of life and death—like Marie, who "reads[s], much of the night, and go[es] south in the winter" (55)—only plunges existence into a death in life. The wastelanders will have to come to terms with the limitations of the human predicament and confront their despair, a necessary step in the quest for a spiritual identity.

In "A Game of Chess," another prophet insistently warns the pubgoers to "HURRY UP PLEASE ITS TIME," a phrase which he repeats five times (60, 61). The bartender's impersonal call announcing closing time urges the pubgoers to change their lives before it is too late, and so avoid Ophelia's tragic fate—her last farewell words are heard in the poem: "Good night, ladies, good night, sweet ladies, good night, good night" (61). Furthermore, they must do so before death checkmates all, as in another fateful game of chess, that of Thomas Middleton's play *Women Beware Women*.

Ezekiel anticipates Tiresias, the prophet of Thebes, who is "the most important personage in the poem" and who, Eliot tells us, "sees the substance of the poem." He unites all characters "all the women are one woman, and the two sexes meet in Tiresias" (74). He is the universal consciousness that perceives the void at the heart of life that persists through history in men and women, rich and poor.

## THE QUEST FOR WATER

*The Waste Land* is a poem about drought and the quest for water, signifying a search for a life-giving force. For Eliot, drought aligns with man's failure to observe his relationship to the transcendent, as the poem stages the drama of a tortured consciousness flung between hope and despair, flung between hope and despair across a nightmarish desert, "dead mountain mouth of carious teeth that cannot spit" (68), among hostile figures, "bats and baby faces" (69) amidst the falling towers of crumbling citadels. In its quest for water, which translates into a search for origins and beginnings, the poem moves eastward, tracing a metaphorical journey from London to Carthage to Palestine—which includes references to the Trial, Passion and Death of Christ on Mount Golgotha—and eventually ends high on the mountaintops of Himavant. Like the romantic philosophers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Eliot considered India the cradle of human knowledge, and Sanskrit the Ursprache, the common source of all languages. Eliot's poem thus also incorporates multiple allusions to Hindu rain and thunder gods from the Vedas and the Upanishads.



Ganga was sunken, and the limp leaves  
Waited for rain while the black clouds  
Gathered far distant, over Himavant. (Eliot 2015, 70)

If the sterility and impotence of *The Waste Land* are rooted in the loss of metaphysical and spiritual awareness, which transforms man into a dispossessed fragmentary being, an unidentifiable nonentity, then Ganga, the divine consort of the God Shiva and the generic name of sacred water, remains “sunken” even at the heights of Himavant, the sacred abode of the divine couple (Rao 1976, 64). Yet, Indra, “the thunder god, liberator of waters by slaying the demon of the drought” in the *Rig Veda* (*Rig Veda* 1.32; Rao 1976, 52), defeats Vritra, the gigantic dragon who held captive the seven rivers of India in a black cloud. His victory is equivalent to the triumph of life over sterility and death. Metaphorically, Indra releases the waters of knowledge from the den of ignorance; he forces them to come into being by the realization of their imprisoned potentialities, which Kierkegaard finds rooted in despair. Indra’s feat is an oblique model as well as a summons to the wastelanders to put an end to their spiritless life.

#### ON BECOMING A SELF: THE FIRE SERMON AND WHAT THE THUNDER SAID

*The Waste Land*’s many prophetic voices and luminous moments prepare the awakening of the self to its spiritual dimension which culminates with the teachings of Buddha and the commandments of the Thunder from the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, two non-European texts that mark the cardinal turning point and the resolution of the poem. The philosophy of the Masters of Life, Christ, Buddha, and the rain and thunder gods that appear in the poem –Indra, Varuna, Prajapati– show the way out of despair towards “the heart of light.” They concur that ascetic discipline and detachment from worldly aspirations and the insatiable cravings of the self enable deliverance from endless suffering or despair, a belief in keeping with the Christian message of renunciation as well as with Kierkegaard’s existentialism.

Buddha’s “Fire Sermon,” which gives the eponymous title to the third section of *The Waste Land*, lays bare the source of depravity: the fire of the appetites. Buddha coincides with St. Augustine, who laments in his *Confessions*: “To Carthage then I came, where a cauldron of unholy loves sang all about my ears” (3: 1). The reference to the “cauldron of unholy loves” sums up all the passionless couples of Eliot’s poem. Both Buddha and St. Augustine ground the cause of human misery in the all-consuming fire of the appetites. Burning is a central motif, in which all the world is on fire with its own thirst for sensual gratification.

Eliot advocates the need for ascetic discipline and fuses the trends of eastern and western mysticism. He considered that Buddha’s Fire Sermon was analogous in importance to Christ’s Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7; Eliot 2015, 75, note to line 308). Freedom from the snare of senses and craving is reached by “blowing out of the fire.” Buddhist and Christian mysticism propound a burning of the self’s



forms of identity, rooted in the immediate and the phenomenal world in an attempt to awaken its spiritual consciousness. “All is transitory, all is suffering” is Buddha’s theme and the leitmotif of post-Upanishadic thought. Moreover, identification of suffering with the ephemerality of life and its resulting illusory quality is also congenial with the Christian outlook that advocates the need for the spiritual. For Buddha “All things are on fire,” they burn “with the fire of hatred, with the fire of infatuation, with birth, old age, death, sorrow, lamentation misery, grief, and despair are they on fire.” Hence Buddha believes that “the learned and noble disciple conceives an aversion for” the senses, “[a]nd in conceiving this aversion, he becomes divested of passion, and by the absence of passion he becomes free...” (Warren 1963, 351-353). Buddha preaches detachment from the sensual as a way of liberation from the chains of the phenomenal and a requirement to root existence in the spiritual. Consequently, the Hindu outlook akin to, if not entirely aligned with, Kierkegaard’s existentialism, which argues that people waste their lives, deceived by its joys and sorrows and “never became decisively and eternally conscious as spirit, as self ... so that each individual may gain the highest, the only thing worth living for and enough to live in for an eternity” (1980, 26-27). Eternity for Kierkegaard means the eternal God, Christ’s father, and Jesus himself.

Buddha’s Fire Sermon is not without consequences. Detachment, the renouncing of the natural man, makes possible a process of regeneration in “Death by Water,” which is an elegy for the death of Phlebas, the prototype of everyman and the protagonist’s card. This section fulfils the death wish of the Sybil as well as the promise of Ariel’s song, in which drowning is a metamorphosis “into something rich and strange.” The “current under sea” that “Picked his bones in whisperm” (67) puts an end to despair and dissolves his old life in a process of metempsychosis: “He passed the stages of his age and youth / Entering the whirlpool” (67), while the “I” gives up the natural self, forgets the sensual world, “the cry of gulls,” renounces “the profit and the loss,” and finally frees himself from attachments and from seeing life in terms of youth and personal attraction: of being “once handsome and tall as you” (67).

The descent into water, meanwhile, is a voyage into the unknown realities of the psyche. Death by water is not a drowning, but a moment of catharsis and a baptism. Phlebas puts an end to his death in life. From a Christian perspective this is “the dark night of the soul,” the moment of total surrender, in which the “I” gives up individual will in order to achieve union with God; the loss of the empirical self is the path towards a spiritual life. From an existential point of view, the “I” gives up the philosophy of “to have” for a philosophy of “to be,” an attitude substantiated by the fable of the Thunder and close to the tenets of Kierkegaard’s existentialism (Patea 2007, 91-110). The mystical meaning of this passage is reconfirmed by the Biblical invocation “Gentile or Jew”<sup>6</sup> (Romans 2: 9-11; Eliot 2015, 67) which affirms

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<sup>6</sup> “Tribulation and anguish, upon every soul of man that doeth evil, of the Jew first, and also of the Gentile; But glory, honour, and peace, to every man that worketh good, to the Jew first, and also to the Gentile: For there is no respect of persons with God” (Romans 2: 9-11).



that the new life in Christ is open to both Jews and Gentiles. In the same Epistle, Saint Paul affirms the inseparability of death and life in the process of rebirth and regeneration: “Know ye not, that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into his death? (Romans 6: 3). Phlebas’ life is judged by “Oh you who turn the wheel and look to windward” (67), and it is Buddha, who in Hindu iconography is represented as the Lord of the wheel, who presides over this circular bondage of temporality. There is also a Biblical plea (Romans 2: 1)<sup>7</sup> not to be harsh in our judgements on him “who was once handsome and tall as you” (67).

In *The Waste Land*, the life-giving rain falls in the form of the revelation of the Word which, Prajapati, the Lord of creation, discloses to his disciples in the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, (the oldest Upanishad dating back to 800 BC). An Upanishad is an utterance pronounced by one who has “seen” –a *drasta*, a visionary sage; it is a statement “spoken in a wilderness, ‘a great desert’, the waste land, what life is without faith.” *Aranyaka* means “as being spoken in a desert, and *Brihad* (great) from its extent” (Rao 1976, 22). An Upanishad, Nageswara Rao explains, is “a secret message delivered in the waste land for those who wish to liberate themselves” (1976, 22). Similarly, *The Waste Land* is also a poem that delivers a secret message. In the fable of the Thunder, Prajapati reveals to his disciples his ultimate nature, the Word, DA, the non-manifested unity beyond, which is the universal law, the *dharma*, fundamental to existence. DA contains ideals that make life meaningful. The disciples’ understanding of the Word is fragmentary, they –men, demons and gods– perceive only one aspect of the Word. These three declensions of the Word are the practical means to root out ignorance and the self’s thirst for the sensual. The self attains wholesomeness by adjusting his impulses to the commandments of the eternal and by orienting its life to the pursuit of the spiritual: through self-surrender to the higher demands of love (“the awful daring of a moment’s surrender / Which an age of prudence can never retract” [70]), through universal compassion for the other (“the key” [70]) that breaks the isolation of the self); and through submission to the eternal by restraining the impulses of the self in accordance with the laws of the absolute (Sri 1985, 91-92; Rao 1976, 55-84).

The fable of the Thunder underscores Kierkegaard’s notion that the self has an eternal and spiritual destiny and illustrates the Danish philosopher’s thesis of eternity’s claim over the self. Eliot’s thesis reconciles Christianity, Buddhism and the Vedanta<sup>8</sup> by way of an existentialist discourse. Specifically, *Datta* defines existence as a matter of irrevocable choices that have to be lived out and actualized in time, as is summed up in the final question “What have we given?” (Brooker and Bentley 1990, 191):

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<sup>7</sup> “Therefore thou art inexcusable, O man, whosoever thou art that judgest: for wherein thou judgest another, thou condemnest thyself; for thou that judgest doest the same things” (Romans 2: 1).

<sup>8</sup> Vedanta is applied to the teachings of the *Upanishad*, the *Brahma-Sutra* and the *Baghavad Gita* (which is assumed to have reached its present form by 400 AD) and the commentaries of the mystic Shankara (788-820 AD).



DA

*Datta*: what have we given?

My friend, blood shaking my heart

The awful daring of a moment's surrender

Which an age of prudence can never retract

By this, and this only, we have existed

Which is not to be found in our obituaries

Or in memories draped by the beneficent spider

Or under seals broken by the lean solicitor

In our empty rooms (Eliot 2015, 70)

The "I" is not defined by that which it possesses, the gains accumulated over the years to be found in legacies consigned "under seals broken by the lean solicitor" nor by external factors such as the worldly honours and recognitions mentioned in obituaries or in other "memories draped by the beneficent spider." Christianity and Hinduism conceive life as a form of being not of having, and these ethico-religious principles are in accord with existential tenets. To have is not the premise of to be, despite the tangible values celebrated by "an age of prudence." To live a safe life is to live an inessential one. Human value is not a function of "I am what I have" but of "I am what I give." As *The Waste Land* turns in Part v, it conveys the idea that man does not exist in virtue of the material evidence of his possessions, but through love, which becomes real in the act of giving: "The awful daring of a moment's surrender / Which an age of prudence can never retract" (Eliot 2015, 70).

*Datta* is the final balance of one's life before the Absolute, when in Kierkegaard's words "the hourglass of temporality" has run out (1980, 27). It is an examination of life in the light of existential ideals of authenticity and love. In Kierkegaardian terms, it is the scrutiny of the relationship of the self with itself reflected in the relationship with the Power which constituted it. By following the Thunder's command, the self accepts eternity's claim over the self, which represents the highest challenge made upon it to be spirit (22). It exemplifies the way in which the human being can be "conscious of itself as spirit, or conscious of itself before God as spirit" (44).

The ending of *The Waste Land*, "Datta, Davadhvam, Damyata / Shanti shanti shanti" (71) indicates the way in which despair can be completely overcome once the self accepts its infinitude, in congruence with Kierkegaardian thought. The self achieves composure in willing to be itself and "in relating itself to that which has established the entire relation" (14). Kierkegaard concludes "in relating itself to itself the self rests transparently in the power that established it" (14). The power in which the self is grounded is God whom Kierkegaard conceives of as "the third," the relation that contains the self and relates to its opposing constituents:

If the relation that relates itself to itself has been established by another, then the relation is indeed *the third*, but this relation, *the third*, is yet again a relation and relates itself to that which established the entire relation. The human self is such a derived, established relation, a relation that relates itself to itself and in relating itself to itself relates itself to another. (13-14) (my italics)





“The Third” for Kierkegaard is the eternal, that which established the authentic relation within the self. Eliot also denotes a missing third, and a third realm which maps out the transcendent:

Who is the third who walks always beside you  
When I count, there are only you and I together  
But when I look ahead up the white road  
There is always another one walking beside you  
Gliding wrapt in a brown mantle, hooded  
I do not know whether a man or a woman  
–But who is that on the other side of you? (Eliot 2015, 69)

He refers to the transcendent as “the third who walks always beside you.” The third is both the resurrected Christ whom the disciples do not recognize on their way to Emmaus, as well as the ghostlike companion of the Antarctic explorers, as Eliot indicates in two different apparently contradictory notes to lines 46 and 359 (72, 76). Eliot’s “third” sounds strikingly similar to Kierkegaard’s “third,” “a relation” that “relates itself to that which established the entire relation” (1980, 13) and which is the power that grounds the self. The spiritual dimension is inseparable from the self: it is “that on the other side of you,” the ever present other “who walks always beside you.”

The “other” is the self’s spiritual projection, its inherent yet hidden, “hooded” aspect, which does not conform to Cartesian categories nor lends itself to physical, logical-empirical explanations or differences of gender: “When I count, there are only you and I together / ... / I do not know whether a man or a woman” (69). Because the third is “das ganz Andere” –*mysterium tremendum et fascinans* in Rudolf Otto’s definition of the numinous– the wholly other, the Creator and not the creature He has created, that cannot be reduced to creaturely categories. The third is that which shatters the objectifying structures of human understanding. Eliot’s God, invoked later as “He who was living is now dead,” is fused with the Vedic thunder god Varuna, the god of righteousness, referred to in the *Rig Veda* as “the third whenever two plot in silence” (Rao 1976, 59). In the same way, Eliot’s Word is not only the Christian Logos, but also DA, the revelation of Buddhist and Hindu texts that discloses ethical religious mandates allied with the Christian existentialism of Kierkegaard, which also conceives life in terms of giving, grace, and love.

## CONCLUSION

Although explication and exegesis have tamed its spirit, *The Waste Land* still strikes us in a way similar to that which impressed readers in 1922. Its novelty may have faded, yet its power remains. *The Waste Land* is a poem full of despair, offering an x-ray of the aridity and vacuity of modern life, as it mourns a collapsing civilization. However, despite the desolation it portrays, *The Waste Land* is essentially a spiritual text that traces the path out of the self’s inner emptiness. In his treatment of the causes of despair, Eliot keeps close in spirit to Kierkegaard’s existentialism.



The poem shores fragments against ruins and ends with the revelation of the Word which is the affirmation of ultimate love that alone vanquishes despair. This vantage point will be the starting point of Eliot's pilgrimage to *Ash-Wednesday* and the *Four Quartets*, his "epic of the soul."

Eliot admired Dante as he did no other writer, considering him "the most *universal* of poets in the modern languages" (Eliot 1972, 238). Dante, he believed, "tended to concentrate on what men of various races and lands could think together" (239). Eliot especially applauded the fact that "The culture of Dante was not of one European country but of Europe," and that his "lucid, or rather translucent" style cut across "the modern division of nationality" (239). In the twentieth century, in the era of logical positivism, Eliot is a twentieth century Dante who has gone beyond European frontiers and attempted to bring together the metaphysical tradition of the West with that of the East –specifically, Buddhism and Vedanta– whilst respecting the particularity of each. Eliot grounds *The Waste Land* in a web of culturally diverse sources which enables him to articulate the common language of Eastern and Western spirituality which he translates in Christian existential terms. The reason why Eliot conjoins the Orient with the Occident is that he wishes to underscore how the self's call to the transcendent is ubiquitous, regardless of the religion one has been born into. His goal is not to pursue a form of syncretism, but to strive for the universal.

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