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## Revisiting the Waste Land: What the Thunder Is Saying

Walter Coppedge

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## ESSAYS AND READER COMMENTS

### REVISITING *THE WASTE LAND*: WHAT THE THUNDER IS SAYING

Sixty-seven years ago T. S. Eliot published in book form the poem which occasioned—along with *Ulysses* (also 1922)—the most violent literary controversy of the decade. A few readers immediately recognized its greatness; but the larger reading public, baffled by its fragmentation, its polyglottal allusions, and its stream-of-consciousness merging of identities and narrations, reacted with hostility. Today the poem is the only work which is routinely taught in surveys of British, American, and world literature. Although it still maddens and mystifies students, the poem is now regarded not only as a Modern masterpiece about the disintegration of European culture after the First War, but also as the greatest poetic vision of the twentieth century. Contemporary political, psychological and ecological conditions continue to reveal its prescient authority. Of this work as of few others it may be said that anyone who knows the poem cannot be said to be uneducated. Although a reader may be troubled initially by quotations or allusions embedded in the text from some thirty-five sources (in Latin, Greek, German, French, Italian, Provençal, and Sanskrit), understanding these fragments is not necessary to grasping the design of the poem.

The main themes derive from two impressive scholarly works. The first, Jesse L. Weston's *From Ritual to Romance* (1920), recounts the Grail legend and the passage of its central hero through the ordeal of a nightmarish waste land in order to attain his quest: the vision of the Grail. This vision would enable him to heal the ruler, a maimed king whose impotence has brought blight and sterility to his domain—now a waste land. Employing the ancient anthropological conceit that the fortunes of the land and king are one, the myth teaches then that the fertility and prosperity of the land are associated with the virtue and potency of the ruler. From Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough* (12 volumes, 1890-1915), the volumes entitled *Adonis*, *Attis*, and *Osiris* describe the rites and cults of the ancient vegetation myths of Phoenicia, Phrygia, and Egypt. As many people know, these myths recapitulate agricultural religion: just as the seed must die before it can be reborn, and the bulb must be buried in the earth before it sprouts in the spring, so the god must die before he can be resurrected. The crucifixion and death of Jesus of Nazareth, also from the Near East, recapitulate the pattern of this divine archetype; His resurrection at the vernal equinox connects Him

recognizably to these ancient vegetation ceremonies. The Waste Land is thus Eliot's metaphor for the present state of Western culture: the land is drought-stricken waiting for the waters which will bring spiritual refreshment. Cut off from faith and the traditions of the past, Western man lives among "a heap of broken images," "withered stumps of time," and "Dead mountain mouth of teeth that cannot spit." April is "the cruellest month" for he fears spiritual renewal and the implications of "a handful of dust." On the shoreline there are "the broken fingernails of dirty hands."

The sounds of the waste land are wind and cicada, the dry grass, the swinging door of an abandoned chapel, and "voices singing out of empty cisterns and exhausted wells." The nightingale recounts her plaintive tale of abduction and rape; bones in a little low garret are "Rattled by the rat's foot"; over the gramophone streams the music of the modern age, the Shakespeherian rag—"It's so elegant/So intelligent."

Throughout the poem snatches of monologue, song, and conversation are heard. A fatuous woman talks of reading much of the night and going south in the winter. A debased fortune teller reads the Tarot deck and turns up cards alluding to characters in Grail and vegetation myths who later figure in the unfolding poem.

The present day waste land is modern London where "each man fixed his eyes before his feet" and "the human engine waits/Like a taxi throbbing,"—a land where another kind of death has "undone" many. Other characters are a neurasthenic lady sitting in desolate splendor "Pressing lidless eyes and waiting for a knock upon the door." Then, as the scene shifts to a pub, a group of drinkers chatter indiscriminately about abortions and hot gammon while the bartender—like an angel of the Apocalypse—ominously reminds everyone to HURRY UP PLEASE ITS TIME. Then sitting on the riverbank is Ferdinand, Shakespeare's romantic hero from *The Tempest*, who surveys the trash of river and shore—empty bottles, sandwich papers, cigarette ends and "other testimony of summer nights." Ferdinand, a sea-voyager, merges into the ironically named modern Levantine trader, Mr. Eugenides—"unshaven, with a pocket full of currants," who propositions the narrator for "a weekend at the Metropole." This invitation to sterile sex is immediately followed by a scene of joyless seduction in a typist's flat where a carbuncular clerk finds that his "Exploring hands encounter no defence" (for his vanity "makes a welcome of indifference"). The typist, glancing at herself in the mirror, is "glad it's over"; then "She smoothes her hair with automatic hand/And puts a record on the gramophone." All the figures thus far surveyed merge at this point in the central stream-of-consciousness narrator who is Tiresias, the blind androgynous prophet ("And I Tiresias have foresuffered all . . .").

Behind the figures of Ferdinand and Mr. Eugenides is the prototypical Phoenician sailor, Phlebas, whose drowning is the subject of the fourth section. He is also the one-eyed merchant on the Tarot deck the fortune teller has uncovered. Phoenicians, early traders of the ancient world, had carried their vegetation cults as far as Spain and Cornwall. Phlebas who like all of us in daily life and work is distracted from ultimate questions "Forgot . . . the profit and the loss" entering the whirlpool. Whether Gentile or Jew, each of us is invited to "Consider Phlebas, who was once handsome and tall as you."

Jesus, the last divine avatar of this vegetation mystery, appears in the dry and rocky desert of the last section, entitled "What the Thunder Said." He is here the resurrected Christ on the road to Emmaus, "Gliding wrapt in a brown mantle, hooded." At the same time "hooded hordes" swarm over endless plains in the east, and towers fall from Jerusalem, Athens, London—signs figuring the collapse of civilization. But among these images of desolation, in an empty chapel among tumbled graves, a cock crows on a rooftree, a hopeful sign as the rooster is associated with the dawn and the coming of Christ.

Even more hopeful is the gathering of black clouds over the Himalayas and the expectancy of "the limp leaves" waiting for rain. Then the thunder speaks. Although associated with rain, thunder does not always bring water to the thirsty land. Will the Waste Land be revitalized? That depends on whether the three orders of being—gods, men, and demons—obey the Thunder's command. To the gods the thunder enjoins *give*: but what, the poet asks, have we given? The only measure of life ultimately is "The awful daring of a moment's surrender," a surrender of self or ego to the divine will. To men, the thunder commands compassion, or *sympathy* for others. But each person in his own prison thinks of the key which will enable his escape and thereby confirms the prison. To demons the thunder commands the virtue whose absence now accounts for their hellish condition—*control*, or discipline. Paradoxically, this is the command which brings freedom. For to set the individual will against the divine will is to steer the boat against the forces of wind and water. To discipline oneself in accordance with the way things naturally are is to respond, like the boat, "Gaily, to the hand expert with sail and oar"—

Your heart would have responded  
Gaily, when invited, beating obedient  
To controlling hands.

Whether the rain will fall—whether, indeed, not only civilization but perhaps the very planet itself will survive—will depend on the extent to which we can remedy these conditions which cause the Waste Land. These causes are human, spiritual rather than political problems: they

manifest themselves in egotistical greed; in loveless indifference; and what is evident to anyone who surveys the debris of modern culture, in colossal self-indulgence. Giving remedies greed; sympathy, indifference; and control, self-indulgence.

Greed? Does that sound like a familiar word for the eighties? Think of Michael Douglas's speech in *Wall Street*—a speech Oliver Stone lifted verbatim from Ivan Boesky's address to an NYU audience. From the nation's waters the nymphs are departing, hastened no doubt by James G. Watt who slowed dramatically conservation of the nation's wild and scenic river system. The Rhine maidens have additional reason to lament the loss of their treasure after the Sandoz chemical spill which has destroyed fish for years to come on portions of that fabled river. Greed has strip-mined mountains from Virginia to Montana. The deplorable record of the Bureau of Land Management indicates that the designation of a wilderness area is not enough to withstand the temptation of mineral development. The loss of the primeval balsam forests on Mount Mitchell, the devastation of a third of Germany's Black Forest, the absence of fish in a quarter of the lakes in the Adirondacks—all bear grim witness to acid rain and to the priority of industry over the environment.

In their scramble to satisfy international markets for hamburgers, third-world entrepreneurs are cutting down rain forests at the rate of fifty-four acres per minute; yearly this amounts to a loss equal to the state of Connecticut. For them, the slash and burn destruction of pristine forests is good business; for us it is one further contribution to the greenhouse effect.

But even more destructive to the planet is global-scale indifference and insensitivity. How else can we explain the conditions which befoul our habitats? About 22,000 tons of garbage are dumped daily into the Atlantic off Cape May. The Great Lakes are sick with pollution—goiter is present in most sea gulls and many fish are afflicted with tumors. The New England lobster catch has diminished 90 percent in the last few years, and almost all scallops have disappeared off Carolina coastal waters. Virginia now imports oysters, although formerly the Chesapeake Bay exported them to the world. Over all, fish harvests have declined more than ten percent since 1979. The seas, as *Time* magazine has shown, are in a perilous condition.

The indifference we can identify immediately is as close as the television set. At last count there were some fifty crime shows a week, casual violence at the flick of a finger. The degree of brutalization on the screen is an index of the degree of brutalization within; to paraphrase Blake, we become what we behold. No wonder that flesh and blood people become no more than three-dimensional abstractions to robbers and rapists, moving targets to expressway snipers. The phenomenon of pornography with its endless variations on organ grinding is another instance of

indifference, of accommodation to abstraction. The grotesque and mutilated looks of the young, the visceral throbs and screech of popular music, the sterility and alienation of much that is admired in museums, the dead fluorescent light of windowless offices and classrooms—these phenomena among many others (concentration camp chickens? laboratory vivisections? Milgrim experiments?) constitute the social testimony to indifference.

And now to the glaring problem of self-indulgence. We are the consumers whom the Coneheads parody. There is cocaine. *Vanity Fair*. Fur coats. The Bakkers and Queen Leona. Poodles with diamond collars. Fat farms where you can lose five pounds a week for \$2,000. The Fontainebleau Hotel. The Hunt Brothers. Steroids. Michael Jackson. His and Her Cadillacs. Frank Sinatra doing it his way. Milk-fed veal. Donald Trump. Judith Krantz. Bermuda, It's You, Isn't It? Everybody can contribute his own catalogue.

Albert Einstein once asked, "How is it possible that this culture-loving era could be so monstrously amoral? More and more I come to value charity and love of one's fellow being above everything else . . . all our technological progress—our very civilization—is like the axe in the hand of the pathological criminal."

The crisis in civilization is the crisis of the planet, for greed, indifference, and self-indulgence are the causes of our problems. That the land and the king are one is clear enough: if acid rain is the consequence of political decision by our rulers, so the aridity of Spain, it has been speculated, was caused by the decision of Phillip II to cut down the forests to build the Armada.

As that mad prophet of the twentieth century Wilhelm Reich wrote, there is a simile between the spread of the desert chollas and cacti and the prickly outer behavior of human beings who are empty and desert-like inside: "It is characteristic of desert life that even animals have a bristly, prickly surface or sharply pointed organs to kill: the scorpion, the rattlesnake, the Gila monster." Reich pointed out that in modern civilization, "The deadness of emotion, the dehydration of tissues alternating with puffy swellings, fatty flabbiness, or inclination to edema or disease which causes edema, alcoholism which serves to stimulate what is left from an original sense of life, crime and psychosis and the last convulsions of a thwarted, frustrated, badly maltreated life are only a few of the consequences of the emotional desert."

To realize—as surely we must—the devastation created collectively and individually by greed, indifference, and self-indulgence, we need the kind of global perspective provided by this account of a Russian cosmonaut to Henry S. F. Cooper in *The New Yorker*:

You look down on the planet and see that there are no boundaries . . . you see for yourself how small the globe is. And you see all

the pollution, when a polluted river gets to the ocean, you see a huge smear. And you see smoke—from cities, from forests being burned off. You see all sorts of pollutants—and you see no place other than the earth where we can live.

We need to return to an awareness that the Earth is a being—not an inert object to devastate and plunder. The Earth is our mother who gives us all our common lease of life. But rather than pronounce insane any plan to destroy vast portions of the planet, scientists cheer each successful explosion of atomic bombs in the womb of our mother.

Looked at from a global perspective, the pettiness of such warfare—only different in degree from the battle of the warring simians in Kubrick's *2001*—is enough to make the gods, had they our spleens, shake with laughter: as the giant Emperor of Brobdingnag in Swift's tale tells Gulliver (one of us), "I cannot but conclude the bulk of your natives to be the most pernicious race of odious vermin that nature ever suffered to crawl upon the surface of the earth." Well? Can we continue to devote energy and our most valuable material and intellectual resources into plans for mutual annihilation? Can this be sanity?

This lonely little ball in space is the only home we have. With our expertise and technology we could create not the Waste Land but the Garden. How long, how long will it take before we are ready to listen to what the Thunder says?

WALTER COPPEDGE  
Virginia Commonwealth University