“What Tiresias Sees”: Discord, Revelation, and Nausea in *The Waste Land*

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Disorder is the only law in T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*. The physical and psychological landscapes described in its title and body constitute a nightmarish vision characterized by the dissolution of order and tradition, the perversion of moral and social values, the loss of sanity, and a confusion that extends from the voice of the poem to the minds of readers and, more broadly, the society that provoked it. Though the text appears to consist of multiple perspectives relating a collection of fragmented responses to a catastrophic event, consistencies of thought and diction reinforce a conception of the poem as an account told from one point of view, albeit a branching one. Consequently, the division of voice perpetuates confusion on a scale that prevents a resolution from being reached, while defying critical interpretation. *The Waste Land* depicts all-encompassing destruction as it takes place, internalizing cognitive and planetary turmoil in its composition and the mental states of its voices, and expressing the most total form of ruin via the documentation of psychological collapse.

In his “Notes on ‘The Waste Land,’” Eliot identifies the Greek prophet Tiresias, who appears in Book III, as “the most important personage […] uniting all the rest,” due to the prophet’s awareness of “the substance of the poem” (Eliot 53). Eliot’s analysis explains the connection of multiple consciousnesses within the text—as one voice “melts” into another and “all the women are one woman”—and the limited insight given to some of its speakers (Ibid.). Tiresias describes himself as “throbbing between two lives” and claims that he “perceived the scene, [or] foretold the rest” (45, line 229). As an isolated speaker with a connection to other minds, he confirms the origin of his fellow voices in a single
source. Accordingly, he appears to be the most stable of the speakers. Still, the nature of the prophet’s narrative exemplifies the extent of the crisis taking place.

Joseph Bentley and Jewel Spears Brooker identify Tiresias as a pivotal agent in the definition of the “Absolute” in Reading The Waste Land: Modernism and the Limits of Interpretation. His function results from his contact with multiple voices external to time:

Tiresias defines a binary perspective that serves as the point of view of the poem. He is a figure from the ideal order of myth; yet he is spying on the sordidly historical typist and clerk. By saying that Tiresias is spying on all the characters, Eliot is suggesting that the reader make an effort to perceive them in an equivalent way, from both internal and external perspectives. (Bentley, Brooker 53)

According to Bentley and Brooker, the Absolute is the “sum total of all experiences,” the accumulated thoughts and sensations of all people throughout history (53). In the context of the poem, the Absolute is an incredibly vast collection of thoughts and impressions. The critics note Tiresias’s location at the epicenter of a network of speakers, but their most significant observation deals with his status as a consciousness “outside space and time […] [suggesting] that the reader must try to imagine that The Waste Land is a phenomenon to be viewed from the perspective of the Absolute” (54). Tiresias is exposed to a larger mind. The prophet does not validate Eliot’s “idealizing nostalgia for the past,” or his contempt for “his own time”—therefore, he offers no evidence that the poem should be read as a morally conservative commentary, or the product of a specific moment (53). Context has no effect upon his perceptions. Like his fellow speakers, Tiresias is a tributary subject emerging from a more authoritative source: that of the solitary, poetic voice, splitting apart as it speaks.
Tiresias is a prophet, but he is also a device that forcibly connects readers to the text. According to Bentley and Brooker, the prophet “functions as Eliot’s ‘higher’ viewpoint which will include and transmute the figures in *The Waste Land* and also, perhaps, include and transmute reader as subject and text as object,” leading to the “subsumption” of readers (Bentley, Brooker 54). Rather than speaking on behalf of the other voices in the poem, or assuming agency by making sense of its contents, Tiresias is a functional component that imposes the same concerns and stresses upon readers as speakers. The critics build upon this idea in their discussion of Eliot’s “attribution of substance” in his note on Tiresias, which “[warns] that the poem has no substantial unity from any […] point of view” (54). The prophet’s confusion serves as a caution against investment in the poem, but his warning is too unclear to be of any use.

The critics falter in the conclusion of their argument, which argues that Tiresias is a guide for readers. Despite his immersion in the unbalanced world of the poem, Bentley and Brooker affirm that the prophet “[provides] a means for the reader to transcend jarring and incompatible worlds, to move to a higher viewpoint that both includes and transcends the contemporary world” (59). Tiresias may be omniscient, but his visions are not a means to anything but further perplexity. If readers “transcend” the world by following Tiresias, they will suffer exposure to the same inconceivable forces which transform the prophet, and force him to walk to perpetually “among the lowest of the dead” (Eliot 45.246). The prophet is not the key to the poem, but a sign of the extent of its turmoil.

The position of Tiresias is only one suggestion of the comprehensive disorder of *The Waste Land*. The verse is rife with images of death and decay, from the “dead land” to
the “stony rubbish” from which “branches grow,” to “[d]ead mountain mouth of carious teeth that cannot spit,” to the “Unreal City” that occasionally appears throughout the poem (Eliot 38.2, 20, 19; 40.60). One voice notes, “I had not thought death had undone so many,” before asking “‘Stetson’” whether “‘that corpse you planted last year in your garden […] [began] to sprout” (40.69, 71-2). Like the rubbish, and the first voice’s description of flowers growing “out of the dead land” in “The Burial of the Dead,” the insinuation that dead and barren sources produce life suggests a perversion of values (38.2). The cycle of life and death is nonexistent in the poem. When life emerges from death, it is unnatural, an indication that something is amiss in the world, that the crisis has changed the principles of nature as well as destroying the land.

The inhabitants of the waste land—the speakers—refer to themselves as being insubstantial, transitory, or otherwise incapable of elucidating their position. The condition of their physical surroundings mirrors their mental states, due to the interrelation of minds and spaces within the poem. Of his circumstances during a prior meeting with the “‘hyacinth girl,’” one voice says, “I could not/Speak […] I was neither/Living nor dead, and I knew nothing,/Looking into the heart of light, the silence” (Eliot 39.36, 38-9, 39-41). Later, a voice comments, “Here one can neither stand nor lie nor sit,” while another voice is mystified by the presence of “another one walking beside you” (48.340; 49.363). The speakers are cognizant of one another, yet the extent of their awareness varies. One voice’s command to “[c]ome in under the shadow of this red rock,” where “I will show you something different from either/Your shadow at morning striding behind you/Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you,” seems to demonstrate such insight (39.26, 27-9). Though the voices sporadically name the subjects of their
address—here, the subject is the “[s]on of man,” Christ—the continual use of the word “you” throughout the poem suggests the involvement of the reader (38.20). No one is exempt from the crisis the speakers describe.

When they glimpse presences external to themselves, the speakers communicate the shifting orientation of voices and thematic conditions within the waste land. Madame Sosostris’s observation of “‘crowds of people, walking round in a ring,’” is consistent with this reading (40.56). As a voice speaking through another voice, with insights similar to those of Tiresias, she comprehends the scope of the poem by witnessing events and individuals external to her particular scene. Nevertheless, the disarray that overtakes the poem restricts her vision, even though she “[i]s known to be the wisest woman in Europe” (39.45). The unstable mass experience described by Bentley and Brooker as the Absolute imprisons Tiresias within minds other than his own, but it also disorients the other speakers, so that the symbols described in the poem are left unclear.

The integration of multiple mythologies, historical references, and personality types into the text of the poem substantiates the extent of their removal from time, space, and order. Eliot links the “Man with Three Staves […] with the Fisher King,” though Madame Sosostris fails to recognize the correlation of the figures during her Tarot reading (Eliot 52). The “Shakespeherian Rag” suggests constitutes a ruin of literature and written art in keeping with the natural degradations in the landscape (42.128). Likewise, the image of “the change of Philomel […] by the barbarous king,” which hangs over the “antique mantel” in “A Game of Chess,” is only one among many “withered stumps of time,” rendered meaningless by the crisis taking place (41.99, 97, 104). The loss of integrity in art and myth evokes the loss of direction on the part of the speakers.
The values which are not lost in the devastation of the text undergo a complete transformation.

Dependence on the images of the poem leads to a sort of vertigo that expedites its disintegration. The disaster is too extensive for its symbols to restrict it—instead, they facilitate the spread of the crisis outside the limits of the poem. Each speaker says, either to another speaker or to the reader, “you know only/a heap of broken images” (39.21-2). I return to my earlier note regarding another speaker’s call to the “[s]on of man,” which concludes with the line, “I will show you fear in a handful of dust” (38.20; 39.30). Despite the blatant invocation of Christ in this passage, the content of the address appears unrelated to Christianity, though one could derive an insinuation about the downfall of religion from the grim tones of the verse. The title of the second book only refers explicitly to one line, “[a]nd we shall play a game of chess […]”; all other connections between the game and the book are unstated (42.136). Few of the details mentioned in The Waste Land stand out as remarkable or explanatory; the absence of a “testimony of summer nights” in the Thames is no more or less significant than the fifth book’s “prison and palace and reverberation/Of thunder of spring over distant mountains” (48.326-7). The contents of the poem gain meaning based on the sentiments of the reader.

Some images stand out as significant, even though their purpose is unclear. The number of specific cards drawn by Madame Sosostris matches the number of books in the poem, the Phoenician Sailor whose death is foretold in her reading becomes the subject of the fourth book, and the Unreal City occurs and recurs (39.43; 48). These items are all linked, but their resonance is insignificant in light of their critical application. Though
multiple voices describe the crisis at the center of *The Waste Land* in an array of different idioms, the character of the event is fairly understandable. The title of the poem and its images of nature indicate that the crisis affects the physical world either through destruction or negative change. As the speakers collectively suffer from a kind of mental illness, or at least, from a dislocation with the world, the event affects thought in addition to physical conditions. Because art, myth, and history are products of thought, they change as well, mirroring mental and planetary decay. Still, any attempt to trust the images as guidelines will result in further confusion.

Eliot presents the apocalypse and its repercussions as developments which affect the real world to the same extent as the world of the poem. *The Waste Land* reflects the horrors of the world, but exacerbates them, rather than containing them. The reader, finally, is the victim of Eliot’s apocalypse, because the text offers enough symbolic material to provoke analysis, but insufficient subtext to explain its purpose. Eliot’s notes are no less cryptic than the poem because his goal is not the evocation of modern concerns, but the challenge of modernity itself. The poem cannot engage the world without collapsing, and perpetuating the decline of representational forms. Eliot’s disaster is written; therefore, its first victims—after the speakers tasked with recounting it—are critics and readers.

In *T. S. Eliot and the Human Predicament*, Audrey F. Cahill uses a critical approach which is confined to the idea that *The Waste Land* serves a singular function. She keeps with Bentley and Brooker’s argument by citing “people and places” as “being mediated through the mind of Tiresias,” and “not subject to the physical limitations of time and place” (Cahill 38). However, her analysis departs from theirs, and my own, in her claim
that Eliot “[imposes] order on experience,” or rather, attempts to distill a deeper meaning from the hysteria he records (38). Cahill asserts that the lives of “the people of the Waste Land” are “a monstrous escape from life, and a continuous evasion of reality,” and that “‘death’ is a kind of mass-inertia chosen by those who refuse to choose” (40, 45). The latter point has some credence in that the speakers, such as the “crowd” that “flowed over London Bridge,” embrace a death-like state (Eliot 40.62). Nevertheless, Cahill falls into the same trap as Eliot’s speakers: she searches for meaning where there is none, and worse yet, assumes that the speakers have chosen insanity and death—that their actions imply the existence of a subtext contemplating the doom of the modern world.

Further, Cahill seems to contradict her own claims regarding the figures of the poem. If, as she says, the images and “identities” of the poem are “unfixed,” then her position is unfounded, because it is based on points which, in her own reading, are too dynamic to trust as communicative (37). Her most severe departure from this reasoning lies in her dependence on the myth of the Fisher King as the “framework” of the poem (38). Cahill maintains that “the sickness of the Fisher King has affected the whole land, which is parched and infertile […] each individual life appears as part of a general infection, barren and meaningless because the life of the whole community is barren and meaningless” (39). Again, the critic contradicts herself: if the entire poem is “meaningless,” then it cannot be a definitive response to any myth. The text resonates with the story of the Fisher King at times, but not consistently, even in light of Eliot’s notes. The poet may have written in light of any number of myths, but his product is separate from his intentions, and he is not exempt from its effects.
Critics and readers are incorrect in assuming that the poem aspires to a resolution, or that it has any specific “point.” The work disassembles itself, develops fragile symbols and shatters them, and presents figures whose confusion reflects and is the result of a more comprehensive formal disorientation. Even Tiresias, despite the clarity of his vision, is confined within the thought processes of the sailor and typist, insofar as he has “foresuffered,” rather than foreseen, the “assaults” of the “young man carbuncular” and all other acts “[e]nacted on this same divan or bed” (Eliot 45.243, 239, 231, 244). The first and most horrible crisis in the text is the instability resulting from the destruction of the authoritative mind of the artist and creator. The impact of the collapse of that mind is plain: the poem is the moment of destruction as well as its effect.

The cause of Eliot’s apocalypse is debatable. “What the Thunder Said” intimates that the end of civilization is the disaster: “the agony in stony places/The shouting and the crying,” and “[f]alling towers/Jerusalem Athens Alexandria” (48.324-5). Later, however, a speaker affirms that the problem may relate to extreme living conditions: “[t]here is not even silence in the mountains […] not even solitude” (49. 341, 343). The end may be the quiet horror of the conversation that ends with Ophelia’s line, “[g]ood night, ladies, good night, sweet ladies […] ,” given its indirect commentaries on the anguish of life for disadvantaged people and the repetition of the line “HURRY UP PLEASE IT’S TIME” (43.172, 168). Alternatively, the modern realization that art exerts no more influence over the world than the mind may be the turning point. Given the characterization of the apocalypse as a psychological incident in The Waste Land, I feel compelled to put stock in this last point. Still, instead of trying to determine the catalyst for the changes documented in the poem, I believe the most responsible approach will involve a change
in focus, away from the question of what provoked the event and toward a less presumptuous concern: the definition of madness.

Insanity is at the heart of the text. The waste land—the space occupied by the speakers, reflecting the world outside of the poem, and emerging as a result of contact with a traumatized higher consciousness—is a product and image of mental discord. Because the speakers are unstable, to the extent that it is difficult to even determine their physical positions, let alone their identities, their surroundings are mostly undefined. None of Eliot’s voices provide the assurance that the setting of the poem is anything more than a hallucination. Some sections feature a landscape so simple that it appears artificial. The lines of the fifth book’s text shorten to accommodate a rendering of an incredibly stark landscape: “If there were water/and no rock/If there were rock/And also water/And water/A spring/A pool among the rock […]/Not the cicada/And dry grass singing” (Eliot 49.346-55). The language used to describe the scene decays even further, so that the one sensory detail left to the reader is the sound of falling water: “[d]rip drop drip drop drop drop drop” (49.358). The change in voice and the change in setting are interrelated, and the provision of sensory material depends entirely upon the clarity of Eliot’s speakers. Their contact with a higher consciousness leads to a comprehension of the world in the large scale, and thereby, to insanity.

Insight is madness in The Waste Land, because undiluted contact with a larger consciousness—indeed, with experiences external to one’s own—casts the most basic assumptions regarding objectivity and objective knowledge into doubt. Vision comes to Tiresias via engagement with the delirium consuming the creative voice that divides to produce his account. The “substance” of the poem is the chaos resulting from a constant
movement between irreconcilable and equally subjective value systems. By attempting to encompass a universal experience, the text falls victim to a host of internal contradictions and inconsistencies. This is Eliot’s crisis and its aftermath, a moment of clarity and resultant uncertainty on a small scale. There is no resolution for the doubts raised by the crisis, despite its presentation as an imagined, written moment. Only the final utterance of “‘[t]he Peace which passeth understanding,’” a desperate attempt to restrain what has become an uncontrollable calamity, works to avert the disaster (51.434; 56). The one hope for the poem—for readers, for the world—is a prayer, spoken by a voice most likely as mad as its peers.

_The Waste Land_ responds to the creative dilemma underlying the modern period by documenting an apocalypse of the mind, reflected in the thoughts and perceptions of its speakers and expressed in the suspension of thematic and structural consistency. Eliot integrates nightmarish imagery, myth, and absurdity in the process of selecting and arranging his speakers. If there is a driving force in the poem, it is madness itself, guided and characterized by the nightmare of war and the decay of civilization. The poem is not a prophecy, but a reality that emulates life so perfectly as to bear its heaviest burdens and communicate its most awful truths. There is no solution for the problems it addresses—only the hope for one.
Works Cited


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