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Language in *The Waste Land* as Intermediate Area of Meaning

Gordon Gamlin

**Keywords:** Imagist Poetry, Imagism, Reader Response, T. S. Eliot, The Waste Land

**Abstract:**
This study focuses on T. S. Eliot’s poem *The Waste Land* and examines the role of language and the relation between recorded representations of moments in time, reader response, and meaning. In order to situate the discussion within a historic context we revisit the Imagist movement as well as Eliot’s own theoretical frameworks before turning to pertinent passages within his poem.

**Introduction:**

T. S. Eliot’s influential work is as innovative and relevant today as it was on its date of publication nearly ninety years ago. Critics note, that technically, his imagist collage of references, self-reference, and irony combine in an aesthetic we now recognize in contemporary Hollywood movies, Late Night shows, and music-videos, to name but a few products of the culture industry (Karr 2001). Thematically, Eliot’s bitter critique of humanity’s impoverished spiritual state in the modern age of mechanization and automation may also strike a note of recognition with today’s reader (Coopey 2001). The list of universal themes for a modern age only partly explains the longevity of Eliot’s work, which stands, more importantly, as a well-crafted artistic creation on its own. Thus the critically acclaimed poet Duers Gruenbein goes further and celebrates *The Waste Land* as the definitive Ur-text of
Modern poetry (Die Zeit 2008). Recently, Hilene Flanzbaum makes the case for T. S. Eliot’s “globalism” by citing his influence all over the world as she explicitly situates her postcolonial inquiry of the poem within diasporic and transatlantic studies (Flanzbaum 2009). We might go further, though, and read this work as an early modern expression of Planetarianism or Planetary Humanism. In doing so, as G.C. Spivak proposes, we ought to take the globe and its confines of recorded history, market-fundamentalism, and Globalization and instead overwrite this globe with the planet and its inherent notion of deep time, interconnected ecosystems, and Planetarianism (Spivak 2003). While the concepts of “deep time” and “Planetarianism” originate with geology and astronomy respectively, scholars of Comparative Literature nonetheless succeeded in making the aforementioned notions their own in an effort to affirm universal values, a Humanist political philosophy, and to advocate the stewardship of the planet by a knowledgeable society. Today, we thus can read T. S. Eliot’s The Waste Land in terms of planeterity. In other words, the universal quest for values and meaning has a natural setting with real consequences to those who physically inhabit it. History, culture, and spirituality are not thrown into the proverbial “melting pot” nor glued into a limiting “mosaic.” Instead cultural origins, personal histories, and scriptures are individually respected and with each unique strand in tact, they are woven into a universal creative expression.

In order to realize how this extraordinary feat was accomplished we may begin in a traditional way by examining the form of the work. Few poems are as obsessively self-reflective as this one. As we move through The Waste Land, we constantly examine language, its shortcomings as well as its redemptive qualities. Eliot’s lament is not just a catalogue of woes but also points repeatedly to ways of healing the ills it describes. Content and form both point towards the cathartic moment of
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transcendence and understanding. At one level, we find a quest for meaningful communication that leads us thematically to the central symbol of “DA” —a syllable spoken though thunder by the divine voice. At another level, the techniques, complexities, and synergy of the poem take us well beyond the tangible representation of any historiographic moment in time and hence beyond the “objective correlative” propagated by Eliot’s Imagistic contemporaries. The true power of the poem, however, stems ultimately from Eliot’s ability to transcend the inherent confinements of language and to approximate an “intermediate area of meaning” which encompasses the response of individual readers into the poem itself.

The literary movement of imagism was shaped by T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound and preceded the gestation period of *The Waste Land*. Eliot calls Pound *Il Miglior Fabbro* — the finer craftsman — “because of is brilliance as *[The Waste Land’s]* editor” (MacGrath 2008). Presumably it was Pound who set the tone of poem by cutting Eliot’s satirical elements from early drafts. Thus R. S. Lehman argues that the role of satire in the early drafts of *The Waste Land* was intended to reconcile the critical-historical with the creative-innovative as an initial means to manage literary history (Lehman 2009). Pound then turned to the building blocks or images of the poem. In the March 1913, issue of Poetry F. S. Flint calls for the “[d]irect treatment of the ‘thing’”(Pratt 18). What other term employed to define imagism could be more apt and at the same time more vague? The “thing” inevitably invokes phenomenology, and Eliot, a scholar of philosophy, was well aware of the problems inherent in the “objective correlative”: Any mode of representation which attempts to communicate an objective or subjective perception of a given phenomena through a particular arrangement of objects would eventually have to grapple with the problematic nature of these objects. Ultimately, these objects would hide more than they reveal, as their arbitrary nature would never fully do justice to the complexity
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of poetic representation. Imagism need not be examined in the context of phenomenology here, although Eliot certainly had an encompassing theory on this subject. For our purposes it suffices to acknowledge that the "meaning of an object" resides not only in that object nor in the mind that perceives it, but also in an "intermediate area" (of language), which combines these two. "In Eliot's language," Moody writes, "the truth of things resides in an indeterminate area; neither subject nor object, but a state in which the double obligation is registered" (Moody 201). While the object's location is physical, the image in the perceiving mind is much less tangible. The area in which the two combine to give "true meaning" to the phenomena is entirely intangible.

Perhaps, the closest analogy to the "intermediate area of meaning" is the act of interpretation of the written word. "All language is beside itself" (Miller 40) and can only approximate the artistic representation. In *The Waste Land*, meaning becomes "the third, who walks always beside you" (360) - the reader who is both "hypocrite lecteur" and "frere semblable" (77) follows along the text much like Wolfgang Iser's wandering "I / eye" which is enriched by the text it negotiates. Poetic "language is always symbolic, i.e. based on conventions, the only iconic element being onomatopoeia" (Pratt 18). Ezra Pound applied this maxim rigorously as he edited the poem (Osterwalder 20). Again, meaning resides neither in the object, nor in the perceiving mind, but in another intangible area. Multiple speakers such as the ones in *The Waste Land* each approximate this area in which "true meaning" resides. It must be stressed that in the end, "each new speaking is not merely a subjective point of view on a fixed object, [but that] the linguistic creation has an ontological status equal to the object. A new being is uncovered and has found its way into our world" (Davidson 29).
In Knowledge and Experience we find “the clearest formulation . . . of Eliot’s view . . . of reference and signification” (Ross 19):

It is a mistake, I think, to treat the word as something which barely points to the object. ... [T]he denoting phrase denotes itself. ... [O]ur difficulties arise from trying to treat... a denoting phrase [...] as a thing. It is not simply that, for a mere that (which is in fact only a theoretical limit) does not refer to something else; reference is a kind of activity, original or delegated. ... [A] word or phrase... [has] an existence which straddles so to speak two moments of objectivity. (Eliot 129)

This “existence which straddles ... two moments of objectivity” is Davidson’s “new being.” Here, language and more specifically ‘the phrase’ attempts to denote “reality.” The very act of “straddling”, however, causes an ambiguity that may ultimately lead to misunderstanding. The two moments may be confused or result in privileging one aspect over the other. According to Eliot the “ideal state of reference would involve some “mystic marriage” that, in practice, is [not easily] achieved, or else misinterpretation would be impossible” (Ross 22).

Drawing on Emanuel Kant, Sigmund Freud gives one reason for the perpetual difficulty of communication:

He distinguishes between two types of presentation, the “Dingvorstellung” (thing-presentation), which is derived from the direct registration of the object, and the “Wortvorstellung” (word-presentation), which is associated with a verbal image of the object. (Ross 23)

Still, the two never fully merge. While the Wortvorstellung can be compared to the symbol, the Dingvorstellung is closer to the image. In other words, we witness a struggle between contextual and representational signification. Just as the often private “symbol” of the Symbolists and the more universal “image” of the Imagists
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may be seen as points on a continuum, their difference being in part one of appealing to different parts of the imagination, so is the “intermediate area of meaning” connected to both the thing and the word. Though the two are related, they are also sufficiently distinct to potentially hinder the formation of a merged meaning. To summarize, if we consider the “direct treatment of the thing” in light of phenomenology, meaning is found neither in the object, nor in the perceiving mind, but as mentioned earlier, in an intangible “Third”. This transcending agent joins the image and the thing and thus functions as a “copula”. (Here one could envision a graphic model of interpretation based on triads to illustrate the relation in a simple triangle with the “copula” at the top, the “image” in the lower right, and the “thing” to the left.) The term “copula” is a deliberate choice, since the poem is modeled on the myth of the Fisher King and is a quest for fertility and unity - physical as well as spiritual. In the myth “the weakened and dying fisher king hopes for the savior who will bring redemption and revival to the land” (Weston 2001). In bringing together the image and the ‘thing’, the ‘copula’ sparks emotion, which translates into meaning. Like language itself, the “Third” is simultaneously of one, as well as beside one. In *The Waste Land*, Eliot describes this connection as follows:

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?
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What is that sound high in the air  
Murmur of maternal lamentation  
Who are those hooded hordes swarming  
Over endless plains, stumbling in cracked earth...

(360-370)

Although the ethereal “Third” is “gliding wrapt in a brown mantle, hooded... [like] those hooded hordes” of grim reapers, s/he is not menacing. “A man or a woman, it is a Tiresias figure that encompasses all ages, cultures and both sexes like a demi-divine Everyman. Eliot states elsewhere: “What Tiresias sees, in fact, is the substance of the poem” (Matthiessen 60). “But who is that on the other side of you?” The “Third,” like “reality” in the largest sense of the word, ultimately remains a mystery. More recently, critics have restored the hope for redemption of the original quote in which we see Jesus ‘beside his two followers walking to Emmaus, revealing himself as the risen Lord’ (Luke 24.13-15) to this scene” (Singh 2001).

This “substantial” intricate relation is illustrated, using the “I” and the “You” because contemplations of language must be primarily concerned with those communicating. Without the interlocutor there would be no communication. One could add that the figure of the reader and even the act of interpretation itself is anticipated in these lines. There are two ways of looking at this triangular relation. From a whimsical perspective, speaker and addressee both sense the presence of their reader and the speaker comments on it. Another picture emerges if the speaker addresses the reader directly. In that case the “one walking beside” the reader becomes the embodiment of meaning itself. Reader response theorists, especially, may wish to contemplate this scenario in which meaning does not reside with the author, the reader, or the text, but outside all three in a mystical space free
How, then, can language be used to explain the closest possible approximation of "reality"? How can words on a page denote the ethereal "Third" and simultaneously signify the object, to be "truly meaningful" to the reader? The answer to this question emerges when we examine those factors that prevent language from being "wholly communicative." The Waste Land can be read as a quest for language in the latter's pre-lapsarian state. The poem not only portrays the impossibility of articulation and communication, it also illustrates the various causes for the collapse of language. Thus, the quest for language runs like a plot line through The Waste Land and leads us to the revelation in the form of "Da." As in an overture, so in "The Burial of the Dead" the major themes are introduced. The first discussion of the limitations of language portrays a speaker who in a momentary instance of visionary perception realizes not only the scope of his bliss but also the ultimate doom of his love relation. Although the lovers' return ought to be a joyous occasion, the moment is described only in negative terms, which bring it much closer to the act of expulsion from Eden:

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.
Oed' und leer das Meer. (37-42)

Inevitably the universal impossibility to fully realize a moment of happiness, let alone communicate it to another, leads to the defeat of language. In the moment
of bliss the lover “could not speak” nor see, like Tiresias. As in the “Third” scene examined earlier, echoes of Tiresias are linked to language. Free of all limitations of mortality and sex, Tiresias is a seer who could potentially grasp “reality.” At the same time the paralysed lover is “looking into the heart of light” an antithesis of Joseph Conrad’s “Heart of Darkness” which Pound edited from the poem. Kurtz’s dying words “The horror, the horror”, which formed the original epigraph of The Waste Land, were replaced with the Sybil’s lamentation. She, confined to a bottle, “was neither living nor dead.” Thus the image of the prison, or the confining bottle, is linked to the discussion of language. The issue of confinement in a prison of one’s own making is latent within the hyacinth scene but only later, in the “Dayadhvam” scene, is the confining quality of language made more explicit.

Following the initial presentation of language and its problems, the section entitled “A Game of Chess” illustrates the demise of language stylistically. The movement leads from Enabarbus’ description of Cleopatra in Antony and Cleopatra to the neurotic “upper class” couple and finally to the “lower class” exchange. This deliberately depicted class-conscious account is paralleled by the “fall” of diction. At the regal level, language “drowns the senses.” The description causes sensuous confusion along with miscommunication and ends in a violent act that negates everything that was evoked in the first place. Next, the woman in front of the dressing table invokes Alexander Pope’s mock epic The Rape of the Lock. The instant of violent depravity, she describes, relies on a pun, perhaps, leading back to the lock of the prison, which in turn prepares for the “Dayadhvam” scene. Confusion, linguistic slight-of-hand, and the brutal negation of everything that is ostensibly said combine in a scathing attack on canonized examples of poetic achievements.
Then the “upper class” couple engages in barely concealed hostilities:
‘My nerves are bad to-night. 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 it that noise?’
   The wind under the door.
‘What is that noise now? What is the wind doing?’
   Nothing again nothing.
   ‘Do
‘You know nothing? Do you see nothing? Do you remember
‘Nothing?’

I remember
Those are pearls that were his eyes.
‘Are you alive, or not? Is there nothing in your head?’
   But
O O O O that Shakespeherian Rag -
...
‘What shall I do now? What shall I do?’
‘I shall rush out as I am, and walk the street
‘With my hair down, so. What shall we do tomorrow?
‘What shall we ever do?’
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The hot water at ten.
And if it rains, a closed car at four.
And we shall play a game of chess

(112-138)

While the exchange of the couple is foregrounded, we are also introduced to a third agent of articulation. Along with *Shakespearean Rag* by Buck, Ruby and Stamper (Rainey 2005), the wind and the noise it makes are “doing Nothing.” To this an image of confinement is added which contrasts with the free movement of the wind and its noise. Here, the car as an American symbol of mobility and freedom is closed and thus confining. Routine and a meaningless ritualistic behavior reduce the couple to automatons. “Emotionally, psychologically, and spiritually, both of these people are mechanical” (Dilworth 2002). In the end they are merely “waiting for a knock at the door.” They are waiting to be released. Again, the opposition between the place of confinement and the sound of wind that transcends it is further explained in the “Dayadhvam” scene. In the last part of “A Game of Chess,” the “lower class” women add an inflation of words. The phrase “I said” occurs nineteen times in twenty-eight lines (139-167), while very little is in fact said about the abortion which is the underlying reason for one of the women’s veiled accusations. In comparison, speakers are only identified explicitly four more times in the entire poem. As a result of such an inflation of words, language becomes impotent. In the end, there is nothing to be said.

The final part of *The Waste Land*, entitled “What the Thunder Said,” continues the quest for language thematically rather than stylistically. It also includes the section of the “Third” cited earlier. At first we are led past the ancient oracle vaguely reminiscent of Plato’s cave:
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Dead mountain mouth of carious teeth that cannot spit
Here one can neither stand nor lie nor sit
There is not even silence in the mountains. (339-341)

The "mountain mouth" is the decayed oracle. It is also the prison, a medieval cell in which a grown man could "neither stand nor lie nor sit." There is not even "Nothing" in these mountains.

In this decayed hole among the mountains
In the faint moonlight, the grass is singing

(385-386)

But this is still "dry grass singing" (355), which is contrasted with the "sound of water over a rock" (356). The oracle in the cave, which ought to be the powerful source of a language that foretells events, is thus dismissed as a possible source of rejuvenation and salvation. The language of beasts is also denied the possibility of salvation and renewal: "Co co rico co co rico" (393). The "cock on the roofftree" (394) calls out as predicted after Peter denies his connection with Christ three times. Here the poet is guilty of a similar practice. Earlier, Christ and the theme of resurrection are linked to the cave:

And the dry stone no sound of water. Only
There is shadow under this red rock... (24-25)

When the women remove the rock of the grotto, which held the body of Christ, he is gone. In the soundless "red rock" imagery, the resurrection pattern, the water imagery, and the language theme, are united. The shadowy, sterile silence of the
rock pre-empts the good news of salvation—The New Testament—from spreading.

Despite these numerous obstacles, the possibility of salvation and of the restoration of language finally arrives in form of divine intervention. God speaks from the outside in Sanskrit - a language that connotes unity in a pre-lapsarian state. In Knowledge and Experience, Eliot presents Sanskrit as a personal symbol. Sanskrit, in Eliot’s mind, was the last language universally understood throughout the Indian subcontinent before it broke up and was replaced by the many languages found in India today. Its unifying power and demise may be analogous to the historical status of Latin in Europe and its influence on French, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, to name a few. Using such pre-lapsarian language, God speaks through thunder, perhaps, because the awesome divine voice would otherwise overwhelm the limited human senses, and the message would be entirely lost. Help comes in form of language, as God speaks enigmatically: “Da Da Da.” The reader must turn to the Upanishads to find out that these syllables mean different things to different beings: Datta (Man is to give), Dayadhvam (The demons are to sympathize), Damyata: (The gods are to control themselves). This message travels through various filters of languages before it appears in the poem: The divine words are ironically softened by thunder, interpreted by a human ear, and ages later translated from a forgotten language. So much is lost along this way that mere common sense, if not platitudes, are left. What the thunder said (“Da”), nevertheless, remains a symbol of the possibility of salvation. “Da” can also be read in light of the cannon of American literature. As in Emily Dickinson’s poetry, this is a momentary vision. It is Nathaniel Hawthorne’s letter “A” - symbol of a sign in the sky. It is Edgar Allan Poe’s Ulalume light; the Lord’s voice and ultimate word passed on through nature. But it may also be the fixed language of a parrot, repeating like Poe’s Raven: “Da Da Da.” This is the sign in the landscape of the mind to which the poem
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and the narrative voice's quest gradually leads - the sign in *The Waste Land* as well as the wasteland. "Da" is to be interrogated and ultimately one might find an answer by first formulating one's questions.

The closing vision of the poem is, however, only cautiously optimistic. The "Dayadhvam" scene, which connects to the "Hyacinth" scene as well as to the "The Game of Chess", again draws attention to language and its inherent problems:

Da

*Dayadhvam*: I have heard the key
Turn in the door once and turn once only
We think of the key, each in his prison
Thinking of the key, each confirms a prison
Only at nightfall, aethereal rumours
Revive for a moment a broken Coriolanus
(411-417)

"Dayadhvam", to sympathize, was the order given to the devils. "I have heard the key," echoes Dante's Inferno: "And below I heard the door of the horrible tower being locked." We are in Hell - in a prison with only the memory of possible hope: "I have heard the key ... once and turn once only." The clinging to hope itself becomes a confinement, as the lines echo the restless pacing of the prisoner. The image of the prison also links this passage with the "mountain mouth" and the Greek Sibyl oracle. Here, we are faced with a description of the human condition, which is a state of isolation. While language merely mirrors that state, the "thinking" only underlines it. In Appearance and Reality, F. H. Bradley puts the predicament this way: "[R]egarded as an existence which appears in a soul, the
whole world for each is peculiar and private to that soul” (Bradley 346). Along with a hint at the possibility of hope (the key), there is the “broken Coriolanus” revived but nonetheless captive alike. The more prominent lines of Shakespeare’s Coriolanus may come to mind: “There is a world elsewhere!” Still, the promises of liberation and of a new “reality” are remote; they are echoes of promises only. Significantly, these echoes, these ethereal rumors, are like “the wind under the door” (117), since they are a bodiless external agent. Yet, they carry meaning and even hope. An escape - a transcendence of the isolation - is possible if only language could be brought to work like the ethereal agent. With this in mind, Eliot set out to transcend conventional modes of communication in the end of The Waste Land.

The success of Eliot’s endeavor is corroborated by the testimonies of other critics, who, when seen in light of each other, attest to his achievement: “Eliot developed a new technique, at once laconic, quick and precise, for representing the transmutations of thought, the interplay of perception and reflection” (Wilson 107). Such comments on technique invite reflections on content: I. A. Richards felt that Eliot’s poetry “probably comes nearer to the original mystery which it perpetuates than transcendentalism does” (Richards 291). The existentialistic view is originally best expressed by Antrim who sees a stumbling block where “the privacy of the self also bespeaks the privacy of language” (Antrim 14). The poet must, therefore, adapt a deliberate strategy to breach the communication gap through language itself. The narrative must be arranged in such a way that it not only stimulates contemplation on several textual levels, but the very act of the reader’s contemplation must be manipulated in the course of the reading: “Language can . . . shape and define the experience of contemplation itself” (Antrim 75). The key, then, lies not in what is said but in how it is said or how the said is arranged.
When contemplating the arrangement of The Waste Land, its fragmentary nature becomes at once apparent. The wind and silence between the lines is reinforced by a physical blank space or ‘support system’ on the page. The nothingness on the page becomes an active agent shaping our response to the text, physically guiding our reading and giving a pictorial image. To the “listening eye [the word] is also the way it looks on the page” (Eliot 127). The “nothingness” is thus part of the poem. For example, one needs only to consider the approximation of blank spaces to “wind” images and to the word “nothing” itself. The third scene in “A Game of Chess,” quoted earlier, illustrates this point, as does the closing of “The Fire Sermon:”

“On Margate Sands.
I can connect
Nothing with nothing.
The broken fingernails of dirty hands.
My people humble people who expect
Nothing.”

To Carthage then I came.

(WL 300-307)

Steve Ellis notes the “frequent blanks” and their relation to reader’s response theory (1994). In prompting the reader to “connect Nothing with nothing”, Eliot can maintain unity while, at the same time, projecting fragmentation of form and theme. Throughout The Waste Land, Eliot thus achieves “ironic unity”. Like the divine intervention in form of the Thunder’s “Da” in “What the Thunder Said,” Eliot is
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relying on outside help to communicate. Meaning resides partially in the reader, as well as in the text. A fusion of these two areas of meaning occurs “between the lines” in the blank spaces of the text. The nothingness on the page allows the readers to project their very own responses onto the poem. At the same time, a space is created for the intangible aspect of language as a social and historic construct deeply rooted in spirituality. Like a theoretically possible point on an endless continuum, “nothing” meets a concept closer to “everything” in an “intermediate area of meaning” of the “Third.”

Like the “thing,” the term “nothing” becomes charged as it echoes through *The Waste Land*:

“I knew nothing. (40)

Nothing again nothing.

“Do

“You know nothing? Do you see nothing? Do you remember
Nothing?” (120-124)

I can connect
Nothing with nothing. (300-301)

My people humble people who expect Nothing.” (303-304)

King Lear states: “Nothing can come of nothing.” As the tragedy unfolds,
something, if not everything, comes of "Nothing." "Nothing" is something to be reckoned with. With language in a "fallen," paralyzed state, we rely on silence and on "Nothing" to bridge gaps and to reconstruct a meaningful discourse.

In The Poetics of Impersonality, Maud Ellman points out:

Throughout we are asked to supply the missing information, to fill in the elision. We are constantly reading the poem against other works of literature or simply against Eliot’s footnotes ... For it is in the silences between the words that meaning flicker, local, evanescent - in the very "wastes" that stretch across the page. These silences curtail the power of the author, for they invite the hypocrite lecteur to reconstruct their broken sense ... [the] subject is the victim of a general collapse of boundaries. (Ellman 92)

Ellman is not just "reading between the lines." A fundamental shift of power has occurred from "the power of the author" to that of the text itself. In the absence of a definitive authoritarian voice, the "hypocrite lecteur" who is also "mon semblable, —mon frere?" (76) is acknowledged as all readers become equally entitled to their reading of the poem. The abolishment of a monopoly on the interpretation of art creates a text, which actively engages readers to participate and to bring their own experience and background to the page. Such a text will be infinitely more successful and alive than more closed forms. After all, the elisions are not accidental. They are placed deliberately and strategically to guide the reader’s response throughout. At the same time, one does not encounter merely one simple strategy of omission. To the contrary, the silence and the nothingness in The Waste Land take different forms, which in turn lead to a varying reader’s response. One obvious strategy of deliberate omission is pointed out by Ellman: "We are ... reading the poem against
other works of literature. . .” Like the hooded Third, Ur-texts such as The General Prologue of The Canterbury Tales or Antony and Cleopatra are gliding simultaneously along on a sub-level accompanying our reading. This allows Eliot to join opposites into psychological realities. The juxtaposition of the vigor found in The General Prologue and the fatalism of “The Burial of the Dead” combines in “psychological and mythical unity” (Smith 48) for some, or ironic dislocations for others. Another strategy of elision is bridging by way of free association. In the “Dayadhvam” section, for example, we are never explicitly told what the “aethereal rumours” are. One of the many possibilities may be Coriolanus’ optimistic call for a new world free of restraints and confinement: “There is a world elsewhere!” What other remembrance of past glory would “revive for a moment a broken Coriolanus?” (WL 416)

Within the few pages allotted to the poem, Eliot also sets up internal dynamics, which inevitably prompt a guided response from his reader:

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.
(60-65)

Unreal City
Under the brown fog of a winter noon
Mr Eugenides . . .

(207-209)
What is the city over the mountains
Cracks and reforms and bursts in the violet air
Falling towers
Jerusalem Athens Alexandria
Vienna London
Unreal (373-378)

At this point readers may imagine: “...[London] city, under the brown fog of a winter dusk.” The reader’s response is the silent “Third,” “gliding wrapt in a brown mantle” (365), like the brown fog. “Nothing” is the ethereal intangible space beside the reader and the printed page in which the Third resides. As we move along the road on our quest for pre-lapsarian language, emptiness between the fragments glides along like the Third. We too, “can connect Nothing with nothing” (300-301). Regardless which strategy of omission is employed, the “Nothing” - this “intermediate area of meaning,” allows readers to bring their own response to the text. The poem thus becomes more real and more meaningful as it engages the reader at a personal level and makes the universalities of text relevant to the individual. Here, Matthew Gold makes an interesting connection between Eliot’s actual visit to Roger Vittoz’ sanatorium in Lausanne, Switzerland in late 1921 and the text: “Because the reader is both implied and explicitly indicated in the poem, reading The Waste Land becomes a therapeutic act: The reader, along with Eliot, is diagnosed, treated, and cured” (Gold 2000).

Through his ingenious collage of poetic fragments, Eliot seems to answer Emersonian Transcendentalism. One of Ralph Waldo Emerson’s challenges in articulating his vision arose from the confining characteristics of language: How could anything fixed reflect the many? In the resonant complexity of The Waste
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*Land* the ethereal whispers in intermediate areas of meaning allow for the infusion of vitality. In contemplating *The Waste Land* the reader brings, as it were, new life-blood to the text. In “Circle”, Emerson assigned partial responsibility for the confining qualities of a text to the author. He, therefore, calls for a continuous replacement of one author by another. The narrative strategy in *The Waste Land* heeds this call. Just as one scene is realized we move to the next voice. For some, all these speakers blur into one in a kind of *spiritus mundi* to become the chorus of planetariansim. Thus language is “vehicular and transitive” and “symbols are fluxional,” as Emerson demanded in “The Poet.” Like Tiresias, the speaker is “many.” Another connection to “Circles” can perhaps be made where Emerson also speaks of the “fragment remaining” - the Greek letters. While newer generations have obliterated the old, they failed to replace it with something equally great.

In the end we are left with a wasteland in which a forlorn voice can merely observe: “These are the fragments I have shored against my ruins” (431). They, in turn, become the raw material to convey a sense of reality in the twenty-first century. Like archeologists we begin the curative task of sorting through the broken pieces of distant cultures. According to Karr, readers can take one more healing step: The poem “can work like the miracle of communion as you take the Eucharist of the writer’s words into the rough meat of your body in order to be transformed by someone else’s mysterious passion” (Karr 2001). Hopefully *The Waste Land* will never share the fate of the lamented, lost Greek works of art. Instead, the poem will endure primarily because of its innovative internal dynamics. The arrangement of the fragments allows for the “Third” to glide along like a shadow of the reader. This doppelganger lends real meaning to the text as new generations probe into it. Through “Nothing”, the “intermediate area of meaning,” the text achieves a resonance which other more conventional forms lack. In the “Third,” readers find their “frere
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semblable” and in him reflections of themselves. Ultimately, this great prophetic poem of our times speaks to each of us individually and thus paradoxically evokes a universal sense of community, deep time, and planeterity.

References:


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