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# Reading The Wasteland

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Were there more time, I would lay some of this out in class. But since we will be zipping through this important and difficult poem *very* briskly, this handout is meant to orient you and lay the groundwork for discussion.

## **How to read it.**

There are two ways to read this poem: as a kind of crossword/puzzle/challenge (looking up all the allusions, translations from foreign languages, and struggling to “decode” its difficulty) or as something like a piece of music, to be (in the first instance) *heard*, and then responded to intuitively. I recommend trying the second way first, and then going back for the footnotes. You won’t “get” all the allusions, and it isn’t necessary to get them, but the footnotes should give you a general sense of the texts and (sometimes) stories that are being evoked.

A few words of context. This poem was, you’ll notice, published in 1922 – a few years after Shackleton’s voyage in the *Endurance*, and also only a few years after the end of World War I. A change in sensibility is evident: no waving of a flag given by the King will suffice to “buck up” the wasted cityscape of Eliot’s poem. The absence of coherent, natural characters and of a conventional storyline gives an aesthetic form to the (widely shared) sense that, somewhere in those intervening years, things fell apart in a pretty decisive way. Eliot’s response is not only to represent this fragmentation in the fragmented form of his poem; in announcing the Grail legend -- and the fertility rituals and myths underlying it – as the real “meaning” of the poem, he reaches outside a modern, European culture he sees as broken and quarries the “primitive cultures” studied by anthropologists for a more stable and enduring pattern of meanings. That pattern is, essentially, the archetypal narrative of the journey or quest.

I’ll say a few more framing things below, but before continuing at this general level, I’d like to get started with a representative outline of what’s going on in section I, to help everyone find their footing in the poem.

## ***The Wasteland*, section 1: a guided tour.**

In this section, like others, we hear a number of different voices and languages, none explicitly identified with a character or source: the effect is something like what you hear

when you scan through different frequencies on the radio (an aural experience that would have seemed very modern in 1922). Eliot – like Phillips – works by juxtaposing pieces of text without giving us the connecting tissue between them. But a little digging makes the thematic connections between these fragments pretty apparent. Check it out; we'll talk about this section briefly in class before heading towards the end of the poem.

- Lines 1-7: “We” (all of us) are in a dead land, where the possibility of renewal, of getting up and trying again, seems less appealing than forgetfulness, sleep, and giving up. (A bit reminiscent of Cherry in the Antarctic!).
- Lines 8-18: “Marie” seems to be a Central European aristocrat (her cousin is an Austro-Hungarian archduke), a cosmopolitan of somewhat uncertain nationality; she leads a life of leisure and privilege, yet is still insomniac (she stays awake all night reading), only feels “free” in the mountains, and migrates with the seasons, an expensive form of homelessness. You will remember that World War I began with the assassination of one of “Marie’s” presumptive relatives, the Archduke Ferdinand. The juxtaposition of this voice with those around it connects the particular “deadness” of *The Wasteland’s* setting to the cultural and historical setting of early twentieth-century Europe, one of whose features was an intermarried, cosmopolitan aristocracy – the heirs of several much decayed but still lingering empires – that still played a key role in national rule. The existence and influence of this international aristocracy helps to make intelligible (along with many other factors) the precipitation of “world war” by the murder of a wealthy Austrian archduke in Sarajevo.
- Lines 19-30: A prophetic voice, with echoes of Isaiah, Ezekiel and Ecclesiastes. Again, “we” are in a wasteland, but this voice that speaks from beyond our knowledge can reveal to us not the coming of the Messiah, but only the “secret” of our fear and mortality. The world is “stony rubbish,” and we are “a handful of dust”.
- Lines 31-34: a quotation from Act I of the opera *Tristan und Isolde*. Isolde is at sea, and hears a sailor sing this song of longing: a fresh wind blows, seeming to promise something – and yet the wind does not bring the beloved’s ship home. (In the story, the ship is taking her to marry King Mark of Cornwall, but she will soon fall passionately in love with his nephew Tristan. In act II of the opera, they become lovers, are discovered, and Tristan is wounded in a duel). Tristan, by the way, was a knight of King Arthur’s Round Table, connecting this story to one version of the Grail Legend (as a quest set for King Arthur’s knights).
- Lines 35-41: this lyrical memory of a girl given flowers (“Your arms full, and your hair wet”) contrasts with the dry and empty landscape of lines 19-30; *yet* what the speaker remembers is his inability to say the right words to her, to seize the moment – he “failed” somehow to capture this brief glimpse of other possibilities that seem fertile, erotic, beautiful.

- Line 42: *Tristan und Isolde* again; now we are in Act III, and the wounded Tristan is at his castle in Brittany, waiting for Isolde’s ship to come – and yet as he looks out to sea, he sees only “desolate and empty” waves – she is not there.
  
- Lines 43-59: Madame Sosostris is a more modern prophet; she tells fortunes using the Tarot cards. In contrast to the grand and frightening voice we heard in 19-30, she is a bit seedy (not to mention ill) – and her horoscopes are illegal. She might be a fraud – or is that voices and authorities from outside the modern cityscape have now been made illegal and driven underground? (The figures in the horoscope she draws will recur later in the poem).
  
- Lines 60-68: the quotation at lines 63-64 is from Dante’s *Inferno*: he is describing the crowds of damned souls in hell. These lines are seamlessly integrated into a closely and accurately observed description of morning rush hour in the City, the old part of London where banks and financial businesses are located. These are places you could find on a map or visit on an urban walking tour, but the real landscape and the phantasmal, imaginary landscape of hell merge in Eliot’s description. As the lines at the entrance to Dante’s hell read: “Abandon hope, all ye who enter here.”
  
- Lines 69-76: “Mylae” was a naval battle during the first war between Rome and Carthage, 260 BCE. Eliot is again collapsing the modern urban scene with another place and time, bending the rules of nature. Most significantly, these lines imagine the possibility of new growth, renewal, or rebirth as deeply disturbing (don’t let that corpse bloom or get dug up!), taking us back to the poem’s opening lines. In section 1, “we” (and the last lines insist that “we readers” are not only an audience, but are also implicated in this problematic) are caught between the emptiness and desolation of modern urban life, and fear of what any possible change might look like or might demand from us. (When Isolde does finally arrive in Wagner’s opera, Tristan tears off his bandages and dies).

### ***The Wasteland* and travel writing**

What else, besides its quest structure, makes *The Wasteland* an appropriate reading for this class? I was, of course, tempted by the Shackleton reference, which we’ll talk about – but there is more. Eliot had initially wanted the poem’s epigraph to be a phrase from Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, his searing novel of a journey up the Congo River on a route brutally opened by Stanley only a few years earlier. (You’ll remember that we read Conrad’s essay on explorers in September). A few allusions to Conrad’s novel are still woven into the poem, as traces of Eliot’s preoccupation with it. More than that, though, both the poem and its writer exemplify an especially modern (or, Modernist) variant of travel. Eliot was born in America, but moved to England and took English citizenship; this voluntary exile resembles that of his contemporaries James Joyce (*Ulysses*) and Samuel Beckett (*Waiting for Godot*), both Irishmen who spent much of their writing lives in Paris, as well as that of many writers in the present who have left former colonies to live and work in metropolitan centres like London, Paris, and New York. Boston alone has a number of illustrious examples -- Seamus Heaney (Ireland),

Derek Walcott (St. Lucia), Jamaica Kincaid (Antigua) -- a few other well-known names might be V.S. Naipaul (Trinidad), Salman Rushdie (India), Michael Ondaatje (Sri Lanka)... you get the idea.

The two key terms for Eliot's life are *exile* and *cosmopolitanism*. He is cosmopolitan in the sense that he is working not so much in a tradition of American poetry or even Anglophone poetry, but appropriating the entire Western European literary tradition. (You can try counting the number of languages in the poem). Although he is obviously a huge nerd with respect to literature, he is not *only* a nerd – in the poem, we hear the voices of elite speakers and of canonical literary and musical texts (Shakespeare, Wagner, Dante, etc.) but we also hear the voices of lower-class women drinking in pubs, of secretaries eating from cans in one-room apartments, of travelling salesmen looking for a quick gay weekend in a hotel near the train station.

With all these languages and all these sociolects (the ways different social groups speak a common language), Eliot is taking us on a kind of tour of his historical moment and cultural location. Not only the findings but the method of anthropology have marked this poem, which is made up of closely observed and recorded voices – in all their variety -- as much as of literary allusions. He is also, of course, paying careful attention to the map of Greater London.

### **Shackleton and the “fourth man”.**

In a footnote to *The Wasteland* l. 360, Eliot identifies the passage beginning “Who is the third who walks always beside you?” as an allusion to Shackleton's expedition. He is recalling a phenomenon described by Worsley (and by Shackleton in his own book) as having been experienced by all three of the men present on their epic crossing of South Georgia; it is right at the end of our reading for Tuesday. We can talk about this passage *in* Worsley; in *The Wasteland*, this passage about the phantasmal extra companion occurs in the poem's last section, as we finally approach the “empty chapel” that might hold the Grail or something like it – in essence, an object with power to catalyse healing and renewal. As the notes helpfully explain, Eliot is weaving together the Grail legend, contemporary history, and the story of the disciples' journey to Emmaus in the Gospel of Luke, chapter 24 (the reference is hyperlinked in the notes, and it's worth looking at). In any case, in terms of the poem's narrative *as* in Worsley, the invisible “third” or “fourth” person on the journey appears as the goal of the journey draws near, and as the travellers' practical and spiritual resources hover close to exhaustion.