

**T. S. Eliot. 2005 (1922): *La tierra baldía*. Edición bilingüe. Introducción y notas de Viorica Patea. Traducción José Luis Palomares. Madrid: Cátedra, Letras Universales, 2005. 328 pp.**

Paul Scott Derrick  
Universitat de València  
Paul.S.Derrick@uv.es

It is practically impossible to overestimate the importance of T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922), not only in the course of twentieth-century poetry in English, but for Western poetry in general. This single poem has been the object of many hundreds of critical articles and book-length studies. And that interest, that cultural fascination, still shows little sign of diminishing.

Along with Pound's *Cantos* (begun in 1915), Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), Williams' *Spring and All* (1923) and Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), *The Waste Land* can be classed as one of a handful of 'centrepiece texts' of the first-generation Modernist enterprise. It is a masterwork of constructive destruction, a brilliant application of Cubist collage techniques to language. It is both an expression and a demonstration of the cultural malaise and the crisis of belief that resulted from the First World War. It is a profound experiment in the compression, or codification, of an encyclopaedic body of knowledge—as if we had sensed the need at that point in time to condense our heritage into complex, hermetic forms in order to preserve our cultural memory in the face of some impending disaster. But, in addition, it offers a possible therapy for our illness, an opportunity to put a broken world together again—or at least to practice putting it together again. And in this sense, *The Waste Land* is a powerful record of a yearning for health, wholeness and holiness (words which are all, as Eliot must have been aware, etymologically connected).

The poet himself, however, claimed that he had no such exalted aims in mind in 1921 when, trying to recuperate in Margate from the stress contingent on his gradually disintegrating marriage to Vivien Haigh-Wood, he sat down to write what would eventually become part III, "The Fire Sermon". (He had begun the poem at the end of 1919 as a long series of stylistic parodies with the title "He Do the Police in Different Voices". He composed the final section, "What the Thunder Said", in late 1921 in Lausanne, under the care of a pre-Freudian analyst named Roger Vittoz.) In his own, undoubtedly dissembling words, *The Waste Land* was intended to relieve "a personal and wholly insignificant grouse against life" (Eliot 1971: 1). All false modesty aside, the question that immediately arises is: how does an insignificant personal complaint get converted into such an astounding religious, philosophical and literary accomplishment?

Providing a credible account of such a complicated process might be compared to producing a high-resolution, three-dimensional, multi-sectional holographic map of the occult intestines of the Gordian Knot. But that's what this edition does. The personal aspects of *The Waste Land's* genesis, the stages of its development, its roots in Eliot's previous experience, the warp and woof of its incredible texture and much much more are masterfully illuminated in Viorica Patea's lengthy and well-written

Introduction to this new translation of *The Waste Land* into Spanish. There seem to be very few of those hundreds of studies the poem has inspired that she is not aware of.

It first appeared in the London journal *Criterion*, in October 1922. It was published one month later in New York in *The Dial*. For reasons that Eliot never made clear, he decided to append those famous notes to each of the poem's five sections for its first edition in book form (New York: Boni and Liveright, [December] 1922). Did he do so simply for commercial reasons, to make the book longer? Did he feel the need to protect himself against possible claims of plagiarism? Was it part of the overall strategy of Modernism to present its practitioners as connoisseurs, a subterfuge by which the Modernist poet distinguished himself from the sentimentality of many *fin-de-siècle* versifiers and emphasized his 'professionalism'? Or was it a sincere attempt at explanation, to make the poem accessible to more than an elite coterie of privileged readers? Whatever the motives may have been, those notes have raised more questions for serious students of Eliot's work than they answer and have notoriously become an integral factor in the poem's lasting fascination.

But of course it was not Eliot's duty, or intention, really to explain his own poem to the public. That is a task for those of us who follow. In this edition, Dr. Patea, Senior Lecturer in American literature at the University of Salamanca and a specialist in Modernist poetry, elucidates the meaning and significance of *The Waste Land* just about as thoroughly and effectively as it seems possible to do.

The book consists of three general sections. The first, the Introduction, provides us with a wealth of background material which is an indispensable aid for an appreciative reading of the text. The second one is a meticulously annotated bi-lingual edition of the poem itself, and its notes, with a translation by José Luis Palomares. And the third, an extremely helpful addition, is an Appendix of ten short texts (1-2 pages), also in bi-lingual format, which are among the most important of *The Waste Land's* cornucopia of intertextual references.

The Introduction, also structured in three sections, is a well-balanced mix of biographical information and critical assessment of Eliot's thought and work. This kind of approach is always enlightening, but especially so in the case of an author who went to such extremes to obfuscate the many traces of his personal life that inform his work. We learn about Eliot's New England family background, and the atmosphere surrounding his childhood; the influence of Irving Babbit and George Santayana during his undergraduate years at Harvard and the early but lasting literary influence of Baudelaire, French Symbolism and the work of Dante.

Few readers beyond specialized academic circles are aware that Eliot carried out his graduate studies at Harvard in philosophy. Dr. Patea provides a very informative discussion of this fundamental period in his intellectual development, pointing out the importance for him of teachers such as Josiah Royce, William James, Bertrand Russell and, above all, the subject of his doctoral dissertation (which he completed but, because of the First World War, never defended), the English idealist philosopher F. H. Bradley. Patea is especially effective in signalling the impact of Bradley's philosophy on Eliot's poetry and tracing Bradley's imprint in *The Waste Land*. This very complex aspect of the poem was first seriously considered by Anne C. Bolgan (1973), who rediscovered Eliot's dissertation in the Pusey Library at Harvard. Since then, few commentators have

failed at least to mention Bradley, although the most satisfying studies in this respect are probably still those of Schusterman (1988) and Jain (1992).

We are also given a good overview of Eliot's earliest critical essays and how they are intimately linked with the content of the papers he wrote for many of his graduate courses in philosophy, as well as a survey of the development of his poetry and criticism over the course of his life.

The second part of the Introduction offers a panorama of detailed information concerning *The Waste Land* itself and discusses the most important influences contributing to its innovative form and breathtaking scope. We are given a fine description of Ezra Pound's incisive editorial work. In convincing Eliot to cut out more than 40% of the original text, Pound ensured not only a tighter and stronger organization and a more allusive and esoteric quality, but also a higher degree of Cubist fragmentation. Patea explains how Eliot discovered what he described as 'the mythical method'—which defines his use of history in the poem—in his own reading of Joyce's recently-published *Ulysses*. She also gives a clear account of the use Eliot made of Jessie Weston's *From Ritual to Romance* and James Frazer's *The Golden Bough*. Because Eliot directly cited these two works in the introductory paragraph of his notes to the poem, their importance is undeniable (regardless of what his motives for appending that material may have been). Patea's Introduction, however, places them in a much more balanced perspective than usual, within the framework of the mythical method, among a larger number of literary, religious, anthropological and psychological influences.

Finally, the third part of the Introduction devotes just over 75 pages to a detailed, insightful and coherent close reading of the poem. Many ingenious metaphors have been invented to illustrate what happens in *The Waste Land*. My own personal choice is the archaeological site. The ultimate grace of the Eliot/Pound collage technique is that it confronts us with a field of confusing fragments that we need to reconstruct, fragments that happen to be the remains of earlier cultural continuities: the various traditions of the West, primitivism and the wisdom of the East. This act of reconstruction corresponds with the final phase of the Cubist aesthetics. After the painter has analyzed a scene, taken it apart and placed the pieces into a new design, the viewer must complete the process by recreating the original scene (or stimulus) from the confusing cues the painting provides. In the case of *The Waste Land* though, the original scene, or stimulus, is the whole expanse of Western culture. The reader, like an archaeologist at a dig, is forced to use every bit of intelligence, imagination and knowledge at his or her command to flesh out those fragments, reconstitute them and to recover, or maybe better, recreate the historical continuity those fragments are remnants of. There can be a virtually unlimited number of coherent and valid explications of the poem. But every one of them is, in effect, an individual step toward recovering the health—or the wholeness—of the waste land of Western society. In her particular unfolding of this enigmatic complex of language and cultural memory (and forgetfulness), Dr. Patea applies a fine imagination and a generous intelligence to the large body of knowledge that the first two sections of her essay display.

*The Waste Land* ends with an appeal to Buddhist and Hindu scriptures as offering a possible model for a cure to the spiritual aridity that is destroying the West:

con estos fragmentos a salvo apuntalé mis ruinas  
 Sea, pues, que habré de obligaros. Hierónimo esta furioso otra vez.  
 Datta. Dayadhvam. Damyata.  
 Shanti shanti shanti (285)

The poem itself, in spite of its apparently chaotic fragmentation and pervasive air of pessimism, constitutes a journey from despair to hope. “*La tierra baldía acaba*”, writes Patea,

con un atisbo de lo trascendente y la aceptación de lo sagrado. [. . .] La verdad revelada conduce a la conciencia lírica a la realidad de lo inexpresable “donde el significado aún persiste aunque las palabras fallan” [. . .] El poema de Eliot traza el viaje del alma a través del desierto de la ignorancia, del sufrimiento y de la sed de las aspiraciones terrenales. Concluye con la revelación de una realidad que libera su condición fragmentada. En el misterio de la contemplación el ser intuye la plenitud de este estado de conciencia no dual y no objetivable. (170-71)

It is probably true that it *began* as an attempt to relieve “a personal and wholly insignificant grouse against life” (Eliot 1971: 1). But Eliot is an artist whose individual mind came to accommodate the collective mind of his culture. This is an artist who taught himself to write, as he describes it in his early essay ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’, “not only with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order” (Eliot 1964: 4).

His ‘insignificant grouse’ therefore inevitably transcends to a universal plane. *The Waste Land* is a prototype of the verbal collage, a case study of Eliot’s concept of the historical consciousness and the mythical method. It can be thought of as a puzzle to be solved, in which we solve—or resolve—ourselves. Or it might be thought of as a verbal field containing relics of all that we are losing—fragments, mixing memory and desire, forgetfulness and need, pointing us the way toward a new sense of wholeness.

Several worthwhile contributions to the general field of Eliot studies have been published in Spain (Gibert 1983; Abad 1992; Zambrano Carballo 1996; Vericat 2004), each one commendable in its own way. But this edition of *The Waste Land* seems to me to offer Spanish readers the best opportunity to appreciate and to comprehend all of the manifold dimensions of this towering signpost to the Modern (and post-modern) condition.

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