

THE WASTE LAND: MEANING AND MULTIPLICITY

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ABSTRACT

T.S. Eliot's "stony rubbish ... / A heap of broken images" is often characterised as both *The Waste Land's* theme, and the technique it employs to "connect" aspects of modernity. To read the poem from within the British twenty first century lyric tradition is to admire the way that such tessellation creates a literary whole. What lessons can be learnt for contemporary poetics, in an era characterised arguably less by a breakdown in meaning than by a multiplication of meanings: in the multiplying sources of authority offered by identity politics, or citizen journalism; in competing public discourses; in the ramifying identities one individual may acquire as they occupy a number of social or emotional roles? If the impulse of lyric poetry is to "sing" these into a kind of coherence, a unifying voice too often creates unifying perspective, is it possible that *The Waste Land* offers a counterexample?

KEYWORDS: tessellation, authority, disruption, British, contemporary.

LA TIERRA BALDÍA: SIGNIFICADO Y MULTIPLICIDAD

RESUMEN

La "basura pétrea ... / un montón de imágenes rotas" de T.S. Eliot se caracteriza a menudo tanto por ser el tema de *La tierra baldía* como por la técnica que "conecta" aspectos de la modernidad. Al leer el poema desde la tradición lírica inglesa del siglo XXI admiramos el modo en que dicha teselación crea un conjunto literario. ¿Qué lecciones se pueden extraer para la poética contemporánea, en una época caracterizada posiblemente menos por la ruptura de significados que por la multiplicación de los mismos: en las múltiples fuentes de autoridad que ofrecen las políticas de identidad o el periodismo ciudadano; en los discursos públicos que compiten entre sí; en las identidades ramificadas que un individuo puede adquirir al ocupar una serie de roles sociales o emocionales? Si el impulso de la poesía lírica es unir todos estos aspectos buscando cierta coherencia, una voz unificadora crea con demasiada frecuencia una perspectiva unificadora. ¿Es posible que *La tierra baldía* ofrezca un contraejemplo?

PALABRAS CLAVE: mosaico, autoridad, disrupción, británico, contemporáneo.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25145/j.recaesin.2022.85.10>

REVISTA CANARIA DE ESTUDIOS INGLESES, 85; octubre 2022, pp. 153-165; ISSN: e-2530-8335



Famously, it makes almost no sense to discuss *The Waste Land* as if it were either a singular textual entity or a text which had the kind of integrity that the realist contract and its variants generally propose. We can advance no unifying “vision” or unified intention lying behind Eliot’s poem, published in 1922: at least, not in any chronological, authorial sense. Because the preceding drafts, with Ezra Pound’s interventions, are freely available in the edition edited by Valerie Eliot (1971), we cannot create the usual readerly contract with *The Waste Land*, in which we “believe” what the authorial voice has to tell us. Or at least, believe in its relationship to authorial intention. There is no sense, in other words, of the poem as having sprung from T.S. Eliot’s mind (to use that loose umbrella term) in a way that has primacy over its detailed, line by line, instantiation. And this disturbs our usual reading (or listening) experience of the work.

Roland Barthes would not propose “The Death of the Author” for another forty-five years after *The Waste Land* was published (1967), though his essay’s influential appearance did predate Valerie Eliot’s edition of facsimile drafts. Barthes belongs, though, to another moment in modernism’s complicated relationship with itself and with such traditional literary givens as truth and intention. This matters, certainly for the exploration I want to undertake here. It’s important to separate the emerging postmodernism of the Sixties –whose validation of each reader’s interpretation above the tradition of writerly authority has clear links with the anti-authoritarian *événements* of 1968– from the ultimately more conservative way that the interwar modernism of which both Eliot and Pound were a part was, on the contrary, struggling to refresh faith in the authority of literary texts and other cultural forms, including music, art and architecture. In Britain, 1922 was the year in which L.S. Lowry painted one of his first works to receive recognition, *A Manufacturing Town*; Eric Gill was carving and engraving at the neo-mediaeval community he had created at Ditchling; Edith Sitwell published *Façade*, with William Walton setting some of it to music; and Ralph Vaughan Williams’s *Pastoral Symphony No. 3*. in remembrance of the dead of the first world war, was premiered.

Eliot and Pound were both, of course, American. But Eliot had been living in Britain since 1914, and Pound for much of the time between 1908 and 1921. The context of *The Waste Land* is British: it is indeed the great poem of London. Thus it is not a postmodern work, attempting to kill off its author(s). Its lament for an order that seems to have become disordered is just that –a lament for discontinuity. Can the traditional forms of authority, with their mythic force, be resurrected to fruitfulness?

There I saw one I knew, and stopped him, crying: 'Stetson!
'You who were with me in the ships at Mylae!
'That corpse you planted last year in your garden,
'Has it begun to sprout? Will it bloom this year? ['] (Eliot 2015, 57)

All of this gives the public story of the poem’s creation a disruptive force. A work which makes the modernist appeal to refresh traditional author/ity itself emerge from a textual hinterland which is all about the contestation of authority. Valerie



Eliot's edition has allowed us to become intimate with Pound's interjections. The waspish aside: of "cautious critics," "surely as you are writing of London this adj. is tauto" (1971, 27). The impatient: "verse [double underline] not interesting enough as verse to warrant so much of it" (1971, 45). The witty: "qui dira les gaffers de la rime," of a stanza contorted for the sake of end-rhymes (1971, 45). And, of course, the acute: encountering yet another qualifier, this time in a passage spoken by that blind seer, "make up yr. mind / you Tiresias if you know damn well or else you don't" (1971, 47). This display, this *conversazione*, is addressed not to future scholars but to the author of the manuscript on which they're written.

So it's not that Pound as editor/collaborator emerges from the manuscript pages as a destructive force in the appearance of the closest thing we have to what we might call "the original poem." Rather, the Eliot/Pound practice of revision *itself* disrupts the reader's traditional reliance on a kind of transparent relationship between authorial intent (conscious or no: better, perhaps, to call it "authorial action") and the finished text. This is different from our knowledge of Marcel Proust's precursor to *À la recherche du temps perdu* (1913-1927), his posthumously published *Jean Santeuil* (1952), or of D.H. Lawrence's earlier versions of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928), *John Thomas and Lady Jane* (1927, first published posthumously, in Italian translation, in 1954) and his first attempt, *The First Lady Chatterley* (eventually published in 1972) –although it's perhaps revealing to note these overlaps with the publication dates of *The Waste Land* and of its drafts. The differences are two-fold: for the final versions of the Proust and Lawrence novels, there is no change either in authorial personnel or in overall scope. Though Proust's technique, and with it de facto his scope, developed almost beyond recognition from the rehearsal work to its successor.

All of this means that, in thinking about *The Waste Land*, it's important to remember both to mistrust any implied authorial intent, and that what unified form the poem does achieve should be read as a textual occurrence, not a trace of such intent. This poem is a particular event in language, created by language; and while this is true of all texts, it is peculiarly true of *The Waste Land*, which as a poem retains the marks of a discursive form which is characterised in English as the exercise of subjectivity; a form against which this event occurs. That has been particularly true since the end of the eighteenth century, when the early Romanticism of Helen Maria Williams (1782), or of the *Lyrical Ballads* of Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Wordsworth (1798), developed a poetics of sensibility: one which requires that individual personhood which used to be called a "subject" to have that sensibility. But it's also true more generally, and over a much longer historical period, of poetic composition by named individuals –rather than within the anonymous epic or folk oral traditions. Though a sonnet by John Donne, or a mock-epic by Alexander Pope, is not confessional even in the milder, non-technical sense of seeming to be an utterance about the poet's self, it still "confesses" the workings of an individual mind.

The Waste Land disrupts this relationship between poem and its author, not least by relegating one contributor to the dedication, that famous "*il miglior fabbro*" which perhaps ever so slightly backhandedly quotes Dante's praise of that other constantly receding authorial figure, the twelfth century Occitan troubadour Arnaut Daniel, about whom relatively little is known:



Ieu sui Arnaut qu'amas l'aura
E chatz le lebre ab lo bou
E nadi contra suberna (Pound 1910, 36)

I am Arnaut who harvests the dawn
And chases the hare with the ox
And swims against the stream

Though then again, in his *The Spirit of Romance* (1910, 13), Pound had praised Daniel as the greatest of poets.

We are left with a text whose own prehistory mimics its famous message about the difficulty of making meaning out of the exhausted cultural fragments that follow destruction such as the world war. That message is iterated many times:

What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow
Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,
You cannot say, or guess, for you know only
A heap of broken images, (Eliot 2015, 55)

I think we are in rats' alley
Where the dead men lost their bones. (Eliot 2015, 59)

The river's tent is broken; the last fingers of leaf
Clutch and sink into the wet bank. The wind
Crosses the brown land, unheard. The nymphs are departed.
Sweet Thames, run softly, till I end my song.
The river bears no empty bottles, sandwich papers,
Silk handkerchiefs, cardboard boxes, cigarette ends
Or other testimony of summer nights. The nymphs are departed.
And their friends, the loitering heirs of City directors;
Departed, have left no addresses. (Eliot 2015, 62)

'On Margate Sands.
I can connect
Nothing with nothing.['] (Eliot 2015, 66)

Here is no water but only rock
Rock and no water and the sandy road
The road winding above among the mountains
Which are mountains of rock without water
If there were water we should stop and drink
Amongst the rock one cannot stop or think (Eliot 2015, 68)

London Bridge is falling down, falling down, falling down (Eliot 2015, 71)

Sostenuto iteration like this runs its theme and tone through the whole of the poem, the way the sustaining pedal on a piano keeps notes sounding through what comes next. There is no escaping the message, even in passages which seem to honour the way London's history remains present (58), record the speech



rhythms of cockneys in a London pub (60-61), play with the tarot (67) or return to Gethsemane and the Passion (68). No escaping the message, either, which underlines its ubiquity by threading through a similar variety of contexts and sources. Eliot's own, notoriously oblique, Notes reference for these passages Ezekiel II, i, Ovid's *Metamorphoses* III, 195 and Edmund Spenser's *Prothalamion* (1595). But the reader can add to these the Blues (2015, 59) alongside the upcoming ragtime (2015, 59); the seaside resort of Margate, which has long been, in the British idiom, "no better than it ought to be" and frequented not by royalty but by working people (2015, 66); a complex of Christian allusions to the living rock, the water of baptism and the Flight out of Egypt (2015, 68); and the children's nursery rhyme whose next line is "My fair lady" (2015, 71).

These multiple sources are themselves from among the "heap of broken images" from which the poem will "connect" its meaning. Technique is thus held up to the light as a palimpsest of meaning itself. But perhaps it would be better to call this a strategy than a technique, since *technique* surely means the execution, which is carried out at a micro, often almost at a grammatical, level, but a *strategy of juxtaposition* creates the poem as a whole.

For example, in the passage I quoted above (2015, 62), which owes much to Spenser, the sentence "The nymphs are departed" is repeated. But this sentence does not occur in the Spenser poem itself, whose "nymphs" are on the contrary very much present, making garlands for themselves and travelling to London to be married. In fact, so much do they advance to the foreground of the *Prothalamion* that the poem's viewpoint resembles a camera they come towards until, by its ending, it is over their shoulders and they are out of frame:

Against their bridal day, which is not long:
Sweet Thames, run softly, till I end my song.

Spenser ends each stanza with a couplet that rhymes, "Sweet Thames, run softly, till I end my song" with variations on "Against the bridal day, which is not long": variations which, finally, twitch the curtain, allowing a glimpse of the naughty second sense of a wedding day foreshortened by the hurry to bed.

Eliot, too, writes with a certain leer:

And their friends, the loitering heirs of City directors;
Departed, have left no addresses. (2015, 62)

But where Spenser celebrates the legitimacy of two dynastic weddings—his subjects, Elizabeth and Katherine Somerset, the daughters of Edward Somerset, the 4th Earl of Worcester, were of royal descent through John of Gaunt—Eliot indicates non-aristocratic "new money" made in the companies and banks of the City of London. His use of the word "friends," then a euphemism for lovers, also suggests not marriage but dalliance.

This is carefully done, a tessellation of nuance within the larger pattern of tessellation with which *The Waste Land* is laid out. But the distinction between technique and strategy, in a poem which after all helped set the terms for a certain



kind of modernist culture, must be more than a question of scale. It's important to preserve the distinction in order to prevent the work's poetic strategy itself being relegated to a question of successful execution.

What I metaphorically call tessellation –the acknowledgment, first, and then the utilisation, of the fragmentary, multiple and often pre-existing nature of what this text has to say– is distinctively different from citation, homage or quotation, which respect and indeed reify the character of the original. In literal tessellation, the pre-existing redness, say, of a ceramic piece “becomes” bloodiness, for example, within the mosaic picture. Analogously, their re-use in *The Waste Land* turns pre-existing phrases and ideas into new material with new meanings.

One of these new meanings is, simply, the resonance of historicity. It's true this is the case of much quotation and homage, for example in the contemporary British fashion for using quotations as book titles. Aldous Huxley's *Antic Hay* (1923), for example, takes its title from Christopher Marlowe. *The Waste Land*, though, uses the sense of historic perspective such allusions create not as if it were a retrospective shadow, colouring in “depth,” but to create its vertiginous sense of temporal and cultural instability. We don't know whether the poem's “here and now” is our own, and so we cannot quite know where we ourselves “stand.” There is a discomfiting sense not so much of a rich silt of history under our feet as of silt's susceptibility to erosion, meaning we keep shifting our conceptual position.

We don't, for example, encounter any sympathetic characters in *The Waste Land*; this creates a sense that psychic integration is absent from the world of the poem. In Part II, Eliot's queen is mute as Philomel until she starts her nervous nagging:

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.' (Eliot 2015, 59)

Later in the same section, the cockneys drinking up at closing time cruelly bitch:

When Lil's husband got demobbed, I said–
I didn't mince my words, I said to her myself,
HURRY UP PLEASE ITS TIME
Now Albert's coming back, make yourself a bit smart.
He'll want to know what you done with that money he gave you
To get yourself some teeth...
.....
He said, I swear, I can't bear to look at you.
And no more can't I, I said, and think of poor Albert,
He's been in the army four years, he wants a good time,
And if you don't give it him, there's others will, I said.
Oh is there, she said. Something o" that, I said.
.....
Well, if Albert won't leave you alone, there it is, I said,
What you get married for if you don't want children? (Eliot 2015, 60)



As a woman reading *The Waste Land* I experience these passages as particularly destabilising, because they speak to a “truth” –one which disparages women– that I don’t experience as “true.” However, this is a *literary* effect, not a matter for political comment, because it troubles my experience of narrative omniscience. If I cannot “trust” the text that speaks to me, how can I spend time with it?

On the other hand, what, beyond the old realist contract, would such readerly “trust” mean? The reader does not have to be a postmodernist, prioritising their private experience of reading over the agreed public territory of the well-known text itself, to acknowledge that this experience, of falling out of enchantment with the narrative position of *The Waste Land*, can be at work in a reading of the poem. For the work takes the breakdown of all relationships, of the marriage contract as much as of the social contract, as part of its theme: and so the struggle for understanding across gender’s multiple divides is part of precisely the experience it is designed to evoke.

The poem’s third section sees a third well-known passage addressing women and their intimate relationships. While the daughters of the aristocracy flirt with the heirs to City empires –“The nymphs are departed./And their friends, the loitering heirs of City directors;/ Departed, have left no addresses” (2015, 62)– “The typist home at teatime” (2015, 63) lets herself sleep with “the young man carbuncular [...] / A small house agent’s clerk,” (2015, 62) merely because she is bored:

The meal is ended, she is bored and tired,
[He] Endeavours to engage her in caresses
Which still are unreproved, if undesired.
.....
Exploring hands encounter no defence;
His vanity requires no response,
And makes a welcome of indifference. (Eliot 2015, 64)

This is not love across the barricades of a new generation’s mores, but boredom and (“one final patronising kiss,” (2015, 62)) contempt; an abusive relationship compounded by self-disgust:

‘Well now that’s done: and I’m glad it’s over.’
When lovely woman stoops to folly and
Paces about her room again, alone,
She smooths her hair with automatic hand,
And puts a record on the gramophone. (Eliot 2015, 62)

The flicker of allusion to the song Olivia sings, in Oliver [*sic*] Goldsmith’s *The Vicar of Wakefield: A Tale, Supposed to be written by Himself* (1766), when she finds herself abandoned by her seducer, Squire Thornhill, is quickly extinguished by this double automation, of hand and musical machine.

Goldsmith’s original gives us art –and, crucially, redemption:

When lovely woman stoops to folly,
And finds too late that men betray,
What charm can sooth her melancholy,
What art can wash her guilt away? (1766, II, 78.)



But there is no readily completed redemption in *The Waste Land*, no Christian pathfinding in which sin is both readily identifiable and, accordingly, “washed in the blood of the lamb.” Even the ending of the poem, in which the thunder offers its remote consolatory advice, is a commandment to the long task of self-improvement. “Datta. Dayadhvam. Damyata” (2015, 71) means, roughly, “Give. Sympathise. Direct.” These actions are turned outward: they push aside what might be characterised in comparison as Western navel-gazing and face towards a good society. But that society is not London. For this truth, whose Hindu source is the second Brahmana—if “truth” it indeed is, in the world of the poem—breaks through the increasingly fragmented Western cultural references that populate the poem’s last fifty lines. It is a breakthrough the poem stages as a thunderstorm: and in so doing it runs the risk of reducing the Hindi terms to mere aural effect. All those rumbling *Da*, *Daya* and *am* sounds, and their arrival with the Freudian thunderclap of DA (in *fort-da*, *da* is the child’s triumphant return), make it tempting to ignore source and meaning and visualise instead some conclusive storm sweeping through “the arid plain” (2015, 71). “DA”: that full stop, which is not repeated, and not retained, in fact stands at the head of the first manuscript draft Valerie Eliot presents (1971, 78) like a title.

“Shall I at least set my lands in order?” asks line 425 (71); but “London Bridge is falling down falling down falling down,” the next line responds. The poem ends by bringing together that tripartite injunction, which has so far been introduced term by term: “Datta. Dayadhvam. Damyata.” (71). Perhaps there is a trace in this construction of the triune Christian god (Christ giving, Spirit sympathising, Father directing, even)? Either way, the line follows after a stanza space, and it is indented even though that indent does not follow on from a half line above, as occurs elsewhere in the poem lines 422-423 (71) for example:

To controlling hands
I sat upon the shore

Now the tripartite has become a triple repetition:
Shantih shantih shantih (71)

We know “shantih” means, roughly, “peace”; and that it too has a source in Hindu scripture. As Eliot’s own note informs us: “Shantih. Repeated as here, a formal ending to an Upanishad. “The Peace which passeth understanding” is our equivalent to this word” (77).

As the conclusion to a poem which eschews resolution it seems insistently unitary—unifying, therefore. But what does it do to leave this repetition unpunctuated, except by the space bar, and without a final full stop? It makes sense to read the line as not statement but echo: and one which is dying away at that.

It feels counterintuitive to call these particular kinds of textual arrangement and interplay (inserting spaces for example) “composition”, and so it is possible to set aside the fact that both manuscript and typescript drafts of these final lines appear almost untouched by Pound (1971, 78-81, 88-89). There is no case to be



made for differentiating them from the rest of the poem in terms of the ways they circumvent the conventional notion of the author. Instead, Eliot's tessellation reaches an accelerated climax as the poem ends, racing between centuries and cultures to juxtapose the legend of the Fisher King, nursery rhyme, Dante, the *Pervigilium Veneris*, Gérard de Nerval and Thomas Kyd:

I sat upon the shore
Fishing, with the arid plain behind me
Shall I at least set my lands in order?

London Bridge is falling down falling down falling down

Poi sascose nel foco che gli affina
Quando fiam uti chelidon – O swallow swallow
Le Prince d'Aquitaine de la tour abolie (Eliot 2015, 71)

...before it arrives at the well-known line which encapsulates the poem's whole strategy and content: "These fragments I have shored against my ruins" (71). A line which originally read (although Eliot had already changed it in the manuscript draft), in a more telling reveal of the poem's approach: "These fragments I have spelt into my ruins" (1977, 80-81). Both its position, so close to the end of the poem, and its relationship with the work's formal strategy, lend this line a summative weight. Whoever is addressing whomever, the implication of summation within a text is always that there is matter which *could be* summed up. This is true regardless of content: as demonstrated by political rhetoric which seems to lack joined up thinking, or the way we respond as reader/listener to summation as cue even in a theoretical paper we have not followed. The gesture of summation is a gesture towards meaning.

In the context of *The Waste Land's* potential for spelling out meaning (or spelling in, as Eliot's draft had it), alongside the poem's overtly multiple materials and sources, the work continues to pose questions about meaning and multiplicity. Reading it, as I am, from the perspective of the twenty-first century British lyric tradition of which my own work forms part, means necessarily accepting it as a significant, if apparently contradictory, legacy for that tradition. Anecdotally, it is the work of Eliot's which is most cited by contemporary British poets. This is not the legacy of a national educational curriculum: T.S. Eliot is rarely taught in British schools –apart, that is, from *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats* (1939). It does however often form part of the curriculum in Higher Education.

The Waste Land seems to inspire a greater sense of intellectual ease and cultural recognition in British scholars and poets than his other large scale poetic work, the *Four Quartets* (1943). I would suggest that the reasons for this are twofold. The *Quartets'* four settings, though recognisably British, are rural, or maritime. They include a country house in the Cotswolds, a village in the West Country, the mid-Atlantic (though the Dry Salvages are clearly not British territory, the Atlantic coast and climate dominate the national meteorology and wildlife), and an East Anglian shrine. In fact, the rural settings are not only British but more narrowly



English: a point of significance in contemporary social and political culture, where “Englishness” is often appropriated by jingoistic and racist forms of nationalism, or by the political right, while “Britishness,” often used by the political left, embraces not only the other countries of the union, but the diversity –of religion, race and ethnicity, and tradition– that characterises contemporary British society. In a further significant cultural marker, such diversity is still a largely urban phenomenon in Britain today. *The Waste Land* may be chock-full of Western high cultural allusions; but it is at least set in a version of London –a city of waste lands– which is still recognisable today.

It is also easier to teach *The Waste Land* than the *Four Quartets* to a lecture hall of contemporary British students because the earlier work *appears* secular –even if it in fact addresses the loss of a faith which, as traces demonstrate, is Christian– while, among the *Quartets*, *East Coker* and *Little Gidding* in particular are at the same time expressions of Christian faith and culturally Anglican. This entails a content of theological ideas, quotations and allusions which are by now as unfamiliar (without research) to teaching faculty as they are to students; and which faculty may feel squeamish about expecting students from diverse backgrounds to acquaint themselves with.

One contemporary British response is to regret this, on behalf of today’s emerging poets in particular. The *Quartets* seem to integrate their sources more deeply –and more melodically– than does *The Waste Land*. They *sound* more univocal. The ending of *Little Gidding* may cite John of the Cross, Julian of Norwich and the opening of *Burnt Norton*, but by this stage the diction which has emerged over the course of the four long poems has become conclusive certainty:

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.
Through the unknown, unremembered gate
When the last of earth left to discover
Is that which was the beginning;
At the source of the longest river
The voice of the hidden waterfall
And the children in the apple-tree

Not known, because not looked for
But heard, half-heard, in the stillness
Between two waves of the sea.
Quick now, here, now, always
A condition of complete simplicity
(Costing not less than everything)
And all shall be well and
All manner of thing shall be well
When the tongues of flames are in-folded
Into the crowned knot of fire
And the fire and the rose are one. (Eliot 2015, 208-209)



An alternative response is to reconfigure this sense of literary loss and gain in terms of the advantages of a poetics which reveals, if not incoherence, then at least discontinuities between its materials. The unifying force behind the diction of Eliot's *Quartets* might, in such a reading, be as much an imperative of faith as the simple technical matter of "having a good ear." There is a great deal to be explored here which is not the purpose of this paper. What is to my purpose, however, is to see what happens if contemporary British poets look at *The Waste Land* and its tessellated approach to its materials –by which I mean not only its multiple sources, but the multiple ideas these seem to provoke. *The Waste Land* may have an overarching tone, but it does not have an overarching argument. Or, to put it the other way, it successfully avoids the temptations of creating an overarching argument. Such an argument would, after all, gainsay the incoherence and multiplicity the poem addresses.

It's not true, *pace* Plato, that all art is mimetic, and that the only way to address the experience or idea of the fragmentation of meaning is to imitate that fragmentation. But, on the other hand, it is true that to do so is one way to explore such material. The resources that *The Waste Land's* textual strategies open up for contemporary British lyric verse are considerable. British lyric verse is today often written as if against the grain of contemporary experience of the disjuncture of competing authorities. Today's Britain includes cultural moments where world news is uncovered not by professional journalists but by citizen journalists who have their mobile phone cameras at the ready; and where, in the shadow side of such developments, the scrutinised research of experts may be trumped by popular opinion (as in anti-science movements which share "news" of their opinions on social media). It is a culture where the liberating insights of identity politics can mean the individual of good will is torn between peers' competing claims to the trump card of authenticity of experience. It can mean, at the individual level, a shift from the unquestioned sense of an ungainsayable citizenship, with an equal set of rights and forms of social participation, to a struggle for self-definition according to emotional or social role, or experience, or essential qualities.

However welcome, contemporary challenges to traditional establishment authority, can, in other words, lead to uncertainty about whether any kind of authority can be trusted; and to a sense of social atomisation. These uncertainties are felt everywhere in the global North at the time of writing: their particular pertinence in Britain is that *The Waste Land*, that poem of London, is a poem of the British context, and as such part of the British contemporary poet's cultural inheritance. And in the way it lays out the experience of an earlier moment when traditional authority seemed uncertain –and does so by juxtaposing, rather than eliding, difference– it offers a distinct set of strategies for a poet who is so positioned.

Though a North American postmodern poetic is increasingly taking hold within the contemporary British poetic tradition, largely through a flood of transatlantic publication, the sense of polyvalence and the strategy of tessellation have made comparatively few inroads. Where such strategies appear, their closest relationship is not necessarily to *The Waste Land*. Among the northern British heirs of European modernism, Basil Bunting (1900-1985) erupted into modernist mastery



at the age of sixty-six with *Briggflatts* (1966), which owed as much to the friendships of his maturity with other regional poets, including Tom Raworth, as to his long friendship with Ezra Pound. The London-based Australian Peter Porter (1929-2010) juxtaposed a notable range of cultural allusions within a tensely wrought line of argumentation, such as the rueful, elegiac *Better than God* (2009), but acknowledged W.H. Auden as a model for intellectual, witty verse.

The leading heir to both Bunting and Porter, Sean O'Brien (b. 1952) writes verse which is unafraid of either traditional verse-forms or the feat of incorporating depth charges of resonance into a poetry which retains not only strong argumentation but a strongly distinctive narrative voice. This voice can be witty, sardonic, passionate and elegiac; it is nearly always politically or socially engaged. In particular, his collections since *Downriver* (2001) have returned repeatedly to the sense of a new waste land being created in British cities, particularly in the post-industrial north of the country, by successive right-wing governments' policies of austerity. For O'Brien, the resulting impoverishment is more than physical, and entails a clearing out of meaning from individual lives which is epitomised by the closure of much of the public library system. He titled his 2015 collection addressing, among other things, the redemptive power of culture, *The Beautiful Librarians*. In a reflexive echo another northern poet, the Scot Don Paterson, has published numbered poems called "The Alexandrian Library" in several of his collections. Most recently, "The Alexandrian Library, Part IV: Citizen Science" –which, as its title indicates, refers to both one of the great lost libraries of the world and to the erosion of the role of expert– appears in *The Arctic* (2022, 59-71).

As these examples suggest, *The Waste Land's* resourceful strategies open discursive space for a developing poetics which addresses the instability of contemporary cultural meanings. Even if the resources of these strategies have not yet been fully exploited.

Reviews sent to the author: 17/05/2022

Revised paper accepted for publication: 21/06/2022



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