



The Prefiguration of T. S. Eliot's Conversion in "The Waste Land"

By Paula L. Gallagher

A few famous poems of the modern age critique the state of modernity—its sterility, its emptiness, its rejection of culture and tradition. One of the most influential of these poems is T. S. Eliot's "The Waste Land," which was first published in England in 1922, about six years before Eliot's conversion to Anglo-Catholicism. Despite the distance between these two events, "The Waste Land" does contain imagery, allusions and ideas that prefigure his conversion.

The beginning of Eliot's conversion, as prefigured in the poem, begins with his recognition of the emptiness of modernity. The fact that Eliot is writing this poem about the barrenness of modernity and imaging it as a Waste Land shows that Eliot sees through modernity to the reality of its sterility. The image of the Waste Land represents the aridity of modernity, its lack of culture and tradition, and indeed its inability to allow culture and tradition to grow and flourish. Hence, the Waste Land is repeatedly described as a desert with "dry stone and no sound of water". The Waste Land, where "there is not water but only rock", lacks the life-giving and life-sustaining water which will enable tradition and culture to thrive. The poet is seeking the rain which will reanimate the Waste Land of modernity; the rain which will touch and enliven the dead roots of tradition and culture. This water, ultimately, is Christianity.

The Waste Land also encompasses the "Unreal City" of London, a particular instantiation of modernity, which Eliot uses

to convey specific ideas about the state of modernity. London is "Unreal"; it is not connected to objective reality but is immersed in the empty pursuits of modernity. In the fifth section of the poem, other major historical and cultural cities in addition to London are depicted as crumbling "falling towers" and as "Unreal": Jerusalem, Athens, Alexandria, Vienna. Significantly, Rome, the city from where the Pope traditionally leads Christianity, is not included in the list, and as such it is symbolically excluded from the Waste Land. Rome is not included in modernity because, in addition to symbolizing the grace of Christ, it is also a perennial fortress and advancer of culture and tradition. Eliot's recognition of the unreality of modernity and the role of Rome in history is another step on his path to conversion.

From the beginning, the poem is set up as a pilgrimage, which is an expression of a movement toward God, both physically and spiritually. The opening line, "April is the cruellest month", is a reference to Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, which opens with "Whan that Aprill with hise shoures soote".¹ The *Canterbury Tales* are told on a pilgrimage, and thus Eliot, through allusion, is associating his poem with the Christian idea of pilgrimage. After the Waste Land is first presented in the poem, the poet says, "I will show you something different", presenting an invitation for the audience to also go on a pilgrimage to find something beyond the emptiness of moder-

nity. Another symbol of pilgrimage is worked into the poem with the next two lines: "Your shadow at morning striding behind you / Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you". The poet is walking toward the east; the east is a Christian symbol for Jesus Christ. In walking east towards Christ, the poet is indicating that the remedy for modernity lies in ever more perfectly orienting ourselves to Christ. By setting up the poem as a pilgrimage, Eliot employs a Christian concept to explore the sterility of modernity and to search for its remedy. The use of the pilgrimage is another instance in the poem that prefigures Eliot's conversion.

Occurring throughout the poem are multiple *memento mori*. A *memento mori* is a reminder of the unavoidability of death for all men, which is meant to help effect a deeper conversion to God in the present life. The first *memento mori* in the poem directly follows the invitation to join the pilgrimage: "I will show you fear in a handful of dust". Man was created from the dust of the earth and he will return to being dust after death, serving to remind the audience of their own mortality. The use of *memento mori* and of pilgrimages has the same ultimate end of effecting a deeper conversion towards God. Eliot's use of both shows that he is moving towards a more Christian perspective of reality.

Eliot uses Madame Sosostris and her Tarot cards to give an example of modernity's search for truth and reality in something that is wicked and false. The clairvoy-

ant speaks, “and this card / Which is blank, is something he carries on his back, / Which I am forbidden to see. I do not find / The Hanged Man. Fear death by water”. Madame Sosostri’s words show how modernity cannot see or understand Christ, and how it fears Christianity. The thing which “he” carries is the Cross and “he” is Christ. The “Hanged Man” is another image for Christ because Christ hung on the Cross. The Tarot card is blank because the spiritualist cannot see or understand the meaning of the Crucifixion of Christ. Madame Sosostri also says to fear death by water, which means baptism. Baptism is a dying with Christ, but it is also a rising with Him in a new life of grace. In presenting the spiritual blindness of the spiritualist, Eliot indicates that modernity is blind to the real importance of Christ and baptism.

Another prefiguration of Eliot’s conversion can be found in the opening lines of the fifth section, “What the Thunder Said”, which contain allusions to Christ’s Passion. Lawrence S. Rainey recognizes a connection between the phrases “silence in the gardens” and “agony in stony places”, and the Garden of Gethsemane.² The “Prison and Palace” is Pontius Pilate’s house and prison, continuing the connection to Christ’s Passion. Christ has died—“He who was living is now dead”—and His Resurrection is merely hinted at: “reverberation / Of thunder of spring”. Thunder is preliminary to the rain, and springtime is the time of rebirth. The rain is the symbol of hope, that there could be a regenerative, spiritual rebirth. Water in the Waste Land is Christianity, and the Resurrection is the heart of Christianity. The Resurrection makes possible the rebirth of mankind into the life of grace through Christian baptism. In choosing these images to prepare the later presentation of Christ as the source of hope and regeneration, Eliot’s conversion is again prefigured.

Eliot alludes to Christ’s appearance to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus. In the poem, the people are journeying, continuing the conceit of a pilgrimage. The poet sees the third person but does not

know who it is: “Who is the third who walks always beside you?” It is Christ, but he is hidden from recognition; he is “Gliding wrapt in a brown mantle, hooded”.

The climax of the poem comes with the arrival of the rain. The scene is a deserted church, inside of which a “cock stood on the rooftree”, crowing. The cock traditionally heralds the dawn, which is another symbol of Christ. Thus the cock is announcing the Resurrection. Instantly the rain arrives: “Then a damp gust / Bringing rain”. The arrival of the rain is the apocalyptic moment, when the reanimation of modernity can finally come to fruition. The arrival of the rain, at the moment when the cock crows, connects Christ and His Resurrection as the source of life (water) in the desert of the Waste Land. With the Resurrection and with grace, modernity can recover its deadened culture and traditions; modernity can be regenerated and made fertile again. By connecting the Resurrection imagery with the remedy for the barrenness of the Waste Land, Eliot recognizes the crucial role that Christianity plays in society and in reality.

The Thunder, which is mentioned in the title of section five, speaks near the end of the section. The thunder gives three commands: to give (datta), to sympathize (dayadhvam), and to control (damyata). According to Rainey’s commentary, by *giving* is meant charity, by *sympathy* is meant compassion and by *control* is meant self-control.³ These three commands, given in the voice of the thunder, are Eliot’s instructions for what to do when the rain, or the grace of the Resurrection, comes to the modern man. Living these commands will allow the modern man to truly live a meaningful life, after he is reanimated by the rain.

The last lines of the poem contain many images and allusions, which formally incarnate the collapse of the Waste Land. The unreal city is collapsing: “London Bridge is falling down falling down falling down”. Modernity cannot sustain itself and it crumbles. Eliot knows that the Waste Land is empty and collapsing; for him the way to the Waste Land is ruined. The next line,

from Dante’s *Purgatorio*—“Poi s’ascose nel foco che gli affina” (“Then he vanished into the fire that refines them”)—indicates that Eliot himself has chosen to leave the Waste Land and to journey towards Purgatory and its purification.

Eliot’s poem about the sterility of modernity ends with an offering of hope. The last line is “Shantih shantih shantih”, which, according to Eliot’s footnote, means “the Peace which passeth understanding.”⁴ Rainey notes that this line also alludes to Philippians 4:7, “And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.”⁵ The journey through the Waste Land of modernity resolves with the arrival of rain and grace, and concludes with the peace of God. The poem ends on a note of hope and the possibility of order emerging from the madness and disorder of modernity.

T. S. Eliot’s personal journey through the Waste Land—from the rejection of modernity, to the search for Christ, to the arrival of rain—contains imagery, allusions and ideas that prefigure his conversion to Anglo-Catholicism. Although the form and the style of the poem are modern, the content is supportive of tradition and true culture. It is in looking past the avant-garde aspect of the poem into the deeper meanings of the imagery and allusions that Eliot’s movement towards God is seen.

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References

1. Geoffrey Chaucer, *The General Prologue*, in *The Broadview Anthology of British Literature: The Medieval Period* (Canada: The Broadview Press, 2006), p. 330.
2. Lawrence S. Rainey, *The Annotated Waste Land with Eliot’s Contemporary Prose* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), p. 116.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 120.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 74.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 126.