

# ‘A heap of broken images’: The Possibility of Connection in TS Eliot’s *The Waste Land*

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Eliot’s work is filled—especially the poetry—with masks, role-playing, and multiple voices. Yet it is saturated everywhere, too, with displaced personal pain, regret, sexual desire, and emotional and spiritual yearning.<sup>1</sup>

**T**S Eliot’s *The Waste Land* is vested with both narratorial distance and, ironically, sympathetic investment. The poem reads like a narrative and an anti-narrative in that it lets one journey in many a stranger’s shoes through Eliot’s seamless, at times inconspicuous, weaving of several voices into the fabric. The glued voices in this cacophony, a ‘heap of broken images’, appear indistinguishable from one another at times, piled on top of and underneath one another, fluidly weaving through and getting lost in one another like entangled limbs. Through employing such a collagic interplay of voices, endless allusions, and decontextualised intertextuality, Eliot deliberately drowns the reader in uncertainty as to who the speaker of the poem is and which voice, if any, is a reflection of his own. The innately challenging and elusive nature of the piece, which features six foreign languages and various allusions, distances the reader from the poet’s voice and authorial intent. However, these facets of the poem also draw the reader into a more intimate and rigorous collaborative process with the poet, and into investigative and performative interaction with the poem.

Despite Eliot’s insistence on authorial impersonality, the prioritisation of the execution of the creative task itself over self-expression as a bedrock of ‘great art’, his ‘displaced personal pain’ seeps into *The Waste Land*. As a result of the waste and sterility of World War I, in addition to Eliot’s own deeply troubled marriage to Vivienne Haigh-Wood, the poem has a strong sense of lack, loss, and yearning for defiantly resolute human connection developed

beyond materialism, pretence, and sexual desire. This essay asserts that such ideal connectivity is depicted as intangible and irretrievable in the poem’s landscapes, as a result of the almost prelapsarian pre-war past Eliot nostalgically yearns for throughout the poem. The creation of the poem itself can be interpreted as a symptom of Eliot’s desire for connection to that irretrievable past. Hence, the desire for authentic connection in *The Waste Land* can only lead to ‘frustration, ennui, and violence’.<sup>2</sup>

Eliot exploits the multiplicity of nature’s elements and forms in order to examine the idiosyncrasies inherent to human connection. The first stanza of Eliot’s poem is littered with oxymorons and paradoxical metaphors. Eliot utilises the semantic field of nature to establish a strong sense of lack, loss, and sociopolitical fracture representative of that suffered by people in post-war Britain. With ‘April is the cruellest month’ (I.1), Eliot uses the superlative, ‘cruellest’, when personifying April, a month often associated with birth, fecundity, and creativity. This immediately establishes the month as a metaphorical tormentor of the speaker which ‘[breeds] lilacs out of the dead land and [mixes] memory with desire’ (I.2–3). Active verbs such as ‘stirring’, ‘breeding’, and ‘mixing’ suggest a vigorous and intentionally painful intermingling of memory with desire. The personified month of April’s ‘stirring’ of the brewing mixture ultimately intensifies and fixes desire further onto such memories of a seemingly prelapsarian past—one that is painfully intangible in the speaker’s present moment. Rather than invoking an expected sense of hopefulness and joy at the world’s pastoral regeneration, the month of April serves only as a reminder of the unsalvageable practical, spiritual, and emotional crippling the world has undergone. Eliot compounds this motif of decay and degeneration through subversive symbolism and deliberately discombobulating oxymorons. Although lilacs conventionally serve

<sup>1</sup> Vincent B Leitch, William E Cain, Laurie A Finke, Barbara E Johnson, and John McGowan (eds), *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* (second edn, WW Norton 2010).

<sup>2</sup> *ibid* 127.

as literary symbols of sensuality and romance, as in *The Portrait Of A Lady*<sup>3</sup> and *Ash Wednesday*,<sup>4</sup> Eliot here subversively employs the image to represent anguish and mourning at the loss of a type of love, a type of connectivity, that cannot exist in a world so utterly fractured by the war. Hence, April breeds a morbid reminder of mutilated sexuality, arising from post-war spiritual sterility, 'dead land', and bleak hopelessness. Such perverse sexuality, implicitly represented by the image of the lilac, sharply contrasts with the almost presocial innocence represented by Marie towards the end of the passage.

For Eliot, only 'winter' (I.5) can provide 'warm' (I.5) respite from such painful truth, as the 'forgetful snow' (I.6) provides emotional numbing, literally and metaphorically blanketing over the dark past but unable to bury or evade it even within the literary landscapes of *The Waste Land*. Approximant alliteration subversively conflates warmth with winter, suggesting that any echo of birth is a haunting reminder of the obscene deaths witnessed as a result of World War I. Hence, aesthetic transformation provides welcome transient distraction but cannot alter the pain of reality.

Eliot depicts the quest for connection as a fool's errand, an inaccessible dream—mirage-like in its intangibility. Hence, Eliot conjures up the dream of connectivity through his exploration of nature's interdependence, in order to deliberately dispel the illusion and forcefully undermine the possibility of such connection in a post-war era.

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, where the sun beats,  
And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,  
And the dry stone no sound of water. (I.19–24)

The active verb 'clutch' suggests intimacy and closeness as well as the persistence and permanence of life, as roots clinging to soil for life-giving water emphasise the interconnectivity and interdependence necessary for survival. Moreover, the image of 'branches' resiliently 'growing out of stony rubbish' compounds this symbolic persistence of new life, emerging against all odds. This holds particularly true as the natural imagery is reminiscent of Gospel passages depicting Christ as the 'true vine': 'Yes, I am the vine; you are the branches. Those who remain in me, and I in them, will produce much fruit. For apart from me you can do nothing.'<sup>5</sup> This Biblical allusion clearly delineates the need for interconnectivity and remembrance of one's origins and history, one's roots. The poet's symbolic use of natural imagery ultimately tethers struggle and connectivity inextricably, as indivisible strands of thread, depicting struggle as almost a prerequisite for growth and genuine interrelation. The struggle nature undergoes for survival perhaps mirrors Christ's own struggle to connect with his people. Just as roots 'clutch' and branches emerge out of 'stony rubbish', perhaps representing the residue of hardships suffered as a result of war, Christ eternally binds himself to his people through his willing suffering and death on the cross. Hence, irrespective of difficulty and hardships suffered, connection persists and heals. Such a notion is compounded as Eliot's poem appears to reinforce the Gospel passage's warning that 'apart... you can do nothing'. However, such truth is realised in tandem with the disconnect and fragmentation permeating *The Waste Land*.

3 Henry James, *The Portrait of a Lady* (first published 1881).

4 TS Eliot, *Ash Wednesday* (first published 1930).

5 *The King James Bible* (first published 1611).

Eliot's rhetorical questioning of nature's mechanisms is, in part, a criticism of man's naïve understanding of, and belief in, connectivity. Eliot's use of rhetorical questions coupled with infantilising diction belittles the 'son of man', the reader, as it imbues the speaker's tone with condescending indignation and tauntingly foregrounds the reader's ignorance about the nature of connectivity and growth—'you cannot say, or guess'. Starkly contrasting with previous images of fecundity and synergy—'in the mountains, there you feel free' (I.17)—Eliot's subversive use of biblical allusion, and motifs of dryness and apathy, depict the setting of *The Waste Land* as a faithless, cruel, and hollow land where the seeds of connectivity are rendered sterile and fruitless. Moreover, the poet's insistence on silence and sterility—'no sound of water'—perhaps emphasises the unquenchable spiritual thirst saturating *The Waste Land*. Eliot's auditory symbolism ensures that not even a trace of hope of spiritual fertilisation, let alone salvation, remains in sight. His use of mesodiplosis—'no shelter, the cricket no relief, and the dry stone no sound of water'—creates an atmosphere of hostility and harshness, as it suggests the impossibility of survival in such an unfeeling and detached environment, in addition to its reinforcement of the overall strong sense of lack exhibited throughout the poem. Additionally, such repeated negations, coupled with motifs of death, dryness, and sterility, emphasise the disparity and discord between humanity and nature. As opposed to the intimacy and closeness suggested by the myth of 'roots that clutch', the active verb, 'beats', subversively evokes an aggrieved image of perpetual aggression and endured pain unlike the connotations of warmth and illumination one would generally associate with sunlight. Eliot's use of the present tense places the verb, 'beats', in everlasting perpetual motion, emphasising the permanence of pain inherent to human existence and experience. This severance between nature and mankind is perhaps symbolic of the utter sense of isolation and sterility felt as a result of the cataclysmic, unprecedented horror of a war that claimed the lives of over eight million soldiers and 13 million civilians.<sup>6</sup>

Eliot's subversive Biblical allusions reductively transpose the image of Christ from a unifying 'true vine' into scattered 'stony rubbish'. Such degradation may be suggestive of man's spiritual descent as a result of his divergence from God, particularly as 'rubbish' has connotations of pollution, worthlessness, and contamination. Moreover, connotations of impenetrability and lifelessness, vested in the adjective 'stony', are perhaps suggestive of the numbing desensitisation and spiritual fracture brought about as a result of the war. Eliot's evocation of Ezekiel in the following line compounds this sense of isolation and disparity as the speaker's form of address, 'son of man',<sup>7</sup> is the form of address God uses for Ezekiel throughout the King James Bible. Hence, it emphasises the distance between God and Ezekiel, and by extension between God and mankind, as the phrase recalls the Old Testament notion that God alone has no progenitors. To be human is, fundamentally, to belong. Such belonging often comes in the form of the familial ties, but these are notably missing in *The Waste Land*. Additionally, 'son of man' unfavourably interlaces the modern man with Christ himself, the purest son. Hence, it perpetuates the notion that modern man cannot reach this purified state—cannot 'bridge the gap', so to speak—as his external and internal worlds have been diminished to a barren 'waste land' of both intellectual and sexual exhaustion, a 'heap of broken images' (I.22), of past and present painfully colliding.

Such a derogatory metaphor, 'heap of broken images', suggests the disorder inherent to human experience and memory, as it reduces

6 Leitch, Cain, Finke, Johnson, and McGowan (n 1).

7 *The King James Bible* (n 5).

humanity's entire life span to a pile of unconnected scattered incomprehensible memories. This is perhaps representative of the death of a unifying epistemology. The mirror previously held up to reality is shattered; the self is fractured. Everything is a shattered image—a heap of broken images—of a fragmented world. Extrapolating from this notion, it is evident that prior social and political institutions are no longer capable of holding society together. As represented by the multitude of voices, languages, allusions, and confusing footnotes within the text, unification is no longer possible in such a post-war world where we know only separation and multiplicity. We have an epistemology that jumps from image to image, each time only seeing a part of the whole. The whole has been destroyed, and all that remains is 'fear in a handful of dust' (I.30).

Eliot's depiction of love and connection within this poem is one wracked with anxiety, disappointment, and bitterness as exemplified in *A Game Of Chess*. The poet's financial lexis, his employment of luxurious and decadent visual imagery, emphasises the superficiality and hollowness of a society which prioritises commercial objects above emotion. The 'Held up ... standards' (II.80) delineated by the speaker are met exclusively by the 'glitter of her jewels which rose to meet' them (II.84). Although unnamed, the 'her' in question is depicted as a mutilated Cleopatra of sorts: a burnt-out 'shadow' of a regal yet vilified 'prostitute queen', at once exalted and suspicious in her sexuality. Eliot's unnamed figure serves as a diminished woman, fit for a fallen, depleted post-war world. Despite Eliot's explicit allusion to Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*, the poet offers no substantial description of the woman's character or likeness, focussing exclusively on the material possessions surrounding her. Given Eliot's allusion to Cleopatra, a woman demonised by ancient Romans as a loathsome manipulator and 'prostitute queen',<sup>8</sup> one can interpret the proliferation of noxious and disorienting concoctions as representative of the woman's dangerous and perverse sexuality. Eliot depicts the unnamed woman's sexuality as feral: 'Unstoppered, lurked her strange synthetic perfumes' (II.87). The adjective 'unstoppered', coupled with the active verb 'lurked', suggests an untameable, almost animalistic force. The active verb 'lurked', combined with Eliot's use of sibilance, evokes an atmosphere of suspicion and eeriness, suggesting something almost scheming or sly about the woman's beautification items, rituals, and sexuality by extension. This image of female sexuality as a predatory force is compounded as Cleopatra's 'perfumed sails' are metamorphosed into 'strange synthetic perfumes' that 'troubled, confused and drowned the sense in odours' (II.88–89). The active verb 'drowned', vested with peculiarly aggressive and murderously malicious intent, equips female sexuality with dangerous, devious, almost sinful connotations as 'her hair spread out at fiery points' (II.110). Hence, in *The Waste Land*, sexuality is portrayed as degenerative rather than productive or procreational, entirely ostracised from the concept of connection whether it be to the other or to the self. Rather, sexuality is depicted to be an entirely sinister and destructive force.

Eliot, through his depiction of characters such as Lil and the 'indifferent' typist, demonstrates how society commodifies and lays claim to the female body, perversely estranging women from their own bodies.

8 Jacquelyn Williamson, 'Cleopatra and Fake News: How ancient Roman political needs created a mythic temptress' (*Shakespeare & Beyond*, 20 October 2017) <<https://shakespeareandbeyond.folger.edu/2017/10/20/cleopatra-mythic-temptress/>>.

Her drying combinations (III.225)

Out of the window (III.224)

Hardly aware of her departed lover;

Her brain allows one half-formed thought to pass:

'Well now that's done: and I'm glad it's over' (III.250–52)

The typist's ambivalence at her bodily exposure, coupled with Eliot's choice of diction in 'her brain allows', suggests a divorce of the mind from the body. The distinction between her brain assenting to thought, rather than her entire being assenting, reinforces both the fracture of the mind and body torn apart by societal expectation and the non-consensual nature of the act. This metaphor of allowing thought to enter, consciously consenting, is perhaps suggestive of the figurative mental barriers the typist must employ as an emotional defence mechanism against the brutality of reality. The brain then acts as a guard of sorts, permitting and disallowing 'thought to pass', but pass into where? Into the body, the mind, the soul? Regardless, such dissociation and compartmentalisation, suggestive of societal fracture and desensitisation, is clearly symptomatic of the trauma of having to physically adhere to societal expectations and predetermined gender constructs whilst being mentally and emotionally unwilling.

Moreover, Eliot depicts the female body as exploitatively mechanised and commodified to the extent that it results in the erosion of female autonomy, male empathy, and the understanding that females have an intrinsic value divorced from profits they can bring. Defined by their bodily output, whether it be their capacity for labour or their fertility, women such as Lil and the nameless typist 'polemically depict a metonymized society in which individuals are both dismembered and standardized'.<sup>9</sup> The typist, blatantly defined by her job, is perhaps representative of the way in which modern labour, through its focus on productivity maximisation and phatic repetition, dehumanises people as it robs them of their individuality and humanity. Moreover, the typist puts up 'no defence' (III.240) against the 'young carbuncular man's ... assaults' (III.231–39). Apathetic to her desires, he 'makes a welcome of indifference' (III.242) and 'bestows one final patronising kiss' (III.247). The carbuncular young man's clear disregard for the other's emotions, his prioritisation of his own pleasure irrespective of the other, clearly delineates his view of the nameless woman's body as a vehicle for pleasure. Eliot's revelatory hierarchical rhetoric in 'bestows ... patronising' clearly indicates the male's strong sense of agency over, and entitlement to, the typist's body. Such a notion is further perpetuated through Eliot's strategic use of diction, as 'patronising' perhaps refers to the man's commodification of the female body in addition to his condescension towards the lady. In both cases, it is evident that there is no place for emotional connection in the sterility of Eliot's 'waste land'.

Eliot's strategic grating of this motif of sterility and infertility against the expectation that relationships must be generative and profitable in some way, tenuously fuels the seething fire of anxiety underlying most heterosexual relationships in *The Waste Land*. Eliot depicts how the issue of fertility, its conflation with intrinsic value of a female, transcends class. His exploration and intertwining of a conglomeration of upper-class and working-class voices and experiences delineate the ironic universality of fragmentation and isolation: 'I didn't mince my words, I said to her myself ... think of

9 Michael North, *The Political Aesthetic of Yeats, Eliot, and Pound* (Cambridge University Press 1991).

poor Albert ... HURRY UP PLEASE ITS TIME' (II.140–52). The repeated intrusion of this ushering voice immediately establishes a strong sense of urgency 'as it serves to make the more general point that "we" are in crisis'.<sup>10</sup> Like a ticking time bomb, a timer about to run out, the bartender's call is seemingly symbolic of the societal pressure on women to conform to particular gender constructs and bear children in adherence to society's deadlines. Eliot's purposive capitalisation of the phrase intensifies the strong sense of urgency, as if the voice were a shout from afar, a call from the void. It ultimately emphasises how loud, aggressive, and pressurising society's expectations of the female body can be. 'Lil', representative of all women at this point in the poem, doesn't get to decide when her time is, society dictates that. Moreover, the speaker's repetition of the personal pronoun 'I'—'I swear, I can't bear to look at you. / And no more can't I, I said' (II.146–47)—establishes a strong sense of singularity which, through drawing the reader away from Lil's lived experience into the speaker's biased narration of it, ultimately denotes the lack of sophisticated empathetic faculties available to members of such an emotionally depleted, now inept, society.

Vivien Haigh-Wood's addition of the pointed question 'What you get married for if you dont want children?' (II.164)<sup>11</sup> is perhaps reflective of her own marital troubles as Eliot's refusal to have children would likely have been perceived as a refusal to carry out expected marital duties at the time. This notion that connection should only exist, relationships should only be forged, if quantifiably profitable and generative is linked to recurring motifs of transactionality, sterility, and desensitisation within *The Waste Land*. Obsession with the tangible and the financial, and with the commodification of all sacred things, such as bodies and language itself, is perhaps symptomatic of the utter loss and devastation collectively suffered at the hands of death that has undone 'so many' (I.62). 'The rich profusion' (II.85) of wealth is thus futilely utilised in an attempt to fill the void loss has created.

Such fixation on quantifiability manifests itself both subtly and explicitly in Eliot's appropriation of monetary diction in *Death by Water*. Eliot's use of oxymoron ('deep sea swell' (IV.313)) establishes motifs of increase and decrease, inflation and depreciation, indicative perhaps of the 'profit and loss' (IV.314) he goes on to mention in the following line. Financial motivation, this 'rich profusion' of monetary madness, manifests itself subtly in Eliot's witty wordplay, 'A current under sea / Picked his bones in whispers' (II.315–16). Eliot's intertwinement of the semantic fields of nature and finance covertly sows the seeds of monetary diction throughout the section, perhaps symbolising how capital is consciously and subconsciously valorised in such a society. Eliot's omission of 'the' covertly hints to currency, perhaps metaphorically symbolising the way in which superficiality and the prioritisation of the tangible slowly wears one's soul and sincerity away. Such financial preoccupation perhaps stemmed from Eliot's own personal concern about economic life after the war. He worked at Lloyd's Bank for a time, and read several publications in several languages regarding post-war economic affairs. John Maynard Keynes, for example, confessed a lack of hope for a healthy global climate should the Versailles Treaty, which imposed an immense amount of global debt onto Germany, not be revised. Hence, Eliot's private concern with the economic peril

facing Europe, in addition to his understanding of cooperation and interaction as prerequisites for survival, may spill both consciously and subconsciously into the entirety of *The Waste Land*.

Moreover, one of the rare instances in which Eliot chooses to employ direct speech comes in the form of a nameless woman's erratic plea: "Stay with me. / Speak to me. Why do you never speak. Speak" (II.111–12). Eliot's purposive implementation of speech marks, in tandem with his omission of question marks, proves particularly intriguing as it simultaneously facilitates and restricts the speaker's scope for self-expression and connectivity. By virtue of Eliot's rare attribution of direct speech—the privilege of self-narration—to female characters in his poem, this delegation seemingly bestows a unique sense of agency upon this nameless speaker. This, coupled with the repeated imperative 'Speak', would likely create the illusion of authority were it not for Eliot's utilisation of such techniques exclusively in order to counteract and undermine them at a later point. One may perceive Eliot's omission of question marks, 'Why do you never speak' as a reinforcement of the increasing forcefulness and frustration with which the nameless speaker commands the other, though it is perhaps more indicative of the other's disengagement. As the tissues of her speech disintegrate from dialogue into the fibres of a neurotic stream of consciousness, it is evident that the speaker's proliferation of imperatives are indicative of desperate supplication, symptomatic of intense loneliness, as opposed to frustration. Moreover, it is important to note that the speaker's dialogue is ultimately being expressed and mediated through Eliot himself, thus adding another layer of distance between the reader and the nameless female. Perhaps inspired by Vivien Haigh-Wood, one assumes similitude between this decaying female character and Eliot's former spouse as a result of her infamous struggles with mental health and her inability to cope with the loss of Eliot's love and presence: 'The only thing I yearn for & bleed for is the day when Tom calmly returns.'<sup>12</sup> The speaker's strong sense of isolation and loneliness is thus illuminated through Eliot's juxtaposition between the agency associated with the privilege of self-narration and the lack of reciprocity and acknowledgement indicated through Eliot's omission of question marks.

The desire for connection and true understanding of the other is compounded through the speaker's repetitive questioning, "What are you thinking of? What thinking? What ... Think" (II.113–4). Through its emphasis on inquisitive and contemplative diction, Eliot's symplote elucidates the speaker's attempt at linguistic infiltration of the other's internal landscapes. However, once more, the hope for reciprocity and acceptance dissipates as the coherence and sentence length of her speech dwindles, increasingly revealing the impossibility of connection. In place of such lack lies bleak numbness, monotony and sterility:

'What is that noise?  
The wind under the door.  
'What is that noise now? What is the wind doing?'  
Nothing again nothing. (II.117–21)

Ultimately, Eliot summarises his stance on the possibility, or lack thereof, of all forms of connection in *The Fire Sermon*: 'On Margate Sands / I can connect / Nothing with nothing' (III.300–03).

10 Raymond Southall, 'The Poetry and Culture of T. S. Eliot' (1983) 1 Sydney Studies in Society and Culture 146.

11 Dalya Alberge, 'Diaries of TS Eliot's first wife reveal her torment at the end of their marriage' *Guardian* (London, 2 June 2017) <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/jun/02/diaries-of-ts-eliot-first-wife-reveal-her-torment-at-end-of-their-marriage>>.

12 *ibid.*