WHAT THE THUNDER SAID

WL-V: WHAT THE THUNDER SAID

Eliot considered "What the Thunder Said" the most important part of *The Waste Land*, and he thought "the twenty-nine lines of the water-dripping song… were *good*".[110] He was able to finish it seemingly after receiving a "sign" while recovering from an illness in 1921. He said that a passage like this, on which the author makes no progress for months or years,

> may suddenly take shape and word, and in this state long passages may be produced which require little or no touch.[111]

WL-Va: Jesus in the tomb (322-330)

The scene is the Passion of Jesus, "who was living is now dead":[112] His "agony" in the garden of Gethsemane, His betrayal by Judas ("torchlight red on sweaty faces") and denial by Peter, His condemnation and humiliation ("prison and palace", "shouting and crying"). Later in the poem the "thunder" will speak, sounding over the "distant mountain" of the Himalayas, heralding the "spring" of new life, but here it marks the death of Jesus.[113]

The Gospels bear witness to the life and death of Jesus from a point in time after the resurrection. But waste-land time is different: its perspective is *after* Jesus died but *before* He rose again; in the waste land one dies but one does not rise again. Death accompanies us; while we are alive, we are dying "with a little patience". The waste land thus reverses St. Paul's conviction that we embody not only the suffering and dying of Jesus, but above all His rising again:

> ever bearing in our body the dying of Jesus,
> that His life may also be shown in our body.[114]

WL-Vb: Desert without theophany (331-346)

The children of Israel, camped in the Sinai Desert without water and said to Moses:

> Give us water to drink.

Moses answered:

> Why doest thou quarrel with me? Wherefor do ye tempt the Lord?

and he cried out to God:

> What shall I do with this people? A little more and they will stone me!

God replied:

> Go on before the people... take thy rod in thy hand; ...
> I shall stand before thee there on the rock in Horeb [Sinai];
> and thou shallt strike the rockand water will come forth from it
> that the people may drink.

Moses did so and called the place "The Tempting" (*Massah*) and "The Quarrelling" (*Meriba*) because

> the people quarreled there and tempted the Lord saying
> "Is the Lord among us or not?"[115]

In the waste land the Lord is not among us. Its mountains are stumps of rotten teeth; there is no Mount Sinai, where God could speak to us. Its wells are empty; no Moses comes to break open the rock to give us to drink. In the Bible, wandering in the wilderness is the "honeymoon" of God with Israel, his Bride, whom he has just "wed", freed from bondage. But the waste land there may be no theophany.

We cannot go into the waste land to get free to search for God, as did the Desert Fathers. We do not build hermitages to find solitude, because we cannot get away from the surly creatures, sitting in their hovels, sneering at what they do not understand, with their "red" faces. Instead of a holy "silence" and "solitude" there is thunder; yet the thunder brings no rain, it is "sterile". Thunder in the past has spoken to man, as Eliot will show pres-

ently,[116] but in the waste land it conveys no word beyond itself. The rock of Peter, the church, has a Word, but it, too, is lost on the waste land.

WL-Vc: Drought (347-359)

St. Paul said of the rock struck by the rod of Moses:

> the rock is Christ,

and Jesus told the Samaritan woman:

> whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst,
> but the water that I shall give him will become in him
> a fount of water springing up into everlasting life.[117]

If only there were a "pool among the rock"— like the pool in the rose-garden that Eliot will describe in *Burnt Norton*— or a "spring" that St. John of the Cross spoke of:

> Oh, well I know Wellspring,
> pooling, running;
> although by night.[118]

In the waste land we hear not water flowing but the "cicada" which, says Ecclesiastes, burdens the old, and the "singing" of windswept dry grass.[119] We would even welcome the song of the hermit thrush, which merely *sounds* like water dripping. St. John of the Cross said of the night of the senses, when emotions are purified:

> this dryness could often come not from the night, not from the cleansing of the drives of our feelings, but from sin and immaturity, laziness and lukewarmness, from moodiness or bodily ailment.[120]

The dryness of the waste land is not a sign of spiritual progress.

WL-Vd: Emmaus (360-366)

The Emmaus story from St. Luke's Gospel[121] is set in waste-land time: Jesus "who was living is now dead". Two of Jesus's followers were "foolish and slow of heart to believe" the reports that his tomb was empty. Downcast,

they had left Jerusalem for Emmaus, a village not far to the west. As they were walking along discussing what had happened, another traveler joined them, but

> their eyes were bound, so they would not know him.

After reaching Emmaus they were sitting at table when their companion took bread,

> blessed and broke it and gave it to them; then their eyes were opened and they recognized

Jesus. In the waste land skepticism has no end for there is no resurrection.

Eliot included a note about a group of Antarctic explorers "at the extremity of their strength, had the constant delusion that there was one more member than could actually be counted". In the waste land the third wayfarer, the figure "wrapped in a brown mantle, hooded", is a delusion. Christ is not acknowledged even symbolically; the risen God walking among us goes unrecognized.

WL-Ve: Fall of the Cities (367-377)

Eliot now invites us to contemplate the "hooded hordes" as they gallop through the waste land bringing destruction in the "violet air". They are the barbarians who annihilated the capitals of western culture: Judeo-Christian (Jerusalem), Greek (Athens), Hellenistic (Alexandria), Modern (Vienna), our own (London). The havoc they cause is "unreal", surreal.

In his note Eliot quotes Hermann Hesse,[122] who at that time (1920) saw Europe, especially Eastern Europe, staggering toward chaos, taking drunkenness and madness for worship and holiness, singing "hymns" which only make the middle class they target snicker —and saints and prophets weep. *The Waste Land* was written shortly after the First World War and the Russian Revolution: the end of one hope and the beginning of another. Paradoxically, after Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1931) and George Orwell's *Nineteen-Eighty-Four* (1949), it is "western civilization" itself that is the target of progress.

Christians and Pagans alike were shocked when the Barbarian Goths sacked Rome in 410: Rome was the eternal City! The two Hebrew kingdoms were destroyed: the southern kingdom of Judah by the Babylonians (586 B.C.)[123] and the northern kingdom of Israel by the Assyrians (722-721

B.C.). Eliot´s phrase, "murmur of maternal lamentation", recalls the words of the prophet Jeremiah on the devastation of Israel:

> A voice was heard in Ramah— lamentation and bitter weeping;
> Rachel weeps for her children, wished not to be consoled,
> because they are no more.[124]

The passage is cited in the Gospel of St. Matthew referring to the massacre of the innocents by King Herod.[125]

WL-Vf: Apocalypse (378-385)

Let the nightmare begin![126] A woman stretches out her long black hair and bows it as if it were a violin. Bats swarm down a wall squeaking and fluttering in the "violet" twilight before the dead of night. Towers hang upside down, tolling a time "reminiscent" of the ninth hour when Christ died,[127] or our own hour, which is fast running out. The macabre symphony swells in time with the bells: the whispers of the fiddle, the whistling of the bats and the whirring of their wings, the wind hissing over the dry grass,[128] howling over the dry cisterns and empty wells.

The prophet Jeremiah cried out again, this time when the Babylonians were destroying Jerusalem and its temple:

> Be stunned at this, heavens, shudder with great horror! Says the Lord:
> for two evils have my people done:
> * they have forsaken me, Spring of living waters,
> * and they have dug themselves cisterns, broken cisterns that hold no water.[129]

This is the *turning* in reverse: an *aversio* away from God with a *conversio* toward the waste land.

WL-Vg: The Chapel Perilous (386-395)

Now it is fully night, and the Knight draws near to the Chapel Perilous where the holy Grail is kept. But the shrine stands empty, its broken door banging in the wind, amid the blowing grass and open graves of the churchyard. The scene becomes superimposed on the events surrounding the Crucifixion,[130] with its traditional symbols of "the day of the Lord", doomsday, the denouement of history. When Jesus yielded up His breath:

> darkness came over the whole land.... And behold:
> the temple veil was torn asunder, the earth quaked,
> rocks split, graves opened.[131]

We see scattered the "dry bones" of Ezekiel's lost civilization; they will never be joined together to stand up again as a community renewed.

The rooster crows on the weathercock as it crowed when Peter at the house of the high priest swore that he was no follower of Jesus:

> at once a cock crowed.
> And the Lord turned and looked at Peter, and Peter
> remembered the word of the Lord:
> "Before the cock crows thou shalt deny me thrice".
> Then Peter went out and wept bitterly.[132]

The desolation, the danger, tempts the Knight to deny his quest of the Grail. But the lightning comes, then a breeze bringing rain. Will he respond?

WL-Vh: Vox Dominii (396-423)

Now the scene shifts to India, the river Ganges. The people —all of nature— silently await the rain promised by the "black clouds" over the snowcapped Himalayas. Storm clouds are a traditional symbol of theophany, and it will reappear in *Four Quartets*.[133] The "black cloud" was "where God was" when Moses encountered Him on Mount Sinai;

> Clouds and darkness are about Him,
> justice and judgment the base of His throne.[134]

In a note Eliot refers to a fable recounted in the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad from the holy writings of India.[135] The gods, human beings, and the demons asked Prajâpati, god of creation and wisdom, to speak. The trio represents all intelligent life and recalls St. Paul's *Carmen Christi*: at the name of Jesus

> every knee should bow: in heaven, on earth, and under the earth.[136]

Prajâpati answered in the voice of thunder: "DA". In a Hebrew psalm God discloses His presence in a great storm; his voice is the thunder:

> The voice of the Lord comes over the waters,
> the God of glory thunders;
> the Lord, above vast waters.[137]

Gods, men, and demons interpreted "DA" as the first syllable of three commands given in Sanskrit, the ancient language of the Upanishads: "give, sympathize, control".

1) *Datta*: give!

After we die, by what shall we have "existed"? Not by the résumé we have handed out, the "estate" we are bequeathing, the home we leave empty. Surely we will go on existing at least in the memory of others? Not so fast; Eliot quotes the poet Webster, who tells us that even your spouse will

> ...remarry
> Ere the worm pierce your winding-sheet, ere the spider
> Make a thin curtain for your epitaphs.

"Prudence", staying on the safe side, blocks "the awful daring of a moment's surrender" —what "we have existed by". It is a "moment" of yielding that redefines, like Eliot´s experience in the rose-garden.[138] In *The Rock* Eliot will associate the "moment" to the incarnation:

> A moment in time but time was made through that moment...[139]

It is analogous to the "hardly, barely prayable/ Prayer of the one Annunciation", "the hint" in *Dry Salvages*: "be it done to me".[140]

2) *Dayadhvam*: sympathize!

Eliot quotes Dante's *Inferno* in his note on the "key" turning in the door.[141] Count Ugolino had betrayed his political party, and in revenge his enemies shut him up along with his children and grandchildren in a "horrible tower". When inside, he heard the key turn "once only", since the door was unlocked only after they had all starved to death. At death we will find out that we have been locked in our own "horrible towers".

The Roman leader Coriolanus was a traitor twice over. He left Rome after opposing the distribution of grain to his starving people and went over

to their enemies, the Volces, and led a Volscian army against Rome. Later he betrayed the Volsces, who finally executed him.[142]

Eliot also quotes the American idealist philosopher F. H. Bradley in his notes. Because our feelings and thinking are private property, held Bradley, each of us must live in our own little world. In the waste land, egoism causes us to lose compassion even for those closest to us.

3) *Damyata*: control!

Taming the emotions, said Plato, is like a charioteer driving a pair of wild horses. When the weather is calm it is easy to tack "gaily" against the wind, just as the heart, once invited, would have "gaily" responded. Self-discipline is not a waste-land value,[143] but religious traditions have seen the need to follow a "rule" and to practice "virtue": asceticism comes with mysticism. In *Four Quartets* Eliot will comment repeatedly on our both active and passive relationship to the Divine.[144]

These three Hindu commandments of almsgiving, compassion, and self-control recall the traditional Christian "Gospel counsels", the monastic vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience.[145] Paradoxically, they bind us to set us free:

* poverty: giving away things to get away from their clutches
* obedience: giving way to others to curb willfulness
* chastity: giving up coveting to avoid "burning".

Prajâpati's commandments and the Gospel's counsels go unheeded in the waste land. The knight seeking the holy Grail, it seems, has failed his initiation; he cannot say that he gave of himself, empathized with others, controlled himself. Will the rains fall after the thunder sounds? Another Upanishad, the Chandogya, will form part of the "moment" in the rose garden described in *Burnt Norton*: the lotus flower rises as time stands still.[146]

WL-Vi: Peace (424-434)

"I" have now become the traveler who has passed through the "arid plain" and come to the end, to "the shore". I am "fishing", still seeking deliverance. I take stock. I cannot do away with the chaos of the waste land, but I might "at least set my own lands in order"— as the prophet Isaiah once spoke in God´s name to the ailing King Hezekiah:[147]

Set thy house in order, for thou shalt die and not live.

The King, weeping bitterly, affirmed his trust in God, and God "saw his tears and added fifteen years to his life".

"I" begin desperately to throw out all sorts of "fragments… to shore against my ruins", scraps that might at least sound like hope.

* "London Bridge" leads across to the fishermen's church of the fishermen, Magnus Martyr.[148] In the well-known children's game the bridge is "falling down". It was built by the Romans in 50 A.D. and has since fallen and been rebuilt several times. Will a bridge some day lead to something other than a financial district?

* The line in Italian is from Dante's *Purgatorio* where the author calls the Provençal troubadour Arnaut Daniel "the better craftsman". Eliot used the quote as as his dedication of *The Waste Land* to Ezra Pound. Dante met Daniel in purgatory, where souls are cleansed by fire before they are able to see God. Daniel was standing among the souls atoning for their life of lust,[149] and after speaking to Dante, he

> hid into the fire which refines them.[150]

"The burning" destroys but it also purifies,[151] and Daniel hopes to see God. In *Four Quartets* Eliot will refer again to "that refining fire" in Dante's purgatory.[152]

* The Latin line is from the anonymous Latin poem, *Pervigilium Veneris* ("The Vigil of Venus"). It was written before 500 AD and was connected with the spring festival of the Venus, goddess of love. Because of its focus on nature common later in medieval Latin poetry, it has been called "the prologue of the Middle Ages". Here Eliot turns again to the rape of Philomel by her sister's husband, King Tereus,[153] quoting from the end of the poem, where Philomel is pictured now not as a nightingale but as a swallow. Philomel,

> the "friend" of Tereus, sings in the shade of a poplar.
> One would think that her melodious voice sang of feelings of love,
> Not that a sister complains of a barbarous husband.

Tomorrow may he love who never has loved,
And who has loved, may he love tomorrow.
She sings, but we are silent; when will my springtime come?
When shall I become like that swallow, that I cease to be silent?...
Tomorrow may he love who never has loved,
And who has loved, may he love tomorrow.[154]

Even after the brutality of Tereus,

O swallow swallow

will there be hope for love?

* The line in French,

the prince of Aquitaine of the ruined tower,

is from the sonnet *El desdichado* (Spanish for "the luckless, unhappy one") by French poet Gérard de Nerval (1854). It is the name of the "black knight" Ivanhoe who, in Sir Walter Scott´s novel, lost both his inheritance and his love. De Nerval has been considered a mystic; from a spiritual mishmash — asked his religion, he replied "all of them"— he said he "felt led back to the true way". He wrote *El desdichado* when confined in a mental institution, and after years of sickness and poverty he hanged himself. The last words speak of pain and faith, purification:

> [I am] happy about the [religious] convictions which I have gained, and [my] sufferings I compare to... a descent into hell.

* In the Elizabethan drama, *The Spanish Tragedy*, by Thomas Kyd, the hero Hieronymo plans to avenge his son's murder by agreeing ("I'll fit you") to write a play in which the murderers are killed. He appears to be insane, but he gets what he wants —just as Gérard de Nerval, and perhaps Arnaut Daniel and the author of the *Pervigilium*— or even Hamlet.

Through these "fragments" or "broken images"[155] —actually throughout the entire poem— Eliot tries to make sense out the clash between expectations and the "ruins".

"Shantih" is the Sanskrit blessing ending each Upanishad. Eliot says in his note that our equivalent is

the peace which passeth all understanding,

a blessing from St. Paul, who also “hoped against hope”.[156] In earlier versions of *The Waste Land*, instead of the Sanskrit words, the thunder spoke these words of Jesus:

I am the resurrection and the life.[157]