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“THE SECOND COMING” AND “THE WASTE LAND”: CAPSTONES OF THE WESTERN CIVILIZATION COURSE

by *Jewel Spears Brooker*

“**T**he Second Coming” by W. B. Yeats and *The Waste Land* by T. S. Eliot are ideal companion poems to use as a capstone experience in a course in Western Civilization. Both poems deal powerfully with the state of civilization in the twentieth century; both suggest that civilization is falling apart and each in its own way reveals the cause of the crisis. Both poems (especially *The Waste Land*) allude to central events and major texts of the last several thousand years of Western (and Eastern) Civilization. *The Waste Land*, furthermore, suggests that the main activity of general humanities courses, *i.e.*, systematic study of great texts, has value as a means of redeeming civilization from ruin.

In his most famous critical essay, “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” Eliot argues that a poet must write with Western Civilization, so to speak, in his bones. He calls this presence of the past within a poet “the historical sense,” and argues that it is “indispensable for anyone who would continue to be a poet beyond his twenty-fifth year.”

The historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence; the historical sense compels a man to write not merely 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.¹

One can disagree with the idea that the historical sense is a universal require-

ment for poets, but not with the fact that Eliot used it as a standard for himself and conscientiously prepared himself to be a poet by saturating himself in the great texts of Western Civilization. Next to Milton, Eliot is probably the English language's most learned poet; his mind includes most of the great classics of Western Civilization and is like the "mind of Europe" described in "Tradition and the Individual Talent,"—a "mind which changes, . . . but which abandons nothing *en route*" (6). The great texts hover over everything that he wrote, but in a special and obvious sense, they literally and conspicuously constitute *The Waste Land*. Yeats was not learned in the same classical sense as Eliot, but he too was well educated, particularly in the great myths of Western Civilization. As a repository of the myths of the Greeks, Hebrews, Romans, Christians, and especially the Celts, as well as a representative of his age, Yeats is invaluable in a general humanities course.

The reason for using "The Second Coming" and *The Waste Land* as capstone texts in a Western Civilization course, then, is that they gather within themselves many of the texts included in early parts of the course. In that they focus on the same crisis from very different standpoints, they tend to be reciprocally interpreting and are more valuable used together than alone. Moreover, Eliot's particular mode of re-collecting texts provides students with the joy of re-cognizing and re-interpreting the past texts at the same time that they are beginning to understand the present ones. These poems enable students to understand another point that Eliot makes in the "Tradition" essay: the new changes the old as much as the old influences the new. The *Divine Comedy*, for example, not only influenced and became a part of *The Waste Land*, but for a student who studies first Dante and then Eliot, *The Waste Land* actually makes a difference in the *Divine Comedy*.

In spite of the fact that the two modern poems seem made to order for use as companion capstone texts, they are seldom so used. The main reason is that they are considered too difficult for such courses. Many faculty feel uncomfortable with them; many more feel that they are simply too advanced for general education courses, courses usually taught in the first two years and often as requirements. But even though both poems are in some ways endlessly complex, both are remarkably accessible to students, especially if introduced into a course which anticipates them by including great works which they in a sense recapitulate. In my experience, students find "The Second Coming" mysteriously powerful, even before they have any idea of what it means. And today's students, brought up on rock music rather than on books, are in one way more prepared than their more literary elders to read *The Waste Land*. Unhampered by expectations of narrative form, they

bring an immediate appreciation of discontinuous form. In fact, to the astonishment of teachers, students often take to *The Waste Land* far more naturally than to the "easier" poems of, say, Wordsworth or Frost.

In the conviction that the poems by Yeats and Eliot are both invaluable and accessible, I have written the following guide for students (and faculty), especially for those in general humanities courses of the kind so often taught in American colleges. The first part of my essay provides the context for these poems and offers a reading of "The Second Coming"; the second part focuses on *The Waste Land*. Both parts assume that students bring to the twentieth-century materials some experience with central texts of Western Civilization, specifically including Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex*, St. Matthew's gospel, St. Augustine's *Confessions*, Dante's *Purgatorio*, Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Darwin's *Origin of Species* (selections), Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy*, Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams*, and Frazer's *Golden Bough* (selections).

I THE AGE OF ANXIETY

The importance of such poems as *The Waste Land* and "The Second Coming" is inseparable from their value as pictures of modern man and modern civilization; and they should be considered, first of all, in the context of the civilization and the crisis which they document. At the core of this crisis is a fear that Western Civilization is on the edge of disaster and, in fact, may be wiped out entirely. One reason that these poems continue to speak to us so powerfully is that we are still in this crisis. There is a real danger that contemporary man will destroy his universe and everything in it, that he will literally annihilate himself and his civilization. Our anxiety is an extension of Eliot's and of Yeats', for both have the same roots. Around 1920, when these works were written, and in 1986, the danger is related to incredible advances in knowledge and at the same time a loss of cultural memory, a collective forgetfulness about basic spiritual and humanistic resources and values.

The massive collapse of traditional values and the lamentable failures in brotherhood characteristic of our century have resulted in a pervasive cultural uneasiness. W. H. Auden calls the modern crisis a breakdown of liberal humanism, by which he means a breakdown of faith in the existence of God, in the goodness of man, and in the possibility of progress. This breakdown produced what Auden in a fine poem calls "The Age of Anxiety." In that "anxiety" is distress or uneasiness caused by the apprehension of some certain but vague disaster, Auden's term seems appropriate. The Age of Anxiety is often said to have begun in August, 1914; and it is true that the

First World War had an incalculable effect on the modern mind. In that war, Western Civilization began literally tearing itself to pieces on the battlefields of Europe. The war, however, was not primarily a beginning; it was, rather, a culmination, not a cause of the modern spiritual crisis, but a result of it.

The pervasive disillusionment characteristic of the Age of Anxiety should be associated with a radical revision, during the second half of the nineteenth century, of ideas and principles which had long served as the foundation of Western Civilization. Among those most responsible for the revision are Charles Darwin, Friedrich Nietzsche, Sigmund Freud, and Sir James G. Frazer. In *Origin of Species* (1859) and *The Descent of Man* (1871), Darwin removed mind (human or divine) from the origin and development of life. He maintained that God, if he existed, had been absent in history; and implied that man, merely a creature among creatures, is not justified in considering himself endowed with inalienable "human" rights. Like all other organisms, he is a creature of environment and chance. In *Birth of Tragedy* (1872), Nietzsche argued that Dionysus, the dark god of wine and irrationality, is more basic to art and to life than either Socrates or Apollo, symbols of reason and light. And in a famous boast, Nietzsche proclaimed that "God is dead." Sigmund Freud, in *Interpretation of Dreams* (1899), suggested a model of human nature in which the irrational and the unconscious and the violent are foundational. In *Civilization and its Discontents* (1930), he summed up his findings that man is not a gentle loving creature who simply defends himself when attacked but an innately aggressive one opposed to culture. The anthropologist Sir James Frazer also contributed much to the shape of the Age of Anxiety. In *The Golden Bough* (1890), a great encyclopedia of primitive religion, he argued that religion evolved from magic and is in turn being replaced by science. He meant to recover respectability for Christianity by bringing it into line with Darwinian evolution, but ended by suggesting that all religions are the same religion, all heroes (Christ and Dionysus) the same hero. The disquiet produced by these thinkers was compounded around the turn of the century by physicists who called into question or denied notions of reality which had supported the Western mind for millenia. In the place of an ordered universe, scientists such as Max Planck and Niels Bohr postulated one ruled by chance, a universe consisting of tiny and unpredictable bits of energy. All of this is part of the intellectual background leading to the Age of Anxiety, to the disease associated with the fear that Western Civilization was falling apart.

The conviction that a major dispensation in history was quickly drawing to a close was not limited to artists. German historian Oswald Spengler ar-

gued in *The Decline of the West*, published in German in 1918 and in English a few years later, that civilizations are organisms which go through stages of youth, maturity, decay, and that then, like all organisms, they die. As Greece and Rome flourished and disappeared, so shall we. Western Civilization, in his diagnosis, is in a very late stage of decay, and death is being hastened by neglect of the spiritual (philosophy, religion, art) and cultivation of the merely material. In the 1930s and 40s, the famous British historian Arnold Toynbee, in *A Study of History*, also argued that Western Civilization is breaking down. He did not believe that civilizations automatically move through stages of growth and decay, but that civilizations stand or fall insofar as they meet or fail to meet environmental and moral challenges. Toynbee argued that Western Civilization is breaking down because we resort to violence and war to solve our problems. He was part of a chorus of intellectuals who claimed that in abandoning our spiritual and humanistic values, we have lapsed into barbarism.

Yeats and Eliot were not alone, then, in their feeling that a major era in civilization was coming to an end. Eliot is often described as having expressed in *The Waste Land* the disillusionment of his age. He himself hated this sort of talk, and once quipped that maybe he expressed his readers' illusion of being disillusioned, but never meant to do so. He was, he claimed, expressing his own disillusion; he was just "grumbling." But whether he meant to or not, he transformed his personal grumbling into art, expressing in a new form what many of the most intelligent and sensitive people of this century have felt. In *Ulysses* (1922), published the same year as *The Waste Land*, James Joyce put it this way, "History is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake."

II THE SECOND COMING

The conviction that Western Civilization is falling apart, important in most twentieth-century art, is perhaps most memorably expressed in Yeats' "The Second Coming," written in 1919 and published in 1920.²

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
 The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
 Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
 Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
 The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
 The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
 The best lack all conviction, while the worst
 Are full of passionate intensity.

Surely some revelation is at hand;
 Surely the Second Coming is at hand.

The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out
When a vast image out of *Spiritus Mundi*
Troubles my sight: somewhere in sands of the desert
A shape with lion body and the head of a man,
A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,
Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it
Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.
The darkness drops again; but now I know
That twenty centuries of stony sleep
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?

The title of this poem is taken from the Christian religion. The first coming was the birth of Christ, the Incarnation; it marked the end of one major historical dispensation and the beginning of another. According to the New Testament, Christ's second coming, to be preceded by a time of troubles and sorrow, will mark the end of this present age. In many interpretations, the second coming is also to usher in a new age, a millenium in which Christ will reign on earth and in which there will be peace. This doctrine of the second coming as a turning point in history can be found in Matthew 24 and other parts of the Bible.

Yeats strongly believed that civilization as we know it is coming to an end. He had a theory of history similar in some respects to that of Spengler. Like Spengler, he believed that history moves in large cycles of growth and decay. Yeats believed that these cycles last about two thousand years and that the present cycle, which began with the birth of Christ, is about to end. The second coming of Christ, traditionally considered as a major historical intersection, as the end of this age and the beginning of the next, is thus a useful image for him.

The first stanza begins with an image of a falconer who has lost control of his hawk. Communication and control are lost, and things fall apart. This image is followed by a description of the historical situation when Yeats was writing this poem, a time of unprecedented violence and barbarism. These were the days of the First World War, the Russian Revolution, and civil war in Yeats' own country of Ireland.

St. Matthew's gospel describes the days just before the second coming in the following terms: "For then shall be great tribulation, such as was not since the beginning of the world to this time, no, nor ever shall be. And except those days be shortened, there should no flesh be saved." Surely, the poet cries, this anarchy and violence and moral collapse in history must be

the sign that the second coming is at hand. The mention of the second coming triggers a vision. It arises from the *Spiritus Mundi*, that is, from the "Spirit of the World." (For Yeats, the *Spiritus Mundi* is the storehouse of primitive and archetypal images, images like that of the Sphinx.) One would expect that the vision triggered by the phrase "the second coming" would be the same as that described by Matthew: "And they shall see the Son of man coming in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory." And one would expect that the vision of the new age would be an image of the Biblical kingdom of God, where swords (implements of war) have been recycled as plows (implements of agriculture), where love and pity have banished hate. But Yeats' vision is not the Christian vision. This turning point in history will not be the second coming of Christ the Prince of Peace, but the appearance of another god, a successor to Christ. Like Christ, this god will come from the Mediterranean world. But whereas Christ was a combination of the divine and the human, a perfect man, his successor in Yeats' vision is a combination of the bestial and the human, a monster with the head (intelligence) of a man and the body (passions, instincts) of a lion. In this ultimate nightmare, Yeats sees a god with a blank gaze and slowly moving thighs, a god who is the antithesis of love. This new master will be "pitiless as the sun"; that is, he will be morally neutral and radically democratic. The sun, as the Bible says, shines alike on the just and the unjust. This blind god sheds his beams equally on murderer and victim; he smiles at the same time on the gluttony of despots and the starvation of children.

Yeats interprets his vision by saying that the Greek world was vexed to nightmare by the birth of Christ in Bethlehem. And now, interpreting contemporary history, he sees the Christian era in its own nightmare. In the famous closing image, he wonders about Christ's successor, the rough beast now slouching towards Bethlehem to inaugurate the next era of human history.

III THE WASTE LAND

T. S. Eliot is of towering significance in the aesthetic and moral life of this century. The first half of the century, in fact, is often referred to as the "Age of Eliot," and the publication in 1922 of *The Waste Land* is the most important event in twentieth-century poetry.³ As the distinguished critic Richard Ellmann has said, *The Waste Land* became so famous that for much of this century, the latest poetry in Arabic, Swahili, or Japanese was far more likely to have been influenced by Eliot than by earlier poets in those languages or by any other poet in English. After *The Waste Land*,

Eliot turned to a different kind of poetry, of which the masterpiece is *Four Quartets*, published during the Second World War.

A waste land, of course, is a desert or any place inhospitable to life and health. Some waste lands, such as deserts or icebergs or rocky mountains, are natural; but others, such as the used part of a coal mine, a trash dump, a city slum, or a bombed countryside, are man-made. And of course some waste lands are symbolic, that is, they are not "lands," but states of being. For example, a college or a marriage may be a waste land. Eliot's poem includes references to all of these waste lands. The literal desert may be seen in such lines as "What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow/ Out of this stony rubbish?" The man-made waste lands may be seen in such lines as those describing the polluted river banks where the "flowers" of summer consist of "empty bottles, sandwich papers, / Silk handkerchiefs, cardboard boxes, cigarette ends." The symbolic lands can be seen in the two families of part II—the miserable and fruitless couple from the upper classes, and the literally fruitful but loveless Lil and Albert, whose children are the expensive and unwanted by-product of Albert's lust.

The most important waste land in Eliot's poem, however, is the comprehensive one that includes all of the others—Western Civilization in the twentieth century, a place which is sterile and hostile to health and flourishing. Eliot's poem is his metaphor for the state of man and culture in the twentieth century. Like Yeats and many others of his generation, he interpreted the contemporary situation in Europe and the United States as one of moral and cultural decay. He felt that the basis of cultural unity had disappeared, that the glue which had held Western Civilization together had dissolved. As Yeats describes this crisis in "The Second Coming," "Things fall apart, the centre cannot hold." The center of which Yeats writes is Christianity, which for two thousand years had held things together. But in the late nineteenth century, Christianity lost its power to unify culture, and for the first time in two thousand years, the non-existence or irrelevance of God was consciously taken as a cultural assumption. *The Waste Land* is a picture of what remains when the center is removed; it is a picture of civilization with no moral or cultural or religious center, no god-concept, no glue. It consists quite literally of hundreds of fragments of the western present and of the western past insofar as it had survived into the twentieth century. The text of the poem is in some ways comparable to what Bloomsbury would look like if a bomb should drop on the British Museum.

Some of the fragments in *The Waste Land* are preserved exactly. For example, "Those are pearls that were his eyes" is a line from Ariel's song in

Shakespeare's *The Tempest*; and "Poi s'ascose nel foco che gli affina" a line from Dante's *Purgatorio*. Other fragments in the poem have been changed by evolution through time, but are still recognizable. The pathetic song of Ophelia in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, for example, has evolved into the popular song "Good night, ladies, we're going to leave you now" and also into the final words which contemporary people say as they're leaving the pub after an evening of drinking together, "Goonight Lou. Goonight May. Goonight."

Eliot's fragments may appear at first to be more or less independent, related only by the fact that all can be connected on some level to a waste land. But in fact, the fragments fall naturally into groups, with a number of fragments falling into several groups at once. These fragment clusters, then, are not mutually exclusive and do not have firm boundaries. Part of the poem's meaning derives from the juxtaposition of these clusters. For example, there are many fragments dealing with wasted landscapes, and also many dealing with city scenes. By simply placing these fragments side by side without comment, Eliot suggests that the modern city is a waste land. This idea is reinforced by portraying the city dwellers as sterile, loveless, and isolated. He does not actually state: "London (or Paris or New York) is a waste land," but he clearly suggests that these cities are places where life does not flourish. The accuracy of Eliot's depiction of modern urban existence may account in some part for the power of his poem.

The single most important group of fragments in Eliot's poem are those having to do with literal waste lands, for these references refer to an ancient myth, and it is this myth which provides Eliot with his title and his major symbol. The myth describes a land cursed with sterility, a land in which crops will not grow, women cannot bear children, cattle cannot reproduce, etc. The sterility in the land and its occupants is connected in some mysterious way to impotence in the ruler of the land. The ruler, who is both a god and a king, has been wounded in his genitals (as a result of war, sickness, old age, or whatever), and this sexual incapacity affects his entire kingdom, depriving it of regenerative power. Just as the curse on the divine ruler has blighted his people and land, so would his healing lead to their health. The curse can be lifted if (1) a hero will come and undergo certain trials in order to find the wounded ruler and ask him certain ritualistic questions, and if (2) the healed ruler is allowed to die, a circumstance which would permit his resurrection or revitalization.

The waste land myth is part of the background of the Greek tragedy *Oedipus Rex*. The following description of the city of Thebes, from the

translation by Dudley Fitts and Robert Fitzgerald, is one of many ancient versions of the myth of the cursed land and its suffering inhabitants.

Thebes is tossed on a murdering sea
 And cannot lift her head from the death surge.
 A rust consumes the buds and fruits of the earth;
 The herds are sick; children die unborn,
 And labor is vain. . . . Death alone
 Battens upon the misery of Thebes.
 . . . The noble plowland bears no grain
 And groaning mothers cannot bear—

The curse on the land and its inhabitants is directly related to the king's sexual health. Oedipus is guilty of the great sexual taboo of incest (as well as the sin of patricide), and this situation reacts on his land. For healing to occur, certain questions have to be asked and answered. The horrible irony of this version of the waste land myth is that Oedipus is at once the sexually unclean king and the questor who must ask the questions and purge the land.

Eliot was particularly well-educated in philosophy, literature, and religion, and he must have encountered this myth in innumerable versions. In a note to *The Waste Land*, he reveals two special sources of his understanding of the myth.

Not only the title, but the plan and a good deal of the incidental symbolism of the poem were suggested by Miss Jessie L. Weston's book on the Grail legend: *From Ritual to Romance*. . . . To another work of anthropology I am indebted in general, one which has influenced our generation profoundly: I mean *The Golden Bough*; I have especially used . . . *Adonis, Attis, Osiris*.

The Golden Bough by Sir James Frazer is a twelve-volume collection of thousands of myths from all times and all places. Frazer began his work in the generation after Darwin, and as Darwin had attempted to discover the origin of the species and chart the descent of man, so Frazer tried to discover the origin of religion and chart the descent of the gods. He discovered that most myths have certain features in common, and as Darwin had postulated a common ancestor for man, so Frazer postulated a single ancestor for all religions. By putting together the common features of many myths, he was able to construct what he considered to be the parent myth. This myth had broken up over time, but its fragments persist in the myths and religions that we know from history and in the present world. According to Frazer, all religions, including Christianity, are fragments of this one great myth. The myth which Frazer constructed out of all his fragments is the

myth of the waste land, outlined above and taken by Eliot for the main symbol of his poem.

Jessie Weston was a student of the legends having to do with the Holy Grail, the cup Christ is said to have used at the last supper. In studying these legends and fragments of legends, most of which date from the early middle ages, she came to the conclusion that the legends of the Holy Grail had also descended from a single parent. Like Darwin and like Frazer, she used the fragments she had to construct what she thought to be the parent legend. She argued that the legends of the Holy Grail are, in fact, fragments of the pre-Christian waste land myth.

Eliot's interest in the waste land myth, unlike that of Frazer and Weston, is not in the myth itself, but in its power to suggest truths about contemporary life, and also in its claim to support an underlying unity for modern society. Post World I London, in which Eliot was living at the time he wrote the poem, contained all sorts of people, all sorts of beliefs. They seemed to have nothing in common with each other or with the poet; and although crowded together in a modern city in which they literally touched and smelled each other daily, they all seemed alone, isolated. But in terms of Frazer's thesis, all people, regardless of how separate they seem to be, are brothers; all beliefs, no matter how bizarre, are one belief. *The Waste Land* is a collection of human voices and mythic fragments such as is found in any modern metropolis. The human and mythic odds and ends of a modern city seem unconnected, but they are all related because of the myth of the waste land.

Eliot works mainly by suggestion, and so he does not say precisely what causes a flourishing place to become a waste land. By using the myth, he suggests that there is a mysterious but certain relationship between the wounding of God and the existence of a waste land. In wounding or sterilizing our God, we have wounded ourselves. His decay and ours are intertwined. Fruitfulness in a family or a city or a civilization is dependent on connections between people who know and love each other, who share traditions and beliefs. The physical or sexual connection by itself, however, without the traditions and beliefs and the love, generates not a garden, but a different type of waste land. By using the myth, Eliot also suggests a connection between human love (*caritas*) and divine love (*agape*). The Bible makes the same connection by stating that a man who cannot love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot truly love God, whom he has not seen.

The background myth, then, suggests that the cause of the waste land is a failure to connect, a lack of love. The myth also suggests that it is possible

to get rid of the curse. In the myth, the healing of the land is tied to the healing of the king. His healing, death, and revitalization would lead to ours. This healing could be accomplished by undergoing certain trials and by asking certain questions about the meaning of life. The healing, interestingly, happens because the questor asks the right questions rather than because he receives the right answers. God cannot heal himself; he is dependent on a person who will conceive of and ask certain questions.

Whether *The Waste Land* is experienced as difficult or easy depends to a great extent on the expectations brought by the reader. If the reader demands a story or plot, a hero or main character or main speaker, an argument or lesson; if the reader demands an understanding of every line; if he demands any or all of these things, he will have a difficult time indeed. But if (as Eliot expects) the reader suspends these demands and accepts the poem as an arrangement of fragments of western culture, he will have an easy time. To return to my example of Bloomsbury after a bomb has fallen on the British Museum: if one came upon such a scene, he would be able to make sense out of it without understanding every fragment. In fact, he could get the basic idea just by experiencing the scene, even if he did not at first recognize any specific fragment. And then he could start reconstructing by identifying a few fragments and finding complementary fragments and so forth. And he would find meaning, not just in the reconstructed fragments, but more important, in the act of reconstructing them.

Eliot's poem has suffered from the work of teachers who try to explain it line by line, layer by layer. It is often introduced by presenting the reader with a list of fragments with tags showing where Eliot got them. Such a list overwhelms most readers and constitutes a barrier to understanding the poem. A better approach is a simple reading, noticing the fact that the poem is made up of fragments of Eliot's own verse and fragments of Western Civilization, knowing that these fragments (according to Frazer and Weston) were once part of one myth, trying to understand what has happened and why. Simply knowing the myth and experiencing the bits and pieces of meaning in the poem is to most readers at once illuminating and unforgettable.

A second stage in reading this poem has to do with the recognition of specific fragments. Many of the fragments are pictures and sounds of contemporary life, familiar because we see and hear them every day. Others are from other times and places; some, we instantly notice, are in foreign languages. These fragments of contemporary and historical life have been carefully selected and arranged by the poet so that the more one knows, the

richer the poem becomes. Most people will recognize some of the fragments of myth and religion and history and literature, even on a first reading. But since getting the main point of the poem does not require understanding all of the fragments and does not require immediate understanding of any specific fragment, the best procedure is to focus on the familiar ones and, for the time being, forget about the others.

The richness which comes from retrieving fragments (and the works from which they came) can be suggested by considering the lines "To Carthage then I came/ Burning burning burning burning," lines which can be understood simply as part of a scene of contemporary life. The first part of this passage from *The Waste Land*, however, is a translation of the opening phrase of chapter 3 of St. Augustine's *Confessions*, which reads (in Edward Pusey's translation):

To Carthage I came, where there sang all around me in my ears a cauldron of unholy loves. I loved not yet, yet I loved to love . . . I sought what I might love, in love with loving . . . For within me was a famine of that inward food, Thyself, my God, yet, through that famine I was not hungered . . . my soul was sickly and full of sores, it miserably cast itself forth, desiring to be scraped by the touch of objects of sense. . . .⁴

If recognized as part of Augustine's autobiography, if recovered as part of his quest for love and knowledge and truth, if understood as part of his attempt to put his loves in order, if then returned to the context of the modern city, the fragment in Eliot's montage takes on profound suggestiveness. This process of recognizing and recovering fragments and bringing them to bear on Eliot's poem will be rewarding in itself and will lead to the heart of his deeply moral vision of Western culture. In asking such questions as why the line from Augustine exists only as a fragment, why Eliot thought it and the tradition of which it is a part were worth recovering, and why he put it at the end of a contemporary scene of sterile lust, a reader will have begun the work of reconstruction that might lead civilization beyond the waste land.

Some readers are disquieted by the foreign phrases scattered throughout *The Waste Land*. The fact that they are jibberish to most of us and to most of the modern characters in the poem is more important than any meaning they have in themselves. A main point in the poem is that we are so split up by nationalism and other "isms" that we do not understand each other's languages, much less each other's masterpieces. Most of us would not recognize lines in English from Tennyson, much less lines in Italian from the *Inferno* or in German from *Tristan und Isolde*; and Eliot claims that this inability to connect to our past and to each other is the main cause of the

waste land. A mere translation of foreign phrases, such as appears in the footnotes of many teaching editions of the poem, does not solve the problem, because simply knowing the translation of a line does not permit the reconnection which Eliot considered essential. In the final analysis, recovery of meaning and reconstruction of bridges will not be accomplished by editors, but by readers who take Eliot and his landmark poem seriously.

As parts of classic works available in ordinary libraries, most of the waste land fragments are in a literal sense not really fragments. But Eliot is not concerned with what exists in libraries, but with what exists in the heads and hearts of modern man. And to most modern people, Plato, the Bible, Augustine, Dante, Shakespeare, and most of our noblest ancestors exist only as a name or as a part of a line heard in an advertising jingle or as part of a popular song (“O O O O that Shakespeherian Rag—”). Fragments in themselves have no power to unify and revivify culture, but as part of the great traditions of our common history, they have the power to help us turn our waste land into a garden.

NOTES

- 1 T. S. Eliot. “Tradition and the Individual Talent.” *Selected Essays*. 2nd ed. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1950.
- 2 W. B. Yeats. “The Second Coming.” *The Poems of W. B. Yeats*. Ed. Richard J. Finneran. New York: Macmillan, 1983.
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