

Die Neue Nationalgalerie: T.S. Eliot's The Waste Land as a Literary Museum

At once both enigmatic and lucid, *The Waste Land* is one of T.S. Eliot's most anthologized poems. Conversely, it is also one of his most exhaustively criticized poems. A great deal of this scholarly criticism focuses on deciphering the allusions within its poetic lines in search of a higher allegorical meaning. Some examples of this include Cleanth Brook's "*The Waste Land: Critique of the Myth*," Northrop Frye's "Unreal City," Florence Jones' "T.S. Eliot Among the Prophets" and finally George Williamson's "The Structure of *The Waste Land*." All of these scholarly works trace an allusive strand throughout the poem to argue how, and in what way, the poem functions as an allegorical tale of the spiritual infertility of Western Civilization. My issue with these examinations is not with the meaning derived from the poem, but the lack of focus on how the structure of the poem endorses the production of such overarching allegories. I am concerned with the framework that serves as the means by which these critics draw their conclusions, not their end result. So, in the short time I have today, I wish to present a cursory analysis of T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* and propose that its form derives from the material arrangement of a museum since it provides the spectator a poetic space for the contemplation of pure spectacle. To that end, this paper will briefly demonstrate the influence of the British Museum on Eliot's poetics and explore the concept of the museum in order to provide a firm foundation on which to briefly dissect Part III of *The Waste Land* as a gallery exhibit.

To suggest that the textual stratification of *The Waste Land* mirrors the formal organization of a museum should not sound surprising. Museums are a major cultural influence in the cultural landscape of most modern, westernized cities. The British Museum, in particular, has been a mainstay of Bloomsbury since George II established it with Act of Parliament in 1753 ("General History"). The original collection, gifted by Sir Hans Sloane, underwent a series of rapid expansions at the dawn of the 20th Century due to the large influx of historical material

from the ever-increasing collection of territories administered by the Crown. To provide perspective for you, between 1850 and 1900 the size of The British Museum's collections grew tenfold due to several large acquisitions and bequeaths like Henry Christy's ten thousand item collection in 1892 ("History of the Collection"). It nearly goes without saying that the British Museum was one of the foremost centers of ethnographical, anthropological, and historical learning in England.

For this reason, the young T.S. Eliot spent the majority of his time between 1914 and 1921 in the Reading Room of the British Museum. As he recounts in a letter to Eleanor Hinkley, "I have been passing my days at the British Museum Library with occasional walks, and [it] agrees with me—better in fact than the seashore ever did" (*Letters* 85-6). Interestingly, T.S. Eliot actually had higher aspirations early in his residency in England. In a letter to his friend Conrad Aiken in 1914, Eliot laments, "if I could be allowed to stay in London and work at the Museum I should be content," and then appends a poem entitled "Afternoon" in which he directly treats the subject. Even after he found employment at Lloyd's Bank in 1917, Eliot continued to regularly visit the museum. In fact, his work at the bank most likely contributed to his public complaint to the editor of *The Athenaeum* in 1919 that the British Museum Library needed expanded hours since it was not accessible to "those who are regularly occupied elsewhere for even six hours of the day" (*Letters* 410).

Of course, when considering *The Waste Land* as a final product, we should not neglect its other contributor and *il miglior fabbro*, Ezra Pound. Originally, the poem was nearly twice as long and only after "three times through the sieve by Pound" did it take its present form (*Letters* 623). Ezra Pound was also a regular visitor of the British Museum and, in his "apologia to literary life in general," he actually declared to T.S. Eliot's father that "any philological job [...] must start [...] in the British Museum" (*Letters* 107). As Zhoming Qian explains "Pound's

notion of Chinese culture was awakened [...] in England in the years between 1909-1914” due to his friendship with Laurence Binyon, the Keeper of the British Museum’s Department of Oriental Prints and Drawings (6). After meeting “BinBin” in 1909, Pound regularly sat with him in the Vienna Café around the corner from the British Museum to discuss poetry and art (Qian 10). Through Binyon, Pound gained his first systematic understanding the Oriental aesthetic and also gained access to the Print Room to view the British Museum’s newly acquired collection of Chinese prints such as the *Admonitions of the Instructress to Court Ladies*—a collection only made possible by Britain’s imperialist machinations in Asia between 1900 and 1910 (Qian 11-12, 17).

While stating the importance of the British Museum to in the intellectual development of these two writers is one thing, to suggest that *The Wasteland* is a literary museum is quite another. So, I would like to take a moment to define the term “museum.” I use the definition provided by the Museums Association of England, since it includes the British Museum as a principle member, which states: “A Museum is an institution which collects, documents, preserves, exhibits and interprets material evidence and associated information for the public benefit” (Museum Association). This succinct definition defines the museum as an active and process-driven designator of historical interpretation in the community. You can see this in many ways, but considering time constraints, the easiest is to list a few titles of prior exhibitions at the British Museum: “Treasures of the Saints: Devotion in Medieval Europe,” “Sex and Pleasure in Japanese Art,” and “Defining Beauty: The Body in Ancient Greek Art.” Since the focus is on concretely defining “devotion,” “pleasure,” and “beauty” socio-historically, the purpose of the museum is to represent a seamless cultural totality to the audience. By lending coherence to historically distinct and culturally divergent productions, museums give us an “eternal” image of the past ultimately for the purpose of legitimizing the current hegemony.

For this reason, museum collections have acquired a structure similar to a *mise en abyme*. As Susan Pearce explains in *Museums, Objections, and Collections*, the museum does not contain any one collection, but rather contains a multitude of collections each with a unique “group identity and personal association [...] deeply embedded in the material itself” (36). While the separate collections demonstrate reflexivity in regards to the original gatherer(s), their display and acquisition within the larger monolithic collection is decided primarily on compatibility with the preexisting collection already curated in the public setting. Susan Pearce extends this idea further by asserting that collecting in society forms a “relationship between the subject, conceived as the individual human being, and the object, conceived as the whole world [...] which lies outside” (37). The collection then, and in turn the museum as a collection of collections, is a physical manifestation of this desire to construct the world in its totality and mediate the relationship between subjective and objective existence. The new collection then must resonate with the already gathered material otherwise it would undermine the socially sanctioned whole that the collection itself represents.

This description of a museum bears a striking resemblance to Eliot’s conception of the literary canon in “Tradition and Individual Talent.” In his oft-cited essay, Eliot’s describes the poet’s mind as “a receptacle for seizing and storing up numberless feelings, phrases, images, which remain there until [they] form a new compound” (*Selected Prose* 41). This new compound collection, unique to the author, will only have value if it can “conform” and “cohere” to the existing collection of previous texts, which already form “an ideal order among themselves” (*Selected Prose* 38). While Eliot explains how true novelty causes “the relations, proportions, values of each work of art toward the whole [to be] readjusted,” he clearly indicates that the homogeneity is necessary to maintain the collections’ “wholeness” (38). Now, Eliot wrote and published this essay in 1920 while working on *The Wasteland*, so it seems logical to assume

there is a correlation between the two works. More to the point, if Eliot defines the curation of the literary tradition and a museum collection similarly, then the poem should subsequently mirror a museum collection to a similar degree.

The preparation of *The Waste Land* for publication clearly reflects a collective process since Eliot gathered the poetic objects sporadically over several years between the poem's conception in 1919 and its publication in 1922. Several poetic fragments from much earlier find their place within the poem, including previously published works. To present a quick example, the three pieces that make up the majority of section five, "What the Thunder Said"—"After the turning of inspired days," "I am the resurrection and the life," and "so through the evening, through the violet air"—are from as early as 1914 (*WLD* 130). In addition to the collective process, constructing a cohesive identity and defining the subject's modern existence seem to be the principle concerns of the entire poem. The narrator's concluding admonishment that "These fragments I have shored up against my ruins" would seem to serve no purpose otherwise (*WL* 430). Cumean Sibyl's response in the preface, "ἀποθανεῖν θελω," is reiterated throughout the poem, such as in the hyacinth girl's declaration in Part I, "I was neither / Living nor dead," and suggests an overall supposition that modern existence is a state of living death and thus no life at all (39-40). Guy Debord expresses this result in *Society of the Spectacle* in a more theoretical way: "in societies where modern conditions of production prevail, all of life presents itself as an immense accumulation of *spectacles* [and] everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation" (1). The modern life is neither a lived life nor a life at all, but the simulated actuality of living – a *curriculum vitae*.

If we accept that Eliot realized the loss of reality to the spectacle of existence, then the poem must be an attempt to reclaim remnants of that reality before it is entirely subsumed within representation. The only way to do this in a spectacular society is to mediate an external concord

with the *perceived* existing sequence. To compose a contemporary collection for preservation Eliot needed to create consonance with society's already sanctioned whole and accepted collection of the perceived past—the literary tradition. What we have before us then in *The Waste Land* is a doubly fragmented collection of literary artifacts and broken images of modern reality. The intertextuality of the poem allows it to resonate with the already curated material of the tradition by producing a miniature and infinitely recursive reproduction of it. From Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannous* to Aldous Huxley's *Chrome Yellow*, Eliot provides a systematic collection of allusions to canonical works and writers—Ovid, Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Spencer to name a few. Through this method Eliot affords the poem its necessary coherence even though the fragmented narratives of modern reality are the essential display.

The sequencing of the poem into five distinct sections mediates exposure to these narratives over time and necessitates their examination in isolation as detached poetic units before the reader can analyze them as the embodiment of the poem's tone and theme. Each of the sections—"The Burial of the Dead," "A Game of Chess," "The Fire Sermon," "Death by Water," and "What the Thunder Said"—operate as separate exhibition galleries within the museal structure of the poem. Since galleries are spaces that display a myriad of related objects to accentuate the thematic topics and focus within the larger sectional gallery, each exhibition contains multiple narrative installations to peruse.

To demonstrate this structure let us conclude with a brief analysis of the third section of the poem, entitled "The Fire Sermon" after Gautama Buddha's like named homily. Eliot appropriates the theme of Buddha's sermon to provide an exposition on the spiritual sterility of modern sexual relationships (*WL* 308-10). This particular gallery displays four distinct installations. The first is "the river's tent is broken," which provides a description of the "Sweet Thames" after "the nymphs are departed" (173, 176, 175). Nothing remains in the dawning day

of the affairs and liaisons between the “nymphs” and “the loitering heirs of city directors” along its banks (178-80). The sexual sterility of suggested prostitution in this scene carries over into the second exhibit as the spectator moves from the banks of the Thames to the “Unreal City” of London” where “Mr. Eugenides, the Smyrna merchant” asks the unseen narrator “To Luncheon at the Cannon Street Hotel / Followed by a weekend at the Metropole” (212-213). Interestingly, it matters little whether the reader interprets the narrator as male or female, or whether the scene is Eliot’s indictment of homosexual relationships or an example of the continuous flow of prostitution to the city, even though the act of interpretation remains necessary to provide continuity with the gallery’s thematic focus on the sterility of modern relationships and its accusatory tone. While the design of the poem requires active participation by the passive viewer within the poetic space, all participation leads to the same general understanding due to the collection’s careful curation.

The third exhibit in the section moves from public spaces to a more intimate scene with “the typist home at teatime” setting up for a meal with “young man carbuncular” who “Endeavors to engage her in caresses / Which still are unreproved, if undesired” (*WL* 225-38). The explicit and detailed focus of this section still unmistakably connects with the theme of the gallery as a whole again, but the closed in privacy of this exhibit contrasts heavily with the fourth and final section, which circles back to the Thames to hear the pleasure sailing maidens on the river lament “Weialala leia / Wallala leialala” (266-7). Each of three ladies seems to tell a tale of sexual conquest or loss. The first relates, “By Richmond I raised my knees / Supine on the floor of a narrow canoe” (294-5). The second claims, “After the event / He wept. He promised a new start” (298-9). While the third recounts “On Margate Sands” she “can connect / Nothing with nothing” and can only painfully recall “the broken fingernails of dirty hands” (300-4). These three accounts by the maidens illustrate sexual relations that amount to nothing and produce

nothing except perhaps pain. They provide appropriate closure to the other exhibits in this particular gallery by highlighting the potential causes for the current situation: commercialization, economic inequality, and systematic oppression. As we have seen, each of the four installations present the spectator with a narrative that illustrates these overarching issues, but each exhibit is distinctly separate from all others in this gallery through clear locational and narrative shifts. However, every single one also illuminates the “Burning burning burning burning” that defaces all these modern sexual relationships and leaves only spiritual desolation illustrated within the gallery exhibition (308). So, as with any good gallery exhibition, the final installation provides a “take away” for the spectator—a succinct cultural summation and a seamless totality of meaning that unifies the disparate parts together.

The five gallery sections of *The Waste Land* each with their own unique theme wholly envelope the viewer’s focus within their individualized poetic space, isolating what sequentially came before, but also informing what must come next in the continuum. The design gestalt of conjoined galleries, each with individually unique installations that exhibit distinct literary artifacts, promotes the disassociated critical perspective necessary for museums to function by separating the audience from the poetic action while also indicating the continuance of that action beyond each isolated poetic space. Moreover, it enables the audience to transcend the material realities of the poem itself and revel purely in the visual experience excited in the poem—that is carnivalesque spectacle—and allows the poem to ultimately assume the role of a museum of literary material collectively safeguarded and interpretively exhibited in meta-narrative form by the curator poet, T.S. Eliot.

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