

The Blank Card: Meaning and Transcendence in T. S. Eliot's *The Wasteland*

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What is meaning and how do we find it? This question is a thematic thread that pervades the fragmentary lines of T. S. Eliot's *The Wasteland*, a diagnosis of humanity in our crumbling, modern civilization. The poem is disjunctive in many ways: it is written in five parts, all with diverse subjects; a multitude of voices confuses regular distinctions of character and perspective; the poem spans the entire range of poetic styles, from lyrical to narrative; and the variety within each of these elements appears so chaotic and inexplicable that we are left to assume a complete dearth of unified themes or meaning in the poem as a whole. Nevertheless, it is precisely through this apparent disjunction and disconnection that Eliot means to convey his ideas on humanity and modern civilization. Through various images and episodes, Eliot explores the different ways we seek meaning in the world, in our lives, and in others, and how these usual ways all ultimately fail: ironically, only through recognizing the limits on our ability to discover meaning do we find any at all.

Eliot begins the poem with our basic sensory faculties, mainly vision, and claims that, though we depend on them greatly, they cannot provide us with the full knowledge and meaning we desire, nor can we even depend on them to function properly at all times. From the sensory, he moves to the sensual: our yearning to find meaning and purpose in love of another, though noble in intention, fails us as we realize that each of us is as blind and inept as the other. Then we seek meaning in language and our desire to communicate, but this yearning too is unfulfilled, for words, like sense and love, also fail us. Finally, prophecy, as a representation of all forms of human interpretation, fails us, but only if we hold it to a standard

of truth beyond what we ourselves can know—that is, something beyond this human realm, something divine or deterministic.¹ Thus, we conclude that we may find meaning in interpretation, as long as we recognize its limits, a solution personified in the character of Tiresias, the blind prophet. Eliot is suggesting that ultimately, whether we seek meaning in vision, love, language, or any other pursuit of knowledge, we will find it only if we do not seek to attain it by transcending ourselves or this wasteland of a world.

The relationship between our different forms of vision is a thread that runs throughout *The Wasteland*. It forms the thematic connection between our sensory vision, our emotional and romantic receptivity, and our ability to find meaning through linguistic and prophetic interpretation. One of the first episodes that ties together these otherwise disparate strands is the memory of an interaction of one of the speakers with “the hyacinth girl” (36). The speaker remembers this girl saying to him ““You gave me Hyacinths first a year ago; / They called me the hyacinth girl”” (35-36). These lines suggest the promise of love—the hyacinths are a symbol of resurrection, a possible rebirth of the speaker through love. However, the rest of the speaker’s memory of desire warps and destroys any chance for love with the hyacinth girl:

—Yet when we came back, late, from the hyacinth garden,
 Your arms full, and your hair wet, I could not
 Speak, and my eyes failed, I was neither
 Living nor dead, and I knew nothing,
 Looking into the heart of light, the silence. (37-41)

¹ It is important to note that Eliot converted to Anglicanism later in his life, and his faith came to inform much of his subsequent work. *The Wasteland*, however, was written in 1922, before his conversion in 1927, and as a result, we see none of this religious influence in this work.

The speaker expresses his failure to apprehend the true meaning of his interaction with the hyacinth girl, through language, sight, or any other faculty of human knowledge: he cannot speak, his eyes fail him, and he knows nothing—just as Dante is struck dumb when he finally glimpses Beatrice, and then God, in heaven. Dante’s vision is revelatory: as he looks into the “Highest Light” of God in heaven, he comes to know all and is unable to fully express it in words (*Paradiso* XXXIII, 67). For the speaker in *The Wasteland*, however, “looking into the heart of light, the silence” (41) is a confounding and reductive experience, whereby he knows nothing and is not even able to express his lack of vision or knowledge in language until after the fact, and even then only indirectly, through Eliot’s poetry. Here, the pursuit of meaning—in love, language, and vision—fails precisely because one lover expects love to elevate them both above this world, while the other recognizes that such transcendence is not only impossible, but undesirable, for it spells the categorical failure of any pursuit of meaning in this world.

In Part II, “A Game of Chess,” Eliot provides another episode suggestive of confused lovers engaged in a disjunctive search for meaning that ultimately fails:

“My nerves are bad to-night. Yes, bad. Stay with

me.

Speak to me. Why do you never speak? Speak.

What are you thinking of? What thinking?

What?

I never know what you are thinking. Think.” (111-114)

The single voice suggests that one lover is urgently trying to find personal meaning and affirmation in her beloved. She seeks to affirm her own feelings and thoughts by finding them

in him. He, however, is silent, and does not speak or think. Though the speaker tries to elicit some sort of response by progressively simplifying the language, reducing it to the monosyllabic imperatives “speak” and “think,” her beloved has nothing to say. What begins as an open invitation to communicate soon degenerates into a breakdown of all possible communication. The desire to be completely open, to understand, and to be fully understood, leads to the demise of any faculty of communication or knowledge—be it love, language, memory, or sight-- when such understanding seeks to transcend the limits of human interaction. The one lover, when she realizes this failure, implores her beloved:

“Do

You know nothing? Do you see nothing? Do you

remember

Nothing?” (121-123)

The great irony of her insistent questions is that she will never know the answer; the only knowledge we can have of others in the wasteland is indirectly through what they tell us; however, language has already been proven to fail when used so earnestly. In asking her lover if he knows, sees, and remembers “nothing,” she has already at some level conceded that she will never know whether he does or does not. Her desire to fully transcend the boundaries between individual people inherent in the privacy of thought and feeling spells the failure of the love in which she so frantically tries to find meaning. In this way, she ends up finding no meaning at all.

Eliot recognizes this irony: the more we try to find meaning, the less we are able to do so, and he reifies it in prophecy as a synecdoche for all modes of human interpretation. He

explores this theme through three characters: the Sibyl, Madame Sosostris, and Tiresias. Our first encounter with prophecy is in the very first part of the poem, the epigraph, where the Sibyl at Cumae, immortal but not in eternal youth, wishes most of all to die. Her only way to transcend her life in this world is to leave it forever. The meaning she finds in her prophecies ultimately does her no good. The Sibyl's extreme desire for transcendence through death is not the vision of the tempered search for meaning Eliot prefers.

Then, in Part I, "The Burial of The Dead," we are introduced to Madame Sosostris, the "famous clairvoyante, / ... known to be the wisest woman in Europe" (43-45). Here we have the other extreme of the prophetic search for meaning: with her "wicked pack of [tarot] cards" (46), Madame Sosostris reaches for knowledge beyond this world and beyond herself, seeking to map out patches of the grand plan of the universe, pulling such cosmic knowledge into immediate, quotidian human life. Nevertheless, Madame Sosostris is sick with "a bad cold" (44); her prophetic vision is hampered, figuratively through illness, precisely because she reaches beyond her station. The limits of her ability are represented in the one blank card "which [she is] forbidden to see" (54). This blank card is the central image that characterizes Eliot's ideas about our faculty of interpretation. The card inevitably comes up; we cannot help but recognize the necessary use of our interpretive faculty in interacting with the world. The card "is something [the one-eyed merchant] carries on his back" (53); it is a burden, functionally empty and therefore full of all possible meaning. However, the Madame's being "forbidden" to see it implies that it is not an understanding of the necessity of tempered interpretation that keeps her from trying to transcend this world, but rather some superior authority, a 'forbidder,' who prevents her from deriving the meaning she needs from it. Though Madame Sosostris

perhaps aims at a more practicable transcendence than the Sibyl, the fact that she attempts it at all is still disagreeable to Eliot, who searches for a prophet who is able to separate our need to interpret meaning from our desire to use it for transcendence.

Eliot finds this understanding in the character of the blind prophet Tiresias, in whom the otherwise disconnected voices of *The Wasteland* meet. "Throbbing between two lives" (218), he is a man turned into a woman and back again, to settle a dispute between Zeus and Hera over which sex has more pleasure during intercourse. Tiresias sides with Zeus, in favor of women, for which Hera punishes him with blindness, while Zeus consoles him for his loss of sight with the power of prophetic vision. Tiresias is the center to which all the degeneracy of the wasteland converges. He is the character who connects all the others: in him, the disconnected and estranged male and female lovers are united; in him, a lack of vision in one form is rectified in another; in him we may find not a solution to the wasteland, not an escape, but a consolation and an affirmation. Indeed, the very poem itself is an objection to our misguided hope for transcendence and reduces it to nothing more than feeble escapism that is doomed to fail.

Tiresias provides the alternative to this inevitable failure. Unlike the Sibyl, he does not fruitlessly yearn for death, though neither does he deny its approach. He knows he is "at the violet hour, when the eyes and back / Turn upward from the desk, when the human engine waits / Like a taxi throbbing waiting" (215-217). Eliot is referring to the point just before death, which for us non-prophetic beings could very well come at any time. We may look upward from our toil in this world, wondering and hoping for divine redemption and transcendence, yet it is not any other-worldly power, but our own "human engine" that keeps driving us forward.

Tiresias, “though blind... can see / [this] violet hour, the evening hour that strives / Homeward, and brings the sailor home from sea” (218-221). He is the true prophet of the poem, the one character that has the ability to see beyond the wasteland to the completion of his own life. He is the only one able to find meaning in life in the wasteland precisely because he alone does not seek to escape or transcend it. He “perceive[s] the scene, and fore[tells] the rest” (229) for he has “foresuffered all” (243). His acceptance of and commitment to life in the wasteland enable him to understand the full range of his experience, from which he is able to derive meaning that, though not a guarantee of its attainment, leads him at least to the possibility of “shantih” (433)—the peace which passes understanding—at the violet hour of his death.

Thus, Eliot frames Tiresias as the model for us to examine and emulate if we wish to seek any true meaning in this wasteland of modern civilization. Eliot is suggesting that we should not compromise any meaning we discover by hoping to escape or transcend this world we live in. Before we become able to take this “heap of broken images” (22) and these “withered stumps of time” (104) and derive any sense or meaning from them, we must first make our interpretation honest by examining why we seek meaning in the first place. We will fail to find meaning in our lives, in language, in love, and in any human endeavors if we seek to escape and transcend this world through it because to do so is to deny the source of any such meaning. We will find we “can connect / Nothing with nothing” (301-302), unless, like Tiresias, we seek to join together the disconnected parts of this wasteland in order to understand our lives here in this world, rather than seek to escape it, no matter how barren and degenerate it may appear to be. In “these fragments” bound in poetry that Eliot has “shored against [the]

ruins” of the wasteland, we are to find meaning; instead of trying to escape or transcend this world, we should try to understand and accept our place in it.

Works Cited

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