

A Reading of T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* from the Perspectives of Cubist Painting

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Abstract: This paper is a reading of T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, particularly its two sections, "The Burial of the Dead" and "A Game of Chess," from the perspectives of painting, in particular Cubist painting. Poetry and painting, make use of two different media, one the language, the other line and color, but the two media are dealt with on the basis of the same principles, and thus there are many things in common. Although *The Waste Land* belongs to the Modernist tradition, it is different from the Modernist poetry created by Cubist poets, such as Gertrude Stein and the poet Pablo Picasso, in that at first sight Eliot's still maintains its efforts to make sense of what the speaker in the poem says and thinks while the Cubist poetry looks far more radical than T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*. But the fact is that Eliot's is not as traditional as it looks while Stein's and Picasso's are more coherent and easier. This paper discusses why and how *The Waste Land* resembles some aspects of the Cubist practice in painting, in particular Picasso's painting, and claims that the poem is part of the Cubist movement in the 20th century.

Key words: T. S. Eliot; cubism; *The Waste Land*; painting; modernism

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标题: 艾略特的《荒原》: 立体主义绘画艺术视角的阅读

内容摘要: 本文试图从立体主义绘画视角阅读艾略特《荒原》中的“死者的葬礼”和“对弈”。诗与画各自以语言或线条色彩为媒介, 不过两种媒介也常常基于相同的原则, 因而这两种艺术存在诸多共性。通过考察, 本文认为艾略特的《荒原》是一首立体主义诗, 不过比格特鲁德·斯泰因和毕加索等立体主义诗人更复杂, 后者比艾略特的诗歌更连贯、更易读。本文探讨了《荒原》在某些方面与立体主义绘画艺术实践(特别是毕加索绘画艺术实践)相似的原因和表现, 认为该诗可以被视为 20 世纪立体主义运动的一部分。

关键词: 艾略特; 立体主义; 《荒原》; 绘画; 现代主义

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This paper is an attempt to read T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* from the perspective of painting, in particular Cubist painting. When you look at a Cubist work, for example, by Pablo Picasso, it

looks quite simple, though it is different from any painting in the past, before him. Likewise, when you read the poem, *The Waste Land*, by T. S. Eliot, it looks clear and coherent, not complex at all. But that is misleading for the reader. Try any section of the poem, out of the poem's five sections; in fact, not all the five sections have the same formal principle, all of them being different. But the major principle that underlies the overall structure of the whole poem is: multiplicity of the perspectives as well as multiplicity of form, as in Cubist painting. More often than not, one single sentence in the poem *The Waste Land* is beguiling enough for the reader, as there are so many perspectives and echoes of form that thread the very sentence. *The Waste Land*, as a single poem, at first sight, looks perfectly a Modern building that is new and polished. Let's look into the inside of the poem, to see if that is the case or not.

Poetic Form and Multiple Perspectives

The formal principle of the poem: multiple perspectives. Look at a Picasso painting, any of his Cubist paintings with a woman in an armchair. It is not necessary to heed one single painting, but maybe, Davis Tomlinson is right to pay attention to one of Picasso's. Tomlinson's conclusion of his essay "Eliot and the Cubists" seems to be probably the most comprehensive treatment of the background of the Cubists in relation to Eliot's presence in Europe in the early 1900's: Tomlinson singles out Picasso's *Femme assise dans un fauteuil* (1914) as possible influence on Eliot. Tomlinson uses most of his space — 15 pages out of 17 pages of his article — to prove that Eliot was under the influence of Picasso or Picasso painting by mentioning that Eliot must have seen Picasso's exhibition[s] or some of his paintings or must have read criticism by critics on the Cubist movement or Picasso, although Eliot hardly talked about Picasso in person. Toward the end of his essay, using the last two pages, Tomlinson is bold enough to link Eliot and Picasso by directly talking about their works.

Let's compare Tomlinson's conclusive remarks and the beginning of the second section "A Game of Chess" of Eliot's *The Waste Land*:

The Chair she sat in, like a burnished throne,
 Glowed on the marble, where the glass
 Held up by standards wrought with fruited vines
 From which a golden Cupidon peeped out
 (Another hid his eyes behind his wing)
 Doubled the flames of sevenbranched candelabra
 Reflecting light upon the table as
 The glitter of her jewels rose to meet it,
 From satin cases poured in rich profusion;
 In vials of ivory and coloured glass
 Unstoppered, lurked her strange synthetic perfumes,
 Unguent, powdered, or liquid — troubled, confused
 And drowned the sense in odours; stirred by the air

That freshened from the window, these ascended
 In fattening the prolonged candle-flames,
 Flung their smoke into the laquearis,
 Stirring the pattern on the coffered ceiling. (Eliot 137)

And Tomlinson's paraphrasing of the chair in relation to Picasso's *Femme assise dans un fauteuil* (1914):

... the second section of "The Waste Land" opens with an extended description of a woman sitting in a chair[.] Not only is the subject the same (and in the welter of commentary on this poem it has never been suggested how she comes to be there), but the method is similar. Picasso has built up a conceptual picture by assembling memories of the frame under the upholstery of the chair arm, of the underwear under the woman's dress, and of the navel and breasts beneath the underwear, and, wittily, the two picture-hanging pegs on the gallery wall under his representation of the woman's breasts; Eliot, with more rigorously philosophical intent, has built up his conceptual picture by combining fragmented memories of great seductions in literature: *Anthony and Cleopatra*, Dido at Carthage, Keats's *Lamia*, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, *The Duchess of Malfi*, *Paradise Lost* (Book IV), Middleton's *Women beware Women*, and possibly also the *Lestrygomians* episode, *Cymbeline*, and *Madame Bovary*. These are overlaid and intercut in precisely the same manner as in Picasso's picture, except that Eliot's combing memory is not that of a single human observer but of a whole cultural tradition. (79)

It is obvious that there is little resemblance between the poem and the paraphrase of Tomlinson's. The reason is that no two works in two different media could be the same, not to mention that Eliot and Picasso were working on two different works: Eliot on Modern civilization and Picasso on a particular woman, although they probably were working with similar principles.

Cubism and *The Waste Land*

With the differences considered between Picasso and Eliot, we need to set up the literary equivalents to the aesthetic principles of Cubist painting. For the purpose of comparison between the poem and the painting, I look for comparative means in poetry to those in painting. As I study the first two sections of the poem, I offer principles that are parallel in both media.

Let's begin with an equation: the multiple perspectives realized in the painting of, for example, Picasso can be compared with the multiple literary sources streamlined in a poetic sentence, stanza, or section. Eliot makes use of very many different sources skillfully and artistically, just as Picasso makes clever use of all the good qualities in his contemporaries as well as great masters of the past. An experienced gallery goer will find it not so difficult to find much resemblance between Picasso and his rival Matisse, who has gone to the other extreme of Modernist painting of the last century: Picasso never is afraid of taking anything that is good,

though *that* anything is not congenial to his painting. Picasso has a keen eye for good quality in other artists; he creates a totally new thing by taking the best in best artists. Eliot is an equal to Picasso in that probably he is the greatest poet in history who knows almost everything in English poetry [and to a lesser extent in French.] Therefore, *The Waste Land* became a complex poem, the newest, greatest poem of the 20th century. Paying attention to the multiplicity, or the multiple perspectives in Cubist painting, let's look at so many different sources of the poem. In his notes to the poem Eliot admits:

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* (Macmillan). Indeed, so deeply am I indebted, Miss Weston's book will elucidate the difficulties of the poem much better than my notes can do; and I recommend it (apart from the great interest of the book itself) to any who think such elucidation of the poem worth the trouble. To another work of anthropology I am indebted in general, one which has influenced our generation profoundly; I mean *The Golden Bough*; I have used especially the two volumes *Adonis*, *Attis*, *Osiris*. Anyone who is acquainted with these works will immediately recognize in the poem certain references to vegetation ceremonies. (147)

So the poem's whole structure depends on two books, *From Ritual to Romance* and *The Golden Bough*.

Let us go back to the beginning of the poem. In the first section of the poem, "The Burial of the Dead," there are 76 lines, with so many references: not only the referents but the echoes of the rich tradition of English poetry. The beginning is the beginning of Chaucer's except that it is a twist of Modernist bitterness in it.

In this section, there are quotes from the Bible, *Tristan and Isolde*, Webster, Dante, and Baudelaire. Eliot instinctively has chosen the best referents that fit in his section. The title sets the tone of the section, if not the theme of the section. The burial is not simply the burial of the dead; it's like the Christ rising out of his grave, just as the "Lilacs [stirring] out of the dead land." But the April is never warm; it is rather the Winter that is warm:

Winter kept us warm, covering
Earth in forgetful snow, feeding
A little life with dried tubers. (135)

So, that Eliot has quoted something from the Bible is most appropriate for a great poet with an eye keen and sharp as Picasso's. Baudelaire's poetry must be a new passion for the age, if not for Eliot, who would not have lost sight of Baudelaire's foresight: what is ugly is as good as what is beautiful in man.

In the two images of the two seasons, Spring and Winter, Eliot maximizes the potential of the oxymoron, like Picasso who makes the most of multiple images of a woman, with the face and the

back of a head of a woman shown simultaneously on same canvas:

April is the cruellest [coldest] month, ... / [yet it breeds] / Lilacs out of the dead land. /
[Meantime,] Winter kept us warm, covering / Earth in forgetful snow, feeding / A little life
with dried tubers.

That's to say, the cold of April feels colder than in Winter: this is the oxymoronic condition of the Waste Land represented by London.

After the introduction of the perennial Winter, the rest of the first section individualizes, particularly in the depictions of summer and winter in the later part of the stanza, the condition of the world, where the speaker is still asexual, the speaker I being *he* or *she* (or the speaker is a bisexual, as Tiresias, as in Section III). The two children represent memory of, for example, innocence, not yet mixing it with desire. They are asexual, Tiresias not in the bad sense, not yet a human downgraded by desire of body: children, not with desire, but only with innocence; "In the mountains, there you are free."

In this section there appear the German expressions: "Starnbergersee; Hofgarten; Bin gar keine Russin, stamm' aus Litauen, echt deutsch." They appear in Line 8, Line 10, and Line 12, and the 12th line — the line in German — breaks the part into the two seasons: summer and winter. Before this sentence is a depiction of summer, and after this is a depiction of winter. The last line of the stanza is both about summer and winter: "I read, much of the night [in summer], and go south in the winter." As shown above, although the first section looks at first sight very clean and highly polished, and capable of forming a coherent image, compared with the rest of the sections in the poem, it does not give a clear image. This is a depiction of "Unreal City," probably London, as it is with "London Bridge" (Stanza 4). It is a story of today's London, the section laden with so much imagery of the past, richly laden with so much literary, Biblical tradition: thus, a section with multiple perspectives.

Eliot does not provide any note prior to Line 20, which means that the beginning is as usual: Section I The Burial of the Dead, however, is with different perspectives of seasons — spring, winter, summer, winter — seasons perennial and personal. What could Picasso have done with the passage of time in a woman, from young to old, on the same canvas: he focuses on different aspects of a woman at one particular moment, not at the different points (past and present) of time.

Cubes and *The Waste Land*

In Stanza 2, the poem begins describing the world by asking: "What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow/ Out of this stony rubbish?" (135). The question implies that none can grow in this condition. The world is desolate, it is just "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. Only

There is shadow under this red rock,
(Come in under the shadow of this red rock),
And I will show you something different from either
Your shadow at morning striding behind you
Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you;
I will show you fear in a handful of dust. (135)

This is a scene that is opposite to the paradise Yeats describes in his “The Lake Isle of Innisfree”:

I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree,
And a small cabin build there, of clay and wattles made:
Nine bean-rows will I have there, a hive for the honey-bee,
And live alone in the bee-loud glade.

And I shall have some peace there, for peace comes dropping slow,
Dropping from the veils of the morning to where the cricket sings;
There midnight’s all a glimmer, and noon a purple glow,
And evening full of the linnet’s wings.

I will arise and go now, for always night and day
I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore;
While I stand on the roadway, or on the pavements grey;
I hear it in the deep heart’s core. (74)

In the poem, the whole imagery is progressive and logical, and is not broken into fragments as in what is quoted just before this poem. Meanwhile, in Eliot’s lines quoted above, there are several images found in Yeats’s poem, and the latter has some striking contrast with Eliot’s poem. Eliot’s echoes so many images in the poetry of other great poets. It is *papiers collés* in painting adapted in the Eliot poem, which is discussed below.

From the perspective of Cubist painting, it is a repainting of a fertile world, turning it into a desolate scene of “a heap of broken images; it is a world with nothing but the dead tree and the dry stone, in which the shadow of the red rock is cast. The speaker says: “I will show you fear in a handful of dust” (135). It is a painting of broken images, broken into geometric cubes.

The cubes in painting are not only for the purpose of depicting desolate scenes; it is a principle of painting Paul Cézanne happened to discover in the mountain in Provence — this is the origin of the Cubist painting, which has changed the history of arts: he spent his childhood spending much time in the mountains where the marbles in beautiful yellow and orange had been quarried; there are all over the mountain many huge, geometrically shaped rocks, part of them being quarried, forming beautiful “Cubist” paintings themselves. When he became a painter and came back to Provence, Cézanne painted them faithfully, and it helped him form a prototypical

style of Cubism. Daniel Albright in his “What Is Painting” discusses this principle:

Without perspective, a sphere is a circle and a cone is a triangle. There is nothing wrong with constructing a painting out of circles and triangles, but Cézanne had a special fascination with depth, as he often said; and for giving an impression of depth spheres and cones are more useful than their flat derivatives. In some of his paintings Cézanne looked not to the cylinder, the sphere, or the cones, but to the cube. In his *Mountains in Provence*, there is a continuum between the tilted cubes in the foreground and the tilted squares in the distance, ... Stein [the Cubist poetess] keeps stuttering on the words *would* and *shut* just as Picasso keeps obsessively piling up his cubes, neutral and trivial as individual elements, rhythmically tense in the aggregate (104-07)

Going back to the second stanza, which is a depiction of a bleak world, the stanza ends with a scent of something human, though it is “neither/ living nor dead”:

You gave me hyacinths first a year ago;
 “They called me 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. (135-36)

But the human condition here is as bad as the condition of the world that has been described above: he is neither living nor dead, knowing nothing, and incapable of speaking or seeing. Therefore, there will be, the speaker hopes, someone who could help him, as enumerated in a hurry in Stanza 3.

Papiers Collés

In order to accentuate in Stanza 2 the dire condition of humanity, the poet inserts in Line 31 a quotation from *Tristan und Isolde*, i, verses 5-8; in Line 42, *Tristan und Isolde*, iii, verse 24. The first quotation — “*Frisch weht der Wind / Der Heimat zu. / Mein Irish Kind, / Wo weilest du?*” (135) — breaks the second stanza into two parts, the first part of this stanza is a depiction of the world as barren as a desert, and the second, after the quotation, offers something human, but he/she is barely living. The second quotation plays the same role in breaking the scene and tone of the preceding stanza, and it is also a continuation of the desperate human desire to see ahead, with a warning: — “be so careful” (136). That is, while the second quotation — “*Od’ und leer das Meer*” (136) — links this stanza with the third stanza, the third stanza lists one after another who could tell of what lies ahead, but the stanza is finished with a warning: “One must be careful these days” (136). The third stanza offers the possibility of knowing the future of humanity, but we learn

that “Madame Sosostris, famous clairvoyante, / Had a bad cold...” (136), which means that she is not working for us now.

What Eliot does here in Stanzas 2 and 3 is what Cubist painters often do: *papiers collés*. The painter takes what is not related and applies it to what he is creating. We see a lot of art works made this way. The inserted quotations in the middle of Stanza two and at the end of Stanza two achieve the same intention in the poem.

Stanza 3 of the poem is a desolate London, with a crowd flowing over London Bridge like water flowing under London Bridge. The speaker stops a nonentity, calling him, who buried a corpse:

“Stetson!
 “You who were with me in the ships at Mylae!
 “That corpse you planted last year in your garden,
 “Has it begun to sprout? Will it bloom this year?
 “Or has the sudden frost disturbed its bed?
 “Oh keep the Dog far hence, that’s friend to men,
 “Or with his nails he’ll dig it up again!
 “You! hypocrite lecteur – mon semblable, - mon frère!” (136-37)

It is as in Hell, where there is so large a crowd that flows over London Bridge —

And each man fixed his eyes before his feet.
 Flowed up the hill and down King William Street,
 To where Saint Mary Woolnoth kept the hours
 With a dead sound on the final stroke of nine. (136)

It is in Hell or Purgatory, where a soul wanders and speaks amongst the crowd, that keeps flowing without responding. The speaker keeps questioning him, Stetson, who must be flowing with the crowd without responding or without looking up. It is a city of London:

Unreal City,
 Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,
 A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,
 I had not thought death had undone so many.
 Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled, (136)

This is what is described as London, the fittest place, in which a corpse could be planted and it will sprout in spring, like a plant.

In this last stanza Eliot uses the technique of *papiers collés*: he takes a Yeatsian line out of the context and creates a new context. Yeats says:

That civilisation may not sink,
 Its great battle lost,
 Quiet the dog, tether the pony
 To a distant post; (437)

Yeats's context is that a general, Caesar, is on the point of making a decision that will change the history of the world, with the dog quieted and the pony tethered away from him so he is not disturbed. It becomes a papier collé, transforming the grand context into an ordinary one: keep the dog far so he will not dig up the corpse. Eliot has changed the quote completely in the poem, trivializing and generalizing our passing concerns with the corpse: it is a perfectly worked out papier collé. Here's his masterful expression that fits in the poem perfectly:

"Or has the sudden frost disturbed its bed?
 "Oh keep the Dog far hence, that's friend to men,
 "Oh with his nails he'll dig it up again! (137)

In conclusion, Eliot's *The Waste Land* takes the formal principle of Cubist painting, which is multiple perspectives. The careful reader will find the same aspects in this poem, as one of the scholars, Tomlinson, has already paid full attention to one of Picasso's *Femme assise dans un fauteuil* (1914) as possible influence on Eliot. Although Eliot hardly talked about Picasso, he must have been under the influence of the great movement, Cubism, that was in fashion in Europe. This principle has parallels in this poem, in the poetic sentence, stanza, or section of this poem. Eliot makes skillful and artistic use of the principle of multiple perspectives. *The Waste Land* is, in a sense, a repainting of a fertile world, turning it into a desolate scene of a heap of broken images. This is a world with nothing but the dead tree and the dry stone. The poem is a painting of broken images, broken geometric cubes. Eliot also does what Cubist painters often do: papiers collés by taking what is not related and recreates broken images in his poem. Eliot's *The Waste Land* is a chief crystallization of this Cubist aesthetics, the main stream art movement of 20th century Europe.

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