A Sound-world for deranged times

T.S. ELIOT'S 433-line poem *The Waste Land*, regarded as one of the masterpieces of the literary movement called Modernism, was first published in the journal *The Criterion* in October 1922.
I have had two extraordinary experiences of hearing the poem in full. One was a Jeremy Irons reading on the radio. I was early for a hospital appointment that summer, and was listening to the poem in the car park, with the car windows open. I saw in the mirror that a woman had pulled her car up directly behind mine. After that extraordinary ending of the poem, "Shantih Shantih Shantih" (which Eliot's note describes as the equivalent of the peace that passeth understanding), the woman called out to me to ask what had been on the radio. "That was astonishing," she said. What was so striking to me was that, although she had no idea what she was listening to, it had made such a deep impression.

MY MOST recent hearing was at the T.S. Eliot Festival at Little Gidding this past July. Simon Callow was the reader. He "did the police in different voices" (Eliot's original title for the poem, *He Do the Police in Different Voices*, was a reference to a character in Dickens' *Our Mutual Friend*): Marie, Madame Sosostris,
Tiresias — each had their different accent and inflection, and the overall effect was stunning.
So that is my newest discovery about what is perhaps the most famous poem of the 20th Century — that it is, first and foremost, a sound-world. It is almost musical theatre; and that is a dimension of the work which it is hard to inhabit reading the poem on the page.
What I have also come to notice recently is how much end-rhyme Eliot uses, especially in the middle section of the poem, contributing to the sense of a web of narratives being recounted in a kind of song.

MY OTHER recent realisation, informed by re-reading *The Waste Land* during COVID, is that it must be seen as a pandemic poem. Eliot mentions Spanish flu only once during the main outbreak, in a letter to his mother on 7 July 1918, but the period of early gestation of this poem was marked by the flu pandemic spread across the world by returning troops. In all, 50,000,000 people died. Some who began to feel ill in the morning were dead by late afternoon. Unlike COVID, Spanish flu was at its most pathogenic in young adults. Eliot was thus in the high-risk group, and commuted daily into London through the summer of 1918.
COVID enabled us to feel with a new intensity the lines "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." The fourth line quotes Book III of the *Inferno* of Eliot's beloved Dante; London is now the lobby area of Hell itself.

FROM its very first line, "April is the cruellest month" — which evokes Tennyson's *In Memoriam — The Waste Land* is first and foremost a poem of loss. At this time which has included so much loss of security of various kinds, it is a profound experience to lose ourselves again in the kaleidoscope that is *The Waste Land*.
And strikingly, astonishingly, at the end of the last section, "What the Thunder Said", Eliot turns the kaleidoscope faster and faster through nursery rhyme, *Purgatorio*, poetry, drama, and Sanskrit scripture. Beyond what the thunder says can be discerned a peace that will never let us go.

Peace is not argued for, any more than joy is argued for in *The Rite of Spring*. It emerges out of concentration of effect, the auditory imagination honed to an extraordinary degree. The assumption-shattering character of an era of world war and pandemic is faced with utter honesty.
The writer Amitav Ghosh has described our predicament, facing climate change, as “the great derangement”, in which the complacency of bourgeois modernity is being swept away by reminders of how dangerous is the natural world. *The Waste Land* is also a poem from a time of great derangement. In its bewildering shifts of tone and allusion it is a kind of anti-chronicle of its time, connecting that time with great mythic and literary tropes of the past, but only ever in fragments.

IT MAY be argued that *The Waste Land* is by no means a Christian poem in the way that much of Eliot’s subsequent work so evidently is. Lyndall Gordon’s biographical criticism, published as *T.S. Eliot: An Imperfect Life*, has helped us to see just what a deep spiritual searcher the Eliot of this period was. Gordon also shows us how Ezra Pound’s editorial surgery, which contributed so much to the auditory power of the poem, diluted its religious qualities.
Significantly, Pound left the final section, “What the Thunder Said”, untouched. And behind its three “thunderous” Sanskrit exhortations, *datta, dayadvam, damyata*, lie spiritual imperatives with deep Christian associations: *datta* — give, or surrender the self, echoing that most profoundly Christic of movements, that of kenosis; *dayadvam*, which Gordon describes as “not so much human sympathy as a kind of receptivity to intimations and signs” — he who has eyes to see, let him see; *damyata* — control the self, the last of Paul’s list of the fruits of the Spirit in Galatians 5.
The Waste Land wins through to the promise of the peace that passes understanding, found not in retreat from the kaleidoscope of feelings and sensations but in its centre, which Eliot was later to glimpse as “the still point of the turning world”.

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A longer version of some of this argument can be found in the author’s article in *Theology in Scotland* 28.1 (2021): 37–47.