

## INTRODUCTION

### THE DESERT

The desert is ambiguous; is both bad and good. It is dry, lonely, dangerous, but for religious people it has always had a deep spiritual meaning. Eliot brings out this meaning in *Four Quartets*<sup>1</sup> but pointedly excludes it from *The Waste Land*. The waste land is just that: a lifeless wilderness.<sup>2</sup> It is what redemption is from.

The waste land is, more and more, our own civilization, and the reader should feel a part of the scenery. The poem has a “spectator”, Tiresias, and what Tiresias “sees” is us.<sup>3</sup> Eliot himself is a character in *The Waste Land*; he included autobiographical material in earlier drafts of the work: his falling in love and unhappy marriage, his revulsion for the financial “City”, his confession of personal flaws, his spiritual uncertainty and yearning for deliverance. Eliot speaks to us in the words of French poet Charles Baudelaire:

Reader, you hypocrite— my brother, like unto me”,<sup>4</sup>

for

We are the hollow men  
We are the stuffed men  
Leaning together  
Headpiece filled with straw.<sup>5</sup>

Moses, John the Baptist, and Jesus went into the wilderness. The early Christian “desert fathers” abandoned the city, which they thought to be decadent, to seek God by themselves in the wilderness. Eliot’s Puritan ancestors came to a “desert land” in America to enter God’s kingdom. This is the pattern: getting through the waste land in search of possible deliverance.<sup>6</sup>

## THE SIBYL

Eliot introduces *The Waste Land* with an epigraph, in Latin and Greek, from Gaius Petronius, a Roman “novelist” who in his *Satyricon* tells of a mysterious Greek prophetess, the Sibyl of Cumae. According to the Latin author Ovid, the Sibyl asked the god Apollo to give her, in exchange for her virginity, as many years of life as the grains of sand she held in her hand—but she forgot to ask him for eternal youth. Apollo, then rejected by her, granted her no more favors and allowed her to grow old. Now she is a wrinkled old woman, locked in a cage, wishing only to renounce her immortality.

With mine own eyes I saw the Sibyl hanging in a vessel,  
and when the boys asked her

Sibyl, what dost thou wish?

she replied

I wish to die.<sup>7</sup>

The Sibyl, a decaying prisoner of time hoping only for death, symbolizes the waste land: London between the World Wars, our modern age since the Renaissance, us.

The Sibyl was famous in Christendom because she was thought to have predicted the coming of Christ. The *Dies Irae*, the famous sequence of the mass of the dead, begins:

The day of wrath, that day,  
will dissolve the world into ash,  
as David witnesses with the Sibyl.<sup>8</sup>

*The Waste Land* begins as a funeral and ends in a doomsday apocalypse. The source of the prediction is the “Messianic Eclogue” the Roman poet Virgil, written about a half century before birth of Jesus.<sup>9</sup> According to the Greek poet Hesiod, the five ages of man have decreased in value: the first was of gold and the last of iron.<sup>10</sup> The waste land, like the Sibyl, will go on coming to an end.

In his notes on *The Waste Land*, Eliot explained how anthropological studies influenced his conception of the poem.<sup>11</sup> Ancient stories about a land wasted and later restored suggest that human beings know they need re-

demption and may expect to find it. In the legend of the holy Grail, redemption comes through a knight like Parsifal, who ventures into the desert in search of the cup that Jesus used at the Last Supper.

In the story of the Fisher King, redemption comes through a nature-god who rises again in the spring from the death of winter. Fishing will be a symbol of seeking the Divine in *The Waste Land*. Eliot was not thinking so much of sitting on a pier with a pole waiting for a bite, but venturing out into a dangerous sea like the brave fishermen Eliot admired as a boy in Gloucester, Massachusetts. Seeking God means going to sea— not once, but again and again.<sup>12</sup> The fish was also an early Christian symbol; the word in Greek ἰχθύς (ichthys) is an acronym of “Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior”.

Mythology suggests that it is natural to hope life will win out over death, but waste land dwellers do not know that the myths may, after all, be true.

#### DEDICATION TO POUND

The American poet Ezra Pound introduced Eliot to London literary circles and helped him revise *The Waste Land*. The Italian phrase (“the better craftsman”) was the tribute that Dante paid the Provençal troubadour Arnaut Daniel.<sup>13</sup> Eliot will mention him at the end of the poem.<sup>14</sup> Dante, who lived in Italy around 1300, was the author of the great medieval epic, *The Divine Comedy*, a “guided tour” of hell, purgatory, and heaven. Eliot will imitate his famous verse form, *terza rima* (interlocking tercets) in *Little Gidding*.