Melodies Unheard
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This occasion encourages me to begin with a quotation from William Empson’s commentary on some excised passages from The Waste Land:¹ “Half the time,” wrote William Empson in Using Biography (1984), “when the impressionable English were saying how wonderfully courageous and original he was to come out with some crashingly reactionary remark, he was just saying what any decent man would say back home in St. Louis” (196). Empson was trying to face, though not quite squarely, the bedeviling topic of Eliot’s anti-Semitism, which I must leave for another time. At this time I want to address only the first eighteen lines of the first section of The Waste Land, the opening of “The Burial of the Dead.”

April is the cruellest month, breeding
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
Memory and desire, stirring
Dull roots with spring rain.
Winter kept us warm, covering
Earth in forgetful snow, feeding
A little life with dried tubers.
Summer surprised us, coming over the Starnbergersee
With a shower of rain; we stopped in the colonnade,
And went on in sunlight, into the Hofgarten,
And drank coffee, and talked for an hour.
Bin gar keine Russin, stamm’ aus Litauen, echt deutsch.

¹ The occasion was the Centennial Conference on T. S. Eliot, held at Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri, in September 1988, where the remarks in section I were delivered.
And when we were children, staying at the arch-duke’s,
My cousin’s, he took me out on a sled,
And I was frightened. He said, Marie,
Marie, hold on tight. And down we went.
In the mountains, there you feel free.
I read, much of the night, and go south in the winter.

We have grown so familiar with and accustomed not only to *The Waste Land* itself but the diligent and learned commentaries upon it that we may be in some danger of not being able any longer to gauge the astonishment it is calculated to provoke right from the start. It is, however, a measure of the poem’s greatness that it continues to surprise, in marked contrast to a lot of poetry which aims crudely at effects of shock and violence but which lies dead on the page at even a second reading. Eliot’s verse is subtle, intricate, and reflexive in that it returns upon itself for the fulfilment of its significance. And this is exhibited even in its singular and compelling music. Out of the first seven lines, five end with participles—in part a musical device, providing for run-on motion and continuity. How crucial, and characteristic, it was to Eliot may be illustrated by his recurrence to it elsewhere:

Here are the years that walk between, bearing
Away the fiddles and the flutes, restoring
One who moves in time between sleep and waking, wearing

White light folded, sheathed about her, folded.
The new years walk, restoring
Through a bright cloud of tears, the years, restoring
With a new verse the ancient rhyme.

*(Ash Wednesday)*

I have trodden the winepress alone, and I know
That it is hard to be really useful, resigning
The things that men count for happiness, seeking
The good deeds that lead to obscurity, accepting
With equal face those that bring ignominy,
The applause of all or the love of none.

*(Choruses from “The Rock”)*
This participial emphasis, besides its rhythmical “dying fall” and floating cadence, points to a curious paradox about time that is, I think, central to *The Waste Land* and slyly played out in its opening. For the participles point to “continuing action in the present,” which is itself a paradox in that “the present is static, and when it ceases to be static it has become the past.” “Memory and desire,” which “we” were gratified to leave buried under winter snow, represent motions backwards and forwards in time, out of the present, the still point of the turning world. To exist only in the present seems to be the chief yearning of the opening lines, but the participles themselves hint at the difficulty of this. The memories and desires that are bred may have to do with the liveliness of Chaucer’s characters’ “longing” to go on pilgrimages, and the dirgelike grief of Whitman’s belilaced elegy; after all, *The Waste Land* was first called “He Do the Police in Different Voices,” and it still bears traces of being an assemblage of monologues and dialogues. But though these backwards and forwards impulses may be partly literary in this very literary poem, they also point to past and future as *history* and *destiny*, which the speaker, speaking here in the collective plural on behalf of us all, is eager not to think about. And for a reason, in part, that the verbal tenses themselves will cunningly reveal.

Christopher Ricks, in a lecture, was admirably speculative about how the first five words are to be read and how ambiguous is the copula, *is*, but rather than commit depredations on notions he may plan to publish, let me merely insist on the present tense of the verb. It encourages us to believe we are firmly situated in April. This encouragement is confirmed by the past tense of “Winter kept us warm, covering / Earth with forgetful snow,” for it is in the right sequence of things to look back from April to winter. But we are in for a shock when we get to the eighth line:

Summer surprised us, . . .

All very well to look backward from April to winter, but if we can also look backward to summer, and a summer which seems very clearly to have followed winter, we are bound to be puzzled about where we are to situate ourselves.

The answer, which might dawn on us at any moment, is that we, who are the dead, can see everything as past and the only present for us consists in *not seeing*, from which we are unwillingly aroused by the engen-
derings of April. We are not “situated” in April but in the stasis of our death, which is the deadness of everyone in this poem, the crowds that flowed over London Bridge, the young man carbuncular, Tiresias, the drowned Phoenician Sailor.

These first eighteen lines of *The Waste Land* must be the most familiar opening lines of any poem in the twentieth century. I have already commented on the stasis of the participial present tense (“breeding,” “mixing,” “covering,” “feeding,” “coming”); the sad intimations of a past and a future in “memory” and “desire,” both unspecified, therefore muted; and our growing sense, confirmed with Baudelairean accusation at the end of the section, that it is precisely *we* who are the cadavers of “The Burial of the Dead.” But now I want to dilate on two details in these lines, ones that attract notice precisely as a consequence of the discovery and publication of the manuscript of *The Waste Land*. In the draft version, later to be revised, Eliot wrote,

Summer surprised us, coming over the Königsee.

This lake, located at the east end of the Bavarian Alps, very near Berchtesgaden (which, at the time Eliot was writing, had not attained its later prominence), is identified in the guidebooks as “one of the most beautiful lakes in the Reich.” Baedeker is unequivocal in his praise: “The gem of this district,” he writes, “is the clear, dark-green Königsee, or Lake of St. Bartholomew, . . . the most beautiful lake in Germany, vying in grandeur with those of Switzerland and Italy. Some of the surrounding mountains, which rise almost perpendicularly from the water, are 6500 ft. in height above the lake.” I am going to conjecture as to why Eliot chose to shift venue to the now canonical Starnbergersee, which is also located in southern Bavaria, if somewhat less touted for tourism. And I suggest that the change is connected with these lines:

And when we were children, staying at the arch-duke’s
My cousin’s, he took me out on a sled,
And I was frightened. He said, Marie,
Marie, hold on tight. And down we went.
Annotating these lines in her edition of the manuscript version, Valerie Eliot observes: “Writing in the *Partisan Review* (21, no. 2: 1954), Mr. G. K. L. Morris drew attention to similarities between parts of *The Waste Land* and the reminiscences of Countess Marie Larisch, *My Past* (London, 1913). The assumption was that Eliot must have read the book, but in fact he met the author (when and where is not known), and his description of the sledding, for example, was taken verbatim from a conversation he had with this niece and confidante of the Austrian Empress Elizabeth [sic].”

To characterize Marie Larisch as a niece and confidante of Empress Elisabeth is technically perfectly correct, though by itself it greatly and misleadingly dignifies her. She was born out of wedlock, married off to an impoverished nobleman to cover the indiscretion of her birth, and was banished from the imperial court for playing the ignoble role of pander and procuress in the last great scandal to beset the Habsburg Empire. It is not irrelevant that the nobleman she was designated to marry was impoverished. The countess had very extravagant tastes and was almost always short of cash. Because her husband could not supply her wants in this regard, she made the greatest possible use of her position and entrée at the court, and it was widely understood that she was prepared to mortify her noble pride by accepting thoughtful considerations from those who hoped for social or political advantage. She was in a position to drop names and even to arrange audiences, or levées. In pursuit of getting on by these methods, made so familiar to us by the members and friends of the Reagan and Clinton administrations, the countess became acquainted with the ambitions of the wealthy family of Mary Vetsera, whose mother, Hélène, was a shameless social climber. This teenage girl had fallen wildly, one might say idolatrously, in love, at a suitably devotional distance, with Archduke Rodolph, who was direct heir to the imperial throne. He was, in his way, a good-looking man, and many women of the day paled or swooned at the royal sight of him. Mary Vetsera had little to recommend her apart from her youth and good looks; and there were barriers to such a match that might have seemed insurmountable. The archduke was thirteen years her senior, married, and a father, as well as being heir to the throne. His marriage, however, was an unhappy one. His wife, Crown Princess Stephanie, was self-righteous and stupid, while he himself was intelligent, brilliantly educated, and given to liberal political views not entirely consistent with
those of his father’s regime. Furthermore, the marriage may have been forced upon him for dynastic reasons.

The marriage was poisoned in another way. The archduke was not only politically liberal; he was sexually liberal as well, and some three years after the birth of his only child, a daughter, he contracted gonorrhea, with which he infected his wife, rendering her sterile besides causing her continued ill health. Rodolph himself was frequently in pain because of his infection and took morphine for relief. But in no ways did he abate his life of indulgence with women or with drink. He was a handsome and troubled young aristocrat, the kind that women often find irresistible.

His troubles were not confined to his unhappy marriage, his venereal disease, or his ideological differences with an autocratic father. He was also obsessed with death and with a fear of going insane. There were reasonable grounds for the second, since his family, on both sides, was strikingly tainted. The empress’s second cousin was the mad King Ludwig II of Bavaria, and by the time of Ludwig’s death at the age of forty-one, both he and his brother were incurably insane. There had been, moreover, some twenty or more marriages between the Bavarian royal family of Wittelsbach and the Habsburg family; to complicate the matter still further, there was a history of mental illness in the Baden family, to which the empress’s grandmother belonged. The emperor and empress were themselves first cousins whose mothers were not only sisters but also related in other ways so intricate that Rodolph had only half the normal number of grandparents. As Sarah Gainham, from whom I have derived my information, has written in *The Habsburg Twilight* (1979), “The rigid family custom as to the rank of possible marriage partners and the need for an heir to the greatest of Catholic dynasties to marry only a born Catholic, made the choices very narrow” (28).

So here was a pining seventeen-year-old beauty and an attractive, liberal, and degenerate young archduke. It was, in the words of Wodehouse, “but the work of a moment” for Marie Larisch to bring them together. And she did a great deal more than that. She arranged and facilitated the rendezvous and assignations between Mary Vetsera and Rodolph, in a liaison of which the emperor strongly disapproved and summarily ordered his son to abandon. What this peremptory command meant to Rodolph is hard to say, but it is plausible to conjecture that it strengthened his rebellious determination. Mary, in any case, became pregnant, and there
followed a period of hysteria during which she threatened several times
to do away with herself by (please take note) drowning herself in the
Danube. Rodolph, with his fears of madness, his venereal infection, and
his unhappiness and frustration as regards his political convictions (his fa-
ther was healthy, in his fifties, and in no mind to resign his throne and au-
thority to his son), embraced the thought of death as the only solution—
and not, it may be added, for the first time. Hinting to the credulous Mary
that the two of them would run away together in some impossibly ro-
mantic way, he contrived to smuggle her out to the imperial hunting lodge
at Mayerling, where, sometime during the night and probably with her
crazed consent, he shot her in the head, killing her instantly, and then later
put a bullet through his own temple, using a hand mirror to assure his aim.
The precise circumstances of their deaths are admittedly uncertain; impe-
rial families are deft at covering things up, and they worked overtime in
this case. It was, however, a Liebestod such as Rodolph had contemplated
more than once in the course of his short, unhappy life; he had once pro-
posed to a call girl named Maria Kaspar that they go to a public garden
and shoot themselves together.

In any case, Marie Larisch had from the first been an aider and abettor
of this final doomed and tragic romance, and for the prominent part she
played in the affair she was banished from the court. When her son found
out about his mother’s role in the liaison, he committed suicide. Needless
to say, when the countess got around to writing My Past, she presented a
wonderfully sanitized version of these events of 1888–89.

As a consequence of Rodolph’s suicide, his younger brother Ferdinand
(a name that, through Shakespearean resonance with The Tempest, echoes
inaudibly throughout The Waste Land) became heir to the throne of the
Austro-Hungarian Empire and, on June 28, 1914, was assassinated at
Sarajevo, precipitating the First World War, a conflict that furnishes one
form of the rubble that fills Eliot’s great poem. The war is explicitly pres-
ent in the pub conversation about Lil’s husband Albert, but all the images
of collapsing civilization point to it, and in the years that immediately fol-
lowed (the years in which Eliot’s poem was written), it was viewed as a
calamity from which no recovery seemed possible—as Paul Fussell has in-
dicated in his book The Great War and Modern Memory.

But what of the unannotated shift from the Königsee to the Starn-
bergersee? The lake Eliot finally settled upon was not contemptible as re-
gards its picturesqueness. It is the “second biggest stretch of water in Bavaria” and “much frequented as a summer resort.” But Eliot’s interest in it, I suggest, had rather to do with its very dramatic association with the chief of Richard Wagner’s patrons. In 1864, deeply depressed and overwhelmed with debts, Wagner received out of the blue an invitation, conveyed by His Majesty’s private secretary, to become the permanent and honored guest of the eighteen-year-old mad King Ludwig of Bavaria, who had fallen in love to the point of lunacy with Lohengrin. Wagner was invited to take up residence at the royal palace in Munich; it was for him a miraculous and totally unexpected reprieve.

Even as a teenager, Ludwig was already giving signs of being insubordinately willful and something of a psychopath. But he regarded himself as a connoisseur of the arts and had the means to become a patron; so, with a stubborn determination to make Wagner his protégé, he began by paying off most of the composer’s outstanding debts. It was under Ludwig’s patronage that Tristan und Isolde was introduced at Munich in 1865, followed, in due course, by the Ring. But Ludwig was not only a patron of music, he was a patron of architecture as well, and in 1876 he built a neogothic chapel for the seventeenth-century Schloss that belonged to his family and that was located on the Starnbergersee. In the course of time, Ludwig’s behavior became so irrational that he was deposed by a council of state and placed under house arrest in the very chapel he had built. Within twenty-four hours after that arrest his corpse, and that of his physician, Dr. von Gudden, were found drowned in the lake. A plaque marks the place where the bodies were brought ashore, and a neo-romanesque chapel was built there as a memorial in 1900. It was never satisfactorily determined whether Ludwig drowned in an attempt to escape from captivity or in some rash act of suicide; nor do we know whether Dr. von Gudden was his faithful and doomed accomplice or one who was trying to prevent his escape. His death, in any case, was a death by water, such as Mary Vetsera had threatened during her hysteria. So the poem is able, in covert and subtle ways, to introduce themes both personal and social or historical right in the opening lines.

A great part of the poem was worked on while the poet was being treated for nervous disorders by a doctor at Lausanne, and Eliot’s first wife, Vivien, was herself seriously unstable. Her mother, Rose Haigh-Wood, was fearful that Vivien “had inherited what was then known as
‘moral insanity,’”\(^2\) and, according to Eliot’s biographer, Peter Ackroyd, she may have voiced these fears to her son-in-law on the occasion of their first meeting after the marriage. The taint of insanity (“My nerves are bad tonight”) that so troubled the Habsburgs, Wittelsbachs, and Badens must at this point in his life have seemed highly pertinent to Eliot. And if we consider that the poem originally began with an episode at the drunken end of a night of debauchery (“First we had a couple of feelers down at Tom’s place, / There was old Tom, boiled to the eyes, blind”) and then recall the profligate life of Rodolph, we recognize in that private and dynastic drama of loose behavior leading undetectably up to the collapse of western Europe a symbol of the desecration, sterility, and grief, both collective and individual, that lies at the core of *The Waste Land.*

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