Introduction

In its clamorous polyvocality, T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* can be read as a variety of dramatic text — one with a dense, if dispersed, form that might have been unrecognizable as drama to readers in 1922 when the poem was first published but which would be all too familiar to twenty-first-century theatergoers acquainted with the bricolage dramaturgies of such playwrights as Heiner Müller and such directors as the Wooster Group’s Elizabeth LeCompte. Eliot quotes liberally, in several languages, from sources ranging from Shakespeare to the Buddha to popular songs of the poet’s day. High culture mixes with low. The sacred becomes entwined with the profane. Snatches of throwaway dialogue that could have been overheard in any bedroom or any bar come into conversation with the most exalted of utterances. No single, authorial voice unifies; the model of consciousness the poem proposes is a skittering one. It takes a step in one direction, then pivots before permitting itself to advance too far and sets off in another direction, only to pivot again. Insofar as each shift in tone or source text represents a foray into a worldview, avenues of inquiry are foreclosed nearly as quickly as they are opened. Eliot’s grace and writerly poise collapse into a scrum of conflicting impulses comprising a self that fundamentally lacks confidence in itself.
The poem even struggles to end itself: “these fragments I have shored against my ruins,” Eliot announces. Language gets demoted to matter, to something with heft that can be defensively positioned between the self and the world. Language props up civilization. Language holds it all together and is now itself falling apart. The glue won’t stick. The poet can’t write, only pick up and rearrange the pieces.

The poem then concludes several times, rehearsing a mastery it never attains. Thomas Kyd’s *The Spanish Tragedy,* “[w]hy then Ile fit you. Hieonymo’s mad againe,” suggests an acquiescence that truth, even if knowable, is uncommunicable. Language cannot overcome this divide. Yet, Eliot chooses to quote *Hamlet*’s lesser-known urtext rather than the more iconic cultural artifact, which allows both plays to come alive in the reader’s mind; the one invokes the other, and this invocation points to language’s resilience, if not its efficacy. One play will close, one character will die, only to be resurrected and revised by some as yet unknown collaborator. The very impotence of language may speak across the generations, may create the continuity that sustains culture.

The penultimate ending, “Datta. Dayadhvam. Damyata,” comes from the *Upanishads,* holy text of the Hindu religion, one of the world’s oldest wisdom traditions. In his notes, Eliot translates these words as “Give, sympathise, control.” Elsewhere, they have been translated as “give,” “be compassionate,” and “restrain yourselves.” In the *Upanishad* from which Eliot draws it, this tripartite admonition is broken up, delivered by the creator god Prajāpáti to his three species of children: gods, men, and demons. Prajāpáti repeats the same syllable, Da, three times, and his different categories of offspring hear, or interpret,

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2 Ibid.
3 Ibid.
4 Ibid., 86.
a different message. In this way, then, to the gods he recommends restraint. He urges the men to be giving. The devils he tells to be compassionate. Here is the hermeneutic that Eliot’s poem demands; independently incoherent fragments, like nonsense syllables, cohere as different channels of expression in different readers’ minds. Some early critics assumed that this was how Eliot imagined Sanskrit would be experienced by his readers, as nonsense, like Hieonymo’s madness, a failure of language.  

Madness and sacred knowledge appear as two sides of the same coin, irreducible, inextricable. The final ending, “Shantih shantih shantih,” translates as “inner peace,” or “the peace which passeth all understanding.” This cacophonous poem with its many borrowings, interruptions, and eruptions ends with surrender to the unsayable, an acknowledgement that that worth having, or being, cannot be told, cannot be wrangled into language. Solace is ultimately found in the mute void. 

*The Waste Land* was initially praised for its “positive” content, its revitalizing transposition of Christian symbols and the Grail quest legend into a complex and distinctly modern idiom. Eliot encouraged such readings, announcing in his notes that the “plan” of the poem and “a good deal of the incidental symbolism” was suggested to him by a book on the Grail legend. It was not until much later in the century that the poem began to be appreciated for that which had inspired censure upon its publication: its “negative” content. In 1982, for example, Eloise Knapp Hay described *The Waste Land* as “a poem of radical doubt and negation, urging that every human desire be stilled except the desire for self-surrender, for restraint, and for peace.” Read negatively, the poem becomes eloquent as a fresh disavowal of the species responsible for the First World War, which officially

8 Ibid., 82.
ended just four years before *The Waste Land* was published. The war decimated the population of Europe, Eliot’s adopted home, and revealed a hitherto inconceivable capacity for human self-destruction. The war also turned great swaths of the cities and fields of the continent into literal wastelands, barren and uninhabited by any save the fallen and the bereaved. In his poem, Eliot marshals great reserves of erudition to help him confront the catastrophe of the war, as if surely one of the many books in his eclectic library must contain the key to redeeming the carnage by rendering it meaningful. He fails. When the poem ends, a new kind of creature has been born—one which must live with the knowledge that its existence is irredeemable.

The First World War was one of two catastrophes that occasioned the writing of *The Waste Land*. The second was personal for Eliot; the poet suffered what was diagnosed as a nervous breakdown shortly after the war ended. Then-popular theories of “psychic scarcity” held that a person’s supply of nervous energy was finite, like one’s bank account balance. If they were not careful, psychic “wastrels” could overdraw and go bankrupt. Unscrupulous, irresponsible, seen as menaces to themselves and burdens to others, wastrels of any kind were, then as now, not regarded as exemplary members of a society that cherishes productivity and efficiency. Eliot, who worked in a bank throughout the period when he was writing much of his most important work, and who frequently complained to friends and family in his letters that he was anxious about his personal finances, was initially prescribed a “rest cure” in a resort town on the southern coast of England to repair the damage he had done to his psychic bank account. This treatment proved unsuccessful.

Instead, Eliot found relief under the care of the “psychological doctor” Roger Vittoz at a sanitarium in Lausanne, Switzer-

land. He also composed much of *The Waste Land* there. Though Eliot always professed an aversion to Freudian theory, Vittoz’s methods were not in most respects too distinct from those of the originator of psychoanalysis.\textsuperscript{12} Vittoz had his quirks — he believed that a skilled physician could detect the precise workings of a patient’s brain by placing his hand on the patient’s forehead — but his work with Eliot involved regular daily sessions and the pursuit of what could be understood as a version of the talking cure.

Vittoz also shared with Freud an understanding of the human psyche as an economic system, “a system for the production, distribution, and consumption of psychic resources.”\textsuperscript{13} From Lausanne, Eliot wrote to his brother, “[t]he great thing I am trying to learn is how to use all my energy without waste, to be calm when there is nothing to be gained by worry, and to concentrate without effort.”\textsuperscript{14} It is interesting to consider the title of *The Waste Land* in this light — Eliot was emphatic in letters to Ezra Pound and others that the title of his poem was not *The Wasteland*, which would have circumscribed its resonances, but *The Waste Land*. The former evokes a decimated, barren, or overgrown landscape, but the latter is a different way of writing “place of waste,” which suits a text that doubled as a repository for what its author was being trained to recognize as his profitless worries, his failures to keep calm, his failures to channel his energy efficiently.

From the beginning, the narrator of *The Waste Land* wrestles with the inefficient complexities of his experience of himself and the world:


April is the cruellest month, breeding
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
Memory and desire, stirring
Dull roots with spring rain.\textsuperscript{15}

The narrator gives the impression that he prefers the less ambiguous seasons—winter, summer—that encourage either the dormancy of forgetting and abandonment or the tickle of surprise and discovery. April pulls in two directions; the narrator at once yearns to lie with the dead and to writhe in the arms of someone warm and new. The pull of mourning is overwhelming in \textit{The Waste Land}. The earth is stony; abortion renders wombs barren and women prematurely old; Shakespeare’s Ariel keeps singing, “those are pearls that were his eyes.”\textsuperscript{16} Here, as in the “neurotic” analysand, the psychic economy is an inefficient one, producing excessive, unwanted, and disruptive stimuli: psychic waste. The past interferes with the present and the death drive vies with the pleasure principle for dominance. Like Freud, Vittoz understood himself as being in the business of waste management, of helping his patient regain psychic equilibrium and constancy, where it was presumed something like health could be found. \textit{The Waste Land} is also a record of its author coming to terms with the realization that, to exist in the modern world outside the confines of the sanitarium, the “worry,” the perverse desire, the psychic waste had to be jettisoned. The world had become too much. The only way to survive it was to pass over the great majority of its sorrows in silence, to learn to ignore the insupportable violence at its foundation. \textit{Shantih shantih shantih}.

Prometheus Contrite

Eliot’s painful document of becoming-modern (or becoming-“well”) is evidence that human existence is as bound up with what we discard, abject, and devalue as it is with what we recognize and revere. The narrator oscillates between a quasi-religious faith in language, in expression, in art, and in being ashamed of these superfluities of consciousness the way one is ashamed of the stench of one’s own waste products. *The Waste Land* suggests that the most salient feature of being human is our ability to be ashamed of ourselves.

While late-capitalist modernity applies a new and terrible pressure to this existential fact, this is not a uniquely modern insight—it was articulated in some of our earliest aesthetic artifacts. Georges Bataille reads the first known artistic gesture as a negative gesture, an act of self-abnegation. Examining the prehistoric cave paintings at Lascaux, Bataille observes that while their early human creators rendered animal subjects with apparent reverence and relative anatomical exactitude, when it came to depicting human subjects, themselves, the painters omitted their own faces, and in some cases replaced them with the faces of animals.17

The painters omitted this signifier of that which is most elevated in the species, the organ of speech, individuation, and recognition. The painters rendered the human not as a superior and distinct entity capable of foresight, collaboration, and construction, but as a frail body among stronger bodies. “He had not yet prevailed,” Bataille writes of man, “but he apologized.”18

Long before the human had acquired the ability to shape the landscape according to its vision and will, Bataille sees these early artists recoiling from the possibility that the human might come to stand outside of nature.

18 Ibid., 80.
Hannah Arendt identifies this ability as the domain of *homo faber*, or “man the maker,” the human animal engaged in work as opposed to mere labor. For Arendt, labor encompasses the biologically dictated activities necessary for subsistence; its products are consumed as quickly as they are brought forth. Work, however, refers to the fabrication of things designed to outlive their creator. *Homo faber* is the deviser of laws and institutions, the architect of cities, and the maker of art. Where the animal is of its environment, constrained by its horizons, *homo faber* takes the environment as a starting point. *Homo faber* moves through the world making improvements, revisions, shaping the world to suit her purposes rather than always only adjusting herself to suit the purposes of the world. The trees are there to be converted into timber, the water to be diverted, the surface to be adorned.

The prehistoric human could not have dreamed of industrialization, world war, and climate change, but she intuited the downfall that this initial separation would bring. According to Bataille, the Lascaux paintings represent “a stupefying negation of man. Far from seeking to affirm humanity against nature, man, born of nature, here voluntarily appears as a kind of waste.”\(^{19}\) Early humans perceived and depicted themselves as *waste*, as excess, more like a tumor in the flesh of the world than like the “masters and possessors of nature.”\(^{20}\) At the very moment when the capacity for image-making, for art, was emerging, the human felt not pride, but shame. The birth of this difference did not bode well — this difference carried within it the possibility of total annihilation.

This intuition, that our distinction would be as much a source of suffering as of joy, also motivates some of our foundational dramatic texts. The eponymous protagonist of Aeschylus’s *Prometheus Bound* is a Titan who steals fire from heaven and gives it to human beings. His offense is grave not merely because he

\(^{19}\) Ibid., 46.

has taken from the gods, but because Prometheus “gave honors to mortals beyond what was just.”

In Aeschylus’s telling, when Zeus ascended to the throne of Mount Olympus, he determined that the best thing to do with “the unhappy breed of mankind” would be “to blot the race out and create a new.” Prometheus alone, harboring a special fondness for the creatures, took pity on humans and saved them from obliteration by sharing with humankind “the brightness of fire that devises all.” Prometheus upsets the cosmic order of things; it is not for the human, frail and finite creature, to strive to create that which will endure. Zeus perceives the human’s progression towards becoming homo faber as an abomination. Prometheus is admonished for giving that which belongs to the gods “to creatures of a day.” The god’s anger is not mere jealousy. He knows the human’s new aspirations are rooted in a dangerous lie because Prometheus committed more than one offense. Before giving human beings fire, he “stopped mortals from foreseeing doom,” and “sowed in them blind hopes.” This original folly, which provides the scaffolding for our major narratives of human overreach — the Faust plays, the Frankenstein story — leaves the human fundamentally deluded about her nature and bound to suffer endless torment as a result.

As is Prometheus, who spends the play nailed to a rock, where he is condemned to remain for all eternity as punishment for his transgression. As visitors come and go, he bemoans his fate and attempts to justify his actions to whomever will listen. The play becomes a recitation of humanity’s accomplishments as Prometheus tries to make the case for his betrayal. From his perspective, Prometheus has given humanity a great gift. He found mortals “mindless / and gave them minds, made them

22 Ibid., 1:74.
23 Ibid., 1:65.
24 Ibid., 1:100.
25 Ibid., 1:74.
masters of their wits,” he says.26 “First they had eyes but had no eyes to see, / and ears but heard not. Like shapes within a dream / they dragged through their long lives and muddled all, / haphazardly.”27 Prometheus describes human beings living “be-neath the earth like swarming ants / in sunless caves.”28 They groped their way through life, at the mercy of nature, incapable of design, unable to impose their will on their surroundings. Prometheus tutored them in the ways of homo faber — he taught them how to read the stars, how to domesticate animals, how to prophesy. Prometheus gave mortals arithmetic, written lan-
guage, medicine, and the natural sciences. He set civilization in motion, and saved mortals from oblivion.

Or so he claims. One of Prometheus's interlocutors, the god Hermes, listens to the Titan’s raving and, perhaps not incor-
rectly, concludes he has gone mad. Prometheus is a hero, but a tragic one, fatally flawed by hubris. Prometheus Bound is an atypical Greek tragedy in that it is almost entirely static — Pro-
metheus is being bound by servants of Zeus at the beginning of the play and remains bound until the play’s end. We witness nei-
ther an action nor a fall from great heights; we only hear about the hero’s deeds after misfortune finds him. Prometheus's static position suggests that the fall of real consequence takes place elsewhere, that his personal fall is somehow incidental to the tragedy. The fall is humanity’s to take. Prometheus has indeed given mortals a gift, but it is a mixed blessing. He has endowed mortals with hubris to rival his own, setting civilization up for a long rise and eventual fall, the denouement of which we now appear to be approaching. Prometheus Bound is believed to have been the first play in a trilogy. Of the other two plays, only a few fragments of the former, Prometheus Unbound, remain. In these, Prometheus finds himself subjected to fresh torments; a bird of prey visits him each day to peck at and feed upon his liver, which regenerates each night so that the bird returns hungry for more

26 Ibid., 1:81.
27 Ibid., 1:82.
28 Ibid.
every morning. The play that depicted Prometheus’s ultimate triumph over his circumstances and reconciliation with Zeus, Prometheus the Firebearer, has been, appropriately, lost to history altogether. All we have are scenes of suffering; redemption is indefinitely deferred.

Of all the art forms, the theater is best suited to representing the human’s perverse relation to her finitude. Each night, the theater calls into being a new and wholly unnecessary world at great physical, material, and emotional expense to all involved. As Tolstoy put it, when taking into account the farthest-flung and most tangential of contributors, every production “requires the intense effort of thousands and thousands of people, working forcibly at what are often harmful and humiliating tasks.”

People literally destroy themselves out of devotion to the theater: “these people, often very kind, intelligent, capable of every sort of useful labour, grow wild in these exceptional, stupefying occupations and become dull to all serious phenomena of life, one-sided and self-complacent specialists, knowing only how to twirl their legs, tongues or fingers.” This labor is real, not infrequently all-consuming to the point of being disfiguring, and yet its products are ephemeral. The world of the play melts into air when the curtain falls. The baseless fabric of the vision dissolves, the insubstantial pageant fades. “We are such stuff / As dreams are made on,” the theater reminds us in ritual form if not always in content, “and our little life / Is rounded with a sleep.”

In the theater, even our mightiest incursions into the void are, self-confessedly ineffectual, doomed before they begin. The stage is always already anticipating being cleared to make space for the next show to load in. The actor playing Oedipus adopts a part which is not really his, struggles as if the stakes were high. He curses the gods for casting a shadow over his existence with their prophecy that he would come to ruin. He curses himself for

30 Ibid., 4
31 Shakespeare, The Tempest, 4.1.156–58.
the hubris that led him to believe he could root out the source of his people's suffering, that led him to disregard all warnings, led him to trust that knowledge would elevate him and allow him to attain mastery, when in the end it would only lay him low. For Oedipus, like the actor playing him, like the thousands of people toiling at their often harmful and humiliating tasks to bring the production to fruition, an illusion constitutes the substrate of his endeavor.

Everything about the theater is suffused with existential shame: the painted flats done up to resemble stone parapets, the cognac conjured from iced tea, the shabby, worn-out costume that only makes the actress appear elegant from a distance, under the lights, if she keeps her back to the audience so no one sees she is being held together at the waist with safety pins. And yet, how wasteful, how extravagant the theater is, a diversion of so many resources to be consumed in the blaze of a single performance before, more often than we might like to admit, fewer people in the audience than there are on stage. The theater is that rare and strange human accomplishment that understands itself as being made by and for “creatures of a day.” At its best, the theater is not deluded about its nature, origins, and destiny. At its best, the theater gathers artists and audience in one space to die together for a little while, to consciously waste, not spend, their time.

Existential Shame

For Bataille, the principle of waste, or “nonproductive expenditure,” steers all human feeling and behavior inexorably towards inefficiency and extravagance. Knowing on the deepest level, like prehistoric humans, that we are waste, we are paradoxically compelled to self-effacement through excess. Play, religion, eroticism, forgiveness, art; none of these human activities are necessary for survival, but they are what make life worth living even though (or because) they are not profitable in any conventional or measurable way. To measure the success or failure of these pursuits according to their efficiency or productivity
would be to miss the point entirely. The effort they require is inherently valuable, pleasurable, meaningful. We cannot give back the fire; the question that remains is what we will do with it before the fire burns out.

Under capitalism, however, “everything conspires to obscure the basic movement that tends to restore wealth to its function, to gift-giving, to squandering without reciprocation,” Bataille argues.32 Under capitalism, the expectation is that any outlay should yield a return on one’s investment, even though to be authentically human is to operate at a loss. Capitalism encourages spiritual miserliness, when human beings derive pleasure, honor, and glory, from freely spending their resources and themselves. “The more costly the life-generating processes are,” he writes, “the more squander the production of organisms has required, the more satisfactory the operation is. The principle of producing at the least expense is not so much a human idea as a narrowly capitalist one (it makes sense only from the viewpoint of the incorporated company).”33 Societies that privilege the acquisition and accumulation of wealth over its disbursal and consumption are sick societies. Bataille points to the potlatch ceremonies of certain Native American tribes of the Pacific Northwest as archetypical of the righteous squandering he sees as innate to the human. At these opulent feasts, tribal leaders would compete by attempting to outdo one another in extravagant gift-giving. He who divested himself of the most possessions would accrue the most prestige in his community. Our current economic system, however, privileges accumulation, parsimony, and the obsessive tabulation of debts, all of which, Bataille contends, contribute to the gradual mutilation of the human essence.

The theater is where we can see this most clearly. The theater is a waste. The theater is a prodigious waste of time and space. It is also, almost without exception, a waste of money for both

33 Ibid., 2:85.
producer and consumer. The ticket-buyer is not able to gather up the production and hang it on her wall if she finds it to be to her taste. Her purchase is gone before she has received the full benefit of it, and it has no resale value. The overwhelming majority of theater-making must be subsidized by funds derived from the state or other forms of patronage, and the theater would be decimated in a truly free market. The theater cannot save us. It cannot even meaningfully shape public discourse, so unequivocally marginal is the place theater occupies in our culture. Most people never go to the theater at all. And yet, for those afflicted with, or attuned to, the existential shame the theater specializes in, the theater is where we must go to rehearse our catastrophes, to atone for our excesses and our penury. “Vanity of vanities,” the theater is where we go to be recalled to an awareness that “all is vanity.”

34 Ecclesiastes 1:2.