Rewriting *The Waste Land*

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*The Waste Land* witnesses to the pain of writing, of undergoing an accumulated past, of books and of history, which is both plethoric and unending. So did Eliot’s distress abate when he became a Christian? His views changed, but did they remove his earlier views? It is of interest to ask what we should expect. One might suppose that the standpoint of faith would make writing a straightforward, though challenging, activity, and would offer comfortable thoughts about the movement of history. Yet seeing things in a biblical light can render the ‘vanity’ of history and of writing even more momentous, and intolerable. To convert is to be shown a whole new world but also to realise more fully just how fallen is the old one. A Christian lives, surely, between two worlds, and although the second is powerful to be born, it is still not here. We have, but what we have is a ‘pledge’, a ‘taste’; everything has changed, but the Change is for the future. Redemption makes a différence.

It is certain that after 1927, the year when Eliot became an Anglo-Catholic and also, strangely, the year of Yeats’s rough beast, Eliot set about dealing with his atheist years (I use the word with its Pauline meaning) by rewriting the works they had produced. Appropriately, *Four Quartets*, the culmination of his Christian poetry, took on his most important pre-Christian poem and the one to which all his previous poetry had led. He seems to have seen the opportuneness of escaping from the waste land of time, and writing, and self, partly by, quite literally, rewriting *The Waste Land*. Yet *Four Quartets* recognises that to rewrite *The Waste Land* is not to dismiss the waste land: that one cannot, by an act of writing, merely enter a new world, and bracket the Fall. So Eliot, with a new faith, writes a poem which, while it explores that faith and the possibility it creates, also mocks its own pretensions to understanding, and is even more rigorous than *The Waste Land* in its searching of our ills.
Rather, indeed, as the New Testament, while promising and celebrating salvation, is more far-reaching than the Old in its condemnation of the world from which we need to be saved; and rather as Jesus Himself is fiercer than the Old Testament’s wrathful – and loving – Jehovah. It is the gentle Jesus who says such things as, ‘Ye are of your father the devil’, and ‘Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire.’ The horror of Four Quartets is less intense than that of The Waste Land, but more real: ‘O dark dark dark. They all go into the dark.’

Conversely, The Waste Land is not without hope, so that in his rewriting Eliot was able to take hints from it. As an example, the final, albeit disguised, ‘yes’ in the Russian reading of ‘DA’ (line 400), which is chiefly to engender the Sanskrit ‘Datta’, ‘Dayadhvam’ and ‘Damyata’, is a sign of Pentecost beyond the poem’s Babel. The very scope of the poem is itself a positive. Its ground is no less than the geographical area of our civilisation, so many of whose roots it reaches for and whose remote source it traces to India. In a way it really is an epic, which feels its way out to the limits and down to origin, like the Odyssey, the Aeneid, The Faerie Queene, Paradise Lost. It attempts to hold civilisation by charting it.

That Four Quartets rewrites The Waste Land is known to the extent that the structure of ‘Burnt Norton’ and subsequently of the other quartets follows its five-part division, with sometimes close parallels such as the brief fourth-section lyrics on death; and also that the later poem retraces the steps of the earlier from a garden, or gardens, to a chapel: from a natural place, with mythic overtones, to a spiritual; from a place for innocence before the Fall to a place for guilt after. Both poems have a completed mythic shape, and the first is a kind of palimpsest for the second. Their beginnings and endings hum, furthermore, with correspondences. Four Quartets opens no less than The Waste Land with images of origin: tree, children, light, water, dust, and with their occultation, and even the ‘time present’ from which it views them, so as to enter the strain of time past and time future, is a reworking of the fractured now of The Waste Land, heavy with ‘Memory and desire’.

It continually returns to the opening of the earlier poem, as part of its determination towards renewal. When the final lines of ‘East Coker’, for example, look through the ‘empty desolation’ of ‘vast waters’, or waste waters, they echo the cry, ‘Oed’ und leer das Meer’, as a preparation for the searching beyond it in ‘The Dry Salvages’. They add a specific meaning to the quartet’s closing words: ‘In my