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Late Modernism

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**Rebirth by Water: Surviving Late Style in the *Waste Land***

T.S. Eliot’s *Waste Land* describes a world riddled by discontinuities yet still inhabited with a desire for renewal. It skulks, anachronistic and anomalous, through a pastiche of sounds and images. These are the same qualities identified by Edward Said in his book on a “late style that involves a nonharmonious, nonserene tension, and above all, a sort of deliberately unproductive productiveness going *against…”* (Said 7). But what marks late style above all—unproductive productivity—is also the hardest to identify in the *Waste Land*, whose fragments do not resist but struggle to suggest a greater whole and the possibility of salvation. The poem’s intransigence is not irreconcilable or inescapable because the possibility of renewal is presaged in the end through death by water, and the poem is split from its time only to look back often. Adorno’s description of “surviving beyond what is acceptable and normal” marks the *Waste Land* but if lateness must also include “the idea that one cannot really go beyond lateness at all, cannot transcend or lift oneself out of lateness”, that is where similarities end*.* The poem encompasses late style but is not lost to it.

In *On Late Style*, Said examines a diversity of late styles across the final works of various classical musicians and writers. It is natural to expect a lifetime of work to culminate in an apotheosis of maturity and serenity, but Said is interested in deviations from this. *On Late Style* examines the production of a kind of fruit Adorno imagines as not round and delectable, but furrowed and ravaged, that is, “artistic lateness not as harmony and resolution but as intransigence, difficulty, and unresolved contradiction” (Said 7). The phrase *late style* comes from Adorno’s essay about the last, contrapuntal works of Beethoven, which Said uses to introduce his themes in his first chapter. Adorno identifies the discontinued phrases, awkward spacing, caesuras, and unfinished quality in the works from Beethoven’s third period as signs of late style’s distinguishing characteristic: intransigence.

The *Waste Land*’s qualities of intransigence are unmistakable. One feature of intransigence as a type of style is the absence of unity, as seen for instance in the episodic nature and lack of synthesis between musical conventions in Beethoven’s last sonatas. The *Waste Land*’s lack of unity is distinctive as the poem is formed from strands of narrative, incomplete quotations and unrelated sounds and images juxtaposed in antithesis. The form of the poem is incoherent with no formal scheme to meter, rhythm, stanza, or rhyme (besides the couplets in “Death by Water”). Nor is all the content even accessible—Eliot switches between seven different languages and bounces between high- and low-brow allusions without discrimination. Finally, the poem lacks a unified consciousness that could hold the disparate strands together, instead shifting among numerous disjointed voices, none of which repeat beyond their own scenes and until the final lines, none of which appear to belong the poet himself.

Another feature of intransigence as a type of style is “self-imposed exile from what is generally acceptable” (Said 16). Said points to the way Beethoven’s music rejects connection with its time in favor of an contradictory, inaccessible relationship. Likewise, the *Waste Land* is exiled in time and space. The shattering of narrative into fragments is powerful because the fragments themselves are made irreconcilable by their distance from one another. The fragments are almost all anachronisms, being lifted from sources of all ages—ancient, medieval, Renaissance, and contemporary. In one breath, Eliot quotes Verlaine in French, in the next he plucks a conversation from a pub.

But while the poem’s anachronism obscures it to Eliot’s contemporary audience, the poem doesn’t abandon them as Beethoven’s late music had. Said is interested in lateness in terms of a work’s orientation towards its time, writing that “Lateness is being at the end, fully conscious, full of memory, and also very (even preternaturally) aware of the present” (Said 14). Yet, instances in the *Waste Land* seem not only to be aware of the present, but to return there. We locate ourselves in time and place by overhearing references to people and places, for instance in the scene from lines 139-173 in the pub. We immediately recognize that Albert, who was “demobbed” after being “in the army four years”, is recently returned from WWI. The voice calling “hurry up please its time” belongs to an English bartender, disclosing location in place too: an English pub. The setting also returns to present-day commercial London fours times in the “Unreal City”. In the first vignette (lines 60-67), Eliot describes a crowd of sighing people streaming through London using a poem by Baudelaire about an encounter in the streets and Dante’s description of the entry to Hell in the *Inferno*. These two allusions follow each other seamlessly, and just as seamlessly, Eliot situates these allusions in decisively local and present-day sites like King William Street and London Bridge. Making Baudelaire and Dante’s story his own, Eliot then picks out “each man” in the crowd, and even converses with one in particular, Stetson. Anachronistic allusions are not just reconcilable with the present-day and its undertones, but constitute its very articulation.

Despite being in the present and showing acute awareness of its time, artistic lateness is always set apart—not just standing aside, but moving away. But moments such as the pub scene or whenever the Unreal City is revealed to be contemporary London are touch points that return us to post-war England and indicate that between the lines time continues as something linear.

Furthermore, the culmination of the poem in the vital line “these fragments I have shored against my ruins” casts doubt on the impossibility of reconciliation. The speaker of this line seems to be the poet himself, and Michael Levenson points out that the self-awareness in this line is itself enough to lift the poem out of incoherence:

And to recognize fragments as fragments, to name them as fragments, is already to have transcended them not to an harmonious or final unity but to a somewhat higher, somewhat more inclusive, somewhat more conscious point of view. Considered in this way, the poem does not achieve a resolved coherence, but neither does it remain in a chaos of fragmentation.

The intimation of a lost totality is key to lateness for Said. Quoting Rose Subotnik, he notes, “Beethoven’s late works communicate that ‘no synthesis is conceivable [but is in effect] the remains of a synthesis, the vestige of an individual human subject sorely awareness of the wholeness, and consequently the survival, that has eluded it forever’” (Said 11). The outline of a totality is grasped through what is left out. But in this line, it is not just the fragments all together, the “figure they create together” (Said 12), but the fragments themselves that the speaker-poet forms into a bulwark. And this is not implied, but pronounced.

Nor is this fractured landscape inescapable: the *Waste Land* culminates in a place different from where it began and in a cataclysm which suggests a possible primordial salvation. The remarkably cohesive images in the final section “What the Thunder Said” give direction to the world’s regression through fragmentation, whereas late style lacks this impulse towards conciliation. The progression towards rebirth can be identified through the potent symbol of water.

Water is an element that possesses exceptional resonance as a life-giving, cleansing force. The poem begins in springtime, presaging the emergence of the new out of the old fragments and ruins of history with the stirring of dull roots by the spring rain. The *Waste Land* does not approach this process happily, calling April the “cruellest month” for disinterring what memories winter had kept forgotten. As indicated by the title, the physical attributes of the poem’s landscape are dominated by decay and death that occur from a lack of water. The landscape is brown, stony, arid, and all life dries up under the beating sun. In the once-overflowing canal in “The Fire Sermon”, nymphs and enchantment are replaced by a single slimed rat (187). Fecund images rise to the surface, like the hyacinths and wet hair or Elizabeth and Leicester sailing down a swelling river, only to be memories. And when it does appear, water brings not life but death. It is something to avoid—fear death by water, Madame Sosotris warns (55). It is something sterilizing—when Mrs. Porter and her daughter rinse their feet with soda water (201), they turn the religious rite into something vulgar.

But in a world whose fragmentation resists closure and which has turned back to older art and myths, water turns out to be a salvation *because* it can bring death. Here, the poem returns full circle to the epigraph, where the immortal Sibyl is asked “What do you want?”, and replies: “I want to die”. Twice, characters remark “Those were the pearls that were his eyes” (48, 130), and these words do not only refer to a death by drowning, but are words of comfort used by Ariel to console Ferdinand. Another reminder that water brings a welcome end comes with the closing of the banal scene in the pub. The scene ends with Ophelia’s farewell “Good night, ladies, good night, sweet ladies, good night, good night” (172), which in *Hamlet* is what she says one scene before she drowns herself. Then, “Death by Water” fulfills Madame Sosotris’s prophecy, describing how “Phlebas the Phoenician, a fortnight dead, / Forgot the cry of gulls, and the deep sea swell / And the profit and loss” (312-4). Death results in negativity—Phlebas knows nothing now, neither memory nor desire. And so the poem harks back to its beginning lines in which the spring rain and what it exhumes is desired less than the forgetfulness of winter. Here water has transformed into that which brings death, and because of death, a chance to renew.

A change has occurred in the *Waste Land* between this point and the beginning lines—fear of water is replaced by an anticipation for water. Now the leaves wait for rain, the clouds gather, and the speaker increasingly obsesses over rain, his neurosis reflected in the fugal nature of his thoughts that cycle between rocks and water. While we do not witness salvation come after the thunderstorm, the poem ends with a Sanskrit prayer *shantih shantih shantih*, and this ending is one of peace, serenity, and the expectation of possibility.

What precedes late achievement or late intransigence is the end of life. The marks of senescence are here in the *Waste Land* in the decay of senses and protracted sterility. But where we would expect ever-increasing fragmentation and contradiction, we are left with something that resembles rebirth via destruction.

Works Cited

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