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What the Thunder really said: T. S. Eliot's 'The Waste Land' as a proto-Necrocene

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ABSTRACT

T. S. Eliot's 'The Waste Land' is viewed by many as the definitive modernist work. The chaotic verses tell stories of a fractured modernist world. What is it that fractured this world, however? The answer: capitalism and accumulation. Herein I discuss Eliot's poem as pre-empting Justin McBrien's notion of a Necrocene, an epoch defined by capitalist accumulation hurling humanity towards the apocalypse. Though the Necrocene itself is a widely acknowledged and established concept, its use in exploring literature, within and without of the canon, is reasonably rare. Herein I seek to ask – and answer – whether Eliot's poem builds a proto-Necrocene within its lines, essentially functioning as a warning of what was to follow, by analysing the literal and metaphorical presence of capitalism in the poem's lines, the effect of this on the various characters of the poem and also by drawing parallels between 'The Waste Land' and the Christian Book of Revelation through both language and content.

Introduction: The Necrocene of Modernity

In his essay *Accumulating Extinction: Planetary Catastrophism in the Necrocene*, Justin McBrien argues against the perception that we live in the Anthropocene, 'a… geological epoch which… [emphasises] the central role played by humanity in shaping the geology and the ecology of the Earth' (Baer, 2017, p. 433) or even the Capitalocene, 'a world ecology system ramped up with its reliance on cheap labour and cheap energy' (p. 434). McBrien confidently asserts that 'both recognise extinction but have yet to grasp its ontological significance' (McBrien, 2016, p. 116), viewing the two terms as not fit for purpose on the debate of humanity's existence and survival – and the threats posed to it – namely because the terms are 'less interested in naming culprits – be they "capitalism", "modernity" or "western thought"' (Horn & Bergthaller, 2019, p. 12). To counteract this, McBrien proposes a different name for our period: the Necrocene – '[placing] capitalism's death drive front and centre in the discussion of what produces ecological change' (Woods, 2019, p. 543). According to McBrien, capitalism 'necrotizes the entire planet' (2016, p. 116), is 'the Sixth Extinction personified' (2016, p. 116) and is therefore the destined cause of humanity's extinction, stating clearly 'Capitalism is extinction' (2016, p. 135). The Necrocene, then, is the notion that we are in a distinct period approaching a point of no return, threatening the very existence of the planet and of humanity as a species. The Necrocene is the coming apocalypse, and capitalism has brought us here as 'accumulation and extinction are the same process' (McBrien, 2016, p. 135). This article, through performing a close reading of T. S. Eliot's iconic modernist poem

'The Waste Land', explores how Eliot, through his own prejudices, experiences and artistic vision, illustrated the coming Necrocene age before the notion of it even existed by drawing links between capitalism and the recurring degradation in the poem, but also highlighting parallels between 'The Waste Land' and the biblical apocalypse in the Book of Revelation. Though McBrien states this geological period began in the 'post-World War II "Great Acceleration"' (2016, p. 119), this article explores the idea that the Necrocene, and awareness of its existence, came much earlier.

'The Waste Land', first published in 1922, is now known to be one of the definitive modernist works and, given that modernism is often defined as 'a reaction against the modern' (Menand, 1996, p. 554), it is indisputable that the poem would present criticism of modernity and modern society. Capitalism in all its forms (technological development and accumulation being two key elements of this within the poem) is intrinsically linked with modernity. The post-war boom, most well known in the United States throughout the 1920s (notably the decade in which 'The Waste Land' emerged) thrust capitalism to the forefront of humanness. Not only that, but new technologies 'changed the face of combat in World War I and ultimately accounted for an unprecedented loss of human life' (Library of Congress, 2022) in the years 1914–1918, years which immediately precede Eliot's work on 'The Waste Land' and sit in the earlier days of the modernist period. The National Air and Space Museum notes: 'The First World War… saw a breadth and scale of technological innovation of unprecedented impact [and that] manufacturing capability [was] as consequential as the skill of the troops on the battlefield' (2017), while David Edgerton asserts:

> 'clichés [such as] the idea that the First World War was a chemists' war (poison gas, explosives)… and the Second World War belonged to the physicists (radar, the atomic bomb)… are absurd: experts of all kinds were involved with the military in peacetime, and more so in war' (2014)

McBrien notes that catastrophism (defined as 'disruptions in ecological homeostasis, driven by… natural catastrophes' (2016, p. 121)), returned after 'the system of total war that matured across two world wars' (2016, p. 124), a mindset thus reignited by the existence of poison gases and bombs. Furthermore, the widespread use of new technology in day-to-day life grew exponentially in the decade in which Eliot unveiled his iconic poem: 'the fraction of US households with electricity connected nearly doubled between 1921 and 1929, from 35% to 68%' (Higgs, 2021). There is a clear link between modernity, against which Eliot and his contemporaries railed, and capitalism, thus the idea that 'The Waste Land' could perceive an apocalypse brought on by capitalist accumulation is both feasible and intriguing.

Throughout the poem, there are two angles taken by Eliot that feed into the notion that 'The Waste Land' pre-empted the idea of McBrien's Necrocene. The first is water as a symbol for capitalism. The second, less clearly, is the disdain with which Eliot represents consumption in the modern world. It seems counterintuitive to begin with the poem's fourth section, especially given the wealth of material before it and, comparatively, its short length (ten lines). However, 'IV. Death by Water' offers a clarity to that which precedes it, heightening the impact of the poem's final section, 'V. What the Thunder Said'. The opening line: 'Phlebas the Phoenician, a fortnight dead' (Eliot, 1980, p. 63, line 312), when married with the section's title, implies that water is the cause of his death. Carver states that water 'has a long history of suggesting motions of the market' (2020) and insists they are 'not the first critic to suspect capitalism of killing Phlebas' (2020). Though Carver's attempt to construct a 'socialist Eliot' (2020) is arguably wading too deep, the notion of the water itself, not just in 'IV. Death by Water' but throughout the entire poem, as representing capitalism is a convincing argument that becomes highly probable when considering the poem alongside McBrien's Necrocene. After all, Phlebas forgets 'the cry of gulls, and the deep seas swell/

And the profit and loss' (Eliot, 1980, p. 63, lines 313–14) as he '[rises] and [falls]' (p. 63, line 316) and '[enters] the whirlpool' (p. 63, line 318). Not only that but, in 'III. The Fire Sermon', 'The river sweats/Oil and tar' (p. 61, lines 66–7), a distinct merge between capitalism ('oil') and water ('the river'). Water has caused Phlebas' demise. Water has caused his mindlessness and passivity. Madame Sosostris states: 'Fear death by water' (p. 52, line 55) in the poem's first section, but she means fear death by capitalism.

Sosostris' claim here begat a whole new angle from which this poem can be explored as having pre-empted the Necrocene: through its distinct use of the apocalyptic genre. Ian Boxall asserts 'an apocalypse provides a narrative framework within which… a revelation can be described' (2002, p. 13). The revelation herein is the coming of the Necrocene age, and the use of the apocalyptic genre allows Eliot to explore this, '"uncovering" or "unveiling"' (Boxall, 2002, p. 13) it to the reader. Furthermore, Boxall claims that such revelations are 'normally attributed to an authoritative figure' (2022, p. 13). Sosostris' position as 'famous clairvoyante' (p. 52, line 43) suggests she bears such authority while simultaneously implying her ability to see the future. Hence, the coming of some of her warnings, most specifically the drawing of the card of the 'drowned Phoenecian sailor' (p. 52, line 47) and the command 'fear death by water' (p. 52, line 55) prompts the reader to decide whether they are to believe in these mystical powers of prediction. It is no coincidence, I am sure, that the end of the world in theological literature often features a seer or prophet, most famously John the Divine of the Book of Revelation – a theological text which Eliot subtly references throughout. Herein I will argue that 'The Waste Land' contains a variety of different prophets, hiding in plain sight as the varying characters and narrators of the poem's multiple fragmented scenes, by drawing parallels between the poem's prophets and John the Divine (selected for two reasons: the various references and parallels of Revelation throughout the poem and his worldwide notability as an apocalyptic prophet). This will further my assertion that this poem represents the coming (capitalist) apocalypse: the Necrocene.

Death by water: Eliot's metaphorical wastelands

The water in the poem, present in various ways, both surrounds and engages with the various fragmented scenes. The 'crowd flow[ing] over London bridge' (Eliot, 1980, p. 53, line 62) are 'workers on their way to the City district of London, the financial and business area' (Southam, 1994, p. 151). Nearing literal capitalism, with the symbolic water flowing beneath them, the people lack individuality and even, it seems, conscious thought: 'each man fixe[s] his eyes before his feet' (Eliot, 1980, p. 53, line 66). Eliot declares them 'a crowd' (p. 53, line 62) as opposed to individuals – akin to how Carey discusses the ideas of the intellectuals of the period, Eliot himself included, and their tendency to see 'the masses' (1992, p. 3) within the rapidly increasing population – a view that itself lacks individuality. The eyes fixed upon the feet suggest a mindlessness, that humanity are themselves part of the titular Waste Land, perhaps even representative of it. The presence of water here, too, is intriguing. London Bridge of course crosses the River Thames, and the distinct mindless passivity and absent individuality of the crowd when in close proximity with water concocts a clear image of how capitalism is degrading humanity. The use of the verb 'flowed' (Eliot, 1980, p. 53, line 62) cannot be accidental. A term connoting water, it envisions the people as one with it and hence as one with capitalism – with horrifying results. 'The implication [is] that London's crowds are not really alive… [corresponding] to Nietzsche's claim that… life in the modern state is really slow suicide' (Carey, 1992, p. 10). This implication is more than reasonable with regards the poem. Carey later quotes Orwell's *Keep The Aspidistra Flying* and implies it is the breakdown of capitalism that causes this: 'life under a decaying capitalism is meaningless' (1992, p. 10). While Eliot himself may have believed this, or at least perceived the decay of capitalism as causing the breakdown of culture, 'The Waste Land' conveys a very different meaning: that capitalism itself is the cause of the decay.

Madame Sosostris exists in this section as the poem's first named prophet (it is plausible that each section of the poem either contains or is narrated by a different prophet; each section appears to have a different narratorial voice and it is indisputable that they also featured wildly different characters. Sosostris, and later Tiresias and the Thunder, are the poem's only named prophets). Sosostris, the 'wisest woman in Europe' (Eliot, 1980, p. 52, line 45), provides a tarot reading for an unnamed narrator. Such a reading would of course require a monetary transaction, tying this scene (and by extension the visions and the contents of the visions) immediately to capitalism. Unlike Tiresias and the Thunder (who function as narrators and prophets simultaneously), Sosostris both sees visions and shares their contents with a character, who is addressed by her (through her dialogue) but curiously absent from the scene (including the character's words – we hear Sosostris respond, saying 'Thank you' (p. 52, line 57), but do not hear what the character says to prompt this response). Eliot crafts the poem in such a way, however, using second-person narration and direct address such as 'Here, said she,/ Is your card' (p. 52, lines 46–7) that the reader becomes this absent character-narrator for the duration of the scene and hence for the duration of the reading. For a time, then, Sosostris functions as more than merely a prophet, a John the Divine for Eliot's poem. Instead, she is the, in David Aune's words, 'angelic intermediary' (1998, p. 8): 'the 'revelation from Jesus Christ is dynamically described as "given" to [John] by God… "made known" to John through an angelic intermediary' (Aune, 1998, p. 8). With Sosostris' giving of the vision to the reader, the reader themselves becomes the prophet John, entangled in the poem's complex narrative. As John then communicates the vision he is shown to countless readers through his revelatory text, the reader is encouraged to pass on the message, the most explicit here being the command to 'fear death by water' (p. 52, line 55), to fear death by capitalism. After all, Revelation 1:3 insists 'blessed is he that readeth, and they that hear the words of this prophecy… for the time is at hand' (King James Bible, 1769/2017). Thus, the warnings of the poem, warnings of capitalist corrosion, become intertwined with the world outside the narrative, with the world we inhabit.

Alternatively, Sosostris can be perceived at the very least as representative of John the Divine herself. Both Sosostris and Tiresias (who we will explore later) use language that parallels John's language in Revelation, but Sosostris also describes visions that, before we reach the apocalyptic waste land of the poem's final section, come to pass. Firstly, Aune asserts that John has a 'typical audition word, "I heard"… [and]… vision phrases, "I saw, and behold"' (Aune, 1998, p. 389). One of Sosostris' many fragmented visions reads: 'I see crowds of people, walking round in a ring' (Eliot, 1980, p. 52, line 56). 'I see' is but a present tense construction of John's 'I saw'. Furthermore, Sosostris herself seems to have her own 'vision phrase', 'here is…' (p. 52, lines 46–7, 49, 51 & 52), used as she presents the various tarot cards. These cards, specifically the 'drowned Phoenician sailor' (p. 52, line 47), present visions that come to pass by the poem's end. Phlebas the Phoenician drowns in 'IV. Death by Water' (p. 63, lines 312–22). In one of the many scenes of 'II. A Game of Chess', a separate unnamed character remembers 'the pearls that were his eyes' (p. 55, line 126), which Sosostris attributes to Phlebas in her visions. We do not know the identity of 'the lady of the rocks' (p. 52, line 49), but the presence of rocks in the Waste Land in both 'I. The Burial of the Dead' and 'V. What the Thunder Said' cannot be coincidental. The presentation of 'the man with three staves' (p. 52, line 51) also comes to pass, but not quite as explicitly as other visions herein. Looking at Eliot's initial drafts, he annotates this line with 'fisher King' (Eliot, 1971, p. 9, no line), implying that the Fisher King's emergence at the poem's conclusion is what is being foretold with this card. Finally, though we never specifically meet a 'one-eyed Merchant' (p. 52, line 52), in 'III. The Fire Sermon', 'Mr. Eugenides, the Smyrna merchant' (p. 59, line 209) who speaks 'demotic French' (p. 59, line 212) seems all too eager to spend vast amounts of money, fuelling the capitalist machine (and further hurtling the world towards the Necrocene, the waste land at the poem's conclusion) as he

'luncheon[s] at the Cannon Street Hotel/ Followed by a week at the Metropole' (p. 59, lines 213–14).

Literal representations of capitalism, such as the aforementioned 'luncheon at the Cannon Street Hotel' (p.59, line 213) pervade this poem time and time again, but it is water, in numerous different ways, which is a recurring symbol throughout the poem and can be read, each time, as representative of capitalism. At the start of 'III. The Fire Sermon', a pastoral vision of the Thames – 'Sweet Thames, run softly, till I end my song' (Eliot, 1980, p. 58, line 176) – is juxtaposed with a modern capitalist image where 'the river carries the detritus of urban life' (Tonning et al., 2014, p. 35): the pastoral Thames 'bears no empty bottles, sandwich papers,/ Silk handkerchiefs, cardboard boxes, cigarette ends' (Eliot, 1980, p. 58, lines 177–8). This is one of the few areas where the symbol of capitalism and literal capitalism interweave, suggesting its polluting of society in a similar manner to which its presence pollutes the poem. Later in the section there is a 'public bar in Lower Thames Street' (p. 61, line 260), capitalist consumption married again with water. The colour violet is repeated four times in the poem, in 'III. The Fire Sermon' as 'the violet hour' (p. 59, lines 215 & 220) and in 'V. What the Thunder Said' with the 'violet air' (p. 65, line 372) and the 'violet light' (p. 66, line 379). Stacy Alaimo notes in *Prismatic Ecology: Ecotheory Beyond Green* that the 'violet-black ecology hovers in… the three regions of the deep seas, one thousand metres down' (Alaimo, 2013, p. 233). Even when water is not literally present, allusions such as this can be made to its lingering somewhere in the background, as capitalism is present in each line of the poem and in modern society as a whole.

Capitalism also surrounds the 'various sterile couples of "The Waste Land"' (Lucy, 1967, p. 143), namely the typist and the 'young man carbuncular' (Eliot, 1980, p. 60, line 231) and Lil and Albert in 'II. A Game of Chess', albeit capitalism appears with their relationship in a more literal form. Relating first to the latter, in 'III. The Fire Sermon', Eliot describes 'food in tins' (p. 59, line 223) and 'a record on the gramophone' (p. 60, line 256), elements surrounding perhaps the most robotic and unfeeling scene in the entire poem when 'the young man carbuncular' (p. 60, line 231) 'assaults at once' (p. 60, line 239) and, we presume, engages in sexual intercourse with the typist – who 'makes a welcome of indifference' (p. 60, line 242) to the action. The lack of feeling surrounding sexual intercourse, one of the most intimate things people can do, is worth noting: the typist has the 'half-formed thought' (p. 60, line 251) of 'Well now that's done: and I'm glad it's over' (p. 60, line 252). Here, the mindlessness and passivity of the crowd on London Bridge is present once again.

Of the capitalism surrounding this unfeeling scene, it is the tinned food that is of most interest. Carey notes a 'curiously persistent attribute [of the mass] is tinned food' (1992, p. 21), listing its presence in not only 'The Waste Land' but also in works by Forster, Hamsun, Betjeman, Orwell and Wells (1992, pp. 21–2). It is a collective derogatory way in which to characterise the masses, the working class, the poor. The use of the words and thus the effect of their connotations is clearly intentional, as Ezra Pound crosses out 'in tins' (Eliot, 1971, p. 45, line 131) in the original typescript, yet Eliot still includes it for publication in the final version – one of the few pieces of Pound's feedback ignored. It is also interesting to note Eliot's theory of the objective correlative, wherein he states, 'The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an "objective correlative"; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that *particular* emotion' (Eliot, 2020). The use of 'in tins' (Eliot, 1980, p. 59, line 223), then, perhaps exists to correlate an emotion, a feeling of distaste towards the masses. This analysis, however, fails to note that it is capitalist modernity that has led to the very creation of tinned food and other forms of mass consumption. A reading of 'The Waste Land' following the reading of Justin McBrien's *Accumulating Extinction* makes this link clear.

It is here, as the reader views the incident between the typist and her lover, that the second of three distinctive, named prophets appears. Tiresias, who identifies himself as the narrator of this scene,

stating, 'I Tiresias… perceived the scene, and foretold the rest' (Eliot, 1980, p. 60, lines 228–9). The phrasing of this statement bears similarity to that of John the Divine in the Book of Revelation who, in Chapter 6 alone, utilises 'three occurrences of his vision phrase, "I saw, and behold"' (Aune, 1998, p. 389). 'Perceived' is loosely synonymous with 'saw'; however, it offers up different senses through which Tiresias can explore the scene and 'fore[tell]' it to the reader. In the Book of Revelation, John often perceives aspects of his visions through more than one sense, namely in Revelation 1:12: 'I turned to see the voice that spake with me' (King James Bible, 1769/2017) – a situation in which he both hears and sees a voice, which defamiliarises the reader in a way not too different from how Eliot's erratic verse defamiliarises readers even now, one hundred years after its initial publication. Tiresias' broader perception of the scene, the vision, ensures this section of Eliot's poetry is, however, more tangible than the contents of the biblical apocalypse to which it bears similarity. It is the use of the word 'foretell' (p. 60, line 229) that makes explicit the visionary elements of this section, however, with its connotations of future prediction. This is furthered when Tiresias states 'I… have foresuffered all' (p. 60, line 243). Is this Tiresias admitting to viewing a future image, suffering this robotic, unfeeling, loveless scene in order to warn of it? It is certainly feasible. The choice of the word 'foresuffered' to describe his experiencing of this scene furthers the idea that such lack of human feeling and connection, such roboticness akin to those who stroll mindlessly across London Bridge earlier in the poem, is indeed negative, is indeed something humanity should wish to avoid and can avoid should they detach themselves from the tendrils of capitalism that envelop them from all sides.

The poem's most overt representation of consumption in the modern world is in 'II. A Game of Chess'. First, we meet an unnamed woman and, for the first 33 lines of the section, beautiful language is used to describe her. It is clear through this language that she is of high social class, and Rainey even considers that it could be based on Eliot's own wife Vivien (2005, pp. 104–05). She sits in a chair like a 'burnished throne' (Eliot, 1980, p. 54, line 77) by a 'sevenbranched candelabra' (p. 54, line 83). This person is envisioned quite obviously as elite and is made more attractive through the language and through the standard form the poem takes (juxtaposed with the second half of 'II. A Game of Chess', where the form is haphazard and the characters explicitly lower class). The original drafts of the poem show little amendments made to this particular section, proving a clear vision from Eliot from the beginning, a vision also supported by Pound, who refrains from crossing out large sections (Eliot, 1971, pp. 11–17). Nevertheless, this woman is not untouched by the corrosion of capitalist modernity, wearing 'strange synthetic perfumes' (Eliot, 1980, p. 54, line 87) and '[drowning] in the sense of odours' (p. 54, line 88) – the words 'strange' and 'drowned' having negative connotations. The latter harks back to the opening section and the warning from Madame Sosostris to 'Fear death by water' (p. 52, line 55). The link through the verb 'drowning' between the perfume and corrosive capitalism is stark.

This second section continues in an English pub, where lower-class characters are drinking and talking until closing time and the relationship between Lil and Albert is brought to the forefront. The scene continues explorations of social degradation, this time not pinning the blame on mass culture but on new technologies present in the modern world. 'You ought to be ashamed… to look so antique' (Eliot, 1980, p. 56, line 156) furthers Eliot's distaste towards the lower class and blames it on the modern ability to have abortions (Southam, 1994, p. 164): 'It's them pills I took, to bring it off' (Eliot, 1980, p. 56, line 159). These pills, of course, exist because of a key facet of capitalism, scientific development – the same facet that led to the use of poison gases in World War I. Even though abortions (and hence the pills themselves) would at the time of the poem's publication be illegal, they still existed due to the human ability to develop new technology and no doubt involved a monetary transaction. Not only that, but the repeated line 'HURRY UP PLEASE ITS [sic] TIME' (Eliot,

1980, pp. 56–7, lines 141, 153, 166, 168, 169) encourages the characters to leave the pub, where they have clearly remained until closing, consuming alcohol (consumption, in this case quite literally, being a cornerstone of capitalism). The haunting repetition of that phrase, which appears five times (and each time with seemingly increased anxiety) also raises questions in and of itself. Why does the phrase appear in capital letters, as if shouted? Nothing in the scene indicates that a raised voice would be necessary to remove the patrons from the pub. At the end, they leave quite willingly. Perhaps here we are seeing a terrifying warning of the coming of the end of time – the apocalypse as brought on by the very capitalism that keeps Lil and her friends drinking, that keeps the pub economically afloat (here again, in the very language required to explore such themes, is that linguistic link between capital and water). With this in mind, tracking through the scene again from beginning to end, we see capitalism surface over and over in conversation, interrupted time and time again by that fateful warning: 'HURRY UP PLEASE ITS TIME'. The narrator asserts: 'He'll want to know what you done with that money he gave you/ To get yourself some teeth' (p. 56, lines 143–4). Here we see money being used (or at least, intended to be used) to alter someone's appearance, to remove their teeth for a 'nice set' (p. 56, line 145). Though the benefits of dentures cannot be disputed, here we are seeing the necessity of monetary transaction for a person to be able to have a part of their body functional, an undeniable example of how capital has knotted itself around the human experience. Before this discussion, they are warned that 'ITS TIME' (p. 56, line 141). Afterwards, they are again warned that 'ITS TIME' (p. 56, line 152). After discussing abortion and Lil's acquisition of the pills from 'the Chemist' (p. 57, line 161), they are again warned that 'ITS TIME' (p. 57, line 165). Each time capitalism infringes upon their lives, they are warned.

Eliot's apocalypse: The literal wastelands of 'The Waste Land'

The poem does not contain only metaphorical wastelands; in fact, it begins and ends with a literal wasteland. In 'I. The Burial of the Dead', lines 19–30 introduce the titular Waste Land, split into two separate words in Eliot's title (thus propagating implications of wasted land, or land laid to waste, instead of merely barren land explicitly stated by the single-word noun form 'wasteland'). In the words of Parashar, 'The poem begins with ecological concern' (2015). The poem welcomes the reader into this Waste Land, much like how McBrien steeps us in the Necrocene with his opening declaration: 'Capital was born from extinction, and from capital, extinction has flowed.' (McBrien, 2016, p. 116). A first-person narrator invites the reader into 'the shadow of this red rock' (Eliot, 1980, p. 51, line 26) and states 'I will show you fear in a handful of dust' (p. 51, line 30). This reads as a direct warning to the reader, the narrator showing the reader the post-apocalypse similarly to how Sosostris showed the reader her visions. The 'handful of dust' is the world post-extinction as 'dust is the symbolic reminder to man of his bodily mortality' (Southam, 1994, p. 145). Not only that, but according to McBrien it is the buried dead (animals that have become extinct) and our subsequent exhuming of their remains that led to our discovery of extinction and started humanity, through use of fossil fuels, on their journey towards today's Necrocene age (McBrien, 2016, pp. 120–1). Eliot warns of this when he writes 'That corpse you planted last year in your garden/ Has it begun to sprout? Will it bloom this year?/ … keep the dog far hence… or with his nails he'll dig it up again' (Eliot, 1980, p. 53, lines 71–6). Humanity is the dog. The corpse blooming is oil.

The apocalyptic nature of Eliot's writing is equally obvious and subtle, alternating throughout, though original drafts show a more blatant link to the Christian apocalypse in The Revelation of John The Divine, Chapter 22: 'And I John saw these things and heard them' (King James Bible, 1769/2017) – a line echoed in an original typescript of the poem (and crossed out by Ezra Pound) – '(I John saw these things, and heard them)' (Eliot, 1971, p. 9, line 110). This frames Eliot's original intention to have at least some of the poem, likely lines 43–59 of the final version, narrated by John, the prophet who

envisions the Christian apocalypse. This is incredibly telling of Eliot's frame of mind at the time of writing and furthers the notion that the poem's various narrators are envisioned as prophets. Even without this line, readers and critics have still been immediately drawn to the poem's apocalyptic undertones. '[John Peale Bishop was] convinced that ['The Waste Land'] represents a certain reckoning with the modern world' (Rainey, 2005, p. 106) and, referring to the last section of the poem, Tonning believed that 'The thunder is an image of revelation' (Tonning et al., 2014, p. 47).

Eliot tells us right away that 'April is the cruellest month' (1980, p. 51, line 1) because it is then, when the flowers would usually bloom, that we are shown what we have lost. It is curious, however, that it is the beginning that offers the only respite from the darkness and apocalyptic nature of the poem. Between lines 8 and 18, there is only 'a shower of rain' (Eliot, 1980, p. 51, line 9) or, through our lens, only miniscule capitalist influence. The narrator (Marie) here reminisces on their childhood and, for only this brief time, the poem's tone is one of positivity: 'When we were children/…[the archduke] took me out on a sled/… He said Marie/ Marie, hold on tight. And down we went' (p. 51, lines 13–16). It cannot be a coincidence that when the poem explores the people that capitalism touches the least: children, who do not go to work, 'flow[ing] over London Bridge' (p. 53, line 62), who do not 'engage… in caresses/… unreproved… undesired' (p. 60, lines 237–8), this is the time when the summer comes, the time when the flowers bloom and, more specifically, the time when Eliot's world is the furthest it can be from his post-apocalyptic Waste Land.

The barren, lifeless land described at the poem's conclusion, when the titular Waste Land emerges, paints a picture not too different from how we would imagine a post-apocalyptic setting (indeed, it is not far from how such settings have been brought to life on cinema screens). Writing following World War I, however, Eliot will have been more likely to imagine France's scarred land in writing: 'you know only/ A heap of broken images' (Eliot, 1980, p. 51, lines 21–2) and 'the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,/ And the dry stone no sound of water' (p. 51, lines 23–4), land so damaged due to the 'technology [that] changed the face of combat in World War I' (Library of Congress, 2022). With that in mind, capitalism bearing some of the blame for the damage caused in World War I, and with water herein as capitalism, and the only place where there is no water being the post-apocalyptic titular Waste Land, McBrien's statement of 'life into death and death into capital' (McBrien, 2016, p. 117) is evoked. Life has been transferred into death through corrosive, destructive capitalism. McBrien's opening phrase of 'capital [is] born from extinction' (2016, p. 116), implies, however, that capitalism is destined to destructively return, as capitalism both comes from and causes extinction in an infinite destructive life cycle (McBrien crafts capital as a being rather than an abstract concept (2016, p. 117)). The return of capitalism from the extinction-riddled Waste Land is the apocalyptic storm in 'V. What the Thunder Said'. Capital has become death, and from that death capital is set to explode once more.

The Thunder itself is our third named prophet. The use of the verb in the past tense, 'said', in the title, 'V. What the Thunder Said' is curious when one considers Aune's assertion that 'Thunder is used… in Revelation… to characterise an extremely loud voice' (1998, p. 393) and that 'God's voice is frequently compared with the sound of thunder' (1998, p. 393). The idea of thunder having a voice is not a new feature – it is in fact ancient and inextricably linked with the coming of the end of time, as sent by God, as shown to John the Divine. The Thunder becomes our final prophet through the construction of the title, however. All that follows is framed as the words of the Thunder itself. This could be the word of God or merely an extremely loud apocalyptic, revelatory declaration. Regardless, it is the Thunder that imparts the final visions to the reader, just as John imparts his visions in Revelation.

When the rain comes it is all too easy to read it as nourishing the dry, wasted land, especially given the presence of the mythological Fisher King, 'a king whose impotence… has affected the fertility of

the land and reduced it to a barren wasteland' (Tonning et al., 2014, p. 34), in lines 423–5: 'I sat upon the shore/ Fishing, with the arid plain behind me/ Shall I at least set my lands in order?' (Eliot, 1980, p. 67). The Fisher King myth celebrates the coming storm almost as a Parousia. This Second Coming, however, brings with it the end of all things, just as Christ's return occurs against the backdrop of Armageddon in The Book of Revelation. Looking back on McBrien's opening statement that 'Capital was born from extinction, and from capital, extinction has flowed' (2016, p. 116) sheds light on the final section of Eliot's masterwork. Capitalism comes from extinction. Throughout the poem, capitalism has driven humanity to extinction and turned the world into the wasteland presented first in 'I. The Burial of the Dead' and again, here, in 'V. What the Thunder Said'. When humanity discovered extinction, discovered oil and fuel, capitalism grew from it. From that capitalism, extinction was born. Now extinction is achieved, capitalism is set to burst from it once again. This is the thunder and torrential rain at the end of the poem. This is what the Thunder said.

'He who was living is now dead/ We who were living are now dying' (Eliot, 1980, p. 64, lines 328–9) is one of the most tangible and frank statements in the entire poem. The first half, in the past tense, is admittance of this capitalist apocalypse, from which extinction (the wasteland, the 'stony places' (line 324)) has come. The second half, with its present tense assertion that some are still 'living' and hence are still 'dying' foreshadows the continuing cycle of capital into extinction and extinction into capital that defines the Necrocene. On a subtextual level, however, there is also a link between Eliot's 'The Waste Land' and the apocalyptic Book of Revelation. The creature which beckons John to Heaven, which instructs John to write his revelation, asserts in Revelation 1:18, 'I am he that liveth, and was dead' (King James Bible, 1769/2017). The first-person narrator of 'I. The Burial of the Dead' also asserts, curiously, 'I was neither/ Living nor dead' (p. 52, lines 39–40). If we remain steadfast in our analysis that each section of this poem, even each different fragmented scene, contains a different vision imparted by (often) a different prophet, the narrator-prophet of the section 'I. The Burial of the Dead' has here presented a vision which, when the Thunder tells us of the final apocalyptic end, has indeed come to pass.

The second stanza sees the Thunder present humanity's longing for water: 'if there were only water amongst the rock' (p. 64, line 338). Once again, a surface level interpretation sees the water as good, as nourishing. But if water is capital, this line presents human beings as so mindlessly entangled in capitalist ideals that they yearn for their own end. What is testament to humanity's entanglement with capitalism more than, reading this poem one hundred years after publication, the very world around us? We are obsessed with consumption more now than ever. The system has remained fixed for a century. 'Drip drop drip drop drop drop drop' (p. 65, line 357) sounds like a clock ticking time away. After all, as asserted in 'II. A Game of Chess', 'ITS TIME' (lines 141, 153, 166, 168, 169).

The mention again of the 'dry sterile thunder without rain' (p. 64, line 342) maintains the belief that capitalism (the water) is good, is nourishing, a belief the poem's conclusion will shatter. The apocalyptic end ebbs nearer. 'Who is the third who walks always beside you' (p. 65, line 359) is the 'return of God' (Southam, 1994, p. 188) – synonymous with the Christian apocalypse in the Book of Revelation. The 'hooded hordes' (p. 65, line 368) are the masses assembling for their 'reckoning' (Rainey, 2005, p. 106). It cannot be a coincidence that there are 'seals broken' (p. 67, line 408) as in Revelation, Chapter 6, when the lamb opens the four seals to summon the four horsemen of the apocalypse: 'when the Lamb opened one of the seals… I heard as it were the noise of thunder' (King James Bible, 1769/2017). In Revelation, the thunder scores the end of the world, but also assists in imparting the visions to John as the voice of God (Aune, 1998, p. 393). When the narrator asks 'What is the city over the mountains' (p. 65, line 371) is he seeing Babylon, as John the Divine sees in his visions? The 'falling towers' (p. 65, line 373) could

imply so, furthered by the frantic listing of five major cities: 'Jerusalem Athens Alexandria/Vienna London' (p. 65, lines 374–5). Are these cities that will fall in this capitalist apocalypse? After all, Babylon falls because of its 'wickedness' (Aune, 1998, p. 976). The wickedness herein is water, is capital. Or is he perhaps seeing the entrance to Heaven, also witnessed by John the Divine in that same vision? Regardless, both interpretations imply the coming of the end.

'London Bridge is falling down falling down falling down' (p. 67, line 426) into the Thames, the polluted Thames corrupted by capitalism at the start of 'III. The Fire Sermon', sweating 'oil and tar' (p. 61, line 267), the water that herein symbolises capitalism over and over. This furthers the link between the fallen Babylon and the fallen modern world. Society is collapsing into water, sinking into capitalism because of capitalism. Finally, a 'medley of languages displayed in [the] final lines' (Southam, 1994, p. 195) paints a final picture of the fragmentation of language, culture and society (p. 67, lines 427–9), again furthering the notion that the world is Babylon and that its wickedness, capital, is its destined destroyer.

Eliot concludes with three words and a prayer. 'Datta. Dayadhvam. Damyata.' (p. 67, line 432), meaning 'Give. Sympathise. Control.' (Southam, 1994, p. 198), reads like guidance, but it is the first word that is most curious. To give, for free, like charity, is the opposite of capitalism. Just as the Necrocene has yet to reach its apocalyptic conclusion, just as the prophetic pages of the Book of Revelation have yet to occur, the events of 'The Waste Land' are avoidable. The coming of the apocalyptic rain, when capitalism is again born from extinction (McBrien, 2016, p. 116), when capital again begins to hurtle us towards extinction, can be averted. In McBrien's own words: 'the human being can be decoupled from Capital. Capital is extinction. We are not' (McBrien, 2016, p. 135).

Conclusion

Maybe Eliot was conscious of his apocalyptic writing, or maybe he was translating his thoughts, feelings and experiences of the modern world around him into his work. Either way, it is feasible to read Eliot's 'The Waste Land' as pre-empting McBrien's Necrocene. The subtle links between the poem and the biblical Book of Revelation hint at an authorial frame of mind that was very much thinking of the end of the world, while the toxic presence of capitalism throughout, literally and symbolically, paints a dangerous picture of our accumulation and consumption that goes hand in hand with McBrien's theory. Eliot's various prophets, from Madame Sosostris to Tiresias to the Thunder, with various unnamed narrators and voices throughout, condemn a loveless, consumer-based world. His titular wasteland stands as a stark image for the world post-apocalypse, but also for a dead world looking to birth capital once more, looking to be reborn just to fall to the same fate. The world has already ended for countless extinct creatures, but it kept on spinning and life went on. This poem questions our naivety, our pride, our belief that humanity itself cannot become extinct. That our world cannot end. 'The Waste Land', bursting out of the modern world and out of the World War I, saw what was coming. Still, today, the poem screams a warning to a world more obsessed with accumulation than ever: 'Fear death by water' (p. 52, line 55), fear death by capitalism.

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