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Post-War Poetry: The Impact of the First World War in T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land" and Hope Mirrlees's *Paris*

Clare Patterson

The modernist poems "The Waste Land" (1922) and *Paris* (1919) both respond in oblique ways to the aftermath of the First World War, featuring prominent images of both death and societal decline as well as new growth and restoration. Through close readings which place these two texts within the post-war context and the poetic and literary responses of this period, I examine the ways in which T. S. Eliot and Hope Mirrlees combine emotional and societal responses to the First World War with wider conceptions of civilisation, myth, folklore and cultural history.

Both T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* and Hope Mirrlees's *Paris*, were published in the aftermath of the First World War; *The Waste Land* in 1922, and *Paris*, in Mirrlees's own words, in "Spring 1919".¹ While both of these works make few *direct* references to the war, the influence upon the cities inhabited by the narrators of these works, and upon the emotional states of the narrators themselves, can be profoundly felt. The trauma and destruction of war is present throughout, as both writers look to history and mythology to convey the modern experience of destruction and uncertainty, and to assimilate this trauma into the cultural consciousness. However, both works also offer a sense of hope engendered by the chance to rebuild, and by the potential for a pan-European future, exemplified by the multitude of languages and locations employed across both texts. Both texts are lengthy, intricate, difficult works in which their authors process and consider the long, complex, destructive power of The Great War at both a personal and political level, and come to a conclusion of uncertain hope for the future.

The dead appear, in one form or another, throughout these poems, from Eliot's "crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many/ I had not thought death had undone so many," to Mirrlees's "blue ghosts of Kingfishers".² These haunt the Seine, while "the ghost of Pere Lachaise" walks the streets. *Paris* opens with the metaphorical descent of the narrator into the underworld, as the chorus of "brekekekek coax coax", taken from Aristophanes' "The Frogs", doubles as onomatopoeia for the rattle of the metro carriages—in itself another kind of underworld, travelling deep underground and "passing under the Seine".³ The Seine here recalls another aspect of the classical underworld, which was accessed by crossing over the River Styx. Here, Mirrlees's narrator enters her underworld by crossing *under* the River Seine; a kind of spiritual recollection of the classical descent into the underworld. Her emphasis on classical mythology may be due in part to her relationship with classical scholar Jane Harrison, whose work focused on "ancient Greek ritual and its relation to art, and the powers of its female deities", and who is referenced and written to multiple times throughout the text.⁴ As with the frequent invocation of Jane, there is an invocation of history throughout Mirrlees's work. In 1926, Mirrlees herself writes "a swift, fleeting sense of the past is the nearest I have ever got to a

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¹ Hope Mirrlees, *Paris* (London: Hogarth, 1919), 22.

² T. S. Eliot, "The Waste Land," in *T.S. Eliot: Selected Poems*, (London: Faber and Faber, 2009), 40–55; Mirrlees, *Paris*, 14.

³ Mirrlees, *Paris*, 11, 3; Julia Briggs. "'Modernism's Lost Hope': Virginia Woolf, Hope Mirrlees and the Printing of Paris," in *Reading Virginia Woolf* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006) 84; Mirrlees, *Paris*, 3.

⁴ Briggs, "Modernism's Lost Hope", 84.

mystical experience,” and that “the written word [...] will never be superseded as the best means of telling us about the past”.⁵ In her invocation of the classical past, as well as many other histories later in the poem, she informs us that death and grief, though affecting and traumatic, are nothing new: Aristophanes’s world needed an underworld, just as modern France needs “an elegy for the war dead”.⁶ Eliot also borrows extensively from classical mythology in his contemplation of mortality. The epigraph to “The Waste Land” reads, in Latin and Greek:

Nam Sybillam quidem Cumis ego ipse oculis meis vidi in ampulla pendere, et cum illi
 pueri dicerent: Σίβυλλα τι θελεῖς; respondebat illa: ἀποθανεῖν θελω.⁷

This is taken from the *Satyricon*, written by Gaius Petronius in the late first century A.D. Eliot translates this as:

I saw with my own eyes the Sibyl at Cumae hanging in a cage, and when the boys
 said to her: ‘Sibyl, what do you want?’ she answered: ‘I want to die.’

The “Satyricon” tells the story of the Cumaean Sybil, who wished for eternal life but not eternal youth. While Mirrlees’s depictions of the dead tend to focus on the ephemeral and ghostly, death in Eliot’s portrayal is far more bodily; Mirrlees offers us ghosts in various forms, while Eliot asks “that corpse you planted last year in your garden/has it begun to sprout? Will it bloom this year?”⁸ While Mirrlees’s concern is for the supernatural soul, Eliot’s interest lies in the body’s decay, the bodily suffering of the soldiers who lost their lives in trench warfare; consider the body horror of Eliot’s imagery of “rat’s alley/where the dead men lost their bones” and the “current under sea/picked his bones in whispers” in relation to Wilfred Owen’s first-hand retelling of his experience in the trenches; “the white eyes writhing in his face/His hanging face, like a devil’s sick of sin”.⁹ While Mirrlees opens with a spiritual journey to the underworld, Eliot introduces us to an aged body, physically sick and suffering, desperately wishing to die but unable to. Here we have an example of what Paul Fussell calls Eliot’s “ironic pastoral”, juxtaposing natural, often floral imagery with images of decay; “breeding lilacs out of dead land” or J. Alfred Prufrock’s “evening [...] spread out against the sky/like a patient etherised upon a table”.¹⁰ Mirrlees employs this technique too, with “talk, talk, talk/manuring the white violets of the moon”.¹¹ As Melissa Boyde writes,

the sense of a city awakening from wartime is realised through images of spring: Lent, the first of May, lilies of the valley, horse-chestnuts and lilac. But above these images of regeneration the ‘April moon’ is ‘wicked [...] casting shadowy light.’¹²

⁵ Hope Mirrlees, “Listening to the Past”, *The Nation and Athenaeum* 39 (1926): 670.

⁶ Briggs, “Modernism’s Lost Hope”, 83.

⁷ Eliot, “The Waste Land”, 40.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 43.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 45, 53; Wilfred Owen, “Dulce Et Decorum Est,” in *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, 5th edn (New York and London: Norton and Co., 2005), 1387.

¹⁰ Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (London: Oxford University Press, 1975), 239; Eliot, “The Waste Land”, 41; T. S. Eliot, “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” in *T.S. Eliot: Selected Poems*, (London: Faber and Faber, 2009), 3.

¹¹ Mirrlees, “Paris”, 22.

¹² Melissa Boyde, “The Poet and the Ghosts Are Walking the Streets: Hope Mirrlees—Life and Poetry,” *Hecate*, 35 (2009): 35.

The imagery of flowers, spring and new growth, is twisted and intruded upon by images of the decaying, the obscene, and the wicked; the feeling of potential post-war regeneration is still imbued with the horror of war, and with uncertainty regarding what may come next. Both poets cast April as a negative force—for Eliot, “the cruellest month”, while for Mirrlees it is “the wicked April moon”, which she informs us in her notes is “supposed to have a malign influence on vegetation”.¹³ Here we have an aspect of the magical and the occult that permeates both of these works, a sense of “malign influence” that is beyond human control or understanding—for example, the representation of Eliot’s Madame Sosostris and her tarot pack and Mirrlees’s “invisible Magi”.¹⁴ Helen Williams notes “a common theme in Eliot and in this group was the problem of retaining fertility and spiritual awareness within the context of modern civilisation.”¹⁵ Mirrlees, as the author of *Paris*, though not American, can potentially be regarded as another of these “exiles”; as an anglophone and member of both “literary London and lesbian Paris”.¹⁶ Here we see how “spiritual awareness” can manifest itself in the modern city, but the spiritual forces of which the poets are aware seem to have an unpleasant, malignant quality, are “cruel” or “wicked”, and are presented as destructive forces. Here is a sense of the war as something enormous and unknowable, a hostile force beyond human understanding. This is comparable to the historic perception of natural disasters as “acts of God”, or the personification of the bubonic plague in medieval societies as a skeletal Death moving from town to town. There is a sense of the world being dragged almost against its will into the modern; and of spiritual forces being unsettled by this disturbance.

However, the effect of the dead in these works is not confined only to the ghostly and the spiritual: the intrusion of history into the contemporary cityscapes of Eliot and Mirrlees is a crucial element in their understanding of the war. Eliot himself remarked, for example, that “the current superstition that our epoch is Alexandrine, decadent, or disillusioned is parallel; there are no ‘disillusioned’ ages, only disillusioned individuals; and our time is just as deluded as any other.”¹⁷ This sense of history as repetitive across every era is pervasive throughout both poems. Eliot asks:

What is the city over the mountains
Cracks and reforms and bursts in the violet air
Falling towers
Jerusalem Athens Alexandria
Vienna London
Unreal¹⁸

Here we are presented with a kind of universal city, an amalgamation of all of history’s great cities into one, which continually falls and remakes itself in a cyclical fashion. The first three provide historical examples that have been besieged or destroyed in the past, most notably Alexandria, as the destruction of its library is often used symbolically to represent the loss of cultural knowledge between the Classical period and the Middle Ages. The last two, “Vienna London”, were the capitals of major powers on opposing sides of the war. Although both cities escaped the war relatively unscathed, the “crowd flowed over London Bridge” in which “death had undone so many” shows the destruction, if not of infrastructure, then certainly of population.¹⁹ Eliot describes in his notes on “The Waste Land”;

¹³ Eliot, “The Waste Land”, 41; Mirrlees, *Paris*, 14, 23.

¹⁴ Eliot, “The Waste Land”, 42; Mirrlees, “Paris”, 5.

¹⁵ Here referring to what Williams calls “the American ‘exiles’ (Gertrude Stein’s ‘Lost Generation’) in Paris”; Helen Williams. *T.S. Eliot: The Waste Land* (London: Edward Arnold, 1974), 12.

¹⁶ Boyle, “Life and Poetry”, 29.

¹⁷ Williams, *Eliot*, 8.

¹⁸ Eliot, “The Waste Land”, 55.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 43.

just as the one-eyed merchant, seller of currants, melts into the Phoenician Sailor, and the latter is not wholly distinct from Ferdinand Prince of Naples, so all the women are one woman, and the two sexes meet in Tiresias”.²⁰

Just as all people in the poem melt into one person, all cities in the poem melt into one city, all histories into one history in the same cycle of rise and fall.

Mirrlees, too, seems to be interested in this idea of history repeating—she presents her collection of imagined artworks in the Louvre:

Manet’s *Massacres des Jours de Juin*,
David’s *Prise de la Bastille*,
Poussin’s *Fronde*,
Hang in a quiet gallery²¹

These “[create] a historical sequence of acts of French political resistance, that extended from the strike of 1st May 1919, through “les journées de Juin” of 1848 (when the army rounded up, disarmed, and then shot protesters) and the revolution of 1789, to the popular rising of the Fronde in 1652”.²² This is Mirrlees’s portrait of France’s turbulent history, placing the 1919 strike—which took place around the time at which she wrote the poem—in the wider context of France’s historical revolutions. Just as Eliot’s collection of cities portray a world of empires in constant rise and fall, Mirrlees’s collection of fictional paintings portrays France in a state of constant revolution, of which the strike she is surrounded by is but a single aspect. The fictionalisation of these artworks is particularly interesting, especially when considering that the Louvre has no shortage of real depictions of revolution—yet Delacroix’s “Liberty Leading the People” does not appear in this poem alongside other genuine artworks she lists earlier: “The Pieta of Avignon, / L’Olympe”, among others.²³ This draws attention to the idea of civilisations creating their own narratives from their histories, and in a manner that is almost postmodern, Mirrlees draws attention to the fact that this is what she, as a poet, is also doing; noting with a hint of irony that “whatever happens, someday it will all look beautiful.”²⁴

Thus far, these poems have been discussed as a method of processing post-war trauma, however they also contain an aspect of positive outlook, which comes chiefly in the form of their use of language. Briggs describes Paris as being written in “the language of international modernism”, citing its bilingualism and use of “eccentric typographical features [in] its exploration of space and vision”.²⁵ The same is true of “The Waste Land”. The use of multiple languages and unusual formatting, frequently considered to be the height of innovation in modernist poetic technique, present a new kind of poetry that is as international as it is experimental.

Eliot cites two academic works on mythologies in his notes on “The Waste Land”: Jessie Weston’s *From Ritual to Romance* and James George Frazer’s *The Golden Bough*. The former investigates the relationship between the Pagan and Christian elements of the King Arthur legends, while the latter is a comparative study of multiple mythologies and religions, particularly looking at belief systems which “were linked with the life cycle, seasons, and most importantly, the vegetation cycle”.²⁶

²⁰ Ibid, 60.

²¹ Mirrlees, “Paris”, 15.

²² Briggs, “Modernism’s Lost Hope”, 86.

²³ Mirrlees, “Paris”, 8.

²⁴ Ibid, 15.

²⁵ Briggs, “Modernism’s Lost Hope”, 84.

²⁶ Williams, *Eliot*, 59.

Both seek to find common threads across disparate cultures in search of universal characteristics of human spirituality and belief. As Francesca Bugliani Knox notes, “if there are common features in different primitive rites, as Frazer ha[s] argued, then they all testi[fy] to a common spiritual longing and to the existence of the divine.”²⁷

This is crucial to our understanding of Eliot’s use of language, as he uses not only European languages (French, German, Latin, Greek) but also Sanskrit, through which he invokes aspects of Hindu tradition and mythology. This is particularly true in the final section of “The Waste Land”, “What The Thunder Said,” where the words “Datta. Dayadhvam. Damyata.” appear multiple times.²⁸ Eliot elaborates in his own notes as to the definitions of these words and his usage of them; “Datta, dayadhvam, damyata. (Give, sympathize, control). The fable of the meaning of the Thunder is found in the Brihadaranyaka—Upanishad.”²⁹ In said fable,

the supreme deity, Prajapati, gives instruction in the form of the syllable *Da*, which the Gods understand as ‘be restrained’ (damyata), humans as ‘give alms’ (datta), and demons as ‘have compassion’ (dayadhvam). All are correct, and a divine voice repeats the syllable with the force of thunder.³⁰

The incorporation of both language and religion from outside the Western world of thought into “The Waste Land” speaks of a kind of cross-cultural connection, a universal human experience, and the idea purported in both Weston and Frazer’s works that “the quest for the divine was an ineradicable feature of human experience”.³¹ The ideas of the Upanishad quoted are also relatively universal ideas across all world religions. For example, “give alms, have compassion, practice self-control” are tenets of Christianity just as much as they are of Hinduism. The jumbled languages, therefore, of the closing of “The Waste Land”, may not be the image of chaos and destruction that is at first suggested when “London Bridge is falling down, falling down, falling down.”³² Though we are left at first with a sense of closing comparable to death; the narrator of “The Waste Land” asks with finality, “can I at least set my lands in order?”³³ “Hieronymo’s mad againe”,³⁴ the subtitle of Thomas Kyd’s “The Spanish Tragedy,” recalls the central character’s murder-suicide, and the final two lines speak less of ending than of transcendence:

Datta. Dayadhvam. Damyata.
Shantih shantih shantih³⁵

meaning “Give. Empathise. Practice self-control”, and then a repeated mantra which Eliot translates as “the peace which passeth understanding”.³⁶ If this is a death or a eulogy, it is not one imbued with

²⁷ Francesca Bugliani Knox, “Between Fire and Fire: T.S. Eliot’s The Waste Land,” *The Heythrop Journal* 56 (2014): 236.

²⁸ Eliot, “The Waste Land”, 57.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 63.

³⁰ Margaret Ferguson, Mary Jo Salter, and Jon Stallworthy, *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, 5th edn. (New York and London: Norton and Co., 2005), 1355.

³¹ Knox, “Fire and Fire”, 236.

³² Eliot, “The Waste Land”, 57.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 64.

mourning or grief but of hope for transcendence. In essence what it says is “be kind; be at peace”.³⁷ In the context of the war, here is hope for some kind of rejuvenation after destruction, much like that of the belief systems collected in “The Golden Bough”, with its “numerous accounts of sacred kings who participate in the ritual drama of sacrifice that re-enacts the myth of the dying and reviving god”.³⁸ “The Waste Land” itself is “a ritual drama of sacrifice”, but here the dying and reviving God represents both the people and landscape of war-damaged Europe.

Paris begins with the declaration “I want a holophrase”, a term defined by Mirrlees’s muse Jane Harrison as “a primitive stage of language in which long words expressed complex relationships more fully and less analytically than in more developed languages”.³⁹ In other words, she seeks communication, and an ability to easily express complex things; what Briggs describes as “the search for a single word that might encompass the complex range of experiences the poem comprehends”.⁴⁰ This theme of ease and yet simultaneous difficulty of communication continues as the poem becomes bilingual:

NORD-SUD
ZIG-ZAG
LION NOIR
CACAO BLOOKER⁴¹

The capitalised French here denotes the signs and advertisements as the narrator enters the Nord-Sud Metro station, the other names being products advertised by the posters. The use of French continues throughout the poem in various forms; in snatches of conversation—“*vous descendes madame?*”—and in the commentary of the narrator—“*Le petit Jesus fait pipi*”.⁴² At times, a single word of French appears in an English sentence – “the silence of *la grève*”.⁴³ Briggs writes of Mirrlees’s use of French:

Paris creates its own gesture of reconciliation, its own commitment to Europe through language, by adopting a strange hybrid of English and French that is part of the process of breaking down national and cultural barriers, while also exploring the many similarities and differences of meaning and usage between the two languages.⁴⁴

The same applies to Eliot’s repeated use of numerous languages in “The Waste Land”; this mixing of the languages and cultures of Europe, the comparison of similarities, differences, and quirks is a conscious erosion of language barriers, an attempt at pan-European communication in rebuilding after the war. While Eliot uses a wider variety of languages in brief snatches, Mirrlees blends her two almost seamlessly, switching back and forth throughout the poem, and even mid-sentence. While Eliot makes occasional references to other languages, *Paris* can be considered a truly bilingual poem; Mirrlees moves effortlessly from one language to the other throughout, constantly inhabiting two linguistic spheres and blurring the edges of linguistic, and therefore cultural, difference.

³⁷ Ferguson, Salter and Stallworthy, *Norton Anthology*, 1355.

³⁸ John B. Vickery, *The Literary Impact of “The Golden Bough”* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1973), 214.

³⁹ Mirrlees, “Paris”, 3; Jane Ellen Harrison. *Themis: A Study of the Social Origins of Greek Religion* (London, Merlin Press, 1989), 473.

⁴⁰ Briggs, “Modernism’s Lost Hope”, 84.

⁴¹ Mirrlees, “Paris”, 3.

⁴² *Ibid*, 3, 9.

⁴³ *Ibid*, 14.

⁴⁴ Julia Briggs, “Hope Mirrlees and Continental Modernism” in *Gender in Modernism* ed. by Bonnie Kime Scott, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press 2007) 265.

It is not only with language, however, that Mirrlees makes innovation; she uses not only the words themselves but the *shape* of the words on the page to convey her poetry. A passage on the Jardins du Tulleries is shaped, for example, like the design of the gardens themselves, she writes “there is no lily of the valley” as a column, one letter per line, to mimic the shape of the long, thin lily stem on the page.⁴⁵ While a holophrase is perhaps out of reach, an image can communicate far more across language barriers than attempts at verbal communication. *Paris* is an example of this, and even wields a line of musical notation, stretching the limits of what a poem can be.

However, no image is more imbued with meaning than the last line of the poem; an image of the constellation of Ursa Major.⁴⁶ A private message between Mirrlees and Harrison, Mirrlees signed many other works with this secret dedication, the constellation “perpetually pointing towards the Pole Star at the highest point of the night sky—also stands for art’s aspiration to permanence”.⁴⁷ In a single image, Mirrlees combines personal intimacy, artistic aspiration, and political optimism. She may, in a manner of speaking, have found the holophrase that she was looking for.

Both *Paris* and “The Waste Land” are innovative modernist masterpieces. Pushing the boundaries of technique in both language and form, the influence of their experimentation is felt throughout modern poetry. In a society still left reeling from the aftermath of the Great War, the influence of contemporary narratives is deeply felt in both works also. These political and psychological legacies serve to shape the literary landscape of their era. Through their use of elegy, satire, dream sequence, and dramatic monologue, these complex and intriguing texts both define, and are defined by, the period in which they were written. The raw trauma of post-war society is constantly present in the *gothic* subtext of both works, from Mirrlees’s “ghost of Pere Lachaise” to Eliot’s “unreal city”.⁴⁸ However, so too is a hope for growth; in Eliot’s “dying and reviving Gods”, and Mirrlees’s search for something “outside the divisions of language”, both poets find, in their respective languages and mythologies, a vision of the future.⁴⁹ Just as the artworks of the Louvre “arise, serene and unetiolated, one by one from their subterranean sleep of five long years”, so too, in the wake of The Great War, does the innovative spirit of modernist poetry.⁵⁰ ■

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⁴⁵ Mirrlees, “Paris”, 4, 13–14.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁴⁷ Briggs, “Modernism’s Lost Hope”, 87.

⁴⁸ Mirrlees, “Paris”, 11; Eliot, “The Waste Land”, 49.

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