



**‘You ought to be ashamed’: Sexuality in Eliot’s *The Waste Land***

Alfie Goodwin

August 2025

---

*‘April is the cruellest month’ (Eliot I. l. 1)*

Sexuality (qua the capacity for sexual feelings and actions, that is) is depicted as a predominantly negative force in *The Waste Land*. For Eliot, it is a force of corruption and destruction insofar as it is complicit in perpetuating the monstrosity of cyclic existence, guilty of belonging to the ‘three unwholesome roots’<sup>1</sup> which lead to suffering and degradation (‘dukkha’) (Buswell and Lopez 28-29, 270-271), and horrifyingly capable of destroying the Self—though not in terms of transcendence, but in terms of regression. Eliot’s poem thus conveys a sense of carnal unease and loathing such as that expressed in poets like Baudelaire<sup>2</sup>, painters like Edvard Munch<sup>3</sup>, and, significantly, Buddhist philosophy.

Sexuality is primarily depicted as destructive insofar as it perpetuates the monstrous cycles of nature. ‘Reproduction’, remarks Georges Bataille, ‘only multiplies life in vain, multiplies it in order to offer it up to death whose ravages alone increase when life tries blindly to spread further’ (Bataille 232). Bataille’s sense of the monstrous futility of Nature’s cycles—of life spilling forth in rich profusion only to suffer, perish, and feed the next death-bound generation with their corpses—resonates in Eliot’s poem from the very start. In the first stanza, the budding fecundity of spring is associated with the fresh onslaught of sexual desire. Both spring and desire express and entail new and rich life, they are both balmy and fecund, and so this association is natural. However, Eliot makes the association even more explicit by describing the ‘spring rain’ (I. l. 4) of ‘April’ (I. l. 1) falling upon the ‘breeding’ (I. l. 1) ‘roots’ (I. l. 4), awakening ‘desire’ (I. l. 3), and leading the speaker to recollect memories of dates with a German in the ‘Hofgarten’ (I. l. 10) or ostensible sleigh rides in the mountain—‘I was frightened’, she recalls, then ‘[h]e said, Marie, | Marie’, and ‘down [they] went.’ (I. l. 15-16) This association tacitly implicates sexuality in perpetuating Nature’s cycles. The stanza’s content

---

<sup>1</sup> Viz., greed/craving (‘lobha’), hatred (‘dveṣa’), and delusion (‘moha’).

<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, ‘Un voyage à Cythère’.

<sup>3</sup> See ‘Puberty’ (1895), or ‘The Three Stages of Woman (Sphinx)’ (1894).

moves from ‘April’ (I. l. 1) to ‘summer’ (I. l. 8) and finally to ‘winter’ (I. l. 18), foregrounding the cycles of Nature and locating ‘desire’ (I. l. 3) at their (re)starting point. It is precisely because it embodies the lusty restarting of cyclic existence that ‘April is the cruellest month’ (I. l. 1). Such sentiments regarding sexuality’s perverse complicity in Nature’s cycles are consistent with Eliot’s sustained portrayal of obscenity in his poem. The Oxford English Dictionary links the word ‘obscenity’ back to the latin *obscenus*, meaning both ‘filthy and indecent’ and, importantly, ‘ill-omened’. Nowhere is the double significance of obscenity apprehended more fully than in *The Waste Land*, where obscene bodies are damningly depicted not only because of their ‘filthy’ and taboo nature, but also because they are ‘ill-omens’ of the continuation of cyclic existence. Whether the ‘young man carbuncular’ (III. l. 231), vulgar colloquy in the London pub (II. l. 139-172), Tiresias’ ‘wrinkled dugs’ (III. l. 228), barge-poles and fornications on the Thames (III. l. 266-299), or the ‘hearty female stench’ (Eliot 22-23) and prostitution (Eliot 4-5) included in the first drafts, obscenity must be read in this dual sense of ‘filthy’ and ‘ill-omened’. Eliot’s references to Buddhist asceticism in Part III are also expressions of the poem’s consistent loathing of the Flesh for its tendency to perpetuate cyclic existence, albeit in a different sense of the word. The title, ‘The Fire Sermon’, refers to the ‘Adittapariyayasutta’, a sermon spoken by the Buddha in which he describes how all of one’s ‘sense bases’ (sense organs), and all of their objects, are ‘burning’, notably with the fire of lust or greed (‘raga’/‘lobha’) which, if not dispelled by ‘sensory restraint’ (‘indriyasamvara’), inevitably leads to suffering (‘dukkha’), as well as to the perpetuation of one’s cyclic existence (‘samsara’), the constant cycle of rebirth into a mundane and miserable life (Buswell and Lopez 18, 693, 373, 270-271, 757-758). Eliot’s frantic incantation of ‘[b]urning burning burning burning’ (III. l. 308) following vignettes of vulgarities yielding to the flames of their desires, such as the ‘young man carbuncular’ (III. l.

231), obviously expresses the threat of 'raga' in perpetuating 'samsara'. Eliot thus sustains his concern over sexuality's destructive capacity in perpetuating miserable cyclic existence. But there is another, albeit linked, consequence of the conflagration of sexuality: suffering, 'dukkha'.

In *The Waste Land*, sexuality is figured as destructive insofar as it leads to suffering and degradation. In Buddhist thought, desire or lust ('raga') belongs to what are called the 'three unwholesome roots' or the 'roots of evil' ('akusalamula') (Buswell and Lopez 28-29). These lead to suffering, 'dukkha'. Rereading the first stanza in this context therefore proves fruitful. 'Dull roots' (I. l. 4) are stirred by the lusty 'spring' (I. l. 4), that is, the 'roots of evil' sprout, 'raga' returns: a state of affairs that is much worse than the frigid winter which, in contrast, 'kept us warm' with 'forgetful snow' (I. l. 5-6). Multiple vignettes in the poem substantiate this pattern of 'raga' leading to 'dukkha'. For example, the 'raga' of the 'young man carbuncular' (III. l. 231) inclines him to rape the typist, 'he assaults' (III. l. 239) and causes her suffering. As Rachel Potter remarks, the 'sexual interaction constitutes a supreme instance of psychic isolation, mired as it is in male violence and female fear' (Potter 140). Their psychic disjunction is also evident in his obvious concupiscence contrasted with her carnal 'indifference' (III. l. 242), or in his 'vanity' (III. l. 241), implying that he is not thinking of her in this situation but, perversely, himself, his own image, his own proud virility. His assault therefore leads to 'dukkha' inasmuch as it severs social bonds and thus perpetuates the alienation already endemic in urban mass society. Furthermore, Eliot's evocation of the King Tereus and Philomel myth, an exemplary example of 'raga' leading to 'dukkha' in that Tereus' lust leads to the rape and mutilation of Philomel, also emphasises the same bleak pattern in human experience. Additionally, Sweeney's 'raga' also leads to 'dukkha' in that it sustains the degradation of Madam Porter's prostitutes (III. l. 196-202). That Mrs. Porter's 'daughter[s]' (III. l. 200) are in fact prostitutes is signalled by

Eliot in the notes. He claims to have modelled the bathing of Mrs. Porter's 'daughter[s]' off of an Australian ballad which described the sordid ablutions of prostitutes (Asher 44). The degradation, the 'dukkha', of the prostitutes is not only evoked by the sordid nature of their ablutions, washing their 'feet' (III. l. 201) (or, in the original, their 'cunts') (Asher 44) with 'soda water' (III. l. 201), but also by the undignified polyphonic rhymes of 'Porter', 'daughter', and 'water' (III. l. 199-201) that assert the farcical and ridiculous nature of the scene and by extension of the prostitutes' existence. Finally, Eliot's allusion to vampires in Part V once again argues the threat of destructive sexuality, its capacity to corrupt and cause 'dukkha'. The 'bats' that 'crawled head downward down a blackened wall' (V. l. 379-381) are an allusion to the most infamous image in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, when Jonathan Harker sees the Count 'slowly emerge from the window and begin to crawl down the castle wall[...] *face down*' (Stoker 35). Vampires are emblematic of destructive sexual energy, they are 'demonic penetrator[s]' (Craft 111) whose embrace leads to death, madness, and 'dukkha'. Eliot's allusion thus reiterates the threat of 'raga', the 'evil root'. However, there is another consequence of vampiric penetration, namely, the transformation of an individual into a soulless monster, 'the erasure of the conventional and integral Self' (Craft 107). And this constitutes yet another reason why Eliot figures sexuality as profoundly destructive.

In *The Waste Land*, sexuality is depicted as a destructive force insofar as it is capable of destroying the human Self—not in terms of transcendence, but in those of regression. A prelude from Georges Bataille will elucidate Eliot's thinking:

The organs' plethora induces reactions alien to the normal run of human behaviour[...] A madness suddenly takes possession of a person. That madness is well known to us but we can easily picture the surprise of anyone who did not know

about it and who by some device witnessed unseen the passionate lovemaking of some woman who had struck him as particularly distinguished. He would think she was sick [...] Sickness is not putting it strongly enough, though; for the time being the personality is dead (Bataille 106).

Thus, when the typist relinquishes her albeit dispassionate fornications, even she must search herself in the mirror, she ‘turns and looks a moment in the glass’ (III. l. 249), retracing a momentarily suspended identity. Additionally, when the ‘hyacinth girl’ (I. l. 36) and her ostensible lover come back ‘late’ and ‘wet’ ‘from the hyacinth garden’ (I. l. 37-38) (‘Gather ye rosebuds while ye may’!) (Herrick 133-134), she ‘was neither | Living nor dead’ and ‘knew nothing’ (I. l. 39-40), that is, in a vacuous liminal state between life and death: death-in-life. Finally, Philomel’s rape, ‘[s]o rudely forced’, and transformation into a ‘nightingale’ (II. l. 100), as Rachel Potter notes, ‘is a moment in which sexual violence instigates a myth of human turning animal’ (Potter 140), and therefore once again evokes sexuality’s destructive capacity to regress and destroy the human Self.

It is clear, then, that Eliot’s *The Waste Land* depicts sexuality in a mainly negative light, figuring it as a profoundly destructive force capable of sustaining the monstrosity of cyclic existence, causing suffering, and regressing the Self. It has also been demonstrated that this depiction of sexuality is much influenced by ancient Buddhist thought and a philosophical perspective that is, in many ways, similar to that of George Bataille.

## Works Cited

- Asher, Kenneth. *T. S. Eliot and Ideology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.
- Bataille, Georges. *Eroticism*. Trans. Dalwood, Mary. London: Penguin Classics, 2012.
- Buswell, Robert E., and Lopez, Donald S., *The Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014.
- Craft, Christopher, “‘Kiss Me with Those Red Lips’: Gender and Inversion in Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*.” in *Representations*, no.8. California: University of California Press, 1984. Pp. 107-133. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2928560>.
- Eliot, Thomas Stearns, *T. S. Eliot: The Complete Poems and Plays*. London: Faber and Faber, 1969.
- Eliot, Thomas Stearns. *The Waste Land: a Facsimile and Transcript of the Original Drafts*. Ed. Valerie Eliot. San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1994.
- Herrick, Robert. ‘To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time’. In *The Oxford Book of English Verse*. Ed. Christopher Ricks. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999. Pp. 133-134.
- Potter, Rachel. ‘Gender and Obscenity in *The Waste Land*’. In *The Cambridge Companion to The Waste Land*. Ed. McIntire, Gabrielle. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015. Pp. 133-146.
- Stoker, Bram, *Dracula*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013.