

‘This Broken Jaw’: T. S. Eliot, Ern Malley and Australian Modern Art

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IN THE 20TH CENTURY THE EKPHRASTIC CONVERSATION BETWEEN SEEING AND SAYING, between *opsis* and *lexis*, really begins to swing (and I use the jazz metaphor advisedly).

Both visual and literary artists experimented with new languages, languages of fragmentation and reassembly born of cinema and experimental photography, telegraphy and radio, newspapers and advertising, of the shocking impact of industrial weaponry during the Great War, of the discomfiting interpretation of dreams in psychoanalysis, and of the awful reimagining of the physical universe in Einstein’s theories of relativity. Dada and surrealism’s clipped dialect of collage merged with the literary avant-garde’s symbolist, free verse and stream-of-consciousness tendencies to form a coherent (or deliberately incoherent) cultural domain.

Exemplar of this nexus is T. S. Eliot, whose work was first published in England in Wyndham Lewis’s vorticist organ *Blast*: his poems *Preludes* and *Rhapsody of a Windy Night* featured in the second edition of the magazine (*Blast* 48-51). Indeed, the early, *Prufrock* Eliot was one of those ‘New Poets’ famously denounced by

Arthur Waugh as ‘literary “Cubists”’ (Waugh 386).¹ As demonstrated in a recent exhibition at Turner Contemporary, Margate,² Eliot’s *The Waste Land* is something of a beacon of twentieth century Anglophone modernism, sweeping its light across the plastic as much as the literary littoral, with its themes and imagery picked out and reworked by Anglo painters such as Graham Sutherland and R. B. Kitaj in Britain, and Cy Twombly and Philip Guston in the United States. Over an extensive period, too: from Wyndham Lewis in the 1930s to David Jones in the 1950s, from Martin Rowson in the 1980s to Fiona Banner in the 2000s.

The exhibition *Journeys with ‘The Waste Land’* also featured a rather surprising inclusion: a Western Australian *wanda* shield. Through this object, the curators intended a reference to the eternal simultaneity of space-time in the Aboriginal Dreaming, comparing it to Eliot’s ‘continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity’ (Eliot, ‘Ulysses’ 483). Long exiled in the Powell-Cotton Museum at Birchington-on-Sea, the artefact also provided a reminder of the manifold and intimate connections between the culture of the British metropolis and those of its far-flung empire, both Indigenous and settler. As Eliot himself put it, in one of the choruses from *The Rock*:

The desert is not remote in southern tropics,
The desert is not only around the corner,
The desert is squeezed in the tube-train next to you,
The desert is in the heart of your brother.

Indeed, for the poet’s modernist brothers in the Antipodes, *The Waste Land* exercised a profound and lasting influence, and in art as much as in literature.

Although Eliot had been widely-noticed and often admired in local literary circles through the 1920s and 1930s, the blue-and-gold landscape conservatism of contemporary Australian painting and the largely purely formal—that is, post-impressionist and cubist—orientation of the oppositional *avant-garde* were such that his work does not register in the visual arts much before 1940. When it does, however, it is with a vengeance—in the work of the dark, irascible Albert Tucker. In an interview with Robin Hughes in 1994, Tucker declared that the poet was ‘one of the big formative figures of my life ... I encountered his poetry in the middle thirties and ... he’s been a dominant figure ... intermittently ... right through my life’. He went on to declare: ‘I’d say probably my first mature paintings emerged in

¹ Eliot is certainly represented cubistically by artists, as in Wyndham Lewis’s *T. S. Eliot* (1938, Durban Art Gallery), Patrick Heron’s portrait of 1949 (National Portrait Gallery, London), and Cecil Beaton’s triple-exposure photograph (1956, National Portrait Gallery, London).

² *Journeys with ‘The Waste Land’: A Visual Response to T.S. Eliot’s Poem*: Turner Contemporary, Margate, 3 February – 7 May 2018; Herbert Art Gallery, Coventry, 15 September – 18 November 2018. This exhibition was community-curated by local volunteers working under the guidance of Prof. Mike Tooby of Bath Spa University and Research Curator Trish Scott.

the late thirties and early forties and they were based very largely on ... images that came out of Eliot' (Tucker 9).

In Tucker's *The Futile City* (1940, Heide Museum of Modern Art), the expressionist-surrealist landscape draws its iconography directly from *The Hollow Men*. The skeleton and the sunset illustrate quite literally 'The supplication of a dead man's hand / Under the twinkle of a fading star', while in the lower right we see 'In this hollow valley / This broken jaw of our lost kingdoms'. *We Are the Dead Men* (1940, National Gallery of Australia), painted in the same year, even quotes from the poem in its title, as well as in the foreground figure of 'the Old Guy ... Headpiece filled with straw'. Tucker's conscious tribute is equally clear in the eponymous *The Waste Land* (1940, National Gallery of Australia), in which the landscape with its cliff of multi-storey buildings facing an ocean of mountains fortuitously suggests (to this writer at least, if perhaps not to the artist) the sea-front at Margate, where the poem had its beginnings.

Later, Tucker would name his son (by fellow-artist Joy Hester) Sweeney, after Eliot's *Sweeney Agonistes*, and even in his seventies the shadow of the poet persists, in an extended sequence of retrospective portraits that Tucker made of his Heide circle contemporaries. The title of this series—*Faces I Have Met*—is a direct allusion to the lines from *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*: 'There will be time, there will be time / To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet' (Tucker and Mollison).

While Tucker's references are direct, blunt, even, it is worth noting in passing that there is another, more obliquely Eliotic presence within the Heide circle. In their combination of a dessicated, classical sensibility with modernist assemblage technique, James McAuley and Harold Stewart's fictional Ern Malley poems in many ways echo both Eliot's bleak emotional tone and his liturgical linguistic cadences. Indeed, writing to Dorothy Auchterlonie a few years prior to the Malley affair, McAuley refers (self-)mockingly to his own 'usual Eliotism'. (McAuley) When the two conservative pranksters sent the poems to the editor of *Angry Penguins*, the self-described 'vain, erudite and stupid' Max Harris (McQueen 88) was both seduced and deceived, devoting the Autumn 1944 issue of the magazine to Malley's suite *The Darkening Ecliptic*. The hoax was exposed in June, but not before Malley, the vernacular and equivocal local Eliot, had already had his *Petit Testament* beautifully illustrated by that other vernacular and equivocal (though in his case *self-made*) fiction, Sidney Nolan (*Arabian Tree*, 1944, Heide Museum of Modern Art).

The Ern Malley saga has been rehearsed too many times to bear further elaboration here, but a couple of things are worth mentioning. First, it was evidently recognised by McAuley and Stewart that there is a fundamental, even

necessary, connection between the sister arts of poetry and painting. Throughout the brief sequence there are references to art: the immortal line 'I had read in books that art is not easy' (*Durer: Innsbruck, 1495*), with a second Durer reference in *Documentary Film*; 'I have remembered the chiaroscuro / of your naked breasts and loins' (*Perspective Lovesong*); and '... spurious seals upon / A Chinese landscape-roll' (*Palinode*). Furthermore, although Max Harris's immediate enthusiasm rendered any further teasing temptation unnecessary, the modernism-mockers had further cards up their sleeves, just in case; Stewart had created a series of Max Dupainesque soft-surrealist collages (1943, private collection), supposedly also by Ern Malley (Heyward 26-36).

The other issue is the reciprocity of animus and ambiguity. Tucker sketched an acerbic caricature of a pinched, uniformed McAuley, *Ern Malley disguised as James McCauley [sic]* (1945, National Gallery of Australia). More curiously, having in 1944 unknowingly painted an image from a fraudulent concoction, thirty years later Nolan knowingly produces his own portrait of the fictional poet. To complicate matters still further—particularly in the light of McAuley and Stewart's military service and his own desertion—the *Portrait of Ern Malley* (1973, Art Gallery of South Australia) is strongly reminiscent of Nolan's *Gallipoli* series of 1955, itself an exploration of the nexus of myth and reality.

Eliot was evidently on the reading list at Murrumbidgee in this period, too: John Perceval made a series of *Waste Land* drawings (1940-42, National Gallery of Australia), and it is arguable that in Arthur Boyd's grand and tragic *The King (The Deluge)* (1944, National Gallery of Australia) the eponymous subject is in part a personification of *The Waste Land's* Fisher King.

After the war, gallerist and collector William Ohly's edge-of-London art commune The Abbey Art Centre was much frequented by expatriate Australians, amongst them Bernard Smith, Noel Counihan, Leonard French and Grahame King. There, in 1948, the sculptor Robert Klippel and the painter James Gleeson combined forces to produce *No. 35 Madame Sophie Sosostoris: A Pre-raphaelite Satire*. Politely surrealist, this little modernist totem shows *The Waste Land's* 'famous clairvoyante' as a sulky Pre-Raphaelite damsel in an organic-mechanistic egg cup; in a crowning gesture, she is laurelled with Prufrock's 'pair of ragged claws'.

Gleeson, of course, having poetic urges and ambitions of his own, was already under the master's spell; when the art publisher Lou Klepac asked him in old age to recall the dozen or so books and authors that were most important to him by his mid-twenties, Eliot headed the list. (Klepac 16)³ No doubt Eliot's 1948 Nobel

³ Eliot was the first of several poets nominated by the artist, the others being W. H. Auden, the Sitwells and Ezra Pound.

Prize for Literature reinforced this early devotion. Back in Australia a couple of years later, a further *The Waste Land* image washed up on the strand of Gleeson's consciousness: the drowned *Phlebas the Phoenician* (1951, private collection), a mottled, surrealist *écorché*.

Another well-known wasted exotic, from the poem's 'The Fire Sermon' section, is 'Mr Eugenides, the Smyrna merchant / Unshaven, with a pocket full of currants'. This dissipated character appears in two major paintings by Jeffrey Smart: *T. S. Eugenides, Piraeus* (1970-71, private collection) and *Mr T. S. Eugenides, Morning, Shaftesbury Avenue* (1978, private collection), the Eliot connection being underscored by the addition of Thomas Stearns' initials. These works clearly signal Smart's intense admiration for the poet, which is almost as strong as Tucker's. Recalling his first encounter with Eliot's *Preludes*, Smart writes: 'It seemed that all poetry I had read before was about roses in the spring, sparkling dew, billabongs and gum trees and daffodils. But here were phrases like "newspapers from vacant lots", which was authentic poetry with images I could accept immediately, and "His soul stretched tight across the skies / That fade behind a city block" ... they provided me with images of urban life that were valid' (Smart 69, 70).

As well as the appeal of its contemporary, metropolitan subject matter, the poet's astringent formalism provided Smart with a vindication of his own 'timeless', classical approach to composition. The well-known passage from the *Four Quartets*:

... Only by the form, the pattern,
Can words or music reach
The stillness, as a Chinese jar still
Moves perpetually in its stillness

could serve as a declaration of the painter's aesthetic intent. But there are other, subtler suggestions, too: an early painting which might otherwise seem simply to be regionalist reportage bears the title *The Waste Land II* (1945, Art Gallery of New South Wales), while in a much later work, *The red warehouse* (2003, private collection), we can read the opening lines of *Burnt Norton* on a poster stuck to a light pole:

Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future
And time future contained in time past.
If all time is eternally present
All time is unredeemable.

Sometimes the Eliot influence is not so much a matter of iconography as of mood. John Brack, who, like Gleeson, harboured poetic ambitions, once described the flow of commuters in his celebrated *Collins St., 5 pm* (1955, National Gallery of Victoria) as having taken its affective colour from *The Waste Land*'s lines: 'Under the brown fog of a winter dawn, / A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many, / I had not thought death had undone so many' (Grant 102).

Another mid-modern artist, the eccentric Edwin Tanner, shared both Brack's ironic sensibility and his crisp graphic style. A great friend of Tasmanian poet Gwen Harwood and no mean versifier himself, Tanner acknowledged a debt to Eliot in a number of works. *The Hollow Men* (1966, private collection) renders its and Eliot's title literally, punningly, presenting humanity as a cartoonish posse of pipes or whistles on wheels. Developing both the homage (this time with a reference to the *Four Quartets*) and the pun, in *Fare Forward Voyagers. Homage to Eliot* (1966-67, private collection) Tanner turns these figures through 90 degrees so that they become horizontally-racing traffic. A few years later he once again quotes from 'The Dry Salvages' in the title of one of his subtle, minimal-gestural pastels *I think that the river is a strong brown god—sullen, untamed and intractable*, adding the cheeky postscript (at the time he was living in Melbourne, with its famously upside-down-brown River Yarra): *'but wholly devoid of fish'* (1972, private collection).

That title of the third of the *Four Quartets* seems to have exercised a particular attraction for Australian artists—perhaps it is the associations with the national *mythos*, with droughts and making do. Whatever the motivation, *Dry Salvages* has been appropriated for two very different abstract works of art: the first an architectonic-expressive oil painting by John Olsen (1956, Art Gallery of New South Wales), and the second a madcap mixed-media assemblage in full Annandale Imitation Realist mode by Colin Lanceley (1963, Art Gallery of New South Wales). Later, during his years living in London, Lanceley returned to Eliot for inspiration, producing *The Wasteland [sic]* (1975), a suite of lithographs made at the Kelpra Studio which illustrates (in a quasi-surrealist style simultaneously evocative of Kitaj, Francis Bacon and David Hockney) each of the poem's five sections.

The above is not a complete catalogue of *Eliotiana Australiana*, of course, but more than enough to indicate the profound influence that the American-British poet exercised on Australian painting from the middle of the twentieth century, his 'nervous juxtapositions' (Wallace-Crabbe) licensing a wide range of expressive pictorial strategies.

Moreover, he continues to inspire. Rick Amor's several paintings and etchings of *The Anteroom* (c. 1993-2002) were prompted by a single line from *Sweeney Among*

the Nightingales: 'The host with someone indistinct / Converses at the door apart'. More direct is Gareth Sansom's *Sweeney Agonistes* triptych (2005, collection of the artist). This painting in part refers to Bacon's *Triptych* of 1967, a painting which was in turn inspired by the same poem. It also incorporates as one of its collage elements a 1975 photograph by Sansom himself of Sweeney Reed, who (as noted previously) was Albert Tucker and Joy Hester's child, adopted by John and Sunday Reed. Sweeney was Sansom's dealer for several years in the early 1970s. Finally, and even more recently, the late Brian McKay made a self-portrait for his 2011 Bunbury Regional Art Galleries retrospective, a photographic image overlaid with text from *The Hollow Men* which could well serve as a motto for ongoing research into the influence of *poesis* on *pictura* in the modern and contemporary space: 'And the end of our exploring / Will be to arrive / Where we started / And to know the place for the first time'.

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