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Art and Ideas

### Relating to One Another: the Power of Shared Experience

“Dayadhvam<sup>1</sup>: *I have heard the key  
Turn in the door once and turn once only  
We think of the key, each in his prison  
Thinking of the key, each confirms a prison*”

~T.S. Eliot, *The Wasteland*

In prison, alone. Such is the human condition according to T.S. Eliot in his post World War I poem *The Wasteland*. Our isolation makes any sort of meaningful relationship impossible, and after The Great War, communication too became fruitless. Indeed, even today John Berger holds that our perception of the world occurs in a deeply individual way, that “our vision [perception] is continually holding things in a circle around itself, constituting what is present to us as we are,” as opposed to what is present to others given the same stimulus (Berger 9). This notion that “we never look at just one thing; we are always looking at the relation between things and ourselves” helps illuminate many of the themes of *The Wasteland*, the poem as well as the performance directed by Dan Sacks because of its deficiency (Berger 9). Berger’s proposition leaves room for a disconnect between people – for what if, between two people, the way the first relates to the second does not line up with the way the second relates to the first? I shall call this the Bergerian deficiency. Post war, people wanted to communicate, to break out of their prisons, but it proved exceedingly difficult, and *The Wasteland* offered a different approach to communication. By examining the relationships formed in the poem and the performance, we can see how both Eliot and Sacks tried to communicate in spite of the deeply personal and alienating experience of perception. Berger’s analysis of relationships, that how we see them is irreconcilable with how they see us, sets up a rift visible in all the relationships created in *The Wasteland*: between audience and action, actor and actor, and theme and our lives. T.S.

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<sup>1</sup> Dayadhvam is the advice given by Prajapati in the Upanishads to the devil: show mercy and relate to others.

Eliot and Daniel Sacks get around this deficiency and develop a meaningful interpersonal connection in *The Wasteland* by causing the audience to *experience* rather than “relate to” the action in a revolutionary new way.

In the performance, the relationships between audience and action draw the audience in to the performance almost in spite of themselves, breaking down Berger’s dichotomy between “thing” and “self,” notably through the use of brooms, lighting, sound, curtains, and language. To open the play, a man walks out sweeping the stage clean with a broom. An unconventional performance act, this shows two things: first, the audience will be witnessing something behind the scenes and beneath the surface, something not usually performed, but rather experienced after the masses have gone. Second, the audience feels a part of the dirty environment – if that area needs to be cleaned, so does the rest of the room. The next scene depicts a woman, curious and alone, exploring a light. She tries three times to touch it, getting shocked each time and withdrawing into a very self-contained dance of pain. The audience perceives her, but would not progress past a brief moment of empathy if they were not involved somehow in her emotion. Sacks achieves this involvement through keen use of lighting and sound, both of which disorient the audience, deemphasize the plot, and highlight perspective, mood, and feeling, causing viewers to *feel* with the dancer, allowing the dancer to move past the first dimension of perception into the next stage of relationship. By involving the audience, they don’t just see the relation between the dancer and their life, rather they have an actual connection, an understanding. Too often in *The Wasteland*, this understanding is lost.

Continuing with the scene, the woman wanders back into the stage, losing herself in some curtains and pushing her way around others, getting deeper and more lost. The audience feels lost and confused with her, wondering where the curtains will end and just how big the stage is. The curtains let them see only snippets of the struggle, yet help them understand it better than if the actor just said “I am struggling.” They both illuminate and conceal, showing a paradox of life –

whenever one learns new knowledge, it complicates old knowledge. Were the dancer just to show she was lost through dance, the audience would have perceived her, and even seen the relation between her being lost and their own lives, perhaps remembering a time they themselves were lost, but by experiencing her disorientation with her, the audience has again formed this connection that solves the Bergerian deficiency, where the seer and the seen do not have to question how the latter sees the first and vice versa because they are one. Finally, and in a different way, the use of French in the opening movie clip from *The Wizard of Oz* brings the audience into the story in a unique way. As they could not enter into the narrative in the way they are used to, the audience had to find a new way. Brecht describes this as the alienation effect, a phenomenon that pushes a viewer back in one way so s/he can enter in another. In this case, it forces us to forget whatever connections we would have made between our past and the movie and instead form new connections in the present with the new stimulus. That is the whole point of the interaction between the audience and the action – to force them to experience things in the present, free from external judgment, so that real relationships can be formed rather than ones influenced by one's own personal past and bias.

In the poem, the relationship between reader and text performs a similar role, one very similar to another post war art form, Dadaism. Although *The Wasteland* is not Dada art, it uses many of the same techniques, especially the de-emphasis of language, sounds, disorientation, and seemingly non-sequitur transitions. First, it uses sound as a universal language. The bird sounds, such as “jug jug,” “twit twit twit,” and “tereu,” as well as a line about children singing follow a section about a Sweeney “rudely forcing” sex from another woman, and help to bring the reader to a calmer internal state. No words were involved, thus the resulting feeling is a deeper soul-to-soul connection. By deemphasizing the language like the Dadaists, Eliot closed off the option to look at the relationship between the bird singing and ourselves, instead forcing us to experience it. Another use of sound to connect with the reader in a way that transcends analysis is through the

Shakespearian O, “so elegant, so intelligent” (Eliot 42). The one letter has no definition, nothing to relate to, yet Eliot uses it in many different situations. The reader has no choice, then, to be actively involved in the definition of the O, again closing the gap between thing and self.

Berger’s quote applies not only to ourselves but also to an interaction between two strangers, they contextualize everything to their lives too. In Sacks’ performance, the relationships between actors themselves portray loneliness and show a desire yet an inability to communicate. For example, the movement between dancers is all very intertwined, especially the lifts in partner dances, showing humanities interdependence. In one scene, there were three different sets of people on the stage: one couple dancing, one woman solo dancing, and one woman watching them, motionless. The partners, although very entwined in the other still seem isolated from each other, capturing the feel of the poem. The dancers were unable to relate to one another, saw no entrances from one soul to the other, even though they were very intimate. One notable solo featured a man dancing alone in the starlight. There was a lot of lying down and standing up, perhaps representative of the vicissitudes of life. The man had to complete the dance by himself, even though there were others around him. That they did not join in shows that they had a very Bergerian relationship – the spectators were not in touch with the solo dancer. Even though they had related to him, he had not related to them in the same way, and thus a typical post-war relationship was formed, one without true understanding.

In the poem as well the interactions between characters reveal a lot about their situations and deeper feelings. Consider the scene with a “neurotic wife sitting in the parlor with her recalcitrant husband,” as Mary Karr describes it (Karr xxiv), in which the wife yells at the husband to “speak to me. Why do you never speak? Speak. What are you thinking of? What thinking? What? I never know what you are thinking. Think” (Eliot 41) Her insistence shows a disconnect between her husband and her, and Mary Karr describes the scene as full of “starved sterility” with an ironically

“calm surface” (Karr xxiv). She cannot understand him because she cannot relate to him. Her way of seeing, from a Bergerian perspective, limits her from forming a relationship because she has no common ground on which to form a relation between the thing (her husband) and herself. Her husband further shows this disconnect as he reveals he thinks “we are in rats’ alley Where the dead men lost their bones” (Eliot 41). Such a disconnect comes through strongly in the poem and characterized post-war isolation.

Another such interaction features a man walking down the barren, lifeless banks of the river Thames. This relationship, between character and environment, again shows relationships to be a whirling, personal black hole, but also shows how necessary they are, and that humans need more empathy, more *dayadhvam*, to break free from the mental prison that holds them. The setting emphasizes the bleakness of the scene – the “wind crosses the brown land, unheard,” the “nymphs are departed,” and the river bears no sign of life, past or present, as the leaves have fallen and the trash is gone (Eliot 43-44). It is beside this river that the narrator “sat down and wept...” and cried “Sweet Thames, run softly till I end my song, Sweet Thames, run softly, for I speak not loud or long” (Eliot 44). The narrator wants desperately to relate to someone, but in a valley of death can find no one. In fact, when a rat finally creeps through the river valley, the narrator smiles broadly because he can relate to life. His relationship with the environment is founded on his desire for life and to connect with others but is unable to, a recurring theme of the poem.

A final example of the Bergerian deficiency between characters comes with the Tiresias’ envisioned lovemaking in the poem. Tiresias feels the pain brought upon by a vain man violating an indifferent woman. The way the woman relates to the man bears no resemblance to how he relates to her. Their relationship has nothing, as they make no connections beyond the physical. Afterwards, the woman “turns and looks a moment in the glass, hardly aware of her departed lover” (Eliot 46). Tiresias, a prophet, shows that one does not need sight or anything physical to relate to

another. People must connect on an emotional level; only then will they begin to understand the world as he does. Even with this new emotional knowledge, though, some secrets still cannot be seen, such as what the one eyed merchant carries on his back (Eliot 39).

Those three examples of interactions between two characters all show a disconnect between the perceived and the perceiver. How can we now esoterically relate the play and poem to our lives? By examining the use of allusion and the mask and mirror scene we can appropriately address this relationship. With respect to allusion, the poem itself is Eliot's relationship with the events and stories alluded to and himself. By recontextualizing this old knowledge, however, he has made connections where previously there were none, mixing the classics as Girl Talk might mix rap music today. While some of the allusions help reader form new connections, others in fact alienate them. The allusions are in fact one last great method by which Eliot involves the readers in the poem – by alienating them, he makes them feel the disconnect that so many experienced between sensory input and meaning. While Berger is right, we make connections between things and ourselves, when the “things” are as inaccessible as the Sibyl quote Eliot opens with, we can only relate to the feeling of not relating. *The Wasteland* primarily deals with showing a need for true relationships by letting the reader experience ones that are Bergerian in the sense that the seer and the seen are inherently different.

So if everything is a relationship between content and us, how can we form meaningful relationships? The ending of both the play and the poem help us answer this. What exactly happens behind a mirror? While the woman thought she was looking at a reflection of herself, hidden just beneath the surface were these masked strangers. The masked men clean her house in a very strange ritual as she writes on the mirror in lipstick. In the end, she sits down with the monsters as a black void takes them over. While this is loaded with symbolism, this scene makes two main points. The first involves the idea that there is nothing in the sacred secret center – no man behind the curtain.

Second, the relationship between the woman and these masked people is the first real relationship in the whole play. They are not trying to relate to one another or explain themselves through words, rather they are experiencing life together, the grandest adventure one can undertake. In a post-war world, life seems to stop being experienced and starts to be dissected by psychologists and meaning gets lost. By sitting down with them, she restored meaning to human interaction.

The end of the poem has a similar message – you may think Eliot mad, just like Hieronymo, but he is not. By accompanying Eliot on the journey through his poem, we have shared an experience with him and thus formed a relationship. Rather than perceiving him then deciding how he relates to us, contextualizing him in our life, as Berger might suggest we do, we come away having constructed some whole out of the fragments of a journey that we went on while reading the poem. We must learn to let go of a desire for meaning from an external source. Like enlightenment, that cannot be explained, the only way to get to the destination, the only way to get Dorothy back to Kansas, is to take her ourselves.

Mary Karr ends her introduction to the poem by writing “reading the poem gives me the conviction to live my life, not with the despair and angst rendered, but with the alertness the poem demands. People spend hundreds of thousands of dollars in therapy for the same fusion of inner self and outer experience” (Karr xxvi). It is this fusion that, when shared, connects humans to each other. Berger, in *Ways of Seeing*, proposes that we look at how things relate to ourselves, and our perception changes as we change. *The Wasteland*, however, shows that when people treat perception as such a personal thing it alienates one from another, and we must connect in new, more direct ways if we are ever to be wholly human, with the peace that passeth understanding,

*Shantih Shantih Shantih.* (Eliot 51)