

Research Article

Where the Rain Fails to Fall: Hydrological, Energetic, and Commercial Circuits in T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*

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Abstract

Critical readings of T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922) have generally treated the poem's landscape as a symbol of spiritual or cultural desiccation, and sustained ecocritical attention to its material ecologies remains scarce. This article argues that the poem is organised less around a single symbol of drought than around the interruption of three material circuits: the water cycle, the combustion of fuel, and the movement of commodities. Using hydro-elemental reading, a method of close reading that tracks the states of water, fire, and exchange across the poem's five Parts, the study shows how each circuit fails in a distinct way and how the failures compound. It then introduces two concepts. "Semiotic drought" names the condition in which signs proliferate as the material things they promise recede. "Monsoon hermeneutics" names the practice of reading Part V against the pre-monsoon climate of the Gangetic plain to which its Sanskrit thunder refers. The final section reads *Datta*, *Dayadhvam*, *Damyata* as a compressed ethics of reciprocity, interdependence, and restraint. The article contends that the poem registers conditions that later Anthropocene frameworks help us read, while offering a South Asian vantage from which its ecological argument becomes newly legible.

Keywords

T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*, ecocriticism, hydrology, Anthropocene, monsoon

1. Introduction

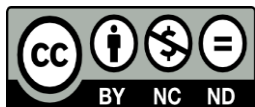
When T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* appeared in *The Criterion* and *The Dial* in late 1922, its first readers found in it a diagnosis of postwar Europe: a civilisation whose myths could no longer organise experience. For most of the century that

followed, criticism kept faith with that diagnosis (see, for example, Leavis; Brooks). The wasteland was a metaphor, the drought a symbol, the river a figure for something else. What the poem's dust, sewage, gas, rain, and rivers might tell us

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about the material world of which they are part received far less attention, and sustained ecocritical accounts of its material circuits remain scarce. This article argues that such attention is overdue and that it changes what we understand the poem to be saying.

The neglect has a history. Early ecocriticism, as codified in Glotfelty and Fromm's reader and in Buell's *The Environmental Imagination*, gravitated toward nature writing and Romantic poetry, texts in which nonhuman nature is visibly present and valued. Modernist urban poetry, with its cities, commodities, and fractured voices, appeared to lie outside the field or even to be its antagonist. Recent ecocriticism has shifted its ground. Heise's call for a "sense of planet," Nixon's account of slow violence, Morton's hyperobjects, the material turn associated with Alaimo and Bennett, and Bristow's work on the Anthropocene lyric make it possible to ask a question that earlier ecocriticism could not: whether a poem so thoroughly of the city might also be among the most ecologically exact poems in English.

The claim advanced here is that *The Waste Land* is organised around the interruption of three material circuits, hydrological, energetic, and commercial, and that the poem's celebrated fragmentation is, in part, the formal counterpart of that interruption. Rain does not fall. The river carries away what is put into it only by displacing it elsewhere. Corpses do not become crops. Fuel burns without warming. Goods arrive with their origins erased. The poem's ecology is therefore neither pastoral nor apocalyptic. It is an ecology of aftermath, of systems that continue to operate in damaged form.

The article makes three contributions. First, it proposes hydro-elemental reading, a method that follows the states of water, fire, and exchange through the poem rather than isolating a single master symbol. Second, it introduces the concept of semiotic drought, the condition in which signs proliferate as the material things they promise recede. Third, it develops monsoon hermeneutics, the practice of reading Part V against the pre-monsoon climatology of the Gangetic plain to which its Sanskrit close refers, which treats the Indic material as ecologically meaningful rather than as philosophical ornament. After a theoretical framework and a statement of method, the analysis moves through the poem's Parts before turning to the monsoon reading, the closing ethics, and the limits of the approach.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Ecocriticism and the problem of modernist cities

Buell's well-known criteria for an environmentally oriented text include that the nonhuman environment is present as more than a framing device, that human interest is not the only legitimate interest, that human accountability to the environment is part of the ethical orientation, and that nature is

understood as a process rather than a constant. *The Waste Land* meets these criteria in a negative register. Its nonhuman world is present chiefly through absence and damage, and accountability is implied by the poem's pervasive sense of consequence. Cohen's critique of ecocriticism's tendency toward nostalgia and Buell's own later account of the field's emerging directions both point to the need for approaches that can address built, polluted, and technological environments. Williams's *The Country and the City* is helpful here, since it shows the opposition between rural and urban to be historically produced. Eliot's poem inverts the pastoral it inherits, and Gifford's notion of post-pastoral writing helps name the resulting awareness of damaged nature without retreat into idyll.

2.2 Material ecocriticism and scale

Material ecocriticism treats matter as active and narratively significant. Iovino and Oppermann describe material forms as "storied," Bennett attributes agency to nonhuman things, and Alaimo's idea of trans-corporeality emphasises that human bodies are porous to their environments. These positions are useful for a poem in which a drowned body is taken apart by a current and in which dust, gas, and river-oil act on the people who move through them. The questions of scale raised by Morton and Nixon are equally relevant. Slow violence is the harm that unfolds gradually and out of sight, and hyperobjects are entities so widely distributed in time and space that they defeat ordinary perception. Chakrabarty's argument that natural and human histories have collapsed into one another, and the geological framing of the Anthropocene by Crutzen and by Steffen and colleagues, supply the wider horizon.

A methodological caution follows. The acceleration that Steffen and colleagues date to the mid-twentieth century lies after 1922, and it would be anachronistic to claim that Eliot foresaw climate change. Even Crutzen's proposed starting point for the Anthropocene, the late eighteenth century, already takes in the coal-fired London of the poem; only the mid-twentieth-century Great Acceleration post-dates it. The claim here is more modest. The poem records the environmental conditions of an early industrial and imperial metropolis in a form that later frameworks help us read. Eliot himself, in later years, played down the poem's status as a grand diagnosis and described it in personal terms (Eliot, *Facsimile*). An ecocritical reading therefore proceeds from the poem's language and not from any claim about authorial ecological intention.

2.3 Ritual, myth, and land

Eliot's notes acknowledge Jessie Weston's *From Ritual to Romance* as the source of the poem's plan (Eliot, note on the title). In the Grail legend as Weston presents it, the sterility of the land is bound to the impotence of the Fisher King, and fertility returns only when the king is restored. The governing myth is thus already an ecological one, since it makes the

health of the land and the health of a social order interdependent. Read this way, the poem's scenes of failed renewal are not merely allegories of spiritual crisis. They also assert that a community's relation to soil and water is a measure of its condition.

2.4 South Asian context and its risks

Eliot studied Sanskrit and Indian philosophy at Harvard, and Kearns has shown how deeply Indic traditions shaped his

poetry and belief. A South Asian reading of the poem must nonetheless avoid a familiar trap. Said's *Orientalism* describes how Western writing has often treated the East as a store of wisdom for the West's own repair. The monsoon reading offered below therefore does not claim that India solves Europe's crisis. It asks what happens when the poem's final movement is read against the climate that its images literally describe.

3. Methodology

The study is qualitative and interpretive. Its text is the poem as edited by Ricks and McCue, read alongside Eliot's notes and, for questions of composition, the facsimile of the original drafts edited by Valerie Eliot. Line numbers refer to the Ricks and McCue text. The argument proceeds through four analytic steps.

The first step is hydro-elemental coding. Each Part of the poem was read for the states of water (falling, standing, flowing, absent, or hazardous as sewage, oil, or drowning), for the states of fire and heat, and for images of exchange, including trade, money, and consumption. The coding is manual and thematic, and no statistical claim is made. Table 1 summarises the results of this coding.

Table 1. Hydro-elemental coding of *The Waste Land*, by Part

Part	Water	Fire and heat	Exchange
I. <i>The Burial of the Dead</i>	Rain as unwelcome renewal; dust and dry stone; the corpse in the garden	Winter warmth and "dried tubers"; brown fog of coal smoke	The crowd on London Bridge; burial treated as planting
II. <i>A Game of Chess</i>	Rain anticipated as an inconvenience ("if it rains, a closed car"); "hot water at ten"	Enclosed, decorative fire (candelabra, coloured hearth flames)	Luxury goods and domestic consumption; the pub at closing time
III. <i>The Fire Sermon</i>	The Thames as sewer and working channel (oil, tar, barges)	Gashouse, coal smoke, motors; the Buddha's "burning"	Mr. Eugenides and "C.i.f. London"; the typist's tinned food
IV. <i>Death by Water</i>	The sea as the one completed circuit; the body taken up by a current	Absent	"Profit and loss" forgotten by the trader
V. <i>What the Thunder Said</i>	Water absent; dry thunder; rain awaited, not delivered	Sun and heat on rock; the arid plain	Commerce absent; giving (<i>Datta</i>) proposed in its place

The second step is circuit analysis. For each of the three domains the analysis asks where the circulation is interrupted, by what kind of agent (human, institutional, or nonhuman), and what the poem does formally at the point of interruption, whether through syntax, allusion, or rhythm.

The third step is situated cross-reading. For Part V the poem's images are read against the climatological literature on the Indian summer monsoon (Gadgil; Webster et al.), and the poem's treatment of the Sanskrit source is set against the critique of Orientalism.

The fourth step is critical self-audit. The reading is tested against the poem's own ambivalences, including its treatment of women, of the urban poor, and of pollution as moral contamination. The concept of a "circuit" is used as a heuristic and not as a claim that the poem presents a systems model of the world.

4. Analysis and Discussion

4.1 Dormancy and the refusal of renewal (Part I)

The poem's first line reverses the opening of Chaucer's *General Prologue*, where April's sweet showers pierce the drought of March. In Eliot, "April is the cruellest month"

(Eliot, lines 1–2), and the agent of cruelty is the regenerative process itself, breeding lilacs "out of the dead land" and stirring "dull roots with spring rain." Winter, by contrast, "kept us warm, covering / Earth in forgetful snow" (5–6). The seasonal cycle is intact, but the speaker experiences it as injury and prefers dormancy, living on "dried tubers" (7), a store of past energy.

The ecological interest of the passage lies in where it locates the failure. The sky still sends rain and the ground still yields lilacs. What is broken is the receptive capacity of those who live in the aftermath of catastrophe. A landscape can go on cycling while its inhabitants are unable to bear renewal. The following lines press the point by interrogating the soil itself: “What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow / Out of this stony rubbish?” (19–20). “Stony rubbish” names a ground made of debris, and the sequel completes the picture: “the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief, / And the dry stone no sound of water” (23–24). Shelter, insect life, and the sound of water are withdrawn one after another. When the speaker offers to “show you fear in a handful of dust” (30), fear is given a material unit of measure, dust being soil without moisture. Bate has argued that poetry can help us imagine dwelling on the earth. This opening presents the reverse, a poetry of un-dwelling in which the ground can no longer be trusted to hold a life.

A pattern of transferred vocabulary is also visible. In the London passage the crowd that “flowed over London Bridge” (62) is described in the language of water, while the river beneath it will be described as dead or absent. Hydrological vocabulary migrates from water to people, and water is left without its own words. This transfer recurs at other points in the poem and is one of the formal means by which its ecological argument is carried.

4.2 The sewered river and the commodity circuit (Part III)

The Thames passage of *The Fire Sermon* opens with a broken canopy: “The river’s tent is broken” (173). The refrain borrowed from Spenser’s *Prothalamion*, “Sweet Thames, run softly” (176), invokes an earlier poetic river peopled by nymphs. Eliot then describes the river by an inventory of what it no longer carries: “empty bottles, sandwich papers, / Silk handkerchiefs, cardboard boxes, cigarette ends” (177–178). The nymphs have departed, and the loitering heirs of city directors “have left no addresses” (181). The spatial logic is instructive. The river appears clean in this moment not because the city produces no waste but because waste has been moved elsewhere.

That movement has a documented history. Halliday’s account of the Great Stink of 1858 and of Bazalgette’s intercepting sewers shows that the Thames of Eliot’s London was an engineered channel through which the metropolis exported its effluent downstream. A cleaned surface therefore conceals an infrastructure of removal. The double meaning of “waste” in the title, land left uncultivated and matter thrown away, is here made concrete. The poem’s later lines make the river’s industrial function explicit: “The river sweats / Oil and tar” (266–267), and the barges “wash / Drifting logs / Down Greenwich reach” (273–275). Water is a working substrate for trade and a receptacle for its

residues.

The commercial circuit is personified in Mr. Eugenides, the Smyrna merchant “with a pocket full of currants / C.i.f. London: documents at sight” (210–211). The abbreviation stands for cost, insurance, and freight, a contractual shorthand that reduces a dried fruit, a place of growth, and the labour of harvest to terms of delivery. The ecological body of the commodity is present only as a document. Eliot’s own working life in the City, at Lloyds Bank (1917–1925; see Ackroyd), lent him an insider’s view of this abstraction, and the poem registers it with the same flatness with which it registers the river’s oil. What the passage exposes is a circuit of exchange that moves matter across the globe while cancelling the knowledge of where it came from, a pattern that Nixon’s analysis of out-of-sight harm would recognise.

4.3 Combustion and the energy ecology of the *Fire Sermon* (Part III)

The Fire Sermon takes its title from the Buddha’s discourse that all things are burning, and the Part draws to its close by pairing the Buddha’s “Burning burning burning burning” (308) with Augustine’s “O Lord Thou pluckest me out” (309), a pairing that Eliot’s note presents as a deliberate conjunction of Eastern and Western asceticism. Fire in the poem is commonly read as desire. It is also literally the city’s metabolism. The “brown fog of a winter dawn” (61) is the coal smoke of a metropolis warmed and powered by combustion, and the fisher-king figure sits “in the dull canal / On a winter evening round behind the gashouse” (189–190). The gashouse was the plant in which coal was carbonised to produce the gas that lit and heated the city. Eliot’s mythic sufferer, the guardian of the land’s fertility, is placed behind a fossil-fuel installation, and the poem’s king muses on “the king my brother’s wreck” (191) beside the infrastructure that powers the modern order.

The passage continues with “the sound of horns and motors” (196), which will bring Sweeney to Mrs. Porter, and thus internal combustion enters at the very moment the poem depicts a degraded fertility ritual. The combustion circuit is interrupted in a particular way. Energy is released but does not sustain. Fire, which should warm, dries; the Part’s heat produces sterility rather than growth, and this prepares the arid heat of Part V. The Buddhist teaching Eliot invokes prescribes extinguishment, the literal meaning of *nirvana* being a blowing out. Read ecologically, the poem’s response to a world that burns is a call for restraint, a theme that returns in the final movement.

4.4 Buried and drowned bodies: an ecology of aftermath (Parts I and IV)

The most disturbing passage of Part I is the question put to Stetson: “That corpse you planted last year in your garden, / Has it begun to sprout?” (71–72). The war dead have been

translated into horticulture, and the question treats a body as seed. The passage then warns, “keep the Dog far hence, that’s friend to men, / Or with his nails he’ll dig it up again!” (74–75). The interrupted circuit is precise: burial should lead to decomposition and renewal, but the dead cannot be allowed to become soil, because the living cannot bear what soil would say. Alaimo’s trans-corporeality is inverted here. Bodies and land are porous to each other, yet the culture refuses that porosity.

Part IV, *Death by Water*, offers the poem’s only completed circuit. Phlebas the Phoenician, a trader, forgets “the profit and loss” (314), and “A current under sea / Picked his bones in whispers” (315–316). The body is taken up into a marine system and passes “the stages of his age and youth / Entering the whirlpool” (317–318). Theological readings emphasise baptism and rebirth, and they are not wrong. But the passage can also be read materially, as the one moment at which a body is metabolised by a natural process. The contrast with the garden corpse is stark. On land the dead are guarded against decomposition, whereas in the sea decomposition simply happens. The address that follows, “Gentile or Jew / O you who turn the wheel and look to windward” (319–320), makes the trader’s fate a warning to all who navigate by commercial wind. That Phlebas belongs to the commodity economy of the Mediterranean links this section back to Mr. Eugenides. Both are merchants, but only one is allowed to rejoin a cycle.

The ecology of aftermath, then, is not a landscape of total ruin. It is a set of processes (burial, drainage, combustion, trade, tides) whose operation continues but whose reciprocity is damaged.

4.5 Semiotic drought (Part V)

The opening of *What the Thunder Said* is among the most sustained drought passages in English poetry. “Here is no water but only rock” (331) begins a sequence in which the word “water” is repeated until the reader hears it as an incantation: “If there were water we should stop and drink” (335), “If there were only water amongst the rock” (338), and the long conditional litany of springs and pools (346–352). There is “dry sterile thunder without rain” (342), the doors of “mudcracked” houses (345), and the hermit-thrush’s “Drip drop drip drop drop drop drop” (358) followed at once by the deflating line “But there is no water” (359).

The passage exhibits what this article terms semiotic drought. Language proliferates around an absent referent. The word for water is spoken again and again, the sound of dripping is mimicked, and none of it yields a drop. The poem’s wealth of cultural reference, from Dante and Baudelaire to Ovid, Shakespeare, and the Upanishads, is at once its glory and its predicament. It possesses an immense symbolic capital that cannot be converted into a single material

resource. As defined here, semiotic drought is the condition in which signs proliferate as the material things they promise recede, a structure and not merely a mood. Morton has described how the idea of “Nature” can obstruct actual ecological thinking, and semiotic drought extends the point by asking what happens when the very abundance of representation becomes a substitute for the resource it represents.

The concept has interpretive consequences. It explains why the poem’s allusive method, often treated as a purely aesthetic matter, is bound up with its subject. The fragments that the speaker says he has “shored against my ruins” (430) are the poem’s answer to drought, and they are made of words. They shore up, but they do not irrigate. The point is not a criticism of the poem’s method but a recognition of its honesty: it does not pretend that its citations are a substitute for rain.

The three failures also reinforce one another, as Table 1 suggests. The river that exports the city’s waste downstream (Part III) runs beside the gashouse and beneath the coal smoke of the same city. The heat that the Fire Sermon releases without warming is the heat that, in Part V, dries the rock and cracks the houses. The commercial circuit, in which goods arrive as documents cut off from their origins, supplies the model for a discourse that likewise circulates without its referent. Each failure also removes a condition for repairing the others: with water absent there is nothing to temper the burning, and with exchange abstracted from origin there is little knowledge left with which to manage either river or fuel. The compounding is cumulative and not causal, and it is the reason the poem’s later parts read as intensifications of its earlier ones and not as new subjects.

4.6 Monsoon hermeneutics: reading Part V from the Gangetic plain

The sequence that follows is the poem’s most concrete meteorological image: “Ganga was sunken, and the limp leaves / Waited for rain, while the black clouds / Gathered far distant, over Himavant. / The jungle crouched, humped in silence. / Then spoke the thunder” (395–399). Eliot’s note identifies the Ganges and the Himalayas. The scope of the reading is the Gangetic plain, the region to which the passage’s Ganga and Himavant point; the Bengal delta figures below only as the eastern end of that plain. Read against the climatology of South Asia, the passage becomes strikingly exact.

The Indian summer monsoon is a seasonal reversal of winds that delivers the greater part of the region’s annual rainfall, and its variability shapes agriculture, water supply, and disaster (Webster et al.; Gadgil). The months preceding onset are the hottest of the year, with low river flows, dust, and thunderstorms that in much of the plain announce weather without reliably delivering it (the pre-monsoon nor’westers of Bengal, by contrast, often do bring rain). A

river “sunken,” leaves limp with heat, clouds massing against the mountains at the horizon, and thunder preceding rain are the features of that pre-onset interval. To read Part V as monsoon-adjacent is not to claim that Eliot observed it, since his Indic knowledge came from texts and teachers. It is to observe that the images he selected from that world are hydrologically accurate, and that a reader who lives inside the monsoon calendar will recognise them as more than exotic scenery.

The comparison reveals a contrast of hydro-cultural regimes within the poem itself. In the temperate, northern-European settings of Parts I to III, rain is background, occasionally welcome and occasionally an intrusion (“Summer surprised us, coming over the Starnbergersee / With a shower of rain,” 8–9). In Part V rain is a social and existential necessity awaited across a season. The poem moves from a culture that has forgotten dependence on water to one that cannot forget it. Monsoon hermeneutics, the practice of reading Part V against the pre-monsoon climatology of the Gangetic plain, attends to that shift, so that the Indic setting is understood as the place where the poem’s question about circulation is posed most literally. For readers in the Bengal delta, at the eastern end of the plain, where the annual monsoon governs both the fields and the floods, this is not a peripheral vantage but a privileged one.

Two features of the passage resist a purely spiritual reading. First, the thunder speaks before the rain falls, so that interpretation precedes the resource it anticipates. The Upanishadic thunder’s single syllable, *DA*, is heard and interpreted by different orders of being, and the poem ends inside that act of interpretation and not after the downpour. Second, the closing gesture is agrarian. The speaker sits with “the arid plain behind me” (424) and asks, “Shall I at least set my lands in order?” (425). Whatever the arrival of rain depends on, it does not depend on him. What he can do is prepare the land.

4.7 Datta, Dayadhvam, Damyata: an ethics of restored circulation (Part V)

The thunder’s three injunctions have usually been read as a spiritual programme. They can also be read as responses to the three interrupted circuits, though the correspondence is suggestive and not strictly allegorical. In the Upanishadic passage on which Eliot draws, the three syllables are heard differently by gods, humans, and demons, as restraint, giving, and compassion. Eliot’s poem gathers all three into a single ethical vocabulary.

Datta, give, is answered by “The awful daring of a moment’s surrender / Which an age of prudence can never retract” (403–404). The line stands against the insured exchange of “C.i.f. London.” Where commerce covers every risk, the gift is irreversible and unprotected. As a response to the commodity circuit it proposes reciprocity in place of

extraction, an exchange in which something is actually given up.

Dayadhvam, sympathise, is answered by the image of the key turning once in the door: “We think of the key, each in his prison” (413). The line describes isolation, and isolation is the human counterpart of the broken hydrological circuit. Water is what connects bodies, fields, rivers, and clouds, and a culture that experiences itself as sealed in separate cells will not recognise its dependence on that connection. Sympathy here means acknowledging enmeshment.

Damyata, control, is answered by the boat that “responded / Gaily, to the hand expert with sail and oar” (418–419) on a calm sea. The image is of skilled cooperation with water, though not one free of the language of mastery. The lines that follow speak of a heart that would have responded “Gaily, when invited, beating obedient / To controlling hands” (420–422). The vocabulary of obedience and control has to be acknowledged. Yet the response is conditional on invitation (“when invited”) and on a hand that is “expert” in the medium it governs, so control here is the exercise of skill within a responsive element, a governance that depends on what it governs. The cooperative reading is offered in that qualified sense. The Sanskrit term means self-restraint, and in the context of the Fire Sermon it points to the moderation of burning. This is the poem’s counterpart to the combustion circuit, the recognition that fire must be governed if it is not to consume.

The poem does not promise that these virtues will bring rain. It ends with fragments, a nursery rhyme of falling bridges, and the triple *shantih*, which Eliot’s note calls a peace that “passeth understanding.” Its ecology is one of preparation and attention and not of restoration secured.

4.8 Implications and limits

Several qualifications are necessary. First, the poem’s environmental disgust is not innocent. Douglas has shown that ideas of pollution often express social anxieties, and in *The Waste Land* contamination is repeatedly attached to women’s sexuality and to the urban poor. An ecocritical reading that celebrates the poem’s attention to waste must also register that its moral geography can align nature with purity and bodies with defilement. Second, the poem’s hydrological imagination is one of deficit and of individual drowning, as in Part IV. It has little to say about the seasonal, collective flooding that is a recurrent condition of life. A monsoon-based reading exposes that limit, since in the Bengal delta the relation to water is defined as much by excess as by lack. Third, the Indic material enters the poem through a Western modernist’s selection, and Said’s warning about the extraction of Eastern wisdom for Western purposes remains pertinent.

These limits do not undo the reading. They show that hydro-elemental reading is a method that can accommodate its

own critique. Its wider promise is that it can be applied to other modernist works, including those of Woolf, Joyce, and Lawrence, where water, fuel, and trade also structure the imagined world.

5. Conclusion

This article has argued that *The Waste Land* is best understood ecologically as a poem of interrupted circuits. The hydrological circuit fails because rain is either unwanted or absent and because the river is a channel for removal. The energetic circuit fails because the fire of the city burns without sustaining. The commercial circuit fails because goods circulate with their origins abstracted into contract. Corpses, the poem's most intimate matter, are either guarded from the soil or, in a single instance, given to the sea. The poem's form registers the same interruptions. Its shored fragments (430) and its transfer of hydrological vocabulary from water to people are the formal counterpart of circuits that no longer close.

The concepts developed here offer tools for further work. Semiotic drought, the condition in which signs proliferate as the material things they promise recede, offers a structure that further work might apply to contemporary environmental communication, where knowledge is abundant and material change is scarce. Monsoon hermeneutics suggests that reading the poem from the region whose climate its final images describe is a supplement to interpretation and, at points, a corrective to it. And the poem's closing ethics of giving, sympathising, and restraint, though modestly framed, identify the dispositions any restored circulation would require.

Eliot's poem ends before the rain. That deferral is what makes it available to a twenty-first-century reader, for whom the question is no longer only whether the rain will come but how a society that has altered the conditions of rain might learn to set its lands in order.

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