

From The Waste Land To The Waste World

by John Coopey

In this edition, we offer a review of absence. John Coopey writes on the marginalization of issues of environment in contemporary society, and uses T.S. Elliot's *The Wasteland* as a vehicle to draw together a diverse range of critical revelations and provocative questions.

T.S. Eliot's poem *The Waste Land* was published in 1922. Had he been writing now on the same theme - the spiritual emptiness of people's lives - he might well have called it 'The Waste World', resonating with contemporary spiritual issues concerned with safeguarding the wider natural world of which we are part.

The epigraph to the poem sets the scene for this transition. It tells how the God Apollo grants the wish of the prophetess, Sybil, to live as many years as there are grains of sand in her hand. As she ages and becomes feeble Sybil cannot die and her life becomes an agony of boredom and suffering.

When Eliot drew on this myth the idea of a radically extended life was a subject solely of the newly created science fiction genre. Now, however, biological and medical scientists claim to be developing technologies that will offer 'the real thing', responding to our Sybil-like urge to defy mortality. Already, some rich Americans arrange that, when they die, their heads will be deep-frozen - taking advantage of the burgeoning science of cryogenics - in the belief that the time is not far off when they can be grafted on to newly created bodies. In his TV dramas, *Karaoke* and *Cold Lazarus*, Denis Potter parodies this urge, exploring the existential horrors likely to accompany these Frankenstein-like notions.

In any case there seems little sense in extending the human lifespan when it is forecast that there will be grave problems in sustaining the increased number of human beings predicted

to be on the Earth by 2050, a population growth that, ironically, threatens the existence of many other species on whom we rely for our physical and spiritual wellbeing.

In the poem Eliot describes how in a winter dawn ... a crowd flowed over London Bridge ... sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled, and each man fixed his eyes before his feet. This scene is still played out most days across London Bridge and at thousands of similar sites around the world. Rich financial experts go to their offices on their way to being 'burned out' at thirty, or bored at forty just hanging on until 'retirement' at fifty. Others dawdle at all times of the day and night to their 'work stations' in call centres. Once there, eyes fixed on monitors, they can only hope that some chatty customer will free them from the boredom of their choreographed script without fear of reprimand from invisible watchers within their technological panopticon.

Then there's the 27 million modern slaves held illegally, 'more than twice the total number taken from Africa during the 400 years of the Atlantic slave trade'. Unlike the earlier slaves those of the new millennium are cheap - cheaper than slaves have ever been - and disposable. Nor do they have the freedom, be it painful or pleasurable, of walking to work. They live where they work, like the six year old cousins, Huro and Shivji, taken hundreds of miles from their home village in India to labour 18 hours a day in separate, gloomy cells where they slept alone. There is Drissa, lured into slavery on an Ivory

Coast cocoa farm and locked in a small room at night with 17 other young men with only a tin can as a toilet. Surely a contemporary Eliot would use the words of Vincent, another Ivory Coast slave, on his release: 'Tell them, when they are eating chocolate, they are eating my flesh'.

Such wretches don't need Eliot's *Madame Sosostris, famous clairvoyante ... known to be the wisest woman in Europe, with a wicked pack of cards* to tell them their fortunes. As good a prediction of their life chances can be gleaned from knowledge of their place of birth and father's occupation. This is true too of those who are not enslaved, as in parts of Russia, now re-branded as a 'free market', or of the USA, the richest country of the so-called developed world. Take Mrs. Camarillo, resident of one of the Hispanic shanty towns clustered along the Rio Grande Valley in Texas. She hesitated to take her son Robert to the doctor when he had bronchitis. Why? Because Mrs Camarillo and her husband have no insurance for their child even though they have no regular jobs. But the assessed value of the pick-up truck they use to migrate northward each summer for work is over \$2000, so they are adjudged too "wealthy" to qualify for Medicaid, the free healthcare scheme.

Slaves around the world and 'free' people like the Camarillo family are victims of a cruel 'game of chess' not very different in spirit to that played in *The Wasteland*. Eliot's model is a game from Middleton's 1657 play, *Women Beware Women*, in which manipulation and deceit are deployed, fuelled by lust. Manipulation and deceit there are in plenty in the modern, global version of this game but driven primarily by greed for power and wealth. It is played out by politicians with their constituents, governments with citizens, large corporations with their employees and consumers and among various national and international agencies such as Central Banks, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Trade Organisation (WTO). The game's sessions, held in the world's capital cities, are still set in grand, ornate rooms with each delegate sitting in a *chair ... like a burnished throne ... the flames of sevenbranched cande-*

labra reflecting light upon the table ... air that freshened from the window... fattening the prolonged candle flames ...stirring the pattern on the coffered ceiling.

It is to such sessions that we should look for modern answers to Eliot's question: *What branches grow out of this stony rubbish? ... a heap of broken images, where the sun beats and the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief, and the dry stone no sound of water ...*. This 'Wasteworld' scene reflects the spiritual desolation out of which sprang modern slavery in the Ivory Coast to satisfy civilised people's grotesque appetite for chocolate; for example, the average Briton's annual intake is the equivalent of 200 bars. In satisfying this gluttony the Ivory Coast is a victim of games played since the 1970s by the grand-masters - Western governments and banks - against the novices - developing countries. In the opening move developing countries were urged to strengthen their economies by taking out loans to be serviced by production of 'cash crops' such as cocoa that could be traded on the world market. The target countries moved in response and the global market became flooded with cash crops. By the 1980s crops did not earn enough to service the debts undertaken and countries such as the Ivory Coast were effectively bankrupt.

To protect Western commercial banks from losses, the IMF and World Bank took the next move, lending money to developing countries to help them reschedule debts. Over the long term this decision has had the pernicious effect of increasing the debt burden such that, by the millennium, the Ivory Coast spends five times more on servicing international debt than on health care for its citizens.

As a supplementary gambit developing countries 'benefiting' from this debt rescheduling were required to implement a Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) designed ostensibly to strengthen their economies. For the Ivory Coast the SAP required the government to stop acting as intermediary in trading cocoa, based on giving a fixed price to farmers, but to 'allow

the cocoa buyers of the world market direct access to the farmers'. Thus the cocoa price was further depressed, plantation owners and farmers achieved lower returns and were less able to pay their workers. In the final, desperate move in the game, many turned to the entrapment of slaves such that 'today 90 per cent of the plantations in the Ivory Coast use slaves'. Meanwhile, as part of the Byzantine games played in the world cocoa market based on trading contracts for future delivery 'the constant buying and selling of cocoa futures is like a laundry that washes away knowledge of the cocoa's links to slavery'.

Western hedge funds are now moving in to achieve 'check mate' by 'trading in misery'. Their ploy is to buy up third-world debts at a discount and then sue the government for the full face value. A great irony is that the landmark move was made in 1999 when Elliott Associates, a New York based hedge fund, forced the Peruvian government to pay it \$65 million to discharge a debt the company had purchased for \$20 million.

What would T. S. Eliot have made of this horror that can be multiplied many times in different earthly contexts in the year 2000? Would he see it as just part of 'the intense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history' - words Eliot used in praising James Joyce's skill in *Ulysses* in 'controlling ... ordering, and giving shape and significance to' such events?

Eliot's conservatism, pessimism and deliberate emotional detachment, and his deep concern with spiritual poverty and loss of faith would probably have yielded an interpretation of little help to slaves or to those devoted to helping them. It seems to me, however, that spiritual growth comes from engagement which in turn is enhanced by spiritual strength. In words attributed to Mohammed returning from battle: 'We come back from the little strife to the bigger strife. The strife of the soul'.

However, from this particular soapbox neither Mohammed's faith nor Eliot's critical frame seem more or less useful than any single per-

spective on the world such as those provided by Marxism, Sound Science, Post Modernism and Critical Realism. That's why I make no apology for being a bricoleur, borrowing from any position that offers useful insights into how to achieve an emancipatory critique as a basis for action.

And to whom should we offer the fruits of our reflection and interpretation in order to support positive action? When, for example, the British Academy of Management advises academics in UK business and management schools to commit themselves to a research agenda based upon 'the user', to whom are they referring? For me, there's no question: I am not in the business of researching and writing to provide succour for unreconstructed businessmen and managers, although I am prepared to search out and work with those who are taking seriously their responsibilities towards the natural environment, including of course their social responsibility to this and future generations. I am even more inclined to collaborate with NGOs that are placing pressure on the grandmasters in governments, international agencies and corporations to change their game. Relevant to some of the issues raised above are Christian Aid, the World Development Movement and Anti-Slavery International. There are many more: take your pick.

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