

Thinking with the Rocks: Life and Non-life in T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*

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Abstract

Rocks, as Jan Zalasiewicz suggests, embed stories of “corpses.” They archive deep time as well as deep memory. As the bedrock of civilization as well as the stratigraphic object to visualize Anthropocene, the rock is a geologic capsule. A medium to translate traumatic planetary stories of death, desire, and extinction, to think with the rock is to think geologically. It compensates for the anthropocentric vision that is indifferent to capitalist-driven human slaughter or bodies aging without perception. The lithic becomes a prescient metaphor in the hands of T.S. Eliot to visualize the machinic age in *The Waste Land* (1922), where humans are automatons with stony indifference. In its materiality, the lithic metaphor animates the poem's geologic imagination. Pearl-eyed Alonso, the carbuncular (carbuncle) man, the recalcitrant lovers “neither living nor dead,” flowing corpses, dry bones, dead mountains, stony rubbish, each of these lithic images suffuses the ontological wasteland, an arid desert of cataclysmic times. The poem also works through transposing the lithic in humans and the anthropomorphic in the stone to present moments of transit between human and non-human nature. As such, the paper will investigate the non-human entanglements in the poem through the lithic metaphors/figures and read intertextuality as the sedimentation of voices and presences such that the poem itself becomes a geological metaphor to visualize life and non-life. To do so, the paper will critically evaluate the poem from the new materialist perspective, reading intertextuality through Stacy Alaimo's theory of inter-corporeality. It will also read Eliot's geological imagination as a contestation of the anthropocentric view of reality, deferring the Enlightenment's project of instrumentalizing life and non-life.

Keywords: Lithic images, geological imagination, trans-corporeality, new materialism entanglements, anthropocentrism



Nonlife is marked by absence. Albertus Magnus, a thirteenth-century philosopher, alchemist, and saint, argues in his *Book of Minerals* that stones, as nonlife lithic beings, are constituted of negation- sans life, sans soul, infertile rubbish deprived of vitalism. He writes, “stones have no function corresponding to a soul, since they do not use food, or [have any] senses, or [even] life, as shown by any vital activity” (Magnus 20). In the tradition of medieval alchemy and commonsensical understanding, Geoffrey Chaucer in his Prologue to *The Canterbury Tales* compares human-life as spoken, marked by speech and utterance, as opposed to stones that are “dumb”, “For truly, it is no comfort nor mirth/ To ride by the way dumb as a stone” (Chaucer 773-774). Speechlessness and silence, saturates nonlife. Life, unlike nonlife can sustain narratives, iterate them through speech. Such that life and narrative becomes consanguineous entities. On the other hand, the literal sense of being dumb, embodies a scientific bifurcation of beings into life and nonlife and the metaphorical dumbness gives out a sense of impervious facticity of the lithic. Stones are of Nature, but distinct from Nature’s renewing and miraculous cycle, as the pilgrimage itself, in the Chaucerian world. They are non-performative lithic beings. In being dumb, they become non-human or inhuman, incapable of affect. Such that the notion of ‘being’ is constituted by our anthropocentric worldview of life and non-life which again is fed from the discourses on differences. The difference between life and non-life is generously cultivated through the pre-supposition, that life is distinct from non-life, assuming the conclusion to be the premise (Jeuken 14, 19). In this case the stones are dumb because being dumb is already disposed as non-human. As such what counts as nonlife is always a political question, as much as it is a human question. The very act of conspicuously defining nonlife entails a prior knowledge of what constitutes life. But with the discovery of deep time, stratigraphic knowledge, geo-ontological navigations, the ontological divide between life and non-life becomes somewhat tangential (Ivanchikova 4). Nonlife as “geos, the inorganic, the inanimate” (Povinelli 54) is agentic enough to shatter onto-epistemological knowing, “Hurl a rock and you’ll shatter an ontology, leave taxonomy in glistening shards” (Cohen 2).

The lithic remains entangled in the processes of life. Stones and rocks are variously positioned, at times they are “primordial dwelling, a substratum of life, a habitat, a weapon, a medium of memory, and the final resting place of the human” (Ivanchikova 3). Stone becomes history’s bedrock as lithic agency impels human knowing. Within the rhetoric of the Anthropocene, the rock becomes a capsule, storing deep time. Much of the Anthropocene debate is, as well, conjectured through the carbon imaginary which is linked to the rocks and locating them. Elizabeth Povinelli states as an example, “the eighteenth-century expansion of the Lancashire, Somerset, and Northumberland coalfields” which led to three tasks simultaneously, “it uncovered large stratified fossil beds that helped spur the foundation of modern geologic chronology, it created a massive increase in resource extraction, and it released unheard of tons of hydrocarbons into the atmosphere” (Povinelli 55). Paul Crutzen, proposed 'Anthropocene' as a “contemporary phenomenon, dominated by human, a geological epoch, supplementing the Holocene — the warm period of the past 10–12 millennia” (23). It is when humanity becomes “catastrophic at a planetary level” (Cohen, et al. 86) or what Dipesh Chakrabarty suggests, “a measure of humans’ impact on the planet” (20).

More critically, Anthropocene marks a moment of judgement that constitutes man as “human,” as a species, where “we” as a whole start making difference in the world (Colebrook 4). It requires us to think of humans as a species, while reiterating on species



bifurcation as an essential paradigm to consider and converge meaning, where humans become humans in the first place and their survival becomes imperative. Such bifurcations also anticipate the difference between life and non-life. Claire Colebrook suggests that “the formation of a “we” is generated from destruction and from the recognition of destruction: humanity as global Anthropos comes into being with the Anthropocene, with the declaration that there is a unity to the species, and that this unity lies in its power to mark the planet (Cohen, et al. 8). Anthropocene makes “we” felt, our presence marked and readable, accessible to the structures of mourning. Such that it becomes possible to read humans as constituted by its own speculations of self-erasure, humanity as an effect of what is not humanly or non-humanity, inhumanity. What if the “proclamations of overcoming humanism, Cartesianism and anthropocentrism” is producing man as the being who can annihilate himself in order to become animal”? (11) The stones and the rocks, hence run the risk of being fetishized as objects of memory and desire. These recalcitrant bodies are situated as abled modes of being and becoming. Although to not withstand the jeopardy of aesthetic and imaginative incarceration in the human return to the non-human, a trans-corporeal or an intra-active becoming can become crucial in ethically approaching the nonlife/nonhuman turn.

Meaning making through an entangled vision of “human corporeality and nonhuman nature” is an alternative theoretical insight, to uncover matter and materiality of the nature-culture, biological-philosophical interactions (Braidott and Hlavajova 435). In *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self*, Stacy Alaimo develops the concept of trans-corporeality through discourses of newly emergent material feminisms and Karen Barad’s theory of intra-action, she states that “the trans-corporeal subject emerges from environmental health” and other environmental factors (436). She takes cue in the “Proletarian Lung” to diagnose the concept of trans-corporeality, to show how it becomes a particular condition of the lung, and contending, that “the human body is never a rigidly enclosed, protected entity, but is vulnerable to the substances and flows of its environments, which may include industrial environments and their social/economic forces” (28). Such as, trans-corporeality saturates humans as entangled beings and not as a supreme surveyor of beings. The theory also allows a full-fledged scope to uninstall anthropocentrism, which visualizes human at the center of the phenomenal world. And most importantly it states the condition of human subjectivity and agency being embedded in other localities.

The paper seeks to negotiate T.S. Eliot’s trans-corporeal vision in *The Waste Land*, through environmental and geological factors that underscore life and living as entangled with non-life ontologies. Three figures or metaphors, dominate Eliot’s entanglement of bios with the geos- the lithic, the desert, and the machine. Again, each of these figures stand interconnected and inter-actively situated in the text and never isolated in meaning. The narrative is interspersed across an inter-locutionary plain, crowded with human and nonhuman, living and dead, mythic and real, historical and local, lithic and organic, who encounter each other at several contact zones, with different voices doing different things. Also, the narrator’s agency is dependent on literary textuality. He/she is at best a storyteller entangled in stories, the mythic Tiresias who foregrounds the phenomenological understanding of the world through contemporary mappings. The paper



will thus focus on the trans-corporeal becoming(s) in Eliot's wasteful and polluted material world.

Reverting Chaucer's faith in the harmonious fecundity of organic life, T.S Eliot by way of allusion to it, begins *The Waste Land* (1922) by positing an entropic worldview, elegiac in rumination. The reverdie tradition is negated with April turning into the "cruellest month, breeding" (Eliot 1) dead and dying bodies that swarm up across the text almost in the fashion of the Thames River sweating "oil and tar" (267). The perceptual shift of the natural phenomenon, works to defamiliarize and intimidate the readers to visualize the vagaries of existence in the modern world. The soil sustains dead corpses, tree-like they are expected to sprout, "That corpse you planted last year in your garden, / Has it begun to sprout? Will it bloom this year? / Or has the sudden frost disturbed its bed" (71-73). Only "Dried tubers" (7) sustains deprecated lives, winter remains a source of warmth and remembrances. The city turns into surreal landscape of hooded automatons, devoid of life, lithic in their composition. For Eliot, the lithic non-life does not merely seek to resuscitate the difference between life and non-life, rather the lithic itself becomes an actant to negotiate the conditions of existence.

The pilgrims of Eliot, impaired in speech and thought, have turned towards nonlife conditions of becoming, unreal and unrealized. "White naked bodies" (193) that lie abandoned or "the hooded hordes swarming/ over endless plains" (369-370), barely in quest of enlightenment or redemption, flowed across the simulated desert of upside-down cityscape. Pearl-eyed Alonso, the carbuncular (carbuncle) man, the recalcitrant lovers "neither living nor dead," (39) flowing corpses, dry bones, "dead mountains" (339), "stony rubbish" (20), each of these lithic imageries suffuse the ontological wasteland, an arid desert of cataclysmic times. Like the lithic, they are unable to sustain narratives, and almost all of the characters rush off the scene in some kind of hurried and perverted epiphany,

What shall I do now? What shall I do?
I shall rush out as I am, and walk the street
With my hair down, so. What shall we do tomorrow?
What shall we ever do?
The hot water at ten.
And if it rains, a closed car at four.
And we shall play a game of chess,
Pressing lidless eyes and waiting for a knock upon the door. (131-138)

They represent the civilizational excess, embodying not the human life but the residual waste of the over-consumptive and materialist culture, the "human engine" (116) that is "throbbing waiting" (117) like a taxi.

The organicity of the roots has turned "dull" (4) making the land dead and sterile, almost ineffective to sustain or infertile to replicate. Hence, the vitalism of April's showers, stunts the tubers, deadens the trees, and mars the possibilities of survival. The West Wind that synonymizes life for Chaucer or that which becomes Percy Bysshe Shelley's arbiter for the new order, is identified by Eliot as the harbinger of death, the inhuman potentiality of life to destroy, annihilate being, as is correlated through the Hyacinth myth in "The Burial of the Dead". Unable to stand Apollo's love for Hyacinth, Zephyrus (west wind) deflected the discus of Apollo towards Hyacinth to immediately kill



him. On the other hand, the cruel and impassive seasonal phenomenon is estranged from human emotions, that helps descend the timid into the rat's alley, or fossilize the nostalgic into "forgetful snow" (29). The epigram's reference to the deprecated Cumaean sibyl, the prophetess who embodies living death in life, marks the cataclysmic endings of human fate. Her desire to die, echoes a malignant burden of time, the temporal engendering of a spatial rupture. Similarly, the mythic Fisher king, impotent, is condemned to rule the non-arable soil, weathered beyond human reparation,

The rat crept softly through the vegetation
 Dragging its slimy belly on the bank
 While I was fishing in the dull canal
 On a winter evening round behind the gashouse
 Musing upon the king my brother's wreck
 And on the king my father's death before him. (187-192)

The poem's ground is in fissures. Each section drifts apart and collide like tectonic plates, enfolding meanings and new becoming. The relations that emanate from the nomadic plates of thought, are thus always in momentum, apprehending change and turbulence. The socio-political backdrop remains embedded in the strained fate of war-torn Europe. The fall of the Austro-Hungarian and the Ottoman Empire, collapsed geographical sensibilities to reimagine the borders of identity and order (Rabate 9),

Cracks and reforms and bursts in the violet air
 Falling towers
 Jerusalem Athens Alexandria
 Vienna London
 Unreal (373-377)

Most notably, the cascading fall of the empires, finds poetic life in Marie's incandescent yet irrevocable descent down the snowy terrain, as much as faith collapses in human development and civilizational anarchy surfaces as an unreal yet newly found reality. Men and women resemble de-mineralized potentialities, akin to the shell-shocked victims of the First World War, incompatible in speech and traumatic in semblance. Fragmented knowledge of "the son of man/You cannot say, or guess, for you know only/ A heap of broken images" (20-21), the silence of the hyacinth lovers "I could not/ Speak, and my eyes failed," (38-39), the sense of fear and trepidation of the lovers eerily enslaved in the rat's alley, "Speak to me. Why do you never speak. Speak" (112), Phlebas the mummified Phoenician sailor (312), the stone-eyed Alonso, transmute as the victims of post-traumatic stress, sullied by anxiety and psychosomatic depressions. The apathetic Anthropos hence fails to become in the poem. They are always in the periphery of death/extinction or nonlife, "neither living nor dead" (30). And chiefly in this failure, the lithic imagination appears. The inorganic petrified life thus uncannily resuscitates nonlife as an altered mode of becoming. Also, the lithic transposes as life with the human semblance, the "dead mountain mouth of carious teeth that cannot spit/ Here one can neither stand nor lie nor sit" (339-340). And in the climactic moment of bewildering flashes and blasts, culminates the finest transposition between life and nonlife, the dumb and the conscious- Thunder interrogating the Anthropos "What have we given?" (402). The question triggers not just human knowledge that one has "shored against" (431) one's ruin, but one that has to be literally shored against the entropic wave that permeates entangled living, forming and becoming, and thus appropriately voiced by the nonlife being.



T.S. Eliot reimagines the space as a “soteriological terrain” (Tynan 2), a timeless topology to think “human subjectivity” and the changing logos of the machinic individuality, of “He who was living are now dead/ We who were living are now dying” (Eliot 328-329). Spencer Morrison in his essay *Geographies of Space: Mapping and Reading the Cityscape* urges that, *The Waste Land* uses techniques of spatial representations through the “frames of desert and jungle geographies, Eastern and Western spiritual traditions, and historical and literary allusions”, that renders the process of reading spaces as that of an archaeological practice (26). To delve deeper into the uncanny analogies between human life and nonlife spatialities of desert, space becomes in Eliot’s textual frame, a geophilosophical concept. Articulated and developed by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari in their last co-authored book *What is Philosophy*, geophilosophy seeks to conceptualize thinking through territory and geos, instead of engaging with bios and its subject-object dichotomy (Tynan 63). Most notably, the territory of the body in its sterility becomes a geophilosophical desert. It is non-productive and antithetical to life forces. As much as the territoriality of the cities have become desert in its hyper-active modern living conditions, in their machinic organizations, “stoniness – a spiritual and cultural emptiness –” (Morrison 25), the spiritual aridity is overpowering. Morrison further claims that “the aridity of *The Waste Land*’s desert... transmutes itself, by way of the poem’s spatial story, into a cultural and spiritual aridity within city life produced by material decadence” (25). Like humans, London is deprived of life. The territorial non-fecundity finds partial succor in the East; the West with its disturbances and desertification becomes solaced by the voice of Prajapati, the supervisor of creation,

Bringing rain
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 (Eliot 395-400)

Desert has a Latin origin meaning a deserted condition, which in turn is inspired by its Egyptian counterpart of desert being an abandoned or desolated scape, generally referred to a space slackened off human intervention (Arnaldo 5). Desert therefore seems to be both contentious and contemptuous to human habitation and production, of defying human scales of time and space. It is malignant to life. On the other hand, it remains time’s own laboratory to experiment the organicity of life and plasticity of nonlife: the lifeless visage of Ozymandias in Percy Bysshe Shelley’s imagination remains preserved in its soil. The desert in Eliot’s imagination shares close affinity with the idea of Henry Lefebvre’s concept of “logico-epistemological” space, “the space of social practice, the space occupied by sensory phenomena, including products of the imagination such as projects and projections, symbols and utopias” (12), as much as it remains anchored in the Deleuzian notions of geophilosophy. While the debilitating effects of war, evoke sensory predicaments of a desert and its onto-ecological crisis, art movements and phenomenological studies which defied “scientific materialism” and positivist approaches to reality, sediment the concept of a desert for Eliot. One can easily visualize *The Waste Land* in Salvador Dali’s surrealist masterpiece “The Persistence of Memory”. It contextualizes both the desert in sight, and in ideology, the subtending of instrumentalized rationality. The poem in such a fury of automatism, akin to but different from surrealist’s



automatism, envisions the cityscape of London as “unreal”, ghoulish ephemeral habitation above the surface, almost in staggering dystopic hybridity of life and nonlife,

Unreal City,
 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.
 Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled,
 And each man fixed his eyes before his feet.
 Flowed up the hill and down King William Street,
 To where Saint Mary Woolnoth kept the hours
 With a dead sound on the final stroke of nine. (60-68)

The sexual aridity is pronounced throughout. The cold and stony indifference of the carbuncular man and the typist, describes how the “newly found sexual freedom leads to mechanical and meaningless lovemaking” (Rabate 17). The contemptuous Tereus casting violent blows on Philomela has turned into a stony object of undesired and unreprieved encounters, repeating the mechanized liaisons. The debased bodies of Lil, Philomel, the typewriter, Mrs. Potter, implied Cleopatra, either brutalized by men or masqueraded with synthetic extensions, embody generative non-performativity. Thus, the sense of hollowing individuality, deserted individualism, and spiritual aridity structure itself as wastefulness in the poem. Deprived of rain and its vegetative renewal, the matter of self ontologically expresses absence, “Here is no water but only rock/ Rock and no water and the sandy road (Eliot 331-332). Water is available only in the form of prophecies “Fear death by water” (55), or exclamations “if there were water” (346) or textual references to Ophelia’s death by water in Hamlet, Phlebas the Phoenician’s drowning in the whirlpool of the sea, Alonso’s simulated death in *The Tempest*. Or available as manufactured and bottled soda water to clean the soiled feet, “O the moon shone bright on Mrs. Porter/ And on her daughter/ They wash their feet in soda water” (199-201). Water has become an antique and debased element, that the onomatopoeic “Drip drop drip drop drop drop drop” (358) sound is spelled, and not naturally present. The nocturnal bats have territorialized the wells and springs, water’s natural habitats:

And bats with baby faces in the violet light
 Whistled, and beat their wings
 And crawled head downward down a blackened wall
 And upside down in air were towers
 Tolling reminiscent bells, that kept the hours
 And voices singing out of empty cisterns and exhausted wells. (380-385)

What remains poignant in the last section of “What the Thunder Said” is a desperate anticipation, a pilgrim’s progressive search through mendicant notes of ‘what if’, a speculation of conviviality in the mundane forests of existence:

If there were water
 And no rock
 And also water
 And water
 A spring
 A pool among the rock (356-350)

Machinic Liaisons

What consists of the machine for Eliot, becomes a matter of trans-corporeal becoming. Machines are not simply external to human subjectivity, neither are they capital factors of production, but machines form a representative pattern of human psyche. They are human extensions as well. Juan A. Suarez argues that Eliot remains “uneasily entangled in gadgets, circuits, media networks, and technologies of textual production and reproduction” (747). The typist in “The Fire Sermon” is “named metonymically for the machine she tends” and uncannily the object permeates her private self (North 48). The bodily “automatism and machine conditioning” (Suárez 749) is the embodiment of the machinic typewriter further pressing on the transposition of nonlife to life. She functions through her “automatic hands” (Eliot 255). Similarly, Lil becomes “antique” (166) in consuming the pills the chemist provided her to abort her children. Her ancient object-like appearance is a materialization of the biopolitics, of letting people live or die through technologies of control. One might negotiate such bodies in Deleuze and Guattari’s term, as “schizophrenic bodies” with machinic unconsciousness (Tynan 62).

The corporeality of beings has turned machinic and automatic, much like the engineered impulses of inhuman objects, pathological and trans-corporeal in nature. Such ontological conditions of trans-corporeal entanglements, where agency and embodiment are relationally perceived through the web of interactions between various subjects and objects, annihilates resurrection as a possible mode of transcending human subjectivity. Eliot savored on such reflexive imaginations to comment on the general decadence of culture and a personal discontent through the failures of towering cities that have now become desert/deserted. The dialogic moments seem interrupted disposed to vagaries of traumatic breaks to automatically echo the fluctuating radio transmitters.

Eliot juxtaposes the agency of the machinic nonlife more succinctly through sounds- noise, music and its ancillary effects become part of an organic whole. The soundscape of the poem is therefore eerily human and machinic at the same time, “throbbing” human machines that pulsate in sync with the locomotive bursts, unpleasant fumes and foggy atmosphere, “the sounds of horns and motors” (Eliot 197) reminds Tiresias of the perversion of labor through Mrs. Porter and her daughter's ritual sabbatical with soda water, they act as the “inviolable” (101) voices that fill up the desert ecology. The city is crowded with noises made from human's interactions with everyday machines, the mandolin, and the gramophone that fill the river and the city with clattering and chattering. The humans become machine and the machine human in their iterative notes of melody and cacophony,

The entangled becoming of life and nonlife, speaks for the trans-corporeal nature of human life. Eliot’ vision of such an entangled predicament of human existence structures “The Wasteland”. In its fragmented notes, the character's repeated failures to sustain narratives, rhythmic breaks and convulsions, inverted logic, false hopes and a decadent individualism, the Anthropos is breached. Life is a perforated whole. The play of nonlife is therefore crucial to the poem’s imagination to justify the experience of the self and its standing. The lithic imagination that *The Waste Land* so profoundly envisions to translate a story of ruins, within and without- his London is hellish, modern city life is a sundered ephemerality, post-war Europe is the deserted trench scattered with broken bones and sullied roots, personal spaces are impenetrable territories- helps us confront the materiality of life for Eliot. Moreover, the stone’s agency to confront human life with the



implications of death, deep time and fossilization brings home the notion of a diminutive Sybil, the withered prophetess powerless to grow or die.

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