

Hegel's Wasteland: Situating T.S. Eliot's Representations of History in Conversation with Hegel

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Abstract

In this paper, I argue that T.S. Eliot's whirlpool motif and characterization of the prophet Tiresias in his poem "The Waste Land" engage with and problematize Hegel's teleological conception of human history. As I suggest, Tiresias, through his sexual plasticity and historical moveability, undermines both prongs of Hegel's dialectic, Spirit and Nature, while the whirlpool motif subverts the idea that history's temporal progression can be subordinated to a dialectical logic. Since Hegel's teleological doctrine situates Europe at the apex of humanity's rational development, I ultimately conclude that Eliot's whirlpool and Tiresias reveal Europe's post-war anxiety about its exceptionalist self-image.

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Following the devastation of World War I, Europe found itself in the throes of a spiritual crisis. The Greco-Christian philosophical inheritance that underpinned European identity and legitimized its self-ascribed global exceptionality was beginning to falter under the weight of so many corpses. As Paul Valéry puts it, the war forced Europe to contend with the possibility that it was not "the elect portion of the terrestrial globe, the pearl of the sphere, the brain of a vast body" but, instead, a "little promontory on the continent of Asia" (Valéry, 1962).

For philosopher Simon Glendinning, Europe's exceptionalism derives from teleological conceptions of world history that situate the European continent at the culmination of human moral and rational perfection. With its history and self-image inextricably entwined, Europe's spiritual crisis implies a profound anxiety about its teleological doctrines. This anxiety is clearly depicted in T.S. Eliot's

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1922 poem “The Waste Land”. While Eliot’s poem copes broadly with the depredation of WWI and the ensuing collapse of meaning in Western modes of self-understanding, Eliot also seems to directly challenge teleological conceptions of world history through his depiction of the prophet Tiresias and motif of the whirlpool.

In the following sections, I will argue that both of these figures particularly engage with and problematize Hegel’s dialectics, or the idea that history acquires its telos through the synthesis of “unconditioned” Spirit and “conditioned” Nature into World Spirit. The whirlpool inverts Hegel’s dialectic by representing history as a process of progressive alienation from this synthesis, culminating in the decomposition of the individual into matter. Conversely, Tiresias, through his sexual plasticity and historical moveability, renders the idea of an unconditioned, freely self-determining “Spirit” and conditioned “Nature” impossible. Moreover, by narrating instances of sexual violence, Tiresias gives violated subjects a historical legibility and capacity for self-expression. This further destabilizes European exceptionalism by eliciting a confrontation with the violated, historically-oppressed “other”.

Ultimately, by resisting a teleological understanding of history and exposing the violence advanced by such an understanding, I will argue that both Tiresias and the whirlpool motif reveal Europe’s post-war anxiety about its exceptionalist self-image. I will also suggest that both figures offer productive models for thinking about our position in history.

Hegel develops his dialectical account of human history through Kant’s notion of antimony, which describes reason’s dual drive towards apprehending the causes of all causally-determined objects (or, as in formal logic, the premises from which all conclusions proceed) as well as the ultimate cause or premise of the causal chain; the last stage of an inquiry. This latter ultimate cause is *unconditioned* or underivable from any prior cause, while the former “causally-determined” objects are *conditioned*. Reason synthesizes the conditioned and unconditioned through its antimony by allowing them to coexist within itself and the concepts it generates. While, in the Kantian formulation, the conditioned and unconditioned remain separate entities, for Hegel they are synthesized *over time* as human beings acquire a historical self-consciousness.

Hegel argues that reason generates antimony by striving towards an understanding of the world as both unconditioned Spirit (or human consciousness) and conditioned Nature (or matter). For Hegel, human consciousness is unconditioned because its essence is freedom, or the capacity for self-determination and self-production (Houlgate, 1990). Rather than something fixed by our biological make-up, consciousness produces itself by becoming aware of itself; it does not rely on any other “cause” in order to exist. By contrast, physical matter is conditioned, or dependent upon some further cause for its

existence. Reason ultimately synthesizes Spirit and Nature (and, in doing so, resolves the Kantian antimony) as humans become progressively conscious of the fact that our relative awareness of consciousness's essential freedom conditions our material circumstances. In other words, as humans become aware of their intrinsic capacity to self-determine, our political and economic systems change accordingly: we establish conditions that reflect our understanding of human beings as more or less free.

Contemplating history in a rational way (or in a way that aims to synthesize the unconditioned Spirit with conditioned Nature) we perceive consciousness's modalities over time, which, in turn, discloses the intrinsic free, self-producing essence of consciousness. Simultaneously, we perceive that historical circumstances are shaped by particular stages in the development of human consciousness; consciousness is thereby revealed in and through the act of externalizing itself into objective reality.

Acquiring an awareness of ourselves as possessing an empirical history constituted intersubjectively by all past self-determining consciousnesses, we obtain consciousness of (and thereby posit) "World Spirit". This simultaneous consciousness and positing of World Spirit, (which, for Hegel, is the telos of human history) involves synthesizing consciousness as a free, unconditioned entity (i.e., as self-producing activity) and matter as a conditioned one (i.e., the empirical events of human history). As such, World Spirit is neither fully consciousness nor fully matter, but a third term comprising both. Moreover, the instantiation of the World Spirit implies the creation of a state or a set of political conditions that affirm both the existence of a shared human history and each individual's intrinsic capacity for self-determination. Hegel identifies this state generally with Europe, and specifically with Germany.

Hegel's dialectical conception of history, or the process by which Nature and Spirit are synthesized into World Spirit, involves the sublation of Nature into Spirit, and the sublation of Spirit into World Spirit. The first sublating gestures occur when Nature negates itself as we move from a biologically-determined understanding of consciousness to something determined by particular forms of self-consciousness, or ideas about what a human being is- such as national subject or moral creature. The second gesture occurs when Spirit negates itself as we look back upon the past and become aware of consciousness exteriorizing empirically throughout all of human history. In this backwards glance, we obtain an awareness of humanity's *universal* capacity to self-determine and discard an understanding of ourselves as *particular*. Spirit, no longer strictly relative to particular individuals or groups, sublates into World Spirit. Thus, World Spirit is the product of a double-negation, or double-sublation, that, in synthesizing the components responsible for its production, conserves them.

In “The Waste Land”, Eliot’s whirlpool figure seems to both concretize this sublating activity and subvert it. The whirlpool emerges in Section IV of the poem titled “Death by Water”, which describes the corpse of a drowned sailor, Phlebas the Phoenician, as he descends into and transforms through time:

“Phlebas the Phoenician, a fortnight dead,
 Forgot the cry of gulls, and the deep-sea swell
 And the profit and loss.
 A current under sea
 Picked his bones in whispers. As he rose and fell
 He passed the stages of his age and youth
 Entering the whirlpool” (Eliot, 2001).

In this excerpt, Eliot describes Phlebas entering the whirlpool by withdrawing himself from his sensual world and transcending the stages of his “age and youth”. These stages characterize Phlebas’ historical situation, or the circumstances that determine where Phlebas is situated in time. Since transcending these circumstances configures the whirlpool’s threshold, the whirlpool itself becomes a force that displaces Phlebas’ historical rootedness and, in doing so, positions Phlebas *out of time*. However, the whirlpool also represents a backwards descent *into* time. As Phlebas moves past the stages of his age and youth, we can envision him passing ever-earlier historical stages in his spiraling progression through the whirlpool. This intuition is enforced by the verb “passing”, which characterizes Phlebas’ “stage-passing” movement as continuous or actively ongoing through the progressive verb tense. In turn, the whirlpool becomes a figure that represents and comprises a series of chronologically-descending historical stages. Encased in the whirlpool form, these stages acquire a dialectical logic.

The whirlpool-form organizes its historical stages into a series of intersecting spirals that open and close progressively onto other spirals. As each spiral progress into the next, the corresponding stages of “age and youth” can be construed as sublating into other stages and spirals. While, in doing so, each spiral negates itself, all spirals are seemingly conserved within the larger whirlpool structure that is itself produced by their repeated sublating activity. In this way, the whirlpool figure seems to both attribute and concretize a dialectical relation between the historical stages. Moreover, by mapping out each stage, the whirlpool can also be said to depict the trajectory of Hegel’s Spirit. Beginning with Phlebas’ “age and youth”, the whirlpool’s spirals, by giving this “age” concrete, material dimensions, disclose the

empirical exteriorization of Phlebas' individual and his larger Phoenician milieu's Spirit or self-consciousness. They make this exteriorization legible both as a concrete historical moment and a stage in a chronological sequence moving from and towards other forms of exteriorization. Phlebas' "age and youth" as well as all the historical instances of Spirit-exteriorization that precede it, are thus cumulatively represented by and synthesized within the whirlpool.

While the whirlpool's representation of history's empirical progression from stage to stage and civilization to civilization sediments a dialectical logic obtaining between the "stages" (to the extent that history is propelled by it), it is not a logic governed by reason, nor is it a *productive* logic prompting the synthesis of Nature and Spirit into World Spirit. This is because the whirlpool, which Eliot depicts as moving backwards in time, makes historical self-consciousness culminate in a confrontation with Matter, not Spirit. As Phlebas descends into the whirlpool, he encounters "history" which, in the Hegelian formulation, implies an encounter with Spirit's exteriorization. But in the whirlpool form, history is a series of ever-constricting spirals that become smaller and smaller with each descent backwards in time. As they shrink, the spirals' ellipses will ultimately collapse into dots, transforming the first stage of history into a kind of "object" or unit of matter. Importantly, for Hegel, Spirit and matter are radically opposed. Whereas Spirit is a unity that does not rely on anything besides itself for its own production, matter relies on further causes in order to exist. Spirit, according to Hegel, conditions matter as a correlate of Nature: in exteriorizing into Nature and matter, Spirit shapes them to reflect its historical development. Since the whirlpool moves interminably backwards in time, it does not represent Spirit as exteriorizing, but as disappearing from the material circumstances of the world. As Spirit progressively disappears, pure matter is left behind and the whirlpool gradually freezes over, turning empirical reality to stone.

Phlebas is, thus, absorbed into an inverted iteration of Hegel's "historical" dialectic. In progressing downwards, he encounters each stage of history as increasingly matter-like through the sublating activity of the whirlpool's spirals. This "becoming-matter" and "disappearing of Spirit" is, at some level, consistent with Hegel's view that Spirit exteriorizes *progressively over time*. Put crudely, Hegel seems to suggest that the further back one goes, the less "Spirit" one will find. As such, the fact that Spirit ostensibly disappears from history would not appear to undermine Hegel's doctrine. But, because the whirlpool schematizes historical *reflection* (in addition to history as a whole), its objectification of the past seems to be radically *inconsistent* with Hegel's dialectical doctrine. This is because, for World Spirit to be attainable, we must be able to *perceive* Spirit exteriorizing by reflecting back upon history. However, if, as the whirlpool suggests, such reflection culminates in a confrontation with matter (both in the encounter with the final, objectified ellipse as well

as with each stages' progressive tending towards "objectification") and not Spirit, then we cannot actually acquire an awareness of Spirit's self-determining, nature-conditioning essence. Accordingly, we cannot instantiate World Spirit. Instead, we are brought into contact with a different type of awareness: our universal, inescapable anchoring in matter. As the last spiral in the whirlpool, the objectified ellipse is likewise the first stage in human history; the originary starting point that causally motivates the progression of all human temporality. This stage, being pure matter, reveals that Spirit does not propel the movement from stage to stage, nor is it something we intrinsically possess by virtue of our humanity. Thus, confronting our origins in matter, the dialectical progression of human teleology assumes a narrative arc that, because it begins with matter, must likewise end in our material petrification; an arc encapsulated in the biblical fragment "for dust you are and to dust you shall return."

This becoming-matter that the whirlpool sets in motion is further evidenced by Phlebas' progression within it. At other points in the poem, Eliot characterizes Phlebas as a subject with "pearls that were his eyes" (Eliot, 2001) or a subject transformed into matter. Such a characterization, in addition to the condensing, tightening movement of the whirlpool spirals that "pick [Phlebas'] bones in whispers", suggest that the whirlpool gradually transforms Phlebas from embodied human flesh to non-human object and, by extension, from a historically-situated individual to an ahistorical unit of matter. By "ahistorical" I mean that the whirlpool depicts Phlebas as something which is not determined or conditioned by Hegel's rational movement of Spirit through human history, but as something singularly subject to the obscure machinations of matter: death, decay, and reconstitution into other matter-based objects. As such, the whirlpool further displaces Phlebas from his abstract historical setting – his Phoenician "age and youth" – transforming him from a product of history's teleological progression into an object configured by obscure natural forces. His corpse does not absorb and assimilate "the stages of his age and youth" in such a way that it can render them empirically legible as a historical "artifact" of Spirit's teleological unfolding. Instead, Phlebas' corpse, in becoming-object, is alienated from the "stages" that situate him within a particular historical moment, and, thus, the phases in the development of Spirit.

Therefore, the becoming-object of the whirlpool form as well as the way in which it reconstitutes historical subjects into "matter" seems to represent history as a series of contingent empirical circumstances governed by a dumb, impenetrable, and arbitrary force. In turn, our relation to history is one of objects subordinated to and conditioned by this force, not one of individuals advancing history's telos through the progressive acquisition of the consciousness of freedom. And, rather than offering us a picture of Spirit conditioning humanity's empirical reality as it unfolds *in time*, the whirlpool demonstrates Spirit shriveling up and dropping *out of time*– leaving

this reality unconditioned. History no longer seems to follow the “rational course” set by Spirit’s abstract machinery, but throws up the image of a bleaker path – one of our funeral march towards calcification and decay in the graveyards of humanity’s past.

While the whirlpool challenges Hegel’s conception of history by undermining his dialectics, Eliot’s Tiresias directly problematizes the unconditioned essence of Spirit and the conditioned essence of Nature. In the poem, Tiresias is a blind, androgynous prophet extracted from Greek myth who provides both a descriptive and predictive apocalyptic diagnosis of modernity. Tiresias’s capacity to prophesize and describe derives from their historicity as a figure that physically “experiences” every stage of human history by outwardly transitioning between different subjectivities across time and inwardly transitioning between different gender identities. As such, Tiresias exhibits both the unrestrained capacity to self-determine of Hegel’s Spirit (in the sense that they can understand and, thus, posit themselves in various ways as various individuals) and the externalization of that capacity throughout the empirical progression of history of Hegel’s Nature. By becoming aware of themselves, Tiresias can be read as becoming aware of history disclosing their power to self-determine, thereby positing the synthesis of Spirit and Nature and instantiating Hegel’s World Spirit. However, Tiresias’ transitivity ultimately destabilizes Hegel’s conception of Spirit and Nature, as well as the possibility for their “synthesis” in World Spirit. Eliot introduces Tiresias and characterizes their transitivity in the third section of the poem through the following lines:

“I Tiresias, though blind, throbbing between two lives,
Old man with wrinkled female breasts, can see” (Eliot, 2001)

“Throbbing between two lives”, Tiresias is characterized as being constantly in transition between two gender-identities without ever settling in or departing definitively from one gender to the other. While this in-betweenness or “transitivity” lends ambiguity to Tiresias’ gender identifications, it also *en-genders* their prophetic/seeing capabilities. The semantic composition of the excerpted passage reinforces this causal relation between transitivity and prophetic ability by situating the fragment “throbbing in between two lives” conditionally against the fragment “can see”. The first “throbbing” fragment is also placed in opposition to Tiresias actual, physical “blindness”, strengthening the affiliation between seeing-power and transitivity. However, Tiresias’ seeing capacity, derived from their gender transitivity, does not take the form of detached, ahistorical observation, but involves their embodied presence. This is demonstrated through the following excerpted parenthetical:

“(And I Tiresias have foresuffered all
Enacted on this same divan or bed;
I who have sat by Thebes below the wall
And walked among the lowest of the dead.)” (Eliot, 2001)

After recounting the rape of a young woman, Tiresias claims to have “foresuffered all”, extending their “prophetic” capacity beyond “perceiving” all past, present, and future events to physically enduring them. Their physical, corporeal presence thus becomes mapped onto history; onto past, present, and future iterations of the divan and the bed. However, Tiresias’s corporeal presence does not occur in the same body. If Tiresias can “suffer” the young woman’s rape, then they can be said to become manifest in that particular woman’s body. Their ability to “prophesize”/ “see” the rape is precisely an ability to transition into the woman and experience the event from her perspective.

Tiresias also lays claim to different physical embodiments throughout history in this passage, whether that be the Theban Tiresias from the Oedipus myth, Apollo myth, and/or any other raped body. As a result, Tiresias seems to undergo a constant transubstantiation through time and historical circumstances, making them a perpetually transitive figure. Present at every historical moment, Tiresias can thus be said to embody history in the poem; it is through them and their embodied experiences that different historical events are expressed/become available for expression.

However, Tiresias’s embodiment of history is not an embodied synthesis of Hegel’s Spirit and Nature but rather undermines both concepts. Tiresias complicates Hegel’s Spirit because, through their transitivity, they never successfully posit themselves as a new individual, but frenetically vibrate in-between themselves and the other, new one. Like Spirit, Tiresias relies upon themselves for self-production (only Tiresias can motivate the transition from one subjectivity to another), but also can never quite actualize that self-production because they are both unable to definitively depart from the old self and are already engaged in a new productive activity. Thus, whereas Hegel understands consciousness as an activity of successful self-production, Tiresias embodies consciousness as hyperactive self-production that cannot actually produce. Instead, Tiresias exists as an indeterminate totality of the past, present, and future fragments of the different subjectivities (or modes of self-understanding) they occupy throughout time.

Moreover, Tiresias’s transitivity undermines the capacity to self-determine for every other subject in the poem. If Tiresias’

prophesizes/describes events by embodying, then any subject they describe in the poem (as the poem's narrative voice) is a subject that they have physically "taken-on". This implies that every subject portrayed in the poem may not be stably themselves, but also Tiresias. The parenthetical that Eliot employs in this passage illustrates how Tiresias's transubstantiation can operate as an appendage to every section of the poem. We can envision moving around this neatly-packaged parenthetical to any part of the poem, demonstrating how Tiresias operates as a constant, though not necessarily foregrounded, figure speaking through the subject's portrayed in the poem.

Besides introducing a critical ambiguity in the poem about whether each subject is truly that subject, this hints at an opacity within self-consciousness. If Tiresias is also a part of the subject, then that part of the subject which is not-itself becomes impenetrable to the subject in self-consciousness. The subject, in understanding itself to be stably X-or-Y individual or, at least, not-Tiresias, would then actually lack proper self-consciousness and would not actually posit itself as *itself*. Understanding Tiresias, then, as a symbolic representation of the human *sub*-conscious, we can see how Hegel's Spirit, or understanding of consciousness as the capacity to self-determine, is severely limited because it asserts that we actually have an intelligible essence that, through progressive intervals of cognitive sophistication, we can access. In other words, the self-reliance, or ability to realize itself by becoming consciousness of itself, that Hegel posits as fundamentally constitutive of Spirit's "unity" requires not only that there be something metaphysically "essential" or "definitive" about consciousness for us to become aware of, but also that we can achieve such an awareness *when the time comes*. Eliot's Tiresias, instead, illustrates that there are aspects to consciousness that we can never penetrate and that these aspects (deriving from an intrinsic obscurity figuratively equivalent to Tiresias) are responsible for our "transitivity" or transformations over time, rather than the progressive, enlightened awareness of ourselves as self-determining. As such, Eliot's Tiresias can be understood as indicating that human consciousness is not an unconditioned entity (like Hegel's Spirit would seem to suggest) but conditioned by forces beyond intelligibility or control.

Secondly, Tiresias challenges Hegel's Nature by portraying it as unconditioned. This is apparent through the following fragment.

"What is the city over the mountains
Cracks and reforms and bursts in the violet air
Falling towers
Jerusalem Athens Alexandria
Vienna London
Unreal" (Eliot, 2001)

In this passage, Tiresias depicts an apocalyptic scene in which historically eminent cities, alongside modern ones, explode and become “unreal”. Since the “unreal” cities are both historical and contemporary, it is unclear whether this scene is predictive or descriptive. The ambiguity here can be attributed to Tiresias who, lacking a determinate temporality, could be narrating from the historical Athens, Vienna, or London, or experiencing, and thus invoking, the future collapse of modern cities in the present. By destabilizing the precise “time” of this collapse, Tiresias depicts it as something which has happened, is happening, and will happen. And something which, because it cannot be fixed temporally, explodes all of linear time. This is reinforced by the passage’s description of the cities as collapsing *all at once*, rather than gradually or successively, within an unidentifiable present-past-future moment.

The collapse of these cities extends to the modes of self-understanding affiliated with them. As Jerusalem becomes unreal, so might Christian conceptions of humanity. Likewise, as Athens becomes unreal, so might a rational conception of “man”. Applying unreality to these conceptions implies negating their role in materially constituting the civilizations in which they emerged; rejecting that they ever “externalized” into the physical world and acquired objective existence. By extension, the material-empirical aspect of these civilizations (i.e., cities, artistic objects, technology, etc.) are revealed as “unconditioned”. Absent the causal force (i.e., the Hegelian Spirit) through which we can source these aspects in human activity, they become arbitrary or contingent—empirical datum which, in being totally separate from us, we can neither shape nor comprehend. Thus, by becoming incomprehensible, they become *unreal* to us.

Since Spirit is here portrayed as never having externalized into empirical reality, it cannot organize empirical history in a sequence from civilization to civilization. In other words, it ceases to constitute human temporality in a linear way. No longer a progression, empirical history stops presenting linearly—forcing us to confront time in all its unconditioned natural opacity as an inextricable amalgamation of past-present-future. Tiresias, too, embodies time in this way. Being atemporal and non-localizable in time, they make events manifest *precisely* by collapsing the past/present/future formulation of time. As such, through them, we encounter time as disorganized and non-linear. And our empirical reality, dissolved of its temporal indicators that differentiate past, present, and future, becomes a space of total disorientation.

Ultimately, by depicting human consciousness as irremediably fragmented, and the physical world as pure obscure chaos, Eliot’s Tiresias subverts an understanding of human history in which consciousness is shown to constitute and, thus, exist in the objective circumstances of our world. By extension, Tiresias shatters the

illusion that “Europeans” are specially aware of humanity’s intrinsic self-determining capacity and that this awareness is concretized in European modes of self-governance. “The Waste Land’s” representation of apocalypse can, thus, be read as prophesying the impending apocalypse of teleologically-derived European modes of self-understanding. It is an apocalypse also symbolized by Paul Valéry’s European Hamlet, who, holding before him the “illustrious skulls” of Europe’s philosophical tradition, knows he cannot discard their teleological narratives without committing a kind of suicide; without ceasing to be himself. (Valéry, 1962)

However, the anxiety tormenting Valéry’s Hamlet might also emanate from the contemplation of a different set of skulls: the skulls of violated individuals “begat” by a misplaced sense of European exceptionalism. These skulls depict a two-part violation, the physical violation of “body” and the abstract violation of historical visibility. This latter violation occurs as teleological narratives of history erase instances of violence by characterizing them as necessary for the achievement of humanity’s telos. Through this erasure, violence ceases to be violence and becomes a mere stage in the progression of humanity’s providential development. Violence, in other words, becomes “ordered” in history in a way that “produce[s] and maintain[s] an androcentric European ethno-class of Man as the pinnacle of being” (Snorton, 2017).

However, through their transitivity and historical function, Tiresias illuminates these repressed instances of violence, sedimenting and legitimizing their place within history. In doing so, Tiresias forces us to encounter historical subjects as actually violated, or violated in a way that cannot be neutralized by European exceptionalism. Thus, Tiresias elicits an encounter with historical instances of violence outside of the teleological narratives that render them invisible. Since we can encounter history beyond the narratives that claim to capture and represent it, Tiresias further reveals these narratives to be epistemically inadequate for grounding our perception of history.

The whirlpool also forces us to confront the violence of Eurocentrism, though in a somewhat roundabout way. Stripping Phlebas’ corpse from its capacity to meaningfully function as an artifact (and, thus, orient Western civilization in time) the whirlpool harkens to the absence of archival material depicting the violence endured by slaves in the Middle Passage. The whirlpool, depicting matter’s domination of time, reveals the impossibility of recovering and deriving meaning from past objects. With respect to Western historical objects, such meaning is only partially non-recoverable since the objects themselves continue to exist (albeit transformed beyond recognition). However, with respect to the Middle Passage, literal, material documentation of historical violence is *totally* non-recoverable- both in the channels of the Triangular Trade and in the archive. Philosopher Edouard Glissant formulates this absence as an

abyss. As he writes, “the abyss [of water] thus projects a reverse image of all that had been left behind, not to be regained for generations except – more and more threadbare – in the blue savannas of memory or imagination” (Glissant, 1997). Here, Glissant’s abyss serves a dual function, it represents, first the lack of artifacts and, second, the enormous epistemic gap produced as a result.

The whirlpool hints at both material and epistemic aspects of Glissant’s abyss. By depicting the transformations of Western artifacts through time, the whirlpool positively signals their continued material presence. At the same time, it negatively signals the absence of artifacts whose presence would have denoted the empirical reality of slavery. The whirlpool, thus, implicitly distinguishes between two types of epistemic collapse. While both occur by virtue of a confrontation with history’s empirical repository, one involves being unable to recover some previous meaning from existing artifacts. The other, however, involves facing a lack of artifacts and, by extension, the sheer impossibility of discovering meaning or knowledge in history’s archives.

The former, then, can be understood as a kind of epistemic severance (in which a previously known object becomes unfamiliar and incomprehensible), while the latter can be understood in terms of Glissant’s epistemic abyss. Since this “epistemic abyss” is implicit within the whirlpool, it co-constitutes the latter’s symbolic function, further signaling the ways that European teleo-historical narratives fail to create meaning. Housed silently within the whirlpool like Jacques Derrida’s sepulchral trace, the abyss exposes Hegel’s narrative failures; the plot lines of violence he (and others) emptied out in the name of Europe’s providential superiority while claiming, nonetheless, to represent all of human history.

Thus, through the whirlpool and Tiresias, Eliot seems to respectively challenge Hegel’s notion of a historical dialectic as well as his conceptions of Spirit and Nature. While this “challenging” expresses Europe’s postwar anxiety about its exceptionalist self-image, both the whirlpool and Tiresias also offer productive models for thinking about human history. The whirlpool, by indicating that human history is governed by seemingly random and impenetrable natural forces, leaves our past undetermined by abstract frameworks and open to continued re-investigation. We can, by recourse to the whirlpool-figure, think and rethink human history without being constrained by teleological logics.

By contrast, Tiresias encourages us to attend to the ambiguity within human consciousness and our historical circumstances. In our world where scientific developments strive to convince us that human consciousness can be cracked open and explained, that all empirical events have a determinate cause, temporal duration, etc., contemplating this ambiguity can help us to avoid conceding human experience to dogmas that either exclude its essential aspects or

privilege some experiences over others. For instance, by attending to all of the ways that time presents itself as non-linear (i.e., in memory, in the way our personal backgrounds and future goals materialize into the present when we make important decisions), we can resist scientific conceptions of time that organize our experiences along a strict past-present-future continuum and, in doing so, disfigure them. By extension, we can begin to see how empirical history is not relegated to the past – something that gives way to the present like a ladder gives way to a top-shelf – but is always manifesting itself in our present, structuring and restructuring how we perceive ourselves, each other, and the world around us.

Recognizing, too, that our human consciousness is, at some level, disordered and opaque, we can acknowledge that how we define what it means to be human throughout history is (in part) motivated by unintelligible forces; that the light of reason through which we examine ourselves *itself* emerges from a shady mess of desires and impressions that are always in flux. Still, with politics and science advancing ideas of humanity as cohesively one way or another (e.g., free, requiring certain rights, seeking social recognition, or, along the scientific conception, unfree, constrained by DNA, driven by a need for survival), we are bombarded with frameworks that tell us who we are, what our past is, and what our future will be. By looking to Tiresias, we can shield ourselves from the totalizing power of these frameworks, adjusting our eyes to the murky landscape of human experience throughout time.

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