

The Expert Hand and the Obedient Heart: Dr. Vittoz, T.S. Eliot, and the Therapeutic Possibilities of *The Waste Land*

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It seems appropriate that *The Waste Land*, a text which ushered in a new modern literature characterized by disjointed narration, fragmented identities, and splintered religious faith, was written by a man in the midst of a nervous breakdown.¹ Having felt “very shaky” for months,² T.S. Eliot composed most of the poem while under the care of Dr. Roger Vittoz at a Lausanne, Switzerland, sanitarium in late 1921.³ Dr. Vittoz’ role in the composition history of the text has been studied only vaguely, yet it is comparable to Ezra Pound’s famous “caesarean Operation.”⁴ If Pound was the midwife of the poem, as Wayne Koestenbaum and others (including Pound himself) have claimed, then Dr. Vittoz was the anesthesiologist on call during the delivery, guiding Eliot through the birthing process and slipping him an epidural when the pain became too great. Vittoz’ therapeutic program re-educated Eliot’s broken will and enabled him to complete his work. *The Waste Land* stands as a record of Eliot’s sickness and his cure.

Although scholars of Modernism have gone to great lengths to make connections between the life and work of writers such as Pound and Hemingway, relatively few critics have examined and interpreted the circumstances surrounding Eliot’s stay in Lausanne, as well as their relation to the poem which he took with him when he left. This unusual critical neglect

¹ I would like to thank Robert D. Richardson, Jr., Joan Richardson, Louis Menand, Wayne Koestenbaum, Tan Lin, Tom Marsh, Liza Miller, Jeanne and Daniel Gold, and the editors of the *Journal of Modern Literature* for their insightful comments on earlier drafts of this essay.

² T.S. Eliot to Richard Aldington, [3? October 1921]. *The Letters of T.S. Eliot, Volume I: 1898-1922*, ed. Valerie Eliot (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1988), p. 473.

³ Critics have debated the composition history of the poem. Most agree that Eliot wrote section III before arriving at Lausanne. There is no doubt that he wrote section V while he was under Vittoz’ care, and there is strong evidence to suggest that Eliot compiled sections I, II, and IV at Lausanne. See Grover Smith, “The Making of *The Waste Land*,” *Mosaic* VI (1972), pp. 127–41, and Lyndall Gordon, “*The Waste Land* Manuscript,” *American Literature*, XLV (1974), pp. 557–70.

⁴ Ezra Pound to T.S. Eliot, 24 Saturnus An I [24 December 1921]. *Letters*, p. 498.

might be due to Eliot's famous doctrine of "impersonality"—his belief that "poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality."⁵ Some negligence is no doubt due to the influence of Eliot's academic champions, the New Critics, who preferred close readings of texts to biographical examinations of the authors of those texts. Yet, as Lyndall Gordon notes, the more we know of Eliot's life, "the clearer it seems that the 'impersonal' façade of his poetry—the multiple faces and voices—masks an often quite literal reworking of personal experience."⁶ The personal in Eliot tends to emerge in unexpected ways; even though his theory of "impersonality" is often quoted, for example, the naked confession that follows the theory is sometimes overlooked: "But, of course, only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to want to escape from these things."⁷

Since the publication of Eliot's original drafts of *The Waste Land* manuscript in 1971 and *The Letters of T.S. Eliot* in 1988, scholars of Eliot's work have paid increasing attention to the relationship among Dr. Vittoz, Eliot, and *The Waste Land*. The first work done on this subject was by the psychiatrist Harry Trosman, who in 1974 published "T.S. Eliot and *The Waste Land*" in *Archives of General Psychiatry*.⁸ After Trosman's article appeared, biographical studies such as Peter Ackroyd's *T.S. Eliot: A Life* (1984) and Ronald Bush's *T.S. Eliot: A Study in Character and Style* (1984) began to discuss Vittoz.⁹ Wayne Koestenbaum took up the issue in his 1989 study of the erotics of male literary collaboration.¹⁰ In 1995, Adam Piette corrected some of the inaccuracies in Ackroyd's descriptions of Vittoz' treatment and further explored his connection to Eliot.¹¹ Many of these studies have taken into account the effect of Vittoz' therapy on Eliot, but none of them interrogates Vittoz' book, *Traitement des psychonévroses par la rééducation du contrôle cérébral* (*The Treatment of Neurasthenia By Means of Brain Control*), or uses a close reading of Vittoz' text as an interpretive tool for understanding *The Waste Land*. Eliot scholars have long traced the literary sources of his poems, on the reasonable grounds that if he read or wrote about a given book, it might have influenced his thought. Vittoz' text is no different—Eliot read and marked the copy that he owned—and one may make a strong case for it as an influence on Eliot. For Vittoz' authority was bolstered by recommendations from Eliot's friends and by the prestige of the medical profession at a time when patients increasingly turned to doctors to help them cope with the stresses of modern life. Although Eliot, in his notes to the poem, claimed that "Not only the title, but the plan and a good deal of the incidental symbolism of the poem" were suggested

⁵ T.S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1919), in *Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot*, ed. Frank Kermode (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1975), p. 43.

⁶ Lyndall Gordon, *Eliot's Early Years* (Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 2.

⁷ Eliot's statement may have been inspired by Vittoz' book, which was first published in 1911. He writes that the neurasthenic "has no feeling except for his own personality, which he often detests, but from which he cannot escape." Roger Vittoz, *Treatment of Neurasthenia by Means of Brain Control*, trans. H.B. Brooke (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1921), p. 21. Further citations will appear in the text.

⁸ Harry Trosman, "T.S. Eliot and *The Waste Land*," *Archives of General Psychiatry*, XXX (1974), pp. 709–17.

⁹ Peter Ackroyd, *T.S. Eliot: A Life* (Simon & Schuster, 1984), and Ronald Bush, *T.S. Eliot: A Study in Character and Style* (Oxford University Press, 1984).

¹⁰ Wayne Koestenbaum, *Double Talk* (Routledge, 1989).

¹¹ Adam Piette, "Eliot's Breakdown and Dr. Vittoz," *English Language Notes*, XXXIII (1995), pp. 35–39.

by Jessie Weston's *From Ritual to Romance*,¹² Vittoz' book also played an important part in determining the tropes of the poem.

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In 1921, Vivien Eliot wrote to Scofield Thayer, a friend of Tom's from Harvard who later became the editor of *The Dial*, to tell him of Eliot's deteriorating health:

Tom has had rather a serious breakdown, and has had to stop all work and go away for three months. He has to follow a strict regimen, and may only read (for pleasure, not profit) two hours a day.¹³

Eliot had long been burdened by the combined weight of financial pressures and anxieties about his wife's health. Vivien's fragile constitution became an issue soon after their wedding in 1915.¹⁴ During their honeymoon, writes Lyndall Gordon, Vivien was "not far from suicide."¹⁵ In 1920, when Vivien's father became ill (a calamity that "nearly prostrated" her), Eliot wrote to his mother that he had never had "so many difficult things on my mind at once."¹⁶ He expressed his shock and dismay at the condition of Vivien's father:

We have of course been on pins and needles about Vivien's father the whole time. When we think that the surgeon, one of the most skilled in London, was so horrified when he opened him, at the second operation, at what he found inside that he wanted simply to sew him up and let him die in peace—we are absolutely terrified to believe that it is now possible, and even probable, that he will recover.¹⁷

Although Vivien's father did indeed recover, this was, for Eliot, a first-hand encounter with the inevitable decay of the human body over time—a problem which he had avoided a year earlier when his own father died across the ocean in America. Eliot's characterization of the doctor's revulsion upon opening the body of the sick patient points toward the original epigraph of *The Waste Land*: Conrad's "He cried in a whisper at some image, at some vision,—he cried out twice, a cry that was no more than a breath— 'The horror! The horror!'"¹⁸ The surgical scene described by Eliot also prefigures one of the great themes of *The Waste Land*: the opening up of the body (or cadaver) of modern society, only to find sickness and corruption at its core. When faced with this kind of tragic deterioration, the only

¹² T.S. Eliot, *The Complete Poems and Plays, 1909-1950* (Harcourt, Brace, & World, 1962), p. 50. Further references to the poem will appear parenthetically, by line number, in the text.

¹³ Vivien Eliot to Scofield Thayer, 13 October 1921. *Letters*, p. 478.

¹⁴ Ackroyd, p. 67.

¹⁵ Gordon, p. 76.

¹⁶ T.S. Eliot to his Mother, 31 October 1920. *Letters*, p. 417.

¹⁷ T.S. Eliot to his Mother, 12 December 1920. *Letters*, p. 423.

¹⁸ T.S. Eliot, *The Waste Land: A Facsimile and Transcript of the Original Drafts Including the Annotations of Ezra Pound*, ed. Valerie Eliot (Harcourt, 1971), p. 3.

solution is to “sew him up and let him die in peace,” or, in other words, to shore fragments against the ruins and to mouth Sanskrit words of peace until the world either recovers or dies.

The event that probably caused Eliot’s breakdown, though, was a visit from his mother, Charlotte Eliot, and his siblings in 1921. Eliot remained close to his mother while he was in England, writing to her (or at least feeling that he ought to write to her) almost every week. When she traveled to London, it was their first meeting in six years. During the hot summer of the visit, Tom and Vivien gave their flat to his family, an act which led Vivien to complain in a letter to Scofield Thayer that “we have given up our at least cool and civilised flat to them, while we are encamped in an attic with a glass roof. So you see other people have troubles as well as yourself . . .”¹⁹ This statement proved prophetic as deeper troubles beset Eliot and Vivien after the departure of his family at the end of the summer. “I cannot tell you how exhausting we both found it—the reaction from the strain of it has been paralysing,” he wrote to Sydney Schiff.²⁰ During the following month, Eliot continued to complain about his health, telling Mary Hutchinson that “I am feeling completely exhausted—the departure of my family laid us both out—and have had some splitting headaches.”²¹

At Vivien’s behest, he went to see a nerve specialist, who told him that he must “go straight away for three months complete rest and . . . live according to a strict regimen.”²² Eliot applied for and received a three-month leave from his bank job; the reason was recorded officially as “nervous breakdown.”²³ The strict regimen that the nerve specialist prescribed for Eliot was a “rest cure” at the Albemarle Hotel in Margate, a resort area on the southern coast of England. Rest cures were one of the therapies recommended by the burgeoning legion of nerve doctors in England and America. T.J. Jackson Lears has pointed out that they were based on assumptions of “psychic scarcity,” which “compared a person’s supply of nervous energy to a bank account: psychic wastrels could easily overdraw and bankrupt themselves.”²⁴ Eliot was exposed to this kind of financial metaphor when he visited “the most celebrated specialist in London,” who said that he had “greatly overdrawn [his] nervous energy.”²⁵ To relieve such disorders, physicians such as S. Weir Mitchell prescribed cures which were designed to “isolate his patients from nervous stimuli, to ‘fatten’ and ‘redden’ them until they could return to active life.”²⁶ Eliot’s October 1921 stay at Margate, however, proved unsuccessful. “It is difficult to keep calm!” he wrote to Richard Aldington.²⁷

¹⁹ Vivien Eliot to Scofield Thayer, 20 July [1921]. *Letters*, p. 462.

²⁰ T.S. Eliot to Sydney Schiff, 25 August 1921. *Letters*, p. 466.

²¹ T.S. Eliot to Mary Hutchinson, 1 September 1921. *Letters*, p. 467.

²² T.S. Eliot to Henry Eliot, 3 October 1921. *Letters*, p. 471.

²³ Ackroyd, p. 114.

²⁴ T.J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Anti-Modernism and the Transformation of American Culture 1880-1920* (Pantheon, 1981), pp. 52–53. George Beard and Pierre Janet both made comparisons between nervous energy and financial interactions in their writing. One significance of this, Henri Ellenberger points out in *The Discovery of the Unconscious: The History and Evolution of Dynamic Psychiatry* (Basic Books, 1970), was that “neurasthenia was a disease proper to men” (p. 243). Showing the converse effects of relationship between nervous energy and money, Lears looks at the way financial interactions were affected by therapeutic ideologies in “From Salvation to Self-Realization,” in *The Culture of Consumption: Critical Essays in American History, 1880-1980*, Eds. Richard Wightman Fox and T.J. Jackson Lears (Pantheon, 1983).

²⁵ T.S. Eliot to Henry Eliot, 3 October 1921. *Letters*, p. 471.

²⁶ Lears, p. 52.

²⁷ T.S. Eliot to Richard Aldington, 15 October 1921. *Letters*, p. 479.

He began to suspect that he needed more than a rest cure to help him. After his friend Ottoline Morrell recommended a visit to Dr. Vittoz in Switzerland, Eliot sought out the opinion of Julian Huxley, who had also undergone Vittoz' treatment:

There are so few good specialists in this line that one wants to have more precise testimony of a man's value before trying him So would you mind letting me know, as soon as you can, whether you consider that Vittoz benefited you, and how brilliant a physician you think him?²⁸

After receiving Huxley's positive reply and reading *The Treatment of Neurasthenia By Means of Brain Control*,²⁹ Eliot decided that Vittoz "sounds just the man I want."³⁰

Roger Vittoz was born in 1863 in French-speaking Switzerland. He became a doctor in 1886 after studying medicine in Geneva and Lausanne. He practiced hypnosis for a time (as Freud did early in his career), but decided that the patients were forced to be much too passive.³¹ Instead, he began to formulate his own theory of re-educating the will.³² In 1911, he published his major work, *Traitment des psychonévroses par la rééducation du contrôle cérébral*.

Eliot's interest in Vittoz was due partly to the fact that Vittoz was a "psychological doctor" rather than "a nerve man," a distinction that is less clear to us today than it was to him:

I went to this specialist [at Margate] on account of his great name. . . . But since I have been here I have wondered whether he is quite the best man for me, as he is known as a nerve man, and I want rather a specialist in psychological troubles.³³

²⁸ T.S. Eliot to Julian Huxley, 26 October 1921. *Letters*, p. 480.

²⁹ Eliot had the third, 1921 French edition: Roger Vittoz, *Traitment des psychonévroses par la rééducation du contrôle cérébral* (Paris: Librairie J.-B. Baillière, 1921). In this essay I have used the 1921 English translation of this edition (cited above).

³⁰ T.S. Eliot to Julian Huxley, 31 October 1921. *Letters*, p. 482.

³¹ Piette, p. 36.

³² Contrary to Henri Ellenberger's claim that Vittoz "did not teach his method, and few practised it after his death" (p. 807), several of Vittoz' friends and students wrote about him, and his methods are still taught today. The books written by his students describe his techniques, often in hagiographic tones; they tend to dwell on Vittoz' gentle disposition and on his tireless dedication to his patients. Examples of such works include Robert Dupond, *La Cure des Psychonévroses par la Méthode de Dr. Vittoz* (Paris: Jouve & Cie, 1934), Dr. P. D'Espiney, *La Psychothérapie Du D'Vittoz: Une Philosophie pratique de la Vie* (Paris: Librairie P. Téqui, 1949), Henriette LeFebvre, *Un "Sauveur": Le Docteur Vittoz* (Paris: Jouve & Cie, 1951), François Ledoux, *L'Unité de la Personne par le développement de la Réceptivité* (Paris, 1960), several of which are excerpted in *Le Dr. Roger Vittoz et l'Angoisse de l'Homme Moderne*, ed. C. Truchot (Paris: Editions du Levain, 1965). See also *Angoisse, ou contrôle*, ed. Dr. P. d'Espiney (Paris, Editions du Levain, 1976). Julian Huxley, who, along with Ottoline Morrell, recommended Vittoz to Eliot, wrote very briefly about him in *Memories* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1970). Devotees of Vittoz' work remain active today. The most recent edition of *Traitment des psychonévroses par la rééducation du contrôle cérébral* was published in 1993, and there is even a website devoted to his techniques (<http://www.vittoz.org>). Recent proponents of Vittoz' method downplay his concept of cerebral vibrations and instead highlight his teachings on the importance of control and the step-by-step process of rebuilding fragile psyches through the repetition of simple exercises.

³³ T.S. Eliot to Julian Huxley, 26 October 1921. *Letters*, p. 480.

Eliot's comment makes sense, however, when one considers that Vittoz believed that neurasthenia was a less serious condition than hysteria or insanity (p. 11). Vittoz wrote:

It must be admitted that the objective and subjective brain of a neurasthenic person are normal and are in no way organically affected. . . . In all cases of insanity and purely mental illnesses there exists more than insufficiency or lack of control, and though some of the same marked changes as occur in these latter are also to be found in cases of hysteria, it cannot for that reason be said that this illness is only due to a defect of brain control. It is of so complex a nature that it is difficult to give the instability of brain equilibrium as its absolute cause.

On the other hand, in a case of neurasthenia, even the least prejudiced observer cannot but recognize, in every symptom, the undoubted existence of an insufficiency of control, and the truth of the saying that "every neurasthenic lacks control" must be admitted. (pp. 10–11)

"An insufficiency of control" was exactly the problem that Vittoz' therapy was designed to correct. Under Vittoz therapeutic system, Eliot would have been reassured that his brain was healthy, but that his "brain control" needed training. He would have learned, in other words, that his problem was functional rather than structural and could be fixed. He was neither insane nor hysterical—he merely had neurasthenia, an illness that Vittoz promised to cure.

In his book, Vittoz lays out the principles behind his treatment of neurasthenia, a disease that produced a state of mental and physical exhaustion in its victims. The term "neurasthenia" had been coined by George Beard in 1869, but the symptoms of the disease were notoriously vague—they included headaches, noises in the ear, bad dreams, insomnia, flushing, and fidgetiness, "flying neuralgia," spinal irritation, impotence, and hopelessness.³⁴ To a modern observer, the wide range of symptoms that were amassed under the rubric of "neurasthenia" suggests the ways in which the ostensibly objective methods of medical science are tied to the social and cultural conditions in which they are formulated. Such acknowledgements of the historical contingencies of science, however, all too often belittle the fact that to people suffering from these disorders, the symptoms were real, and the therapies at least promised some hope of relief.³⁵

³⁴ Barbara Sicherman, "The Uses of a Diagnosis: Doctors, Patients, and Neurasthenia," *Sickness and Health in America: Readings in the History of Medicine and Public Health*, ed. Judith Walzer Leavitt and Ronald L. Numbers (University of Wisconsin Press, 1978), pp. 25–38; p. 22.

³⁵ Doctors prescribed a wide range of therapies for neurasthenia. The following therapy, recommended by W. Charles Loosmore in *Nerves and the Man* (1921), reads more like an assignment for a college literature class than a course of treatment: "Take a paragraph from Ruskin, or a short passage from Milton or Shakespeare. Get at the idea or ideas in such passages quite clearly, and then express them in your own words. As a beginning, simple passages may be selected, in which the ideas and connections are fairly easy to grasp. Then, take passages a little more difficult, treating them similarly. After a time it may be well to select a few passages from Browning's "Saul" or the "Ring and the Book," extracting their hidden meaning, and expressing it again in your own way. For those who may find this somewhat beyond them, passages from Longfellow or Tennyson or from Scripture, or even from nursery rhymes, may be utilised. In each case, a demand will be made upon sustained mental effort and the response to that demand is the all-important thing" (p. 107). While some literary scholars might take umbrage at the comparison of the poems of Longfellow and Tennyson to nursery rhymes, the passage nevertheless illustrates the scope of therapies used to treat neurasthenia.

Vittoz begins *The Treatment of Neurasthenia by Means of Brain Control* by stating that humans have two anatomical brains, with a force called “brain control” keeping a balance between them. He explains that the “subconscious brain” is a source of ideas and sensations, a kind of subjective, primitive brain center (pp. 1–2). The “conscious brain” is the site of reason, judgment, and will; it is the evolved, objective brain that focuses the subconscious brain’s ideas and sensations (p. 2). Vittoz explains that neurasthenia is due not to the dominance of one brain over the other (a normal condition that the brain control would correct), but rather to a “lack of brain control” (p. 5). Brain control provided a kind of regulating check between the two brains, preserved a sense of balance, and policed

the psychological and even . . . the physiological functions of the brain, controlling actions as well as ideas. The brain control of a man in a normal state of health is automatic . . . [I]t acts of its own accord without any effort of the will . . . (p. 4)

According to Vittoz, brain control becomes noticeable only when it functions improperly. The neurasthenic perceives his brain more clearly than would a presumably normal person and “realizes that he lacks something; that ‘something’ is brain control” (p. 4).

Vittoz believed that “every neurasthenic lacks control” (p. 11). His therapy was designed to “give the patient the will power, concentration and consciousness which he lacks” (p. 43) through sets of six-step physical and mental exercises. All of the exercises begin with one simple movement or thought, and move towards progressively more complex motions or thought sequences. The physical exercises commence with the bending of the arm and graduate to “control in walking” (pp. 46–47). The patient was to practice concentration and consciousness in these exercises—he was to be aware, for example, of the “definite sensation (in his brain) that he is putting his right and left foot forward alternately” (p. 46).

Vittoz’ most conspicuous contribution to psychotherapy was his belief that a well-trained doctor could feel vibrations of the patient’s brain with his hand. Vittoz writes:

We have, however, found, contrary to the opinions generally accepted, that after a certain amount of training, the physician’s hand can, when placed on the patient’s forehead, give him exact indications as to the working of the latter’s brain. (p. 32)

Vittoz did not claim that these vibrations would tell him the thoughts of his patients, but he did believe that “with a little practice one recognizes certain changes in the vibrations felt by the hand which correspond to certain conditions of the brain” (p. 35). Under Vittoz’ therapeutic system, the doctor would use his skill at registering the vibrations to monitor the patient’s progress: “if the exercise is well done, the physician will feel a regular double undulation, if badly done, he will notice interruptions.” (p. 60).³⁶

As Harry Trosman and Adam Piette point out, however, the practical significance of Vittoz’ method was that the patient performed many of his exercises with the doctor’s hand on his

³⁶ Attentive to the skepticism that such claims provoked, Vittoz planned on writing a more scientific explanation of this phenomenon. He also hoped to create a machine that would measure cerebral vibrations, but he died before doing so. Dupond, “La cure des psychonévroses, par la Méthode de Vittoz,” in Truchot, pp. 37–48; p. 45.

head. Vittoz would sit to the left of the neurasthenic; after a few moments of silence, he would delicately place his right hand on the patient's temple in a quiet, non-aggressive manner.³⁷ Vittoz was known to be a kind man, and his hand would have been a soothing force to an agitated neurasthenic.³⁸ Indeed, he encouraged his patients to think of themselves as children and of him as their father:

We must remember that a patient lacking control is like a child who has never walked; let us teach him his first steps and support him in his walk; we will afterwards correct his mistakes. (p. 31)

This comparison of the patient and doctor to a child and parent must have held a certain appeal for Eliot, who no longer had a father of his own to comfort him in times of distress. Eliot found Vittoz reassuring; he wrote that "I like him very much personally, and he inspires me with confidence."³⁹ Vittoz' rigorous mental exercises, such as forcing the patient to make decisions over and over, were mitigated by his paternal hand.⁴⁰

Eliot's letters between October 1921 and January 1922 show us that he not only read Vittoz' book, but incorporated Vittoz' therapeutic vocabulary into his thinking.⁴¹ In a 6 November 1921 letter from Margate, Eliot had written that "my 'nerves' are a very mild affair, due, not to overwork, but to an *aboulie*."⁴² This is a direct reference to a passage which he marked in his copy of Vittoz' book.⁴³ Vittoz writes that *aboulie*, or lack of will, is common in neurasthenia:

Every idea, every act of will causes a sensation of fear in the mind of the sufferer, he foresees that all effort is in vain, and he is paralyzed and fettered by doubt. (p. 26)

This description reminds us of Prufrock in *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*. It also characterizes the "typist home at teatime" (l. 222) in *The Waste Land*, who, like Tiresias, discerns the futility of resistance and makes no effort to fight off the carbuncular clerk. Eliot claimed that Tiresias, who has "foresuffered all" (l. 243), is the "most important personage in the poem, uniting all the rest"; it is therefore important to note the similarities between Tiresias and the neurasthenic state which Vittoz describes. We could read Tiresias as a patient with defective brain control, one who "foresees that all effort is in vain." Vittoz wrote that

³⁷ Henriette Lefebvre, "Biographie du Dr. Roger Vittoz," in Truchot, pp. 49–56; p. 55.

³⁸ Trosman, p. 713; and Piette, p. 38. Piette takes Peter Ackroyd to task for Ackroyd's unspecific characterization of Vittoz' therapy as a "laying on of hands" (pp. 35–36).

³⁹ T.S. Eliot to Ottoline Morrell, 30 November 1921, *Letters*, p. 490.

⁴⁰ Piette, p. 38.

⁴¹ Eliot, of course, was also influenced by writings of Bergson, Bradley, James, and Janet, as William Skaff points out in *The Philosophy of T.S. Eliot: From Skepticism to a Surrealist Poetic 1909-1927* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986), esp. chapter 3: "The Unconscious."

⁴² T.S. Eliot to Richard Aldington, 6 November 1921, *Letters*, p. 486.

⁴³ Eliot, *Letters*, p. 480. In a footnote on this page, the editor notes three passages that Eliot marked in his copy of Vittoz' book.

the neurasthenic patient “lives very little in the present and his thoughts always turn to the past or the future” (p. 19); Tiresias, too, bridges various timeframes, emerging into the present from the past in order to speak of the future.

The issue of the poem’s narrator—whether there is one consciousness that presides over the entire work, or whether the text is spoken by multiple voices—is one of the central critical issues that have surrounded the poem since its publication. The possibility that Tiresias is figured as a neurasthenic who is unable to concentrate (and thus unable to shape an uninterrupted, continuous narrative), however, allows for a narrator with a polyphonic voice. Vittoz writes that the patient with insufficient brain control experiences “a sensation of painful confusion, of a whirl of unconnected and uncontrolled ideas” (p. 7). Furthermore, the neurasthenic’s personality often underwent sudden changes which could account for a multi-vocal performance:

the character is changeable, gay or morose, expansive or self-centred all for no obvious reason. Cross-question the sufferer and he will not be able to describe his condition, but will speak of moral uneasiness and sometimes of an undefined fear or of vagueness in thought. (p. 18)

“Throbbing between two lives” (l. 218), Tiresias shares many characteristics of the neurasthenic patient as described by Vittoz.

Eliot may have chosen to depict Tiresias in this way because he believed that sickness could inspire. In “The Pensées of Pascal,” Eliot seemed to elucidate his own writing experience when he noted that:

it is a commonplace that some forms of illness are extremely favourable, not only to religious illumination, but to artistic and literary composition. A piece of writing meditated, apparently without progress, for months or years, may suddenly take shape and word; and in this state long passages may be produced which require little or no retouch.⁴⁴

If the “main consciousness” of *The Waste Land* is himself ill, then the reading experience itself becomes an exercise in illumination: we may be able to see *The Waste Land* as a sick body that Eliot presents to the reader, in the hope that the sickness would prove revelatory. In other words, if modern society is presented with an image of itself as a body riddled with sickness, then its potential recognition of its ills could prove redemptive. In this view, *The Waste Land* performs a function that is quite similar to the function of Vittoz’ book: it educates its readers about their diseased condition and gives them the means to pull themselves out of that condition.

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⁴⁴ Eliot, *Selected Prose*, p. 237.

In a letter written from Lausanne, Eliot described to his brother the beneficial effects of Vittoz' retraining of his will:

The great thing I am trying to learn is how to use all my energy without waste, to be *calm* when there is nothing to be gained by worry, and to concentrate without effort.⁴⁵

The Waste Land, as the name implies, is a record of Eliot's wasted energy and of his attempt, under Vittoz' hand, to bring himself under control. In order to reach the final "shantih"—the state of calm, or "peace that passeth understanding," which ends the poem—Eliot had to undergo Vittoz' therapy. The manuscript version of the poem mimics this movement: "He Do the Police in Different Voices" begins with a cry of neurasthenic despair—Kurtz's paralyzed whisper, "the horror, the horror"⁴⁶—and ends with the words, "still and quiet."⁴⁷

Eliot represents aspects of his own neurasthenic condition in *The Waste Land*:

On Margate Sands.
I can connect
Nothing with nothing. (ll. 300–302)

The speaker can make no connections, and even his words fall apart: the first line is a sentence fragment, while the second and third lines represent one sentence that has been broken into contradictory parts. The first part of the sentence ("I can connect") raises hopes which the second line ("Nothing with nothing") deflates.

Because the line "I can connect/ Nothing with nothing" is enjambed, however, we can interpret it in two ways. The first way would be to paraphrase it as "On Margate Sands, I cannot connect any one thing to any other thing." Understood in this sense, the lines recall Eliot's inability to write in his neurasthenic condition. But the phrase "I can connect" is an affirmative statement, and we might well read the phrase "I can connect nothing with nothing" the same way we read the line "I will show you fear in a handful of dust" (l. 30)—as the boast of a prophetic conjurer, who, in his sickened condition, is able to make meaning out of handfuls of dust and bits of nothing. Seen in this light, the line speaks to the kind of revelation that, according to Eliot, could emerge from sickness.

The necessity of control is the most central tenet of Vittoz' book, and it is also the primary injunction in *The Waste Land*. After Marie expresses neurotic fear, she is told to "hold on tight" (l. 16)—a thought that recalls Vittoz' repeated direction that his patients control their scattered ideas while performing therapeutic exercises. Other characters in the poem appear as neurasthenics looking for a cure. The last two lines of the stanza, "In the mountains, there you feel free./ I read, much of the night, and go south in winter" (ll. 17–18) describe insomnia (another symptom of neurasthenia according to Vittoz) and a voyage, much like Eliot's own,

⁴⁵ T.S. Eliot to Henry Eliot, 13 December 1921. *Letters*, p. 493.

⁴⁶ Eliot, *Facsimile*, p. 3.

⁴⁷ Eliot, *Facsimile*, p. 123.

to a mountain retreat.⁴⁸ Lines 8–18, which contain casual foreign dialogue, resemble Eliot’s surroundings at Lausanne, where he met “people of many nationalities.”⁴⁹ Later in the poem, a voice declares, “By the waters of Leman I sat down and wept” (l. 182)—a reference to Lake Léman in Lausanne.

Vittoz’ therapy was designed to cure the kinds of neurasthenic ailments that plague characters in *The Waste Land*. Vittoz writes, for instance, that the neurasthenic “often looks without seeing” and “listen[s] without hearing” (l. 47). In the poem, the narrator, whose mind is filled with Dante and Wagner, has problems with sight, hearing, and touch:

. . . I could not
 Speak, and my eyes failed, I was neither
 Living nor dead, and I knew nothing,
 Looking into the heart of the light, the silence.
Oed' und leer das Meer. (ll. 38–42)

Like Tiresias, the speaker appears as a neurasthenic, unable to connect emotions or senses. The quotation from *Tristan und Isolde*, “*Oed' und leer das Meer*” (“Desolate and empty the sea”), captures the despairing listlessness of a neurasthenic patient. Vittoz described such patients as “often troubled and even distressed by a feeling of being only half awake and in a sort of half-dreamy state from which [they] cannot escape” (p. 7), thus recalling both this speaker and the sighing crowd that flows over London Bridge.

Blindness appears elsewhere in the poem in the body of blind Tiresias and “old Tom, boiled to the eyes, blind.”⁵⁰ Another character in the poem seems to “look without seeing” and to “listen without hearing”:

“Speak to me. Why do you never speak. Speak.
 “What are you thinking of? What thinking? What?
 “I never know what you are thinking. Think.” (ll. 111–113)

“Do
 “You know nothing? Do you see nothing? Do you remember
 “Nothing?” (ll. 121–123)

Many critics have assumed that this passage represents a hysteric Vivien speaking to Eliot. Peter Ackroyd argues that this could not be the case, because Vivien had written “Wonderful” in the margins of the copy which Eliot had sent her. Ackroyd notes that there was a strong element of “willed drama” in their relationship, and he surmises that “Eliot and Vivien were quite aware of their nervous predicament, recognizing the effect which it had upon themselves

⁴⁸ Koestenbaum, p. 131.

⁴⁹ T.S. Eliot to Henry Eliot, 13 December 1921. *Letters*, p. 493.

⁵⁰ Eliot, *Facsimile*, p. 5.

and others, and were at this stage inclined to make a kind of game out of it."⁵¹ Elsewhere, Wayne Koestenbaum has argued that the woman acts the part of a male analyst, interrogating a feminized Eliot.⁵² Another possibility, however, is that this scene presents a hysteric asking questions of a neurasthenic. The neurasthenic has lost his will (and with it his senses of sight, hearing, and touch) and is unable to respond to the hysteric's frantic questions.⁵³

In *The Waste Land*, Eliot borrowed at least one concrete image from *The Treatment of Neurasthenia By Means of Brain Control*. Vittoz writes that the neurasthenic "no longer feels master of himself, but is like a rudderless ship in a storm" (p. 22). Later, Vittoz discusses the importance of the "control of ideas" and writes that the patient "will realize that an uncontrolled idea is like a rudderless vessel, which often takes a different direction to what was intended" (p. 54). In *What the Thunder Said*, a section written at Lausanne, Eliot elucidates the term *Damyata* (control) by appropriating Vittoz' image:

DA

Damyata: The boat responded

Gaily, the hand expert with sail and oar

The sea was calm, your heart would have responded

Gaily, when invited, beating obedient

To controlling hands (ll. 418–423)

Near the end of a poem that has been utterly uncontrolled, jumping from one voice or idea to the next without pause, Eliot depicts a distracted mind brought under control by an "expert hand." With Vittoz' hand providing the rudder for the "rudderless boat," Eliot is able to reach the calm sea he had hoped for ("to be *calm* when there is nothing to be gained by worry, and to concentrate without effort").⁵⁴

* * * *

In order to help the neurasthenic focus his mind and exercise his will, Vittoz asks him to concentrate on a specific image, such as "8," "∞," or "1." Vittoz writes that patient should:

try to imagine his brain in a state of calm, and of moral and physical tranquility. He should with this object evoke in his mind some idea which itself will produce that feeling. . . . An artist will, for instance, think of a picture . . . another will find what he needs in a piece of music, or, perhaps, in some lofty sentiment such as a prayer.
(p. 67)

⁵¹ Ackroyd, p. 115.

⁵² Koestenbaum, p. 133.

⁵³ Another possibility is that the interrogating voice in these passages is Dr. Vittoz, asking his patient to make rapid decisions. This interpretation, though unlikely, is worth brief consideration.

⁵⁴ T.S. Eliot to Henry Eliot, 13 December 1921. *Letters*, p. 493.

Freud once reported that some of his patients saw “curious signs looking rather like Sanskrit” while under his hand.⁵⁵ Vittoz, his hand on Eliot’s forehead, would have told him to think of an image that would induce “a state of calm, and of moral and physical tranquility.” It is not difficult to imagine Eliot, with his eyes closed, saying “shantih” silently to himself. Vittoz wrote that the patient should, “several times a day,” repeat ideas of control to himself three times, until he is able to achieve a state of calm (pp. 62, 69). Thus, Eliot’s “shantih” becomes “shantih shantih shantih,” a repeated attempt to concentrate his mind on peaceful thoughts. If we read the end of the poem in this way, the scattered neurasthenic mind of the first four sections is brought under control in the fifth by the doctor’s expert hand and the repetition of Sanskrit commands.

Because the reader is both implied⁵⁶ and explicitly indicated in the poem, reading *The Waste Land* becomes a therapeutic act: the reader, along with Eliot, is diagnosed, treated, and cured. The first section of the poem turns a pointing finger towards the reader, implicating him (through a quote from Baudelaire) in the poem’s various diseases: “You! hypocrite lecteur!—mon semblable,—mon frère!” (l. 76). The poem’s disjointed narration leads the reader to experience a neurasthenic state of mind; it is nearly impossible to be in a state of moral tranquility while reading *The Waste Land*, because the poem’s many languages and abrupt switches of tone jolt the reader out of conventional attitudes toward literature and disrupt the notion that narratives proceed in a logical or linear fashion. Reading the poem, then, becomes a process through which the reader (like the narrator) moves from a space of incoherence to a state of therapeutic calm. *The Waste Land*, seen in this way, reproduces its own illnesses in the reader, but it is able to discipline sickness by the end of the poem through the repetition of Sanskrit commands.

We might interpret “shantih shantih shantih” in another way by considering the end of Vittoz’ own book. Near the close of *Treatment of Neurasthenia By Means of Brain Control*, Vittoz tells his patients to “continue the examination of his brain with care and attention for several months” (p. 111). Vittoz warns, however, against carrying this self-examination too far:

We have known patients who were perfectly cured, but who worried themselves for months by constantly examining the state of their brain . . . [T]his constant agitation tires the most normal brain, and if the patient is not reassured by some convincing experience, he finally produces his former illness by auto-suggestion. (pp. 111–12)

Vittoz points out that his cure can be dangerous; by practicing it too frequently, the patient risks hypnotizing himself and making himself sick again.⁵⁷ If *The Waste Land* is a re-

⁵⁵ Josef Breuer and Sigmund Freud, *Studies on Hysteria*, trans. and ed. James Strachey in collaboration with Anna Freud (London: Hogarth Press, 1955), p. 277.

⁵⁶ Koestenbaum (p. 138) argues that the poem’s “footnotes embody the implied male reader: they invite him to enter and understand the poem.”

⁵⁷ For Vittoz, repetition was both a cure (the patient retrains his will by repeating words and actions) and a symptom. He ascribes his patients’ relapses after treatment to the reappearance of “clichés.” Clichés are “former bad impressions which have not been completely effaced,” and which return to bother the patient” (p. 112). He presents stories of several patients who, after treatment, still had trouble completing certain tasks. Vittoz states that once the

enactment of Vittoz' treatment, then it is possible that the recurring "shantihs" at the end of the poem, instead of curing neurasthenia, merely implicate Eliot and the reader in another cycle of sickness. The poem, in a sense, never ends, but folds back upon itself, returning the reader to the neurasthenic state in which he began his reading. *The Waste Land* truly becomes, as Pound wrote, the "longest poem in the English langwidge."⁵⁸

We may read the "shantihs" in a third way by considering Vittoz' chapter on insomnia in *The Treatment of Neurasthenia By Means of Brain Control*. We have already seen evidence of insomnia in the body of the poem (Marie's "I read, much of the night . . ." [l. 18]). Eliot, moreover, marked his copy of Vittoz' book on the neurasthenic's impaired senses of sight, touch, and hearing:

If the sight is dimmed, the hearing is usually affected in the contrary sense. There is, in fact, often an excessive excitability which makes the sufferer aware of the slightest noise, and is very frequently a cause of insomnia. (p. 27)

The preponderance of apparently random noise in the poem, ranging from birds ("twit twit twit/ Jug jug jug jug jug" (ll. 203–204)), to the patter of rat feet ("Dirge" ends with the line, "Hark! now I hear them scratch scratch scratch"⁵⁹), to a barkeep's closing cries ("HURRY UP PLEASE ITS TIME" in section II), could show that the narrating consciousness of the poem is an insomniac trying to rest, kept awake by the clamor outside his window. The terrified hysteric's questions, "What is that noise?" (l. 117) and "What is that noise now? What is the wind doing?" (l. 119), intensify the imagined sensitivity to noise in the poem. If we read *The Waste Land* as a poem spoken by an insomniac trying to fall asleep, then the narration of the poem itself can be seen as an invocation to sleep.

Vittoz' discussion of insomnia reinforces this interpretation. His cure for insomnia importantly resembles one of his cures for neurasthenia. The patient was to:

concentrate on the figure 1, and then try to efface it from his mind by thinking of it as slowly receding. All distracting or intervening ideas should be checked by reconcentrating the mind on the figure 1. (p. 118)

By concentrating on "the figure 1," or "the idea of calm," the patient is able to put himself to sleep. The "shantihs" at the end of the poem, instead of restoring discipline to a neurasthenic mind, or returning sickness to a supposedly-cured mind, bring rest, and a feeling

original cliché is brought to the patient's attention, similar instances will not bother him or her. One woman—Mrs. N., for example—often vomited at the dinner table, even after her treatment. Vittoz later helped her realize that the cause of this vomiting was a day ten years earlier, on which she had had "a violent emotion during a meal" (pp. 96–97). When she remembered the earlier cliché, "the cause of the symptom was cured," and the woman was able to eat without feeling sick (p. 97). Vittoz' "cliché" is a somewhat simplified version of Freud's theory of repression. Perhaps for this reason, Peter Ackroyd calls Vittoz "pre-Freudian" (p. 116), a classification which Adam Piette (p. 37) disputes, arguing that Vittoz is instead anti-Freudian in his "strong, though confused, emphasis on conscious control over unconscious drives."

⁵⁸ Ezra Pound to T.S. Eliot, 24 Saturnus An I [24 December 1921]. *Letters*, p. 497.

⁵⁹ Eliot, *Facsimile*, p. 121.

of release, to an insomniac. *The Waste Land*, finally, puts its author and its readers to sleep.

However we read *The Waste Land*, or the “shantihs” which conclude it, we must remember that it was a poem written by Eliot while under the controlling influence of Vittoz’ hand. Just before he left Lausanne, Eliot wrote an optimistic letter to a friend:

I have been under Vittoz, who is not a psychoanalyst, but more useful for my purpose; I was aware that the principal trouble was that I have been losing power of concentration and attention, as well as becoming a prey to habitual worry and dread of the future: consequently, wasting far more energy than I used, and wearing myself out continuously. And I *think* I am getting over that.⁶⁰

By the time he left Lausanne, Eliot was speaking Vittoz’ language; his letter closely resembles Vittoz’ description of the neurasthenic:

. . . his uncurbed brain would, without a controlling power, be indeed in a state of anarchy. A prey to every impulse, subject to all fears, unable to reason or weigh an idea, forced to receive all the impressions of his subjective brain, he is nothing but a wreck, doomed to a life of suffering. (p. 5)

Eliot was indeed “getting over that,” but it was only by writing *The Waste Land* that he was able to recover fully. Eliot’s letters show that he was influenced by Vittoz’ book, and *The Waste Land* contains echoes of (and, in one case, a direct reference to) Vittoz’ therapy. Vittoz may not have realized it, but he was treating both poet and poem. The poet was perhaps the simpler case to cure, for the sickness of the poem was embedded in its core.

⁶⁰ T.S. Eliot to Sydney Waterlow, 19 December 1921, *Letters*, p. 495. Eliot writes the letter from “Lausanne (leaving Saturday).”