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Mirrors and Lamps of *The Waste Land*: The Representational Dilemma and Perspectivism's Redemption in T.S. Eliot's Poetics

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Abstract

This article takes the language crisis in T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* as a starting point to explore the profound impact of the 20th-century linguistic turn in philosophy on poetic creation and interpretation. It systematically traces the theoretical evolution from representationalism to expressionism, culminating in perspectivism. The representationalism of analytic philosophy, viewing language as a mirror of the world, excluded poetic and other non-referential discourse. Conversely, the expressionism of continental philosophy saw poetry as a lamp disclosing existence, emphasizing its truth-revealing function, yet it often fell back into metaphysical traps. The article proposes that a perspectivist poetics emerges at the intersection of Nietzsche's and Wittgenstein's thought. This approach contends that poetry does not reflect or reveal a transcendental truth but constructs meaning through specific perspectives. Readers participate in the poetic language-game via the mechanism of "seeing-as", co-generating poetic truth through multiple interpretations. *The Waste Land*, with its fragmented structure, polyphonic voices, and intertextual collage, perfectly embodies this perspectivist poetics—it rejects a single interpretation, inviting readers to experience the complex landscape of the modern waste land through shifts in perspective, making the poem itself a philosophical practice for training perception and reshaping worldviews.
Keywords: The Waste Land, representationalism, expressionism, perspectivism

1. Introduction

--Yet when we came back, late, from the hyacinth garden,

Your arms full, and your hair wet, I could not

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Speak, and my eyes failed, I was neither

Living nor dead, and I knew nothing.

Looking into the heart of light, the silence.

Oed' und leer das Meer.

—T.S. Eliot

These lines from "*The Waste Land: The Funeral of the Dead*" which depict the Hyacinth Girl are the most tender moment in the entire poem. Here, the hyacinths, the hyacinth garden, and the hyacinth girl with her full arms and wet hair symbolize vibrant life in the wasteland—the rebirth of spring, the yearning for pure love, and the desire for the joy of sexual union in harmony with the cosmic rhythm. Yet immediately behind this vibrant hyacinth garden lies a state where "I could not/ Speak, and my eyes failed, I was neither/ Living nor dead, and I knew nothing. / Looking into the heart of light, the silence." (T.S. Eliot, 2004, p. 54) Communication with the Hyacinth Maiden clearly breaks down, for "I" cannot open my mouth, unable to speak.

A similar fragment appears in the subsequent second chapter, "A Game of Chess": "Footsteps shuffled on the stair. / Under the firelight, under the brush, her hair/ Spread out in fiery points/ Glowed into words, then would be savagely still." (T.S. Eliot, 2004, p. 57)

Here, the women in "A Game of Chess" perhaps due to conflict or anxiety, are eager to express themselves and yearn to communicate. Yet, their words, like "fiery points", ultimately fail to be spoken out, subsiding into "savagely still".

If the predicament of speechlessness in The Waste Land is merely the faintly flickering awkwardness of an individual modern soul, then *Four Quartets* bluntly reveals the universal modern condition of being unable to speak or express oneself:

Words strain,

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Crack and sometimes break, under the burden,

Under the tension, slip, slide, perish,

Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place,

Will not stay. (T.S. Eliot, 2004, p. 175)

In Eliot's view, modern language has degenerated into an empty shell, adrift in time and space. The verbal effort of each moment is ultimately swallowed into the vortex of senseless babble, incapable of expressing the heart's intent: "Trying to learn to use words, and every attempt/ Is a wholly new start and a different kind of failure/ Because one has only learnt to get the better of words/ For the thing one no longer has say, or the way in which/ One is no longer disposed to say it. And so each venture/ Is a new beginning, a raid on the inarticulate/ With shabby equipment always deteriorating/ in the general mess of imprecision of feeling, / undisciplined squads of emotion." (T.S. Eliot, 2004, p. 182) Clearly, this represents the language crisis and expressive crisis felt by Eliot and his contemporary writers. This inadequacy of the definite poetic language felt by many poets at one time or another is undoubtedly related to the broader context of the language revolution occurring in the early twentieth century.

As is well known, the 20th century witnessed the linguistic turn in philosophy, which held that philosophical problems originate in language. However, this was predicated on the more fundamental metaphysical turn in language studies, namely a focus on the essence or essentialism of language. In other words, Plato's framing of poetry as the 'other' of philosophy appears to have remained effective throughout much of human history. Undoubtedly, both the linguistic turn in philosophy and the metaphysical turn in language studies exerted a profound influence on artists like T.S. Eliot and his contemporaries, for whom language served as the primary medium.

2. The Dilemma of Representationalism and Its Literary Exclusion

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In fact, during modern philosophy's linguistic turn, interpretations of language's essence revealed profound theoretical divergences. This divergence manifested most starkly in the stark opposition between analytic and continental philosophy regarding the status of poetic language: continental philosophy regarded poetry as the embodiment of language's essence, while the analytic tradition continued Plato's expulsion of poetry, insisting that logic constitutes language's core characteristic. This opposition fundamentally represents a clash between two conceptions of language: the analytic tradition, grounded in the representational conception, emphasizes language's referential function to the world, while the continental tradition, characterized by the expressive conception, prioritizes language's expressive practice.

In the evolution of contemporary philosophy of language, despite attempts to integrate both approaches, semantics grounded in referential theory has remained dominant. This supremacy stems from analytic philosophy's adherence to "correspondence theory of truth"—the notion that a proposition's truth value depends on its correspondence with worldly facts. Within the referential framework of semantics, the fundamental concept of truth is correspondence: a statement is true if it corresponds to a fact. Consequently, this correspondence theory of truth relies on a representational relationship between language and the world—and language representing it like a mirror. Thus, representationalism rests on two assumptions: content and correspondence.

Frege, the founder of analytical philosophy, constructed an exclusive linguistic philosophy by rigorously distinguishing between the "meaning" (Sinn) and the "coloration" (Färbung) of symbols. Within this system, only propositions with definite referents possess

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cognitive significance, while literary expressions like poetry, lacking clear referents, are deprived of the capacity to bear truth values. Although Russell's theory of predicates alleviated the problem of empty references to some extent, its theoretical presuppositions still marked literary language as an abnormal phenomenon requiring "treatment".

Early Wittgenstein (1921) pushed this stance to its extreme in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, explicitly declaring: "The right method in philosophy would be this: to say nothing except what can be said, i.e., the propositions of natural science." (Ludwig Wittgenstein, p. 104) Only scientific propositions can be spoken; all others must remain silent, for they cannot be meaningfully expressed in language: "There is indeed the inexpressible. This shows itself; it is the mystical." (Ludwig Wittgenstein, p. 105) More precisely, what cannot be expressed in language are ethics and aesthetics. This assertion not only consigns the realms of ethics and aesthetics to the "unspeakable" but fundamentally denies the philosophical relevance of literary discourse, thereby forming a radical tendency towards linguistic purification.

At the same time, while Saussure's structural linguistics challenged referential theory, it fell into another form of metaphysics. He shaped the linguistic system (langue) into a Platonic world of ideas transcending concrete speech (parole). While denying the direct correspondence between words and things, he simultaneously constructed an abstract formal system that determines concrete linguistic practice. Although this theoretical orientation differs from the representationalism of analytic philosophy, it similarly demonstrates a pursuit of idealized linguistic forms.

Notably, both theoretical traditions encounter similar predicaments when confronting

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literary language: they either treat literary expression as a disruptive element to be excluded (as in the analytic tradition) or reduce it to an accidental realization of the linguistic system (as in structuralism). This shared exclusionary stance exposes the fundamental limitation of the representationalism paradigm—its inability to accommodate the indispensable poetic dimension inherent in linguistic practice. The ubiquitous metaphorical expressions in everyday communication and the rich meaning-generation in literary creation continuously challenge representationalism's simplified understanding of language. When philosophy becomes fixated on constructing an ideal language, it paradoxically loses the theoretical capacity to grasp the complexity of real language.

The representationalism pursuit of an "ideal language" ultimately diverges from the richness of real language. It is precisely this disconnect that led T.S. Eliot to lament that "modern language is dead"—when philosophy reduces language to a puppet of logic or form, living expression becomes the sacrifice of theory:

That was a way of putting it—not very satisfactory:

A periphrastic study in a worn-out poetical fashion,

Leaving one still with the intolerable wrestle

With words and meanings. The poetry does not matter.

It was not (to start again) what one had expected. (T.S. Eliot, 2004, p.179)

In fact, the distinctiveness of poetic and literary language lies not in avoiding linguistic ambiguity and polysemy, but rather in embracing them as the core mechanism for generating meaning. As Gadamer observed, "Poetic language breaks through the boundaries of everyday language." This breakthrough precisely exposes the narrowness of

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representationalism views of language, suggesting the need to seek richer modes of meaning interpretation beyond referential theories.

3. From Representationalism to Expressionism

In his renowned essay "*On Truth and Lie in a Nonmoral Sense*", Nietzsche contends that language does not directly reflect reality but is instead constructed through a dual metaphorical transformation. The first metaphor involves the direct sensory impressions formed by neural stimuli from the external world being converted into sensory images (such as visual or auditory forms). The second metaphor involves the transformation of sensory images into words or sound symbols. Once words become fixed through social convention, they gradually lose their original sensory uniqueness, becoming abstract concepts. The core of Nietzsche's critique of concepts lies in their imposition of homogeneity, that's conceptual generalization which leads to the disappearance of the sensory world. Nietzsche termed this "the death of metaphor"—language stiffens from vivid metaphor into cold concepts. This linguistic mechanism enables humanity to construct a so-called "real world" beyond the world of appearances through language, thereby creating philosophical myths: people mistakenly believe concepts can grasp "essence" or "truth". In reality, this dualism between the real world and the world of appearances is a metaphysical error, the "longest error" that must be overcome. Thus, Nietzsche exposed the "myth" of representationalism underlying language, thereby critiquing the view of its divine origin.

Wittgenstein's "language games" (Philosophical Investigations) similarly criticize the tendency to abstract language from concrete usage. For instance, the term "game" cannot be uniformly defined; it only makes sense within specific activities. His solution, therefore, is to

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return words to their "ordinary usage", as meaningless metaphysical propositions lack verifiable everyday usage and are merely products of language spinning its wheels.

Thus, despite subtle methodological differences, Nietzsche and Wittgenstein shared a similar goal: rejecting representationalism. This idea evolves toward romanticism, aligning with M.H. Abrams' (1977) conception of language—shifting from a "mirror" to a "lamp" that actively illuminates rather than passively reflects the world.

Representative figures of German romantic-expressionist linguistic philosophy—Herder, Hamann, Humboldt, and Lichtenberg—each opposed the metaphysical conception of language in their own way—a language where meaning possesses a fixed essence. They contended that language does not passively "reflect" pre-existing reality but rather discloses new possibilities, functioning as a site of "disclosure". This expressionist conception of language is immanent in the world's manifestation, dissolving the language-world dichotomy.

Clearly, within the romantic conception of language, language is not a "mirror" but a "lamp"—incapable of directly reflecting the world, yet capable of illuminating and revealing it. Meaning is the product of interpretation, not a fixed endowment. Language participates in the construction of the world.

Against this backdrop, when language fails to "represent the world truthfully", philosophy must turn to poetic expression, bringing poetry and philosophy closer together. Schlegel even argued that "poetry and philosophy should become one," and that "philosophy must be poetic," since both explore meaning through creative language rather than pursuing fixed truths.

The fusion of poetry and philosophy finds its concentrated expression in Heidegger's

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philosophy of poetry. He held that the common ground between philosophy and poetry lies in language. Both philosophy (Denken) and poetry (Dichten) essentially "say" (Sagen) a certain "being" (the existence of beings) through language. Thus, they are not opposites but two distinct "ways of saying" through language. Philosophy inquiries into being through concepts, while poetry reveals the openness of place through imagery. Both rely on language to unfold their essence. Consequently, philosophy and poetry are interconnected, mutually altering their perspectives within this relationship. The boundary between them has never been fixed; it constantly shifts through mutual influence, their definitions dialectically constructed through their relationship. Heidegger's shift marked a leap in the philosophy of language from epistemology to ontology. For him, poetry ceased to be merely an aesthetic object and became a crucial mode of being's disclosure.

Clearly, this line of thought from Nietzsche to Heidegger not only dismantled the traditional representational theory of language but also established a new paradigm for understanding language as the source of meaning, thereby transforming language from a "mirror of the world" into a "light of Being". However, although the essence of language is metaphorical, humanity must forget this metaphorical nature for the sake of stability and effectiveness in existence, mistakenly accepting abstract concepts and symbols as "truth" itself. This forgetting prevents humans from perceiving new things, thus leaving the discovery and creation of novelty to artists. Hence, "art is the only place where the 'drive to form metaphors', this 'fundamental human drive', is free." (Philip Mills, 2022, p. 19)

The Waste Land, a pinnacle of modernist poetry and the quintessential fusion of poetic and philosophical thought, stands as the paramount embodiment of expressionism that

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enables humanity to perceive anew. The poem's opening lines present a collapse of language: "April is the cruelest month, breeding/ Lilacs out of the dead land……" (T.S. Eliot, 2004, 54) In traditional pastoral poetry, April symbolizes vitality, yet Eliot describes it as "cruel", directly subverting the established symbolic language system. Examples of linguistic distortion and the rupture between language and reality abound throughout the poem. Consider the line "Dry bones can harm no one" In *Book of Ezekiel*, dry bones symbolize divine redemption, yet Eliot rewrites this as the ultimate state of death, rendering the religious narrative ineffective. Consider the "unreal city" in the poet's vision: London, shrouded in morning mist, transforms into Dante's hell. The city's prosperity is hollowed out, leaving only a crowd of the walking dead: "A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many, / I had not thought death had undone so many."(T.S. Eliot, 2004, 62) The symbolic system of the modern metropolis collapses, and language fails to describe the true state of urban existence. The most extreme "linguistic rupture" manifests in the poem's frequent "quotation fractures". For instance, in the second section, "A Game of Chess", lines 141, 152, 165, 168, and 169 each repeat: "HURRY UP PLEASE ITS TIME." Reportedly a common closing-time prompt in British pubs, it abruptly interrupts the dialogue between the speaker and Lyl. Some interpret this as a voice-over warning or proclamation from the wasteland's inhabitants, while others see it as the speaker's pointed urging to Lyl: "Hurry, or Albert will be back soon." In any case, this distorted, fractured, and misplaced language precisely reveals modern society's ultimate predicament: people still cling to outdated symbolic systems—be it religion or mythology — yet these can no longer organize experience, instead becoming absurd performances. This is precisely the consequence of the "death of metaphor"—language is no

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longer a living metaphor, but a hollowed-out corpse, and humanity still uses it futilely to comprehend the world.

Secondly, the very structure of *The Waste Land* itself employs techniques typical of expressionism—fragmentation, leaping transitions, and collage. From the streets of London to the myth of the Fisher King, from historical figures like Countess Marie, Cleopatra, Philomela... to the modern urbanites “I” and Lyl, the female typist and male broker, from Christianity to Buddhism, from ancient Egyptian resurrection myths to the Fisher King legend... Time and space continually fracture and reassemble within the poem. This discontinuous narrative aligns with expressionism’s rejection of traditional linear logic, emphasizing the complexity and absurdity of modern experience. As for the diverse languages appearing in the poetry—Latin, Greek, Sanskrit, German, French, and various literary allusions—these are all deliberate “textual collages” crafted by Eliot. This technique is not intellectual ostentation, but rather a reflection of the fragmented modern psyche—humans can no longer find meaning within a coherent narrative, but only piece together fragmented cultural fragments to construct understanding. Just as the brushstrokes of expressionist painters like Munch or Kandinsky brim with distortion and turbulence, the verses of *The Waste Land* employ disjointed language to depict the desolate landscape of the wasteland and the spiritual crisis of its inhabitants.

4. From Expressionism to Perspectivism

Yet it remains doubtful whether Romantic Expressionism truly ended metaphysics. They asserted that poetic language transcends the constraints of everyday speech, serving as an instrument for divine revelation or truth disclosure. The poetic function of language

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possesses metaphysical priority, capable of touching a higher reality. This suggests their linguistic philosophy retained a metaphysical dimension. “First, the idea of disclosure suggests that there is something hidden to disclose, perhaps of the kind of the metaphysical true world that Nietzsche criticizes. It suggests that there is a reality beyond or behind the veil of the appearances, behind our everyday language. Second, related to the first point, there is a sacralization of poetry that leaves the ordinary aside.” (Philip Mills, 2022, p. 48) They exaggerated the poetic use of language. Consequently, in their attempt to balance metaphysics, Romantic expressionism lapsed into another form of metaphysics. Simultaneously, it failed to account for the practicality and plurality of poetic language—namely, why truths revealed by different poems might conflict.

Consequently, the philosophy of language shifted toward pragmatic expressionism. “This concept refers to an essentially different tradition, including figures such as Robert Branden, Hugh Price, and Simon Blackburn”, but “also encompasses the early Heidegger and the later Wittgenstein.” (Philip Mills, 2022, p51; 52) Among them, Price proposes the view that “language is a projector”. He “suggests thinking of language on the model of a holographic data projector, not just a lamp that illuminates (and shadows) various aspects of the world”; he also puts forward the metaphor of language as a “‘key’ which is shaped both by the lock and by the hand that it fits.” Thus, “language is not just a way of shaping the world, but also a way of interacting with it.” (Philip Mills, 2022, p55; 56)Here, Price’s holographic projector metaphor resonates with Heidegger’s view of language: language is not a tool, but the clearing in which Being manifests itself. Pragmatism holds that language constitutes the world, rather than merely reflecting it. However, the core claim of

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pragmatism still lies in the idea that "language has a rationalist center" (Philip Mills, 2022, p. 61), meaning that inferential practices must be regarded as the center of language, while poetry, metaphor, and other non-discursive discourses can only belong to the "suburbs". This claim marginalizes the uniqueness of poetry, reducing it to just one ordinary "language-game", and fails to adequately explain why poetry can undertake irreplaceable cultural functions in human practices, such as in religious rituals or as a vehicle for collective memory.

How can we find a linguistic philosophical path between the limitations of two forms of expressionism — Romantic expressionism and Pragmatic expressionism — that both explains the uniqueness of poetic language and avoids metaphysics or reductionism? Philip Mills argues that clues to this middle ground lie at the intersection of the linguistic views represented by Nietzsche's Romantic expressionism and Wittgenstein's Pragmatic expressionism. This middle path ultimately steered expressionism toward perspectivism.

Perspectivism stands as a core tenet of Nietzsche's philosophy, asserting that all knowledge, truth, and morality are products of specific perspectives rather than objective, eternal "reality". As he wrote in Beyond Good and Evil: "There are no facts, only interpretations." Truth does not exist objectively independent of the observer but is an interpretation of the world through a particular viewpoint. In his view, all cognition is "perspectival". Humans, and even animals, can only understand the world through their own limited conditions—such as their bodies, language, and culture—just as different eyes (like an insect's compound eyes or a human's monocular vision) perceive different "realities". Therefore, there is no "eye of God"; only diverse, competing perspectives exist.

Nietzsche's conception of poetry is etched into his anti-Platonism and his

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understanding of Greek tragedy. In *The Birth of Tragedy,* he posits that poetry is not "decoration" or "fiction" (the traditional view that poetry is an "untrue" imagination); rather, poetry strips away the "deceptive garments" of culture (society's assumed "reality") to directly express life's primal impulses (as in Dionysus's ecstatic frenzy). Poetry does not attempt to disguise truth with concepts but directly presents the chaotic essence of the world through imagery, emotion, and rhythm. If the poet is "one who understands the world" (i.e., penetrates life's truth through poetic language), what then is the reader's task? Traditional reading theory holds that readers must analyze elements like rhetoric and metaphor to uncover the author's "intent" or "truth". Nietzsche counters this, arguing that such reading still relies on "correspondence theory", attempting to rationally "reduce" poetry's meaning. Yet truth is not "revealed" but experienced. Thus, the new task for the Nietzschean reader is to participate in the generation of poetic truth. The reader is not a passive recipient but an active "experiencer of life". Poetry does not offer stable "information" but invites the reader into a state of being—what Nietzsche called "intoxication" or "dreaming". The relationship between reader and poetry resembles that of participants in Dionysian rituals — not "understanding" the god of wine, but "becoming" him through dance and music.

As the expressionist starting point of pragmatism, Wittgenstein proposed the "language game" theory, positing poetry as a unique linguistic game whose meaning derives from shared rules of usage—such as those governing ritual, lyricism, and metaphor. Unlike pragmatic reductionism, Wittgenstein acknowledged the incommensurability of different language games, implying that poetry and scientific language serve distinct functions without the former being inferior. Moreover, "for Wittgenstein, the musicality and expressiveness of

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poetic language also play a crucial role: 'The way music speaks. Do not forget that a poem, even though it is composed in the language of information, is not used in the language-game of giving information' (Z 160). There is a similarity between understanding music and understanding poetry, for they both are a particular language." (Philip Mills, 2022, p103)

In exploring the relationship between poetry and music, Wittgenstein examined the concept of "understanding". His reflections on "poetic understanding" stem from the discussion of "meaning is use" in *Philosophical Investigations*, which is often applied to analyze how readers engage with poetry. The central question in this discussion concerns whether the meaning of poetry depends on the author's intent and how readers "understand" poetic lines that cannot be logically reduced. Wittgenstein contends that understanding poetry is not about deciphering codes but participating in a "language game"—readers engage with the poem's specific usage, such as metaphors or unconventional syntax, rather than seeking a "correct interpretation". This participation in the "language game" leads to another of Wittgenstein's concepts: "seeing as". "Seeing-as" bears some resemblance to interpretation and to imagination. It originates from Part II of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, where he uses the "duck-rabbit diagram" to illustrate how the same image can be "seen as" either a duck or a rabbit, depending on the subject's perceptual projection. Here, the concept of "seeing-as" is extended to the reading of poetry. Poetic language, such as the metaphor "time is a river", demands readers to "see" the words as carrying non-literal meanings. This capacity lies at the heart of creative reading. When language reconstructs experience, poetry reading becomes a "training in worldviews", a philosophical tool for reshaping perception. This approach breaks down disciplinary barriers while offering new theoretical resources for

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understanding the obscurity of modern/postmodern poetry.

Integrating Nietzsche's dual metaphor theory reveals its resonance with "seeing as". "Seeing as" constitutes the fundamental mechanism of metaphorical operation—it embodies "perspectival interpretation": we do not perceive things "objectively", but rather through interpretive lenses, such as the "perspectives" Nietzsche described.

Thus, at the intersection of Romantic expressionism and pragmatic expressionism—the very point where Nietzsche and Wittgenstein converge—a poetic philosophy of language emerges: perspectivist poetics. Clearly, its theoretical foundation stems from Nietzsche's "perspectival" conception of truth, insisting that all cognition and meaning originate from interpretations rooted in specific viewpoints. Building upon this, poetry neither reveals some truth nor mirrors the world; rather, it constructs a mode of interpreting the world through language. It is also a unique "language game" that invites readers to participate through techniques like metaphor, rhythm, and syntactic leaps. Here, Wittgenstein's concept of "seeing-as" becomes the pivotal mechanism: through perceptual projection during reading, the reader "sees" the text as carrying non-literal meanings. This process is creative and experiential, not passive reception of fixed information. Thus, during reading, the reader ceases to be a passive decoder of meaning and instead becomes an active "experiencer of life", akin to participants in Nietzsche's Dionysian rites. Through poetry, they enter a state of being (such as "intoxication" or "dreaming") and co-create poetic truth through interaction. Consequently, the meaning of poetry depends on the specific context of use and the reader's mode of engagement.

It is evident that "perspectivist poetics" does not simply juxtapose Nietzsche's

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perspectivism with Wittgenstein's philosophy of language, nor does it merely apply the established framework of reader-response criticism. Rather, it creatively establishes a generative and practical poetic operational pivot between the two. It concretely transforms Nietzsche's epistemological principle—"there are no facts, only interpretations"—into a poetic methodology concerning how meaning in poetry is generated. Simultaneously, it represents a literalization and agential expansion of Wittgenstein's philosophy of language.

Since its publication, T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, with its obscure allusions, fragmented structure, and polyphonic voices, has been a labyrinth of interpretation for critics. Traditional readings often sought a unifying theme or the author's hidden intent, as if the poem contained an ultimate truth to be deciphered. In recent years, scholars have also approached *The Waste Land* from the reader's perspective. For instance, Owojecho Omoha's *Capture Theory: Battling with Tropes* in T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, studies the relationship between the writer and the reader, in particular how the author engages a disengaged and world-weary public imagination in Europe after the First World War. However, from the vantage point of perspectivist poetics, *The Waste Land* is not a puzzle to be "solved" but rather a "language-game" arena that invites the reader to participate in the co-creation of meaning. It perfectly embodies Nietzsche's "there are no facts, only interpretations" and Wittgenstein's "meaning is use" and "seeing-as" concepts, constituting a thoroughgoing practice of perspectivist poetry. While Romantic expressionism sought to reveal a unified, higher reality through poetry, *The Waste Land* fundamentally rejects this metaphysical pursuit.

The poem opens by declaring: "April is the cruelest month," while winter is depicted as keeping "us warm." This inversion of traditional pastoral imagery immediately establishes

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the poem's perspectival nature: the world is not inherently harmonious or divine; its meaning depends on who is looking and how. Subsequently, the poem paints a picture of a living death: "stone rubbish," "dead trees," a heap of " broken images," "dry stone," "the cricket" ... These fragmented images are not randomly assembled; they invite the reader to engage in a continuous operation of "seeing-as." As the reader synthesizes these fragments, they personally experience the "waste land" first and foremost as a sensory, emotional, and cultural composite—a fragmented mode of perceiving the world.

Then the Fisher King and the hyacinth girl appear. The Fisher King, rendered impotent, is "neither / Living nor dead." (T.S. Eliot, 2004, p. 62) Gazing at the radiant Grail held by the hyacinth girl, he "could not/ Speak, and" his "eyes failed". (T.S. Eliot, 2004, p. 62) Filled with fear and frustration, he asks the "clairvoyante" (T.S. Eliot, 2004, p. 62) Madame Sosostris to divine his fate and that of his kingdom using Tarot cards. Madame Sosostris presents six cards: "the drowned Phoenician Sailor," "Belladonna, the Lady of the Rocks," "the man with three staves," "the Wheel," "the one-eyed merchant," and "the Hanged Man." Eliot provides no authoritative interpretation for these cards, deliberately deviating from the traditional Waite deck. This constitutes a quintessential arena for "seeing-as." In this unconventional Tarot reading, we can "see" the "drowned Phoenician Sailor" as the Death card, representing an end to fate; or as a sacrificial deity like Adonis from *The Golden Boug*h; or as a victim of modern desire. Each act of "seeing-as" opens a different path of meaning. The "one-eyed merchant" can be "seen as" the almsgiver on the Six of Pentacles, but more likely "seen as" a modern individual blinded in one eye by material desire. Crucially, the line "which I am forbidden to see" (T.S. Eliot, 2004, p. 62) precisely metaphors the opacity of

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meaning and the limitation of "seeing-as"—there is always a remainder that no single perspective can encompass. This methodological insight highlights that the poem's structure is not an inlay of fixed symbols, but an apparatus designed to stimulate multiple acts of "seeing-as." Readers, based on their familiarity with different intellectual systems—anthropology, Christianity, Buddhism—will project differently, thereby collectively weaving the poem's rich web of meaning.

In the ensuing sections, the poet continuously presents myriad interwoven and conflicting perspectives: the luxurious indolence of an aristocratic woman is juxtaposed with the vulgar conversation of working-class women in a pub; the once pure and sacred nymphs of the Thames are paralleled with anonymous, violated women in the modern metropolis; the exhortations of the Buddha stand alongside the confessions of St. Augustine; the Greek myth of Philomela intertwines with the Egyptian myth of Osiris... These perspectives compete, complement, and subvert one another, collectively constituting the core metaphor of the "waste land." The "waste land," therefore, is not an objectively existing, physical locale awaiting redemption, but rather the sum total of the spiritual world as experienced by countless modern individuals from their specific vantage points. There is no single, true "waste land"; there is only a world "seen-as" a waste land from countless perspectives—the London pub, the typist's flat, the Eastern European city. Furthermore, within *The Waste Land*'s vast, complex, and uniquely-ruled language-game, amidst Eliot's profuse references to myths and allusions, when the reader "sees" Roman debauchery "as" modern emptiness, the medieval Grail quest "as" a metaphor for the modern spiritual search, or seemingly isolated "a heap of broken images" "as" part of a larger pattern, they have already achieved a

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superimposition and transformation of perspectives, accomplishing a creative act of imaginative synthesis.

"Death by Water" is the shortest section of the entire poem, yet one of the richest. Water is both the sea of desire that swallows life and the fountainhead that gives life. This is not a simple symbolic paradox but rather the superimposition of coexisting, competing perspectives upon a single image. "Seen-as" from a natural-mythological perspective, water is the Nile, the medium of life's cycle, integrating drowning and resurrection. "Seen-as" from a Christian perspective, water is both baptismal holy water and the abyss of sin that engulfs Phlebas. "Seen-as" from a modern psychological perspective, water is the subconscious, the flood of desire that drowns the individual, embodying both "profit and loss."(T.S. Eliot, 2004, p. 71) The poem does not adjudicate which perspective is "true"; instead, it allows them to be simultaneously present, forcing the reader to navigate between different acts of "seeing-as." Eliot compresses all these perspectives within a few lines; they simultaneously penetrate the core image of "death by water." The reader's understanding is not a choice of one over others but an enduring of the superimposed effect of this multiplicity of "seeing-as," experiencing this death as both concrete and symbolic, both ancient and modern. The image thus becomes an infinitely refracting prism, its depth of meaning lying precisely in the superimposability of perspectives.

In the final stanza of the poem, the Fisher King reappears: "Fishing, with the arid plain behind me" (T.S. Eliot, 2004, p. 69) Facing the sea, he is evidently contemplating the teachings just imparted by the thunder: "Datta" "Dayadhvam" "Damyata". Behind him lies the "arid plain", the fallen London Bridge, which the Fisher King seems to disregard, merely

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asking himself: “Shall I at least set my lands in order?” The poet then employs four allusions — “fire”, “the swallow”, “the tower”, and “Hieronymo”—to reconstruct a hellish, prison-like waste land, saturated with lust and betrayal. These visions of the waste land’s totality flash before the fishing Fisher King like a slideshow, intermittently accompanied by the thunder’s refrain: “Datta, Dayadhvam, Damyata”. The poem then abruptly concludes with the triple prayer “Shantih”. Evidently, the poet provides no definitive answer regarding redemption. As readers, one might seek salvation through the Hyacinth Girl, who symbolizes primal vitality; or find liberation in the Buddha’s “Fire Sermon”; attain deliverance through St. Augustine’s “Confessions”; or discover resolution in the “*Upanishads*”. The poem presents the problem—desolation—along with fragmentary possibilities of redemption: the Hyacinth Girl, the thunder’s injunction, moments of compassion, Eastern wisdom. Yet it offers no certain path to salvation, only a collection of fragmented instructions: “These fragments I have shored against my ruins.” (T.S. Eliot, 2004, p. 69) This is not a confession of despair, but a challenge to the reader: to piece together meaning through their own perspective.

Regarding the wasteland’s redemption, Eliot refuses to offer a “standard answer”, for truth (if it exists) can only temporarily manifest through the reader’s creative interpretation. The ultimate attainment of meaning depends on the reader’s own shift in perspective and life experience after engaging with the entire linguistic game. Thus, the “truth” of *The Waste Land* lies in the shock, reflection, and potential insights born from the act of reading itself—a Nietzschean “intoxication” that trains the reader’s worldview and reshapes their perception after navigating language’s labyrinth. As Nietzsche advocated, the reader is not a passive recipient but an active “experiencer of life”. We do not “analyze” *The Waste Land*; rather,

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through the act of reading, we “experience” its aridity, its contradictions, its chaos, and its yearning.

5. Conclusion

We do not “discover” the world; we “create” it through metaphor, metaphorical perception, and perspective—and poets, philosophers, and artists are the masters of this creation. Thus, poetry and art may be better than science or religion at describing existence, for they allow multiple viewpoints to exist and coexist. At the same time, poetry requires a kind of reading that reveals the distinction between ordinary language and poetic language is not one of kind (ontological, semantic, or syntactic), but of perspective and interpretation.

The greatness of *The Waste Land* lies precisely in its abandonment of Romanticism’s ambition to reveal transcendental truths, and its rejection of Pragmatism’s tendency to reduce it to ordinary discourse. It candidly acknowledges the perspectival and constructed nature of meaning, creating a powerful “language game” field through its epic fragmentation. It compels readers to abandon the illusion of seeking a singular authorial intent, transforming them instead into active participants. Through the capacity to “see as”, they engage in the collision of multiple perspectives and the symphony of ancient and modern language, personally practicing and experiencing the complex meanings of “desolation” and “redemption”. Ultimately, *The Waste Land* itself becomes part of the world it describes: it is both diagnosis and ritual; both a shattered mirror and a perspectivist training in learning how to “see” anew and how to “survive” anew amidst the fragments.

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