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 **T. S. Eliot, Dharma Bum: Buddhist Lessons in *The Waste Land***

Thomas Michael LeCarner

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

**T. S. Eliot, Dharma Bum:
Buddhist Lessons in *The Waste Land***

Thomas Michael LeCarner

Many critics have argued that T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* is a poem that attempts to deal with the physical destruction and human atrocities of the First World War, or that he had somehow expressed the disillusionment of a generation. For Eliot, such a characterization was too reductive. He replied, "Nonsense, I may have expressed for them their own illusion of being disillusioned, but that did not form part of my intention." He did not want to be the poet of a "lost generation" of war survivors, but rather, he wanted, like most poets, to write for all ages. To that end, Eliot sought to transcend time and space by bringing to *The Waste Land* scores of literary, cultural, and artistic allusions from a variety of sources including the Upanishads, Greek mythology, the Bible, Chaucer, Dante, Spenser, Shakespeare, and Leonardo Da Vinci. Ironically, within this menagerie of literary homages, Eliot has created a vast emptiness, a world of pain, suffering, desolation and despair, as if to suggest that even in the presence of all the greatest artistic and cultural achievements of mankind, we must understand that life is transitory and material things ephemeral.

The idea that life is fleeting and filled with suffering is at the core of Buddhist thought and one that Eliot surely learned from his graduate studies at Harvard. Several scholars have examined the influence of Eastern philosophy, and in particular Buddhist thought, on Eliot's work, largely in the past forty years.¹ My argument departs from this scholarship in two significant ways. First, I will read *The Waste Land* through the lens of Eliot's graduate studies, and in doing so will show how the poem functions as a didactic, artistic representation of the Buddhist doctrine of *samsāra*, an idea that views the world as transitory, overcome [End Page 402] with lustful desires, and forever bound to a cycle of life, death, and rebirth. From this perspective, we can see how Eliot's understanding of the original Buddhist texts, which informed much of his writing of *The Waste Land*, allowed him to see through the all-too-common misconceptions about Buddhism during the early part of the twentieth century. Lastly, we will see that Eliot looked at these misconceptions as a psychological projection of Europeans' discontent with their own lives in an uncertain time.

Over the past three decades an increasing number of scholars have studied Eliot's graduate work. In 1985, Jeffrey Perl and Andrew Tuck published a study that examines the impact that Eliot's coursework and professors had on during his studies at Harvard.² Perl and Tuck point out that Eliot devoted nearly one third of his graduate program to the study of Asian philosophy and philology. Eliot studied Sanskrit and Pali under C. R. Lanman, the preeminent Sanskrit specialist of the age. In his third year, Eliot took a course entitled "Schools of Religious and Philosophical Thought in Japan" with Professor Masaharu Anesaki, a course that had a profound impact on him. Eliot was exposed to several schools of Buddhism in his studies including the *Kegon*, *Shingon*, and *Tendai*, which are characterized as "descendants of the *Madhyamika* School, which was founded in the second century A.D. by Nāgārjuna, the Indian Buddhist philosopher." Nāgārjuna is widely considered the most influential Buddhist philosopher after Siddhartha Gautama himself and is the leading proponent of the *Mādhyamika* ("Middle Way") philosophy.

The central teaching of Nāgārjuna was the doctrine of *śūnyatā*, or as it is often translated, "emptiness." For *Mahāyāna* Buddhists, all things are totally empty of any defining essence. Thus, all things are void of any fixed identity or inherent existence and remain in a constant state of impermanence, change, and flux. This is the fundamental premise of *Mahāyāna* Buddhism. Only through the realization of this emptiness in material things can one achieve Buddhahood. According to one standard text, "the real knowledge of Buddha nature is empty of empirical content, and it is the discovery of that emptiness or void, *śūnyatā*, of the true Buddha..."

THOMAS MICHAEL LECARNER

T. S. ELIOT, DHARMA BUM:
BUDDHIST LESSONS IN *THE WASTE LAND*

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2715 North Charles Street
Baltimore, Maryland, USA 21218
[+1 \(410\) 516-6989](tel:+14105166989)
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T.S. Eliot, Dharma Bum: Buddhist Lessons in The Waste Land (1924, 1961, 1971)

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