

## Line 182

### “By the waters of Leman”: Eliot and Lake Leman

Tucked into the opening dozen lines of “The Fire Sermon” is a sentence that blends a verse from the Old Testament with a detail from Eliot’s own life: “By the waters of Leman I sat down and wept...” (WL 182; ellipses are Eliot’s). Captive Israelites weep by a river in Psalm 137, and Leman is a Swiss lake to which Eliot had personal connections. In 1921, he suffered some kind of nervous breakdown: “I was aware,” he later wrote his friend Sydney Waterlow, “that the principal trouble was that I have been losing power of concentration and attention, as well as becoming prey to habitual worry and dread of the future: consequently, wasting far more energy than I used, and wearing myself out continuously” (19 Dec. 1921). A specialist in London prescribed three months of solitude, “<quite> alone and away from anyone”; he was not to “exert [his] mind at all” (“To Richard Aldington” 3? Oct. 1921). Eliot thus spent a month at Margate with his wife (Margate is mentioned in “The Fire Sermon,” line 300) and toward the end of November traveled alone to Lausanne, Switzerland, where he was under the care of Swiss psychiatrist Dr. Roger Vittoz.

Lausanne is on the shores of Lake Geneva, also called Lake Leman. Unlike the *Waste Land* speaker, Eliot seems not to have been weepy there. He wrote his brother, “I am very much better, and not miserable here—at least there are people of many nationalities, which I always like, and I like talking French better than English, though I think English is a better language to write in. I am certainly well enough to be working on a poem!” (“To Henry Eliot” 13 Dec. 1921).

*The Waste Land* had been in his head for a while. In December 1919, he wrote his mother that his New Year’s resolution for 1920 was “to write a long poem I have had on my mind for a long time” (18 Dec. 1919); the following September he again mentioned wanting “a period of tranquility to do a poem that I have in mind” (20 Sept. 1920). It was quite a while before he found the time to work on it though, and not until April 1921 did he report having begun his poem. By June, he wrote to John Quinn that it was more or less complete: “I have written, mostly when I was at Lausanne for treatment last winter, a long poem.... I think it is the best I have ever done” (25 June 1922).