

BETWEEN FIRE AND FIRE: T.S. ELIOT'S *THE WASTE LAND*

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Desolatione desolata est omnis terra
Quia nullus est qui recogit corde
(Jeremiah 12: 11)

INTRODUCTION

Even traditionally minded critics have maintained that *The Waste Land* defies a coherent interpretation. ‘No critic,’ Helen Gardner wrote, ‘can provide them [i.e. readers] with a magic thread to take them through the labyrinth. Its connections are not connections of logic, but connections of feeling, often of violent reactions of feeling’ (Gardner 19). Plausible though this may seem, there are reasons to doubt interpretations of this kind. *The Waste Land* can be interpreted, and by interpreted I mean ‘interpreted’ in a traditional sense, one that Eliot would have recognized (*The Frontiers of Criticism* 11, 15). This essay aims to show that there *is* a ‘magic thread’. It may not be one that fits our preconceptions of what a modern poem should be, but it is one that can be substantiated on both biographical and intellectual grounds¹. The ‘magic thread’ that I have in mind is Eliot’s intellectual interest in religious mysticism, that is, his interest in the peculiar quality of consciousness called, in Eliot’s times and in the circles he frequented, ‘mystical’. By this I do not mean the mysticism associated with the occult or merely with the Grail legend. The Grail legend is part of the story, but only part. The thread that connects the poem’s themes and details is the mystical Christian tradition popularized by Evelyn Underhill².

Early in his life Eliot had had, exactly like Evelyn Underhill, an interest in the spiritual ‘craving’ of the human soul or, as she called it, ‘psyche’. This, Eliot acknowledged, following the philosophy of Rudolph Eucken, lay at the heart of all religious ‘expression’. By the time that he came to write *The Waste Land*, however, he had begun to identify the true object and perhaps even the source of that spiritual longing, in the incarnation of Christ, exactly as Underhill, under the pseudonym of John Cordelier, had done eleven years before (Cordelier, *The Path of Eternal Wisdom*)³. Seen from this perspective, *The Waste Land* becomes not a poem of despair or scepticism or an expression of the ‘negative way’ written by Eliot before converting to the Christian faith. Instead it is a record of how already in 1922 Eliot regarded Christocentric mysticism as at least the logical fulfilment and crown of what Underhill called ‘the life of the Spirit’ (*The Life of the Spirit* viii). Eliot’s writings, it is true, do not reveal incarnational sympathies or interest in institutionalized Christianity. Yet, not very long after the publication of *The Waste Land*, his mysticism turned openly Christocentric and Eliot came to consider institutional religion as an indispensable channel through which spiritual life might be expressed and kept alive.

The first section of this essay discusses those aspects of Eliot's intellectual background and sources that support this interpretation of *The Waste Land*. The second section offers a detailed commentary of the opening section 'The Burial of the Dead'. The third section interprets the remainder of the poem in the same light, showing its narrative sequence⁴. The final section focuses on how Eliot deliberately challenges us as readers of *The Waste Land*.

THE INTELLECTUAL BACKGROUND

Eliot had been attracted by religious and philosophical mysticism since his days at Harvard. He did not consider mysticism of an intellectual kind at odds with his study of F.H. Bradley's neo-Hegelian philosophy. In fact such mysticism was for Eliot a development of aspects of Bradley's philosophy⁵. The year that he spent at Oxford (1914–15) contributed to his interest in mysticism. The philosophies of Bernard Bossuet, whom Eliot read, and of Harold H. Joachim, who was Eliot's tutor, did not clash conspicuously with the principles of mysticism as explained by Dean Inge and Jean Gerson⁶. His affinities with T. E. Hulme and Paul Elmer More were a further stimulus. Nor did mysticism conflict with his interests in recent psychological and anthropological studies, since the latter, as William James and Jessie Weston had shown, bore witness to the mystical consciousness of the human race. Many other aspects of Eliot's intellectual life before the composition of *The Waste Land* point to the same conclusion, for example, his early interest in Rudolph Eucken, his essay on Dante entitled 'The Spiritual Leader' and his reviews of theological works, many of them modernist. Finally, we have several passages in works published by Eliot during this period confirming his interest in mysticism and his concern to distinguish true from false mysticism⁷.

But if the roots of *The Waste Land* are in the religious mystical tradition, why did Eliot give tribute to the more anthropologically orientated works of James Frazer and Jessie Weston, respectively, *The Golden Bough* and *From Ritual to Romance*? The reason for his tribute to Frazer is that Eliot, who admired and recognized the value of Frazer's discoveries, believed in the possibility of accommodating the new knowledge of anthropology and for that matter psychology into a religious perspective. Eliot did more than just accommodate Frazer's discoveries. He made them the foundation of his mythical method. Frazer's discoveries enabled him to reverse Frazer's implied scepticism about religion and give more room for faith in the divine. If there are common features in different primitive rites, as Frazer had argued, then they all testified to a common spiritual longing and to the existence of the divine. In Underhill's words 'these sacramental dramas – mystery cults – remain the picture of something perceived and longed for' (*The Mystical Way* 38).

In this sense, too, Jessie Weston's *From Ritual to Romance* (1920) was, for Eliot, a revelation. Eliot said and wrote that Weston suggested to him the 'plan' of the poem. What did he mean? He meant that she provided the foundation of his method. Weston had insisted on the continuity from the primitive rituals to the Grail legend. Similarly in *The Waste Land* Eliot used literary references and quotations from many diverse periods as surviving fragments of the life of the spirit. Eliot was not particularly interested in Weston's 'ritual hypothesis' as a scientific explanation of how the legend of the Grail evolved and was transmitted. His reason for mentioning Weston was that he drew inspiration from her *From Ritual to Romance* just as Weston had, in her turn, drawn inspiration from Frazer's *The Golden Bough*. She thought that the cycle of aridity and fertility, the myths of deaths and resurrection in the Grail legend were examples of the primitive rites of vegetation described by Frazer. The rituals that Frazer had described and which she had found repeated in the Grail Legend were, for her, evidence that the

human race had a spiritual, not a material, origin⁸. Eliot used Weston's conclusions to suggest that the quest for the divine was an ineradicable feature of human experience, surfacing at all times and in all cultures, right up to the present. The fact that Eliot acknowledged his debt to Weston's *From Ritual to Romance* rather than to Weston's *The Quest of the Grail* testifies to this. Eliot's approach was again very similar to Underhill's (*The Mystic Way* 15).

In short, although interested in anthropological and psychological theories, Eliot was not ideologically committed to them. Nor was Evelyn Underhill. They both looked instead for a synthesis flexible enough to accommodate new systems of anthropological and psychological knowledge (Underhill, *The Life of the Spirit* 19). And they both found it in the quest for what mystics called 'the life of Reality', namely, the intelligible, as distinct from the perceptible, world. It was into this broad tradition of the Christian spiritual quest for the dispenser of True Life that Eliot wanted to incorporate the Grail legend and the primitive rituals that Weston had linked to it.

How could the Grail legend as reconstructed by Weston be incorporated into the tradition of Christian mysticism? Weston reconstructed the legend from the various versions of the romances. The wasteland, writes Weston, is a kingdom ruled over by a maimed and impotent Fisher King, whose castle or city stands on the banks of a river. For as long as the Fisher King lies wounded, the land is cursed. The Fisher King can only be healed when a knight, Gawain, Perceval or Galahad, arrives at the castle and asks a question concerning the wasteland. After some trials and temptations, a process of purification takes place and eventually the Grail appears.

The legend of the Grail as reconstructed by Weston reads like what Underhill called 'an allegory of the adventures of the soul' (*Mysticism* 154), that is, the journey of the soul to fulfilment. It could be translated, in Underhill's terms, as follows. The desolated soul is ruled over by the debased self, whose experiences are mainly confined to the perceptible world. For as long as the debased self is affected by the sin of ennui and concupiscence, the desolated soul cannot contemplate. The self can only be purified when it becomes aware of the need for spiritual regeneration and starts on the quest for holiness. After trials and temptations, through a process of purification, the soul attains illumination, painful surrender and union with the Divine.

In *The Waste Land* Eliot adopted the symbols of the Grail legend to describe poetically the mystic way, in all its stages, from the spiritual reawakening, through the painful surrender, to the unitive way. It was specifically Underhill's works, notably, *Mysticism* (1911), *The Mystic Way* (1913), *Practical Mysticism* (1914) and, partly, *The Life of the Spirit and the Life of To-Day* (1922), that inspired the general framework of Eliot's quest and its 'incarnational spirituality' (Underhill, *Lent with Evelyn Underhill* 2).

AN INTERPRETATION OF 'THE BURIAL OF THE DEAD'

The Waste Land is disorienting from the start. The many voices challenge unity of self and thought. And yet, the many voices are not meant to undermine self and thought. They are instead meant to represent, in the Bradleian sense, the partial truths or fragmentary wholes which is all that we can know and point at, to quote Underhill, 'the unity of all the higher experiences of the race' (*The Life of the Spirit* 1). Eliot's many voices also invoke from Joachim's idea that truth was revealed in finite minds. 'Each mind is a "part" of the complete intelligence', Joachim wrote, 'each thought a fragmentary expression of the whole meaning' (*The Nature of Truth* 160). Whether they express desire of, or resistance to, the life of the spirit, the voices of *The Waste Land* are dramatized in one stream-of-consciousness and point together only to one end,

namely to the yearning for, quest and experience of the divine (Underhill, *The Life of the Spirit* 3). By dramatizing ‘several voices’ Eliot suggests, again like Evelyn Underhill, that ‘the spiritual man or woman is always fundamentally the same kind of man or woman; always reaching out for the same faith and love towards the heart of the same universe, though telling that faith and love in *various tongues*’ (*The Life of the Spirit* 37; my italics).

Let us then suppose that Eliot envisages a quester’s soul, his and everyman’s soul, expressed in and through so many different voices, awaking from the atrophy of the spirit, feeling its desolation of ‘being laid waste’ and embarking on a spiritual journey to heal itself (cf. Gilson ‘La Mystique de la grâce dans la *Queste del Saint Graal*’). Let us imagine, too, that Eliot prepares and sets out the essential themes of his quest in the section ‘The Burial of the Dead’. And finally let us suppose that the guiding light of this mystical quest is Evelyn Underhill, who is presenting a typical mystic’s way in modern dress. If we accept this hypothesis, then the many jigsaw pieces of *The Waste Land* fit neatly into place.

‘The Burial of the Dead’ is worked out carefully in five movements. The first movement contains first the description of the atrophy of spiritual life (ll. 1–18). Then follow three different movements (ll. 19–30; 31–42; 43–59) suggesting the three different ways in which the ineradicable longings of the ‘Spirit’ call human beings to experience its life in the partial forms of Transcendence, Desire, and Immanence – three forms of the life of the spirit contemplated by Underhill. Finally, associated with a faint awareness of the unspiritual life of today, the fifth movement (ll. 60–76) introduces the question which, however ambiguous, starts the real quest for the holy.

‘The Burial of the Dead’ begins with the description of the general atrophy of spiritual life. By atrophy of spiritual life Eliot meant, like Underhill, the rejection of the ‘instinct of God’ (Underhill, *The Life of the Spirit* 6) or, I quote from Underhill, the ‘simple but inexorable longings and instincts of the buried spirit’ (*Practical Mysticism* 31). Underhill believed that the life of the spirit was, to quote, ‘a genuine fact, which meets us at all times, places and levels of life’ (*The Life of the Spirit* 4). She commented, ‘We must believe that the union of this life with supporting spirit cannot *in fact* be broken, any more than the organic unity of the earth with the universe as a whole. But the extent in which we find and feel it is the measure of the fullness of spiritual life that we enjoy’ (*The Life of the Spirit* 17; Underhill’s emphasis).

Contemporaries seemed to Underhill to resist what she called the ‘inflow of the spirit’ (*The Life of the Spirit* 26, 28). This is the theme of the first movement of Eliot’s poem (ll. 1–18). Here Eliot describes the presence of the spirit at all times, places, and levels of life and, at the same time, he expresses human resistance to it in various voices. Lines 1–7 give us the first example. The presence of the spirit is here introduced at its lowest level, the natural, which, in turn, suggests its potential presence at a higher level, the human. April brings with itself the awakening of the earth, as well as the signs of human spiritual life, that is desire and memory, together with accession of vitality, the spring rain. Yet neither the rebirth of nature, nor the stirrings of human inner life implied in that rebirth, are understood or really wished for (cf. Underhill, *The Life of the Spirit* 28). Men find April ‘the cruellest month’ and would rather they were still in winter, wishing for no desire (‘winter kept us warm’), no memory (‘covering earth in forgetful snow’) and as little movement or growth as possible (‘feeding a little life with dried tubers’).

Lines 8–12 are a second example of human resistance to the life of the spirit. A summer ‘shower of rain’ suddenly falls onto a group of people who had been totally unaware of the coming of spring, namely, of the potential reawakening of the spirit. ‘Summer surprised us, coming over the Starnberger See with a shower of rain’. The ‘shower of rain’ in summer symbolizes in mystical works, including Underhill’s, and indeed in the Bible, an irruption of

vitality coming from above, this time more powerful and sudden. Yet men are disturbed by the sudden accession of spiritual vitality and do not answer the call. They avoid the rain, stopping in the colonnade, preferring everyday talk and drink in the garden of a hotel, rather than the fulfilling spiritual communion with what Underhill calls the 'Eternal' in the garden of the soul. They call their choice 'going on in the sunlight'. In fact they are unknowingly renouncing their own identity ('Bin gar keine Russin, stamm' aus Litauen, echt deutsch').

Lines 13–17 suggest a third, traditional, rejection of spiritual calling. This time Marie remembers how, as a child, she was taken out on a sled by her cousin, the Archduke, and 'down they went'. She was offered the possibility of a descent, which, in terms of traditional Christian spirituality, including Underhill's version of it, symbolizes the humility needed for purification. And yet Marie, as a child, was already frightened of letting go, of accepting a descent into darkness. As an adult she still prefers life in the mountains, signifying sterility, pride and sin, a Biblical symbolism repeated by mystics, including Underhill. There Marie 'feels' free, and deceives herself. Line 18, the last line of the first movement of 'The Burial of the Dead', 'I read much of the night, and go south in winter', sums up the 'distractions' of Eliot's generation. It alludes to the way that his contemporaries tried to avoid what was natural, in this context particularly changes conducive to the life of the spirit. Eliot seems to suggest, like Evelyn Underhill, that exactly that life of the spirit needs to be redirected (Underhill, *The Life of the Spirit* 26).

The second movement (lines 19–30) intimates that, notwithstanding human resistance, the life of the spirit, the 'impulse to transcendence' is 'ineradicable' (Underhill, *The Life of the Spirit* 21). Something keeps growing out of the 'stony heart' ('stony rubbish'). But what are the sources ('the roots') and what the outcome ('branches') of the tentative but inescapable life of the spirit? These are, of course, Biblical quotations as Eliot himself mentions in his notes. How does the spirit continue to attract and call us to a fullness of life, through its various 'branches' of religion, love, the occult, and the arts? Eliot chose as spokesman for an answer the prophet Ezechiel (Ezechiel 2:7). Ezechiel, who was essentially a mystic, had a rich and direct consciousness of God. And he experienced the inflow of the spirit as vital energy. He had experienced that 'root' or depth from whence the human faculties come forth as, to quote Underhill quoting the mystic William Law ('The Spirit of Prayer') 'branches from the body of a tree' (*Mysticism* 61). This 'root' or depth is the Unity, the Eternity of the soul. 'A spirit came to me and stood me on my feet' and 'a spirit lifted me up' are recurrent expressions used in the Bible to point out the moment of Ezechiel's conversation with the Eternal God. Inspired by God, the prophet suggests that man should give up the possibility of understanding the life of the spirit in terms of human knowledge and that he should, like him, experience the call under the protection of divine, transcendent, life. Eliot symbolizes this protection by the biblical image of the shadow. Expressing the call of the spirit to transcendence, Ezechiel reminds that human knowledge is fragmented ('a heap of broken images') and spiritually sterile. It does not meet the deepest human needs ('where the sun beats, and the dead tree gives no shelter'), nor does it take into consideration the possibility of spiritual transformation, of hope ([where] 'the cricket [gives] no relief')⁹ or contemplate Grace, traditionally symbolized in Christianity by water coming from a stone ('the dry stone no sound of water'). The only relief that it offers is the protection of his shadow, the shadow of the Spirit. Only by experiencing divine transcendent life can man understand the source of all spiritual life (cf. Underhill, *The Mystics of the Church* 32). 'There is shadow under this red rock' (cf. Isaiah 32:2). As a result man will be shown a reality which is not made merely by himself or for himself. He will be shown the transience of all human condition: 'I will show you something different from either/ Your shadow at morning striding behind you, Or your shadow at evening striding to meet you; I will show you fear in a

handful of dust'. Once someone has experienced the inflow of the spirit, he or she becomes aware that life without the spirit, the divine breath, is nothingness. 'When you take away their breath', reads Psalm 104 [v. 29], 'they die and return to their dust'. Spiritual experience, warns Underhill in keeping with the mystical tradition, brings with itself a heightened sense of mortality and fear when it does not go beyond the reception of the message.

The third movement of 'The Burial of the Dead' (ll. 31–42) focuses on the theme of human love. The link with the previous lines is clear. Ezechiel's voice had suggested that the starting point of a spiritual life is seeking and finding the Eternal with fear and trembling. And the agent of the seeking and finding of the Eternal is, as Evelyn Underhill underlines, nothing else but love (*Mysticism* 58). Not surprisingly a spirit analogous to the one that Ezechiel experienced as *ruah*, that is breath, or wind, now presides over the awakening of love as a passionate tendency. The lines of the sailor's song from Wagner's *Tristan*, 'Frisch weht der wind Der Heimat zu', ('Fresh blows the wind homeward') signify the inward vital urge of the spirit towards its source, love. Eliot's direct and indirect references to the three acts of Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* suggest the dynamics of human desire in love as an example of spiritual craving analogous to the mystical quest, analogous but imperfect – doomed. The opening song relies therefore on the theme of desire, the wind blowing, the horizon without boundaries, the motive of the crossing.

Eliot constructed the movement of these twelve lines meticulously, as a more detailed analysis than can be offered here would confirm. Suffice it to say that the dynamics of love psychology as portrayed in the third movement from '“Frisch weht der wind”' to '“Oed' und leer das Meer”' ultimately suggest that human passion does not quench the thirst for spirituality. The lover is not redeemed, he is not living nor dead, he cannot see Isolde although Isolde will in fact be coming. The sea of life is empty. The whole third movement suggests that psychic longing is always one, particularly human desire as manifested in love. As Underhill explains, however, the spiritual regeneration is the sublimation of this vital yearning and its redirection to God (*The Life of the Spirit* 26). No such redirection to God takes place in the experience of the garden.

The fourth movement (ll. 43–59) relates to the third in that clairvoyance, which theosophy acknowledged as a valid class of mystical experience, might reveal to the quester what he was unable to see or reach through the experience of the spirit as transcendence or desire. In the Grail legend Tristan visits a soothsayer to learn how he could be healed. Similarly the quester in the wasteland now visits a clairvoyant, Madame Sosostris. Her occultism presents hidden and immanent spiritual forces and theosophy as the possible key to the craving of the human spirit. To foretell the future and explain the mystery of life 'Madame Sosostris, famous clairvoyante', uses the most complete and synthetic code of Hermetic symbolism, a 'wicked pack of cards', the Tarot¹⁰. Eliot, however, did not take the symbols of the Tarot at face value. As his note suggests, he saw the Tarot mainly as a device to give frame and unity to the quest that follows later in the poem, anticipating its characters and elements, and hinting at their ancient and secret roots. He introduced new cards to fit the plan of the poem. Only four of Eliot's cards are to be found in the traditional pack or in Arthur Edward Waite's *The Pictorial Key to the Tarot* (1911), which Eliot knew (Gibbons 561–5; Leavitt 42). The way in which Eliot modified the Tarot and the way in which Madame Sosostris interprets the cards give us a sense of Eliot's criticism of occultism as falling short of the true life of the spirit.

Madame Sosostris shows the quester five cards. The first card, the quester's card, the card that contains the mystery of his life, declares Madame Sosostris, is the 'drowned Phoenician Sailor'. No such card exists in the Tarot. Eliot invented it in order to associate it with the Phoenician Sailor, who dies the death by water in the fourth section, and to present the sailor's death, namely death to the self, as the decisive step along the quest for the holy. The card of the 'drowned Phoenician Sailor' is accordingly accompanied by a line of Ariel's consoling song in

The Tempest, 'those are pearl that were his eyes', to signifying that the sailor's death by water will bring a fruitful change.

The second card that Madame Sosostriis shows the quester is the card of Belladonna. 'Here is Belladonna, the Lady of the Rocks, The lady of situations'. This card too is Eliot's invention. It foretells the role of woman in the holy quest and introduces all future female characters in one. The specific card of the quester, as noted above, is the 'drowned Phoenician Sailor'. The card he must confront, however, and which first hinders and eventually promotes the quest that leads to death by water, is 'Belladonna', 'The Lady of the Rocks', the 'lady of situations'. As 'Belladonna', woman seduces and ensnares the quester becoming an obstacle to the spiritual quest. An example comes later in 'A Game of Chess'. As 'Lady of the Rocks', however, woman symbolizes a creature whose innocence has been violated, thus becoming the epitome of suffering and subsequent purification. The second part of 'The Fire Sermon' indicates the role of the 'Lady of the Rocks'. Because of her dependence on man for the role of seducer (in 'A Game of Chess') and seduced (in 'A Fire Sermon'), that is for her parts as 'Belladonna' and of 'Lady of the Rocks', she is also called the 'lady of situations'.

The three remaining cards uncovered by Madame Sosostriis signify more general principles entailed in the quest. The three cards are the 'man with three staves', the 'wheel' and the 'one-eyed merchant'. All three cards are genuine Tarot cards. Eliot found the symbols of these three cards suitable for accommodating meanings deriving from ancient lore, anthropology and mysticism. They suggested that ancient hidden lore contained traces of the two conditions and the one obstacle traditionally specified in the mystic's spiritual quest, that is, respectively, the three levels of human existence, which reappear in the response to the Thunder ('the man with the three staves'), the action of the moving spirit ('the wheel'), and concupiscence ('the one-eyed merchant').

Eliot's need to invent new cards and to choose only those in the traditional pack that could accommodate the general principles of the Christian spiritual quest suggests that, in his estimation, the Hermetic system of the Tarots was of limited spiritual importance. Besides, Madame Sosostriis' interpretation of the cards turns out to be flawed. For example, she produces one more card, which is blank. The card signifies, she says, something that the merchant carries on his back, and which she is 'forbidden to see'. Then she cannot find the Hanged Man¹¹. Finally, she suggests that the quester should fear death by water. In short, Madame Sosostriis is 'blind' to the three elements which shape Christian conversion. First, the awareness of sin, symbolized by the 'blank card' in keeping with the pagan and Christian idea that evil is not a subsistent substance but the privation of good. Second, the recognition of God's summons to man-Christ as Wisdom, symbolized, as Eliot tells us in a note, by 'the Hanged Man'. Third, and most importantly, the acceptance of death by water allowing final purification. What she can see is 'crowds of people, walking round in a ring', the 'ignavi' to whom *The Waste Land* is addressed (Dante, *Inferno* III 52-7). She does not, however, recognize them as sinners against the Spirit.

The barren knowledge of Madame Sosostriis is 'wicked' because she uses her knowledge only for her own ends and gives no heed to the common good. She is closed, in Underhill's mystical terminology, to the Transcendent. She does not recognize any metaphysical dimension of knowledge. The object of the Quest is eluding her. It is the same complaint that Underhill made of occultists when writing for *The Hibbert Journal* of 1907-8. Only ironically can Madame Sosostriis be called wise, 'the wisest woman in Europe'.

The barren knowledge of the interpreter of the Tarot, the greedy clairvoyant, answers the expectations of people who live the 'unreal' life of the city, people indifferent to the Eternal and, above all, indifferent to sin. To quote Underhill, in cities like Paris or London man's

'fluctuating, yet persistent apprehension of an enduring and transcendent Reality, his instinct for God' is denied (*The Life of the Spirit* 5–6). Again Underhill defines the 'existence' of big towns as 'hurried, ugly and devalizing' (26). Accordingly Eliot dedicates the fifth movement (ll. 60–76) of 'The Burial of the Dead' to describing the hell of modern cities and introducing the quester in that hell. Not surprisingly he discloses the sense of hell by echoing, this time, two poets who had been masters in describing the 'inferno' respectively in this life and the afterlife, Baudelaire and Dante. Eliot's 'Unreal city\Under the brown fog of a winter dawn' echoes Baudelaire's 'Fourmillante cité' of his poem entitled 'Les sept vieillards'. Baudelaire conveys the threat and terror of the outer world of the city, described at early morning, in the mud and yellow fog, and the wreck of the poet's soul at the sight of 'unreal' people, people who are in fact ghosts dead to what is eternal. Here the association with Dante's *Inferno* follows appropriately. 'A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,\I had not thought death had undone so many'. Eliot continues echoing Dante's description of the 'ignavi' (*Inferno* III 55–7), namely, of those people who had been possessed by sloth and indifference, signifying that the threat and terror of the outer world as depicted by Baudelaire is caused by the general sin of *acedia* and cowardice described by Dante and reigning, according to Underhill, in what she called 'the life of today'.

Again Eliot's line 'Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled' echoes Dante, this time Dante's description of the grief of the damned in 'limbo' (*Inferno* IV 25–7), that is, of those people who never knew God. Eliot seems to suggest that men look only downwards during the span of their life and that all along they are constantly but unsuccessfully reminded of the death of Christ. Every day they walk 'To where Saint Mary Woolnoth kept the hours/ With a dead sound on the final stroke of nine.' The incarnation of Christ indicates that Eternity partook of time. Mankind, however, does not acknowledge this. 'Eternity is with us', wrote Underhill, 'inviting our contemplation – but we are too frightened, lazy and suspicious to respond' (*Practical Mysticism* 18). The crowd over London Bridge is a victim of time.

Amid the sloth and indifference (to both sin and Grace), amid the 'unreal city', the quester meets someone he knows, called Stetson, and asks him the question central to the spiritual quest. Stetson is, significantly, described as a colleague in war. Underhill believed that the mystic and the warrior were not too dissimilar, the instincts of both being sublimated. A warrior, like the mystic, was unaffected by the sin of sloth. Eliot suggests that at least in the past Stetson and the quester were not affected by sloth. To Stetson (possibly the quester's *alter ego*) the quester asks the 'overwhelming question': 'That corpse you planted last year in your garden,\Has it begun to sprout? Will it bloom this year?\Or has the sudden frost disturbed its bed?' Is there, he asks, hope for regeneration of the buried spirit or does the buried spirit find him inert and recalcitrant?

The quester does not wait for an answer. Instead he is anxious to give Stetson, the advice that he should keep the Dog far away, since the dog, being friend to men, could 'dig up' the corpse again: 'O keep the Dog far hence, that's friend to men\Or with his nails he'll dig it up again!' (cf. *The White Devil*, V, Iv, 89–98). Eliot himself warns the reader of the difficulty and ambiguity of these lines by choosing as his literary reference John Webster's *The White Devil*, which is a subtle study of spiritual sins, a play in which the audience is continually invited to question the true intention of the speaker. The advice to Stetson should be understood with that context of hypocrisy in mind. Webster's Cornelia is concerned with the preservation of her son's body rather than with honour or virtue for its own sake. Mad for grief at her son's murder by his brother she says: 'keep the wolf far thence, that's foe to men,\For with his nails he'll dig them up again.' The wolf would, in Cornelia's view, prevent the burial, and would disclose the horrid murder. In the quester's view too, the Dog, by digging up the corpse, would prevent the burial and disclose a body deprived of life. And the quester does not wish this

to happen. He does not want, in Underhill's words, 'to lag behind towards animal levels' (*The Life of the Spirit* 38), disclosing the natural man.

This might seem sound advice. But the advice to 'keep the Dog far hence' is not straightforward. It conceals within its simplicity another meaning. The capital letter for dog suggests that 'Dog' might be the symbol of something more powerful than 'natural man'. But what other meaning of 'Dog' is consequential to Eliot's thoughts? What reference can consistently fit the preceding references to Dante, Baudelaire, Webster, all concerned with sins against the Spirit? Once again Underhill's *Mysticism* provides the clue. Here she referred to a poem by the 'greatest mystical poet of modern times', Francis Thompson's 'The Hound of Heaven' (161). The poem describes 'the remorseless, untiring seeking and following of the soul by the Divine Life to which it will not surrender' (161). This 'tremendous Lover' hunting the 'separated spirit' (161) is described by Thompson as a Hound, a Dog.

The other meaning of 'Dog' is, therefore, very probably that of Grace chasing the spirit of man, no matter how resistant or 'buried' the latter is. The quester's advice to Stetson, we now see, works on two levels: Stetson should avoid both the horror of recognizing his sin and the power of Grace, the two elements that are in fact necessary to conversion. The quester's question was, therefore, appropriate, since it concerns the theme of life and death. The advice that follows it, however, shows that the quester is still tainted by the general sin of ennui or sloth, a reluctance, that is, both to feel the 'horror' of his sins and to let the Spirit flow in him.

That resistance to the Spirit is the key to the encounter with Stetson is shown in the following lines when Eliot quotes from Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal*. Baudelaire writes that among the sins ennui is 'supreme and would lay waste the earth quite willingly'. The quester, however, is not the only one at fault. 'How well', adds Baudelaire, 'you know this fastidious monster, reader, Hypocrite reader, you, my double, my brother'. Eliot's 'You. – Hypocrite lecteur, – mon semblable, – mon frère' suggests that the quester and the readers alike have laid their lands waste. Readers of the poem too will do all they can to disown their spiritual longing and resist the call to awaken to spiritual life.

A SEQUENTIAL NARRATIVE: FROM FIRE TO FIRE

The Burial of the Dead ends with the quester still tainted with the sin of 'ennui'. It accordingly leads on to the three scenes of 'A Game of Chess', where ennui and lust disguised as love still dominate and where the life of the spirit is hardly acknowledged. The original title, 'In the Cage', matched the situation in which the lovers of this section, both seducers and seduced, find themselves. They all are, in different ways, entrapped. Above all the original title 'In the Cage' illustrates the reason why they are entrapped. Greed and lust, wrote Underhill, are caged primitive instincts masquerading as love, but in fact entrapping the self, eventually caging other people and dehumanizing them (*The Life of the Spirit* 62–3). Eliot invokes this theme of instincts masquerading as love through the myth of Tereu. These disguised primitive instincts weaken the call to spirituality in both seducer and seduced. Theologians call these instincts 'concupiscence', and indicatively, concupiscence is, together with ennui, the great obstacle to the Grail. In this section the role of the male quester marks the rejection of romance, a farewell to the seductions of 'Belladonna', the card representing this section. At the end of the section the instinctive life of the quester craves for more life.

This longing for more love and life must be redirected, Evelyn Underhill wrote, through a process of purgation, purification and setting in order (*The Life of the Spirit* 80, 61; *The Mystic Way*). These are the traditional mystical steps in the soul's ascent. Eliot's third section, *The Fire*

Sermon, entails exactly this process whereby the instinct of lustful love, of concupiscence, as presented in 'A Game of Chess' is redirected. Eliot makes clear that the redirection from the fire of concupiscence to the fire of the Spirit is not wholly controlled by human powers. Men are seized, to quote Underhill, by 'some stronger power than themselves' (*Practical Mysticism* 32). This movement towards an ascetic disposition is what one would call both, in Christian and Buddhist spirituality, 'freedom'. It is highlighted throughout by literary allusions to exile, spiritual marriage and transmutation, which Underhill calls the three patterns of mystical life. Its objective correlative in *The Waste Land* is the third act of Wagner's *Götterdämmerung*, where heroism is played against betrayal, life against death. Finally, it is confirmed at the end of the section by the reference both to the sermon of Buddha and the *Confessions* of Augustine.

Two principles are pivotal to the soul's ascent. The starting point of purgation is an act of humility, the acceptance of the Caliban within (cf. Underhill, *The Life of the Spirit* 84–5). This act of humility is accomplished in what Tiresias sees. Very appropriately the 'one-eyed merchant' and the 'blank card', the two cards that had foretold in 'The Burial of the Dead' the need humbly to recognize sin, dominate lines 202–56 and illustrate the Caliban within. The 'one-eyed merchant' symbolizes natural man. The 'blank card', which Madame Sosotris cannot see, symbolizes the concupiscence of his degrading encounters (see p. 6 above).

The second principle necessary to the ascetic movement towards freedom is, according to Underhill and the mystical tradition generally, repentance and acceptance of self-sacrifice as the way of purification. The redeeming power of violated innocence and self-surrender was, in the section concerning Madame Sosotris, disclosed in the card of 'Belladonna' understood as the 'Lady of the Rocks'. Here, in the third part of 'The Fire Sermon', the 'Lady of the Rocks' is now, quite appropriately, the dominating character, symbolizing the woman who has been violated and who, repenting, eventually becomes, like Wagner's Kundry, the handmaid to the Grail. A woman in the guise of Belladonna engaged the quester in 'A Game of Chess'. A woman in the guise of the 'Lady of the Rocks' now facilitates the way to freedom. This reversal of the female role is revealed in the voices of the daughters of the Thames, in the allusion to the episode of Pia de' Tolomei and in the implied self-sacrifice of Brunhilde, who symbolizes the evolution of the soul to a higher level of spiritual life.

But purgation towards illumination is only one stage of the quest. What hurries the quester towards what mystics call the unitive way is the painful giving up of selfhood. This process of self-stripping is contained in the next section, 'Death by Water', and entails the experience of death understood as renunciation of worldly things and renunciation of knowledge as power. This rite of passage has a complicated role in the mystical tradition. It denotes the self-surrender that enables the contemplative soul to hear God speak.¹² It entails purification from multiplicity and self-interest (cf. Underhill, *Practical Mysticism* 32). Eliot suggests all this through the card of the 'drowned Phoenician Sailor', which Madame Sosotris had indicated as central to the quest and as bringing drastic change. The radical shift of poetic register in the next section announces that the quester has undergone a transformation as foretold by Madame Sosotris, 'Those are pearls that were his eyes, look'. The way has been a surrender, a being handed over, in brief, a prefiguration, even perhaps a partaking, of Christ's passion, to which, not by chance, the beginning of the fifth section alludes with 'After the torchlight red on sweaty faces/After the frosty silence in the gardens ...' Here, in 'What the Thunder Said', the quester reaches the core of the contemplative and ascetic quest leading towards the unitive way. This is the moment in which the thunder, symbolizing God, speaks and the quester answers by interpreting what he hears.

The section is organized around six movements. The first three (ll. 322–58; 359–84) prepare the soul for the experience of emptiness that it will need to be able to respond to the voice of

the thunder. The fourth (ll. 384–94) signifies that emptiness has been achieved: the chapel, symbol of the soul being initiated to the otherworldly, is empty, is only the wind's home. The soul is now ready for the encounter with the Word. Eliot exemplifies the dynamics of the unitive way (ll. 395–422) by employing as objective correlative a passage from the oldest *Upanishad*, entitled *The Forest of Wisdom*. He may have believed that this passage agreed with a common tenet of Christian mysticism upon which Underhill had insisted (*Man and the Supernatural* 14). Already in *The Mystic Way*, published in 1913, Underhill had stated that the characteristic feature of Christian mysticism was the execution of movements in response to the inflow of Reality, in other words, to the messages of the supernal sphere (*Life of the Spirit* 107).

In Christianity, she wrote, our being does not lose its personality; the 'Divine Truth' respects all diversity and partakes of that diversity. The passage from *The Upanishad* conveys that universal truth precisely. There Prajapati, the father and creator, imparts advice to the gods, men and demons with one single syllable, Da. Gods, men and demons understand the word of Prajapati differently, respectively as *Damyata/Datta/Dayadhvam* (we should control ourselves, we should give, we should have compassion). *The Upanishad* ends with 'shanti, shanti, shanti', an expression predicting 'peace that passes understanding' to those who respond to the word. Although using a different order (man, the godless, gods), Eliot gives us three different levels of response depending on the three different levels of being suggested in the card of the 'man with the three staves'¹³. The imperfections of the soul's response are inherent in the limitations of the recipient. They do not diminish the moment of revelation, the recognition of which is the door to the peace that 'surpasses all understanding', as the last words of *The Waste Land* also suggest.

The two concluding movements (ll. 423–33) deal respectively with the poet/quester and his readers. The quester is now on the shore of the sea – not on the bank of a canal or river of life – fishing. He is the healed Fisher King wanting to bear witness and convince and whose frame of mind is very much like Underhill's in the concluding pages of her *Practical Mysticism* (1914). First he is called to regenerate his own lands with wisdom. He can do this – at least temporarily – by means of the fragments of revealed truth that have helped him throughout his quest. As for his readers, he has other 'fragments' with which to 'fit' them. These are the Hindu fragments, by which the poet/quester rather obscurely intends, like Hieronimo, to both reveal the truth and punish the guilty.

THE ROLE OF THE READER

Eliot must have suspected his readers would misinterpret his poem, that they would be blind to the spirit just like the 'practical men' to whom Underhill had addressed one of her books (*Practical Mysticism* 29). Underlying the difference between the 'practicality' of modern men and the spirituality of poets, Underhill had addressed directly her own readers with the following words:

These [poets] have seized and woven into their pictures strands which never presented themselves to you; significant forms which elude you, tones and relations to which you are blind, living facts for which your conventional world provides no place. They prove by their works that Blake was right when he said that "a fool sees not the same tree that a wise man sees". (*Practical Mysticism* 20)

Eliot too refers to the reader on five other occasions and on each occasion he challenges the reader who is spiritually dead.

The first reference to the reader is contained in the epigraph, a passage from the *Coena Trimalchionis* in Petronius' *Satyricon*. Eliot, I suggest, chose the passage from Petronius to imply that critics and readers are likely to miss the spiritual meaning of the poet's message. In the *Satyricon* Trimalchion is the *arbiter elegantiae* given to sensuality, with very narrow interests, ignorant of literature, at whose dinner table the full horror of the self-made ostentatious magnate is revealed: 'I have seen the sibyl myself in Cumae hang from a phial', he says, 'and when the children asked "Sibyl what do you wish?" She answered "I wish to die"'. Trimalchion stands for the contemporary critic who judges the poet (the sibyl) and interprets his message. In Trimalchion's report the sibyl is caged and shrunk, like the prophets of old. Her answer to the inquiring *pueri* (the readers who insist on wanting to know her intention) is ambiguous. As reported by Trimalchion the sibyl's answer ("I wish to die"), the core of the spiritual quest – makes little sense. It is uttered in a pagan world with no conception whatsoever of rebirth after death. In Trimalchion's report the sibyl's answer is folkloristic, Frazerlike, certainly not metaphysical. And this is because Trimalchion, in his indifference to religion, considers mysticism and mystery religions an outlet for wealthy nymphomaniacs. Of the numinous he can only see the sibyl, whose message he cannot understand completely.

Each of the five references to the reader mark a stage of the quest. In 'The Burial of the Dead', the quotation from Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal*, 'Hypocrite lecteur, – mon semblable, – mon frère', highlights the reader's spiritual apathy. Directly addressing the reader as 'you', Eliot hints at his, the reader's, unreliability in fostering and allowing the growth of spiritual life so that the wound may be healed and the land restored. For both Baudelaire and Eliot the reader is likely, no less than the author, to disguise his craving and to reject being awakened to the horror of sins as well as to a transforming spiritual life.

The next reference to the reader clarifies the quester's own attitude towards the audience of *The Waste Land* once the quest has started. 'Good night ladies, goodnight', in 'A Game of Chess', is not spoken by one of the characters in the pub. It is rather the final statement of the quester imposing itself on the voices of people in the pub. It is the quester's farewell to the world of materialistic people and readers of which he is the victim.

Consequently, in 'The Fire Sermon' the quester does not address contemporary readers any longer. He turns the river Thames instead: 'Sweet Thames run softly till I end my song'. The quester signifies that he is now writing, like Spenser in *Prothalamion*, to ease his own pain, paying respect to a whole tradition rather than to a contemporary audience and being fully aware of his own exile. It is only after the process of purification, which takes place in 'The Fire Sermon', that Eliot once more addresses his reader with the Pauline expression 'O you Gentile or Jew' (Romans 9:10) of the fourth section. St Paul had used the expression to signify that salvation is open to all believers. Eliot uses it to point to his readers as non-Christians, the damned in limbo of the first section, who might, however, find salvation, were they only willing, following St Paul's advice, to die to their dead selves.

The 'Why then Ile fit you' of the last section, however, does not sound optimistic (Thomas Kyd, *Spanish Tragedy* IV, 1, 69). The poet feels betrayed by readers who do not respond to his words, whose 'cunning minds' in the words of Underhill 'suppress the unfulfilled craving', thus killing the creatures of his mind and spirit (*Practical Mysticism* 111). Like Hieronimo, who was deprived of his son by murder, the poet feels betrayed and deprived of something precious. Consequently, he takes revenge on unfaithful readers by providing them with the obscure Hindu fragments, *Datta/Dayadhvam/Damyata*, leading to the quintessence of mystical contemplation, 'shanti, shanti, shanti'. With those fragments the 'hypocrite lecteur' will be punished, in the sense that the reader will not understand them unless he is untainted by the suppression of the spirit. This is the context of 'Ile fit you'. By this expression the poet/quester, thought to be

insane, like all those who have looked into the Grail, not only conveys his revengeful purpose. He also signifies that, just like Hieronimo in his performance, he too, in *The Waste Land*, has given a part to his enemies, the practical readers who cannot make sense of *The Waste Land* because they are 'blind' to the life of the spirit.

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Notes

1 My interpretation differs noticeably from those of Brooker and Bentley, Neill, Claes, Harmon and Blistein. It is more in line with those of Smith, Brooks and Moody (115–34).

2 Childs ('T.S. Eliot and Evelyn Underhill: An Early Mystical Influence'; *T.S. Eliot, Mystic, Son and Lover* 33–41) has commented on Underhill's influence on Eliot. My reading does not owe to him.

3 From then onward Underhill regarded Christian mysticism as theocentric and Christocentric (*The Mystics of the Church* 24; *The Mystic Way*, vii, 35–43, especially 41; *The Life of the Spirit* 44).

4 I disagree here with Moody when he writes that *The Waste Land* ‘has a structure other than the sequential’, (80) with Cooper, who suggests there is no single key to the meaning of the poem (64), and also with Coyle, who dismisses the importance of narrative sequence in the poem (160).

5 Underhill attributed great importance to idealism but she complained it did not take into consideration the ‘desirous heart’ (*Mysticism* 15).

6 Dean Inge defined mysticism as ‘that dim consciousness of the beyond, which is part of our nature as human beings and the raw material of all religion, and perhaps of all philosophy and art’ (4–5). Gerson referred to it as ‘knowledge of God by experience, arrived at through the embrace of unifying Love’ (*De mystica theologia* 1.6.6).

7 On Eliot’s serious interest in mysticism, see Ackroyd (51–2); Gordon (531–2); Childs (*T.S. Eliot* 33) and Dodds (40).

8 For the influence of Weston’s work on Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, see also Surette (‘*The Waste Land: A Personal Grouse*’ 6). My views on the matter and my interpretation of the *Waste Land* differs remarkably.

9 It is worth noting that Underhill wrote: ‘Alike in howling gale and singing cricket it hears the crying aloud of that “Word which is through all things everlastingly” ’ (*Mysticism* 309–10).

10 Ouspensky (3–4) wrote that the reading of the Tarot cards entailed metaphysical speculation about the nature of ultimate reality and of our relation to it. Weston, in line with A. E. Waite, believed that the Tarot cards corresponded to the symbols of the Grail.

11 In the ‘Notes to the Waste Land’ Eliot specified that the ‘Hanged Man’, ‘a member of the traditional pack’, was associated in his mind with the Hanged God of Frazer as well as with the ‘hooded figure in the passage of the disciples to Emmaus’ in the fifth section, that is, with Christ.’

12 ‘et factus est repente de coelo sonus, tamquam advenientis spiritus vehementis’ (Acts 2: 1).

13 Underhill wrote that ‘the Sadhu’s Christianity was fully Christian’ (*The Life of the Spirit* 163).