

THE WHEEL AND THE HANGED MAN IN T. S. ELLIOT'S
THE WASTE LAND

Edgar Lazzari Pacheco*

Resumo

O presente artigo busca uma leitura diferenciada do poema "A terra devastada", do escritor T. S. Eliot, a partir da interpretação de duas cartas do tarô: o Enforcado e a Roda da Fortuna, que o autor alega ter inserido no poema ingenuamente, sem um conhecimento mais aprofundado sobre a simbologia mística de cada uma delas. Este estudo pretende verificar o que representam essas cartas e de que forma esses dois elementos "estranhos" contribuem para uma compreensão mais abrangente de tão complexo poema, que extrapola o textual, o intencional e o próprio estético, para compor uma das obras-primas da literatura do século XX.

According to Richard Ellmann, T.S. Eliot in *The Waste Land* deliberately omitted a mostly aesthetic quest in favor of a more spiritual one.¹

Spirituality here, I advocate, shall be apprehended in the utmost elevated sense, as it were, that which escapes our human rationality - of dogmatic institutions and official religions - and tries to explain the unexplainable: a feeling of replenishment.

It has to be viewed as the space in between the rational and the irrational in which the locus for transitions is set up and the arena for effective transformations finds its way.

It is in this interstice, a "neutral zone" that the sane meets the insane, the luminous turns into gloom, the congregational edges the fundamentalist, the ritualistic is placed *vis-à-vis* the fanatical and the living wake dead.

Dying is no more representative than a renewed reading of history and existence; it is a trance into the perennial, the ethereal, the glorious and ultimately, the divine.

* Professor do Departamento de Letras e Comunicação Social da UNISC.

¹ LITZ, Walton A. *Eliot in his time*. New York: Princeton University Press, 1973. p. 43-45.

When Ezra Pound criticized *The Waste Land* he was not aiming at its meaning, on the contrary, he was more concerned with the poem's despair and was indulgent of its neo-Christian hope but aware of its stylistic adequacy and freshness.²

Ruth Nevo, in her turn, resorted to a minute deconstruction of both aspects, as a Ur-text, under a postmodern guise, in 1982.

She claims that Eliot's note as Tiresias, "although a mere spectator and not indeed a character, is the most important personage in the poem, uniting all the rest. What Tiresias sees, in fact, is the substance of the poem. But, like all other characters in *The Waste Land* melt into one another, Tiresias himself, the prophet of the Thebes, melts into a number of other prophetic or quasi-prophetic figures: the Cumaean sibyl, Ezekiel, Isaiah, Madame Sosostris, (...)" (my emphases)³

Hence, if what Madame Sosostris "sees" is what Tiresias "sees", thus the substance or quasi-substance of the poem is, at the end, one. Moreover:

"The poet's mind for which we are accustomed to seek is indeterminately catalyzer, and/or catalyzed. Nor, similarly, can we differentiate a subject matter, or argument, or myth, or theme for the poem to be unequivocally about or to embody."⁴

and...:

"[Ah, but] there is a language which this mode of symbolic phantasmagoria resembles, the language of the unconscious, with its condensations, substitutions, displacements, and are then challenged to find an interpretative key to this dream."⁵

Indeed, it is left for the reader to try and solve the enigma in this way establishing a nexus for the poem.

Luckily enough, Eliot's somewhat cryptic imagery opens up, rather than narrows down, a multitude of maneuvers with endless other consequent - in chain - arrangements which become new possible readings, each one of them

²NEVO, Ruth. *The waste land ur-text of deconstruction*. From *New literary history*, Vol. XIII, by New Literary History. The University of Virginia. 1982.

³ id., *ibid.*, p. 94.

⁴ id., *ibid.*, p. 96.

⁵ id., *ibid.*, p. 98.

adding endless semantic interpretations of the poem.

Probably, this is why *The Waste Land* has survived and turned out so magnificent a poem of all times. Eliot's work is a masterpiece of originality, rather than an-other fashionable piece of poetry, for ladies, seeking no further than mere consumerism.

"Have we a poem at all? An Anti poem? It oversteps its own frame: Baudelaire's "*You! hypocrite lecteur! - mon semblable, - mon frère,*" like the hand seeming to come right out of the enlistment poster of 1916, transforms author into audience or vice-versa, or both into each other's double. But there is an author at all? *Il miglior fabbro*(...)? Is what Ezra Pound omitted part of the poem or not? Part of the original poem? Or is the original poem now, Pound's? What is original?⁶

Spirituality, freshness, deconstruction, dreams, prophets, quasi-prophets, originality... The work of art precedes the author or is it the other way round? The author mixes his prophets and declares his unwillingness to mean something at all!

In the light of this exuberant confusion, there remains one's craving to untie Eliot's entanglements.

I shall now proceed to an unconventional approach to the poem by focusing on the symbology of two particular Tarot cards employed by Eliot, namely, *The Hanged Man* and *The Wheel*:

Why have *the Wheel* and *The Hanged Man* been elected, even unconsciously, as representational elements in *The Waste Land*? What are their meanings and whatever could they signal for in the context of the poem?:

"Madame Sosostris, famous clairvoyante,
Had a bad cold, nevertheless.
Is known to be the wisest woman in Europe,
With a wicked pack of cards. Here, said she,
Is your card, the drowned Phoenician Sailor,
(Those are pearls that were his eyes. Look!)
Here is the Belladonna, the Lady of the Rocks,
The lady of situations.-
Here is the man with three staves, and here is the *Wheel*,
And here is the one-eyed merchant, and this card,
Which is blank, is something he carries on his back,
Which I am forbidden to see. I do not find

⁶*The American Tradition in Literature*. Vol. p.1188-1189

The Hanged Man. Fear death by water.
I see crowds of people, walking round in a ring.
Thank you. If you see dear Mrs. Equitone,
Tell her I bring the horoscope myself:
One must be so careful these days."⁷

T.S.Eliot claimed that he was,

"not familiar with the exact constitution of the Tarot pack of cards, from which I have obviously departed to suit my own convenience. *The Hanged Man*, a member of the traditional pack, fits my purpose in two ways: because he is associated in my mind with the Hanged God of Frazer (...) (Odin who was attached to the Tree of the World - Yggdrasil)"⁸

Eliot situates the poem between "two kinds of life and two kinds of death, the parallel symbolism of fertility cults and resurrection and the juxtapositional structure which ironically reveals the dissimilarity in surface similarities of a "marked and indirect but unequivocal statement of Christian belief".⁹

In view of the *duality* Eliot finds himself, it eventually appears to be quite pertinent that we trace a parallel between the Wheel and the circumstances he had been undergoing at that given moment. *The Waste Land* depicts the confusion typical of transformations, or, one's attempt to *re-shuffle things* around, so as to attain logic and order.

It mirrors the fractal world and our experiences within a limited cosmos that is ruled by a chaotic order. Like the small pieces of glass that form a Renaissance mosaic or painting, the poem resembles the tarot itself: different cards with different significations.

Depending on where each card lays – or is laid - endless meanings might be obtained. Eliot, as the *overseer*, seemed to have shuffled the cards and scattered them before the reader:

"With the Wheel, we get to the questioning of how and why things happen in the universe. What is it that makes the sun shine? Elements in fusion, one might say, of course, none

⁷ *The American Tradition in Literature*, Vol. foot note 06. p.1188.

⁸ NEVO, R. op.cit. p.102

⁹ MALORY apud. POLLACK. *Setenta e oito graus de sabedoria: um livro de tarô*. p.95

"the less, what makes them burn? Why shall spring follow winter?(...) The further one goes, he will discover that destiny is also an illusion, an artifice to disguise the fact that we, within our limited vision, are not able to notice the intimate connection amidst all things.(...) Things do not happen merely: they are prepared to happen. The power to plan things, belongs to the Holy Spirit, which inhabits the physical world as a presence inside the Holy Grail as well as *Shekinah* inhabited physically the sanctuary in the temple of Jerusalem."¹⁰

Let us now return to *Madame Sosostris*, who cannot find "*The Hanged Man*", one of the most labyrinthine cards of the tarot. Why cannot she find *Him*?

In accordance with Rachel Pollack, this figure is situated in the second line of the *Major Arcana*, in which we transfer our selves from a mostly external experience of the world into its extreme opposite, our inner most selves. The ego mask needs now to die.¹¹ *The Hanged Man* is tied upside down.

In this way, the energy from our instinctive-vegetative activities was believed to flush down to the brain, thus increasing our capability to *think* and *transcend*. This energetic matter was only believed, in a literal sense, by naive alchemists of that time. *The Hanged Man* is suspended from an *ankh* (Egyptian symbol of life), what makes it his *Tree of the World*.

It begins in the *underworld* (subconscious) and ranges through the *physical world* (conscious) as far as the *sky* (supraconscious). This figure affects us because it shows us a direct image of peace and comprehension. For many modern people, this card involves the liberation of emotions which were *deadlocked* for several years.¹²

Sosostris is not capable to find it... or Eliot? or the drowned Phoenician sailor? Or the reader himself?!

Thomas Stearns Eliot's *The Waste Land* is no longer a puzzle poem, except for the puzzle of choosing among the various solutions...

It is, conversely, the illustration of the transitory stage in which mankind and society find themselves and thus should be seen as the very denounce of our immaturity or impotence to *fully redeem* our selves.

¹⁰ POLLACK, R. op.cit. p.81.

¹¹ POLLACK, R. id.ibid, p.107-109.

¹² LITZ, A. op.cit.p. 76.

REFERÊNCIAS BIBLIOGRÁFICAS

- BRADBROOK, M. C. T. S. Eliot. London: Longmans, Green & Co, 1955.
- BRADLEY, Sculley, BEATTY, Richmond Croom et al. *The American Tradition in Literature*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company Inc.
- CALVINO, Ítalo. *O Castelo dos Caminhos Cruzados*. São Paulo: Editora Schwarcz Ltda, 1993.
- CAMPOS, Paulo Mendes. *A Terra Inútil*. Rio de Janeiro: Ed. Civilização Brasileira, 1956.
- Jogos do Futuro. Tarô*. Ed. Nova Cultural, 1987.
- LITZ, A. Walton. *Eliot in his time*. Princeton University Press, 1973.
- NEVO, Ruth. *New Literary History*. Volume XIII. The University of Virginia, 1982.
- POLLACK, Rachel. *Setenta e Oito Graus da Sabedoria*. Um Livro de Tarô. 2 v. Rio de Janeiro: Ed. Nova Fronteira, 1991.