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**A Prayer for Life: Water, Art and Spirituality in T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land***

**Abstract I:** Questo saggio analizza *La terra desolata* di T. S. Eliot da una prospettiva "ecocritica" (Glotfelty & Fromm 1996; Garrard 2004) e "blu" (Hau'ofa 2008; Ingersoll 2016; Mathieson 2021) ovvero inerente al significato dell'elemento acqua nel poema. Partendo dalle innovazioni estetiche e dall'elemento magico che Eliot ci presenta accanto alla sterilità e al degrado della vita dopo la Prima guerra mondiale, l'articolo si focalizza su tre episodi chiave del poema. Questi presentano le rivoluzioni artistiche di quel periodo e le forze evocative e spirituali provenienti dall'eredità americana di Eliot, nonché dal suo interesse per le religioni e filosofie d'Oriente. La lettura delle carte di Madame Sosostri diventa così una danza moderna di archetipi 'liquidi'. Tiresia, il profeta e veggente, evoca una pittura cubista e richiama la necessità di visioni 'fluide' e positive nella nostra vita. La ripetizione della preghiera dello *Shanti* celebra il ritmo delle gocce d'acqua, unico elemento che potrà guarire e riconnettere gli abitanti de *La terra desolata* con la Vita – 'the One life'. In questa mia lettura "indisciplinata" (Benozzo 2010) considero il poema una preghiera per l'acqua, una richiesta collettiva di "partnership" (Eisler 1988; Eisler & Fry 2019) per una rigenerazione e trasformazione del reale, nel riconoscimento che gli esseri umani rappresentino solo una parte della melodia cosmica del mondo.

**Abstract II:** This article reads T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* from an "ecocritical" (Glotfelty & Fromm 1996; Garrard 2004) and "blue" (Hau'ofa 2008; Ingersoll 2016; Mathieson 2021) or 'water' perspective. It focuses on Eliot's magical and aesthetic (r)evolutions depicting the sterility and degradation of life after World War I. I focus on three episodes that mix modern expressions and arts with highly evocative and spiritual forces coming from Eliot's American heritage and his interest in Eastern religions and philosophies. Madame Sosostri's reading of the 'wicked' cards becomes in this way a Modernist dance of 'liquid' archetypes. Tiresias, the prophet and true 'seer' evokes a Cubist painting while substantiating the need for fluid and more positive encounters in our life. The three-time beating refrain in the *Shanti* prayer epitomises the rhythm of water-dropping, the expected coming of water that will heal and re-connect humanity with the 'One life'. In this "undisciplined" (Benozzo 2010) interpretation, I read *The Waste Land* as a prayer for water, a communal and "partnership" (Eisler 1988; Eisler & Fry 2019) claim for regeneration and transformation, in the acknowledgement that we, humans, are just one side of the spiralling and cosmic music of the world.

**Keywords:** Eliot, *The Waste Land*, bue humanities, spirituality, art and literature.

### **Introduction: An Undisciplined Reading of T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land***

Almost a hundred years have passed since the first appearance of T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, one of the most evocative and complex poems of English literature and Western literary 'canon'. Eliot published his masterpiece in October 1922 in *The Criterion*, a literary review he founded with the intent to revive Western civilisation after the painful experience of World War I. Eliot's achievement was the result of a close collaboration with the poet and critic Ezra Pound, his mentor, 'il miglior fabbro', as Eliot called him in the dedication of the poem. Pound was not only a source of inspiration for the young Eliot but also the authoritative voice of an entire generation of writers and artists who were willing to change the world, or better participate in the re-fashioning of Western European aesthetics.

*The Waste Land* is considered one of the pillars of the Modernist movement and its literature. Indeed, apart from recalling autobiographical occurrences of Eliot's life, it sketches and simultaneously interrogates the tangible forces and fluctuating processes that brought about an 'involution' or rather collapse of the modern world. The inhabitants of *The Waste Land* are torn by a general feeling of precariousness. They are unable to communicate, love or express themselves. They loathe established beliefs, narratives and myths, in both the cultural and spiritual domains. They rather accept a 'life-in-death' in a destabilising, fragmented and alienated reality. Through *The Waste Land* Eliot wanted to depict the "falling down"<sup>1</sup> of Western-European dominator hegemony and 'faith' in rationality. He foregrounded the need for a new epistemology that would help humans to re-emerge from the debris of incomprehension, madness and fear. In this regard, as I will demonstrate in my analysis, Eliot evokes the premises of Riane Eisler's "partnership approach" (Eisler 1988, 1995, 2000, 2002, 2007; Eisler & Fry 2019), a thought-provoking lens that highlights the need for love, care and respect between individuals, partners, and family or community relations<sup>2</sup>.

In the appalling and unstable scenario of *The Waste Land*, eerily parallel to what we are experiencing nowadays, Eliot re-discovered the importance of the irrational, the primitive, and the ancestral traits of humankind. He understood that the 'modern' man/woman did not need to repress their incongruities, but rather embrace the power of complexity and constant re-shaping of their identity, culture and history. For Eliot, the path towards peace was determined by a comprehensive understanding of the contrasting forces that govern the world (and the self), in a constant re-mapping of our certainties, views and opinions.

Given this perspective, I intend to approach Eliot's masterpiece from a different point of view. I want to read the poem 'in reverse' or better in an undisciplined way in order to

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<sup>1</sup> This quotation comes from the verses "London Bridge is falling down falling down falling down" (Rainey 2005: 70, v. 426). All subsequent page references from *The Waste Land* are to this edition.

<sup>2</sup> The Partnership Studies Group (PSG) based at the University of Udine and founded by Antonella Riem is an internationally renowned research group that applies the premises of Eisler's partnership model to the field of the humanities. For more information, see the PSG official website: <https://partnershipstudiesgroup.uniud.it/>.

distinguish and highlight some of the unifying forces that allowed Eliot to assemble the fragments and symbols of Western society through a spiralling continuum of life-death-transformation-rebirth.

This process is similar to the “emotion of meeting with texts and words” (Benozzo 2010: 1) for the first time, as the scholar and poet Francesco Benozzo has suggested. It is a disinterested or neutral way of re-possessing or better re-experiencing the power of the poetic word, thus recovering the quality of its rhythms and pace, in an undisciplined journey that the critic may undertake in order to record unnoticed features, correspondences, fluctuations and imaginaries<sup>3</sup>.

Reading Eliot’s work through an undisciplined lens may substantiate an urge that Brook already pinpointed in 1939 when he stated that critics have tended to focus “on large sections of the poem in detail” while “there has been little [...] attempt to deal with it as a unified whole” (Brooks 1968: 128).

In response to this claim, I intend to focus on the significance of the water element in the poem, in order to propose an “ecocritical”<sup>4</sup> (Glotfelty & Fromm 1996: xv-xxv) reading of its thematic function through a selection of emblematic episodes. At the same time, I will show how Eliot, who was known for his conservative ideas, has aptly relied on native and indigenous’ wisdom and traditions, which he had most probably absorbed during his youth in America. As Crawford has pointed out:

Eliot’s own birthplace, St Louis, contained traces of a primitive past, and in that city Eliot was haunted by various voices, some from the pages of books, some from the stories of his own ancestors. [About twelve miles from St Louis,] was a series of those prehistoric Indian mounds which are scattered in groups throughout the alluvial plain of the Mississippi [...] and the largest of which is the Cahokia Group. [...] In Eliot’s youth the Cahokia Mound was famed as the largest terraced earthwork in the United States (Crawford 1987: 5-14).

Even though these aspects may seem marginal, *The Waste Land* is indeed a poem that embraces the power of irrational, shamanic, and mystical experiences connected to

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<sup>3</sup> Francesco Benozzo applied this ‘undisciplined’ approach to interpreting texts in philology, thus founding what he named as the “indiscipline” of ethnophilology (Benozzo 2010). In his premises, Benozzo argues that ethnophilology “aims at extending the opportunities for free thought for generations to come, hoping they can welcome and disseminate them, refusing any resurgence of authoritarian thrusts” (Benozzo 2021: 108). In their introduction to *Ecosustainable Narratives and Partnership Relationships in World Literatures in English*, Antonella Riem and Tony Hughes-d’Aeth have significantly suggested how “ethnophilology thus is an invitation to manifest the capacity not to ‘fix’ or imprison living traditions within a ‘canon’, established by an ‘authority’, within defined margins and crystallised static interpretative schemes. It is a poetic call to be open to challenges, to explore the different lyrical dimensions of words and texts and the emotional vibrations they create in us” (Riem & Hughes-D’Aeth 2022: xxviii).

<sup>4</sup> As a methodological framework, ecocriticism is interested in highlighting the relationship occurring between humans and more-than-human within literary texts. Garrard suggests that perceiving nature as a vital force of agency in literature means showing “the ways in which we imagine and portray the relationship between humans and the environment in all areas of cultural production” (Garrard 2004: i). See also: Buell 2005.

water, whether they manifest in ironic or highly symbolic ways or in more familiar and direct occurrences. This approach dialogues with the recently established field of the “blue humanities” (Hau’ofa 2008; Ingersoll 2016; Mathieson 2021), a theoretical and ecological standpoint<sup>5</sup> that Campbell and Paye define in these terms:

The Blue Humanities is a field that, by definition, seeks the dissolution of terrestrial bias in critical outlooks and methodologies, [thus] outlining how concepts of flow, fluidity, and mobility can oppose strategies of imperialist containment and hegemonic enclosure. The adoption of an oceanic [and sea or water] lens has proven fruitful for inspiring new theorisations of world history and culture (Campbell & Paye 2020: 1).

The first episode I wish to analyse is Madame Sosostris’s reading of the “wicked pack of cards” (46). In this section, I will show how Eliot heavily relied on the image of water to forewarn the common destiny of the peoples of Europe. Madame Sosostris represents the figure of the fake clairvoyant or prophetess of the modern world. At the same time, she is able to introduce a plethora of distorted images, movements and transformations that will be paramount in the unfolding of the poem. From my point of view, this is a highly structured dance of archetypes<sup>6</sup>, which has the aim of introducing the theme of transformation through relevant allusions to water. Indeed, Eliot recalls here the power of intertexts that significantly rely on corporeal re-configurations, alluding to the dance aesthetic revolutions he experienced in London for the first time in those years. I concentrate on the analysis of the cards, as magical key-elements for the understanding of the poem, and on the parenthetical intertext coming from *The Tempest*: “(Those are pearls that were his eyes. Look!)” (48), which Eliot considered fundamental in the final version of the poem, despite Pound’s demand to eliminate it.

The second episode I discuss concerns the central figure of Tiresias, who appears in the middle of section III, “The Fire Sermon”. Tiresias is the true prophet of *The Waste Land*, the shamanic figure capable of gathering in his/her persona the globality of life, thus epitomising humans’ need to recover the ancestral and spiritual bonds that connect all existence with nature. In my analysis, I claim that Eliot’s ‘vision’ of Tiresias derived primarily from the figurative arts and from Picasso in particular. Moreover, I show how this figure is inevitably connected to the malleability of water, and to its function as an element which allows change, transformation and recovery.

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<sup>5</sup> In explaining the “oceanic turn”, DeLoughrey and Flores suggest that we need to stop thinking about the ocean as “blank space or *aqua nullius*” but rather as a “viscous, ontological, and deeply material place, a dynamic force, and unfathomable more-than-human world” (DeLoughrey & Flores 2020: 133).

<sup>6</sup> As Jodorowsky explains: “The majority of authors of Tarot books are content to describe and analyse the cards one by one without imagining the entire deck as a whole. However, the true study of each Arcanum begins with the consistent order of the entire Tarot; every detail, tiny as it may be, begins from the links that connect all seventy-eight cards. To understand these myriad symbols, one needs to have seen the final symbol they all form together: a mandala. According to Carl Gustav Jung, the mandala is a representation of the psyche [...]. The initiatory work consists of gathering together the fragments until the original unit has been restored” (Jodorowsky & Costa 2009: 20).

The last part of the analysis focuses on the prayer appearing at the end of poem, the famous Sanskrit word *Shanti*, coming from the *Brihadaranyaka-Upanishad*, which is repeated three times. In this section, I claim that Eliot's opening towards an-*other* comprehension of life is an attempt to embrace what the scholar and critic Franco Fabbro called a joyful and needed acceptance of a "multi-religious spirituality" for the future (Fabbro 2020). In this respect, I show how Eliot's drawing inspiration from Eastern religions can be interpreted as a proposal for peaceful partnerships between individuals, peoples and faiths. From my perspective, this is why in this last section Eliot refers to the power of music, and in particular to a three-time beating refrain that evokes the awaited falling of water-drops. Eventually, I suggest that the poem is a prayer for water, which constitutes the essential element for survival, and more importantly the only chance for humanity to regenerate from the arid and devastating landscape of *The Waste Land*.

### The Fluctuating Exchanging Dance of Madame Sosostris's Pack of Cards

Eliot's *The Waste Land* opens with a section titled emblematically "The Burial of the Dead", which presents the general setting and themes of the poem. Apart from recalling an Anglican rite, the title evokes an image of desolation and grief since it is connected with the act of celebrating the end of life. In reality, this is the condition in which the inhabitants of *The Waste Land* live and mostly want to live, as *Hollow Men* (the title of another of Eliot's works), because they have 'lost' their sense of existence, and are not able to distinguish, decipher and appreciate the beauty that surrounds them.

Eliot does not begin his poem by introducing a particular character but rather focuses on the chaotic state of nature. Thus, "April is the cruellest month" (1) because it "[stirs] dull roots" (4) out of the dead land. The lack of water, the essential element that allows human and more-than-human life, is immediately foregrounded. "Spring rain" (4) and "a shower of rain" (9) are not enough to provide substance and nourish a corrupted landscape. In *The Waste Land*, people have lost their spatio-temporal coordinates because they have destroyed nature in favour of a more barren and sterile reality:

What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow  
Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,  
You cannot say, or guess, for you know only  
A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,  
And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,  
And the dry stone no sound of water  
(19-24).

In the progressive description of the poem's scenario, Eliot focuses first on lonely figures – such as the "hyacinths girl" (36) and second on couples who do not comprehend themselves (Madame Sosostris and her client) or who are prevented from communicating and relating to each other (Tristan and Isolde). Finally, he presents the real dwellers of *The Waste Land*, who have become hordes of people, running and moving in unclear and 'sightless' ways, as we see in the references coming from Baudelaire – "Unreal City" (60),

and Dante – “A crowd flowed over London bridge, so many / I had not thought death had undone so many” (62-63).

I intend to read this threefold structure of the first part of *The Waste Land* as a “tidalectic”<sup>7</sup> movement of recurrences that gives meaning to the “heap of broken images” (22) through a rhythmical crescendo of states that show the ‘fluid’ condition of modern life. From a solitary seemingly state of quiet, through the surfing of accidental and incomprehensible encounters, until the revolving or crashing of non-linear and unresolved masses of identities. “The Burial of the Dead” shows the travelling of a big wave that crosses the arid landscape of *The Waste Land*, gathering all the fragments of the old world, in order to overflow them on to the shores of new realities, and constitute the basis for a renewal or restarting of existence.

From an imaginative and creative point of view, Eliot’s beginning of *The Waste Land* is finally to be connected to the ground-breaking ‘involution’ that the art of dance was able to achieve in those years. I think the poem moves in the pattern of an early 20<sup>th</sup> century modern-dance piece, which was usually structured in three movements: the presentation of an apparent calm setting, the introduction of a solitary and troubled couple or soul, and the final tribal ensemble dance of the *corps de ballet*, or group of dancers. I am referring here primarily to the work of the Russian impresario Diaghilev and his destabilising dance company named the *Ballet Russes*. Drawing from the disrupted and fragmented forms of figurative artists of that time, Diaghilev and his troupe dismantled the principles of the incorporeal dancer of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in order to propose a return to a ground-based atavistic and primordial movement. This unexpected revision in the highly structured and typically formal art of dance was going to change forever the aesthetics of movement and gestural representation in ballet. Nevertheless, as Terri A. Mester has emphasised:

Only a handful of critics have written at any length on the impact of dance on literary modernism, even though dance, too, met the new century with some profound innovations. Ballet was revolutionized and a totally new genre – the modern dance – was invented (Mester 1997: 1).

The greatest achievement of the *Ballet Russes* was certainly Vaslav Nijinsky’s *The Rite of Spring*, a scandalous representation of a Slavic ritual for the renewing of life, through the killing of a young girl<sup>8</sup>. This occurrence was disrupting the archetypal symbol of the

<sup>7</sup> This concept draws from E. K. Brathwaite’s “tidalectics” (Brathwaite 1992), a challenging perspective that upturns the Hegelian dialectics in order to focus on the flowing and recurrent movement of water/sea/ocean discourses. Brathwaite foregrounds the need to re-consider the strict linearity of existence in order to ponder on the ever-recurrent flowing of events, encounters, dialogues. This perspective embraces the power of a more cyclical view of life and therefore it is suggestive for the reading of Eliot’s *The Waste Land* from an undisciplined view. The adoption of this framework was also inspired from a paper titled *Indoceanic Tidalectics: Aquatic Embodiments and Metaphors in Lankan Literature*, which was delivered by Isabel Alonso-Breto at the International Conference “Aquatic Cartographies: Oceanic Imaginaries, Histories and Identities” held at the University of Lleida (Spain) on 21-22 July 2022, and soon to be published. See also: Amideo 2021: 6.

<sup>8</sup> As Halberstam explains: “*The Rite of Spring* is now a well-established symphony and ballet, firmly a part of the Western canon [...] and once [considered] a runaway performance of madness, queerness, the feral and exhaustion. The original performance [...] in Paris in 1913 drew such ire [...] that the performances were

female/mother who has the power of bringing life to this world, thus connecting with the overturning reality of *The Waste Land*. Indeed, as Mester suggests:

Interestingly, *Le Sacre's* graphic depiction of a ritualized female sacrifice had no precedent in either Slavic mythology or ballet tradition. Even in Frazer's descriptions of universal vegetation rites, the male gods (like Attis and Osiris) are always the ones slain and sacrificed. [...] Nijinsky's ballet [...] did set a precedent for modernist literary texts. [...] More generally, *Le Sacre's* dark vision of a primal past, like *The Waste Land*, was a figure for modern life, especially its barbarism and savagery. It anticipated the evils of war and a depersonalized society ruled by the machine (Mester 1997: 7).

Eliot saw the performance and was most impressed by the power of Stravinsky's music. Indeed, in one of his "London Letters" written for *The Dial* on the cultural scene of the city between 1921 and 1922, he argued:

Looking back upon the past season in London [...] it remains certain that Stravinsky was our two months' lion. He has been the greatest success since Picasso. His advent was well prepared by Mr Eugene Goossens [...] who conducted two *Sacre du Printemps* concerts. [...] The spirit of the music was modern, and the spirit of the ballet was primitive ceremony. The Vegetation Rite upon which the ballet is founded remained, in spite of the music, a pageant of primitive culture. It was interesting to anyone who had read *The Golden Bough* and similar works, but hardly more than interesting. [...] In everything in the *Sacre du Printemps*, except in the music, one missed the sense of the present<sup>9</sup>.

Despite Eliot's belief that Nijinsky's dance failed to portray the "sense of the present", I claim that the choreography was in reality a structural and well-thought revision of the foundations of centuries-long 'traditional' ballet. The intent was to portray the irrationality of the human mind, drawing in particular from revised myths and rites so as to propose a new and yet needed order of movements, gestures and interpretations.

I read the episode of Madame Sosostri's "wicked pack of cards" (46) from this perspective. In my interpretation, the dance occurring between these archetypes needs to be connected with Eliot's challenging re-reading of the traditional meaning of these symbols. In more than one way, the cards recall the irregular flowing steps of Nijinsky's *The Rite of Spring*. Eliot presents them through the character of a "famous clairvoyante" (43). They are in succession, "the drowned Phoenician sailor" (47), whom Madame Sosostri claims to be

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halted after only a few nights. [...] What made audiences respond negatively to Nijinsky's choreography [...] must be some combination of the awkwardness of the stance (pigeon toed), the performance of broken embodiment rather than a body in flight, and the way the dance exhausts its dancers to the point of near collapse [...]. *The Rite of Spring* broke many of the established repertoires of ballet [...], it unleashed an aesthetic of bewilderment and [...] marked the necessary failure of modernity" (Halberstam 2020: 52).

<sup>9</sup> For an overview of a selection of the "London Letters" written by Eliot for the magazine *The Dial*, see the following link <https://theworld.com/~raparker/exploring/tseliot/works/london-letters/london-letter-1921-10.html#navigation>.

her client's card; "Belladonna, the Lady of the Rocks, the lady of situations" (49-50); "the man with three staves" (51); "the Wheel" (51); "the one-eye merchant" (52); a "card, which is blank [and that she is] forbidden to see (52-54)"; and the "Hanged Man" (54), which Madame Sosostris cannot find.

Together with the more traditional meanings that these tarots evoke<sup>10</sup>, they are all connected to water-elements and the power of the sea. I read the "Phoenician sailor" and "the one-eye merchant" as dwellers of a new world order we should aspire to, the liquid reality of the sea. "Belladonna, the lady of the Rocks, the lady of situations" and "the man with three staves" are mythical symbols of wisdom that show us the 'way' when we get lost. In general, these cards request a change of events, forms, structures and modes of being, in tune with the transformative power of water. In this respect, as Brooks has rightly reminded:

Miss Weston has shown [that] the Tarot cards were originally used to determine the event of highest importance to the people, the rising of the waters. Madame Sosostris has fallen a long way from the high function of her predecessors. She is engaged merely in vulgar fortune-telling [...] but the symbols of the Tarot pack are still unchanged (Brooks 1968: 133).

In this panoply of interpretations, the figures of "the Wheel" and that of the "Hanged Man" are probably the most important ones because they foreground the need for changing the cultural paradigm. I claim that they are related to the revolutionary choreography of *The Rite of Spring* and to the water-calling prayer of *The Waste Land*. The Wheel in particular is known to be stationed on water, waiting to be activated and start turning in the infinite possibilities of life. Moreover, this is a card associated with the need to redeem and re-start, which is very close to the image of the Hanged Man, who needs to die in order to be reborn in a different shape and with a different mind.

The verse at the beginning of Madame Sosostris's reading "(Those are pearls that were his eyes. Look!)" (48) manifests this same dancing flow of transformations. The quotation from William Shakespeare's *The Tempest* recalls the visions of Ariel's song, precisely the images of 'change' that the spirit is willing to instil into Ferdinand's mind in order to convince him of the drowning of his father Alonso. As Serpieri suggests:

Pound crossed out the verse 'Those are pearls that were his eyes. Look!' but Eliot kept it in the final version of the poem, v. 48: it is the first quote coming from Shakespeare's

<sup>10</sup> Three cards can certainly be associated with tarots. First, the Wheel, which according to Martin "does not invite us to action, because it speaks of 'change' all around us, and asks us to meditate on the path we have crossed so far" (Martin 2021a: 336, my translation). The Fool is associated with the "card which is blank, is something is carrying on his back, which I am forbidden to see" (53-54). It is "everything and nothing. [...] The sack he carries [...] on his shoulders is full of objects. These are the experiences he has collected in his previous life cycles. [Indeed,] he is suspended between two cycles and it will be [...] the cosmic energy to drive him in one direction" (Martin 2021a: 175, my translation). Moreover, the card is connected to the Hanged Man, which Martin explains "not looking anymore on the world but on himself. [Everything with this tarot] becomes slow, heavy, as if we were walking under water. Step by step, we discover what we have become, how many dresses we wear" (Martin 2021b: 63, my translation). For more interpretations of Madame Sosostris's tarots, see: Pearson 1991; Kaplan 2003 [1970]; Auger 2004 and Wirth 2006.

*The Tempest* and it was inserted [...] precisely after the announcement of the death by water of the Phoenician Sailor, and it served to introduce the important paradigm of the metamorphosis (Serpieri 2014: 158, my translation).

Recalling *The Tempest*, Eliot merged the aquatic images in Madame Sosostris' cards with Prospero's transformative magic occurring on a deserted island in the middle of the ocean. Eliot emphasised how drowning in a sea of possibilities and metamorphosis, in order to come back anew, could bring life back to *The Waste Land*. Likewise, *The Tempest* represents a journey of redemption and change, and exemplifies a utopian world in which people struggle in order to re-unite in a communal and spiritual partnership existence.

Even more interestingly, Shakespeare's *The Tempest* is also a text that is connected to the art of dance. The play was a *masque*, a specific type of entertainment made of music, dancing and mime, which was particularly famous in Elizabethan and Jacobean times. These were highly stylised short plays or performances, and sometimes plays within plays, which allowed any type of spectators, from nobles to monarch, to common people, to be on the stage, usually using masks, in order to revolutionise the world-order. In this sense, Prospero organises his play within play as a series of mini-masques, thus allowing his audience to ponder on his brother's betrayal and final punishment. For the aim of this article, I suggest that the precise dancing structure of Shakespeare's masque may have inspired Eliot to see a close connection with the potential transformative ability of the "Phoenician Sailor" (47). In this respect, Ariel's song is truly immersed in the gestational and amniotic power of the sea, thus emphasising the need for water and sea-elements, in the search for a new transformation. In this perspective, I agree with Mentz when he suggests:

Ariel's famous 'sea-change' imagines the combined physical-and magical powers of the ocean transfiguring human bodies. The song, like all of Shakespeare's diverse and fragmentary figurations of the ocean, isn't just a metaphor or even a description of how dramatic poetry works. It's a poet's attempt to match and figure the great waters (Mentz 2009: x).

### **A Tidalectic Sketch of Tiresias, the Mythical Modern Hero**

If section II of *The Waste Land*, "A Game of Chess", sketches the consequences of a 'life-in-death' at a microscopic level, first in a rich and opulent setting and second in a vulgar and low scene in a London pub, in "The Fire Sermon" (section III) Eliot begins to propose a different view and proactive reality for his poem. The section begins with references to water, which is seen as opposed energy to fire, even though these elements are also complementary because they allow 'death' and transformation. Eliot focuses in particular on the degraded image of the "Sweet Thames" (176), thus forewarning the authentic condition of today's world rivers:

The river bears no empty bottles, sandwich papers,  
Silk handkerchiefs, cardboard boxes, cigarette ends  
Or other testimony of summer nights. The nymphs are departed  
(177-179).

This scene introduces the theme of death, epitomised in the appearance of a “rat” (187) and in the inability of humans to survive on fishing. The only figure who will atone for the harshness of this degraded reality is Tiresias, the shaman-like character who will be able to encompass the entirety of individuals crossing paths in *The Waste Land*, in order to redeem and transform them into new identities, voices and hopes for a better future.

I analyse the character of Tiresias from a threefold perspective. First s/he is a powerful symbol of medicine man/woman, the only one able to transmute what s/he sees through the sacred elements of water and fire. Second, s/he is one of the most reliable points of reference of the entire poem<sup>11</sup>, precisely because s/he is not afraid to embrace the indefiniteness and fluidity of existence, which is evoked through constant referencing to the element of water. Finally, s/he can be seen as a tidalectic picture of the modern individual, because to portray this powerful protagonist, I sustain that Eliot drew inspiration mainly from the revolutionary figurative arts of the time.

As I have pointed out in my introduction, Eliot did not disdain to go back to his beloved American heritage and setting. The Mississippi Valley and St. Louis provided him with lots of material to draw from, especially while examining the tribal and indigenous landscape of his youth. Moreover, as Crawford has argued, Eliot was intrigued by the work of the writer Thomas Mayne Reid, and in particular by one of his Jamaican tales titled *The Maroon*, where Reid talked about the “‘horrid art’ of the ‘Obeah-man’ who specialized in the resurrection of the dead” (Crawford 1987: 17).

Shamanism is one of the most ancient and acknowledged forms of spirituality on earth. It is a sacred path towards the perception and knowledge of the ‘unknown’, namely the spiritual world, which is the gateway for reaching the cosmic energy of existence. Shamans are preachers or better custodians of native ancient traditions. Throughout their practices, which are different for each culture, from the playing of drums to rites towards mother-nature, they are capable of restoring and recentring the energetic power of lost individuals, in order to help them remember that they are only one of many elements allowing existence<sup>12</sup>.

Eliot’s Tiresias is a sort of a modern shaman for he ‘sees’ or better foresees the corruption and shameful decay into which humans have fallen, especially in love. Nevertheless, this acknowledgement will allow Tiresias, and indirectly Eliot, to ponder a solution for the pain of humanity and also propose a transformation of reality.

The redeeming energy that Tiresias proposes is the magic of poetry, which is one of the most spiritual and healing powers of imagination. Through the encounter with Tiresias, happening right in the middle of *The Waste Land*, readers can grasp the real challenges of the poem, which are an attempt to revise and re-read their own lives and stories through a new and empowering perspective.

Another view to consider while examining the figure of Tiresias is that of his/her

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<sup>11</sup> Williamson argues that: “‘I Tiresias’ is the only explicit identification of the speaker in the poem, and there is a reason for it. He is not a character in the fortune; but he is the supreme metamorphosis that brings together all the metaphoric transformations and thus is qualified to summarize their experiences” (Williamson 1967: 142).

<sup>12</sup> See Stutley 2003: i.

undisputable connection to the element of water. Indeed, the hero/heroine is presented in an unmarked and almost oneiric dimension:

I Tiresias, though blind, throbbing between two lives,  
 Old man with wrinkled female breasts, can see  
 At the violet hour, the evening hour that strives  
 Homeward, and brings the sailor home from sea,  
 The typist home at teatime, clears her breakfast, lights  
 Her stove, and lays out food in tins.  
 [...]  
 I Tiresias, old man with wrinkled dugs  
 Perceived the scene, and foretold the rest –  
 I too awaited the expected guest  
 (218-230).

Tiresias emerges from the obscurity of the mythical past to predict and eradicate the future of modern life. S/he comes out from the depths of the sea towards “homeward”, meaning reality, while also perceiving “the sailor [coming] home from sea”. Her/His forms are undefined, because s/he lives not a ‘life-in-death’ but “[a life] between two lives”. S/he defines him/herself as an “old man with wrinkled female breasts [and] dugs”. Tiresias substantiates Eisler’s idea of “partnership” (Eisler 1988, 1995) because s/he comprehends, understands and is able to resolve the agonies of human existence. Tiresias is the saviour of her/his people, who knows precisely what brought humanity to take wrong directions, especially by disconnecting themselves from the embodied joy of physical love. Tiresias is the firelight element that will burn and destroy the decadence of modernity invoking its fluid quintessence, for water and fire are the cooperative forces that will allow humans out of *The Waste Land*.

Tiresias is the turning point of the poem. Indeed, after his/her episode Eliot will start introducing the path towards regeneration, which occurs first through a “Death by Water” (the title of section IV) and finally by an attentive listening to the thunder prayer, in the section titled “What the Thunder Said” (the V and final section of the poem). In my opinion, accepting the “wet ontology” (Steinberg & Peters 2015) of Tiresias is therefore paramount in the poem, for the final aim of Eliot was re-establishing our communal and partnership scope in this world, which is only possible through our recognition of being part of water. In this respect, as Steinberg and Peters suggest:

A wet ontology [is needed] not merely to endorse the perspective of a world of flows, connections, liquidities, and becomings, but also to propose a means by which the sea’s material and phenomenological distinctiveness can facilitate the reimagining and re-enlivening of a world ever on the move (Steinberg & Peters 2015: 2).

It is important to link Tiresias with the revolutionary impact that painters achieved in the same direction in those years. Indeed, if one considers the distorted representation of women that Picasso provides in his famous painting *Les Femmes d'Alger*, one may

easily draw a line of associations that Eliot achieved only through the depiction of his protagonist Tiresias. Whether Eliot or Picasso were inspired by the work of one another is not the purpose of this study<sup>13</sup>. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that in those difficult years, painters, poets, choreographers and artists were all very much in need of new systems of representation and models of reference for sketching the chaos and complexity of the modern world.

Just as Picasso's women constitute a group of undefined, fragmented, disjointed and yet coherent images, *The Waste Land* represents a well-structured and focused palimpsest, a text that encompasses the images, sounds and embodiments of other groups of texts – apparently without meaning. For Eliot, the final aim of literature, and the arts in general, is that of assembling the “ruins” (430) of life, trying to find a way out of disorder and chaos, and propose a collective and positive sense of partnership belonging.

### ***Shantih Shantih Shantih or The Music of Water***

“Death by Water”, section IV of *The Waste Land*, is the shortest part of the poem and it depicts the drowning of “Phlebas the Phoenician” (312), the card that Madame Sosostris presented in section I, and which by now stands as symbol for “Gentile or Jew” (319), meaning humanity at large. In my reading, Eliot presents the necessary departure of the people of *The Waste Land* from terrestrial and physical life, in the acceptance of the cyclical energy of the world, the “whirlpool” (318) of existence, which will allow humanity to go from transformation into regeneration. This is, at the same time, the prelude for the last section of the poem, “What the Thunder Said”, which Eliot considered the most prophetic and well-written part of his masterpiece.

If most critics have focused on the role and “influence [...] that Indic philosophy [...] with its allusions to Buddhist and Upanishadic texts” (Kearns 1987: viii) played on Eliot's mind for the writing of this section, I want to emphasise how *The Waste Land* is revealed here to be a highly cryptic and metaphysical prayer for water. In my interpretation, part V represents a redemptive and quiet song, a chant for liberation in the intangible dimension of a spiritual meditative journey. For Eliot though, the sounds of water-drops are only discernible by those who are truly capable of listening carefully, people who are willing to move away from their ego and step into the understanding and acceptance of our human condition as being part of the One life. In this sense, returning to section IV of the poem, Kearns suggests:

Phlebas's death may be read [...] not as a merely natural or fated one but as sacrifice, the final sacrifice of the individual ego that must precede the full release of insight and liberation. [...] This death may be read as the poem's essential preparation for the peace and unity of Part V (Kearns 1987: 210-211).

<sup>13</sup> Tomlinson provides an important detail when he suggests: “however various the impulses which led to *The Waste Land*, Eliot first settled to serious work on it in the months immediately after the Picasso exhibition at the Leicester Galleries in London during January and February, 1921” (Tomlinson 1980: 66).

Phlebas' death epitomises the final destination of all the protagonists of *The Waste Land*. In this sense, his figure is connected to the murder of the young girl in Nijinsky and Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*. Their departures from this life are nevertheless 'needed' in the transformation of the world-order. Death is part of life, and also a gateway towards another dimension.

He who was living is now dead  
 We who were living are now dying  
 With a little patience  
 (328-330).

As most critics have pointed out, Eliot's connection with the figure of Christ is evident in these verses<sup>14</sup> as much as in changing tone of the poem. Indeed, *The Waste Land* moves from a detached and external point of view, until now represented by a division between reader and narrator/Eliot ("You! hypocrite lecteur! – mon semblable, – mon frère") (76), to a more intimate and interior whispering, a communal voice of belonging that connects all existence to the same fate and destiny.

The first passages of *What the Thunder Said* are evoking a general atmosphere of loneliness and solitude. An arid landscape, silent "gardens" (323), "stony places" (324), "rock" (331), "sandy road" (332) and "mountains" (333), but no sound of water. These are spaces for no relief because "here one can neither stand nor lie nor sit" (340) and everything appears to be very sterile and dry. Very few presences inhabit this empty world<sup>15</sup>. Amongst these, Eliot concentrates on the animal figure of a "hermit-thrush" (356)<sup>16</sup>. This is a very specific bird that the poet allows to "[sing] in the pine trees / Drip drop drip drop drop drop drop / But there is no water" (358).

This is by contrast the prelude for the dropping of water. I claim that Eliot is playing here the sound of nature, the music that humanity has forgotten because of its selfish and self-centred attitude towards life. Eliot is skilfully introducing the coming of water through the image of a rhythmical crescendo of repetitions. In this sense, the first verses of this section of Part V are mostly a continuous recalling or re-uttering of the same words:

Here is no water but only rock  
 Rock and no water and the sandy road

<sup>14</sup> Consider, for instance, Serpieri's interpretation when he explains: "These opening verses are references to the events that will lead to Christ's death" (Serpieri 2014: 123, my translation).

<sup>15</sup> One may notice here the correspondences between the beginning and ending of the poem in terms of descriptions of the landscape or scenario. This confirms the claim that everything in *The Waste Land* is circular, recurrent, fluid and perpetual.

<sup>16</sup> As Kearns explains: "Eliot invokes [...] an ornithological entry in Chapman's *Handbook of the Birds of Eastern North America* which states that this bird is *turdus aonalaschkae pallasii*. *The Waste Land*'s thrush [...] is no literary or derivative songster, but a real bird in a real wood. The illusion is of a return to some original or primary immediate experience, unmediated by the knowledge of intervening texts, which have been suppressed or repressed [...] in this strange metalepsis" (Kearns 1987: 218).

The road winding above among the mountains  
Which are mountains of rock without water  
If there were water we should stop and drink  
Amongst the rock one cannot stop or think  
(331-336).

And again, a few verses later:

If there were water  
And no rock  
If there were rock  
And also water  
And water  
(345-349).

I suggest that at this point of the poem water is already falling on *The Waste Land*. Nevertheless, water-falling or water-drops are only heard by those who are capable of grasping the imperceptible rhythms of repetitive musical sounds and words. In a seemingly incoherent and puzzling reiteration of letters, syntagms and forms, Eliot is here connecting poetry with music, and sounds with poetry. Eliot arouses a “maternal lamentation” (367) which later transforms itself into a “falling [of] towers” (373). In my interpretation, this stands for the falling of our certainties and beliefs, when at peace with ourselves, we finally realise that what we need is to embrace a more of a partnership communion with existence. In this regard, the Babel of the “unreal” (376) cities of *The Waste Land* collapses because humanity has understood the much-needed possibility of encountering and accepting other traditions, views and religions. As the scholar Franco Fabbro has suggested in an interview:

In the world we have at least 10.000 religions and 7.000 languages. [...] If a child is educated in different languages [...] s/he will start observing different perceptions and views of the world. [...] The same thing is true for religions, because religions indeed are very similar to languages. If you educate a child to different religions (not only in theoretical terms but also on practical ones), and so for instance in Christian religion, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and shamanism, [...] you are going to see that s/he will be able to distinguish the pro and cons of other visions and ultimately of his/her own. [At the same time], if we all agree on early plurilingual education for children, it is also true that multi-religious education is not accepted<sup>17</sup>.

This idea of a desired plurality of voices, directions and epistemologies is also evident in the very last part of the poem where a cacophony of speeches manifests into the disturbing acknowledgement of other ‘realities’, peoples and more-than-humans worlds.

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<sup>17</sup> This is a transcript extract of an online interview that the youtuber Marco Montemagno conducted with Prof. Franco Fabbro in June 2020. It is possible to view the talk titled *Neurosciences, mindfulness and a multitude of other things* [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TwD\\_cEAlOE&t=789s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TwD_cEAlOE&t=789s).

Eliot has finally been capable of “[shoring] these fragments [...] against [his, and indirectly our] ruins” (430). He has understood that spiritual wholeness and acceptance of different perceptions of life will be the ultimate path towards collective redemption and peaceful partnership regeneration.

What the Thunder suggests in the three words uttered – “Datta” (401), “Dayadhvam” (411) and “Damyata” (418) – are unclear responses to the voyagers in search for the Grail. Nevertheless, as Eliot has previously pointed out: “the chapel [is] empty, [and it has become] only the wind’s home” (388). The message of the poem is finally revealed because the Chalice of Life that humans are looking for resides only within themselves, in the acceptance and comprehension of being part of a larger cosmic energy of possibilities and truths. This spiritual and ultimate understanding of reality is only possible through the practice of meditation or calm recovery from the brutality of existence. It is a detachment from the material world, money, corruption and many other human faults and wrongs, in order to finally accept and completely focus on the ‘here and now’:

Like many metaphysical poems, *The Waste Land* is also in part a mimesis of the process of the mind in the early stages of meditation. It proceeds from random, scattered, and disparate thoughts, a profusion of intrusive voices and images generated by conscious and subconscious operations of memory and desire, through what Pound, in a letter to Eliot, called ‘cogitation, the aimless flutter before arriving at meditation’ (Kearns 1987: 196).

In my undisciplined reading of *The Waste Land*, I simply suggest that “DA” (400-410-417), the real response and voice of the thunder, stands there to determine the beginning of this revision of intentions, as if it were a booming or opening sound towards another dimension. Meanwhile, the three-repetitive words coming after it, despite my acknowledgement of their different and yet connecting meaning, are in reality a repetition at a higher level of existence of the water-dropping of rain, which readers have heard since the beginning of this section. As I have already explained, I believe that *The Waste Land* is foremost a song of praise for water. In these terms, I again agree with Kearns when she remarks that this final section of the poem is in reality a meditative song:

It mediates between the poem’s esoteric and exoteric levels, its metaphysic and its mediation, and is associated with the shamanistic functions of healing, making rain, and raising the wind, as well as with singing, chanting, and prayer. The water-dropping song works by a kind of sympathetic magic. [...] It is in some sense *The Waste Land’s* ‘rain mantra’, helping to inaugurate both a poetic and a cultural renewal of creativity (Kearns 1987: 218).

The idea of the raining mantra connects the three injunctions of the Thunder with the final closing prayer of *The Waste Land*, which is symbolically defined and framed once again by a three-tone repetitive melodic song, *Shantih shantih shantih* (432). Apart from recalling, once more, the falling of the redeeming water over the landscapes and inhabitants of *The*

*Waste Land*, I believe that Eliot's reference here is suggesting a final human acknowledgement of his lesson. This is humanity's final acceptance of the One life, in its most authentic understanding of being the communal and spiritual energy of possibilities that enables existence. It is also humanity's tolerant and caring response towards other humans and more-than-human forms, beings, entities and presences. *Shantih* is a powerful prayer of surrender, acceptance and control. It points to our innate human capacity to love, dream, create and respect. It is a very much-needed path towards life, it is a very much needed path towards ourselves, it is a very much needed path towards the world.

### Concluding Remarks

If the element of water and the need for water, are some of the most relevant aspects that critics and scholars examined in *The Waste Land*, few readings have considered these objectives as positive and proactive features for a renewal of life. In order to focus on the theme of water, Eliot uses different strategies, which range from allusive intertextual references and explicit narratives (the Fisher King), passing through the representation of tidalectic identities (Tiresias) and ending with implicit and imperceptible sounds of water-drops.

At the same time, Eliot connected his water-quest with other idiosyncratic features that were governing the aesthetics at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. I am referring in particular to the turbulent revolutions of the avant-garde movements and arts of those years, artistic expressions that brought forth innovations in all cultural fields. The arts constituted Eliot's reservoir for imagining and trying out new concepts in order to substantiate the social and cultural chaos of his world. Incorporating the aesthetic innovations that Eliot, Picasso, Stravinsky and Nijinsky brought to the fore, these revolutions epitomised a refusal of the past, allowing the 'irrational' order of the present to emerge, in an evocative, impressionist and highly corporeal experience of reality.

Just as happens when we watch an open ocean of possibilities, *The Waste Land* has no individual voice. It is a communal narrative of existence that works on discontinuity, tidal movements and cyclical spiralling narratives. As Pollard suggests:

On the one hand, Eliot believed that to be true to his age, his poetry must reflect the cultural fragmentation of modern life, which could no longer affirm a sense of historical progress. On the other hand, he believed that to be true to his convictions about art, his poetry must also embody some ordering principle to suggest the possibility of cultural wholeness (Pollard 2004: 46).

From a spiritual point of view, *The Waste Land* draws inspiration from Anglican and Christian rites, passes through Buddhism in "The Fire Sermon", embraces the power of cyclical pagan ceremonies in "Death by Water" and concludes with a meditative prayer coming from Hinduist tradition. The poem thus emphasises the need for a comprehensive acknowledgement of the spiritual visions and voices of the world. According to Eliot, this is the only way to build up a new and more peaceful reality, which will be based on partnership values and ideals of love, care, respect and understanding.

As the new and exciting project of the blue humanities suggests, water plays a significant role in human and more-than-human survival on this planet. As occurs in *The Waste Land*, today we need a collective and restorative journey towards a fresh baptism, in the clear and unpolluted waters of understanding. After a hundred years from its publication, Eliot's *The Waste Land* speaks again to our generation. We live in a world that is threatened by the inability to listen and communicate, a world that limits peoples' liberty and wisdom. Today we live again in a sort of 'life-in-death'. It is our duty to come back to Eliot's poem and words in order to re-empower humanity with a more beneficial, positive and communal path of existence, out of *The Waste Land* of incomprehension, in a healing process that connects all humanity, ourselves and the world.

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