THE BURIAL OF THE DEAD

WL-I: THE BURIAL OF THE DEAD

The first part of the poem begins with death and religion. The title is from the Anglican *Book of Common Prayer*.[15] The hope to live again which fills the beautiful Christian burial service is absent from the waste land.

WL-Ia: The two Aprils (lines 1-18)

The Waste Land begins:

> April is the cruelest month.

Eliot´s April is "cruel", because it contrasts with Chaucer´s April. Renaissance poet Geoffrey Chaucer began his *Canterbury Tales* in this way:

> April with its showers sweet
> The drought of March hath pierced to the root,
> And bathed every vein in such liquid,
> Of which virtue engendered is the flower….

The poem tells the story of a company of pilgrims on their way to Canterbury

> The Holy Blissful Martyr for to seek
> Who them hath helped when that they were sick.

The martyr was St. Thomas à Becket, archbishop of Canterbury who was murdered by King Henry II. Eliot portrayed the events in his drama *Murder in the Cathedral*.

During Chaucer´s April everything was coming alive. Winter had passed, the sky was no longer grey, the earth no longer hard; flowers were opening, birds were singing. The people shared in this joy, the expectation of wellness. April is also the month of Easter, when Jesus lived again.

In the waste land no Easter lilies grow. Rather, roots clutch at the stony soil; the sun beats down on the rocks and there is no water to be heard. In *Murder in the Cathedral* the chorus of the common people speaks these words, as if of the waste land:

> What sign of the spring of the year?
> Only the death of the old: not a stir, not a shoot, not a breath
> Do the days begin to lengthen?
> Longer and darker the day, shorter and colder the night.[16]

Waste land dwellers are not even aware that they are missing something to hope for.

Suddenly the scene changes. A group of elegant tourists are drinking coffee in the *Hofgarten* in Munich, fleeing from a cloudburst over the Starnberger lake, a fashionable nearby resort. The woman's anxious protest contrasts with the conviviality and reveals the cultural insecurity of Europeans displaced between the two world wars:

> I'm not a Russian at all; I'm a real German from Lithuania.

Marie remembers how frightened she was when she was a little girl and her cousin, the archduke, took her sledding. Wealthy Englishmen, too, used to travel to southern Europe to escape the London fog. Eliot himself suffered inhibitions; in discarded versions of this section of *The Waste Land*, he confessed his first shy attempts to launch out into a world of sophistication which ended in disenchantment.

WL-Ib: Lovelessness (19-42)

The scene shifts again, now to a Biblical drought: a wilderness of stone and sun where nothing can take root and grow. Eliot refers to the books of Ezekiel and Ecclesiastes in his note.[17] God addressed the prophet Ezekiel:

> Son of man, stand up on thy feet!
> I am sending thee to the children of Israel,
> to a rebellious nation that has risen up against Me.

But the Israelites did not listen to the prophet, they did not "turn back". Ezekiel was speaking of the northern Hebrew kingdom of Israel, which had been annihilated over a century before by the Assyrians.[18] He was actually addressing the southern kingdom, Juda, when it was under attack by Babylonian invaders, who would destroy the temple of Jerusalem (586 b. C.) and deport the population. Ezekiel himself was in this "Babylonian captivity".[19] The two wayward Hebrew kingdoms, then, just as the waste land, were beyond recall.

The Book of Daniel speaks of another "Son of Man", a mysterious being at the end of time:

> Behold, one like the son of man,
> coming with the clouds of heaven!...
> His dominion is everlasting and shall not pass away.[20]

The early Christians called Jesus the "son of man" in the context of the *eschaton*, the "last thing", "the age to come".[21] The waste land itself is an eschatology, and the apocalyptic imagery will be explicit in the fifth part of the poem.

We have our own personal eschatologies. The "cricket" giving "no relief" recalls Ecclesiastes describing the "evil days" of growing old. The Biblical text has "grasshopper" or "cicada", of which Eliot will speak later.[22] The old person

> rises at the twitter of birds,
> but all the daughters of song are brought low,
> and he fears the heights and terrors along the way.
> The grasshopper is a burden…
> But man goes to his timeless home
> and his mourners wind through the streets

in his funeral procession.[23] Our poor "heap of broken images", our lost traditions, do not avail us any more than the vaguely hopeful "fragments" of poetry that Eliot will scatter at the end of *The Waste Land* to "shore against" our "ruins".[24]

God led Ezekiel around the valley of the dry bones and asked him:

> • Son of man, shall these bones live?

and he answered:

O Lord God, thou knowest.

And after prophesying to the bones as God commanded him,

...suddenly there came a rattling noise,
and the bones came together, bone to bone....
Sinews and flesh came upon them, skin covered them over,...
breath came into them, and they lived.[25]

No breath of life, no "holy spirit", comes into the waste land. Eliot will parody Ezekiel in *Ash Wednesday*; God said:

Prophesy to the wind, to the wind only for only
The wind will listen. And the bones sang chirping
With the burden of the grasshopper.[26]

The shelter of the "red rock" recalls another contrast with Biblical promises. The prophet Isaiah said that the ideal king would shelter his people:

as a hiding place from the wind, a cover from the storm;
as rivers of water in a dry place,
the shade of a great rock in a weary land.[27]

No king will end the drought in the waste land.

The red rock is like a Hebrew altar covered with the blood of sacrifice or like the rock of the church. Both images suggest the redeeming love of God. Ezekiel's warning to the mountains of Israel has come true for the waste land:

Thus says the Lord:
thine altars shall be laid waste;
before thine idols I shall cast down thy slain
and scatter their bones about thine altars.[28]

And from the rock's shadow the poet will show us "something different"; not life brought back, not water to refresh the land, but only "fear". And it will remind us of the "dust" of death, as the priest on Ash Wednesday when he rubs ashes into the forehead of the kneeling penitent:

Remember, oh man, that thou art dust,
and unto dust shalt thou return.[29]

In the morning of life, as we walk ahead facing the rising sun, unconcerned about death, our shadow follows behind us. But our shadow soon overtakes us, and as the evening draws near the setting sun, now behind us, casts our shadow further and further forward until it "meets" us in the night of death. In *The Hollow Men*, which contains material originally intended for *The Waste Land*, Eliot speaks of the rose

Of death's dream kingdom
The hope only
Of empty men,

yet he goes on to say that "the Shadow" (now capitalized, perhaps the Holy Spirit) intervenes in both divine and human choice:

For Thine is
Life is
For Thine is the
For Thine is the Kingdom.[30]

But it is not the course of life that we are being shown from under the shadow of the rock, but death.

In an earlier poem, Eliot wrote of a would-be saint, a "dancer to God", who

could not live men's ways....
So he came out to live under the rock

in the wilderness.[31] This "desert father" has forsaken the city of the damned and taken refuge under a rock in the desert. From this vantage point he would witness the destruction to be visited upon his civilization. But, just as later characters in *The Waste Land* —the "burning" penitent, the traveler to Emmaus, the questing knight—[32] his spiritual plans will fall apart.

Lovelessness is a prominent feature of the waste land, and Eliot comes back to the theme in a series of vignettes in which he invites us to see, from under the rock, how the chance to love is lost. In Richard Wagner's opera *Tristan and Isolde*, the heroine Isolde, as she is sailing away from Ireland, hears a sailor singing about his lost lover:

Fresh blows
The wind homeward;
Where art thou,
My Irish child?

Isolde's lover Tristan lies wounded in Brittany, and only she has the healing power to save him. Tristan anxiously asks a shepherd if he sees her ship coming near, but he can only reply:

Waste and empty the sea.

Then Tristan dies and Isolde commits suicide.

In the second vignette, the Hyacinth maiden —the flower is a symbol of sex, love, life—, comes to her friend offering love. But he cannot return her love, he cannot even speak for he knows nothing.[33] But his ignorance is not the unknowing which is the result of the purification of knowledge, described in the English spiritual classic, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, which Eliot will quote in *Four Quartets*.[34] His "silence" is not the "silent music" of St. John of the Cross he quotes in Dry Salvages. [35] Nor is the emptiness of the sea whence Tristan hopes for deliverance the selflessness which, the saint explains, comes in the night of the spirit.[36]

At the time of his graduation from Harvard, Eliot had an intense experience of silence which anticipated his quiet vision "out of heart of light" in the rose-garden, which he will describe in *Burnt Norton*.[37] But the vision in the hyacinth garden is not the vision in the rose-garden. In the waste land, the man hears nothing—literally; he looks into "the heart of light" without seeing it. He seems rather to see a heart of darkness, the title of the novel of Joseph Conrad *The Heart of Darkness*. Eliot once chose, and later rejected, a passage from Conrad's work as an epigraph to *The Waste Land*; he said he thought the passage was "somewhat elucidative" of the poem.[38] The narrator is speaking of the death, deep in the African jungle, of Mr. Kurtz, the mad European ivory trader:

He cried in a whisper at some image, as some vision
—he cried out twice, a cry that was no more than a breath—
The horror! the horror!

Eliot did use another quotation from Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* as the epigraph of *The Hollow Men*. Mr. Kurtz, called "hollow at the core" in the novel, dwells in the waste land:

This is the dead land
This is cactus land,

where prayer breaks apart and the world ends

Not with a bang but a whimper.

The epigraph is the announcement by the native servant:

Mistah Kurtz— he dead.

WL-Ic: On the cards (43-59)

The "famous" fortune-teller Madame Sosostris, thought to be "the wisest woman in Europe", is not unlike spiritual guides today who distort and commercialize ancient lore. Eliot in a note explains his own reading of the tarot cards which she uses in her business. She is a "clairvoyant" like the "spectator" Tiresias,[39] but what she "sees" in the cards is a jumble of waste land characters —merging into one another, many to reappear later in the poem.

The Phoenician sailor is the "one-eyed merchant" Mr. Eugenides.[40] The "blank card he carries", which Mme Sosostris is "forbidden to see", symbolizes what is "different" from ordinary waste-land experience, from what we saw from under the rock: the uncanny. An example is the mystery religions which the Sailor's ancestors, Phoenician merchants, spread throughout the Mediterranean from their own cities; Eliot mentions Carthage in North Africa and Smyrna in Asia Minor. But in the waste land the vulgar and immoral Mr. Eugenides exports "currants", not mystery.[41]

The sailor is one with the drowned Phlebas[42] mentioned in the fourth section of the poem, whose eyes now "are pearls". The expression is from Shakespeare's play *The Tempest*. Ariel, the "airy spirit", sings these words to the Prince, who believes mistakenly that his father the King has drowned:

Full fathom five thy father lies;
Of his bones are coral made;
Those are pearls that were his eyes:
Nothing of him that doth fade,
But doth suffer a sea change
Into something rich and strange;
Sea nymphs hourly ring his knell.

The sea only changes the king as he fades at death; something lasts: his bones have become hard coral, his eyes are now everlasting jewels.[43] Water, then, is ambiguous: it brought death to Phlebas,[44] and it can also bring change in Christian baptism. In the waste land nothing changes in this way.

Belladonna ("lovely lady") is at one level Mary, mother of Jesus, in Leonardo da Vinci's painting "Madonna of the Rocks". The rocks may stand for the church, for its stability —and, in the waste land, for its faithlessness.[45] Eliot had caricatured the "True Church" on earth,

> Wrapt in the old miasmal mist,

and contrasted it unfavorably with a hippopotamus.[46] Belladonna is also the "lady of situations", like the upper-class woman in the next section.[47] And for more ambiguity, belladonna is both eye make-up and a poison.

Eliot takes the man with three staves in the Tarot cards to be the Fisher King, symbol of redemption. The "wheel" is an image used in Buddhism and, like the "ring" a few lines later, it symbolizes the predictability of life in the waste land. In the next section Eliot will comment more on the "crowds of people" that we are.

But there is one card that Madame Sosostris does not turn over: the Hanged Man. In his note, Eliot interprets this figure as the hanged god whose resurrection revives the land.[48] It is also the "hooded figure", the resurrected Jesus disguised as the mysterious stranger who joined the two "unbelieving" disciples on their way to Emmaus after the crucifixion; the encounter will appear later in the fifth part of the poem.[49] In the waste land nothing follows death.

Mme Sosostris also "sees" the crowds of us walking in circles. Just as the other "seers" in the poem, she does not look beyond our day-to-day waste land. On the other hand, the anxiety she feels about the "horoscope" that she is preparing for Mrs. Equitone seems to forebode an unpleasant future. In *Four Quartets* Eliot will deride horoscopes, "pastimes and drugs, and features of the press".[50]

WL-Id: The decent into hell (60-76)

The "unreal City"[51] is Dante's Florence, Baudelaire's Paris, Eliot's London, our own city. It is the city that Christian hermits and monks abandoned to seek another reality in the desert. It is the city of man that St. Augustine opposed to the city of God, the *civitas Dei*. Eliot felt that when he began work-

ing in London he was "sojourning among the termites" and in his notes he quotes Baudelaire's *Les sept vieillards*, "the seven old men":

> swarming city, city full of dreams,
> where the specter accosts the passerby in broad daylight![52]

In a special sense, the "City" is London's financial district, which Eliot associates with Dante's *Inferno*. The "crowd" funneling across London Bridge into their workplaces is "dead". In footnotes on the next two lines, Eliot quotes Dante describing the march of the dead into hell:

> a train of people
> so long, I had never thought
> death had undone so many.[53]

"Crowds of people" are standing in a long line awaiting their turn to enter hell, and from them came

> no lament, only sighs,
> setting the everlasting air aquiver.[54]

The impression is that the waste land eschatology is not heaven but hell, its dénoument is death. The "dead sound" of the church bell's final stroke at nine marks the time when the commuters begin work. But it also recalls the death of Jesus:

> It was the third hour and they crucified him.[55]

The crucifixion scene will return.[56]

Stetson is a businessman. His name suggests the high-quality hat businessmen wore at the time. The cry "Stetson!" recalls Dante's surprise encounter in hell with an author of Florence whom he admired —Eliot will describe it in *Four Quartets*—:

> "*You* here, *Ser* Brunetto?"[57]

Wars are fought over money. Stetson was at Mylae, where the Romans won a naval victory over the Carthaginians during the Punic wars, motivated by commercial interest.

The strange reference to a "corpse" recalls the funeral dole in the play *The White Devil* by John Webster, where this advice is given:

> But keep the wolf far thence, that's foe to men,
> For with his nails he'll dig them up again…
> the friendless bodies of unburied men.[58]

Such is the only "resurrection" hoped for in the waste land.

The last line of this section,

> Hypocrite reader, my brother, like unto me!

is from the preface "to the reader" from Baudelaire's *The Flowers of Evil*, where the poet calls people stupid, sinful and evil, but worst of all, bored. We are all standing in line, patiently waiting to enter hell.