

DEATH BY WATER

WL-IV: DEATH BY WATER (312-321)

Phlebas the Phoenician falls in with the “drowned Phoenician sailor” and Mr. Eugenides.¹⁰⁶ His fires were at last put out by the seawater in which he drowned. The businessman no longer worries about his credits and debits. The “currant” merchant does not feel the “current” as it swirls about his corpse, nor does he hear the seabirds’ cry. And he was once alive as we are now. Phlebas does not rise again after three days, for his body has been rising and falling in the sea for two weeks. The viewpoint of the waste land is like the Prince’s in *The Tempest*, who was wrong thinking his father was dead, or like that of Jesus’s disciples on their way to Emmaus, who were wrong thinking Jesus had not returned to life. Eliot will introduce these disciples in the next section.¹⁰⁷

Water, like fire, destroys and purifies; in the waste land it only drowns. “Gentile or Jew” is a quotation from St. Paul, when he was speaking of being baptized (the word means “plunged into water”):

all baptized into a single body,
Jew or Gentile, bond or free,
all given to drink of the one Spirit.¹⁰⁸

In *Four Quartets* a prayer will be offered for those who “ended their voyage... in the dark throat” of the sea.¹⁰⁹

This fourth section of *The Waste Land* is nearly a translation of the last part of “Dans le Restaurant”, a poem Eliot wrote in French. There, Phlebas merges with the waiter who is portrayed in the first part of the poem—a dirty old man both in both attire and mind:

The wreck of a waiter with naught to do
But scratch his fingers and lean over my shoulder...
The stains on his vest now number thirty-eight...
You, you dirty old man, at that age....