

## BLURRING FRONTIERS: MYTH AND NARRATOLOGY IN THE ANALYSIS OF *THE WASTE LAND*

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This paper first revises two important anthropological sources for Eliot's *The Waste Land* and later focuses on a narratological viewpoint as a means to uncover some of the most (hidden and) reiterative motifs and devices existing in the famous poem. Especial emphasis is then laid on the technique of infinite regress and on some linguistic contradictions perceived in Eliot's Notes, all of them elements which together with an insistence on blurring narrative borders, may lead the reader to conclude that the *writing of the text* becomes one of its most problematic aspects, which enhances both the incapacity of the different voices to transcend language and the text's ultimately cynic (parodic) stance.

Despite the fact that the opposition between the lyric and the narrative in poetry is quite a traditional one, a pondered analysis of the topic could disclose that such a difference is not as sharp as taxonomical critics would make us believe. In effect, we can define narrative poetry as that in which a narrator tells a story (Barber 1983; Bal 1985) and lyrical poetry as that in which a voice —the lyrical subject— expresses his or her feelings, but pure logic warns us that in the latter those feelings are “part” of a story in which usually a couple is protagonist.

Because of this assumption, many readers of *The Waste Land* would agree to qualify Eliot's poem —although highly lyrical at times— as a narrative one: there is a narrator who tells his/her narratee a story about a quest for regenerating a “waste land” whose condition is abundantly described in the lines of the poem. In the history of literary criticism there are some famous critics, such as Northrop Frye (1957, 61), who would not agree to the qualification of “narrative” for Eliot's work. However, more recent critics, such as Patricia Waugh, already take for granted that our

poem develops a “story” and that its nature, although very complex, is also narrative.<sup>1</sup> Of course, problems arise when we try to find out what type of narrator we are dealing with and what sort of story is the one being told by this narrator.

A narratological analysis of the famous poem offers one of the best ways to re-think or, at least, to start a process of doubt about some of the most difficult aspects of the text, such as the ultimate or “real” intentions of the author, the effect created by the editorial work built by Eliot himself around his poem, or the importance of the “mythic method” for the final understanding of the whole construct. We hope that the reader of Eliot’s poem will come to doubt, after our analysis, that the central issue in *The Waste Land* is simply the dissolution of Western Civilization and the subsequent necessity to rebuild it by means of a series of renewed fertility rites, topics which have frequently been considered by traditional criticism as the main pillars of the text.<sup>2</sup>

It is our contention that a narratological analysis will reveal the important role played in the text by technical devices such as its narrative self-consciousness, the “regressus in infinitum”, or the Genettean metalepsis,<sup>3</sup> devices which have later become very popular among contemporary postmodernist writers and which may suggest to the reader to what extent Eliot’s famous text also relies heavily on the notion that language cannot really transmit any kind of *objective* knowledge. To all

<sup>1</sup> “With realist writing the reader has the illusion of constructing an interpretation by referring the words of the text to objects in the real world. However, with texts like T.S.Eliot’s *The Waste Land* (1922), in order to construct a satisfactory interpretation of the poem, the reader must follow the complex web of cross-references and repetitions of words and images which function independently of, or in addition to, the narrative codes of causality and sequence” (Patricia Waugh 1984, 23).

<sup>2</sup> This sort of criticism on *The Waste Land* has been developed very early and many examples could be cited. See, for instance, Edmund Wilson 1931; Francis Noel Lees 1971, 343-52; and the already classic volume by T.S.Pearce 1967, 95-105. In his book *The Waste Land* (1983; especially Chapter 4), Grover Smith also centres his study on the analysis of the sources and the importance of the mythic element in the poem; however, writing about the Notes, this critic affirms: “The created myth in *The Waste Land* is at all points a *burlesque myth*, but none the less serious and universal” (1983, 86; my italics). Ronald Bush deals more ironically with the validity of Weston’s and Frazer’s sources for an interpretation of the poem, but he does not completely reject its unifying and mythic power: “It may be . . . that Eliot had some kind of short-lived religious illumination during the process of re-envisioning the fragments of his poem, and that his reshaping points to the recognition of a pattern in his life that he had not seen before” (1984, 72).

<sup>3</sup> On the concept of “metalepsis” see G. Genette 1980, 234-37.

probability, the result of such an assumption will show the reader the, in philosophical terms, cynic stance of the author of *The Waste Land*.

As a whole text, Eliot's work presents many peculiarities which produce considerable difficulties in its reading and a certain dose of restlessness in its critics. What are we dealing with? Where does the poem's logic —if any— reside? The number of difficulties increases when the reader realizes that Eliot also wrote an editorial artefact —his well-known Notes— to be added to the poem in its first book edition. The Notes in this editorial work are introduced by Eliot with the apparent aim of helping the reader understand the story being told in the poem and clarify its many obscure parts. However, the result seems to be different: a large number of these notes send the reader to other, previously written works (many of them of a literary status), and this usually results in the average reader having to deal with a complex set of references. The situation becomes a little more puzzling when, facing the poem's difficulties, the reader chooses an edition, such as the one in *The Norton Anthology*, in which a second editor attempts clarification of both the poem and the Notes introduced by Eliot-Editor. Dark passages and many problems are the reward of the persistent reader, and no wonder it is so: Eliot himself anticipated the use of technical difficulties for modern poetry in two well-known essays on criticism, published in 1919 and 1921. Both "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (*The Egoist*, 1919), and "The Metaphysical Poets" (*London Times Literary Supplement*, 1921) can throw some light (or even some more darkness) to help us explain why there are so many difficult passages in a poem and why there is that fascinating interest for an integrative (mythic, in a sense) interpretation of life.

In "Tradition and the Individual Talent" there is a strong emphasis on the integrative idea that no one is alone; in poetry, the poet is living along a line which comes from the past: "No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone" (1966, 15), on the contrary, he is always to be related to the dead poets and artists. Eliot comes almost to affirm the existence of a collective (un)conscious of art and poetry and reaffirms, therefore, the importance of tradition (vs. the avant-garde poets, many of them his literary companions):

The poet must be very conscious of the main current [of art], which does not at all flow invariably through the most distinguished reputations. He must be quite aware of the obvious fact

that art never improves, but that the material of art is never quite the same. (1966, 16)

Eliot goes on with his thesis of the revaluation of tradition and tries to explain the relationship between the poet and his poem. He affirms the role of the mature poet after having talked about the “living whole of all poetry that has ever been written”, and says:

the mind of the mature poet differs from that of the immature one not precisely in any valuation of ‘personality’, not being necessarily more interesting or having ‘more to say’, but rather by being a more finely perfected medium in which special, or very varied, feelings are at liberty to enter into new combinations. (1966, 18)

That is to say, Eliot would conclude advocating the necessity of integration of the past (collective un-conscious)<sup>4</sup> and the present to produce the poet’s real poetry. At last, he had his “own” theory<sup>5</sup> and stressed the idea of the poem not having to be related to the personality of the poet, the man, whose role was that of the medium:

for my meaning is, that the poet has, not a ‘personality’ to express but a particular medium, which is only a medium and not a personality, *in which impressions and experiences combine in peculiar and unexpected ways*. Impressions and experiences which are important for the man may take no place in the poetry, and those which become important in the poetry may play quite a negligible part in the man, the personality. (1966, 19-20, my italics)

“The emotion of art is impersonal”, Eliot maintains, and in order to reach this impersonality the poet must surrender himself to the work to be done. And to know what is to be done, the poet must live “not merely

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<sup>4</sup> My identification of Eliot’s notions on all previous poetry with a sort of Jungian “collective unconscious” could be interpreted as biased, however the careful reader of Eliot’s essay will discover the integrative —“mythical”— tendency which underpins his whole thesis. Cf. Waugh 1984, 24. For a more detailed study of Eliot’s mythic ideology and his use of a master narrative of myth, see Manganaro 1992, chapter 2.

<sup>5</sup> As we know by now, Eliot’s comments on criticism were mainly a mixture of some other critics’ ideas. See Menand 1987.

the present, but the present moment of the past"; the poet must be conscious "not of what is dead, but of what is already living" (1966, 22).

In "The Metaphysical Poets" Eliot attempts a further clarification of his literary theory. As the essay is a review (of Herbert J.C. Grierson's *Metaphysical Lyrics and Poems of the Seventeenth Century*, 1921), he goes into literary history and writes about two attitudes which collided in the seventeenth-century. First of all, however, he praises:

A thought to Donne was an experience; it modified his sensibility. When a poet's mind is perfectly equipped for its work, it is constantly amalgamating disparate experience; the ordinary man's experience is chaotic, irregular, fragmentary. (1966, 287)

The poet always forms new wholes out of very different experiences. Eliot is talking again about a pull for integration. Poets such as Donne or Marvell wrote in this mood. "They are simple, artificial, difficult or fantastic", Eliot says, in the tradition of their predecessors Dante, Guido Cavalcanti or Shakespeare. But in the seventeenth-century a "dissociation of sensibility set in, from which we have never recovered" (1966, 287-88), a dissociation aggravated by the influence of Milton and Dryden. With them, "the language became more refined" but "the feeling became more crude". Later on, this rational poetry was rejected with the sentimental fits of the Romantics but poetry remained unbalanced. In other words, the "line of poetry" was broken in the seventeenth century and, therefore, Donne and his vein were called "metaphysical" by the ones who maintained the other viewpoint (the eminent Dr. Johnson was the one to name them "philosophers" only because of their sense of integration and recondite allusions).

In his essay Eliot clearly takes up the defense of the metaphysical poets: "they were, at best, engaged in the task of trying to find the verbal equivalents for states of mind and feeling" (1966, 289) which would mean that they were better, more mature than later poets. From this argument Eliot comes to the analysis of the role of the contemporary poet and here he writes his often-quoted paragraph:

It is not a permanent necessity that poets should be interested in philosophy, or in any other subject. We can only say that it appears likely that poets in our civilization, as it exists at present,

must be *difficult*. Our civilization comprehends great variety and complexity, and this variety and complexity, playing upon a refined sensibility, must produce various and complex results. The poet must become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate if necessary language into his meaning . . . Hence we get something which looks very much like the conceit. (1966, 289; Eliot's italics)

The method, therefore, would be very similar to that of the metaphysical poets: obscure words, simple phrasing, strange relation . . . “Racine or Donne looked into a good deal more than the heart. One must look into the cerebral cortex, the nervous system, and the digestive tracts” (1966, 290).

These two substantial essays may lead the critic of Eliot's poem to confirm the importance and necessity for the poet to apply an integrative discourse by means of which language can apprehend the whole of civilization, a kind of discourse which *stricto sensu* would correspond to a “mythic pull”.<sup>6</sup> Difficulty and a new kind of poetry—such as the one in *The Waste Land*—would be the outcome of this artistic activity. But, are the aims ever reached?

Eliot's aims according to these two essays were not very innovative for his time and somehow they are still pursued in our contemporary interpretive and literary activities. A thorough analysis of the modernist background and its quest for objective knowledge also requires, it seems to us, a reference to other disciplines which Eliot contemplated with a deep respect: namely the new psychology and the new anthropology of the turn of the century, whose imprints are so evident in *The Waste Land*.

At the beginning of the twentieth-century, writers and critics seemed to face similar interpretive problems as the ones we now have. As Derrida has implied, and many more before him, there is a gap between the human mind (including its linguistic tool) and what is “outside” it,<sup>7</sup> that which, for

<sup>6</sup> I.e., in the sense given by Gordon Frazer and carried out by the mature Freud and more recent thinkers such as Lacan (see Benvenuto and Kennedy 1986). I will insist on this aspect at the end of this essay.

<sup>7</sup> “The sign represents the present in its absence. It takes the place of the present. When we cannot grasp or show the thing, state the present, the being-present, when the present cannot be presented, we signify, we go through the detour of the sign. We take or give signs. We signal. The sign, in this sense, is deferred presence.” (Derrida 1982, 9)

convenience's sake, we could name "external reality". This, which is at the basis of the modernist (and contemporary) epistemological plight seemed to be also one of the main problems faced by Eliot and, to a certain extent, one which made possible some of the most interesting devices in Eliot's poetry, such as his use of irony and of cultural allusions and references.

Simplifying the issue a great deal (see Menand 1987, chapter 2), we could assert in this discussion that Western peoples have systematically accepted what is "conventionally" real and opposed it to what is apparently unreal or fantastic. But when, as Eliot did, we try to analyze reality and the basis to differentiate the "real" from the "unreal", we are bound to have difficulties in discovering such a basis. In other words, we may accept Eliot's thesis in his PhD dissertation on Bradley's theories that there is no basis at all to proclaim that something is real or, at least, objectively true.<sup>8</sup> Eliot could even be thought, at a certain moment, to be a nominalist. Let us take out of its proper context what Eliot wrote in his well-known dissertation:

No symbol, I maintain, is ever a mere symbol, but is continuous with that which it symbolizes. Without words, no objects. The object, purely experienced and not denominated, is not yet an object . . . we have no objects without language. (1964, 132-33)

And, we could add, we have no language without the human mind. Searching for the value of the humanistic subject, Descartes had gone as far as to enunciate the "cogito ergo sum" but he still needed the help of God to grant the existence of the world (external reality). Once the belief in God disappears, humans have to recur again to the philosopher to prove

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<sup>8</sup>Commenting on the irony present in Eliot's dissertation, Menand writes: "The system Eliot adapted from Bradley is one that ironizes itself at every point. Its terms of relation all show up as relative against the background of 'immediate experience,' but when we try to grasp that concept we find that it only points back to the terms it has discredited, since it is founded on the paradox of whatever is 'given' in our experience cannot at the same time be present to us. Such a system is a weapon, not a tool, and having equipped himself with it, Eliot proceeded to analyze away psychology's claim to have something scientific to say about mental states and epistemology's claim to have something theoretical to say about our knowledge of the world . . . The critiques of psychology and epistemology occupy Eliot for most of the dissertation, but . . . by the end it begins to seem as though those subjects have simply strayed into the line of fire, and that the real object of Eliot's attack is the claim of metaphysics to have something true to say about experience" (1987, 46).

the existence of reality. Somehow, studying Eliot's life we are ready to think that the poet, before his Christian conversion, had concluded that no theoretical system could prove the possibility of certain knowledge. Irony would therefore come out of this epistemological doubt about truth and life. As already anticipated, by the turn of the century the psychologists were, to a certain degree, responsible for this apparent state of metaphysical preoccupation. William James and his concept of the "stream of consciousness", the notion of "durée" elaborated by Henri Bergson, or the importance which Sigmund Freud was to confer upon the unconscious, produced a cultural ambience in which the role of the mind was highly stressed, the result being the Modernist interest in internal or mental reality —symbolized by the well-known motif of the "ivory tower"—, in a society still dominated by the bourgeois and proletarian comfortable beliefs in external reality. This cultural background would be the appropriate one for Eliot to develop, even in his poetry, his own epistemological doubts as, not for nothing, he was also a student of philosophy and a researcher on the theories of Pater, Bergson, and Bradley.

Eliot lived a time of cultural fragmentation —"Fragmentation" being another favourite issue in the Modernist ethos—, of political lies, and a terrible war which was fought, in words of his friend Ezra Pound,

For an old bitch gone in the teeth  
For a botched civilization, . . .

For two gross of broken statues,  
For a few thousand battered books.

(*Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* , 90-1, 94-5)

However, it should be emphasized here that culture is already fragmented before the First World War starts. The "battered books" can offer references to the past, but they are not the past, and the individual's mind is cut off from History in the same sense as it is cut off from external contemporary fragmented reality. In this state of cultural affairs some modernist minds attempt a solution also looked for by later writers: reunification, the mythical quest. If we are to believe the theory presented by Mircea Eliade in his well-known work *The Myth of the Eternal Return* (1951), human societies are divided into two types: on the one hand, the



ones which consider life as something cyclical, ever-returning; in this type of society, the human being is perfectly integrated into his/her environment: human life follows the same pattern as the other existing beings, Spring is followed by Summer, and Fall ends up in Winter which, after the resurrection of life, will give way to a new Spring. Opposed to this mythical conception of life, there is the historical conception, in which man (*sic*) experiences life as a linear path of birth, maturity and death. This conception of life, foregrounded by Jewish-Christian culture, provides man with resurrection thanks to the existence of God, who guarantees immortality at the end of the earthly path. But a metaphysical issue arises when man starts to have doubts about the existence of God. The fall of religious faith supposes, in this case, the necessity of coming back to the mythical conception. The alternative to myth is, otherwise, nothing but dissolution. It is not surprising, then, that in modernist times we may find traces of a mythical revival and that we come, together with the emphasis on fragmentation and the epistemological quest, to the rise of integrative theories such as Structuralism or Russian Formalism, and to the tremendous impact which anthropological studies —best represented by Sir James Gordon Frazer's *The Golden Bough*— had at the turn of the century.

The beginning of the editorial building which Eliot constructed to “clarify” *The Waste Land* is precisely a reference to the importance two anthropological works had in the writing of the poem: Frazer's *The Golden Bough* and Jessie Weston's *From Ritual to Romance*. Although both anthropological studies are quite well-known, it may prove interesting to point out some of the arguments defended in their pages, as they will help the reader to a better understanding of the hypotheses which follow.

The apparent aim of Frazer's work is made explicit almost at the very beginning of the one-volume edition of 1922:<sup>9</sup> “to explain the remarkable rule which regulated the succession to the priesthood of Diana at Aricia”. Frazer starts telling the reader what apparently happened in ancient Rome to the priest of Diana in the Wood of Nemi: somebody would come to the goddess' grove, take a “golden bough” from one of the trees and fight the priest with the sword. If the newcomer were to succeed, he would obtain the position of priest of the goddess Diana till somebody else would conquer it by the sword again. Why did the priest's election take this form? To

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<sup>9</sup> Eliot obviously used Macmillan's complete edition in 13 volumes, which had been completed by the year 1915.

explain this single question Frazer spent several decades of his life, the result being his enormous study in comparative religions entitled *The Golden Bough*.

Frazer starts with an analysis of the way magic works and he concludes that this activity is mainly based on either of two principles: on the one hand, there exists “homoeopathic magic”, based on the association of ideas by similarity (we could relate it to the literary figure of the metaphor). On the other hand, he also talks about “contagious magic”, which is the one founded on the association of ideas by contiguity (that is, related to metonymy and synecdoche). This first division established by Frazer could also make the reader think of the “stream of consciousness” theory developed by William James and of Freud’s theories about the production of dreams which, let us remember, would also follow the mechanisms of metaphor or metonymy.

On this double possibility magic started to operate on man so that he could interpret the world (magic worldview) and overcome his primitive difficulties. In the magical conception of the world it is assumed “that in nature one event follows another necessarily and invariably without the intervention of any spiritual or personal agency” (1987, 49). In this sense, the world of magic ultimately seems to show some links with the world of science. But, before reaching the scientific stage, the human being began to realize that he could not always control nature by means of magic and he attributed unexplained external causes to the existence of gods and spirits. In a second stage, therefore, religion would replace the world of magic, although forms of this system still persisted and mixed with religious beliefs. In this way, the principles of similarity and contiguity continued to exert their power on human history.<sup>10</sup>

Frazer proceeds with his research on one of the first human aims: the control of the weather; and he discovers two types of controllers: the religious man-god, and the magical man-god [*sic*]. From this point, the author of *The Golden Bough* investigates the ways in which people become kings and incarnate gods, in many different mythological systems, and the process by means of which these selected people are punished if the weather does not happen to be as good as expected. Frazer affirms:

<sup>10</sup> And, it could be added, these two principles were also continued in the poets’ works, constituting that tradition to which Eliot is not ready to renounce. As we will see, in *The Waste Land* the process of continuous association (metonymic or metaphoric) is essential to understand the role of the narrator.

The belief that kings possess magical or supernatural powers by virtue of which they can fertilise the earth and confer other benefits on their subjects would seem to have been shared by the ancestors of all the Aryan races from India to Ireland. (1987, 89)

In this way, Frazer will come to investigate many magic and religious rituals and establish his theories on the development of the most important ones: the *fertility rites*, which will provide many of the examples used by Eliot in his poem, in that apparent quest for fertility implied in its lines.<sup>11</sup> Summing up, *The Golden Bough* will constitute, by the beginning of the twentieth century, one of the most influential integrative theories of human culture and behaviour.

According to Weston the main aim of her book *From Ritual to Romance* (1920) is to investigate the origin and spread of the Grail legends. Weston is a believer in Frazer's theories and consequently

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<sup>11</sup> In effect, as we will later see, the most important symbols of the story told in *The Waste Land* are explained, from a mythical view-point, by Frazer. Readers of Eliot's work will also be interested in the following lines, written by the anthropologist as part of his analysis about Osiris and his assumed human "representatives": "We may conjecture that the victims represented Osiris himself, who was annually slain, dismembered, and buried in their persons that he might quicken the seed in the earth"(1987, 378). Stetson's parodic passage in part I comes immediately to mind. Later on, Frazer adds: "Taken all together, these legends point to a widespread practice of dismembering the body of a king or magician and burying the pieces in different parts of the country in order to ensure the fertility of the ground and probably also the fecundity of man and beast" (1987, 379). Frazer will discuss once again (711-12) the relations existing between magic, science and religion before finishing the book, offering the reader the possibility to compare his anthropological analysis with Freud's well-known ideas on the ontogenetic evolution of the human race. The following diagram attempts to show in a concise way the remarkably similar interpretations pointed out by these two researchers of human behaviour:

#### STAGES IN THE EVOLUTION OF THE HUMAN RACE

FRAZER'S THESIS	FREUD'S THESIS
1) Magic	1) The animistic (omnipotence of man).
2) Religion	2) The religious (man transfers the power to the gods).
3) Science	3) The scientific (man is bound by the "reality principle").

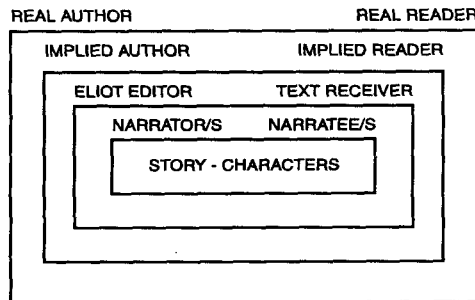
These schemes have a way back, towards the first stage (something which has been named "entropic pull"). This aspect of the mythic discourse will be analysed at the end of this essay, once we have dealt with the narratological elements of the text.

disagrees with the Christian and folklore traditional interpretations of the Grail quest.<sup>12</sup>

Weston maintains that the Grail legends are remains of old fertility rites, and gives her readers the now well-known interpretations of the quest for the Grail, the Waste Land, the dying god, the Fisher King and the necessity for a questing knight who come to fertilize the land again, all of them elements which permeate Eliot's poem.<sup>13</sup>

As the reader of Eliot's poem may notice, the Editor of the Notes is not lying when he states, at the very beginning of his editorial apparatus, that "the plan and a good deal of the incidental symbolism of the poem were suggested" by Weston's (and Frazer's) book(s), but the perceptive reader should also notice that the Editor qualifies this symbolism as merely "incidental". Why is that so? What is the value we should confer to the mythic element after all? These and some other questions sprouting from *The Waste Land* may be somehow clarified by the textual analysis which follows.

If we hold the hypothesis that Eliot's work is not simply the set of poetic fragments it seems to be, a narratological analysis of the edited text called *The Waste Land* can be based on the following graphic, showing the reproduction of the different communicative levels operating in Eliot's text:



<sup>12</sup> "A prototype, containing the main features of the Grail story —the Waste Land, the Fisher King, the Hidden Castle with its solemn Feast, and mysterious Feeding Vessel, the Bleeding Lance and Cup— does not, so far as we know, exist". (1983, 3)

<sup>13</sup> Weston also studies how in many ancient texts (Rig-Veda hymns, for instance) the hero-god's task is the release of imprisoned water so as to fertilize the earth and she concludes then that the task of the Grail hero is ultimately not a literary invention, "but a heritage from the achievements of the prehistoric heroes of the Aryan race". (1983, 29-30)

In the graphic we can find, introducing the deepest level here analyzed—the story—the figure of some narrators or simply a narrator of multiple voices which refer a number of events happening to various characters in different places and times. The reader can think that there is not only one story but several and, in effect, this is one of the most arduous problems to be solved: there are so many “fragments”, voices, and linguistic registers that a “realistic” reading—following the time and space coordinates—seems to be pointless. Let us assume that the narratorial voice is always the same one: if such is the case, whether we refer to the different narrated scenes as “episodes” or “stories”, it seems clear that they are interrelated by the figure of the narrator and his/her mental associations, and not by the common temporal and spatial coordinates of realistic narrative. This narrator sometimes addresses his/her narratee directly by means, for instance, of a literary reference (“hypocrite lecteur! – mon semblable, – mon frère!”), line 76) which attempts to break the “barrier” which separates the level of the narrator from that of the reader.<sup>14</sup> Above the narrator, the story s/he tells, and his/her narratee, we find Eliot-Editor who comments on the poem whose main voice is the above-mentioned narrator: we can, therefore, believe in the omniscient nature of this Editor who, in Genettean terms, is as extradiegetic<sup>15</sup> with reference to the poem as the narrator seems to be with reference to the story s/he tells in the poem: both entities, narrator and Editor, seem to be above the issues they deal with and should therefore possess an ironic view distanced from their objects.

In any case, we should notice that we are already dealing with two different narratorial instances: the narrator of the story tells his/her narratee about a series of events ordered in a very peculiar way. Above the narrator, the Editor comments on the process of reading and interpreting the poem entitled “The Waste Land”: in this way, the editorial

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<sup>14</sup> And which, as such, operates as a self-conscious and, therefore, metafictional device. On these concepts see P. Waugh 1984, and Brian Stonehill 1988.

<sup>15</sup> On this concept see Genette 1980. The French critic defines different types of narrators mainly according to two aspects: their belonging or not to the “diegesis”—or world of the story—; and their having been participants or not in the story. According to the first division, a narrator is qualified as *extradiegetic* when it does not belong in the diegesis, or *intradiegetic* when it does (228-29). On the other hand, the narrator will be *heterodiegetic* when it is not a participant in the story it narrates, or *homodiegetic* when it is (244-45).

building is superimposed upon the narrative, the narrator's narratee having its counterpart in the receiver or addressee of the Editor's Notes. These two acts of communication apparently seem to differ in the fact that the Editor's aim is to comment on a linguistic construction, that is to say, Eliot-Editor's role is to criticize a literary work and not to narrate a series of events. A closer analysis of the poem will disclose, however, the self-reflexivity of the narrator who is also very fond of commenting on the function of language: the poem "The Waste Land" is also a collection of literary "fragments", of quotes and references coming from—mainly— the literary past. The figures of narrator and Editor are, in this manner, linked in a certain way: their roles as linguistic commentators are sometimes similar, but the Editor is always the one who stands above and has the capacity to comment on the poem and therefore on the narrator's activities.

Above the level of the Editor who addresses this hypothetical receiver of the edited text, narratological theory posits (or longs for) the existence of an implied author, an entity which represents the ultimate probable intentions which the real author would have held when writing the text, and which only an assumed sharp reader could discover. In many critical works about *The Waste Land* the figure of the Editor has been thought to convey the views of Eliot himself: that is to say, some critics have assumed that Eliot-Editor perfectly corresponds with the figure of the implied author. On the other hand, some critics have also commented, for instance, that the Notes do not seem to really clarify the "meaning" of the poem; this issue has even developed into the popularized notion that the poem has no "meaning" at all and that Eliot (not the Editor) only wanted to suggest the belief that in contemporary poetry we should never look for a logical meaning. Especially in realistic narrative of the type of the Victorian novel, the narrator frequently seemed to convey the assumed views of the real author; but in such an "unrealistic" text as *The Waste Land* the figure of the Editor is not the only element standing between narrator and author: the level of the implied author adds to the general epistemological frame on which the text is based, that of the—suggestion of— infinite regression. Today, in the "postmodernist" period, we are perhaps in a different position to consider the modernist spirit and the metaphysical implications of *The Waste Land*; the technique of infinite regression—a *mise en abyme*<sup>16</sup> in the broad sense—

appears in the text, as we will see later, several times: level after level, the ultimate meaning may escape our capacity of understanding or may perhaps bring about that possibility of comprehending, even if in an indirect way, the complexity of modern life (Eliot 1966, 289).

The suggestion that in the poem language refers only to language and that it can never reach the external referent —object or situation— can be here understood simply as a contemporary reading of Eliot's text, however I think that the narratological analysis of the communicative levels of *The Waste Land* helps the reader discover the importance that the notion of infinite regression had in Eliot at the moment of writing the poem and also eventually helps to a richer interpretation of the poem. We can therefore proceed with the analysis of the level of the story, paying closer attention to some of the most relevant elements which appear in this collection of "fragments" or episodes represented through the voice and —often— eyes of the narrator.

The title of the poem is a well-known phrase which frequently appears in Weston's book to designate the condition of the land once the (Fisher) King has committed the unknown sin and cannot regenerate his realm. This mythic aspect inherent in the title is accompanied, before the beginning of the narrative itself, by the Latin and Greek quotation and by the dedication of the poem to Ezra Pound. Curiously enough, in this unconventional beginning the idea of death ('apoqanein qelw) already appears close to the idea of artefact ("il miglior fabro"), two aspects which become reiterative in the lines of the poem.

Part I of "The Waste Land" is representative of the whole poem, as the reader finds in it most of the basic techniques used by Eliot in the construction of his work. There are four fragments or episodes and throughout them the narratorial voice changes his/her register when necessary. After the significative title "The Burial of the Dead" —which brings echoes from the Christian burial service, the First World War, and the mythic cycle—, the reader faces line no. 1 which is a parodically distorted allusion to the

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<sup>16</sup> On this concept, see Lucien Dällenbach 1977. In the sense that the poem posits the problem of the difficulties of getting any objective knowledge, it acts as a *mise en abyme* of the superior level —the edited text— which also suggests the incapacity of the Editor to know, from which the reader may conclude the incapacity of Eliot himself: the impossibility to reach the truth in the different levels reproduced *en abyme* would be positing the lack of epistemological value according to Eliot's suggested views, as our further analysis discloses.

beginning of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*: "April is the cruellest month", and which already reinforces the sad condition of the "land" as expressed in the very title of the poem. April is no longer the month in which the new life appears: the mythic cycle has stopped, as the subsequent descriptions of this introductory Part I imply. This parodied line will also be the first of a long list of references; from the very beginning the narrator starts talking not simply about the mythical quest for renewal, but also about literature, about previous texts, "fragments" of which enter the lines of Eliot's poem. Different languages, classic and modern, appear and reappear to suggest, repeat, and combine ideas and motifs present in other —mainly literary— works. The effect is one of difficulty in the reading, but the reader may also be inclined to think of cyclical repetitions, mockery, criticism of the present condition of society. Eventually, the result created by the use of hypertextuality<sup>17</sup> can be understood as an indirect comprehension of many different aspects and moments. In any case it seems clear that the narrator, when using this practice, appears as somebody very interested in literature and as a mixer of language, operating in a metalinguistic way.

The first four lines of Part I are already indicative of another reiterative and integrative aspect: the tendency to mix different elements, a tendency which can be also connected to the trespassing effect of metalepsis and which now appears "mixing memory and desire" (Eliot 1975, lines 2-3) in an April which breeds "lilacs out of the dead land" (2). There is also a clear indication in these first lines which may help the reader clarify the role of the narrator: "April is", in the present tense, opposing the "Winter kept us warm" in the past tense, of line 5. In effect, from the very beginning, we are attending the metaleptic act of skipping from the narrating time into the story time and viceversa: this is one of the main characteristics which help define the figure of the narrator. Here, from his<sup>18</sup> general comments on the desolation of April —narrating time—, he goes back to the time in which he was with some friends in Germany —story time—, where we get some descriptions focalized by the narrator ("we stopped in the colonnade,/ And went on in sunlight", 9-10) and some direct speeches on the part of several of his companions at that time ("Bin gar keine Russin,

<sup>17</sup> On the concept of hypertextuality see Genette 1982.

<sup>18</sup> As the narratorial voice is nearly always that of a male, we will use the double indicator s/he, or his/her, only when there are clear indications of its possessing both sexes (such as happens in Part III).



...”, 12).<sup>19</sup> The temporal jumps are clearly indicated by the verbal tenses: from the narrator’s use of the past tense —when considering the past events from his narrating present— we move into the present tense in the characters’ direct speeches.

The perceptive reader could argue that to cross from the narrating time into the story time is something which happens in most written narratives, and it is true:<sup>20</sup> but in a poem where difficulties abound this action of crossing from one time to another is accomplished in a very subtle way. The extradiegetic narrator more than once operates from his narrating time to apparently act homodiegetically in the story time, in this way mixing times but *also* his two different roles as narrator and as character. That is to say, from the present moment of his narrating activity, the narrator may choose to metaleptically jump into the past time in which the story took place: there he will apparently assume the role of a character but will not effectually stop his narrating activity. This is not the case in the first scene of Part I, but this seems to be the case at the end of the second scene, when the narrator introduces himself as the lover of the “hyacinth girl”: her direct speech in the story time (35-36) is followed by his speech, without inverted commas,<sup>21</sup> in the narrating time (37-41):

‘You gave me Hyacinths first a year ago;	35
‘They called me the hyacinth girl.’	
–Yet when we came back, late, from the hyacinth garden,	
Your arms full, and your hair wet, I could not	
Speak, and my eyes failed, I was neither	
Living nor dead, and I knew nothing,	40
Looking into the heart of light, the silence.	

Let us notice how the girl defines her present time in the story by means of the phrase “a year ago” —from her *now*—, whereas the male

<sup>19</sup> On the actuality of the characters which appear in this scene, see Valerie Eliot 1971.

<sup>20</sup> In effect this is one of the main characteristics which may disclose the artificiality of all fiction to the readers, asking from them the Coleridgean “willing suspension of disbelief”. The interchange of the characters’ time and space coordinated with those of the narrator in the narrating present also constitutes one of the main devices in the production of free indirect discourse, quite a popular technique among many apparently “realistic” authors. See Bal 1985, 137-42.

<sup>21</sup> The use of inverted commas is a common device to announce the direct speech of the characters in the story of “The Waste Land” —and obviously it is also a frequent device in all types of narrative literature.

lover's words suggest he is conversing with the girl: however, from his present, he refers to his feelings always in the past —of the story time—, his words never being announced by the use of inverted commas. The opposition of times also results in a crossing of narrative levels: from his narrating present the narrator apparently jumps into the past of the story but his voice does not seem to be heard by the girl-character.

This peculiar mixture of times with the apparent participation of the narrator, as such, at the level of the story seems also to reappear in one of the most difficult passages of the poem: the first section of "A Game of Chess", in which the lady is talking (to herself?<sup>22</sup>) and is apparently "replied" by the narratorial voice coming again from the narrating time and level:

'What is that noise?'

The wind under the door

'What is that noise now? What is the wind doing?'

Nothing again nothing.

120

The result of this passage has always been puzzling for the critics. The reader discovers a male voice —apparently the narrator's— which is not encircled by the inverted commas and which is not heard by the female character. Once again, an answer to the puzzle, even in narratological terms, is also complex: the extradiegetic narrator, without abandoning his narrating role, jumps "homodiegetically" into the story to apparently participate in it, although effectively he does not participate at this level —he is not "heard" by the lady— because he is still the narrator at the narrating time. The results, however, are distorting: times, spaces, and narrative levels are mixed, their frontiers dissolve in the same way as "memory and desire" mixed at the very beginning of the poem.

The second "fragment" or episode in the first part has also seen a change of register on the part of the narrator. The voice which addresses the narratee as "Son of man" (20) has biblical resonances and with it the reader discovers some of the most reiterative and mythical symbols ("dead tree", "water", "shadow") which already appeared in

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<sup>22</sup>In any case, she talks in direct speech, in the story time, and her words are enclosed by inverted commas.

Frazer's and Weston's books.<sup>23</sup> The beginning of line 22, "A heap of broken images" —which is all the narratee knows, according to the voice—, also introduces a glimpse of self-reference: "image" is a rather ambiguous term, it can be used in the context of the plastic arts, a meaning which may lead the reader to think about the cultural desolation of Europe both before and after the Great War. But "image" is also a literary device and the idea of linguistic and communicative fragmentation, let us remember, pervades the poem from its beginning. "Fragments" of previous written works heap up the lines and by the time the reader reaches the episode of Madame Sosostriis, fragmentation and amalgamation are clearly two predominant motifs in the story narrated in the text.

A third relevant aspect must also be mentioned before we continue the analysis of the poem: the narrator, who was "neither living nor dead" (39-40) also confesses that he "knew nothing" (40), emphasizing already what is going to be perhaps his/her main problem: the incapacity to know. It is not surprising then that the "famous clairvoyante" Madame Sosostriis, "[h]ad a bad cold" (44). Coming from the narrating time, the narrator's irony imposes over the woman who is going to "foresee" some of the characters and events which are to appear and befall in the rest of the poem. References to perceptual difficulties ironically accumulate in this part: the narrator's "wicked" card is the drowned Phoenician Sailor (echoes from Weston's thesis) whose eyes are now pearls, and the funny lady commands the pearl-eyed narrator to look! (48).<sup>24</sup> Another card discloses the one-eyed merchant, another one is blank: difficulties of

<sup>23</sup> What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow  
 Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man, 20  
 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. Only  
 There is shadow under this red rock . . . 25

<sup>24</sup> "(Those are pearls that were his eyes. Look!)" (48) But for the brackets and the last word, this line is also a reference to Ariel's song to Ferdinand in Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (I.ii.398), where the restorative and transformative character of water is once again evinced: in this way Madame Sosostriis associates the narrator with the drowned Phoenician Sailor but also with Ferdinand and his father Alonso, all of them mythically transformed by the regenerative power of the waters. However, with a clairvoyante who has a bad cold and with a narrator whose eyes have been transformed into pearls by the water these lines, although apparently "mythical", become highly ambiguous and ironic.

perception accumulate in the same way as difficulties to understand the poem increase as the reading advances.

Hypertextual references —now to French symbolism— and the mixture of a “brown fog” in a “winter dawn” open the fourth and last episode of Part I, a fragment in which the reader encounters again the “living-dead”, now a Dantesque crowd “flowing” over London Bridge as the waters flow below it (62). From the present of the narrating the reader witnesses, in the past tense of the story, to the encounter between the narrator and Stetson<sup>25</sup> a parody of the cycle of myth, temporal dissolution, and more hypertextual and ironic references accumulate in this last fragment which ends with the metaleptical and hypertextual “You! hypocrite lecteur! – mon semblable, – mon frère!” So far, in Part I the reader has been witness to an almost continuous crossing of narrative levels on the part of an ironic and restless narrator who, on top of making a parody of mythical regeneration, has also shown his self-conscious role as collector of written fragments: all of them elements which help to give the final impression of amalgamation, and temporal and spatial confusion, but which also highlight the artificial, self-conscious quality of *The Waste Land*.<sup>26</sup>

Difficulties of knowing, mixing and crossing of levels or boundaries are also reiterative aspects in Part II of the poem, dedicated, if anything, to the apparent impossibility of direct, effective communication. The story the narrator is telling in such a distorted way opens here with a first section which constitutes the description of a richly furnished room. However, this description can be interpreted as an extended metaphor —or even as a *mise en abyme*<sup>27</sup>— on the impossibility of experiencing direct knowledge or —as can be paraphrased in critical theory— of apprehending the external referent. In effect, lines 76 to 106

<sup>25</sup> There I saw one I knew, and stopped him, crying: ‘Stetson!

‘You who were with me in the ships at Mylae!

70

‘That corpse you planted last year in your garden,

‘Has it begun to sprout? Will it bloom this year? / . . . ’

<sup>26</sup> An assumption which some critics would like to understand simply as a “contemporary or postmodernist” reading of Eliot’s text but which, in any case, is easily found in the text.

<sup>27</sup> Depending on the interpretation the reader gives to the whole text of *The Waste Land*. We will come back to it later in the essay.

of “A Game of Chess” are indeed a game on reflection and indirect apprehension of more fragments:

The Chair she sat in, like a burnished throne,  
 Glowed on the marble, where the glass  
 Held up by standards wrought with fruited vines  
 From which a golden Cupidon peeped out                     80  
 (another hid his eyes behind his wing)  
 Doubled the flames of sevenbranched candelabra  
 Reflecting light upon the table as  
 The glitter of her jewels rose to meet it,  
 From satin cases poured in rich profusion.  
 In vials of ivory and coloured glass  
 Unstoppered, lurked her strange synthetic perfumes,  
 Unguent, powdered, or liquid – troubled, confused  
 And drowned the sense in odours; stirred by the air  
 That freshened from the window, these ascended                     90  
 In fattening the prolonged candle-flames,  
 Flung their smoke into the laquearia,  
 Stirring the pattern on the coffered ceiling.

Mirrors, indirect lights, and marble reflections continuously mix in the visual description of the room. Synesthesia accumulates: sight is followed by odours which, once again, amalgamate to reach the ceiling where some pictures of mythological scenes can also be seen, including the symbolic painting of the change —crossing boundaries again— of Philomel,<sup>28</sup> where myth, art, time, and perceptual difficulties reappear

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<sup>28</sup> Above the antique mantle was displayed  
 As though a window gave upon the sylvan scene  
 The change of Philomel, by the barbarous king  
 So rudely forced; yet there the nightingale                     100  
 Filled all the desert with inviolable voice  
 And still she cried, and still the world pursues,  
 ‘Jug Jug’ to dirty ears.  
 And other withered stumps of time  
 Were told upon the walls; staring forms  
 Leaned out, leaning, hushing the room enclosed,  
 footsteps shuffled on the stair.  
 Under the fired light, under the brush, her hair  
 Spread out in fiery points  
 Glowed into words, then would be savagely still.                     110

and mix. In this manner, the description of the room functions metaphorically to suggest that the poet is that medium “in which impressions and experiences combine in peculiar and unexpected ways” (Eliot 1966, 19). At this stage, however, the narrator also seems to be very worried about the difficulties of ever reaching direct knowledge: many elements in these describing lines clearly refer to indirect possibilities of knowing and to several perceptual problems. “Voice”, “cried”, “told upon the walls”, “hushing”, “footsteps shuffled on the stair”, “her hair . . . glowed into words”, are all terms which further indicate the incapacity or difficulties of the human being to produce an effective communication, and which also herald the lady’s monologue already mentioned in which her isolation is presented side by side with the desperate isolation of a narrator who, in omnipotent fashion, dares come from his narrating time to accompany the lady in her isolated monologue. The crossing of boundaries from the narrating into the story is also highlighted by a process of intratextual allusions when line 126 suddenly repeats line 48: “Those are pearls that were his eyes”, the narrator says again, quoting Shakespeare’s line in *The Tempest* (I.ii.398) and so stressing the metafictional or self-referential component of the poem. Language goes back to language, the poem goes back to itself in an apparent vicious circle in which no way out is to be found.

The emphasis on mixing elements is once more present in the famous “O O O O that Shakespeherian Rag—” of line 128, where the low and high arts are confused again. Some symbolic reminiscences of rain and perceptual abnormalities<sup>29</sup> take the reader towards the second episode of this game of chess: after the rich, in comes the poor; after the richly furnished room we move into the pub, with the ironic echo of “HURRY UP PLEASE ITS TIME”.

If the first episode of the second part suggested, in a metaphorical way, the incapacity of the subject to perceive reality in a direct way, the episode of the pub centers on a process of infinite regression: language is not the appropriate instrument for reaching the truth either. Line 139 introduces now a female voice talking in her present narrating time to

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<sup>29</sup>                   The hot water at ten.  
And if it rains, a closed car at four.  
And we shall play a game of chess,  
Pressing lidless eyes and waiting for a knock upon the door.                   138

some friends in the pub, but she is talking about a previous conversation she had with a female friend called Lil. Within this second conversation the female narrator mentions another, previous conversation she had witnessed between Lil and her husband.<sup>30</sup> In this regressive way, the narratees in the pub are told some news related to the main topics of the poem as a whole: namely, the lack of understanding between Lil and her husband, Lil's abortion, and the misunderstanding between Lil and the female narrator. But, whose truth do we have after all? Language imposes upon language and the ultimate truth seems to be always deferred: the difficulties to establish a successful communication seem to be insurmountable. The so much needed "mythic regeneration" now also seems to be "communicative regeneration" but, as the conversation in the pub indicates, these characters are very far away from reaching its fulfilment. On top of everything else the reader discovers that the female narrator is not the first level narrator of the story of the poem. On the contrary, after the low-class farewell of the group of friends,<sup>31</sup> the first level narrator reappears parodically to end the second part of "The Waste Land" with Ophelia's departing words: "Good night, ladies, good night, sweet ladies, good night, good night" (172).

From the first level narrative we have been witnesses to a conversation about a conversation about a conversation . . . the regression could have gone on for ever, only to suggest the barrenness of the communicative process, a technique which—as already suggested—can also be interpreted as a *mise en abyme* of the whole poem. Truth, using again one of Derrida's favourite terms, is being "deferred" all the time: we are trapped in language.

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<sup>30</sup> When Lil's husband got demobbed, I said—  
 I didn't mince my words, I said to her myself, 140  
 HURRY UP PLEASE ITS TIME  
 Now Albert's coming back, make yourself a bit smart.  
 He'll want to know what you done with that money he gave you  
 To get yourself some teeth. He did, I was there.  
 You have them all out, Lil, and get a nice set, 145  
 He said, I swear, I can't bear to look at you.  
 And no more can't I, I said, and think of poor Albert,  
 . . .

<sup>31</sup> Goonight Bill. Goonight Lou. Goonight May. Goonight. 170  
 Ta ta. Goonight. Goonight.

Due to its location in the text, Part III —“The Fire Sermon”— is the very core of *The Waste Land*. In it, the attentive reader can find again the main technical devices already used in the previous parts: hypertextual references<sup>32</sup> accumulate together with references to previous lines of the poem which, once again, can also be hypertextual references already used,<sup>33</sup> motifs of the waste land and the Grail quest abound, and the narrator changes places and times as easily as the traditional is mixed with the new:

The river bears no empty bottles, sandwich papers,  
Silk handkerchiefs, cardboard boxes, cigarette ends  
Or other testimony of summer nights. The nymphs are departed.  
And their friends, the loitering heirs of City directors;                   180  
Departed, have left no addresses.

Married love was left out back in Part II. “The Fire Sermon” is mainly concerned with illicit or unmarried love and, apart from the already mentioned characteristics, two more elements play a relevant role here: the river—symbolizing water which is not fertilizing any longer—and Tiresias, who—it is suggested—appears as the narrator of the whole poem<sup>34</sup> giving up his/her name on line 218, almost the mathematical middle of the poem.

From a first scene in which hypertextual references mix with past and present times in the river’s landscape, and with the parodic “nymphs” of contemporary society, we face the Smyrna merchant who does not bring in his valise the necessary fertility rituals but simply lecherous—perhaps homosexual—proposals (207-14). Finally Tiresias speaks at “the violet hour”, another reiterative symbolic time—neither day nor night—to be added to

<sup>32</sup> Sweet Thames, run softly, till I end my so . . .                   176  
Back at my back from time to time I he . . .                   196, etc.

<sup>33</sup> Unreal City  
Under the brown fog of a winter noon  
Mr. Eugenides, the Smyrna merchan . . .                   209

<sup>34</sup> Or, at least, as one of the faces of this multifarious figure. Eliot-Editor comments on this figure: “Tiresias, although a mere spectator and not indeed a ‘character’, is yet the most important personage in the poem, uniting all the rest. Just as the one-eyed merchant seller of currants, melts into the Phoenician Sailor, and the latter is not wholly distinct from Ferdinand Prince of Naples, so all the women are one woman, and the two sexes meet in Tiresias. What Tiresias *sees*, in fact, is the substance of the poem . . .” Let us notice how the Editor discards Tiresias’ participation in the diegesis (“not indeed a ‘character’”) and the aglutination in him/her of the figures which, from Part I, mirror the role of the narrator in his/her questing activity of regeneration.



the already long list of elements which suggest the factually impossible crossing of boundaries. The restless narrator, who has already disclosed his/her mythological name, is going to continue mixing times and events: in a highly parodic scene, s/he presents the sexual affair between the typist and the “young man carbuncular” (215-56), a central episode of unfruitful sexual relations leading nowhere and from which the narratee is conducted, once again, to the river waters where dirt combines—in another temporal jump—with old “high” references to the illicit and barren love between Queen Elizabeth and Leicester, and the new “low” references to the river-daughters, the nymph-prostitutes. Once more, the combination and mixing of the socially “low” and “high” leads the narrator-quester nowhere: sex is fruitless, regeneration is impossible, the mythically distressed “condition of the land” is still unsolved. The role of the narrator as the Eliotean medium, does not bring restoration about and—literary, cultural or self-conscious—“mixing” does not seem to solve anything so far.

As the poem advances, reiterative aspects meet in Tiresias, the mixer, man and woman at the same time. A personage who, nevertheless, is *blind*: s/he has perceptual problems but, even so, can connect Buddah’s Fire Sermon with the waters which are not fertilizing any longer and with St. Augustine’s words referring to the purificative fire of God:<sup>35</sup> Eastern and Western religious systems come together in these lines but neither fire nor water—the two mythic generators of life—have so far been able to bring back the restoration of life, and Part IV, “Death by Water”, confirms in its briefness the incapacity of this narrator who “was fishing in the dull canal” (189), a defeated self-conscious Fisher King who is also Phlebas the Phoenician, now “a fortnight dead”.<sup>36</sup> It seems that the mythic cycle is sus-

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<sup>35</sup> To Carthage then I came  
 Burning burning burning burning  
 O Lord Thou pluckest me out  
 O Lord Thou pluckest  
 burning

310

<sup>36</sup> According to traditional mythology and to the anthropological sources cited by Eliot, a wooden image of Adonis was annually thrown into the sea, coming back on shore within one week. This reappearance was understood as a sign of the power of the god and as the beginning of a new cycle. Therefore, the parodic Phlebas, already “a fortnight dead”, has not been able to fulfil his role as the agent of regeneration. Self-irony is more than evident when the reader considers that Phlebas’ is the Tarot card which represents the narrator.

pended in (space-) time, and the narrator once again rushes to warn the narratee that his/hers is also the luck of Phlebas:

Gentile or Jew  
 O you who turn the wheel and look to windward,           320  
 Consider Phlebas, who was once handsome and tall as you.

According to myth and tradition, once the Fisher King has sinned and is dying, a new quester will appear to bring restoration to the land and, in his/her jumping and ironic role, the narrator will offer the last opportunity to his/her narratees to face the saviour of this “land” which is constituted by the lines of the poem. Part V, “What the Thunder Said”, reintroduces the self-reflection upon language (“...Said”) and the Eastern element (“the Thunder”); the reader of Weston’s book will have no difficulty to recognise here many of the symbols and processes present in the Grail Quest. The first lines of this Part seem to be dedicated to the most important dying god in Western civilization: the sufferings and death of Christ are told by a cryptic narratorial voice who, once more, tries to highlight the dissolution of the barrier which separates the living from the dead:

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

Later on the narratorial voice recovers the tone and symbolism used in the second passage of the poem. The narratee participates in a journey—to Emmaus, according to the Notes—along which the narrator insists on mixing elements and presents the sterility of the land and of human beings whose “[s]weat is dry” (337). In ironic tone, line 340 reproduces at once both the tendency towards mixing and dissolution, and the restless quality of the voice itself: “Here one can neither stand nor lie nor sit”.

Before coming to the Perilous Chapel, the reader has faced the hooded shadow in the brown mantle—man or woman? (364)—and witnessed the dissolution of Western culture “in the violet air”.<sup>37</sup> The

<sup>37</sup> What is the city over the mountains  
 Cracks and reforms and bursts in the violet air  
 Falling towers  
 Jerusalem Athens Alexandria  
 Vienna London   375  
 Unreal

encompassing power of the lines is all too clear, as Eliot recommended in his essay “The Metaphysical Poets” and, after the magical crowing of the cock, the possibility of rain appears:

Co co rico co co rico                                      392  
In a flash of lighting. Then a damp gust  
Bringing rain.

In his attempt to comprehend everything, the narratorial voice jumps from this Western lighting into the Eastern “voice” of the Thunder. “DA”, as explained in the Notes, is interpreted —by gods, men, and demons— as “Datta” (give), “Dayadhvam” (sympathise), and “Damyata” (control), a circumstance which allows the narrator to dedicate three different monologues to these terms, where the motifs of desolation and the isolating tower reappear. Let us notice, however, that here —by the end of the poem— the reader has been exposed again to a double act of linguistic interpretation: words lead us to more words, and it is not surprising that the conclusion of the poem (422-33) presents a dense accumulation of hypertextual references and that the narrator-Fisher King introduces the last self-reflexive comment on the results of all his narrating act: “These fragments I have shored against my ruins” (430).

In this self-conscious reference to his own role, the narrator seems to summarize the results of his multiple quest. As a mythic quester he has not been capable of bringing about the restoration of the land. As a quester for a sound epistemology he has also failed in finding any clear meaning: words cannot produce the miracle, they can only refer to more and more words, the external referent being always deferred. As a self-conscious literary figure the narrator ends up being a compiler and mixer of poetic fragments: jumping from the story into the narrating, from being a witness into being the protagonist of his discourse to the narratee, finally submitting to the inevitability of incompleteness and fragmentation.

The narrator’s metalinguistic role as compiler of literary fragments and his “mythic” transtextual quest for regeneration having failed, this leading figure can finally make an only suggestion: “shanti”, magically repeated three times. Meaning “The Peace which passeth understanding” (note to line 433), “shanti” transcends language —that human tool to communicate understanding— and surpasses the narrator’s hypertextual activities. Language is not enough to bring forth the solution to the “waste land”:

communicative —narratological— barriers have been frequently trespassed and the final effect does not seem to be anything but metaphoric: to suggest the necessity of integration between the isolated “I” and the other. But in this attempt language is rediscovered as the referential tool it simply is: it cannot bring the mythic reunion about.

Hypertextuality and the frequent crossing of barriers —temporal, spatial and narratological— are certainly disrupting elements which help create the problems of understanding which befall the reader who faces *The Waste Land*. However, epistemological problems increase when we move to the superior level represented by the Notes written by an Eliot-Editor who decides to comment on the poem “The Waste Land”.

The analysis of this level shows that this editorial artefact also follows the epistemological mood of the poem. In fact, the famous Notes on *The Waste Land* cannot start in a way more clearly destructive against their own function:

Miss Weston’s book will elucidate the difficulties of the poem much better than my notes can do; and I recommend it . . . to any who think such elucidation of the poem worth the trouble. (Preface to the Notes).

First, the reader should notice that the Editor says that Weston’s book *From Ritual to Romance* works more effectively than his own Notes to clarify “the difficulties of the poem”, later on suggesting the reading of that volume to those who think that “*such elucidation* is worth the trouble”. The implications are obvious: the Notes do not fulfil their traditional role, that is to say, textual clarification; furthermore the validity of any reader’s attempt to interpret the poem is questioned. The Editor also recommends the reading of Frazer’s *The Golden Bough* in this Preface to the Notes, pointing out that anyone who knows this famous piece of anthropological research “will immediately recognise in the poem certain references to vegetation ceremonies”. From here on the addressee of the Notes will come across a new system of references upon references in which the editorial voice will progressively attack and destroy its own cognitive power. Soon the reader comes across notes such as the one on line 46:

*I am not familiar with the exact constitution of the Tarot pack of cards . . . 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, and because *I associate him* with the hooded figure in the passage of the disciples to Emmaus in Part V . . . The Man with Three Stave . . . I associate, *quite arbitrarily*, with the Fisher King himself. (My italics)

The narratorial voice's (the Editor's on this level) lack of certainty adds to the emphasis this voice puts on the arbitrary character of his own subjectivity. On top of everything else, the reader of Weston's and Frazer's works knows that these volumes do not clarify the meaning of the poem in a satisfactory way. In the remaining Notes (a referential system operating on the poem) references to activities of individual perception accumulate —as happens in the poem itself. Examples such as the one which follows may increase any receiver's doubts on the possibility of objective knowledge:

The following lines *were stimulated by the account* of one of the Antarctic expeditions (*I forget which, but I think* one of Shackleton's): *it was related* that the party of explorers, at the extremity of their strength, had the constant *delusion* that there was *one more member* than could *actually* be counted. (Note to line 360. Eliot's emphasis; my italics)

It is worth noticing how once again the credibility of the text is at stake: the uncertain narrative of some member of an indeterminate expedition to the Arctic is related, on the level of the story in the poem, to a question: "Who is the third who walks always beside you?" (l. 360). Furthermore, who is asking this question? and who is the addressee —"you"— of such a question?

It is not surprising, then, that the critical artefact built up in the Notes ends in the following way: "Shanti. Repeated as here, a formal ending to an Upanishad. 'The peace which passeth understanding' is our equivalent to this word."

"Shanti" is the end of an Upanishad in the same way in which this note is the end of the text *The Waste Land*. As previously mentioned, "shanti" suggests the necessity of an answer beyond human knowledge, because human knowledge is expressed by language and this communicative system does not seem to apprehend reality: a sign leads us to

another sign, a signifier to a signifier. Forty years later, probably remembering the magic year of Modernism, Joseph Heller was to name his most famous novel *Catch-22* (1961) to introduce his readers to the difficult and absurd condition of a human being trapped in the prison of language, but already by that magic year of 1922 Ludwig Wittgenstein had concluded something similar to Eliot's argument: "Wovon man nicht sprechen kann, darüber muss man schweigen", last proposition of his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. The ironic Eliot chose to do something similar to what Wittgenstein postulated in his book: to cynically use language as a ladder, which you throw away when used, to suggest the impossibility of linguistic communication with other beings and with reality. It could also be argued that many "complexities" of our civilization have been suggested in the lines of the poem and in its editorial work; in this sense Eliot would have fulfilled his own aims as postulated in "The Metaphysical Poets" and elsewhere.

However the final result seems to be rather more pessimistic: knowledge via language seems to be an impossible way. Above the narrator of the poem and the Editor of the Notes, the ultimate implications of the text —the "implied author"— may discover to the reader the fact that it is not possible to build up any sound epistemology; even Eliot-Editor deprived himself of any reliability, and the ultimate implications of the text seem to further suggest that, for all we know, infinite regression can go on playing. If we add to this suggestion the possible nominalist stance maintained by Eliot at the moment of writing *The Waste Land*, we could now explain in a different light the fact that the whole text ends with the word "word" of its last note. Both the level of the story narrated in the poem and the level of the text which incorporates the comments of the extradiegetic Editor help us, in the last communicative act, discover the self-affirmation and self-irony of the text's fictionality: "These fragments I have shored against my ruins" (l. 431) lead us to conclude the nature of "artefact" of the poem, an artefact built thanks to the self-affirmation of its fictionality, to the crossing of boundaries between different narratological levels, to the destruction —or so it seems— of the faith in language, now quite a useless tool to go beyond the text itself. Outside the text and the dominions of the "implied author", the real reader may think —with Jorge Luis Borges— that the over-abundant technique of infinite regression is still

operating to further suggest the fictitious or fictional character of reality.<sup>38</sup> However, due to the apparent necessity operating in such an epistemological impossibility, we are left with just that: a mere linguistic suggestion.

In any case, how can we explain that almost obsessive tendency to blur or dissolve borders which pervades the whole text? It could suffice to say that Eliot was trying to write that kind of all comprehensive, integrative poetry that he defended in his critical essays. But once we have paid attention to the different narratological levels, we are simply left with doubtful interpretations: the tendency to mix elements and cross borders is clearly present in the text, and so are many reiterative elements which refer to myth and the necessity of salvation. A cynical Eliot who tries to apprehend a sound epistemology and come to terms with external reality must necessarily have doubts about the human capacity to reach truth. If we add to that the well-known fact that the poet was having personal problems at the moment of writing the poem and that Europe was still recovering from the Great War, it does not seem far-fetched to assume that Eliot, despite his mistrust, still wanted to find a solution to the eternal human problem of the meaning of life: although ironic and parodic towards the mythic discourse, his tendency in *The Waste Land* to mix and dissolve borders could be also interpreted, coming back to Frazer's analysis and to Freud's correlative theory of the ontogenetic evolution of the human race, as a regressive tendency towards the first stage —Frazer's "magic", and Freud's "animistic"—, that moment of undifferentiation in which the ego and the other are one, that stage in which it is not necessary to search for the external referent because there is nothing "outside". Curiously enough, this tendency towards integration —which R. Jackson qualifies as an "entropic pull" (1981, chapter 3; see also Benvenuto and Kennedy 1986)— may also be termed as "mythic". In this manner we, interpreters of a text which interprets itself, are once again at the beginning of our argument: the primordial mythic cycle of death and regeneration.

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<sup>38</sup> See P. Waugh 1984, 24-27. On pages 21-22 of her volume Waugh offers her readers a list of "features typical of post-modernism", and concludes: "In all of these what is foregrounded is the writing of the text as the most fundamentally problematic aspect of that text." According to her list of postmodernist features, we could have some difficulties not to locate *The Waste Land* in the postmodernist period.

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