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Théâtre du Moi et Théâtre du Monde dans 'The Waste Land'

Jean-Philippe Maucuit

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Théâtre du Moi & Théâtre du Monde dans *The Waste Land*.

Jean-Philippe Maucuit

Présentation

L'article qui suit s'inspire d'une étude réalisée sur *The Waste Land* (La Terre Gaste), l'œuvre poétique majeure de T.S. Eliot. Publié en 1922, ce poème long de 433 vers est largement reconnu comme un texte-clé du modernisme, jetant les bases d'une esthétique nouvelle, certes inspirée des Imagistes, mais au travers de laquelle la substance du poème et son mode d'énonciation furent fondamentalement transformés. Le poème d'Eliot représente une étude d'une civilisation et d'un monde condamnés par leur propre stérilité. Le traitement poétique donne lieu à un surprenant collage moderniste où la simultanéité vient se substituer à la conventionnelle linéarité chronologique de l'écriture. Poème de la fragmentation, *The Waste Land* est "un amas d'images brisées"¹ où la polyphonie vocale et visuelle crée une véritable scénographie de l'événement.

Nous nous intéresserons donc à cette théâtralité inhérente au texte, où l'interaction des voix ouvre l'espace poétique à un espace scénique et psychique. En effet, la scène apparaît comme un lieu mental dans lequel Tirésias – la figure centrale du poème – se rejoue sa propre vie, aux prises avec des représentations de lui-même à travers autrui. Cependant, à la fragmentation de son moi correspond celle du monde, et sa psyché devient théâtre universel et intemporel où Eliot, utilisant la méthode mythique, essaie de saisir l'unité de l'expérience humaine.

Within Tiresias's psyche : from persona to personage

Even a superficial reading of *The Waste Land* reveals that one of the most striking features of the poem is its interplay and multiplicity of voices. Actually, its language suggests periodic changes of speech situation, and,

what is remarkable is that we have constant changes of speaker and hearer as in a play. There are indeed subtle and complex implications of a dramatic performance. For instance, in "A Game of Chess", the scene shifts from an overdecorated and decadent boudoir to a pub in the London East End. There emerges a montage of voices, where Eliot juxtaposes a pseudo-dialogue taking place in Belladonna's rich boudoir to the colloquial talk of two cockney women heard in a London pub. The passage is thus organized scenically, and the voices sound like stage characters, bringing out the dramatic quality of Eliot's text. In this respect, the particularity of the poetic mode of experience in *The Waste Land* comes from the change and interplay of voices. Therefore, one question should be constantly present in one's mind while reading *The Waste Land* : who is speaking ? Who is the persona ?

It would seem clear that the reader of *The Waste Land* hears a multiplicity of voices, dramatic voices, as we have just said. Yet, these are heard within a resonance chamber. All voices are presumably comprehended within an all-inclusive narrative voice, disclosing the unfolding of the questing-figure's journey, from his awakening to life, to his transformation into a prophetic figure and his discovery of Eastern philosophies. Hence some sort of puzzling overlapping takes place between the lyric, narrative and dramatic genres in an astonishing synthesis², where the poem's voice roams from voice to voice.

Obviously, Eliot's famous note to line 218 is of prime importance for a better understanding of the poem's persona:

"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 women are one woman, and the two sexes meet in Tiresias. What Tiresias sees, in fact, is the substance of the poem. [...]"

Thus, Tiresias enjoys a very special status. He is the all-inclusive character of the poem, but, he is not a unified person. He is divided from himself and yet [unites] all the rest. As such, the only actual personage of the poem

hides behind the faceless characters composing his self, and, the poem simultaneously takes place at the inter- and intrasubjective levels. The prismatic and chameleon-like nature of his self also implies that neither himself nor the other characters have a fixed identity or stable essence, as each identity seems to be fluctuating. Hence Tiresias appears to be endowed with a supra-personal dimension, where the epic, narrative and dramatic selves blend together.

However, Tiresias is not only the all-inclusive character of *The Waste Land*, but also its all-inclusive voice, that of an active narrator using different voices with specific intentions. What is remarkable is that all voices are within his collective yet single psyche. They are interior voices creating a theatre of the mind. Actually, the spectacularity of the text hinges on the interplay of its dramatic and psychic voices which release a true spectacle. It is as if the polyphony of voices were creating images of a mental space, as if they were sketching multiple scenes. On this supposition, the poetic space shows symbolically one direction, that of the theatre as a mental place. As we have already said, *The Waste Land* is scenically organized, and because of the poem's form and the disposition of the text, the reader's imagination is tempted to transpose onto a stage, what happens nowhere else than in a mental space, within Tiresias's psyche. Therefore, voice and vision are here closely intertwined, and the dramatic and fragmentary nature of Eliot's text reveals *The Waste Land* as a poetic drama³, testifying of Eliot's will to assemble a poem out of a combination of scenes to suggest the mind in action.

The idea of a theatre of the mind is then backed up by Eliot's choice of Tiresias. Indeed, why does the reader meet the figure of the South sayer of ancient Thebes in *the Waste Land* ? What interests us here is Tiresias's identity as a seer. Actually, Tiresias is only a principle, a scenographic tool. By definition, a seer is the one who sees the world within, that is, an intermediary between the inside and the outside. He has prophetic visions which are interior visions⁴ of the outside world. As such, his visions are both personal and collective, and confirm Tiresias's synthetic role as the inclusive voice and character of the poem. But, this also means that his psyche is an interior theatre where the outside world is staged, inducing the reader to transform what he reads into visions, a theatrical performance.

This is finally confirmed by Eliot's use of theatrical terms such as "spectator" or "character" in his note to line 218. Tiresias is a "mere spectator" : "what he sees" is not his actual experience ; nor is he a "character", since when Tiresias appears in the poem he is not performing any kind of role. Besides, the reader only hears his voice but never sees him. Yet, he is "the most important personage in the poem, uniting all the rest", that is, representing some sort of multiplex channeling of the vocal and visual polyphony of the text.

It should be pointed out that Eliot's distinction between "character" – put between inverted commas in his note – and "personage-spectator" invites the reader to make a significant differentiation between Tiresias's position in *The Waste Land*, and the waste landers' peopling his vision and self. Indeed, Tiresias presumably watches his self from the outside. He attends to interior voices releasing an interior play, acted out for him by the waste landers. They are the actual characters of this drama-poem, performing roles on a psychic stage they cannot comprehend. Unwitting actors of the self who cannot see or reach beyond this world, "each man [fixing] his eyes before his feet"⁵, they differ from Tiresias, who "though blind [...] can see"⁶ beyond appearances and time.

Thus, *The Waste Land* not only works through the mode of the interior monologue and the theatre of the mind. The text also stages a theatre of the self, characterized by a great deal of soul-searching and a sense of self-watching. As Eliot's use of the inverted commas may signify, the poem's "characters" have to be considered as emblematic figures, metaphorical incarnations and expressions of the self. As a consequence, the text conflates the physical and the spiritual world ; it hinges on some dialectic of the inner and the outer. Therefore, the interior play not only conveys the physical world but also an interior attitude. It becomes the factor of a moral life, illuminating simultaneously the present, the future and the past since the voices are voices of roles already played or to be played. For instance, in "A Game of Chess", the questing-figure of the poem relives a past experience of failed love recorded in a pseudo-dialogue with his wife, Belladonna, the modern parody of Shakespeare's Cleopatra. Interestingly, this past memory recalls another moment of failed love as Eliot's note to line 126

suggests. He refers us to the lines 37 and 48 of Part I, namely, the hyacinth garden vignette and the first evocation of the Shakespearean rag : “Those are pearls that were his eyes, which reappears in the pseudo-dialogue of the boudoir scene. In both passages, the questing-figure is left silent : either “[he] could not / Speak, and [his] eyes failed”, or his voice remains unheard, as if he were answering his wife in mute terror. It is worth noting that the questing-figure understands his future role through the superimposition of various past experiences of failed love and past voices, that is, of roles already played. These roles will involve a profound metamorphosis of the self, as the resurgence of Ariel’s voice makes clear, for in *The Tempest*, the sea-changes entail the moral maturation of the characters who pass through a drowning to emerge transformed into a world of harmony.

In sum, Tiresias’s theatre of the mind includes all the voices of the self. This variety of voices not only releases a psychic spectacle, but also partially reveals the inner workings of the mind. As the inclusive voice of the poem, Tiresias enables the reader to hear the subtle poetic modulation from polyphony to unison. As a “personage-spectator” and not a “character”, he has a privileged point of view. He attends to an interior and mental performance, where he plays the role of a periscope of the soul, channeling the kaleidoscopic visions of the self composing *The Waste Land*. As such, his inner world is a stage that slips before his eyes, actually, within his own psyche where he sees himself in a dramatic light⁷.

The theatre of the self is also the privileged place of the reader’s introspection. Indeed, the reader watches a “personage” thinking and looking at other “characters”. But, he sees through Tiresias’s eyes, which may mean that Tiresias’s inward-looking is worth heeding ; it is a type and a paradigm of the activity of self-watching. In fact, Eliot’s poem is a two-dimensional text characterized by a doubleness of vision. The term not only refers to Tiresias’s enlarged point of view as opposed to the waste landers’ confined vision, but, it also refers to the *mise en abîme* between the reader and Tiresias. There is a whole set of eye and mirror effects. Like Tiresias, the reader remains a spectator of the self, “always [observing] from the outside though with complete understanding”⁸. As Tiresias, he sees himself in a

dramatic light. This is indeed what he seems to be asked to do through the resounding and imperious cry : “You! Hypocrite lecteur! – mon semblable! – mon frère !”⁹ concluding “The Burial of the Dead”. Accordingly, he will also have to give his own interpretation of the Thunder God’s triple commands at the end of the poem and, in so doing, to reassess his view of the world.

Seeing through Tiresias’s eyes, the reader’s breadth of view is also enlarged to the world, Tiresias appearing as some sort of bifocal lens through which the reader’s vision is either narrowed to his inner self or is made to comprehend the whole world. Tiresias’s interior stage is indeed given greater volume through the rhetorical structure of *The Waste Land*. It becomes an integrating metaphor of the world, a timeless unity, where all humanities are merged.

The World Within.

As Tiresias is “throbbing between two lives”¹⁰, his vision and voice are jammed between antiquity and contemporaneity. In *The Waste Land*, the South sayen of ancient Thebes is made the contemporary observer of the modern self and world. Looking over the London scene, he is no longer a sheer classical mythological figure, and yet he is neither a fully-fledged inhabitant of contemporary London. Thus, the poem’s collective psyche and self – most presumably an amorphous expression of mankind as a whole – exists throughout ages, but also across gender. “Old man with wrinkled female breasts”¹¹ who has lived in both sexes, he incarnates an intersexual figure. Consequently, his vision and voice are universal and inclusive, conflating various opposites. Seeing and hearing through this timeless and universal persona, the reader is presented with a whole inclusive vision of the world. He becomes the spectator of a theatre of the world, where voices of the past merge with voices of the present. Miscellaneous voices, they are either lifted out of memory and experience, of poetry and religion, or, of history, myth and legend. But they are all subsumed within Tiresias’s dramatic psyche.

Actually, Eliot’s method is to juxtapose fragmented snapshots and voices of the present – such as in the fortune-teller episode or in the typist and clerk passage – with memories and voices of the past. In so doing, he trans-

poses Tiresias's psychic theatre from the self to the world by using what in his analysis of James Joyce's novel *Ulysses*, he called "the mythical method" :

"It is here that Mr Joyce's parallel use of the *Odyssey* has a great importance. It has the importance of a scientific discovery. [...] In using myth, in manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity, Mr Joyce is pursuing a method that others must pursue after him. They will not be imitators, any more than the scientist who uses the discoveries of an Einstein in pursuing his own, independent, further investigations. It is simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history. It is a method already adumbrated by Mr Yeats, and of the need for which I believe Mr Yeats to have been the first contemporary to be conscious. It is a method for which the horoscope is auspicious. Psychology [...] ethnology, and *The Golden Bough* have concurred to make possible what was impossible even a few years ago. Instead of narrative method, we may now use the mythical method. It is, I seriously believe, a step toward making the modern world possible for art [...]"¹².

Thus, the interpenetration between past and present is the principle governing the poet's manipulation of the mythical method in *The Waste Land*. From the point of view of Eliot's poetical technique, the mythic composition enables him to make irony, intertextuality and parody work together to elaborate a palimpsest poem, often making the most of the ironic rewriting. Interestingly, Eliot's manipulation of a continuous link between contemporaneity and antiquity is of two types. Either he employs it to parallel the impotence and cruelty of his own time, or, to suggest the sterility of the contemporary world by showing the modern debasement of ancient myths. But, in both cases, voices of the past and of the present are kept in a continuous flow within Tiresias's dramatic psyche to create a theatre of images staging the modern world.

Eliot uses passages, especially from Greek or Latin legends, to reveal the sameness of the life of the present with that of ancient and legendary times. The construction of the alleged love scene between the typist and the clerk

in "The Fire Sermon" is one of the best and most significant examples of Eliot's technique. The scene depicts Tiresias's trance :

"(And I Tiresias have foresuffered all
Enacted on this same divan or bed ;
I who have sat by Thebes below the wall
And walked among the dead)"¹³

Eliot creates a close structural relationship between the climax of the diviner's trance and the climax of the sexual intercourse between the two protagonists. In fact, his vision obliterates it : this is the function of the parentheses which at the same time refer to and obliterate it. Jammed between contemporaneity and antiquity, Tiresias is in a position that enables him to understand the meaning of the rite of copulation between the two lovers. As the reference to Thebes may suggest, their automatic love-making is a curse upon London as Oedipus's love for his mother was upon ancient Thebes. Thus, listening to Tiresias's timeless voice, the reader accedes to the vision of an accursed modern land.

Besides, it is also through the voice of antique poetry that Eliot makes an analogy between legendary and present times. Indeed, the scene seems to replicate the pattern of the passage concerning Tiresias, Juno and Jove in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. In both cases, Tiresias's watching of the copulation, whether it be between the two snakes or between the typist and clerk, transforms him into a prophetic figure, the legendary world merging again with contemporary London. Hence the implicit presence of Ovid's voice through Eliot's rewriting releases the spectacle of a bestial copulation being repeated throughout the ages.

Thus, the mythical method allows a huge concentration of meaning. It works through a multi-voiced and multi-layering principle, where the present and the past are drawn together to stage the modern world. As we have just seen, it involves pointing out similarities between the ancient and contemporary worlds, but it also implies a revelation of their contrasts, such as in the passage with Mrs. Porter and her daughter.

This time, the voice latently present is that of John Day. Eliot points out in his notes that the passage is a reference to *The Parliament of Bees*, and quotes : "A noise of horns and hunting, which shall bring / Acteon to Diana

in the spring". The line has been transformed in *The Waste Land* through Tiresias's voice into "The sound of horns and motors, which shall bring / Sweeney to Mrs. Porter in the spring"¹⁴. Eliot's rewriting is fully ironical and bathetic. Indeed, Diana is a goddess of chastity, but, here, it is Sweeney – a highly sexual creature in Eliot's gallery of characters – that is brought to Mrs. Porter, the brothel-keeper¹⁵, an image of lust more than a paragon of virtue. Moreover, ironically enough, the passage is followed by a line taken from Verlaine's sonnet *Persifal* : "Et O ces voix d'enfants chantant dans la coupole!"¹⁶ In the sonnet, having mastered the temptations of lust and cured the king, Verlaine's knight adores the Grail and hears the children's voices¹⁷. There is conveyed an image of the spiritual taking over the physical, of the victory of the spirit over the flesh : a sharp contrast with the lust, prostitution and futile sexuality characterizing the contemporary world. In fact, the passage illustrates how the beneficial remains of myth and poetry have been devalued and debunked in the modern world. The voices of the past have now lost their sacred aura, only releasing the spectacle of a spiritually sterile world.

Accordingly, the text stages a theatre of the world where the reader becomes the spectator of the modern waste land. It is a theatre of images hinging on an interpenetration between present and past times, and working either by way of ironic contrasts or parodic similitudes between ancient values and modern squalor. As such, Eliot's poem can be considered as by and large a satire conflating various genres and directed against what he perceives as the spiritual barrenness of his own time. Eliot could not state the modern spiritual drought and dearth in terms of a world staged as a waste land. Instead, he merges past and present voices and gives some primitive force to his poem by using myths and legends, by "returning to the origin and bringing something back, seeking the beginning and end"¹⁸. He concentrates meaning within the succession of disconnected scenes or visions, by juxtaposing them against the patterns of legends, myths or traditions – perhaps part of the collective unconscious or seen as the inherited symbols, those with a significance to a culture, containing meaning within themselves, and which, as Yeats postulated, are given. Yet, the mythic composition is not only a matter of rhetorical construction in *The Waste*

Land, it also presents us with a fundamental clue to analyze Eliot's vision of history and time.

Indeed, in manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity, Eliot does not simply draw a portrait of his own age. Rather, he presents us with a whole inclusive and integrating spectacle of the world, expressing a reflection on the long experience of spiritual life. As B.C. Southam argues :

"The 'waste' is of our civilization. [But], Eliot does not regard this as a single moment in history, particular to the West in the twentieth century, and the poem is organized to present an inclusive, comparative vision; a perspective of history in which (by succinct allusions and references) twentieth-century forms of belief and disbelief are kept in a continuous critical relationships with those of the past"¹⁹.

In fact, Eliot's comprehension of history implies a sense of tradition through which the modern world is at one with the past. In *The Waste Land*, the sense of tradition is made perceptible through the multiplicity of dramatic voices lifted out of literature and myth, or history and experience and echoing throughout Tiresias's interior theatre. This historical awareness is in truth a prerequisite for an understanding of the present, since for Eliot :

"Tradition [...] cannot be inherited ; if you want it you must obtain it by great labour. It involves, in the first place, the historical sense [...]; and the historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence ; the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order. The historical sense, which is a sense of the timeless as well as the temporal together and of the temporal and the timeless together is what makes a writer traditional"²⁰.

As Eliot wrote in *Burnt Norton* : "All times are eternally present". Out of this simultaneity comes a new time, a time of its own, and it is through such inner temporal dynamism that *The Waste Land* works. Chronological time is obliterated in favour of a mythical one, as Eliot chooses to reestablish a synchronicity giving access to eternity. What is remarkable is that in *The*

Waste Land, content and form are at one to illustrate this temporal coincidence. Indeed, the poem's parataxis which involves a rupture with the linearity of writing, is also a practical device for Eliot to convey an impression of simultaneity. Time and space are here joined together since all is given through the poet's spontaneous and immediate thinking. Through that, the reader accedes to immutable instants when past, present and future are joined and conflated into one moment of vision, which acquires in the process a universal significance. Accordingly, Eliot's voice is not that of the self. Rather, the theatre of the world he offers to the reader implies a comprehensive understanding of the world, where voices of the past and of the present blend together, and through which he tries to seize the unity of the human experience, telling us something about the human condition as a whole.

The constant interplay of voice and vision is what the rhetorical and poetical structure of *The Waste Land* is meant to serve. It is the means through which the visual and vocal polyphony of the text makes sense and acquires a dramatic and inclusive sounding. In this drama-poem, Tiresias's self substitutes for the world. The outside world is staged only through Tiresias's mental associations and fragmentary interior visions. Hence some sort of puzzling mix between subjectivity and objectivity takes place where the reader is simultaneously made the spectator of his self and of the world. Awareness is gained from the poem's spectacles which create a whole inclusive vision of life. It is an awareness that all facts are forever present. All times are one time in *The Waste Land*, perhaps as a call for what is eternal, and, indeed, the reader's way through the poem leads him from "April" to "Shantih" i.e. to eternity. But, the poet not only strives to capture the continuity of all human experience, he also wishes to comprehend its unity. In that sense, Tiresias is perhaps more the representation of an osmosis of individual minds than their sheer reunion in a central consciousness, thus becoming a place for a unanimist life.

Jean-Philippe Maucuit

Notes

- 1 *The Waste Land*, Part I, l. 22.
- 2 Of course, this goes against Aristotle's definition of the dramatic genre, which implies that there is no narration, and so, no inclusive narrative voice. Cf. Aristotle's *Poetics*, Chapter VI.
- 3 Poetic drama is to be taken in the sense of an interior monologue using the dramatic form — as in Browning — as opposed to dramatic poetry, which refers to the classical theatrical form — as in Shakespeare or Euripides.
Cf. T.S. Eliot, "The Three Voices of Poetry", in *On poetry and Poets*, London, Faber & Faber, 1957, p. 89-102.
- 4 It should be noted that the original epigraph of *The Waste Land*, taken from Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, makes clear Eliot's view of the poem : "Did he live his life again, in every detail of desire, temptation, and surrender during that supreme moment of complete knowledge ? He cried in a whisper at some image, at some vision, - he cried out twice, a cry that was no more than a breath — "The horror! The horror !"
- 5 *The Waste Land*, Part I, l. 65.
- 6 *Ibid.*, Part I, ll. 218-219.
- 7 This recalls one passage in "'Rhetoric' and Poetic Drama", where Eliot's relates this dramatic light, this sense of self-introspection to everyday's life : "But, in actual life, in many of those situations in actual life which we enjoy consciously and keenly, we are at times aware of ourselves in this way, and these moments are of great usefulness to dramatic verse".
T.S. Eliot, "'Rhetoric' and Poetic Drama", *Selected Essays*, London, Faber & Faber, third ed., 1951, p. 41.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 40.
- 9 *The Waste Land*, Part I, l. 176.
- 10 *Ibid.*, Part III, l. 218.
- 11 *Ibid.*, Part III, l. 219.
- 12 T.S. Eliot, "Ulysses, Order and Myth", *The Dial*, November 1923, p. 482-483.
- 13 *The Waste Land*, Part III, ll. 243-246.
- 14 *Ibid.*, Part III, ll. 197-198.
- 15 B.C. Southam specifies : "Eliot notes that these lines come from a ballad popular among Australian troops in the First World War ; [...] Of the several versions, Eliot gives the polite wording, which obscures the point that Mrs. Porter, a Cairo brothel-keeper, together with her daughter, was notorious among Australian troops for passing on venereal disease".
B.C. Southam, *A Student's Guide to the Selected Poems of T.S. Eliot*, London, Faber & Faber, first published in 1968, sixth ed., 1994, p. 168.
- 16 *The Waste Land*, Part III, l.202.
- 17 Cf. B.C. Southam, *A Student's Guide...*, *op. cit.*, p.168.
- 18 Indeed, one justification of Eliot's use of myths and legends in *The Waste Land* might be found in a lecture he gave on Matthew Arnold in 1933. Dealing with the notion of "auditory imagination", the idea that poetry begins with a rhythm that is too far down in the unconscious, he said : "What I call the 'auditory imagination' is the feeling for syllable and rhythm, penetrating far below the conscious levels of thought and feeling, invigorating every word ; sinking to the most primitive and forgotten, returning to the origin and bringing something back, seeking the beginning and end. It works through meanings, certainly, or not without meanings in the ordinary sense, and fuses the old and obliterated and the trite, the current, and the new and surprising, the most ancient and the most civilised mentality".
T.S. Eliot, *The Use of Poetry and The Use of Criticism : Studies in the Relation of Criticism to Poetry in England*, London, Faber & Faber, first published in 1933, sixth ed., 1975, p. 119.
- 19 B.C. Southam, *A Student's Guide...*, *op. cit.*, p. 126.
- 20 T.S. Eliot, *Selected Prose*, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1953, p. 23.