

T.S. Eliot's Blending Of Myth And Reality In The Waste Land

Subhashis Kundu

Ph.D. Research Scholar of Cooch Behar Panchanan Barma University

ABSTRACT: *Myth and reality are new additions to the various literary devices in use such as metaphor, imagery and symbol. Myth is very distinct. Besides working as a literary device, it also works as a tool to bring order, as emphasizing Eliot's saying "to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history", I am making a narratological analysis of his famous poem The Waste Land(1922) that offers one of the best ways to rethink or, at least to start a process of about some of the most difficult aspects of the text, such as the ultimate or 'real' intention of the poet, the effect that created by the editorial work built by Eliot himself and also his teacher Ezra Pound around this poem, or the importance of the 'mythic method' for the final understanding of the whole construct. It is a part of the unconscious psyche of man connecting the past, present and future which projects itself into the conscious by means of, what Jung calls, "motifs", "primordial images" or "archetypes". Applying Frazer's "magic" and Freud's correlative theory of ontogenetic evolution of the human race as a regressive tendency in which it is not necessary to search for the external referent because there is nothing outside. Hence, this paper will provide this tendency towards integration as an 'entropic pull' which R. Jackson qualifies as "myth".*

KEY WORDS:-*Mythic Method; Mythopoeia; Use of Myth; The Waste land - Mythic text; A narratological reading of The Waste Land; Postmodernist trend in Eliot*

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As we move from myth to archetype we find certain motifs and images recurring in different mythologies of people widely separated in time and place and having a common meaning, eliciting comparable psychological responses and serving similar cultural functions called archetypes as universal symbols. 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 or 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, 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. 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. I hope that the reader of Eliot's poem will come to doubt, after my 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. It is our contention that 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, 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.

The word 'myth' is derived from the Greek word 'mythos' meaning fable, story-telling, or fictions to make sense of the world. It is as Hayden White states "a mode of discourse". Myth can, however, also be a distortion of memory. Mythology is that which we do not think is necessarily true, whereas memory is thought to be more precise. According to Graves myth has two main functions: The first is to answer the sort of awkward questions that children ask, such as 'Who made the world? How will it end? (...) The answers, necessarily graphic and positive, confer enormous power on the various deities credited with the creation and care of souls - and incidentally on their priesthoods. The second function of myth is to justify an existing social system and account for traditional rites and customs. One commonly held view is that myth represents a past phase of history. This idea has been supported as a way of explaining why we no longer accept certain myths. But it is a fallacy. They are still with us, albeit often in a different form. To quote Baudrillard: "history has transmuted into myth in the modern era. (...) History is our lost referential, that is to say our myth".

In *The Waste Land*, the underlying plot is based on the myth of Fisher King who has been wounded in his genital and his lack of potency makes his kingdom a waste land. Little is left for him to do but fish in the river near his castle Corbenic. Only by finding the Holy Grail can the country regain fertility. This Grail,

according to a medieval legend, is a sacred and miraculous vessel used by Jesus at the Last Supper, and then given by him to Joseph of Arimathea, who took it to England in 64 A.D. So knights travel from many lands on the journey of Quest in order to heal the Fisher King. After great difficulties, they succeed in finding the Grail and finally the King is rescued. The kingdom becomes a fertile land again. The Quest of Holy Grail literally means the search for the lost vessel and is symbolically understood as the search for truth and authorities, as well as redemptions of spirits. Eliot wrote these lines in Section Five of *The Waste Land*:

“In this decayed hole among the mountains
In the faint moonlight, the grass is singing
Over the tumbled graves, about the chapel
There is the empty chapel, only the wind’s home
It has no windows, and the door swings,
Dry bones can harm no one.”

-Eliot, *The Waste Land* 68

Adonis and Attis are Greek gods, representing the yearly decay and revival of life, especially of vegetable life as the personification of gods who annually died and rose again from the dead. Adonis, a god of Asiatic origin, was taken into the Greek mythology. Adonis is the son of Myrrha and her father, Cinyras. Myrrha, the daughter of Cinyras, fell desperately in love with her own father. Tormented by her sense of shame and guilt, the poor girl was on the point of suicide, but she was rescued just in time by her faithful nurse, who eventually wrenched the secret from her. Although the old woman was horrified by what she learned, she prepared to help her satisfy the girl’s passion rather to see her die. It was arranged that the daughter should go to the bed of her father without his knowing her identity, and their incestuous relations continued for some time until Cinyras in dismay found out with whom he had been sleeping. In terror Myrrha fled from the wrath of her father. As he pursued her, she prayed for deliverance and was changed into a myrrh tree which continually drips with tears. Myrrha had become pregnant by her father and from the tree was born a beautiful son named Adonis, who grew up to be a most handsome youth and keen hunter. At the sight of Adonis, Aphrodite fell desperately in love. One day while hunting in the forest, Adonis was attacked by a wild boar and died. Attis, like Adonis, is another resurrection god. According to the Greek mythology, Attis was the youth loved by Phrygian goddess Cybele, the Great mother. Attis was also god of vegetation, and in his self-mutilation, death, and resurrection he represents the fruits of the earth, which die in winter only to rise again in the spring. The myths of Adonis and Attis are of Frazer’s main concern in his monumental work *The Golden Bough* to which Eliot acknowledged his indebtedness for the construction of his *The Waste Land*. He tried to show that the resurrection has been a major mythical motif lying in the collective unconsciousness of all men throughout different ages, from primitives to modern men in the very opening lines of *The Waste Land*:

“April is the cruelest month, breeding
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
Memory and desire, stirring
Dull roots with spring rain”

Ibid. 1-4

Eliot works both the myth of Dido and Aeneas and Augustine’s treatment of it into the flowing stream of consciousness that is the poem’s argument or substance. Thus, the greatest of the Latin Church Fathers mediates between Virgil and Eliot and the worlds they envision. The saint’s understanding of the human condition lies at the heart of *The Waste Land*’s mythic structure, and in his view the ultimate waste land is the human soul estranged from God. Virgil’s mournful mythic heroism on behalf of imperial glory with Augustine’s Christian vision of humility in the service of God’s glory, Eliot dramatizes his myth of modern disillusionment. Although *Tristan and Isolde* is quoted in “*The Burial of the Dead*” and the *Rhine Maidens* and their song turn up in the third section of *The Waste Land*, it is the final section, “*What the Thunder Said*,” that is the most Wagnerian, offering a miniature *Götterdämmerung*. The landscape in this part of the poem could be the set of a production of the last installment of the *Ring*, with its barren crags, dry thunder, and oppressive darkness pierced by unearthly flashes of lightning. Moreover, “*What the Thunder Said*” begins with an unmistakable reference to Christ’s Passion, starting with His arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane, and Eliot’s own note explicitly mentions the journey to Emmaus. His “twilight of the gods” thus allows the possibility of God—incarnate as man—overthrowing the powers of darkness and rising again. Finally, the affirmations at the end of the poem are uttered in Sanskrit: Datta, Dayadhvam, Damyata, give Sympathize, Control; and Shantih, Shantih, Shantih gives Peace that pass all understanding. The invocation of a foreign language and religious tradition at this point leaves the result in doubt. Is there a Grail in the chapel, or is it “the empty chapel, only the wind’s home” (389), surrounded by “tumbled graves” (388)? In this poem Eliot does not answer the question. Poems, in any case, usually ask more questions than they answer. The Wagnerian description of apocalyptic destruction, however, can be taken as a Christian critique of an avaricious society preoccupied with power and possessions. This destruction rather death involves the loss of sexual sanctity and absorption in lust, which Buddha and

Augustine symbolized as “burning in flame” and which the poet emphasizes in the third movement, “The Fire Sermon”. Again, the human search for life principle is imaged as a journey and in the fifth movement, three parallel journeys are interwoven; the mythical journey to Chapel Perilous which ended in a “gust of moist wind bringing rain”; the biblical journey to Emmaus which brought about the revelation of Christ; and lastly, the aimless wandering of the modern uprooted humanity, “the hooded horde, ringed by flat horizon only.”¹

In his “Notes on ‘The Waste Land,’” Eliot identifies the Greek prophet Tiresias, who appears in Book III, as “the most important personage [...] uniting all the rest,”

due to the prophet’s awareness of “the substance of the poem”. Eliot’s analysis explains the connection of multiple consciousnesses within the text—as one voice “melts” into another and “all the women are one woman”—and the limited insight given to some of its speakers. Tiresias describes himself as “throbbing between two lives” and claims that he “perceived the scene, [or] foretold the rest”. Tiresias is a prophet, but he is also a device that forcibly connects readers to the text. According to Bentley and Brooker, the prophet:

“functions as Eliot’s ‘higher’ viewpoint which will include and transmute the figures in *The Waste Land* and also, perhaps, include and transmute reader as subject and text as object,” leading to the “subsumption of readers.” (Bentley and Brooker 54)

Rather than speaking on behalf of the other voices in the poem, or assuming agency by making sense of its contents, Tiresias is a functional component that imposes the same concerns and stresses upon readers as speakers. The critics build upon this idea in their discussion of Eliot’s “attribution of substance” in his note on Tiresias, which

“[warns] that the poem has no substantial unity from any [...] point of view.” (Ibid. 54)

The prophet’s confusion serves as a caution against investment in the poem, but his warning is too unclear to be of any use. The critics falter in the conclusion of their argument, which argues that Tiresias is a guide for readers. Despite his immersion in the unbalanced world of the poem, Bentley and Brooker affirm that the prophet:

“[provides] a means for the reader to transcend jarring and incompatible worlds, to move to a higher viewpoint that both includes and transcends the contemporary world” (ibid. 59)

Tiresias may be omniscient, but his visions are not a means to anything but further perplexity. If readers “transcend” the world by following Tiresias, they will suffer exposure to the same inconceivable forces which transform the prophet, and force him to walk to perpetually “among the lowest of the dead”. The prophet is not the key to the poem, but a sign of the extent of its turmoil. The position of Tiresias is only one suggestion of the comprehensive disorder of *The Waste Land*. The verse is rife with images of death and decay, from the “dead land” to the “stony rubbish” from which “branches grow,” to “[d]ead mountain mouth of carious teeth that cannot spit,” to the “Unreal City” that occasionally appears throughout the poem. The integration of multiple mythologies, historical references, and personality types into the text of the poem substantiates the extent of their removal from time, space, and order. Eliot links the “Man with Three Staves [...] with the Fisher King,” though Madame Sosostris fails to recognize the correlation of the figures during her Tarot reading. The “Shakespearian Rag” suggests constitutes a ruin of literature and written art in keeping with the natural degradations in the landscape. Likewise, the image of “the change of Philomel [...] by the barbarous king,” which hangs over the “antique mantel” in “A Game of Chess,” is only one among many “withered stumps of time,” rendered meaningless by the crisis taking place. The loss of integrity in art and myth evokes the loss of direction on the part of the speakers.

It is the flexibility and ambivalence of poetic style that allow an innovative technique to serve a traditional vision. While the surface texture of *The Waste Land* suggests irony and disillusionment, its underlying structure is mythic; that is, it organizes experience in terms of grand, epic narratives. What at first seems nothing more than a sly accumulation of the shards and slivers of Western civilization -

“a heap of broken images” (Eliot, *The Waste Land* 22)

- emerges as something like the ruins of a monument, still noble and still radiating significance. The shallow, fashionable cynicism of the “flapper” generation, of the “bright young things,” is truly disabused of the illusions engendered by its pride, lust, and sloth. To be sure, Eliot handles myth—that is, “plot” or “story”- very curiously in *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 numbers of difficulties increases when the reader realizes that Eliot also wrote an editorial artifact his well-known notes to be added to the poem in its first book edition. In *Traditional 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” (Eliot, *Tradition* 15).

Eliot goes on with his thesis of reevaluation of tradition and tries to explain the relationship between the poet and the poem. He affirms the role of mature poet after having talked about the-

“Living whole of all poetry that has ever written” (ibid. 16).

That is to say, Eliot would conclude advocating the necessity of integration of the past and the present to produce the poet's real poetry. This 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 'strict sensu' would correspond to a 'mythic pull'. 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 achieved? It seems to me that a thorough analysis of the modernist background and its quest for objective knowledge also requires 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*. As Derrida has implied, and many more before him, there is a gap between the human mind and what is 'outside' it, that which, for convenience's sake, we could name "external reality". Descartes had gone as far as to enunciate "cogito ergo sum" but still needed the help of the God to grant the existence of the world. Once the belief in God disappears, humans have to recur again to the philosopher to prove the existence of reality. Irony would, therefore, come out of this epistemological doubt about truth and life. 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 conscious, 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 power', in a society still dominated by the bourgeois and proletarian comfortable beliefs in external reality.

Through the fragments of images, symbols, allusions culled from different languages and cultures, Eliot has been able to put an order on the immense and universal panorama of futility and anarchy spread throughout human life. Myths and archetypal images and symbols have been well adapted to his context and interwoven into the texture of the poem. Diversity has totally been transmuted into unity. They have provided him with the "objective correlative" which Eliot likes to have in every poem and drama:

"The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an 'objective correlative'; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of a particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate the sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked."

This is exactly what myth and archetype achieve in *The Waste Land*, Eliot has been able to achieve this equivalence (correlative) between "objects, a situation, a chain of events" and "that particular emotion" perfectly well with the use of myth and archetype. They are "communicated" to us by "a skilful accumulation of imagined sensory impressions". The words in the poem give the impression of having been "automatically released" by the events being described. And that, according to Eliot, makes the difference between an intellectual poet and a reflective poet. An intellectual poet, like Tennyson and Browning, thinks but he does not feel the thought "as immediately as the odour of a rose". For a reflective poet, thought is an experience, as it is for Donne; it modifies his sensibility. Eliot, in this poem, is a reflective poet. As such, he has amalgamated disparate experiences which he has accumulated with the help of myth and archetype and then presented them, in the poem, as a new whole possessing its own order. As a mythic quester he has not been capable of bringing about the restoration of the land. 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 one only suggestion: "Shanti", magically repeated three times. "Shanti" is the end of an Upanishad in the same way in which this note is the end of the text *The Waste Land*. "Shanti" suggests the necessity of an answer beyond human knowledge, because human knowledge is expressed by language and this community system does not seem to apprehend reality, a sign leads us to another sign, a signifier to a signifier. A cynical Eliot who tries to apprehend a sound epistemological and come to terms with external reality must necessarily have doubts about the human capacity to reach truth. As culture accepts 'undertaker' as an immortal being ignoring the artificial manufacture instead it accepts this manufacturer as given natural timeless being, *The Waste Land* itself become as a myth – a "modern myth".

Notes:

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