

WEAVERS, POETS AND MAGICIANS: UN/MAPPING *THE WASTE LAND*

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims at reading T.S. Eliot's poem *The Waste Land* as a living mandala of voices and symbols. Therefore the dynamics of the mandala principle is introduced and explained in order to provide a structural and structured way of looking at the text. This dynamics is also used to relate the poetic voice that stands in the middle of the poem-mandala to its peripheral display of words. The poet, who is compared with a weaver and a magician, is identified as well with "The Hanged Man," a symbolic expression of change and transformation that can be seen as the silent axis of the whole poem.

KEY WORDS: T.S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*, mandala, poet-weaver, poet-magician.

RESUMEN

Este ensayo se propone leer el poema *The Waste Land* de T.S. Eliot como un mándala de voces y símbolos vivientes. Por ello se presenta y explica en primer lugar la dinámica del mándala con el fin de proporcionar una forma estructural y estructurada de abordar el texto. Esta dinámica también se emplea para relacionar la voz poética que se halla en el centro del poema-mándala con su manifestación periférica de palabras. El poeta, al que se compara con un tejedor y un mago, es identificado también con "El ahorcado," expresión simbólica del cambio y la transformación, que puede ser entendido como un eje silencioso de todo el poema.

PALABRAS CLAVE: T.S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*, mándala, poeta-tejedor, poeta-mago.

I. INTRODUCTION

The complexity and the vast myriad of references *The Waste Land* contains explain the fact that the poem has been called a "palimpsest." However intricate and even obscure *The Waste Land* might be, it seems to follow a certain pattern. In other words, its apparent chaotic flow of references might have an underlying logic, not necessarily in terms of content, but in the way that content is structured (and thus made sense of).



It is my aim in this essay to read *The Waste Land* in terms of the mandala principle, that is, to compare the structure of the poem with the dynamics of the mandala. In order to do this I will first introduce the idea of the “mandala principle” and how it is related to traditional figures like that of the bard or the magician. Then, I will undertake the task of deciphering the mandalic elements that pervade the symbolic fabric of *The Waste Land*. This is a very ambitious endeavour, if I were to take into consideration the structural complexity of the whole poem, so I will limit myself in this essay to two aspects of the first part (“The Burial of the Dead”) which can be understood as recurrent motives later in the poem.

These two aspects will be the relationship between centre and periphery in the symbols that appear in the very beginning of *The Waste Land* (and that reappear later on as well, especially in the fifth part, “What the Thunder Said”) and the importance given to the tarot card “The Hanged Man” as a central (silent) voice that keeps on participating in the poem.

II. THE WEAVER OF VOICES

T.S. Eliot dedicates *The Waste Land* to Ezra Pound, who is acknowledged in the first page of the poem as “il miglior fabbro.” This idea of the poet as “maker” or “creator” (from the Greek word for poet “poietés”) is both relevant and revealing for understanding the way *The Waste Land* is constructed and how the “mandala principle” works as well. This “maker” is an artisan, a craftsman, who works with an already existing matter and gives it a new shape. It is not a creator *ex nihilo* but a “shaper,” somebody who can reformulate tradition and present it in a new way. Although we could apply this idea to all poets from Homer to our days, since all of them have been working with an already existing material (not only in thematical terms, but also, and most essentially, in terms of language, since all had to deal with an already shaped language and its inherent worldview), the image of the “maker” can be particularly identified with Eliot and his *Waste Land*.

In this poem (literal) chunks of other texts are inlaid in it, and the role of the poet seems to be that of making them fall together in a new reformulated whole (which is altogether constructed out of reverberations from other texts). It is Pound who is thought of as a “fabbro,” but we could certainly think of Eliot in the same way. He is actually reshaping a number of traditions that meet in his mind. In his writing flow the influences of Shakespeare, the Bible, the Upanishad and the Pali Canon, just to mention a few. But he is, after all, silent. He speaks only as the last link of a long chain, thus surrendering his “personal voice”¹ to the collective and

¹ This “personal voicelessness” of *The Waste Land*, which —as we will see later— does not neglect a personal engagement with the act of making poetry, links into the Buddhist premises shared by Eliot. As Viorica Patea has written: “Su crítica de la apología romántica de ‘la voz interior’ como criterio de realidad está en consonancia con las premisas budistas, que postulan la insustan-

impersonal voice of tradition, that expresses itself through him as the heir of a long literary lineage.

So this is most clearly the work of a “poietés”: to repeat. But not to repeat in a mechanical fashion. There is space for creativity in repetition. And this creativity lies precisely in a particular use of space. Since the texts are being repeated, the innovation is to be found in how these texts that contribute to the poem are set out within the basic space of the poem and how they relate to each other. This way of relating to the text and to its “creation” (also known as “recreation” or “reformulation”) is very similar to that of the Bards, the holders of oral traditions who learnt the set texts and then—in their public recitation of them—introduced personal elements and reshaped the texts by making them longer or shorter, by altering the order of the elements present in them and so on and so forth. An oral (and performative) tradition is always signed with this sense of fluidity that allows the poet some freedom to improvise over a basic pattern, to reshape and to express the tradition in a “personal” way, although there is no “personal voice.” The personal transformation of the text is always implicit (real but voiceless), because it is assumed that when the bard recites the text he is making it “his” text, he is mingling himself with the text, and his voice becomes one with the voice of tradition. To use a very beautiful expression to define this process of “(re)creation” I will quote a modern bardess, the singer Sheila Chandra, whose 1992 CD was entitled *Weaving My Ancestor’s Voices*.² With that idea of the poet as a “silent” weaver of voices I will now proceed to introduce and explain the notion of the mandala.

III. THE WEAVING OF VOICES

The Sanskrit word “mandala” literally means a circle, something rounded or completed. It is both the idea of circularity and of completion (perfection) that makes the mandala a very interesting symbol of totality; the same totality that Eliot aimed at in his poem(s).³ However, we cannot forget that this circular symbol of

cialidad del ego” (Eliot, *Tierra* 33). The absence of a heavy centre, like “the inner voice” in romantic poetry, will be key to understand the “mandala principle” and its relationship to *The Waste Land*.

² In *Weaving My Ancestor’s Voices* Sheila Chandra improvises—using her voice as an instrument—over the tunes of what she calls her “spiritual ancestors,” which range from Celtic Irish songs, Indian religious Hymns, Islamic music or Manuel de Falla’s *Nana*.

³ I am not particularly interested in proving that Eliot knew the mandala, because he certainly did, but to read his poem in terms of the mandala principle. The mandala, as a diagrammatic figure and as a way of understanding the cosmos, is not an exclusively Buddhist and Hindu thing, not even an Eastern one. For example, we can find in Gnostic Christianity similar representations and principles. The mandala is not a new thing at all; it has been present in the West for centuries (many Roman temples were built following this structure as well). However, the mandalas (named in this way) became famous in the late 19th century and early 20th century thanks to Jung and others, who employed them primarily as drawing devices (not getting deeper into what they actually





perfection is ever-fluid, always dynamic and that it is precisely the movement what makes the mandala possible. It is a map of interactions, a map of the universe seen as a continuum that expands and contracts from a centre (into and back from a periphery).

As may be guessed, we could talk of two basic mandalas: the represented mandala and the real mandala. By this I mean the symbol and the thing symbolized, the map and the territory mapped (the universe itself). Nonetheless, in this essay I will deal only with the represented mandala, or the mandala as a representation, in relationship with *The Waste Land*. I will, thus, deal with *The Waste Land* as a map of *The Waste Land* and not with *The Waste Land* itself. To do the latter would be a most interesting task, because I would have to get into *The Waste Land*'s worldview and deal with its ultimate meaning as a world of itself, but also a very demanding and complex work which would surpass the expected limits of an essay like this one. So, as I said before, I will limit myself to compare the structure of the poem with the representational dynamic of the mandala, with the structure of the mandala as a symbol.

One of the aspects of the mandala that will be essential in my reading of *The Waste Land* is the relationship between the centre and the periphery of the poem as a mandala. In order to understand this relationship it is important to keep in mind two basic features of the "mandala principle" (that could be summarised in one): the constant communication between centre and periphery and their ultimate indivisibility.

Looking at Rigdzin Shikpo's way of talking about the mandala can help in understanding this constant flow⁴:

Mandala (Sanskrit) means something that has a centre and a periphery, and refers to the structure and dynamic of everything that manifests. The centre of the *mandala* affects the periphery and the periphery feeds back into the centre in a constant energy exchange. (Shikpo 89)

This interrelationship between centre and periphery seems to be pointing at the basic fact that Chögyam Trungpa states quite clearly:

The mandala of self-existing energy does not have to be maintained by anything at all; it maintains itself. Space does not have a centre or a fringe. Each corner of space is centre as well as fringe. (Trungpa 145)

stand for) for psychological purposes (see Jung, or Eliade). Eliot was familiar with Jung's ideas and also with the original meanings of the mandala. We know through Gabriela Mistral that he was about to become a Buddhist precisely when he was writing *The Waste Land* (Spender 20).

⁴ The reason why I am using sources that are posterior to Eliot to elucidate the meaning of the mandala principle is because, among all that I have read about the mandala so far, I have never found clearer definitions which were both rooted in tradition (both authors are authoritative voices within their Buddhist Lineages) and at the same time expressed in (very accessible) Western terms.

Thus, the roles within the mandala are interchangeable, the centre might become the periphery and the periphery the centre, and they will keep on communicating and dancing. It is essential to understand that we are not before a dualistic way of looking at the cosmos, in which there is a ruling principle and something to be ruled, a creator that rules over its creation. Au contraire, the centre of the mandala, the “ruling” axis, is rather passive and silent, allowing (providing the space for) the “ruled” periphery to display its activity. However, and as it has been previously stated, those places are endlessly exchanged. The king becomes the servant, and the servant the king, and the king the servant, and so and so forth.

This perspective can be a very useful tool to look at *The Waste Land* as a continuum where the poet, the “persona(s)” and their voices intermingle and change roles continuously. This idea links back again with the figure of the bard, in whose recitation a number of voices mingle, which are ultimately identical with his own and which flow undifferentiated within a text that is set by tradition, and yet reformulated by its reciter. The bard stands at the centre of the mandala, so to speak, and from him the whole display of his recitation manifests. His poetry is his periphery, which emerges from and dissolves back into himself. Although (or maybe because) he incarnates this generative centre he is silent, and his silence is the blank page that allows the voices of tradition to manifest. So “lilacs” are bred “out of the dead land,” the speechless becomes the space needed for speech to happen, the sterility that makes breeding possible, like the “dull roots” that are stirred “with spring rain.”

IV. FROM WINTER TO SUMMER (AND ALL THE WAY BACK)

It seems interesting that the first part of *The Waste Land*, named “The Burial of the Dead,” starts with a reference to “lilacs” that emerge from the dead land, the very ground where everything arises and disintegrates. Although we might think that the title is pointing to the end of life, which is true, at the same time is evoking its beginning, the arrival of spring. In a way the vast potentialities of death are shown, death as a return to the ground, which, despite waste, or precisely because it is waste, can engender infinite possibilities of new life (that will meet death again and so on). In line 5 we find a powerful image that expresses this ambivalence of the ground, which is both womb and tomb: “winter kept us warm.” Winter, the season where everything dies to come back to life, provides the “warmth” of the unmanifested, of what not only has been destroyed, and thus, set to rest, but also of open, endless possibilities of manifestation (that only the unmanifested contains).

The arrival of summer is announced by “a shower of rain” (line 9),⁵ and it means the introduction of human voices in the poem, the breaking of a “silent,”

⁵ This “shower of rain” represents the power of fecundation. The one has turned into two and those two have started to dance. Whereas in wintertime there was just the land covered by “forgetful snow” (line 6), the arrival of rain means also that the land has acquired a new quality. Now



objective and impersonal account of winter. Silence provides the space for voices to happen, and these voices suddenly personalize the impersonal space described before. They become a manifestation of what was previously unmanifested, thus defining and narrowing the space of the poem. It is interesting to see how the verbal tense switches from present continuous (“breeding lilacs,” “mixing memory and desire,” “stirring dull roots,” “covering earth” and “feeding a little life,” lines 1-7) to the past (“And went on in sunlight,” “and drank coffee,” lines 10-11, and so). This change is very significant, because it is pointing at the fact that the arrival of summer has brought not only personal references, but also temporal and spatial ones.

Whereas winter is a silent, impersonal, uncoloured realm⁶ where everything is described in terms of processes (things are merely and barely happening), summer stands for the personally defined, colourful stage in which there is time (past, present, future; thus, the switch to the past tense, which indicates memory, opposed and complementary to the “forgetful snow” formerly mentioned) and where there are also places. In the first lines we are only introduced to universal things: April, snow, winter, memory, desire, and so on. However, after the arrival of summer (line 8), the poetic discourse is transformed, personal voices appear, places are named (“Hofgarten”) and time is introduced (through verbal tenses). Furthermore, the German words in line 12 express this focus and definition that the poem has suddenly embraced. These words (*Bin gar keine Russin, stamm’ aus Litauen, echt deutsch*), roughly translated, mean “I’m not Russian at all, I come from Lithuania and I’m genuine German.” The relevance of the sentence does not lie only on the national(istic) tinge the speaker wants to confer to it, but also on the fact that the speaker makes three statements about him/herself. This shows again the turning into concrete of what was previously unmanifested and vague. We could compare this play over the poetic space with a camera moving from background to foreground (and the other way round, as I will comment on later).

it is a wasteland, that needs the power of rain in order to turn it fertile again. A similar symbolic structure is found in the fifth part in which, after a long and detailed description of the waste land (that starts off with the beginning of that part and finishes with the powerful manifestation of the thunder, preceded by the descent of Ganga, the goddess associated with river Ganges, that cools the dry earth with her waters), the thunder speaks and appears as a revelation in midst of the dried ground. The thunder stands, in the upanishadic paradigm, for the divine voice, but it is also associated to Indra, a male god who is often compared with a bull, and whose virility and fertilizing skills are widely known among women and goddesses.

⁶ It is relevant to mention at this point that the mandala of the five Dhyani Buddhas, which represent the basic structure of the mind and the universe in Tantric Buddhism, is generally depicted with the White Buddha in the centre, as a way of suggesting the undefined and “colourless” quality of the primordial ground of existence. Nonetheless, surrounding the White Buddha are four other “Coloured” (Blue, Yellow, Red and Green) Buddhas. This four-folded periphery is regarded as a manifestation of the colourless (and centreless) centre, that is the empty space that allows everything to happen. An analogous relationship seems to be developed here with the symbolism of winter and summer.

Nonetheless, Eliot seems to be very fond of transitions and middle grounds. The poem starts “in” April, which is neither winter nor summer, neither “centre” nor “periphery.” The “German” voice comes from Lithuania, which is in between Russia and Germany, and tries to turn back from Russia and move towards Germany. This process of transition is what in Tibetan is called “bardo,” which literally means “what comes in between”: a gap.⁷ The idea of the “bardo” is very important within the mandala principle and is very significant to understand its dynamics. The mandala represents the continuum of energy that transforms itself unceasingly and knows neither beginning nor end. However the manifestations or appearances of that continuum (which are, anyway, not different from the continuum itself) are constantly changing, that is, rising and falling, being born and dying, and, subsequently, continuously experiencing processes of transition (“bardo”).

Everything can be seen as a “bardo,” for example, winter can be seen as the “bardo” between autumn and spring. However, Eliot seems to be more interested in pointing at the gap(s) that come(s) in between the states that we tend to perceive as more static, such as winter-summer. Nonetheless, April, the chosen “bardo,” is not presented as part of an ongoing process (like the ones described before and signaled by the present continuous) but as a static event, even a universal truth, marked by the present simple (“April is the cruellest month”). This is a very clear example of Eliot’s game with the notions of static and dynamic. He mixes and interweaves these notions to the point of blurring their boundaries, being this blurring the proclamation of their ultimate inseparability.⁸

To sum up, these turning points repeat themselves all through the poem, and we will see how important they are in the image that Eliot chooses to place in the centre of his mandalic poem.

V. TURNING IT UPSIDE DOWN

It was T.S. Eliot himself who said that all the voices in the poem are indeed the same voice, and that all the personages that appear are also one (Eliot, *Waste* 50). This points at the idea of a centre that manifests in many different ways, the

⁷ As Trungpa has said, “‘bar’ means in between, and ‘do’ means island or mark; a sort of landmark which stands between two things. It is rather like an island in the midst of a lake. The concept of bardo is based on the period between sanity and insanity, or the period between confusion and the confusion just about to be transformed into wisdom; and of course it could be said of the experience which stands between death and birth” (Rinpoche 10-11).

⁸ This idea does not only connect with the inseparability of space and appearances in the mandala principle, but also with Plato’s saying “Time is eternity set in motion,” which was most probably known by Eliot. What Plato seems to point at is that time (understood as lineal and progressive time, which opposes to the static and “timeless” idea of eternity) and eternity are essentially the same. This sense of non-duality is found in much of modernist and imagist poetry, as one of the main symbols of its identity.





empty mother-like space that engenders infinite potentialities and gives rise to different identities, which are essentially the same. As it has been said before, that centre is silent. However, the poet uses a symbol, an image in this case, to stand in between the wordless and the words. The chosen symbol is a tarot card, a particular symbolic kind of image, since the tarot's representations are full of symbolic connotations. They do not intend to (re)present a particular natural image; their aim is not to imitate, but to provide the image of an archetype. That means that the tarot's images are visual incarnations of qualities and principles (i.e. the magician stands for the idea of power).⁹

Various cards are mentioned in the first part: "the drowned Phoenician Sailor," "Belladonna, the lady of the rocks, the lady of situations," "the man with three staves," "the one-eyed merchant" who "carries on his back" something the clairvoyante is "forbidden to see" and "The Hanged Man" which is not found (lines 47-55). Of all these cards, our attention seems to be drawn to "The Hanged Man," which is precisely the absent one, but at the same time the key element that allows Madame Sosostris to formulate her prediction: "Fear death by Water." What motivates her final statement seems to be the absence of "The Hanged Man." "The Hanged Man" seems to be somehow the centre of all the cards, the silent core that works as an axis. Its absent presence makes sense of all the other cards, which constitute its periphery and a powerful influence while remaining wordless. Mandalas are maps, and landmarks on bigger maps (by this I mean that they are part of what they represent). So is the tarot. The tarot functions as a mandala, with a centre and a periphery and expresses designs to which the tarot itself is subjected. And so is *The Waste Land*, a huge map which contains numberless maps within, a map of tradition(s) which is at the same time part of th(os)e tradition(s).

The tarot is a clue left for the reader in order to read *The Waste Land* as a tarot(ic) mandala. So is the game of chess (second part), another space ruled by the centre-periphery pattern. It is interesting to see how this second part starts with a very clear reference to a centre (a throne): "The Chair she sat in, like a burnished throne..." (line 77). And then it spreads out from that centre in a very mandalic fashion, by describing whatever surrounds that Chair, as if it were all a manifestation of the Chair itself, like the silent expression of power that sprang from the throne standing in the centre.¹⁰

⁹ An interesting overview (with references to many critical sources) of the role of tarot in *The Waste Land* is provided by Grover Smith (91-97), even though I have not followed his ideas in this essay.

¹⁰ A very similar idea is found in King Arthur's "mandala." If we read any story from the Arthurian cycle we will see how the King stands silent, being the very centre of his world, and how his court works as a manifestation of his silent power. It is as if he spoke and acted through his knights. In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, for instance, Sir Gawain is the one who responds to the Green Knight's challenge, which was obviously addressed to King Arthur himself.

Coming back to “The Hanged Man,” we cannot overlook the peculiarities of this image. The fact that this is the only card in the tarot whose image is turned upside down makes it very suitable to stand as the central symbol of a poem like *The Waste Land*. All the tarot cards can appear upside up or upside down, and their meaning changes depending on their collocation. However, “The Hanged Man” is upside down when the card is upside up, and viceversa. It is a definite turning point, the very image of transformation. This links back with the idea of the “bardo,” that was introduced in the previous section, the gap that allows (and is) transition. The turning point “The Hanged Man” stands for is the flexible axis that structures a world constantly changing. The card itself is associated with shamans, seers and magicians, those who transform energy (like poets). It is also associated with death as a way of regeneration, the process of disintegrating and, therefore, becoming.

This card is also related to Tiresias, half-man half-woman, caught in between times, sexes and identities (lines 215-256). And to Phlebas the Phoenician, “a fortnight dead” (line 312), who “rose and fell” (line 316) (like the subverted hanged man) and “was once handsome and tall” (line 321). All these characters (I have only mentioned a few) have in common that they are the silent centre(s) of the poem. They are somehow beyond time and space, like silent watchers of the whole display of voices and places, and at the same time they are involved with the suffering and agitation of those voices and places (i.e. the episode of Tiresias and the typist, in which Tiresias “foresuffers” the pain of the typist (line 243), being the young woman a modern incarnation of the ever-returning oracle of Thebes).

Eliot says in his Notes on *The Waste Land* that “all the women are one woman, and the two sexes meet in Tiresias” (Eliot, *Waste* 50). Tiresias has been seen in many readings of *The Waste Land* (some of them made by the author himself) as the poem itself, the continuum of poetry that folds and unfolds in its continuous switch from background to foreground and the other way round. It would be equally right to assert the centrality of Tiresias or of the Phoenician sailor; however, it is the iconic nature of “The Hanged Man” that makes me think of it as the central symbol (in the particular context of a mandalic reading) of a poem full of symbols. Nevertheless, the identification of that “personage,” Tiresias, the magician-seer, with the author has been implicitly ascertained by Eliot as well, who signed some of his letters as Tiresias. So Tiresias, or the Hanged Man, or Phlebas the Phoenician, or Eliot himself, seem to be very suitable *fabbros*-poets-magicians-weavers-of-voices to stand at the centre of a poetic world that is continuously “burning, burning, burning, burning.”¹¹

¹¹ These words, taken from the third part, “The Fire Sermon,” are precisely from the Fire Sutta, to be found in the *Suttapitaka* of the Pali Canon (*Tipitaka*). These words are said to be those the Buddha himself spoke, and were transmitted orally for generations. The oral origin of the text explains its repetitive structure, which was meant to be memorised and then recited (like the repertoire of a bard).



VI. CONCLUSION

To sum up, the symbolic structure of *The Waste Land* seems to be ruled by the underlying principle of the mandala; a mandala in which the poet stands in the centre, as a silent presence that weaves the voices that pervade the whole periphery of his poetry. The relationship between centre and periphery is very fluid and, therefore, the poem is full of turning points, *personas* and images that allow and incarnate this process of unceasing change.

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